

**Through Their Own Eyes: The History of Slavery and the United States Civil War From  
Black Women's Perspectives**

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**Abstract**

Within the history of slavery in the United States, a new black feminist historiography has emerged that seeks to give more space to how the lives of black women fit into this history. This thesis contributes to this historiography by reading the diaries and memoirs of seven black women who were alive during the early to mid 1800s. These women, named Emilie Davis, Charlotte Forten Grimké, Harriet Jacobs, Elizabeth Keckley, Susie King Taylor, Sojourner Truth, and Bethany Veney, lived varied lives across the country. The thesis is divided into six chapters that explores various themes and commonalities between their lives, while simultaneously exploring what made each of their lives unique. Ultimately, this thesis proves that the lives of black women alive during this time period were much more nuanced than traditional historiographies give them credit for, and that there is much one can learn about their experiences through close readings of the diaries and memoirs that they left behind.

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## Introduction

The history of slavery in the United States is long and gruesome. Beginning with the Atlantic Slave Trade, slavery remained a legal institution for centuries before finally reaching its tumultuous end during the United States Civil War from 1861-1865. It was an institution that formed the backbone of U.S. society, and remnants of its legacy can be found even today. Institutionalized racism, segregation, and police brutality all have roots that stem from the institution of slavery. Despite this legacy, the history of slavery is often watered down or entirely ignored. United States history tends to focus on an overwhelmingly white narrative. The history of minorities in the United States is only taught when it becomes intertwined with *white* history. European colonization and the slave trade, the Constitution and the 3/5ths compromise, and the invention of the cotton gin on plantations are all good examples of how issues of slavery were only relevant when they were intertwined with issues within white society.

Many historiographies downplay how important slavery was in relation to the Civil War. In *The Civil War: A Narrative*, author Shelby Foote made little mention of slave participation in the war, nor the impact the institution of slavery had on secession and the cause of the war. This traditional narrative of the war, which Foote participated in, focused primarily on the military and political aspects of the war, without examining the variety of social issues that were also present. This is not to say that military histories of the war are unimportant, but they provide very little space for the social issues that were just as important during the Civil War.

In response to the traditional perspective, a more modern, social historiography has emerged since the 1960s. According to Stuart McConnell, popular historiography of the Civil War (as well as most other areas of U.S. history) changed in order to accommodate “the

inclusion of previously neglected voices, notably those of women and African Americans,”<sup>1</sup> and he later added that “with slavery and race at the forefront of the discussion, histories of the period gradually moved away from politics and toward social and economic history.”<sup>2</sup> The social historiography sought to provide more space to both the institution of slavery as well as to non-white and non-male participants in the discussion of the Civil War. Whilst there is a growing historiography that discussed the specific roles of black women, it is still far less established. Only within the last twenty years has this historiography truly began to grow and discuss the specific roles and lives of black women.<sup>3</sup> Focusing on white women and black men is important-- both of those groups had experiences outside of the normal sphere, and there is a lot to learn from reading about their experiences. It is incorrect to assume, though, that the experiences of black women are the same as white women, or of black men.

This thesis will seek to look at and understand the experiences of black women before, during, and after the Civil War. Why is understanding their experiences is so important? One of the answers to this question is simply because by looking at the experiences of black women specifically, one can begin to look at the history of slavery in the U.S. with a more intersectional perspective. What is intersectionality? First applied by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 paper “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Practices”, Crenshaw explained

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<sup>1</sup>Stuart McConnell, “The Civil War and Historiographies: A Historiographical Survey,” *OAH Magazine of History* 8 (1993), 3, accessed October 6, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> There are several authors who, in the last 20 years, have contributed to this growing historiography. These include Ella Forbes, Chandra Manning, and Kate Côté Gillin, for example. It is interesting to note that many of these historians who are contributing to this historiography are women, both white and black. This increase in historiography could easily be correlated with the growing number of women in the field of history.

that frequently “there is a tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis”<sup>4</sup> (i.e, scholarship has tended to focus either on white women or black men, whilst scholarship on black women has remained underdeveloped, creating an assumption that the experiences of white women and black women are the same). She argued that intersectionality should be introduced as a way of moving away from “the oppression of Blacks as significant when based on race, [or] the oppression of women as significant when based on gender,”<sup>5</sup> and urged scholars to look at how race and gender intertwine and relate to each other. In the context of the history of slavery, this means looking at the experiences of black women specifically, since their experiences are different from their white female and/or black male counterparts.

The desire to look at the history of slavery through an intersectional perspective has led to the rise of a new approach known as the “Black Feminist” historiography. Authors such as Ella Forbes and Chandra Manning are two examples of black feminist historians carving out spaces for black women in the existing historiography of slavery and the Civil War. According to Forbes, “when African American Civil War participation is the focus, the African American male is highlighted. If women are the focus, the perspective belongs to white women.”<sup>6</sup> She argued that black women were doubly ignored when talking about the Civil War, due to both their sex and their race. Manning, however, argued “against exaggerating the agency that black people

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<sup>4</sup> Crenshaw, Kimberlé, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Practices”, *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139, accessed November 7, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* 167.

<sup>6</sup> Forbes, Ella, *African American Women During the Civil War*, (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1998), vii.

could exercise, given the realities of massive power arrayed against them.”<sup>7</sup> The perspectives of these women are important because of their unique status as black women, but it is important to not understate the oppressive society that they found themselves in.

### *Methodology*

The goal of this thesis is to extend the work of black feminists in regard to the history of slavery and the Civil War. Methodologically, this has been accomplished by reading the memoirs and diaries of seven black women who lived during the early to mid 1800’s. Finding primary sources proved to be, at times, surprisingly difficult. There are a finite number of authentic memoirs and diaries of black women from this era. Unsurprisingly, literacy rates amongst black women during this era were low, and it is no coincidence that of the seven women who will become the focus of this paper, only two kept contemporaneous diaries, rather than recording their memories later in life.

Additionally, some historical works have mentioned women and their diaries, yet the path to the original source has been typically dry. Such was the case of the compilation *Noted Negro Women*, by Monroe A Majors. Written in 1893, Majors (a black man) was one of the first U.S. historians to document the lives of black women specifically, and acknowledged the lack of discussion surrounding their lives and accomplishments. Several of the women mentioned in this paper have their own chapters, however, Majors frustratingly failed to cite his sources. He quoted several women’s diaries and memoirs, but because of the lack of citations, the women he cited have been impossible to follow up on. This somewhat weakened Majors’ credibility, solely because without a citation, it is difficult to verify the information he presented. For the women

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<sup>7</sup> Manning, Chandra, *Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 10.

whose writings we do have, however, his information is verifiable, which means that the most likely explanation is that the writings he wrote about simply disappeared to time.<sup>8</sup> Despite the difficulty, his source provided a way in which to track down several women's writings.

Several additional sources were found on the online archive "Documenting the American South". According to the main page of the archive, "*Documenting the American South* (DocSouth) is a digital publishing initiative that provides Internet access to texts, images, and audio files related to southern history, literature, and culture. Currently DocSouth includes sixteen thematic collections of books, diaries, posters, artifacts, letters, oral history interviews, and songs."<sup>9</sup> Serving as a digital archive for a variety of sources pertaining to the history of the U.S. South, this website became incredibly helpful and helped lead to the discovery of three of the memoirs that will be focused on in this thesis.

Through researching and tracking down various memoirs and diaries, the writings of seven women became the source base of this thesis. The seven women are: Emilie Davis, Charlotte Forten Grimké, Harriet Jacobs, Elizabeth Keckley, Susie King Taylor, Sojourner Truth, and Bethany Veney. Geographically, these women lived in a variety of places, ranging from Savannah to New York City. Their lives, despite the commonalities between them, were quite different, and their perspectives and outlooks on their lives varied greatly between them. This thesis argues that by looking at the lives and writing of these seven women, one can see that their

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<sup>8</sup> Majors' work represents one of the first comprehensive sources that sought to establish the lives and accomplishments of black women on paper. His failure to cite his sources makes his book less credible, but as I explained above, we know that at least some of his entries are authentic because we have the sources to back up his claims. I maintain that the diaries that he cited but could not be found were simply lost to time. One woman in particular, named Sarah Dudley Pettey, was mentioned by Majors, however, her diary is untraceable. I reached out to author Glenda Gilmore, who wrote a book on Pettey, who explained to me that she was never to find her diary, nor did her descendants know where it was.

<sup>9</sup> Documenting the American South, home page, last updated March 18, 2017, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/>.



lives were much richer and diverse than they are traditionally given credit for, that they were able to maintain agency and survive despite the harshness of the society they lived in, and that by reading their stories, one can gain a deeper understanding of the impact of the institution of slavery as well as a broader understanding of the U.S. Civil War.

In order to accomplish this, this thesis will be divided into six chapters that will explore different aspects of each of these seven women's lives. The first chapter, entitled "Biographies", will provide basic biographical information on each woman, in order to provide the reader with a basic working knowledge of the details of each woman's life. Chapter two, "The Freedwomen's Experience", and chapter three, "The Slavewomen's Experience", will both examine the everyday lives and experiences of each women. Chapter two will take a close look at the diaries of Grimké & Davis, the two women who were born free, while chapter three will take a closer look at Truth, Keckley, Jacobs, and Veney, all of whom spent a considerable part of their lives in slavery. The fourth chapter, entitled "Slave Agency", explores what that means in the context of slavery. Agency is the idea of being able to exert power and control over oneself, but as a slave, this meaning is put into question. This chapter will focus primarily on Truth & Jacobs, two women whose writings best provide a lens to examine the idea of slave agency. These first four chapters represent a look inward at the women's lives, in order to better understand how their status as black women impacted their lives.

The final two chapters will thus take a more outward look at how these women's lives fit into the broader world. Chapter five, entitled "Relationship to the North", will explore a unique theme that nearly every women addressed, which is how they viewed Northern society, both during their time as slaves as well as upon subsequently earning their freedom. This chapter

focuses on Jacobs, Truth, Veney, Keckley, and Taylor, the five women who were born into slavery. The final chapter, entitled “Broader Historical Context”, will take a look outward at the historical events taking place during the lives of these women. This chapter will focus primarily on Taylor and Keckley, due to their unique experiences as a Civil War laundress and nurse and as a seamstress in the White House, respectively. Grimké and Davis will also be examined in this chapter, due to the fact that through reading their diaries, one can see their reaction to various events of the war as they happened.

The lives of these seven women offer challenging and difficult reading. Many of them faced obstacles that seem unimaginable in today’s society. Their stories were all different, and each woman had her own set of specific problems to fight against. These were very human stories, and oftentimes they challenge the generalizations that are so easy to make about the lives of black women living in this era. In the words of Emilie Davis, “all is well that ends well”<sup>10</sup>, and it is in that spirit that this thesis will be written. Their stories are finished, and all that is left is to learn, to the best of our ability, what we can from them.

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<sup>10</sup> Davis, Emilie, *Emilie Davis’ Civil War: The Diaries of a Free Black Woman in Philadelphia, 1863-1865*, ed. Judith Giesberg, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 193.

## Chapter 1: Biographies

The seven women upon whom this paper focuses had lives very different from one another. While their lives contained commonalities, each of their stories were unique. Their personalities, experiences, and daily lives all differed greatly. Five of the women were born into slavery: two from Virginia, two from North and South Carolina, and one from New York (prior to the abolition of slavery in New York in 1828). Two women born free were both born in Philadelphia, however, while one spent much of her life in the city, the other spent time all across the North. In order to better understand what we can learn from their lives, it is first important to understand some of the basic facts about their lives.

The oldest woman, and by far the most recognizable, was Sojourner Truth. Her writings and speeches have permeated popular culture, and even led her to be named one of the “100 most significant Americans of all time” by the Smithsonian (it is worth noting that she is one of only a few women of color to make it onto the list).<sup>11</sup> In *Noted Negro Women*, Majors echoed this evaluation of her fame and importance, stating “...within a capacious breast beat a heart which had a place for every unfortunate being, a head which contained a brain full of thought and grand knowledge characteristic of the oddity of her name.”<sup>12</sup> He clearly felt awe for her mental fortitude and determination, which was a major theme of her biography. Her biography, which was entitled *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated From Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828*, was unique in that it was dictated to and written by Olive Gilbert, a close friend of Truth. Thus, throughout the narrative, Truth (whose birth name

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<sup>11</sup>Tom A. Frail, “Meet the 100 Most Significant Americans of All Time,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 17, 2014, accessed January 27, 2016, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonianmag/meet-100-most-significant-americans-all-time-180953341>

<sup>12</sup> Majors, Monroe A., *Noted Negro Women: Their Triumphs and Activities* (Chicago: Donohue and Henneberry, 1893), 184.

was Isabella), is referred to in the third person. Truth's life was also unique in that she was the only subject of this paper who had been born into slavery in the North, prior to the abolishment of slavery in New York in 1828 (Truth sometimes cited this date as 1827). It has been easy to forget that for a long period of American history, *every* state was a slave state, and reading her experiences as a slave sheds some light on the experience of a Northern slave. In the beginning of her narrative, Truth cited difficulty in remembering much of her early life, stating "THE subject of this biography, SOJOURNER TRUTH, as she now calls herself--but whose name, originally, was Isabella--was born, as near as she can now calculate, between the years 1797 and 1800."<sup>13</sup> Her narrative spanned from her early life through late 1849, and detailed everything from her time as a slave, her escape, and her subsequent rise as a leader in the abolitionist movement. Her story is valuable in that it provided a unique look into the life of a Northern slave, as well as gave a background story on one of the most iconic abolitionists in United States history.

Truth was not the only woman among the subjects of this paper to have successfully escaped slavery. Harriet Jacobs' memoir *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (which she wrote under the pseudonym of Linda Brent) documented her life as a slave in North Carolina. According to author Jean Fagan Yellin, whose book *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* explored the real woman behind the pseudonym Linda Brent, scholarship originally believed that "while a woman named Harriet Jacobs might perhaps have existed, the book's author was [assumed to be] Lydia Maria Child."<sup>14</sup> Through her work, Yellin eventually proved not only that Linda Brent was

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<sup>13</sup> Truth, Sojourner, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828*, dict. Olive Gilbert, (Boston: J.B. Yerrinton & Son, 1850), 13.  
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/truth50/truth50.html>

<sup>14</sup> Yellin, Jean Fagan, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life*, (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004), xvi.

Harriet Jacobs, but that the story was authentic, as well.<sup>15</sup> Yellin also explained how she was surprised to learn that “Jacobs had achieved some celebrity as the author of *Incidents*, and that it was only later that her identity was forgotten.”<sup>16</sup> This can be attributed to the fact that *Incidents* was published in 1861. With the Civil War about to break out, it is unsurprising that any publicity that Jacobs had received had been forgotten. Without Yellin’s work, it remains plausible that Jacobs’ story would never have permeated cultural memory in the way her story has.

Jacobs’ narrative is quite pointed and shocking. *Incidents* outlined her life as a slave before eventually running away as a fugitive, and her subsequent struggles to escape successfully and survive in the North. Within, she repeatedly criticized and revealed the often hidden cruelties of slavery. For example, she commented on slaves finding love, stating that “why allow the tendrils of the heart to twine around objects which may at any moment be wrenched away by the hand of violence?”<sup>17</sup> She also spoke specifically about the struggles of slave women compared to slave men, explaining that after her child was born, she was disappointed to hear it was a girl because “slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women.”<sup>18</sup> This correlates to the idea of intersectionality, in that Jacobs truly wanted to demonstrate that experiences of slave women differed from slave men. Of all the diaries and memoirs that are being investigated, Jacobs’ came across as by far the most pointed. All of the women wanted to shatter the institution of slavery, but Jacobs’ memoir could easily be described as the most aggressive. She was not afraid to call out those who stood idly by and did nothing, and her motivations to help those in need were made extremely clear.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, xix-xx.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>17</sup> Jacobs, Harriet, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, (Boston, 1861), 58.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 119.

The slave experience varied greatly between participants. Bethany Veney's story (entitled *The Narrative of Bethany Veney, a Slave Woman*) provided insight on the slave experience in Virginia. Like Truth, Veney exhibited a lack of memory about her childhood, stating "I have but little recollection of my very early life."<sup>19</sup> Whereas Truth and Jacobs both interjected their stories with pointed references to those who stood idly by and watched slavery take place, Veney's memoir was much more passive in her approach. She did not use her anecdotes as a way of personally communicating a message to her reader. This does not mean, however, that she was not interested in conveying the horrors of slavery. In the introduction to her memoir, M.W.G. [an unknown figure in her life] explained that:

Compared with the lives of many of her class, Betty's was uneventful. Yet in it was much of tragic adventure and tender pathos. Her endurance under hardship, her fidelity to trust, and, withal, her religious faith, commend her as a fit subject, not only to impress the lesson of slavery in the past, but to inspire and deepen a sense of responsibility toward the wronged and persecuted race which she represents.<sup>20</sup>

History is not just big characters and major events, and understanding the life of someone who spent much of their life in slavery is imperative to gain a better understanding of the slave experience. This introduction by M.W.G. (who possibly was a family member to Veney) helped contextualize the spirit in which Veney decided to write about her life. She, like Truth and Jacobs, still wanted to demonstrate the horrors she was forced to deal with as a slave. Again, it is important to look at her life with an intersectional perspective. Of all the women in this thesis, she spent the longest time as a slave, and her experience as a slave allows us to better understand the female slave experience.

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<sup>19</sup> Veney, Bethany, *The Narrative of Bethany Veney, a Slave Woman*, (Boston: Press of Geo H. Ellis, 1889), 7. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/veney/veney.html>

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

While it was previously stated that is important to look at history as not solely being the stories of big characters and big events, there is something to be said about the unique perspective participants in big events can provide. Such was the case for Elizabeth Keckley, and Susie King Taylor. Their lives were quite different, yet they both experienced some of the most important moments in the history of the Civil War. Elizabeth Keckley, like Bethany Veney, was born as a slave in Virginia, and chronicled her tumultuous life in her memoir *Behind the Scenes, or 30 Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*. Unlike Truth & Veney, Keckley explained how her memories as a slave child were still quite prevalent, stating “my recollections of childhood are distinct, perhaps for the reason that many stirring incidents are associated with that period.”<sup>21</sup> The period in which she referenced was like the 1820’s/30’s, as while she did not mention a specific date of birth, she cited a letter that her father wrote to her mother that dated to September 1833.<sup>22</sup> She was eventually able to obtain her freedom after working and earning enough money to purchase and free herself. Her talents as a seamstress led her to work for some of the most notable people in the war, specifically the wife of Jefferson Davis, and later, Mary Todd Lincoln. Her close relationship with Mary Lincoln led her to become a close friend and confidant, especially following the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Majors commented on their relationship, stating “Mrs. Lincoln found in her the most sympathizing friend, and, indeed, relied on Mrs. Keckley for advice and counsel.”<sup>23</sup>

Unfortunately, the publishing of her memoir would have a detrimental effect on Keckley’s reputation. According to author Xiomara Santamarina, the public viewed Keckley’s

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<sup>21</sup> Keckley, Elizabeth, *Behind the Scenes, or, 30 Years a Slave and 4 in the White House*, (New York: G.W. Carleton & Co. Publishers, 1868), 17. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/keckley/keckley.html>

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

<sup>23</sup> Majors, *Noted Negro Women*, 259.

book “as a betrayal”, stating “the public did not view the dressmaker’s representation of White House family life as either just nor fair,”<sup>24</sup> which single handedly ruined Keckley’s reputation as well as her close relationship with Mrs. Lincoln. While her memoir may have been her downfall, her time in the White House nonetheless provided a unique perspective as to what life in the White House had been like during the Civil War.

Whilst Keckley’s memoir was important due to her close relationship with the Lincolns and other characters of the war, Taylor’s memoir was interesting in that she had a close relationship to the war itself. Born in Savannah as a slave, Taylor was able to gain an education early on in her life, after illegally attending lessons made possible by a friend of her grandmother’s, who taught Taylor how “to learn to read and write.”<sup>25</sup> This knowledge to read, write, and sew came in handy during the war. Upon obtaining her freedom, she became a member the 33rd United States Colored Troops infantry as a laundress in 1862 (despite not getting paid for her work). She subsequently stayed with the infantry for the next three years. All of these events were chronicled in her memoir entitled *Reminiscences of my Life in Camp with the 33rd U.S. Colored Troops, Late 1st South Carolina Volunteers*, which was later edited by Patricia W. Romero into *A Black Woman’s Civil War Memoirs*. Like Keckley, her memoir provided a unique lens on actual events of the Civil War from the perspective of a black woman.. It is a different way of looking at the war, and can help challenge and expand some of the pre-existing ideas and notions of how the war impacted various peoples.

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<sup>24</sup> Xiomara Santamarina, "Behind the Scenes of Black Labor: Elizabeth Keckley and the Scandal of Publicity," *Feminist Studies* 28, no. 3 (2002): 515-37, accessed March 13, 2017, doi:10.2307/3178784.

<sup>25</sup> Taylor, Susie King, *A Black Woman’s Civil War Memoirs*, ed. Patricia W. Romero, (New York: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1988), 29.



The final two women in this paper also share two parallels: they were the only two women in this paper who spent their entire lives free. and they were the only two to leave behind diaries rather than memoirs. Charlotte Forten Grimké and Emilie Davis were both born in Philadelphia to free families. Davis' diary (which was transcribed by Judith Giesberg into *Emilie Davis' Civil War: The Diaries of a Free Black Woman in Philadelphia*) spanned for three years, from 1863-1865. It is rather difficult to read, because it was transcribed from her original manuscript word-for-word. This included any misspellings and grammatical errors, and it can be difficult to discern exactly where one entry ends and another begins. Because of the span of her diary (1863-1865), events of the Civil War were mentioned by Davis, specifically the *Emancipation Proclamation* and the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. In addition, she made semi-frequent mentions of the abolitionist movement and prominent figures within; for example, she mentioned on several occasions seeing Frederick Douglass speak. Her relationship with the war and even slavery was more casual, since her status as a freedwomen meant that it was not a dominating part of her life. This does not mean that she had *no* relationship with either the war or slavery. Giesberg explained how "although [Davis] was born free, her early years were shaped by slavery."<sup>26</sup> Giesberg went on to explain that her parents' status was questionable (whether they were free, indentured servants, or slaves was unclear), but they were eventually freed and relocated to Philadelphia with Davis.<sup>27</sup> Giesberg also stated how "Emilie Davis' diary gives us a sense of the war as a dramatic interruption of life in a northern city."<sup>28</sup> This again ties into the idea of Davis having a casual relationship with the war. The war was still a part of her life, but not in the way it would have been a part of Taylor's life, for example. Through looking at Davis'

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<sup>26</sup> Davis, *Emilie Davis*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 6-7.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

diary, one can learn how a free black women would have lived her daily life, amidst the tumultuous time of war.

While Emilie Davis' diary may be best described as "concise", *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké* were anything but. Grimké's journals spanned from 1854 all the way to 1892 (with a few gaps in between) and provided a comprehensive look at how a free black women would live her life in the North over a long period of years. Grimké's diary has a similar value to Davis' in that one can see how she had been affected by specific events of the war. The same casual relationship is present in Grimké's journals as well. However, there are times in which the reader could see Grimké taking a more active role (such as her efforts in the Anti-Slavery society). According to Brenda Stevenson, the editor of Grimké's journals, Grimké "was eager to please her father and to contribute to the uplift of her race,"<sup>29</sup> and this could be seen through her work as a teacher and abolitionist. Majors echoed this, arguing that "Miss [Grimké] is an erudite scholar, a forcible writer, and, withal, a woman with extraordinary powers who would do honor to any race."<sup>30</sup> Her journals spanned from her life as a student, to a teacher, and to her later life as a married women.

Of all the women, Grimké indubitably came from the highest class, which is a unique comparison when compared to the previous women, especially Davis. Grimké's status as a high class black women allowed her to become, according to Majors, "one of the best educated persons of her race."<sup>31</sup> Giesberg even mentioned Grimké's family in the beginning of Davis' diaries, stating "at the center of Philadelphia's black community stood a group of prominent

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<sup>29</sup> Grimké, Charlotte Forten, *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*, ed. Brenda Stevenson (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 18.

<sup>30</sup> Majors, *Noted Negro Women*, 214.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

black families, including the Purvises, Fortens, and Whites.”<sup>32</sup> The Forten family was a prominent abolitionist family in the North, and Grimké was no exception. Stevenson explained how “[Grimké] grew up in a home where abolition and equal rights for blacks were key issues to discuss and act upon.”<sup>33</sup> This indubitably had a big influence on her, and her drive for abolitionism appeared throughout her journals. Like Davis, she provides a lens in which to see how a freed black woman would have lived her life, and this time from a higher class than Davis.

Understanding these women’s lives is imperative to understanding the subsequent themes and ideas that will be presented in this thesis. As one can see, despite the fact that these women did share commonalities, all of their lives were quite different. Yet, none of them were immune to their status as black women in the United States. Moving forward, this status will continue to be investigated and explored in order to understand how and why their status as black women made their lives different from their white female and black male counterparts.

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<sup>32</sup> Davis, *Emilie Davis*, 8.

<sup>33</sup> Grimké, *Journals*, 15.

## Chapter 2: The Freedwomen's Experience

It is important to understand how the lives of everyday people intersected with historical events. As an historian, it can be tempting to look at history only in terms of big events and players, while ignoring how these big events affected the masses. Ignoring these everyday lives means that one runs the risk of ignoring important and rich social history. In the history of the Civil War and its buildup, for example, it is very tempting to look at it as a series of big events (for example, looking at the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, to the 1860 Presidential Election, to the beginning of the war in 1861). This ignores, however, how everyday people would have lived during this time. Black freedwomen are one of these groups of people that often are not spoken about in discussions of the Civil War. As previously stated, the lives of people of color during this time period are generally under discussed, with women of color doubly so. However, when they are discussed, the focus rarely falls on the lives of free black women.

This chapter will thus look closer at the lives of Charlotte Forten Grimké and Emilie Davis. The only two freedwomen in this thesis, the lives of Grimké and Davis provide a unique lens into how everyday free black women lived their lives. Their lives contained certain commonalities, but it would be a mistake to conflate the two and assume that their experiences were interchangeable. Both women left diaries, and looking at the differences between their diaries allows for us to compare with specifics how their lives differed. Their daily lives may not have been earth-shattering, and at times, one can see the mundaneness of their daily lives that everyone experiences. However, through a close reading, there is a lot one can learn.

Despite both having kept diaries of their daily lives, the logistics of their diaries were quite different. Both the timespan of their diaries as well as the content which they discuss

notably varied quite a bit between the two. While Grimké's life was notable for her abolitionism and her work as an educator (which became a central focus of her journals), it can be much harder to glean a deep understanding of Davis' life beyond the surface-level observations. Several of her entries were difficult to read; she frequently spelt things phonetically, and rarely used punctuation. For example, in an entry that began on July 15th, 1864, Davis stated "cool this morning but pleasent quite busy all day I Practse a little to day Rachel was here this afternoon this evening likely smith and anna came up and spent quite a nice..." The entry trailed off here, before continuing the entry on July 16th, 1864, which started with the phrase "little time."<sup>34</sup> What Davis likely meant to convey was that Smith and Anna came up to visit Davis, during which they spent quite a nice little time together. The rest of the July 16th entry outlined how she received a letter from her sister (which bled over onto the July 17th entry). Much of her diary had been written like this, and it can be difficult to differentiate between entries, ideas, and even people. Many of her entries were quite brief, as well. She frequently commented on the weather and her lessons, but not much else had been brought to the table. Her everyday life had clearly been put on display, however, it was frequently surface-level at best. Does this mean, however, that there is nothing to gain from reading her diary?

According Judith Giesberg, "although [Emilie] was born free, Emilie Davis' early years were shaped by slavery", explaining that her parents had fled to Pennsylvania to escape slavery.<sup>35</sup> Giesberg went on to explain that her diary provided value by "allowing us to see how the Civil War was lived as part of everyday life"<sup>36</sup>, and ended her introduction by stating that she "hopes readers will allow themselves to forget what they think what they know about the war and

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<sup>34</sup> Davis, *Emilie Davis*, 113.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

instead *live* its memorable days, with Emilie Davis's pen as their guide."<sup>37</sup> In reading her diary, it became very easy to get lost in the mundane details that she described. However, as Giesberg commented, this is part of the value of her diary, and one can find moments where it is clear that she did have a very real stake in the war. For example, her very first entry (from January 1st, 1863), spoke about the ratification of the *Emancipation Proclamation*, stating "To day has bin a memorable day and i thank god i have been sperd to see it."<sup>38</sup> Her excitement was palpable, and she clearly felt a powerful emotional response towards Lincoln freeing the slaves. Entries like these are good examples of what Giesberg referred to above, in terms of how Davis interjected descriptions of her everyday life with mentions of important historical moments.

Whereas Davis demonstrated her happiness above, elsewhere, her sadness regarding events of the war was just as clear, such as in response to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. In her April 15th, 1865 entry, she wrote "very sad newes was received this morning of the murder of the President the city is in deep mourning", referencing the assassination of President Lincoln.<sup>39</sup> She spent several pages describing the sadness the city felt, (stating "the streets look mournful"<sup>40</sup>) as well as how she reacted to Lincoln's funeral procession, explaining that "it was the gravest funeral i ever saw."<sup>41</sup> At times, Davis' emotional state could be hard to interpret. She rarely mentioned her personal feelings (as in, very few of her entries stated specifically 'I am sad', 'I am excited', etc.). In order to better understand exactly how she felt in response to certain events, it is necessary to look at her specific syntax and other context clues. For example, in her discussion of Lincoln's death, she never stated 'I am sad', yet quotes such as 'very sad newes'

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 157.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 158.

and ‘the city is in deep mourning’ allowed insight into how *she* felt. In her discussion of the *Emancipation Proclamation*, she additionally stated how it had been a memorable day that she was grateful to have witnessed, implying happiness. Whilst she never outright stated ‘I am happy’, looking at her syntax thus allowed her emotional state of happiness and sadness to be reasonably interpreted.

Unlike Davis, Grimké’s diary was notable in that it was written from a period of nearly forty years, from 1854-1892. Her entries were also much more detailed than Davis, and some spanned for several pages, providing details on her day to day life, and her reaction to the world around her. Whereas Davis’ diary required some interpretation on how she personally felt in response to various events, Grimké often made her emotional state quite clear. One of the interesting things one can see is the everyday racism that Grimké experienced. For example, she told of one anecdote which took place on the 6th of July, 1859. She explained:

I was boarding with Mrs. R., a very good anti-slavery women... well, when I appeared at the dinner table today, it seems that a *gentleman* took umbrage at sitting at the same table with one whose skin chanced to be ‘not colored like his own’, and rose and left the table. Poor man! He feared contamination. But the charming part of the affair is that I with eyes intent upon my dinner, and [did not notice this person’s presence nor disappearance].<sup>42</sup>

In this quote, where Grimké experienced a white man not wanting to sit with her solely because of her skin color, she made her emotional response clear. She played up her indifference, such as how she did not even notice his presence since she was so focused on eating, but a quiet anger could also be seen. Referring to him as a ‘*gentleman*’ or calling him ‘Poor man!’ were sarcastic responses to what must have been an uncomfortable and rude situation, but she did her best to handle it in stride.

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<sup>42</sup>Grimké, *Journals*, 369-370.

This example of casual racism could not be seen in the same regard in Davis' diary. She did not share any anecdotes in which she personally felt victimized due to her race, although she did comment on race relations. In her May 19th, 1865 entry, she explained that "there was quite a riot down at cleront and lombard this evening between the blacks and whites."<sup>43</sup> However, she did not extrapolate on what occurred, and Giesberg equally made no reference to the riot. This does not mean that Davis did not feel connected with her race nor felt that being conscious of racism was unimportant. There were subtle hints in her diary to Davis' role as an abolitionist in Philadelphia. She made several references to seeing "Fred Douglass" (Frederick Douglass) speak, which is notable due to his status as a leading abolitionist during the war.<sup>44</sup> She also made references to an "organ", stating in her December 10th, 1863 entry "I have bin trying to collect money for the organ."<sup>45</sup> It is difficult to understand what an 'organ' may have been, but according to Giesberg, "Emilie's efforts to collect money for an 'organ' may have been for the Anti-Slavery Society or another abolitionist organization."<sup>46</sup> Reading her diary would make it easy to assume that Davis was very much a passive bystander regarding various events taking place during the war. These subtle mentions of her involvement in abolitionist work and seeing Frederick Douglass speak help demonstrate that this was not the case.

Another potential hint to Davis' involvement in the abolitionist movement came from Ella Forbes. In part of her book, Forbes spent time discussing the "Ladies' Union Association of Philadelphia", which she explained was an association that provided services such as "paying the passage home for a stranded freedwoman and purchasing shoes for destitute soldiers." She then

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<sup>43</sup> Giesberg, *Emilie Davis*, 163.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 76.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*.



provided a list of some of the members of the association, including none other than “Miss Emily Davis.”<sup>47</sup> Giesberg also mentioned the association, stating “the Ladies’ Union Association enjoyed considerable success as it raised money among members of Philadelphia’s African American Community and helped end the city’s streetcar segregation.”<sup>48</sup> Davis again referenced the ‘organ’ in a memoranda to her diary, simply stating “for the organ I Promised to go to the sisters to sew.”<sup>49</sup> Her involvement with the ‘organ’ demonstrated that Davis was more involved than what it seemed on the surface-level. Her diary remains a good example of an authentic daily life for a freed black women, since her diaries focused on the mundane events that everyone experiences. It is only with a closer reading that one can discern that despite the mundane qualities of her diary, she nonetheless played a role in anti-slavery organizations in Philadelphia during her life.

Grimké also made her role as an abolitionist quite clear. Early on in her diary, Grimké commented on *Poems of Phillis Wheatley*, asserting that “many of her poems are very beautiful. Her character and genius afford a striking proof of the falseness of the assertion made by some that hers is an inferior race.”<sup>50</sup> Like Davis, Grimké’s diary went into the more mundane details of her daily life, but as aforementioned, she gave much more depth about how her race and her life intertwine. She was a member of the Salem anti-slavery society, and attended anti-slavery meetings frequently.<sup>51</sup> Additionally, as a teacher, she relayed a desire to inspire and empower her students. In her November 13th, 1862 entry, she explained how she “talked to the children a little while to-day about the noble Toussaint. They listened very attentively. It is well that they sh’ld

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<sup>47</sup> Forbes, *African American Women*, 79.

<sup>48</sup> Davis, *Emilie Davis*, xx.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 137.

<sup>50</sup> Grimké, *Journals*, 92.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

know what one of their own color c'd do for his race."<sup>52</sup> She indubitably desired to empower and demonstrate to her students that despite the racism that they were surrounded by, there were people like them that could accomplish amazing things. Unlike Davis, where there were subtle references to her activism, Grimké's activism could be heard loud and clear.

An interesting theme that one could see, however, is that at times Grimké almost seemed to distance herself from her peers in the South. In speaking about Phillis Wheatly, Grimké asserted that "*hers* is an inferior race."<sup>53</sup> Phillis Wheatley was a slave, and the use of 'hers' is interesting, in that it seemed almost as if Grimké was attempting to distance herself from those who were still enslaved. This became more blatant later in her journals. In an entry from November 23, 1859, Grimké commented on how she attended a wedding between what seemed to be former slaves few days prior. She spent several sentences writing on what they were wearing, stating "t'was amusing to see some of the headresses", before finishing with "I am *truly* glad that the poor creatures are trying to live right and virtuous lives."<sup>54</sup> Once again, this feels as if she is trying to separate herself from her race. Phrases such as "poor creatures" implies a sort of superiority/hierarchy, which was a surprising attitude to find, especially from someone who clearly felt that it was important to empower her young black students.

One explanation surrounding this separation from her race could be due internalized racism. Grimké occasionally referenced how she did not feel beautiful. For example, in an anecdote in which she and her friends were discussing an Italian girl, she stated:

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 397.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 92.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 402.

Miss W.[hittier] showed us the picture of an Italian girl, in which she found a striking likeness to me. Everybody else agreed that there was a resemblance. But I utterly failed to see it: *I* thought the Italian girl was very pretty, and I know myself to be the very opposite.<sup>55</sup>

This anecdote certainly suggested internalized racism, since Grimké indicated that the main reason she found herself less attractive than the Italian girl was due to race. Why, then did Grimké feel this way despite her important activism? According to Stevenson, “perhaps Charlotte’s negative self-esteem resulted from her subconscious inculcation of popular views of black inferiority... her criticism of blacks, as of herself, was often severe.”<sup>56</sup> Stevenson also explained that “Charlotte certainly adopted white standards for beauty that caused her to think of herself as unattractive when by all accounts she was a pretty women.”<sup>57</sup> This is quite revealing. There is no doubt that America during this time period was incredibly racist, and the messages that Grimké would have grown up with and been inundated with certainly suggested that she was inferior to white women. In her mind, she may have been pretty, but she would never be as pretty as a *white* woman. Even though Grimké came across in her journals as strong, poised, and confident, she was not immune from these messages about race. She sought to empower her students and demonstrate that their race would and should not be a factor in which they would be held back, and yet she still fell into the same traps that she warned her students against. Perhaps this was why she felt it was so important to empower her students, since she knew the dangers that such racist messaging created.

Overall, the diaries of Emilie Davis and Charlotte Forten Grimké were, while at times mundane and uneventful, full of hidden messages and indications of a deeper relationship to race

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 373.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*.

than either of them let on. For Davis, her role as an activist was difficult to discern and label, as she made few references to her work. Yet, she still discussed her work raising funds and seeing abolitionist speakers, demonstrating that her daily life was less passive and more active than she let on. For Grimké, she made no secret of the fact that she wanted to empower her students and tackle the institutionalized racism that she grew up with. However, one can see that despite her strength, she was not immune from the messages of racial hierarchy that surrounded her.

### Chapter 3: The Slave Experience

There is a lot that one can learn from first hand accounts of slavery, especially those of slave women. It can be quite easy to generalize and stereotype the experiences of black slave women, without looking at the nuance and differences between them. Of the seven women in this thesis, four (Keckley, Truth, Jacobs, and Veney), spent a considerable part of their memoirs/biographies describing their time as slaves. By looking at what they have to say and share about their lives in enslavement, one can begin to better understand both the unique problems that these women faced due to their gender & their race, as well as understand the nuances that made their experiences different.

One framework that can be used to learn about the daily lives of these women are the stereotypes that surrounded black women in this era. In the book *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America*, Micki McElya explored the stereotype of the “faithful slave” and the “mammy” in the antebellum period. According to McElya, the “mammy” stereotype could be traced back to the 1830’s, “when members began using these stories to animate their assertions of slavery as benevolent and slave owning as honorable.”<sup>58</sup> She went on to explain how “the faithful slave narrative, however, went one step further to argue that enslaved people appeared faithful and caring not because the *had* to be or were violently compelled to be, but because their fidelity was heartfelt and indicative of their love for and dependence on their owners.”<sup>59</sup> She concluded her analysis of the “faithful slave” narrative by arguing that “this expression of paternalism, which included both the giving and the taking of

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<sup>58</sup> McElya, Micki, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), 4.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

care, affection, and responsibility, worked to obscure the brutal coercion of slavery.”<sup>60</sup> Her point was that the myth of the faithful slave was an incorrect and dangerous stereotype, which sought to minimize the brutalities of slavery. By taking this idea of “the faithful slave” as a lens in which we can look at the lives of the four women who were born into slavery, one can begin to dismantle this stereotype and better understand the relationship between these slave women and their masters.

In regards to the “faithful slave myth”, many of the women discussed their relationships with their masters in depth, and many demonstrated a certain level of loyalty to their masters and their homes in the South, especially in their younger years. Keckley explained how “one day, when I insisted on knowing whether [my master] would permit me to purchase myself,” her master replied by telling her that if she wanted to go, he would allow her to take the ferryboat to the North, where she would be free.<sup>61</sup> Keckley exhibited shock at his proposal, and expressed her desire to attain her freedom lawfully, telling her master “by the laws of the land I am your slave--you are my master, and I will only be free by such means as the laws of the country provide.”<sup>62</sup> It was only until she worked to earn \$1200 that she was able to attain her freedom legally. While her desire to stay with her master until she had legally obtained her freedom may be a sign of her undying loyalty to him (she wanted her freedom, but would only earn it in a way that would benefit her master), it could also be argued that Keckley was equally motivated to earn her freedom legally as a way of protecting herself. It can be tempting to fall into the trap of questioning why slaves made certain choices (i.e, choosing to stay and work for her freedom

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* 9.

<sup>61</sup> Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 48.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

rather than simply fleeing in Keckley's case), but that would ignore the massive power structures that existed against slaves.

One physical manifestation of this power structure is the 1850 *Fugitive Slave Act*. Drafted in response to a rise in escaped slaves, the act stated that slaveowners had the right to “take and remove such fugitives from service or labor, under the restrictions herein contained, to the State or Territory from which such persons may have escaped or fled.”<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, it also explained that those in the North were legally required to help the slave owners find their escaped slaves. The bill stated “any person who shall knowingly and willingly obstruct, hinder, or prevent such claimant [from finding their slaves] will be subject to a fine not exceeding one thousand dollars, and imprisonment not exceeding six months.”<sup>64</sup> Acts such as this one made it incredibly difficult for escaped slaves to survive, since the law made it legal for their masters to not only track them down, but also made it illegal for their allies in the North to help them. This helps illuminate why Keckley may have felt so determined to obtain her freedom legally. Majors reflected this motivation, explaining how “Keckley could not bear the idea of being tracked by hounds or being placed under arrest as a fugitive.”<sup>65</sup> While it may have meant staying enslaved longer while she worked, becoming legally free implied that she would not have to worry about acts such as this one bringing her back into slavery. Being legally free meant being able to survive much more easily. Keckley did not work to legally obtain her freedom out of loyalty to her master, rather, she did it for survival.

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<sup>63</sup> “Fugitive Slave Act 1850”, The Avalon Project, accessed March 21st, 2017, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/fugitive.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/fugitive.asp).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Majors, *Noted Negro Women*, 259.

Veney also expressed loyalty to her home in “Ole Virginny”. Veney obtained her freedom following her being purchased by a group of abolitionists living in the South, who subsequently freed her and took her and her family back North with them. Upon arriving North, Veney expressed mixed emotions, explaining:

In the Southern kitchen, under slave rule, there was little thought of convenience or economy. Here I found all sorts of Yankee inventions and improvements to make work easy and pleasant. There were dishes and pans of every description, clean and distinct cloths for all purposes, brushes and brooms for different uses. I couldn't help feeling bewildered sometimes at the difference in so many ways, and for a moment wished myself back in "old Virginny," with my own people; and I very, very often longed to see the old familiar faces and hear the old sounds, but never could I forget to be grateful for my escape from a system under which I had suffered so much.<sup>66</sup>

There are several emotions one can see here: nostalgia (“I longed to see the old familiar faces”), gratitude (“Never could I forget to be grateful for my escape”), and loneliness (“for a moment I wished myself back in “old Virginny” with my own people”). This is not to say that Veney was not grateful or happy to be free, but it does challenge the generalization that the number one goal of slaves was to be free. Freedom may have been the goal, and Veney very much expressed satisfaction to have become free, but Veney clearly missed some aspects of her life as a slave. She acknowledged her gratefulness to be free, but still expressed nostalgia for home, regardless of the cruelties she endured there. It would be dangerous to misinterpret her words-- Veney did not say that she missed being enslaved, or that her experience “was not that bad”. The fact that she spent much of her life as a slave likely meant that, if nothing else, she had learned how to survive, and by moving North, she had to relearn everything she had known.

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<sup>66</sup> Veney, *Narrative*, 39.



One major theme that all four women touched on was “loss of innocence”, i.e, becoming aware of their status as slaves and the horrors that they would face due to this status. Jacobs offered a particularly powerful anecdote regarding betrayal from her master, which catalyzed her awareness of her slave status. According to Jacobs, “my mistress was so kind to me that I was always glad to do her bidding, and proud to labor for her as much as my young years would permit.”<sup>67</sup> However, upon her mistress's' death, Jacobs explained that:

She had promised my dying mother that her children should never suffer for anything; and when I remembered that, and recalled her many proofs of attachment to me, I could not help having some hopes that she had left me free... but, alas! We all know that the memory of a faithful slave does not avail much to save her children from the auction block.<sup>68</sup>

Despite her mistress's promise, Jacobs remained a slave, and expressed a desire “to blot out from my memory that one great wrong.”<sup>69</sup> It was the first loss of innocence in her life, and the first time she had been awakened to her existence and purpose *as* a slave. It also demonstrates the potential dangers of loyalty. She may have been loyal and devoted to her first mistress, but in the end, as she reflected, this did not change her future, nor provide her any form of special treatment.

Like Jacobs, Veney as a child was not aware of her status as a slave. For example, during her childhood, Veney explained that her master would occasionally have her sing and perform for his friends, having her sing songs such as:

Where are you going, Jim?  
Where are you going, Sam?  
To get a proper larning,  
To jump Jim Crow.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents*, 14.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>70</sup> Veney, *Narrative*, 9.

This song, which mentioned Jim Crow<sup>71</sup>, had explicit racial undertones, which Veney explained that “the meaning of which I had of course no idea.”<sup>72</sup> It was not until her master died and she was sent to live with her new mistress that Veney became aware of her status as a slave and the cruelties that accompanied that. Her new mistress, named Miss Lucy, married a man named Davis Kibbler, whom she described as a “a man of most violent temper, ready to fight anything or anybody who resisted his authority or in any way crossed his path.”<sup>73</sup> His treatment of Veney clearly had an effect on her; she ended the chapter explaining “I have sometimes tried to picture what my life might have been could I have been set free at that age; and I have imagined myself with a young girl's ambition, working hard and carefully saving my earnings...”<sup>74</sup> Like Jacobs, it was the first time in which she was both aware of her slave status and understood that as a slave, she would be unable to attain many of the things that she dreamed about.

While it took Veney & Jacobs quite a while to become aware of their status as slaves, Truth and Keckley both demonstrated awareness at a very early age. Truth described the living situations in which she and her fellow slaves were forced into, explaining “a cellar, under this hotel, was assigned to his slaves, as their sleeping apartment--all the slaves he possessed of both sexes, sleeping (as is quite common in a state of slavery) in the same room.”<sup>75</sup> These living conditions left a lasting negative impression on Truth, as she exclaimed “she shudders, even now, as she goes back in memory and revisits this cellar, and sees its inmates, of both sexes and all

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<sup>71</sup> The song which Veney sung was likely in reference to the song “Jump Jim Crow”, which had been made popular by Thomas D. Rice, who performed the song in blackface. Blackface was often performed by whites as a way of portraying black men and women as racist caricatures. For more information on the history of Jim Crow, read *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* by C. Vann Woodward.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 11

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>75</sup> Truth, *Narrative*, 14.

ages, sleeping on those damp boards, like the horse.”<sup>76</sup> Keckley also stated the mixed emotions she felt about her childhood, stating “My recollections of childhood are distinct, perhaps for the reason that many stirring incidents are associated with that period... some pleasant, and others sad.”<sup>77</sup> There is a dichotomy here: both Jacobs and Veney expressed relative naivety and innocence in their early childhoods, while Truth and Keckley both vividly remember their childhoods, and the various horrors that they witnessed at that time. Their loss of innocence came early, since they, unlike Jacobs and Veney, were subjected to the harsher elements of slavery right off the bat. All of them eventually reached a point where they were aware both of their status and of the horrors that came with their status.

All four women also touched on betrayal by their masters, particularly in relationship to the promise of freedom. In regards to betrayal by her master, Veney experienced a similar situation as Jacobs, where her master failed to deliver on her promise of freedom. Veney’s new master, Miss Lucy, was clearly a person whom Veney respected. At one point, after being beaten by Kibbler, Veney exclaimed “Poor Miss Lucy! She was kind and tender-hearted. She often said she hated slavery, and wanted nothing to do with it; but she could see no way out of it.”<sup>78</sup> It is interesting that despite Veney being the victim of the beating, she felt that Miss Lucy equally suffered. Later, however, Veney’s relationship with Miss Lucy took a sharp turn. According to Veney:

Miss Lucy now told me, if I would be contented and stay quietly where I was, and not be married, she would, when her nephew Noe came to be of age, give me my freedom. Instead of this, however, I was told soon after that she had made her will, bequeathing me already to this nephew. I was never sure this was true. Her kindness to me and my love for her made it always seem impossible.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>77</sup> Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 17.

<sup>78</sup> Veney, *Narrative*, 11.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

It is clear from this quote that a major source of contention in Veney's early life was loyalty to her master. Even when Miss Lucy failed to deliver on a promise to Veney (similarly to Jacobs' mistress), Veney did not react in the same way as Jacobs did. Jacobs' reaction was very indignant, and it was clear that she felt shocked, hurt, and betrayed by her mistress. Here, however, even after being let down by Miss Lucy, Veney still did not seem to demonstrate strong emotion by the betrayal. At most, she seemed to struggle with the nature of their relationship, since she viewed Lucy's treatment of her as kind and just, and was unable to be angry at Lucy's betrayal, despite the fact that she had seemingly lost her chance at being free.

Truth and Keckley also shared anecdotes of how they had been initially promised freedom, yet were betrayed by their masters. As a slave in New York, Truth was comparably lucky in that the state of New York had planned on emancipating all the slaves in the state by July 4th, 1827. According to Truth:

Isabella's master told her if she would do well, and be faithful, he would give her 'free papers,' one year before she was legally free by statute. In the year 1826, she had a badly diseased hand, which greatly diminished her usefulness; but on the arrival of July 4, 1827, the time specified for her receiving her 'free papers,' she claimed the fulfilment of her master's promise; but he refused granting it, on account (as he alleged) of the loss he had sustained by her hand.<sup>80</sup>

Truth lost her chance at freedom simply because her master had deemed that her work had not been satisfactory enough. Truth demonstrated sincere anger surrounding the betrayal by her master: She stated that:

“the slaveholders are TERRIBLE for promising to give you this or that, or such and such a privilege, if you will do thus and so; and when the time of fulfilment comes, and one claims the promise, they, forsooth, recollect nothing of the kind; and you are, like as not, taunted with being a LIAR; or, at best, the slave is accused of not having performed his part or condition of the contract.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Truth, *Narrative*, 39.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 40.

Whereas Veney struggled to accept the fact that her beloved Miss Lucy had betrayed her, Truth viewed the situation similarly to Jacobs, in that she felt that she had been unfairly treated, and expressed frustration at the fact that there seemingly was not much she could do to change her master's decision. This betrayal would become the catalyst for Truth's decision to escape, which will be explored in detail in chapter four.

Keckley's desire to earn her freedom "legally" led her to work hard under her master. However, as Keckley explained, "I went to work in earnest to purchase my freedom, but the years passed, and I was still a slave. Mr. Garland's family claimed so much of my attention--in fact, I supported them--that I was not able to accumulate anything."<sup>82</sup> She was forced to use the money she had worked so hard to obtain on the very family she was attempting to emancipate herself from. In Keckley's case, it was her loyalty that ultimately became a detriment to her, as it prevented her from attaining her freedom that she deeply wanted. Her master did not trick/deceive her in the way that the other three had been, yet her position ultimately remained the same: she was still a slave. It was not until Keckley's friends got her the \$1200 that she finally achieved freedom.

Despite all four women being betrayed by their masters in relation to their freedom, all of their reactions were quite different. For Jacobs, who had believed she would be granted freedom in her master's will, only to discover that her role as a faithful slave guaranteed nothing, her master's choice to not free her was her first awakening in regards to her life as a slave. She, along with Truth, responded to their situations quite indignantly. Whereas this betrayal would be

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<sup>82</sup> Keckley, *30 Years*, 50.

the first of many that Jacobs would endure as a slave, for Truth, this marked the final straw, and she would escape soon after. Veney struggled to comprehend the betrayal, and exhibited shock that her beloved master would treat her in that way. Keckley also struggled to gain her freedom legally, being forced to accommodate the needs of her master before her own. She had to rely on her community in order to obtain her freedom.

Looking back at the “myth of the faithful slave”, it could be argued that Veney & Keckley best exemplified this myth. Whereas Truth and Jacobs both demonstrated considerable anger and indignance towards their masters and their situations, both Keckley and Veney demonstrated personal loyalty to their masters and their homes in the South. However, it is important to distinguish between the “faithful slave” stereotype and the forms of loyalty that Veney and Keckley exhibited. As McElya stated, the “faithful slave” stereotype was created as a way of minimizing the abusive nature of slavery, and asserts that slaves remained out of loyalty to their masters. In a way, Keckley and Veney *do* embody this stereotype, since they both remained out of loyalty, even if it came at a considerable cost to themselves. However, it is important to remember that neither of them minimize the horrors they experienced as slaves. The best way to distinguish between Keckley & Veney’s loyalty to their masters and the “faithful slave myth” is to look at their situations with a lot of nuance. Both were loyal, yes, and faithful could easily be a term that applies to them. However, both were still driven to become free. The faithful slave myth asserts that there was no desire for slaves to free themselves-- they were happy, loyal, and comfortable. In looking at Veney’s and Keckley’s lives, this was clearly not the case. Both women faced considerable struggles in their lives, and both felt the need to get out. This simple assertion that they could be happier elsewhere directly contradicts the myth of the faithful slave.

They were not willing to sacrifice their entire lives for the sake of their masters, but they were willing to wait it out for as long as they needed. Therefore, while they may have exhibited similarities to the myth, it can be seen here that they ultimately were not the stereotype that the myth wanted them to be.

## Chapter 4: Slave Agency

A common stereotype that has permeated through the history of slavery is the idea that slaves were inherently powerless. They spent their lives completely at the mercy of their master, and while some found ways to escape, the vast majority had very little autonomy. In many ways, this is true-- as Ella Forbes and Chandra Manning both argued, it is important to recognize the immense racism that slaves, both male and female, faced. In a society where the power structure relied on enslaving an entire group of people, it is understandable that there would have been a limit on how much agency slaves could have exhibited, no matter their personal strength. Of course, there are exceptions. Harriet Tubman is a notable example of a slave who was able to exhibit considerable autonomy and strength in order to save both herself and many others from enslavement. Despite the limits on her autonomy due to both her race and her gender, she became one of the most iconic black women in the history of the United States. Not everyone could emulate Tubman, however, and it is important to examine exactly how other slaves maintained autonomy in their lives. Looking at the lives of Harriet Jacobs and Sojourner Truth can help illuminate the answer to this question of exactly how female slaves exhibited and maintained their personal autonomy and agency.

In order to discuss the idea of slave agency, it is important to first define and attempt to understand what agency is. The dictionary definition of agency is “the capacity, condition, or state of acting or exerting power.”<sup>83</sup> However, this is obviously too broad of a definition, especially in context of U.S. slavery. Therefore, within the context of the lives of these women, agency can be best described as “one’s capacity to resist”. Slaveowners required their slaves to

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<sup>83</sup>Merriam-Webster dictionary. *Definition of Agency*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/agency>



“stay in their place”. Fighting back and resisting could be met with severe punishment, and it was in the master’s interest to maintain complete control over their slaves. Therefore, by looking agency as acts of resistance against slavery, we can begin to better understand exactly how slave women were able to maintain agency.

What defines resistance? How can it be classified, and what falls under that classification? There are several different ways to classify resistance, but I argue that in this context, agency could be classified into two categories: internal and external. The most basic internal form one can see is simply the refusal to be broken. The institution of slavery existed to break those whom it enslaved, to better serve the purposes of slaveowners, therefore survival as a form of resistance should not be understated. It qualifies as ‘internal’ agency because it would have required immense personal strength and conviction. It could also be argued that this also represented a more ‘passive’ form of agency, since employing this strength to survive did not necessarily constitute these women becoming active agents of change. It is important to understand that this does not make this form of agency any less valid, only less overt.

What about the more overt forms? One example could be these women daring to tell their stories. Again going back to the myth of the faithful slave, one component of said myth was that slaves needed to be silenced in order to maintain this image of happiness. A slave that dared to speak out against their enslavement could have potentially disastrous consequences (in the minds of slaveowners). Therefore, by telling their stories and being outspoken against the institution of slavery is one example of ‘external’ agency, since it allowed these women to both share their stories as well as try and catalyze action from the North. It exposed their readers to the horrors of slavery through the eyes of a slave women. The most obvious form of ‘external’ agency,

however, is escaping. Escaping arguably could be seen as the biggest form of resistance, since it involved physically removing oneself from the institution. It sent a message that they were no longer willing to participate. It is important to not place value on certain types of agency over other forms, however. Any form of agency and resistance that one could exhibit, especially considering the oppressive society that these women lived in, was valid.

As previously stated, one thing to be cautious of is to not overstate how much agency these women could exhibit. Marjoleine Kars, in her article “Dodging Rebellion: Politics and Gender in the Berbice Slave Uprising in 1763”, argued that “we know that all people have agency”, and instead framed the question as “so what can we learn from the experiences of enslaved people, especially women, in the midst of a messy, dangerous, and tenuous process of self-emancipation?” She ultimately argued that “the question, in other words, is not the role of women in rebellion, but rather the role of rebellion in the lives of women.”<sup>84</sup> Trying to prove that black women had agency is not the right problem on which to focus. Everyone has agency, no matter their situation. It is much more fruitful to examine the various ways in which these women exhibited agency. They all dealt with their enslavement in their own way, yet all of them survived, and possessed the daring and fortitude to write their stories after the fact. As Kars pointed out, “historians of rebellion have tended to see men’s experiences as normative,”<sup>85</sup> but there are many ways studying women can contribute a better understanding of the gendered and raced nature of slavery & the war.

This chapter will explore how Harriet Jacobs and Sojourner Truth managed to exhibit and maintain agency as female slaves. It will be divided into various subsections, that will focus on

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<sup>84</sup> Marjoleine Kars, “Dodging Rebellion: Politics and Gender in the Berbice Slave Uprising in 1763”, *The American Historical Review* 121 (2016): 41-42., accessed December 11, 2016, doi:10.1093/ahr/121.1.39,

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

different themes and methods of agency that these women exhibited. By looking at their stories, one can learn how these women, despite the massive systematic discrimination that they faced, maintained agency in a variety of ways, in order to survive their brutal ordeals.

### *Intersectionality & Writing*

As discussed in the introduction, Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality provided an important framework to look at in this thesis. If race constituted the only issue that these women faced, then this thesis would include the memoirs of both black men and black women. For these women, their status as women was also an important and informative part of their lives. In the writings of Jacobs and Truth, one can see how they referenced their gender and how it intertwined with their race, and used this relationship to call out the women of the North for not helping out their black counterparts in the South. One theme that permeates throughout black history is theme of white women leaving black women behind, and this can be seen in Jacobs' struggle to get her memoir published.

Jean Yellin explained how, upon finishing her memoir and looking for a publisher, Jacobs turned to the famous abolitionist author Harriet Beecher Stowe (author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) to write a preface to her memoir. Despite Jacobs' enthusiasm to potentially involve Stowe in her project, Stowe eventually rejected the idea, stating "if her situation as a Slave should be known it would subject her to much petting and patronizing which would be more pleasing to a young Girl than useful."<sup>86</sup> Essentially, Stowe stated that she did not want to meet with Jacobs out of concern that Jacobs would feel patronized by Stowe's peers, since her status as a slave would lead to people to treat her differently. Whilst Stowe offered to "incorporate [the memoir] into *The Key to*

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<sup>86</sup> Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs*, 120.

*Uncle Tom's Cabin*", Jacobs was shocked and hurt at Stowe's rejection. Yellin explained that, following Stowe's rejection, Jacobs was "smarting from the racial insult in Stowe's dismissal."<sup>87</sup>

This is important in the fact that even with prominent white abolitionist women such as Stowe, Jacobs still felt that she had been left behind, due to her race. Jacobs wanted to involve Stowe in her memoir because "she actually could, she felt, be a value to the cause."<sup>88</sup> By involving another prominent abolitionist, Jacobs believed that she would be able to make a positive impact on those who were still trapped in slavery, as well as make an impression on those in the North who were standing by and watching. With Stowe's rejection, not only did Jacobs feel as though her opportunity to be of use had been diminished, but it showed that Stowe and other white women did not feel particularly inclined to involve black women in their work. Jacobs not only had to struggle with her status as a woman in order to get her work published, but she had to battle with her race as well, since not even white female abolitionists had an interest in involving her.

Truth also brought up intersectionality in various writings from throughout her life. For example, in her well-known speech "Ain't I a Woman?", she first criticized men for not seeing her in the same light as white women, stating "that man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages... but nobody ever helps me into carriages,"<sup>89</sup> highlighting the racism she faced as a person of color. She then pointed out the sexism within the black community, stating "then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men."<sup>90</sup> Truth's criticism of 'that little man in black' likely represented condemning black men for leaving black

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 120.

<sup>89</sup> Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a Woman?" (speech, Akron, Ohio, May 29, 1851), Modern History Sourcebook, <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp>

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*.

women behind. Truth felt betrayed by the fact that black men also had no interest in providing black women with a seat at the table, since Truth clearly was not getting a seat from white men.

Both Jacobs' and Truth's writings demonstrated how they felt that they were getting left behind by their black brothers and white sisters. This awareness of their limited status as black women, especially in conjunction with black men and white women, appeared as a theme throughout their respective memoirs. Tying this back into agency, one of the most potent forms of agency is to call out and point a finger towards the problem. By simply raising awareness surrounding the fact that their status as black *and* female was causing them to be left behind, they could begin the process of stopping it.

This theme of feeling betrayed by the women of the North is prevalent in the prefaces of both Truth's and Jacobs' memoirs. Like demonstrated above, in their memoirs, they wanted to call out the racism they faced and raise awareness surrounding the horrors they faced in their lives. Their motivations were very clear: they wanted to try and shock the North into action, as well as criticize those in the North (specifically white women) for their passivity and complacency. Truth began her memoir by blatantly criticizing the institution of slavery as well as the role white women had to play:

That system of oppression which seeks to cripple the intellect, impair the understanding, and deprave the hearts of its victims—a system which has subjected to its own foul purposes, in the United States, all that is wealthy, talented, influential, and reputedly pious, in an overwhelming measure... it is hoped that the perusal of the following Narrative may increase the sympathy that is felt for the suffering colored population of this country, and inspire to renewed efforts for the liberation of all who are pining in bondage on the American soil.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Truth, *Narrative*, vi-xi.

It is hard to mistake her intentions. Truth simultaneously wanted to make the world aware of the plights the enslaved still faced, as well as stimulate those in the North towards fighting for their liberation.

Jacobs demonstrated similar desires to awaken white America to the struggles of the slaves. In the preface of her memoir, she explained that:

I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself; on the contrary, it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own story... I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I have suffered, and most of them far worse.<sup>92</sup>

Like Truth, she made a point to establish that her motivation was to raise awareness surrounding the cruelties of slavery, not to give herself attention. Jacobs wanted to force those in the North (specifically white women) to wake up to the plights of their counterparts in the South. Neither Jacobs or Truth wrote just for themselves (although it could be argued that writing/dictating their stories was a way of processing their trauma), instead, they used their stories to provide a narrative in which those in the North could better understand the horrors of slavery. Telling their stories constituted a part of their resistance, since they knew that their stories were shocking and difficult to process.

### *Harriet Jacobs & The Drive to Survive*

Examining writing *as* a form of agency is fascinating, but what is equally as interesting is the ways that these women maintained agency during their time as slaves. In the chapter “The Slave Who Dared to Feel Like a Man”, Jacobs went into an in depth explanation of how she and her siblings struggled to understand their enslavement. She explained that her brother Benjamin

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<sup>92</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents*, 2.

had “a spirit too bold and daring for a slave,” while she herself had been repeatedly told by her master that she “was made for his use... that I was nothing for a slave.”<sup>93</sup> Again, this ties back to the myth of the faithful slave. Slaves needed to be broken, and telling Jacobs she had no worth was just one way of doing so. Her master’s attempts did not work, however, as Jacobs later explained how, at fourteen years old, she discovered newfound personal strength. Jacobs stated that, at this point in her life, “the war of my life had begun; and though one of God’s most powerless creatures, I resolved never to be conquered.”<sup>94</sup> The roots of Jacob’s resistance could be found here, since she resolved to never be broken by the institution, despite the insistence by her master and the institution itself that she would be. Her decision to never be broken represented an internal form of agency, since it required an internal strength to survive.

Of course, this is not to say that Jacobs did not struggle to maintain her strength. Anyone would in the face of her situation. She referenced several times that while she had resolved to stay strong in the face of her oppression, she nonetheless struggled to find hope or solace. For example, in describing the sexual abuse by her master, she wrote that while her “soul revolted against the tyranny”, she nonetheless sought to find the strength to resist, explaining that she was too terrified to confide in even her grandmother (due to the shame and fear she felt). Jacobs later described “what days and nights of fear and sorrow that man caused me.”<sup>95</sup> She made it clear that during her time with her abusive master was a particularly dark chapter in her life.

The sexual abuse by her master, Dr. Flint, constituted an important theme of her life, and relates back to the issue of gender roles on plantations. Jacobs explained how Flint had abused her and several other slaves on his plantation, stating “My master was, to my knowledge, the

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

father of 11 slaves...” She went on to explain how his abuse was an open secret, since “[everyone] knew the terrible consequences” if the secret became public knowledge.<sup>96</sup> Part of Dr. Flint’s firm control of his slaves constituted forcing them all to live in fear of his wrath, and for Jacobs, this represented one of the most difficult parts of her life. She described the jealousy of Dr. Flint’s wife, whom, like other Southern women, “[knew] that [their husband was] the father of many little slaves. They do not trouble themselves about it... they regard such children as property, as marketable as the pigs on the plantation.”<sup>97</sup> The jealousy of Flint’s wife eventually forced Jacobs “to become fearful of my life. It had often been threatened; and you can imagine, better than I can describe, what an unpleasant sensation it must produce to wake up in the dead of night and find a jealous women bending over you.”<sup>98</sup>

Jacob’s description of her sexual abuse is important for several reasons. She once again used her description of the abuse as a way of highlighting how white women failed to support black women. Jacobs pointed out the hypocrisy in the behavior of Southern white women, in that they married slaveowners knowing that they had fathered children with their slaves, yet still blamed the slaves for this, rather than their husbands. Additionally, Jacobs’ discussion of her abuse by Dr. Flint highlighted a problem unique to female slaves. Within the power structure of the slave plantation, Jacobs was at the absolute bottom of the totem pole. When she attempted to stand up against Flint, he would try and gaslight her, stating “have I ever treated you like a negro? I have never allowed you to be punished, not even to please your mistress. And this is the recompense I get, you ungrateful girl!”<sup>99</sup> When she was not facing his abuse, she had to worry

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 56.



about his wife, to the point that she lived in fear for her life. To survive in the face of this abuse indubitably had to have required immense mental fortitude, and Jacobs *did* survive, but as established above, Jacobs made it clear that this nearly broke her.

How, then, did Jacobs find the strength to resist Flint's efforts to break Jacobs? The answer lies in one of Jacobs' most important relationships: her grandmother. According to Jacobs, her grandmother was incredibly resourceful, and became an asset to her masters to the extent that they "could see it was for their interest to take care of such a valuable piece of property."<sup>100</sup> Her grandmother's resourcefulness and capability clearly had an influence on Jacob's strength. Ultimately, her grandmother's skill and faithfulness to her mistress that led her mistress to decide to free Jacobs' grandmother upon her death. Unfortunately, Jacobs explained that upon her grandmother's mistress' death, "[the new owner] explained to the faithful old servant that, under existing circumstances, it was necessary she should be sold."<sup>101</sup> On the day of the auction, Jacobs' grandmother was bought and freed by her mistress' cousin, who "knew how faithfully she had served her owners, and how cruelly she had been defrauded of her rights."<sup>102</sup> Her reliability and skill allowed her to maintain a network that would eventually pay her work forward by providing her freedom. Jacobs and her grandmother exhibited different varieties of agency-- Jacobs' main form of resistance was simply not being broken, which constituted an internal form of resistance. Her grandmother, on the other hand, had a much more external form of resistance, since her role as a important figure in the community led her to be freed, thanks to how hard she served. Jacobs examined that "to this good grandmother I was indebted for many

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<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

comforts.”<sup>103</sup> Arguably the greatest gift her grandmother passed on was Jacobs’ will to survive, since even during her darkest moments, Jacobs still managed to resist Flint’s endless attempts to break her.

*Agency through Religion*

Truth’s time as a slave became, like Jacobs, a formative time for her.. She expressed her frustration at her first master’s “inherited habit among slaveholders, of expecting a willing and intelligent obedience from the slave, because he is a MAN.”<sup>104</sup> This ties back into the aforementioned belief that slaves should be meek, quiet, and obedient at all times, as well as the theme of the relationship between gender and slavery. The slaveholder’s status as a man allowed him certain privileges that Truth felt were undeserved, and Truth clearly felt that his beliefs regarding how slaves should behave were incorrect.

Like Jacobs, Truth was forced to find a way of surviving despite the harsh realities she lived in. Whereas Jacobs’ capacity to resist was primarily internal, Truth’s source of strength & resistance was much more external. Truth explained that, as a young girl, her mother taught her that there was a God who, when they prayed to him, would always help.<sup>105</sup> This wound up being an incredibly influential revelation for Truth, as her relationship with God would help her survive some of her darkest moments. She told of one particular anecdote where, when she was 9 years old, she received one of the worst beatings of her life. Following the beating, she explained how:

In these hours of her extremity, she did not forget the instructions of her mother, to go to God in all her trials, and every affliction; and she not only remembered, but obeyed: going to him, 'and telling him all--and asking him if he thought it was right,' and begging him to protect and shield her from her persecutors.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>104</sup> Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 14.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

Whereas Jacobs pulled on her internal strength and the spirit of her grandmother, Truth found internal strength *through* her relationship with God. Anytime she faced a particularly difficult situation, she was able to pray to God to get her through it. Interestingly, like Jacobs' grandmother, Truth had a parental figure who helped introduce her to this form of agency. Both of these figures were quite important in the lives of Jacobs and Taylor, and helped provide them with the tools they needed to maintain their capacity to resist.

Religion was an important part in many slaves lives. In the book *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord*, author Blake Touchstone explained that in the world of the planter south, "religion promoted both docility and rebellion", but ultimately, religion "gave meaning and purpose to those in bondage, buttressing both individual and communal identities."<sup>107</sup> While he explained that religion could be used as a method of control, since "Christianity would make slaves contented, happy, and faithful,"<sup>108</sup> he also explained that there were several other masters who felt that "religious instruction was dangerous, expensive, and a needless bother."<sup>109</sup> Even if slaveowners intended on using religion to make their slaves docile and calm, this does not necessarily mean that it could not *also* be a form of resistance. Even if it kept slaves from acting out, if it allowed them to better maintain hope and strength, then it easily could be seen as a form of resistance as well.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Blake Touchstone, "Planter and Slave Religion," in *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord*, ed. John B. Boles, (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 99.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, 106.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, 109.

<sup>110</sup> A unique theme that occurs in the history of marginalized groups is the idea of claiming or reclaiming ideas or terms that were previously used to maintain their oppression. Examples of this include black communities reclaiming the word 'n\*\*\*\*\*', LGBT+ communities reclaiming the term 'queer', or recently, women claiming the word 'slut' (such as the annual slut-walk). In the context of slavery and religion, I argue that slaves could claim religion for themselves as a way of resistance, even if it was intended to be used as a method of control.

The idea of agency through religion is one that permeated through not only Truth's narrative, but Bethany Veney's, as well. Early in her life, Veney told an anecdote of how she "got" religion after being taken to a religious meeting by her master's neighbour. She described how she was deeply affected by the hymns and felt inspired to follow religion, stating "as soon as I reached home and was alone, I knelt down, and in my feeble and ignorant way begged to be saved. From that day to this, I have been praying and trying to do as I thought my heavenly Master has required of me; and I think I have had the witness of the Spirit."<sup>111</sup> Despite her newfound faith, her master told her that "he was not going to have me running to meeting all the time any longer. He had decided to send me [two miles away], there to stay until I should get over my 'religious fever.'"<sup>112</sup> It is clear that her master fit into the latter group that Touchstone described; the group that felt that religion for slaves was both dangerous and unnecessary.

Despite her master's limitations on Veney's participation in religion, Veney made it clear that her spirituality would not be stopped, and like Truth, Veney was able to rely on her religious spirit to resist being broken. At one point in her life, Veney was imprisoned, and faced the possibility of never seeing her home or her children again. During her time in prison, Veney described an anecdote in which she overheard the jail keeper's daughter singing a hymn: which helped transformed Veney's attitude:

I can never forget the impression these *words* and the *music* and the tones of Jackoline's voice made upon me. It seemed to me as if they all came directly out of heaven. It was my Saviour speaking directly to me. Was not *I* passing the deep waters? What rivers of woe could be sorer than these through which I was passing? Would not this righteous, omnipotent hand uphold me and help me? Yes, here was His word for it. I would trust it; and I was comforted.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Veney, *Narrative*, 16.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

The music that Veney heard obviously had a massive impact on her. Whereas she had originally “got” religion by attending religious meetings, this marked the first time in which Veney felt positively influenced by it. Her time in prison was clearly one of the darkest moments of Veney’s life, but this moment allowed her to find solace and strength. Like Truth and Jacobs in their early lives, Veney maintained a more internal form of resistance. Her time in prison very nearly did break her, and it was only through the religious spirit that she found the strength to persevere. Thankfully, her ordeal in the prison ended on a positive note, with Veney eventually being able to return home and be reunited with her children.

Unlike Veney and Truth, who found solace through religion, Jacobs criticized religion, and pointed out the hypocrisy of her masters’ relationship with God. She explained that “[Mrs. Flint] was a member of the church; but partaking of the Lord’s supper did not put her in a Christian frame of mind.”<sup>114</sup> She went on to describe the various cruelties that Mrs. Flint would inflict upon the slaves. Jacobs also mentioned several times how she saw through the hypocrisy of religion & slavery. She explained how many “clergymen who go to the south, for the first time, has usually some feeling, however vague, that slavery is wrong...” but upon being influenced by the slaveholders to believe that slavery was not that bad (again tying back into the myth of the faithful slave), “the clergymen comes home... and assures people that he has been to the south, and seen slavery for himself; that it is a beautiful ‘patriarchal institution’, and that the slaves don’t want their freedom,” because instead of freedom, the slaves have religion.<sup>115</sup> Jacobs clearly felt here that religion did not help the slaves, but it instead hurt them, since their faith in religion *diminished* their capacity to resist. For Jacobs, resisting meant standing strong internally,

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<sup>114</sup> Jacobs, *Incident*, 22.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, 114.

no matter the obstacles she faced. Religion, to her, did not represent a frame of mind that would strengthen her spirit, rather, it represented another way that her master could attempt to control her with. She also disagreed vehemently with the idea that slaves did not need freedom, since they had religion. Religion, in her mind, did not help slaves resist, rather, it made it harder for them to resist in a more meaningful way.

There is a dichotomy here. Veney and Truth both established religion as an avenue in which they could remain strong in the face of their oppression. Jacobs, however, elaborated on the ideas presented by Touchstone that religion was an avenue in which masters could control their slaves. The conclusion that can be drawn from this dichotomy is that religion could ultimately serve as both. Religion absolutely served as a way of controlling one's slaves. It was a way of "dulling the blade", in the sense that if masters would provide this one concession in the form of giving his slaves access to religion, then it would dull the slave's desire to try and fight back or escape. However, as Truth and Veney established, religion could just as easily serve as a way in which a slave could maintain strength despite their masters attempts to break them, and both eventually found ways to attain their freedom. Religion did not coerce Truth or Veney into passivity, rather, it gave them a framework that they could use to keep hope, and as established above, keeping hope absolutely constituted a form of resistance. Even if their involvement *had* come through coercion by their masters, if it provided them and other slaves with any form of solace, then their involvement should not be seen as a bad thing. Jacobs eventually conceded that "slaves never seemed so happy as when shouting and singing at religious meetings."<sup>116</sup> Even she could acknowledge that religion was one of the few ways slaves could feel happy hopeful. Any

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<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, 107.

form of happiness that one could attain as a slave was likely something that they would have clung on to with all their might, and for some, that would have been more than enough.

### *Active Agents of Change*

As seen above, both Jacobs and Truth struggled to resist their enslavement and maintain autonomy during their younger years. While both were able to find solace and strength either through their spirit or their faith (thus maintaining agency by not being broken), it would be inaccurate to state that they had become active agents of change. It could be argued that escaping slavery is the biggest form of agency, since their resistance meant removing themselves from enslavement. It constituted not only a refusal to break, but also a refusal to participate in the system any longer. Rather than simply maintaining agency internally, escaping constituted a way to exhibit agency externally. Their spirit of defiance remained, but they now had become active agents of change.

Truth decided to escape in response to her master's failure to follow through on his promise. As discussed in chapter three, Truth was to receive her freedom through the state of New York by July 4th, 1827. Her master had promised her that she would be released a year early if she worked hard, however, due to an injured hand, she was incapable of working as hard as normal, causing her master to take back his promise.<sup>117</sup> Due to this failed promise, Truth decided to escape on her own. This is the first example of her becoming a more active agent. Instead of simply surviving, she became determined to escape as a way of demonstrating that she could not be held down. After deciding to escape, she explained how she was terrified to flee during the night but knew that fleeing during the day. Whilst thinking about her problem, she

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<sup>117</sup> Truth, *Narrative*, 39.

described how “the thought came to her that she could leave just before the day dawned, and get out of the neighborhood where she was known before the people were much astir. ‘Yes,’ said she, fervently, ‘that’s a good thought! Thank you, God, for that thought!’”<sup>118</sup> Again, one can see how she truly believed that God was looking out for her and protecting her, as she credited God with giving her the idea to flee during twilight.

Interestingly, Truth went into detail surrounding her thought process regarding her decision to not go too far from where she had come:

She resolved not to go too far from him, and not put him to as much trouble in looking her up--for the latter he was sure to do--as Tom and Jack had done when they ran away from him, a short time before. This was very considerate in her, to say the least, and a proof that ‘like begets like.’ He had often considered her feelings, though not always, and she was equally considerate.<sup>119</sup>

This is another example of the theme of ‘slave loyalty’. Truth did not feel loyal enough to stay (especially after her master failed to keep his promise), but she recognized the fact that he had often treated her with consideration (but she made sure to specify ‘not always’). It is likely that, if nothing else, she wanted to give him a chance at legally freeing her himself. This did not happen, but it demonstrates that the relationship between a master and their slave could be incredibly nuanced. Again, this does not mean that Truth was a “faithful slave” in the sense that she was content with her enslavement, but it did explain that her relationship with her master was multi-dimensional. The house in which Truth found refuge in belonged to a family that “had never been in the practice of buying and selling slaves,” but they offered to purchase Truth’s services for one year for \$25, allowing her to become finally become free.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, 43.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*.



While growing up under her master (Dr. Flint), Jacobs maintained her spirit of defiance, believing that she would never let her children into his hands.<sup>121</sup> After being blackmailed by Dr. Flint to either live with him under his rule (where escape would be next to impossible) or be sent to the plantation with her children (who would likely be sold), Jacobs found herself stuck. She elected to be sent to the plantation, but made it very clear that she was determined to foil him and escape, explaining that “my master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each.”<sup>122</sup> While ultimately planning on escaping without her children, she was dissuaded from doing so by her grandmother, who insisted that “nobody respects a mother who forsakes her children.”<sup>123</sup> However, when word spread to Jacobs that her “children were to be brought to the plantation to be ‘broke in’”, Jacobs elected to flee without her children, stating that the prospect of her children being ‘broken in’ “nerved me to immediate action.”<sup>124</sup> Jacobs continuously expressed her desire to remain with Dr. Flint in order to protect her children, while maintaining her defiant spirit against him. When she learned of his plans to hurt her children in order to get to her, however, Jacobs realized that her priorities needed to change.

Following the news that her children were to be ‘broken in’, Jacobs decided to leave that night, despite what her grandmother had told her. She was able to evade capture, and wound up taking shelter in a friend’s rooftop storage space, where she was forced to hide while avoiding capture by Dr. Flint. Her children, while initially jailed, eventually were purchased by a slave-trader and released into Jacobs’ grandmother’s custody. Upon hearing the news, Jacobs exclaimed that “the darkest cloud that hung over my life had rolled away. Whatever slavery

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<sup>121</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents*, 122.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, 130.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid*, 139.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, 144.

might do to me, it could not shackle my children.”<sup>125</sup> It clearly took an immense amount of strength to flee without her children, and Jacobs regularly referenced the anxiety and depression that had become a part of her life while she was in hiding. When her children were finally freed, she was still unable to flee to the north, due to the ferocity in which Dr. Flint was hunting her. She was subsequently sent to live in a small garret in her grandmother’s house, in which she could barely move.<sup>126</sup> Her living conditions were incredibly difficult, and she was forced to spend nearly seven years there. Yet, as she explained, “I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave, though white people considered it an easy one; and it was so compared with the fate of others.”<sup>127</sup> This is an example of the strength that Jacobs exhibited as a child, amplified. She survived in that garret through strength and perseverance, and through the solace of knowing that her children were free from Dr. Flint.

One of the stereotypes surrounding slavery is that when slaves attempted to escape, it became a stressful, difficult, and harrowing adventure that was monumentalized in books such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Of course, this stereotype is based on truth-- Jacobs’ escape was long, dangerous, and harrowing. Being forced to live inside a tiny garret for seven years would be enough to break anyone. Truth’s escape, in comparison, could be described as easier. She was able to flee and attain her freedom relatively quickly. This is to not minimize the amount of personal strength that attempting to escape must have required, nor the enormous act of agency and resistance that escaping truly was. It is important to illuminate that in the context of escaping, the experiences of slaves was different-- not every slave escape could fit into the mold

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<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*, 166.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, 173.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, 174,

that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had set forward. Escaping indubitably reflected enormous agency, but the ways in which slaves escaped were much different.

In looking at the lives of Jacobs and Truth, one can see that resistance constituted a major part of their lives as slaves. Whether if it was internal or external, both exhibited considerable strength in order to maintain slave agency despite the horrors that they faced. A discussion of slave agency could continue for hundreds of pages, and these are not the only examples in which Truth and Jacobs exhibited agency and resistance. What is important to take from their stories is that despite the arrays of power against these women, they could and did resist. Even if it was just surviving, they still demonstrated that female slaves were able to create spaces for themselves in which they could maintain their capacity for resistance. It may not have been grandiose, yet it was always present. Moving forward, with this understanding that these women not only could but did maintain agency, this thesis will now begin to look outward. These women's lives have been well established, and now, it is important to understand how these women fit into the world around them.

## Chapter 5: Relationship with the North

A recurring theme that one can find in reading these memoirs is how the women conceptualized and related to the North. The five women who were born into slavery (Keckley, Taylor, Jacobs, Truth, and Veney) all spent time in the North, and their reactions to their time there varied greatly. Several of them also touched on the idea of how slaves perceived and reacted to the idea of the North, as well as how their masters wanted them to view the North. This chapter will seek to explore this theme of their ‘relationship with the North’, in order to better understand how this conception of Northern life fit into the lives of these slave women.

A recurring theme in black history is the idea of the “white saviour”. In a modern context, the idea of the “white saviour” is, according to authors Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon, typically a white man who sees themselves as “the redeemer of the weak, the great leader who saves blacks from slavery or oppression, rescues people of color from poverty and disease, or leads Indians in battle for their dignity and survival.”<sup>128</sup> While this myth of the “white saviour” is one that is typically applied to modern day media tropes, it can easily be applied in a historical context too. One can see an example of this “white saviour” in Taylor’s memoir. In the introduction to Taylor’s memoir, Willie Lee Rose explained how the region of South Carolina in which Taylor had fled to was successfully captured on April 12, 1862 by Union forces. The general who captured it subsequently declared all of the slaves in the region free, which led to an influx of Northerners to the South to help the newly freed slaves.<sup>129</sup> Rose elaborated on this influx, stating:

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<sup>128</sup> Vera, Hernan and Andrew M. Gordon, *Screen Saviours: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 33.

<sup>129</sup> Taylor, *Memoirs*, 8.

“[The South Carolina] region had become a proving ground for freedom, and had attracted many Northern men and women of antislavery conviction, who came to supervise the planting of cotton on a free labor basis, to teach the ex-slaves to read and write, and to play a semi-paternal role in the period of transition from slavery to freedom that the people of the islands were experiencing.”<sup>130</sup>

This could be seen as an example of the “white saviour”-- the idea of whites going down into the South in order to save the freed slaves, and help them “better themselves”. As Rose explained, the white people who came down very much came down in order to help the newly freed slaves adjust to freedom. This is not to say that they did not have good intentions, but as Vera and Gordon explained, one of the key components of the “white saviour” is that the white saviour believed that they were doing genuine good while in reality, they were patronizing or, in some cases, even damaging. Their behavior as ‘leaders’ of the newly freed slaves helped reinforce the idea of the racial hierarchy, in the sense that newly freed black slaves could only adjust to freedom with the help of whites-- they could not do it on their own.

Taylor’s memoir also made clear that the soldiers who freed the slaves had little faith in her abilities. Despite growing up with an education, Taylor explained how when the captain asked her if she could write, he did not believe her, saying “and as if he had some doubts of my answers he handed me a book and a pencil and told me to write my name and where I was from.... he was surprised at my accomplishments, for he said he did not know there were any negroes in the South able to read or write.”<sup>131</sup> She did not seem to take this as an offensive statement, yet it is nonetheless illuminating. The captain clearly did not have much faith in the ability of Taylor, or of ‘negroes’ in general, and Taylor was forced to prove him wrong. She had

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<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, 10-11.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

the skill needed to help educate her peers, yet because of her status as a slave, her ability had been automatically questioned.

While the behavior and actions of the white Northerners who came down South can clearly relate to the “white saviour” myth, it was clear that Taylor’s grandmother did not view it this way. After Taylor’s grandmother lost all her savings in the failed ‘Freedmen’s Savings Bank’, (according to editor Patricia Romero, the bank failed due to corruption and recklessness by the white financiers)<sup>132</sup>, Taylor’s grandmother stated “I will leave it all in God’s hand. If the Yankees did take all our money, they freed my race; God will take care of us.”<sup>133</sup>. Despite it being the fault of the white financiers that Taylor’s grandmother had lost all of her money, she still felt grateful simply for the fact that the Yankees “freed her race.” No matter the behavior of the Northerners, Taylor’s grandmother demonstrated gratitude and thankfulness. Even if it was their fault that she had lost her money, they freed her, and for that she would always be at least a little grateful.

Following the war, Taylor expressed both dissatisfaction and hopefulness surrounding the current state of affairs. After living in Boston, Taylor expressed anger over how she and her race were being treated, stating:

In this “land of the free” we are burned, tortured, and denied a fair trial, murdered for any imaginary wrong conceived in the brain of the negro-hating white man... we cannot sing “My country ‘t is of thee, Sweet land of Liberty”! It is hollow mockery. The Southland laws are all on the side of the white, and they do just as they like to the negro whether in the right or not.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid*, 136.

While the Civil War may have led to the end of slavery, it certainly did not lead to the end of racial tension and segregation in the United States, which Taylor had realized. The period immediately following the Civil War would be incredibly dangerous for those in the South, like Taylor mentioned. Her frustration was palpable, since the relationship between races had not improved in the way she had imagined.

However, at the end of her memoir, upon seeing the state of affairs in Louisiana, Taylor became more hopeful, likening her peers to “the children of Israel.”<sup>135</sup> She ended her memoir by stating:

What a wonderful revelation! In 1861 Southern papers were full of advertisements for ‘slaves’, but now, despite all the hindrances and ‘race problems’, my people are striving to attain the full standard of all other races born free in the sight of God, and in a number of instances have succeeded. Justice we ask,-- to be citizens of these United States, where so many of our people have shed their blood with their white comrades, that the stars and stripes should never be polluted.<sup>136</sup>

Her conclusion is fascinating for a number of reasons. From an intersectional perspective, it is interesting how she placed her race in front of her gender. She made several references to racial tensions and problems following the war (as can be seen above), and she felt more positive at the very end of her memoir in regards to the future. Her relationship to her gender does not seem nearly as important to her, and she made little mention of her status as a woman following the war, even though she faced additional problems due to this status. She seemed to take an almost similar attitude to her grandmother. Her grandmother clearly maintained a hopeful and grateful attitude regarding the future and her relationship with the North. Here, Taylor also expressed hopefulness, specifically by stating how wonderful it was that despite the ‘race

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<sup>135</sup> *Ibid*, 151.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, 152.

problems', she and her people were working to attain equality. It was not as forgiving as her grandmother had been, yet it was still hopeful in the sense that, in the end, she believed that relations between races would improve.

Unlike the other four slave women in this thesis, the bulk of Taylor's memoir did not discuss her time as a slave. That leads to the question of what can the other four slave women tell us about how they perceived the North? One recurring theme is that several of the women experienced not only expressed a fear of going North, but had even been told lies about the North in order to dissuade their desire to try and escape to the North. In the eighth chapter of her memoir, entitled "What Slaves Are Taught to Think of the North", Jacobs detailed how masters frequently lied to their slaves as a way of manipulating them to think that slavery was the best option they had. According to Jacobs, "when [masters] visit the north, and return home, they tell their slaves of the runaways they have seen, and describe them to be in the most deplorable condition." She continued to explain that "many of the slaves believed such stories, and think it is not worth while to exchange slavery for such a hard kind of freedom."<sup>137</sup> Jacobs explained that the masters did this for a simple reason:

It is difficult to persuade such that freedom could make them useful men, and enable them to protect their wives and children. If those heathen in our Christian land had as much teaching as some Hindoos, they would think otherwise. They would know that liberty is more valuable than life. They would know that liberty is more valuable than life. They would begin to understand their own capabilities, and exert themselves to become men and women.<sup>138</sup>

A major theme of Jacobs' memoir is how her master had been incredibly coercive and manipulative, and this quote illuminated just one way in which he managed to do so. One way to break down someone's will to survive would be to convince them that their situation was the best

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<sup>137</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents*, 67.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, 67-68.



they could attain. By doing so, the masters could diminish their slaves' capacity to resist, since if they believed that this was the best life could offer, they would feel less motivated to try and resist. Taylor experienced this first hand, explaining that "the whites would tell their colored people not to go to the Yankees, for they would harness them to carts and make them pull the carts around, in place of horses."<sup>139</sup> It was only when she asked her grandmother about this stereotype that she learned that they were simply trying to lie to Taylor and scare her into submission.

Keckley experienced this situation as well, but this time, as a newly freedwomen. Keckley briefly spent time in the service of Jefferson Davis and his wife, shortly before the war broke out. As tensions grew and it became clear that secession and war was inevitable, Keckley explained how Jefferson Davis' wife wanted Keckley to go to the South with them. Mrs. Davis attempted to scare Keckley away from the North by telling her that "when the war breaks out, the colored people will suffer in the North. The Northern people will look upon them as the cause of the war, and I fear, in their exasperation, will be inclined to treat you harshly."<sup>140</sup> Despite consideration, Keckley ultimately decided that it would be best "to cast my lot with the people of the North,"<sup>141</sup> with her argument being that "I knew the North to be strong, and believed that the people would fight for the flag that they pretended to venerate so highly."<sup>142</sup>

Her perspective is especially fascinating, since she demonstrated a lack of loyalty to the North or the South. It must have taken a lot of courage to serve under the Davis', due to their status as the leaders of the slave states. Yet, despite their power and her status as a former slave,

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<sup>139</sup> Taylor, *Memoirs*, 31-32.

<sup>140</sup> Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 71.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid*, 73.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid*, 72.

she still felt a certain loyalty to the family. Her syntax is important-- there is a difference between her saying "I decided to cast my lot with the North" versus saying "I felt safer and better suited to survive in the North." If anything, her choice to go North felt almost strategic, in that she felt that the North would be more likely to win the war. She did not base her decision off of personal loyalty, instead, she based it on strategy and survival.

Upon further reading, one can begin to better understand Keckley's point of view. Unlike Taylor and Jacobs, who were told these lies as slaves, Keckley served the Davis' as a freed women, and rather than responding these lies indignantly, Keckley stated "I had served Mrs. Davis faithfully, and, she had learned to place the greatest confidence in me. At first I was almost tempted to go South with her, for her reasoning seemed plausible."<sup>143</sup> Even after the war, Keckley still expressed a certain devotion to the Davis family:

Since bidding them good-by at Washington, early in the year 1860, I have never met any of the Davis family. Years of excitement, years of bloodshed, and hundreds of thousands of graves intervene between the months I spent in the family and now. The years have brought many changes; and in view of these terrible changes even I, who was once a slave, who have been punished with the cruel lash, who have experienced the heart and soul tortures of a slave's life, can say to Mr. Jefferson Davis, "Peace! you have suffered! Go in peace."<sup>144</sup>

It can be difficult to understand why a former slave would feel any sort of affinity to the very face of pro-slavery rhetoric, but Keckley established multiple times in her memoir that she was willing to make difficult decisions if it would eventually be to her benefit. This could be seen when she decided to work to legally earn her freedom, rather than escape. It meant being forced to stay enslaved for a longer period of time, but it also meant that she would be legally free, and thus have a much easier time in creating a new life for herself. Going back to the idea of agency,

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<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid*, 73-74.

Keckley exemplifies a certain type of agency-- someone who very much was an active agent of change. She demonstrated that she had no fear in making difficult decisions, even if it meant that her status would be diminished. The Davis family, as she stated, had treated her relatively kindly and with respect, and if she could continue to live a life of relative comfort, why not stay with the Davis family? She had carved a space for herself within the family, and had she had more confidence in the South's ability to win the war, she very well may have stayed with the family rather than going North. The North did offer freedom, but she knew that she could attain a life of comfort with the Davis'. It was her choice, and that is why she exemplified this idea of being an active agent. She weighed the costs and benefits of going South or going North and what they could offer her, and she ultimately decided that the North would be the better option.

Veney also established a certain affinity to her former life in the South. As previously explained, Veney was able to attain freedom after being purchased by a group of abolitionists and being freed upon reaching the North. After reaching the North, Veney expressed a nostalgia for "Old Virginny", and detailed her mix of emotions upon finally being free:

I was in a land where, by its laws, I had the same right to myself that any other woman had. No jailer could take me to prison, and sell me at auction to the highest bidder. My boy was my own, and no one could take him from me. But I had left behind me every one I had ever known. I did not forget the dreadful hardships I had endured, and yet somehow I did not think of them with half the bitterness with which I had endured them. I was a stranger in a strange land; and it was no wonder, perhaps, that a dreadful loneliness and homesickness came over me.<sup>145</sup>

Amongst Veney's emotions are loneliness ("I had left behind me every one I had ever known"), homesickness ("a dreadful loneliness and homesickness came over me"), and even nostalgia ("I did not think of [my hardships] with half the bitterness with which I had endured them"). She

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<sup>145</sup> Veney, *Narrative*, 38.

fully acknowledged the brutalities that she endured in Virginia, and yet she could not help but view her memories of the South with a nostalgic lens. Whereas Keckley weighed the costs and benefits to staying in the South or going North, Veney's attitude could be more appropriately attributed to culture shock. The North, whilst a place where Veney could finally live her life as a freedwoman, represented a massive change that Veney may not have been ready for.

Upon going North, Veney was not the only one to experience a form of culture shock upon the difference between Northern and Southern society. Truth, upon escaping, still needed to rescue her son. While searching for help, she stayed the night with a Quaker family, "[who] gave her lodgings for the night; and it is very amusing to hear her tell of the 'nice, high, clean, white, beautiful bed' assigned her to sleep in, which contrasted so strangely with her former pallets, that she sat down and contemplated it, perfectly absorbed in wonder that such a bed should have been appropriated to one like herself."<sup>146</sup> Once her son was successfully rescued, they moved to New York City, which Truth stated was "a place which she would doubtless have avoided, could she have seen what was there in store for her; for this view into the future would have taught her what she only learned by bitter experience."<sup>147</sup> This is in reference to raising her son (Peter), whom she struggled to raise properly, and often failed to resist the various temptations the city held.<sup>148</sup> Eventually, Peter's debauchery led him to leaving New York by working on a ship, and sadly, that was the last Truth would ever see of her son.

Her experiences in the Quaker household and in New York are interesting in that they represented a relative unknown for her. As established in chapter three, the cruelties she endured as a slave led her to be unprepared for the kindness and 'luxurious' treatment she would receive

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<sup>146</sup> Truth, *Narrative*, 47.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid*, 74.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid*.

from the Quaker's. New York City only served to magnify this culture shock. She did not express any form of nostalgia for her life as a slave, unlike Veney or Keckley, yet the unfamiliarity with the North manifested itself at several different points, and at times she came across as overwhelmed and underprepared for life as a freedwomen. Her relationship with the North is interesting in that she was already a slave *in* New York. Despite being a slave in the North, it can be seen here that life as a slave versus life as a free person in the North would have been drastically different. Truth was just as unfamiliar with Northern society as her Southern counterparts, since despite living in the North, she did not have access to the same spaces as freedmen and women did. Thus, despite being a Northerner, her relationship with the North was just as foreign and strange as her Southern counterparts.

Keckley, after moving North and becoming Mrs Lincoln's dressmaker, spent a considerable amount of time speaking on the struggles freed slaves faced coming North. After becoming Mary Lincoln's seamstress, she moved to Washington, D.C.. During her time in the city, she explained that "In the summer of 1862, freedmen began to flock into Washington from Maryland and Virginia. They came with a great hope in their hearts, and with all their worldly goods on their backs."<sup>149</sup> However, she went on to explain that for many, it was a struggle. She elaborated that "to them it was a beautiful vision, a land of sunshine, rest and glorious promise. They flocked to Washington, and since their extravagant hopes were not realized, it was but natural that many of them should bitterly feel their disappointment."<sup>150</sup> The idea of the North versus the reality of the North would have been drastically different for many. Interestingly, this almost reinforces the point that Jacobs' master was trying to make, in that the North would have

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<sup>149</sup> Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 111.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid*, 139.

been even worse for slaves than the South. As Keckley stated, the North was not the idyllic, mythic place that many thought it would be. The slaves, being free for the first time, indubitably would have struggled to make their own way. Veney is a good representation of this group; as explained in chapter three, Veney frequently struggled with the idea of adjusting to life in the North. She and the others had become free, yes, but that did not mean that their lives would have transformed overnight.

This struggle motivated Keckley, and while reflecting on their plight, she ultimately felt inspired that “if the white people can give festivals to raise funds for the relief of suffering soldiers, why should not the well-to-do colored people go to work to do something for the benefit of the suffering blacks?”<sup>151</sup> This ultimately led to the creation of the “the Contraband Relief Association,”<sup>152</sup> an association that would become vastly important to the freed people coming North. Her intersectionality is important here. While her gender and race limited the opportunities available to her, she was still able to use her privilege as a “well-to-do colored person” to help the freed slaves adjust. It also counteracts the “white saviour” complex that was mentioned within Taylor’s memoir. Rather than helping her freed counterparts as a way of asserting her dominance or role as a leader, she felt much more inspired to help the freed slaves simply out of a motivation to help them adjust. She touched on the festivals that white people would throw for wounded soldiers, and this seemed to be a direct motivator for her, since she felt that if white people could help their own people, why could she not help her own people as well? Her privilege and status as a freed black women allowed her to provide help to those who needed it, in order to establish their new lives in the North.

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<sup>151</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid*.

In looking at the history of slavery, it can be easy to oversimplify the roles that the North and the South played in the lives of slaves. Whereas popular history tends to paint the North as “good” and the South as “bad”, through the memoirs of these five women, one can see that the relationship between the North and the South was much more nuanced and complicated. One major theme that one can see is that while many escaped to the North, there was still loyalty and nostalgia towards their former lives in the South. Veney best embodied this, since, while ultimately choosing to be in the North, she felt a nostalgia for the life she had left behind, even with the cruelties that accompanied it. Keckley also explained how she had to weigh the benefits of going North versus going South, since both had costs and benefits to living there. Once going North, however, Keckley used her privilege as a “well-to-do colored person” in order to help her fellow freedmen and women to establish new lives in the North. In Taylor’s memoir, one can see examples of the “white saviour”, i.e, the white person who came down to the South to try and “save” the slaves. However, both Taylor and her grandmother expressed hopefulness that despite the poor treatment they had received through the hands of the whites, both believed that things were going to get better. Finally, Jacobs helped illuminate a certain method of coercion that masters would use to control their slaves. By lying to the slaves in regards to how the North would treat them, slaves would be less encouraged or empowered to try and escape. All five women had nuanced and complex relationships with the North, and by looking at their memoirs, one can see that while the North certainly was seen as the better region, their conceptions and relationships to the North were much more complicated than popular history tends to acknowledge.

## Chapter 6: Broader Historical Context

These seven women lived in a tumultuous time. All of them were impacted in various ways by the events taking place around them, and one can see this impact in the stories they left behind. Historical events from this time period are frequently described from the perspective of white men. What is lacking, therefore, is how minority groups, specifically black women, reacted to and dealt with the various historical events that took place in this era. In order to better understand how these women reacted to these events, this chapter will be dedicated to learning what we can from two women in particular. The first woman, Taylor, served as a nurse and laundress to an all black regiment in the Civil War. The second woman, Keckley, served as seamstress and confidante to Mary Lincoln during the Civil War, which allowed her to witness the events of the war next to one of the most important families in the country. The final section of this chapter will focus on Davis & Grimké, due to the fact that in their diaries, one can see their reactions to events as they happened, in order to better understand both how the events of the war would have affected freed black women, as well as understand how they would have reacted to these events as they happened, rather than retroactively.

### *Taylor's Experiences on the Field*

Taylor's experiences on the field provided a unique and relatively unheard of perspective. During the Civil War, there was limited space for non-white participants. One of the first black regiments to participate in the Civil War was the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, whose actions during the war became quite famous. The 54th Massachusetts indubitably opened up several previously closed doors in regards to black participation in both the Civil War and future wars to come. However, they were not the only black regiment to participate in the war. Upon obtaining



her freedom in South Carolina, Taylor eventually became the laundress for the 33rd United States Colored Troops. As Patricia W. Romero wrote, “much of the rare value of Mrs. Taylor’s book is owing to her having gained her freedom so early in the war, and having been in consequence, in a position to observe some of the most interesting ‘firsts’ of the Civil War.”<sup>153</sup>

Before she even officially joined the war, however, Taylor explained that “about the first of June we were told that there was going to be a settlement of the war. Those who were on the Union side would remain free, and those in bondage were to work three days for their masters and three for themselves. It was a gloomy time for us all, and we were to be sent to Liberia.”<sup>154</sup> It is interesting to hear her mention this settlement. Taylor joined the war front in 1862, before the *Emancipation Proclamation* had gone into effect. Much of the value of Taylor’s memoir is that she touched on events that have been largely forgotten in cultural memory of the war. The *Emancipation Proclamation* is arguably one of the most important documents in American history, yet here one can see that before it ever went into effect, there were other ‘solutions’ being proposed. Had the plan to send the freed slaves to Liberia gone through, U.S. history would have gone on a *much* different path. It is one of those “what if” moments that are all too common in history. The idea of African-Americans returning to their “homeland” was again brought up in the 1920’s, specifically by Marcus Garvey, but the fact that it was considered a possibility during the Civil War is often overlooked. This also illuminates the shaky ground upon which Taylor found herself on-- she and her comrades were treading on uncharted territory (as Romero stated, they were the first group of slaves to be freed by the Union army that were not

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<sup>153</sup> Taylor, *Civil War*, 8.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

sent back into slavery by Lincoln)<sup>155</sup> Again, the spaces for black soldiers in the war were quite limited, and Taylor showed here that her participation in the war was close to never happening.

In a lot of ways, Taylor was an outsider looking in on the troops, despite being a necessary and important part of the infantry. Once becoming a part of the infantry, she was an observer on one of the biggest controversies of the war: the issue of equal pay for black soldiers. According to historian Richard Reid, who wrote the article *Government Policy, Prejudice, and the Experience of Black Civil War Soldiers and Their Families*, “equal pay, equipment, and bounties were granted to black soldiers only after long delays, and many states never provided equal financial aid to the black families of soldiers.”<sup>156</sup> He also stated “the army’s notorious delay in paying the soldiers had reduced their wives and children to destitution.”<sup>157</sup> Taylor reflected this, stating:

The first colored troops did not receive any pay for 18 months, and the men had to depend wholly on what they received from the commissary, established by General Saxton. A great many of these men had large families, and as they had no money to give them, their wives were obliged to support themselves and their children by washing for the officers of the gunboats and the soldiers...<sup>158</sup>

However, she later explained that their white captains stood with them in solidarity, telling how “I remember hearing Captain Heasley telling his company, one day, ‘Boys, stand up for your full pay! I am with you, and so are all the officers.’”<sup>159</sup>

This solidarity took place across many black regiments. According to author Christian Samito, “noncommissioned officers organized the unit-wide refusals to take unequal pay, both

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<sup>155</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>156</sup> Richard Reid, “Government Policy, Prejudice, and the Experience of Black Civil War Soldiers and Their Families,” *Journal of Family History* 27 (2016): 393, accessed March 2nd, 2016, doi:10.1177/036319902236624.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid*, 384.

<sup>158</sup> Taylor, *Civil War*, 42.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*.

maintaining group cohesion and loyalty but also trying to prevent degeneration into open mutiny, violent revolt, or other unacceptable behavior that would have earned charges.”<sup>160</sup> The decision of many white officers to stand up alongside their black regiments in order to receive equal pay deserves praise, but it is important to again visit the idea of spaces for black soldiers. A recurring theme regarding the relationships between whites and blacks is the idea of control. By standing up alongside their black counterparts, white officers were able to not only establish solidarity, but were also able to control the situation so the black soldiers would not mutiny or revolt.

Interestingly, Taylor never seemed to approach the idea of receiving her own pay, since her status as a black women meant that the issue of her even receiving pay was discussed very little. Whilst racism had an effect on both black men *and* women, Taylor’s status as a women meant that she would oftentimes be left behind or kept out of spaces that black men were beginning to gain access to, such as getting paid for their time in the military. She expressed happiness that her regiment was standing up for their right for equal pay, but she stated very little about her own status as a member of the regiment, especially in regards to pay. As Romero stated, “one wishes that Susie had written as much about herself as she wrote about ‘our boys’.”

<sup>161</sup> Taylor’s memoir is an amazing resource for viewing events of the war, and she made a lot of mentions about the various battles and events that she faced alongside her regiment. Her personal emotions and feelings, however, almost always took a place on the back burner. It would have been fascinating to hear how she felt about her lack of equal pay to even her black male counterparts, because as intersectionality shows, that status *is* important to learn and talk about.

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<sup>160</sup> Christian Samito, “The Intersection Between Military Justice and Equal Rights: Mutinies, Courts-martial, and Black Civil War Soldiers”, *Civil War History* 53: 2007, 188, accessed March 2nd, 2016, doi:10.1353/cwh.2007.0043.

<sup>161</sup> Taylor, *Civil War*, 12.

Beyond issues of racism within the army, Taylor also witnessed several important and notable events of the war. One of the battles she goes the most in depth towards is the siege of Ft. Gregg, a Confederate fort in Virginia. Taylor explained that the troops had been ordered to “take Fort Gregg” in July, and were given 3 days to prepare for the battle. On the fourth day, they marched, which Taylor stated “I have never forgotten the good-bys of that day, as they left the camp.”<sup>162</sup> It is one of the chapters where one is able to glean a lot about Taylor’s emotions, specifically in regards to the battle. Her closeness to her regiment is demonstrated here, and she made it clear that she was both concerned and nervous regarding the battle. She went on to explain being able to hear the battle back from camp, stating “the firing could be plainly heard from our camp.”<sup>163</sup> Taylor may not have been physically present for the battle, but she made it quite clear that she was not far from it, either.

However, her most potent description of the event comes *after* the shots were fired, when she described what it was like when the wounded came back: “When the wounded came back... [Samuel Anderson] was badly wounded. Then others of our boys, some with their legs off, arm gone, foot off, and wounds of all kinds imaginable. They had to wade through creeks and marshes, as they were discovered by the enemy and shelled badly.”<sup>164</sup> She went on to describe her effort to provide care to the wounded, and she discussed her emotional state, or lack thereof. She explained how “it seems strange how our aversion to seeing suffering is overcome in war,-- how we are able to see the most sickening sights [without a shudder]; and instead of turning away, how we hurry to assist in alleviating their pain.”<sup>165</sup> This provided a glimpse into her

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<sup>162</sup> *Ibid*, 88-89.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid*, 88.

personal psyche, since she seems to be describing an almost numb-like state. Seeing people you care about with their legs and arms blown off would be a shocking sight for anyone to witness, yet Taylor established very little shock or surprise at seeing her regiment like. Taylor may not have been physically present for this and other battles, but the trauma affected her all the same.

It is also worth noting that it is incredibly difficult to find any sources/mention of the siege of Fort Gregg. The fort more notably was attacked and taken during a different battle on April 2nd, 1865, yet this is not the same battle that Taylor described-- she dated it to July, 1864. Unfortunately, there seems to be nothing else that details this failed siege on Fort Gregg. Of course, it is not one of the more important battles, and it ended in failure, thus it likely would not have permeated cultural memory the way other battles would have. Regardless, there should be *some* mention of the battle, yet it has been a fruitless search. This is not to try and deauthenticate Taylor's memoir-- other events she wrote about are much more well-known, and there equally does not seem to be a reason for her to simply fabricate an entire battle. It is entirely possible that Taylor either confused the date or simply had the name wrong. This was written years after she was in the war, so her memory on the logistics of the battle may be a little foggy.

There are likely two reasons as to why this battle is so unknown. The first is simply, as previously stated, it was not a particularly important battle, so there was little reason to chronicle it. There were hundreds of battles in the war, and not all of them would have entered popular thought the way battles such as Gettysburg and Antietam had. Another reason, which is more subjective, is that it was barely discussed due to the fact that it was fought by primarily black soldiers. It was not an entirely black battle- Taylor wrote that "the line was formed with the

103rd New York (white) in the rear...”<sup>166</sup> However, the 33rd U.S. Colored Troops clearly had a larger role to play, and even doing research into the 103rd New York did not provide any additional detail on the siege of Fort Gregg. Why, then, was their participation not more widely discussed, not only in the context of the battle of Fort Gregg, but in their participation in other battles as well?

One possible answer is the idea of ‘historical tokenism’. Of all the black regiments of the war, by far the most well-known is the 54th Massachusetts; whose story was monumentalized in the 1989 film *Glory*. Their siege of Ft. Wagner remains one of the most symbolically important battles of the war, since it demonstrated that black soldiers were just as, if not more, willing to both fight and die for their cause. The work of the 54th is indubitably important (Taylor even mentioned “[our commissary] was renamed after our hero, Colonel Shaw, who at that time was at Beaufort with his regiment, the 54th Massachusetts.”<sup>167</sup> The idea of tokenism is to have one person/group/event be symbolic of a whole (for example, many TV shows and movies are criticized for having a “token” character of color). In this context, one explanation for the lack of understanding of the siege of Fort Gregg is that because the 54th Massachusetts was the “token” black regiment, the work of other regiments (such as the 33rd U.S. Colored Troops) was less important within cultural memory.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> *Ibid*, 89.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid*, 52.

<sup>168</sup> While there is certainly something to be said about this idea of ‘tokenism’ in history and how the experiences of black soldiers were assumed to be universal with the 54th Massachusetts, it seems that especially in the context of Fort Gregg, Taylor got it confused with another battle. Even in the memoir of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who was a colonel in Taylor’s regiment, Fort Gregg got no mention. Yet, her memory of the actual battle itself is quite clear, which further proves that Taylor likely got the battle confused with a different one. Nonetheless, Taylor’s regiment has been largely forgotten. Her memoir remains the best source there is on the regiment.

Taylor continued throughout her memoir to chronicle the rest of the Civil War, and her experiences with the 33rd U.S. Colored Troops. She also provided interesting social commentary on what took place after the war as well, specifically during the time of Reconstruction.

Reconstruction was an era of considerable violence and racism for African-American. According to Kate Côté Gillin, despite the fact that black women were able to make considerable gains in their social standing, “whites, male and female, found the elevation of black women and womanhood an ugly specter.”<sup>169</sup> While previously touched on in the chapter “Relationship to the North”, it is still worth analyzing how Taylor viewed the new types of racism she witnessed in the South following the war. She dedicated an entire chapter to this, entitled “Thoughts on Present Conditions”, in which she looked at racism both in Boston as well as in the South.

Reconstruction was notorious for its lack of social progress, and in many ways it seemed that if anything, the country was moving backwards into a period of considerable violence and danger.

Taylor reflected this, stating:

I wonder if our white fellow men realize the true sense or meaning of brotherhood? For two hundred years we had toiled for them; the war of 1861 came and was ended, and we thought our race was forever free from bondage, and that the two races could live in unity with each other, but when we read almost every day of what is being done to my race by some whites in the South, I sometimes ask, ‘was the war in vain?’<sup>170</sup>

This ties into Gillin’s point that whites were disdainful of seeing any social progress by blacks, specifically black women. Taylor mentioned several times in her memoir about the frustrations she felt in regards to her and her regiment’s treatment, such as when the regiment helped save a Southern town from a fire. She explained how “these white men and women could

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<sup>169</sup> Gillin, Karen Côté, *Shrill Hurrahs: Women, Gender, and Racial Violence in South Carolina, 1865-1900*, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2013, 3.

<sup>170</sup> Taylor, *Civil War*, 135.

not tolerate our black Union soldiers, for many of them had formerly been their slaves; and although these brave men risked life and limb to assist them in their distress, men and even women would sneer and molest them whenever they met them.”<sup>171</sup>

Overall, Taylor’s frustration was clear-- asking whether or not the war was in vain was a powerful question, especially after the traumas she saw and went through. She felt equally frustrated that, despite the help that the black regiment was providing, they were hated simply because they were black. To her, it was clear that the ‘brotherhood’ that she had helped fight for had not yet been reached, and in many ways, this idea of ‘brotherhood’ has yet to be accomplished even today.

### *Keckley in the White House*

Where Taylor brought value by providing a first hand perspective of life on the field, Keckley brought value through telling the story of her life in the White House. Upon earning her freedom and not following the Davis family South, she eventually became employed by Mary Todd Lincoln as a dressmaker. During her memoir, she frequently referred to the public image of Mrs. Lincoln, and during her explanation of her hiring, she provided such insight stating “I had heard so much, in current and malicious report, of her low life, of her ignorance and vulgarity, that I expected to see her embarrassed on this occasion. Report, I soon saw, was wrong.”<sup>172</sup> Her relationship with Mary Lincoln was important, and as it developed, she would become her friend and confidante. Keckley even reported that, during wartime, people would use her to gain access to the Lincolns, explaining “I soon learned that some people had an intense desire to penetrate the inner circle of the White House”, and went on to explain an anecdote of a woman attempting

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<sup>171</sup> *Ibid*, 107-108.

<sup>172</sup> Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 89.



to bribe Keckley to get her a spot as Mrs. Lincoln's chambermaid.<sup>173</sup> Again bringing back the idea of 'cultural memory', it is interesting to hear about how Mary Lincoln was perceived. History has mostly relegated her to the role of Abraham Lincoln's wife, but Keckley demonstrated that when Mrs. Lincoln was alive, she had a particularly negative reputation.

Keckley shined a light on an often overlooked character in the war, in the case of Mary Lincoln. This close relationship with Lincoln was what helped give Keckley such a unique perspective on the war, since she was oftentimes being confided in by her. It is not the same perspective that she would have gotten from Abraham Lincoln's war room, and in a way, she is really explaining the war from Mary Lincoln's perspective. Yet, she provided her own commentary, which even more heightened the value of her words.

At several points, Keckley described the war in a very detached way, such as: "Oh, the front, with its stirring battle-scenes! Oh, the front, with its ghastly heaps of dead! The life of the nation was at stake; and when the land was full of sorrow, there could not be much gayety at the capital. The days passed quietly with me."<sup>174</sup> This is not to say that she did not respect the intense emotional toll of the war, but despite serving one of the most important people in the country, it rarely seemed to have much of a personal effect on Keckley. Part of this is due to her decision to "throw her lot with the North"-- she did not seem to worry much about her personal stock in the war. However, she did demonstrate much more worry and concern about the freedmen coming up North. As discussed in the chapter "Relationship with the North", it was clear that Keckley was concerned by the struggles that newly freedmen and women were facing upon realizing that their idyllic North was not entirely what they thought it was. She may not have been invested in

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<sup>173</sup> *Ibid*, 92.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid*, 92.

the war itself, but she absolutely felt invested in the well-being of her fellow freed slaves, since that issue constituted a much more relevant part of her life.

While Keckley spent the entire war in the White House, she did not actually write much on specific events of the war. Much more of her writing was focused on her relationship with Mary Lincoln, and how she confided in Keckley. However, there was one event that she wrote about in vivid detail: the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Keckley shared a surprising (and ironic) anecdote that came just before the assassination, when Keckley attended one of Lincoln's speeches. According to Keckley, during the speech, "I whispered to the friend at my side, 'What an easy matter would it be to kill the President, as he stands there! He could be shot down from the crowd, and no one be able to tell who fired the shot.'"<sup>175</sup> After bringing those fears to Mrs. Lincoln, she replied:

Yes, yes, Mr. Lincoln's life is always exposed. Ah, no one knows what it is to live in constant dread of some fearful tragedy. The President has been warned so often, that I tremble for him on every public occasion. I have a presentiment that he will meet with a sudden and violent end. I pray God to protect my beloved husband from the hands of the assassin.<sup>176</sup>

Unfortunately for both Keckley and Mary Lincoln, their fears were soon to be realized. The night of the assassination, Keckley provided a vivid account of the panic that ensued:

At 11 o'clock at night I was awakened by an old friend and neighbor, Miss M. Brown, with the startling intelligence that the entire Cabinet had been assassinated, and Mr. Lincoln shot, but not mortally wounded. When I heard the words I felt as if the blood had been frozen in my veins, and that my lungs must collapse for the want of air. Mr. Lincoln shot! the Cabinet assassinated! What could it mean? The streets were alive with wondering, awe-stricken people. Rumors flew thick and fast, and the wildest reports came with every new arrival. The words were repeated with blanched cheeks and quivering lips.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> *Ibid*, 178.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid*, 185-186.

Keckley's description of the night in which Lincoln was assassinated helps contextualize the panic that the nation indubitably went through immediately following the assassination. The way Keckley described it makes it feel almost as though the nation was nearing anarchy, with the streets 'alive with wondering, awe-stricken people.' It also illuminated the general lack of knowledge surrounding the event. Several inaccuracies were present, such as Lincoln not being 'mortally wounded', or that the entire cabinet was assassinated. Both of these were untrue--Lincoln obviously was mortally wounded, and while it is known that there were other attempts on the cabinet, Lincoln's was the only successful assassination. Of course, it is unsurprising that inaccuracies were present. One can only imagine the raw fear and terror people felt upon first hearing the news of his assassination, even before Lincoln was confirmed dead.

Once Lincoln had passed away, Keckley shared the powerful emotions she felt when she went in to see his body. When she went in, she stated "what a noble soul was his--noble in all the noble attributes of God! Never did I enter the solemn chamber of death with such palpitating heart and trembling footsteps as I entered it that day. No common mortal had died. The Moses of my people had fallen in the hour of his triumph."<sup>178</sup> Calling someone the 'Moses' of their people is no small compliment. There is much to say in regards to Lincoln's political motivation surrounding the *Emancipation Proclamation* and his decision to free the slaves, and arguments can be easily made that it was ratified more due to strategy than compassion. Yet, Keckley (similarly to Taylor's grandmother in chapter five), did not seem to care. She clearly felt very grateful for Lincoln's decision to free the slaves, regardless of his political motivation.

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<sup>178</sup> *Ibid*, 190.

In much of her memoir, Keckley came across as detached to the events going on around her. Her respect for the Davis family or her relative apathy towards the Civil War indicated that she did not feel particularly strong regarding the future of the country at large. Many of the events that she felt detached from were events that were taking place in white society. In many ways, the Civil War was a *white* war, and thus, she may not have felt particularly invested or involved. Issues that affected her and her race, however, did seem to have a much stronger effect. This could be seen in her desire to help newly freed slaves, as well as her shock and devastation when Lincoln died. She clearly felt a closeness with Lincoln (such as calling him the ‘Moses’ of her people), and his decision to free the slaves marked a major shift in U.S. history. Keckley was not detached from the events taking place around her, rather, she felt much closer to events that pertained to black society.

*Grimké & Davis: The War Through a Diary*

As mentioned during the introduction, the diaries of Davis and Grimké are valuable for the fact that one can witness their reaction to certain events of the war in ‘real time’. For example, as explained in chapter two, the very first entry of Davis’ diary mentioned the *Emancipation Proclamation*. The entry, which was dated to January 1, 1863, reads “to day has bin a memorable day and i thank god i have been sperd to see it the day was religously observed all the churches were open we had quite a Jubilee in the evenin.”<sup>179</sup> Grimké also referenced the *Proclamation*, stating in her January 1st, 1863 entry, “the most glorious day this nation has yet seen, *I think*.”<sup>180</sup> Both of their emotions were quite obvious. It was clear that they were excited about the progressiveness in the country. Even though they were free, this did not mean that they

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<sup>179</sup> Davis, *Emilie Davis*, 17.

<sup>180</sup> Grimké, *Journals*, 428.

could not feel excited or enthusiastic to learn that their peers in the South had finally earned their freedom.

While their joy was palpable in the above entries, one interesting observation is that neither of them spoke about actual events of the war in that much depth. It is an easy assumption to make that the diaries of someone alive during the Civil War would have made numerous mentions of the war. The reality is, however, that as civilians, life moved on for Grimké and Davis. Certainly the war was still on their minds, but they had to still live their everyday lives. Grimké's diary even contained nearly a 2 year skip. She wrote an entry on January 1, 1860, and did not write another one until June 22, 1862, well into the war. This is not to imply that neither women cared about the war, since they did have mentions. However, it was clear that neither of them felt that the war permeated their social fabric to the point of disrupting it.

While it was clear that the war was not either of these women's daily lives were interrupted by the war, there were still mentions of the war and important events in their diaries. In her June 29th, 1863 entry, Davis wrote "To day has bin the most exciting day i has witness refugees are comin from all the towns this side of harrisburg the greates excitement Prevails I am all most sick worrin about father the city is considered in danger."<sup>181</sup> According to Giesberg, Davis referenced the potential risk of Robert E. Lee's army invading Philadelphia, however, fortunately for Davis, Harrisburg had been tagreted instead.<sup>182</sup> Only when Davis' city was at risk (thus, her social fabric risked disruption) that Davis considered it relevant enough to fit into her diary.

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<sup>181</sup> Davis, *Emilie Davis*, 48-49.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

Whilst never facing risk of invasion, Grimké did reference the 54th Massachusetts invasion of Fort Wagner in her July 20th, 1863 entry. Grimké stated that “we can only hope it may not all be true. That our noble, beautiful Colonel [Shaw] is killed, and the regt. Cut to pieces! I cannot, cannot believe it.”<sup>183</sup> Part of her shock can be attributed to the fact that she had had tea with Shaw only a few weeks prior. In her July 2nd, 1863 entry, she explained that “Shaw and Major Hallowell came to take tea with us.”<sup>184</sup> Like Davis, she spoke about the war only when it disrupted her life, and losing someone whom she had seen only two weeks prior indubitably qualifies as a disruption. This entry also helps illuminate her “high society” status. As previously established, Grimké’s family was quite important in terms of their abolitionist work, and this allowed her family a higher cultural capacity, that allowed Grimké to meet with important figures such as Shaw.

Grimké’s diary went until 1864, and did not begin again until 1885, well after the war. It would have been incredibly interesting to hear her perspective of events such as the end of the war, and the assassination of Lincoln. Davis, however, continued to diary faithfully through 1865, and the reader can see her reaction to Lincoln’s assassination. On her April 15th, 1865 entry, Davis wrote:

to is the day long to be remembered i have bin very busy all morning the President comes in town... this afternoon i went out about 3 in the afternoon it was the gravest funeral i ever saw the coffin and hearse was beutiful... this morning went down to see the President but could not for the crowd... after church Vincent and i tried to see the President i got to see him after waiting tow [two] hours and a half it was certainly a sight worth seeing very Pelesent.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Grimké, *Journals*, 494.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid*, 490.

<sup>185</sup> Davis, *Emilie Davis*, 158.

Davis' reaction to the assassination reinforces Keckley's earlier thoughts on Lincoln being 'the Moses' of their people. Davis' diary was neatly bookended between the *Emancipation Proclamation* and ended not too long after Lincoln's death. Her last words simply said "all is well that ends well."<sup>186</sup> At the end of the day, the war was not the foremost concern for Davis. She still had to live her everyday life, and only when events that disrupted her social fabric took place did it seem to truly affect her.

It would be easy to view the lack of information in their diaries as disappointing, since as aforementioned, there simply was not a lot of discussion on various events of the war. Only the biggest names and events were given any space in their diaries for discussion. Yet, if one looks at it in the opposite way, one can begin to see the value. Like previously mentioned, discussions of civilian life during the Civil War are rare, and Davis and Grimké are two good examples of looks at civilian life of the war. Davis and Grimké made it clear that even though the war *was* on their minds, it did not dominate their lives. They had the privilege of not having the war dominate their lives, and instead, were able to carry on with their daily lives. Like chapter two demonstrated, the daily lives of black women were not often discussed, specifically in the time period of the Civil War. Therefore, that is where most of the value of their diaries can be found, as authentic looks into the lives of freed black women alive during the Civil War era.

It is hard to find another war with as much of an impact as the Civil War within U.S. history. In a way, it represents a paradigm shift, where U.S. society changed dramatically. By looking at the war through the perspectives of black women, one can learn things about the war that normally would not be discussed. Taylor's life as a laundress and nurse with the 33rd U.S.

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<sup>186</sup> *Ibid*, 193.

Colored Troops allowed readers to see how a black women both experienced and was impacted by various events of the war on the field. On the other hand, Keckley allowed readers a look at both the experiences of life with Mary Todd Lincoln as well as how she was impacted by the death of Abraham Lincoln. Finally, while it was clear that both Grimke and Davis were impacted by the war, they demonstrate that for them, life moved on-- the war did not dominate their lives in the way that many would have expected.



## Conclusion

The history of slavery in the United States is a history that is still very much being discovered. In order to better understand this history, it is imperative to continue to look at the stories of those who were either personal victims of the institution, or were otherwise directly affected. Such is the case for these seven women. Their stories represent a limited quantity of stories from black women who were alive during this era, and by reading their stories, it can be seen that their lives were much more diverse than traditionally given credit for.

Charlotte Forten Grimké and Emilie Davis represented an often under discussed demographic during the Civil War era-- freed black women. Both spent their entire lives free, but their diaries demonstrated that this did not mean they were immune from the messages regarding their race. Grimké in particular shared anecdotes regarding the casual racism she experienced as a black women, and several of her entries betrayed the fact that she felt inferior due to her race. Despite this, her desire for activism and change was clear, as she felt that empowering her black students was an important part of her teachings. This desire for activism and change could be seen in Davis' diary could be seen as well. While quite subtle, mentions of 'the organ' and seeing Frederick Douglass speak proved that Davis had been more involved as an activist than could be originally seen in her diary. Additionally, both of their diaries represent a unique opportunity to see how they reacted to events of the Civil War in 'real time'. Upon a closer reading, it could be seen that while the war was on their minds, their daily lives carried on. Society did not simply stop functioning during the war, and their diaries proved that for those not directly involved, life carried on.

Where Grimké and Davis provided their audiences with perspectives on how freed black women lived their lives, Bethany Veney, Elizabeth Keckley, Harriet Jacobs, and Sojourner Truth provided a look at how slave women experienced their enslavement. All four women demonstrated instances where they ‘lost their innocence’, in that they became awakened to their status as slaves, and all touched on the ways that each felt betrayed by their masters. In looking at stereotypes regarding slaves (specifically the myth of the faithful slave), they proved that the myth was ultimately incorrect, in that while they may have demonstrated some loyalty to their masters, all felt a drive to attain freedom and emancipate themselves from their enslavement. All four also offered a unique look into how slaves perceived the North, as well as how slave owners would use attempt to dissuade their slaves from escaping to the North as a method of coercion and control.

Truth and Jacobs in particular also offered a look into the idea of ‘slave agency’. Both demonstrated internal agency during their childhoods, by refusing to be broken. However, as they grew older, both eventually became motivated to not only resist being broken, but to resist by escaping. Truth and Veney also established how they were able to find solace and strength through religion. As author Blake Touchstone explained, religion could be used by masters as a method of coercion, but Veney and Truth both were able to claim religion as a source of internal strength. Jacobs, however, felt the opposite, determining that religion was a way in which masters would diminish their capacity to resist. Nonetheless, Truth and Jacobs proved that despite the enormous power structures that existed against them, slave women could and did maintain agency through resistance, despite attempts by their masters to break them.

Value could also be found not only in looking at these women's lives introspectively, but also externally. The lives of Susie King Taylor and Elizabeth Keckley in particular provided a lens in which to understand how black women's lives fit into broader historical contexts. After obtaining her freedom, Taylor traveled with the 33rd U.S. Colored Troops as a laundress and nurse, where she touched on themes such as equal pay, the lack of equality following the war, and various battles. While she put her status as a black woman in the army on the back burner, she did touch on the trauma she endured and the frustrations she felt upon discovering that racism had not diminished following the war. Keckley spent the majority of the war in the White House, as the confidant to Mary Todd Lincoln. She provided both a perspective on how citizens viewed Mrs. Lincoln, as well as how a black woman like herself viewed the events of the war. Keckley oftentimes provided a somewhat detached perspective, writing on the events that took place with a certain apathy. However, she wrote with much more emotion on events that affected not only her but her black peers as well. Issues such as newly freed slaves struggling to survive in the North, and the assassination of Abraham Lincoln were both events that impacted her deeply, since they pertained much more to her status as a black woman. Unlike Taylor, who wrote about herself less in favor of writing on "her boys", Keckley's most emotional writing came when she discussed issues that personally affected her.

Through looking at the lives of these seven women and the themes that were touched on above, it is clear that the lives of black women living during this era were much more nuanced and varied than traditional historiography showed. However, all of them shared the commonality in that all were affected by their limited status in society caused by their race and gender. This manifested itself in various ways. Jacobs struggled to even get her memoir published, since she

was unable to get the help of white female abolitionists due to her race. Freedwomen such as Grimké experienced casual racism, and she also showed how she was unable to escape the racist messaging that permeated through U.S. culture. As a black women, Taylor not only had to carve a space for herself within her regiment, but while the black male soldiers were fighting for their right to equal pay, discussion of pay for black women remained nonexistent. Examples such as these help illuminate how black women's place in society was uniquely different from white women or black men. History has shown that white women have frequently left black women behind, as seen above with Jacobs. Taylor also helped illuminate how spaces that had been created for black men did not necessarily give access to black women. It is because of these examples that it is important to continue researching and understanding how black women's lives experiences differed.

Despite the limits placed on them because of their race and gender, however, all of the women fought back in their own way. Whether it was simply by daring to tell their stories or becoming active community leaders, all of the women ultimately felt empowered to raise awareness of their struggles and try and fight back against the system. Overall, this helps expand the ideas that have been put forward by the new black feminist historiography. The stereotype that black women's experiences are not unique or irrelevant to history is rapidly becoming less credible, and as research continues, the stories, lives, and accomplishments of black women will hopefully continue to become more appreciated in cultural and popular memory of this era.

As stated above, it is important to continue to research the lives of black women who were alive during this era. Further research should continue to use Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality as a framework to look at their lives, and I argue that beyond solely looking

at race and gender, intersections such as class and geography should also be considered. Grimké and Davis were both freedwomen, but their experiences still differed, since Grimké came from a higher class than Davis. Research should also look into some of historical discrepancies that were found in this thesis. For quite a while, Civil War historiography believed that *Incidents* had been written by an author other than Jacobs, and it was believed to have been fiction. It is plausible that there are other sources similar to *Incidents* that have yet to be truly authenticated. Additionally, looking into the discrepancies demonstrated in *Noted Negro Women* could allow new sources to be discovered. The diaries that Majors mentioned could still exist, and they could provide new perspectives on understanding black women's history in this era.

The lives of these seven women may be over, but their legacies remain. Reading their stories has provided an equally fascinating and important lens on the history of slavery and the Civil War in the United States. There is so much more to learn about these women and what they can teach us. Reading their stories has been, at times, emotional and frustrating, but also empowering and eye-opening. I end this thesis the same way it started: by quoting Emilie Davis. Her final words, "all is well that ends well", serve as a good closing quote. Her story is done, and so are the others. Now, it is time to continue learning and applying what they can teach us, in order to gain a better understanding about the history of slavery.

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