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African-American Life Writing: Harriet Jacobs and bell hooks

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African-American Life Writing:

Harriet Jacobs and bell hooks

(TITLE)

BY

Luo Yi

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THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

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I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE
ABSTRACT

Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and bell hooks' *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* share a common concern with emancipation and employ complementary rhetorical strategies. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* presents Harriet Jacobs' journey of personal self-discovery through various relationships with others, and her personal narrative finally serves the larger goal of emancipation for her people. Jacobs' narrative is full of other voices, or *personae*. Even the narrator, Linda Brent, is pseudonymous, or "other," in this sense. Jacobs invokes these personae in her autobiography; she explores her experiences as a web of relationships. Jacobs shows a collective or communal notion of selfhood, and she uses this notion of selfhood to establish a bond of sisterhood among black women and white.

Although slavery officially ended with emancipation, black Americans continue to live its historical legacy. *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* is both self-revelation and an attempt to record and refigure a rich Southern black culture. Polyptoton is the governing trope of hooks' narrative. Through it, she invites the reader to enter into her world from various angles. "I" evokes a subjective and an insider's response, whereas the pronoun "she" provokes an objective analysis. The first person plural, "we" serves as an often ironically liminal place between the subjective and a wholly detached, objective perspective. Complementing Jacobs' notion of a collective self, hooks presents the self that is *diffracted* in *Bone Black*. She presents a similar, universalizing argument: people, regardless of skin color, need to know the poison and damage of racial discrimination. As a feminist, hooks is also concerned about women's marginalization. She elaborates on her
personal experiences as lessons for readers of both gender to be aware of the necessity and progress of women's empowerment.

Jacobs' community of personae and hooks' use of polyptoton are complementary strategies. Jacobs' approach grows out of historical, political and legal exigencies. hooks' approach reflects her historical situation as well, with its "partially" emancipated outlook on race and gender. Both writers, however, move—and insist upon the importance of moving—from the singularity of personal experience to the life of the community.
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I

Introduction

Black American culture and history have been preserved most significantly through life writings. African Americans have documented their thoughts and experiences from the slavery era of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, through the years of the civil rights movements of the twentieth century and into the present time. The genre has evolved with the times: from the earliest slave narratives, among them *Memoir of Old Elizabeth, a Colored Woman* (1832), to Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* (1856), through the memoirs of former slaves like Booker T. Washington and others in the twentieth century, the memories and stories of African Americans have always been a significant American genre. Regardless of the century in which these memoirs have been written, there are two consistent elements which show up in all African American life writings: the explicit desire to live as one would choose and tacit criticism of external conditions that confine one’s freedom of choice.

Like other life writings, African American memoirs can be valuable when studied in terms of gender. African American women’s autobiographies display a quite different orientation toward self and others from the typical one demonstrated in autobiographies by black men. In this study I will examine the memoirs of two African American women in my thesis: Harriet Jacobs—slave narrator of the nineteenth century—and bell hooks—African American female autobiographer of the twentieth century. Jacobs writes a slave narrative in which the strongest characters are not the masters but the female slaves. hooks, responding to stereotypes of the victimized black girl, writes a memoir in which she reveals her vulnerability and difficult struggle toward selfhood and girlhood.
Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl* (1856), describes the horrible and inhumane slave experience through the voice of a “fictitious” narrator, a girl named “Linda.” In my thesis, I will explore how “veiling” herself behind the voice of Linda, in addition to allowing her some safety and distance from harm as a former slave/writer on the run, truly renders Jacobs more narrative freedom and advantage as a writer. Jacobs makes a smooth progression in her narrative by transforming Linda’s naive and limited narrative voice into a more sophisticated storyteller, who helps the reader understand her own role in the larger slave culture by describing more than her own feelings and actions. For example, in Chapter XV where the master comes to harass Linda and her children at the house of Linda’s grandmother’s, there are at least six persons involved in two short paragraphs: “he,” “Rose,” “she,” “my grandmother,” “the doctor,” “I,” “your wife and children,” and “Dr. Flint.” Clearly, Linda as narrator intends for us to comprehend that there is a significant network of characters on the slave street, and she describes them with great care.

To the white masters in Linda’s world, black slaves are merely tools, only as capable as speechless beasts of burden. The slaves portrayed in Jacobs’ narrative are, by contrast, competent and engaging; they have active minds and rich conversations, thus defying other stereotypical images of black slaves. Such rebellious points appear especially apparent when Linda defies her master’s sexual seduction, and tries every possible means to escape from his devilish talons. This scene allows us to understand Linda’s sense of rebellion and empowerment. We can observe her intense desire to be treated as she deserves through the account of her fight against the monster-like master.
Later in the narrative, Linda is not shy in acknowledging her relationship with another white man, at the risk of infuriating her master. She is brave enough to acclaim that her two children are not born into slavery, even in front of her dreadful master. Throughout the narrative, Jacobs never gives us a sign of Linda giving up hope of reuniting with her children, no matter how unbearable her suffering is.

The audience for Jacobs' autobiography was the white American readers of her time. Writing an autobiography from a black female's perspective was itself an act of rebellion, since slaves were forbidden to read or write. Using a fictional narrator gave the author distance that she needed between herself and everyone, including even the most ardent white abolitionists, many of whom were not ready to believe that a female slave could have written such a memoir. Jacobs' narrative strategies are simple and straightforward, yet the use of Linda, with her reasonable, timely voice, allows Jacobs to reconstruct the horrors of her slave life and her life as a runaway in ways that her readers could access easily, and could believe. By couching her story in fiction, Jacobs could relate the facts of her life.

bell hooks, a contemporary feminist and activist writer, approaches her personal story *Bone Black* (1996), in a different yet related way from Harriet Jacobs. Where Jacobs uses "Linda" to tell her story, hooks applies shifting pronouns throughout her memoir: she, I, we. The audience's focus is often broadened beyond the narrator herself in the *Incidents of the Life of A Slave Girl*, although Jacobs speaks only from the direct persona—"I." In contrast to Jacobs, the shifting persona in hooks' work decentralizes the audience's attention from hooks herself. The shifting subject (she, we, I) allows hooks to analyze herself from different points of view, and to force her readers to vary their
perspectives, as well, to accommodate the different voices she uses. In other words, Jacobs veils herself as Linda to have the freedom to write about herself, and hooks veils herself as others to write about her entire black community.

hooks' life writing represents the voice of women, either black or white, in the twentieth century, and a modern feminist perspective is more intense and apparent in her personal narrative. It is safe to say that if Jacobs is concerned with drawing attention to the oppression of slaves and understanding female slaves' difficulty in surviving, then hooks is occupied with the lasting effects of slavery on people of all colors—both women and men—a century later. She describes the evils of discrimination among blacks in their own community. For instance, she mentions one black man who is a bit richer than his neighbors, and who is therefore shunned by his own people. People seldom talk with him or visit his house. Children are forbidden to make contact with him. On the other hand, she describes how black people are not allowed, or at least not encouraged, to trust or make friends with the whites. By incorporating many stories about and different perspectives of the multiracial character of discrimination, hooks makes clear that her world—and her audience—is a diverse one: black, white, male, female, feminist, bigot.

Jacobs in her autobiography reinvents the miserable slave period to arouse peoples' consciences and awareness to fight against slavery, and hooks deconstructs the stereotypes of her black girlhood in a multiracial society. As a little girl, hooks enjoys playing boyish games with her older brother; hates girlish colors like pink and red; fights with her brother for excluding her from playing certain games. After growing older, she steals those secret books hidden by her father to explore the forbidden subject of women. Her insatiable love of books distinguishes her from her sisters. At school, hooks makes
friends with one white girl. She is not ashamed to refuse a boy’s pleading for touching. She does not hesitate to defy her father’s authority when he abuses her mother. In other words, in *Bone Black*, hooks defies and destroys the typical image of a black girl that an audience of whites might expect.

One of the striking similarities between the works of Jacobs and hooks is their sense of pride. Jacobs demonstrates in her narrative how a female slave can survive and thrive through her own fortitude; hooks demonstrates through her personal story that being a black female means being self-determined. Also like Jacobs’ work, *Bone Black* is a narrative of coming of age, where we understand that the narrator moves from naivety to maturity. Like Jacobs, hooks writes on loneliness, sexual awareness, racial discrimination, racial hierarchy, family abuses, and gender equality. Also like Jacobs, hooks finds some common ground with what she might perceive to be an alien audience: she writes of traditional issues including the importance of religious life, and the importance of literacy.

The two autobiographies have other common characteristics. “Linda” in Jacobs’s works, acknowledges that reading is crucial for people’s personal achievement. Hooks reveals in her book a strong love of books, painting, and poetry. Sexual exploration is mentioned in both narratives. Jacobs displays a love of black culture, and hooks a pride in her black culture. Jacobs describes her motherhood in a detail; hooks describes her longings for motherhood at the end of her work.

By integrating theoretical works on life writing, feminist studies, and African American culture with my own reading of these two texts, I will finally do more than compare these two African American memoirs. In both works, the skillful positioning of
the narrators allows the readers to understand a world of the black female in America in ways that other genres do not allow. We are taken into the adolescent minds and hearts of two seemingly different black women from two different centuries because of the narrative strategies of the two writers, both of whom understand how to manipulate their material in ways that make them accessible to the multicultural audiences they address. Written in two different centuries, to very different audiences, the two life-writings together help us to hear the harmony in the voices of African American women storytellers.
Chapter One

African-American slaves' blood and tears tainted every inch of the soil in the southern plantations from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Slave narratives reconstruct and critique this “peculiar” institution, eliciting outrage against its irrationality and inhumanity. Female slave narratives not only testify to the cruelty of slavery, but also incorporate a process of self-discovery distinct from what is encountered in the narratives of male slaves. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* presents Harriet Jacobs’ journey of self-discovery through various relationships with others. This collective selfhood is explored behind a pseudonymous narrator Linda.

Robert B. Stepto, in his critique “From Behind the Veil,” argues that “in their most elementary form, slave narratives are full of other voices which are frequently responsible for articulating a narrative’s tale and strategy” (Stepto 3). These other voices often go unnamed or scarcely rise above a whisper, but for the purposes of this examination, I will refer to them as personae. Jacobs invokes these personae in her autobiography; she explores her experiences as a web of relationships. The implication here is that she has a collective or communal notion of selfhood. This may reflect her political outlook as a former slave, and it may also reflect her outlook as a woman, since her web of relations is of wider scope than cannot be found in many male narratives. By making use of diverse personae, Jacobs not only gives voice to her own situation, but also to the class of black women in bondage.

What distinguishes Jacob’s narrative from others is the bitterness of mental suffering and enforced humiliation. She is compelled to endure an enormous amount of emotional trauma as a consequence of her master’s vices and the hatred and jealousy of
her mistress. Jacobs courageously resurrects her ordeal through a complex and interactive network of relationships. Life experiences are reconstructed in terms of her relationships, and the reader is called upon to infer the character of Jacobs' life from her accounts of other people. Jacobs locates herself in the hub of the network but speaks through diverse personae. Sexual harassment and violence of all kinds place female slaves in an even more tenuous and imperiled circumstance than their male counterparts: "there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violent or even from death... The mistress who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage" (Jacobs 26-27). As an autobiographer, Jacobs feels the need to documents her sexual oppression, but she doesn't want the focus to be exclusively on her personal story. Her collective points of view deflect our attention from her personal circumstances to the effects of slavery has on all women victimized on the Southern plantation.

A whipping occurs shortly after Linda comes to the house of Dr. Flint, an infamous slave master. Rather than speak her outrage directly, Jacobs gives us the voices of others as a way of highlighting the triviality of the slave's offense.

There were many conjectures as to the cause of this terrible punishment. Some said master accused him of stealing corn; others said the slave had quarreled with his wife, in presence of the overseer, and had accused his master of being the father of her child. They were both black, and the child was very fair. (Jacobs 12)

In little more than fifty words, Jacobs involves a slave husband and wife, master, overseer, other slaves, and child. Her personal indictment has the quality of a collective outcry. Of particular interest here is the fact that in her world individuals can be penalized

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even for making verbal accusations. Noteworthy, too, is the utterly subordinate position of female slaves: they are at the bottom of both racial and gender hierarchies. In such circumstances, women are unable to protect themselves, much less their progeny. The fate of a mulatto child is doomed at the every moment of its birth. Although Jacobs is technically and physically absent from this account, her fear and indignation penetrate the portrayal. Also as a slave of this monstrous master, and as a biracial girl herself, she is afraid that the “devil” might attack her at any moment, paving the way for her subsequent sufferings. Like Frederick Douglass, Jacobs sees that the system of slavery dehumanizes everyone who participates in it, even—indeed especially—those in high places. Here, for instance, it is clear to the reader that the cause of all the suffering related to this slave family stems from the master’s inevitable corruption as the head of the family. Instead of simply writing a document about slave experiences, Jacobs successfully achieves the goal of analyzing the origins of her people’s affliction.

Slavery is much worse for women, according to Jacobs: “Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortification peculiarly their own” (Jacobs 79). This observation from Jacobs articulates the emotional burdens put upon the black women. Ironically, for slave mothers, New Year’s Day approaches with enormous pain and sorrow, because, far from being a joyful holiday, it is a traditional day to trade slaves. The pain of being separated from their children is devastating to all slave mothers:

On one of these sale days, I saw a mother lead seven children to the auction-block. She knew that some of them would be taken from her; but they took all...She begged the trader to tell her where he intended to take them; this he refused to do. How could he, when he knew he would sell them, one by one, wherever he could command the highest price? I met that mother in the street, and her wild, haggard face lives to-day in my mind. She wrung her hands in
anguish, and exclaimed, “Gone! All gone! Why don’t God kill me?” (14)

Mother/child and slave/slave-trader relationships are explored in this image of a mother in distress. Jacobs makes us attentive to slavery’s attack upon the family and upon family ties of any kind. The absence of fathers serves as further evidence of this practice. Marriage is reduced to husbandry-like breeding, permitted only for the purpose of producing more slaves. For slave owners, family connections would provide slaves with the chance to accumulate power for revolt. In addition to this concern, slaves, regarded merely as working machines, were not supposed to feel any emotion other than cheerful compliance. Black women were denied the right to choose their mates, and even to protect their children. Slave traders treat slaves, even children, as merchandise without any mercy. The trader’s goal is simply to reap the highest profit from his. Jacobs exhibits a picture of twisted human relationships in a civilized world.

Jacobs uses the strategy of collective personae, to depict deformed human relationships between slave masters and slaves, and the sometimes more humane relationships formed within the black community. In the chapter Months of Peril, the author provides us with a glimpse of these relationships:

The thought [Linda’s children are kept in a loathsome jail] was agonizing. My benefactress tried to soothe me by telling me that my aunt would take good care of the children while they remained in jail. But it added to my pain to think that the good old aunt who had always been so kind to her sister’s orphan children, should be shut up in prison for no other crime than loving them. I suppose my friends feared a reckless movement on my part, knowing, as they did, that my life was bound up in my children. I received a note from my brother William. It was scarcely legible, and ran thus: “...If you come, you will ruin us all. They (Dr. and Mr. Flint) would force you to tell where you had been, or they would kill you. Take the advice of your friends; if not for the sake of me and your children, at least for the sake of those you would ruin.” (Jacobs 104)
Once again, various people are involved in this moment: kind white master, children, Linda, brother-William, slave masters, friends, and aunt. Consequently, a kaleidoscope of relationships is described in this small scenario, including friendship, sisterhood, slaves and masters, motherhood, and kinship. All of these people or relationships center on the narrator—Linda (Jacobs). Linda’s friends risk their lives to protect her; her brother is jailed because of her escape; her aunt stays in jail to take care of her children; and her grandmother is put in danger. Linda and these other characters are interconnected, bounded by the similar fate that creates a larger sense of family other than blood. They have created a community, a family of far larger scope and revolutionary power than the masters envisioned.

To some degree, the oppression by the slave masters fosters a strong sisterhood or friendship among black women. Linda depends on the help of friends in her search for safe shelter. The negotiation to buy the freedom of her children with Dr. Flint mentioned above could not proceed in the absence of her friends’ assistance. Jacobs starkly contrasts the authentic humanity of the oppressed to that of the nominally “civilized” oppressors. In her narrative we are struck by the depth of the maternal bond, something which is certain not to escape the eyes of her white readers, with their education and religious background. The moral complexity of her narrative, the fact that “her ties to the children [...] are proof of her sexual transgressions” (Emsley 145) adds a further nuance. Slaves, like free people, are complicated.

The slave narrative’s purpose is to expose injustice and inspire political action. Scenes of degradation can contribute to that end, but Jacobs also wants to present herself in as dignified a way as possible. Focusing on the effects of slavery on others and women
in particular helps Jacobs maintain a sense of privacy. Her narrative strategy—shifting from personal experience to the universal problems of female slaves—effectively broadens the scope of her reader’s interest. By incorporating other voices into her text, Jacobs creates a concentric relational web with Linda in the center. Based on such a network, the reader can relate Linda’s peril to her people, and ultimately perceive the cause of the tribulation—slavery as an institution. This notion of collective selfhood built through other voices facilitates Jacobs’ narration and her political purpose.

Another element of Jacobs’ narrative strategy is the pseudonymity of her narrator Linda Brent, for it affords Jacobs some distance from her audience. Adopting a pseudonym allows Jacobs to document life experience with a kind of “double consciousness,” from the insider’s and outsider’s perspectives. Legal consequences are also at stake here, both for Jacobs and those who help her. Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl was first published in Boston in 1861, three years prior to the promulgation of emancipation. Jacobs’ black friends (most of whom are still slaves or runaways) and white allies, assist her in hiding and escaping from the plantation. She has to be cautious and cunning in recalling her experiences. The fictive name of Linda, among other fictitious names and places secures the safety of those people who have kindly offered help to Jacobs. Her fellow slave would be marked for especially brutal treatment if found out.

The Fugitive Slave Law (1856) was in force, while Jacobs was writing her autobiography. Although living in a free state, Jacobs was still in danger of being hunted, captured, and returned to bondage under this law. Exposing her true identity would only have endangered Jacobs. Historically, in the eyes of nineteenth-century Southerners,
Jacobs was still legally a slave, and therefore had no claim to her own identity or life. Her pseudonym offered a degree of protection from plantation owners in the South and unsympathetic whites in the North.

Jacobs worked as a domestic servant for and lived with Nathaniel P. Willis and his second wife (Mr. and Mrs. Bruce of the text), at the time of writing. Though against Jacobs' wishes, Mrs. Willis sought to protect Jacobs from the fugitive slave law, by persuading her husband that Jacobs should be purchased from her Southern owners and manumitted by the Willis family. Nathaniel Willis, however, was pro-slavery. Jacobs might have feared that her stories unveiling of the atrocity of slavery, once discovered by Mr. Willis, might provoke him to report Jacobs to slave hunters. She would likely have wanted to keep her text secret from him, and this would be another inducement for her to write under a perspective.

Under the name of Linda, Jacobs is free to make "intimate" revelations. Recounting her escape necessarily involves explaining her sexual history: her "affair" with a white man and assaults from Dr. Flint. Jacobs' experience of sexual oppression would certainly have had a sensational appeal to white abolitionist friends and readers. Jacobs does not make a complete confession. She even concedes at one point that it would have been more pleasant for her to have been silent about her own history (xi-xiv). This intention is even clear from her title: *Incidents in Life of a Slave Girl*. As Hazel V. Carby suggests, "the use of the word incidents...directs the reader to be aware of a consciously chosen selection of events in Jacobs' life" (Carby 51). The mask secured by the use of her pseudonym enables Jacobs to effect a compromise between the demand to disclose all and the need for privacy. The love relationship between a white man and a
slave girl certainly could be counted on to scandalize both the white and black communities. It is also, to some degree, degrading for Jacobs to be a pregnant and unwed teenager. Understandably, the pseudonym Linda protects her reputation. As Jacobs writes to her friend Amy Post, “Woman can whisper her cruel wrongs into the ear of a very dear friend much easier than she can record them for the world to read” (Carby 49). Her presentation of such “wrongs” in her narrative are considerably more distanced and “sophisticated”:

> It seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion...There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control lover you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment. A master may treat you as rudely as he pleases, and you dare not speak; moreover, the wrong does not seem so great with an unmarried man, as with one who has a wife to be made unhappy. There may be sophistry in all this; but condition of a slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible. (Jacobs 55)

Jacobs is consciously and explicitly rationalizing, but she effectively problematizes her “wrong”: the world of slavery “confuses” all points of morality. She reveals the depth of her relationship with the young white man, without revealing intimate details. Once again, readers shift attention from Linda’s shame to the cause of this embarrassing situation—the master’s sexual oppression and assaults. What leads to her wrongs overrides the matter itself. Finally, Jacobs’ rhetorical stance displaces violation with revolt: “When he told me that I was made for his use, made to obey his command in every thing; that I was nothing but a slave, whose will must and should surrender to his, never before had my puny arm felt half so strong” (Jacobs 74).

Pseudonymity allows Jacobs to cover the private self that she does not intend to expose to the light of day, we repeatedly see that this technique redirects her readers’
attention to slavery as the cause of Linda’s predicament and peril, instead of the narrowly defined personal circumstance.

Like many slave narratives published in antebellum America, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* intends to provoke the conscience of Northern abolitionists. As a female writer, however, Jacobs is careful to acknowledge her audience of white female readers. She locates the slave’s miserable experiences in the larger context of woman’s emancipation, encouraging “the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South” (Emsley 145). Here, Jacobs draw an emotional connection through writing from a gender perspective. Regardless of race, color, or ethnicity, women as a gender, have common concerns, such as children, family, friends, and sexual abuses.

Punishments like deprivation, starvation, and whipping were common on Southern plantations. In *Incidents*, an astonishing punishment is inflicted upon the Flints’ cook, who is blamed for feeding the dog ill-cooked food: “He [Dr. Flint] took the cook, and compelled her to eat it [mush]. He thought that the woman’s stomach was stronger than the dog’s; but her sufferings afterwards proved that he was mistaken. This poor woman endured many cruelties from her master and mistress; sometimes she was locked up, away from her nursing baby, for a whole day and night” (Jacobs 11). Denouncing the slave master’s heinous behavior is not Jacobs’ only objective; her attention to mother’s agony over the suffering of her newborn baby builds solidarity with her female readers. More than once Jacobs makes it clear that maternity transcends race. Here is how she contrasts the happy free women’s New Year’s Day with that of the slave mother:

O, you happy free women, contrast *your* New Year’s day with that of the poor bond-women! With you it is a pleasant season, and the light of the day is
blessed. Friendly wishes meet you every where...Children bring their little offerings, and raise their rosy lips for a caress...But to the slave mother New Year’s day comes laden with peculiar sorrows. She sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the day" (14).

Concern for children’s happiness builds the bridge between the white and slave women. Mothers in the South mourn the forceful separation from their children, while mothers in the North enjoy happiness with their children. The sharp contrast led by this inhumane institution should intrigue the interest and sympathy from mothers in the North. If a slave mother has a beautiful daughter, she bears an extra burden. This girl will soon become the victim of those licentious masters who will corrupt her with foul words: “If God has bestowed beauty upon her [slave girl], it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave” (27). Jacobs constructs a bond among all women, an elemental feminism, which can “aspire to the complete and reciprocal communication of feeling because it believes in universal sentiment, native human responses that are not bound by circumstance.” (Nudelman 945).

Remarkably, Jacobs takes the advantage of her sexual oppression and transgression to create a hero model for her targeted audience, accomplishing the task of transforming victim to victor. She returns Dr. Flint’s corrupted and vulgar words with contempt and aversion: “He [Dr. Flint] peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred” (Jacobs 26). Although the master tries his utmost to pollute Jacobs’s pure mind, she tries to preserve her self-respect by refusing to submit to his temptations.
Her two love relationships with two free men embody Jacobs' struggle to defy Dr. Flint's oppression. The first lover is a free colored carpenter. Jacobs is even brave enough to confront her master to gain freedom to stay with the lover. She replies to the master's intimidation and contempt with courage and pride: "I replied, 'If he is a puppy I am a puppy, for we are both of the negro race. It is right and honorable for us to love each other. The man you call a puppy never insulted me, sir; and he would not love me if did not believe me to be a virtuous woman'" (38). The failure of this relationship does not deter Jacobs from falling in love with a white man: "So much attention from a superior person was, of course, flattering; for human nature is the same in all... He was an educated an eloquent gentleman. I knew the impassable gulf between us; but to be an object of interest to a man who is not married, and who is not her master, is agreeable to the pride and feelings of a salve" (55). It is not difficult to perceive the pride and joy in Jacobs's expression.

During the period of slavery, the masters arranged most slave-marriages. Jacobs' will and determination in choosing her own mate instead of surrendering under her master's salacious power is another moment of rebellion against expectations conventionally had of slave girls. Confessing guilt and shame at being pregnant by a white man would reflect "proper" ethical standards of women in the North, but Jacobs looks at things differently. "As for Dr. Flint, I had a feeling of satisfaction and triumph in the thought of telling him" (57). Her master's sexual cunning is no match for her profounder integrity.

Jacob uses the "stain" of being an unfree and unwed mother to forge a closer bond with her reader. It allows her to express the depth of her maternal feelings. Cleverly,
Jacobs uses her situation as an inspiration to strive for her and her children’s survival and freedom: “I had often for death; but now I did not want to die, unless my child could die too” (62). The love for her children ignites the spark of escape in Linda. Her masters are quite aware that Linda loves her children. The children can be used as a kind of gambling stake, but ironically this stake works both ways. The children won’t be sold into slavery as long as Linda is not under her masters’ control. Jacobs is highly keen in recognizing her master’s weakness and turning it to her own gain. After enduring enormous pain and torture, Linda escapes successfully to the North and buys freedom for her children: “Reader, my story ends with freedom... I and my children are now free!” (207) For a slave, what is more triumphant than to gain freedom? Jacobs is by no means a victim. What the reader gleans from this narrative is the trial of a hero. This hero is a slave girl!

Given her audience, Jacobs is careful not to alienate the white female abolitionists by insulting or blaming their sisters in the South. In chapter II, Jacobs describes one female slave whose “nearly white” child is mocked and cursed by her mistress. While recognizing the mistress’s cruelty, Jacobs is prudent in her phrasing: “From others than the master persecution also comes in such cases” (Jacobs 12). Jacobs condemns the behavior of female slave owners, but her appeal to a white female audience prevents her from castigating female slave masters as freely as she does male masters. There may be a touch of compromise here, or it may be that Jacobs sees women as being nearly as deeply bonded and disenfranchised as slaves. In any case, as a woman, Jacobs asserts two kinds of solidarity absent in male narratives: motherhood and sisterhood.

Jacobs, as author, challenges an ideology that denies her very existence as a mother. The mother’s instinct to be a protector prevents Jacobs from suicide, and her first
newly born baby encourages her hope for survival in order to protect him. She expresses her maternal feelings naturally enough: “When I was most sorely oppressed I found a solace in his smiles. I loved to watch his infant slumbers” (Jacobs 63). Whenever she mentions her children, Jacobs claims them as “my children.” An explicit bond between mother and children is established. She never gives up any hope and chance to buy freedom for her children: “I was dreaming of freedom again; more for my children’s sake than my own...Obstacles hit against plans. There seemed no way of overcoming them; and yet I hoped” (84).

In order to protect her daughter from suffering sexual assaults and her boy from being humiliated, Jacobs conceals herself for seven years in her grandmother’s garret, which is only nine feet long and seven feet wide, with no access for either light or air. It is motherly love that supports Jacobs while she is in hiding. Physical and emotional sufferings do not keep Jacobs from performing motherly duties. When Christmas comes, Linda “busied herself making some new garments and little playthings for [her] children” (121). Linda is more than the proverbial “angel of the house” here. Her femininity entails the moral and spiritual strength to fight against the slavery.

Jacobs employs two strategies in building her specifically multi-racial sisterhood: she identifies common grounds between the two groups, and she is careful to express gratitude toward her white benefactors. In the first chapter, Jacobs refers to her mother’s mistress and her mother as “foster sisters” because they both are fed at the breast of Linda’s grandmother. Here, it is the slave economy that undermines sororal intimacy. Linda’s childhood under this mistress is described as happy without “toilsome or disagreeable duties” (Jacobs 5). Coming at the beginning of her narrative, this portrait
lays the emotional groundwork for future solidarity and harmony among women of different colors. Jacobs is indebted to one white mistress who shields her from the hunting of Dr. Flint's family. She heartily expresses her gratitude toward this generous woman: "How my heart overflowed with gratitude! Words choked in my throat; but I could have kissed the feet of my benefactress. For that deed of Christian womanhood, may God forever bless her" (103). This demonstrates that women of different colors could be tied together without the racial, political, and economical barriers. Yet, racial factors define the hierarchical relationship between black and white women: "No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence...inflicted by friends who bear the shape of men. The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage" (26-27). The mistresses are also the victims of the patriarchal system, and unfortunately, they have to affirm their social positions at the price of denying the humanity of slaves. Jacobs attempts to clarify that slavery is the vile fruit of patriarchy that causes the sufferings of both black and white women. Thus, black and white women should fight together against these two unjust institutions.
III
Chapter two

Slave narratives document outrages perpetrated in antebellum America. In those narratives, former slaves recount, expose, appeal, apostrophize, and denounce the bondage imposed by an insane political system. Although slavery officially ended with emancipation, black Americans continue to live its historical legacy. Racist ideologies and political corruption hardly ended in the nineteenth century. Both contributed to the ongoing oppression of black people in the twentieth century, oppression that manifested itself in and through all the realms of power: political, economic, and social, in the patriarchal household and in the ostensibly private psyche. Bone Black, an autobiography by bell hooks, is a comprehensive and deliberate examination of the personal consequences of slavery and racial discrimination.

Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood is both self-revelation and an attempt to record and refigure a rich Southern black culture. Emancipation essentially involved the abolition of an economic category, chattel labor. After slavery, oppression continued to manifest itself in the denial of civil rights for people of color. In Bone Black the reader becomes aware of the burden and pain inflicted by this modern oppression through the eyes of an innocent and rebellious black girl,

Through the use of polyptoton (shifts of personal reference from she to we and I), hooks invites the reader to enter into her world from various angles. This rhetorical strategy allows the audience an experience as an experience of hooks’ world as both insider and outsider. hooks’ “I” evokes a subjective and an insider’s response, whereas the pronoun “she” provokes an objective analysis. Thus, “she” mirrors another image of
hooks, "a double of [her] being but more fragile and vulnerable, invested with a sacred character that makes it at once fascinating and frightening" (Gusdorf 32). The first person plural, "we" serves as an often ironically liminal place between the subjective and a wholly detached, objective perspective. Multifaceted worlds are presented to the reader: a private world represented by "I," a radical yet vulnerable female world by "she," a world inclusive of all races in "we." hooks’ rhetorical strategy gives her considerable freedom as retrospective narrator and objective "distance" where she requires it.

hooks entices the reader to explore her dreams, fantasies, and experiences from the perspective created by the personae "I." In the first chapter, while describing her grandmother’s hope chest, hooks exposes a fragile self in her dream: "That night in my sleep I dream of going away. I am taking the bus...There is only the dark and the thick smell of smoke. I stand alone weeping. The sound of my sobbing is like the cry of the peacock. Suddenly they appear with candles, mama and everyone. They say they have heard my sorrow pierce the air like the cry of the peacock, that they have come to comfort me" (hooks 2)². A fragile and hopeless girl appears in the delineation. hooks here shares with her readers about her fear and insecurity. hooks brings to the fore the innocent and imaginative world of a small girl. This dream also builds up a tone of universality: there are feelings people share, regardless of race or color.

The "I" belongs to a world of fantasy and sentiment. hooks reveals her distaste for dressing and posing like a white girl to have her picture taken: "I want never to grow up, to be a cowgirl forever riding in my skirt, with matching vest and hats, with my pointed boots and my one gun. I can defend myself against any enemy. I can shoot

straight. I do not kill Indians—they are family. I protect us from the enemy white man” (hooks 48). What lies beneath the portrayal is the common ground shared by African and Native Americans. “The enemy white man” is committing the same crimes against both.

hooks is equating the segregation policy against blacks with the systematic massacre of the Indians. Not only does hooks rebel against the stereotype of black girls by assuming the cowgirl’s costume, but also she defies the stereotypical image of girls by suggesting the role of a warrior. In hooks’ time, cowboys and cowgirls were seen as white by mainstream culture. hooks’s refusal to dress like a fighting cowgirl contrasts with her later sense of being a warrior. She rebels against the discriminating assumptions toward black girls and conventionalities posed on girls as a whole.

While describing her strange and rebellious behavior, hooks uses the “I” to invoke her reader’s fellow-feeling. For example, different from her peers, hooks rejects seeing her “dying” mother the last time:

They say she [hooks’ mother] is near death, that we must go and see her because it may be the last time. I will not go. I have my own ideas about death. I see her all the time. I see her as she moves about the house doing things, cooking, cleaning, fussing. I refuse to go. I can’t tell them why, that I do not want to have the last sight of her be there in the white hospital bed, surrounded by strangers and the smell of death. (hooks 144)

hooks makes sense of the experience retrospectively. The reader understands hooks’ abnormal behavior from inside. hooks has her own ways to express love to her mother, which is unacceptable to her family. This “I” focuses the reader’s attention on one specific moment, thus detaching the “I” in teenage from the “I” in adulthood. hooks arouses the audience’s sympathy for a rebellious teenage girl. Applying the first person narrative enables hooks to make confession to her family. Her “I” is honest and sincere, and the audience can respond sympathetically, with understanding and forgiveness.
It makes sense for hooks to rebuild her girlhood in the first person singular and plural. The pronoun “I” helps her to expose her life from an insider’s point of view, whereas “we” opens another broader window for the reader to explore her world. hooks extends her life and connections to others by using “we.” Therefore, hooks evokes the readers’ sympathy for the plight of others as well as herself:

We live in the country. We children do not understand that that means we are among the poor... We do not understand that our playmates who are eating laundry starch do so not because the white powder tastes so good but because they are sometimes without necessary food. We do not understand that we wash with the heavy, unsmeaming, oddly shaped pieces of homemade lye soap because real soap costs money.” (hooks 4)

hooks broadens her audience’s focus to include the situation of the larger African-American community. The same color and economic circumstances connect hooks and her people, and those circumstances define a community. She shows us the real living conditions of the blacks. Here, perhaps, the reader senses the genesis of hooks’ political outlook, her need to fight for or change the miserable conditions of her people. Like Harriet Jacobs, instead of focusing exclusively on her personal account, hooks turns to the life of her community. Such a move both makes logical sense and makes for a universal appeal for blacks and whites to strive for justice. At this point, as “we” hooks and the reader are on the same political front.

hooks also uses the first person plural to construct a notion of sisterhood between her people and white women.

WE LEARN EARLY that it is important for a woman to marry. We are always marrying our dolls to someone... One of us has been given a Barbie doll for a Christmas... We know she is white because of her blond hair. Barbie is anything but real, that is why we like her. She never does housework, washes dishes, or has children to care for. (hooks 22-23)

Marriage is regarded as of paramount importance for women regardless of skin
color, and the doll is a popular toy for all female children. The first sentence creates empathy for hooks’ readers of either race. However, the scope of “we” changes, when hooks mentions that the doll is white. It is striking that girls at very young age are aware the color of skin. In America, children are sensitive to racial differences even at an “innocent” age. Both white and black readers will realize the venom of racial discrimination. The adoration of Barbie’s life-style underscores the harsh lives that many black children lead. The reader knows that plenty of black women do the work that Barbie doesn’t “have” to.

The first-person plural affords hooks some distance, while still implicating her, in the narrative. Consequently, hooks can present both insider and outsider’s perspectives: “As small children we think to be called funny [homosexual] is a nice way of talking about something grown-ups are uncertain about, ashamed and even a bit afraid of. Growing older we learn to be afraid of being called funny because it can change everything” (hooks 136). The double roles (insider and outsider) enable hooks to deal with this incident with a mocking tone. Shifting her stance to “we” secures hooks’ physical presence in the story but some detachment from the story, and doing still more. This “we” is deeply nuanced, allowing hooks to “in-clude” female, black, gay, and white worlds in her narrative.

The move from subjective to objective portrayal is completed by changing the stance to “she.” Assuming this perspective, hooks acquires more distance in rebuilding herself, especially when it comes to some private and sensitive issues. She is completely transformed into an outsider. A writer of autobiography can’t avoid the problem of exposing the unwanted private self to the public. Many autobiographers struggle with the
dilemma of needing at once to expose and protect her most private self. Veiled under the persona “she,” hooks cleverly reconciles the conflicting demand to disclose and need to protect her privacy. The third person distances hooks from the girl in her text.

Masturbation is a taboo for girls to talk about publicly. Nevertheless, hooks shows her experience with masturbation, protected under the pronoun “she:”

When she finds pleasure touching her body, she knows that they will think it wrong; that it is something to keep hidden, to do in secret. She is ashamed, ashamed that she comes home from school wanting to lie in bed touching that wet dark hidden parts of her body, ashamed that she lies awake nights touching herself, moving her hands, her fingers deeper and deeper inside, inside the place of woman’s pain and misery, the place men want to enter, the place babies come through—ashamed of the pleasure.(hooks 113)

Readers feel as if they are reading the story of someone other than hooks herself. What is presented to readers is a teen-age girl, without the identity of hooks, who experiments with her sexuality. The author who now looks back at her rebellious girlhood, achieves freedom and distance to recount her story completely and openly. As a result of this shifting persona, hooks successfully diverts her readers’ focus from her personal private experience to a story about anyone who might have the same experience. The pronoun “she” could act like a shield against the conventionalities oppressed upon girls and female writers.

With the help of personae “she,” hooks can also add a playful tone to her story. She has a best friend, a green snake, who understands her frustration in doing things right. The reader now encounters a true friendship between an innocent yet shy girl and an animal. One evening, after playing with the snake, hooks falls down a hill on the way back home. The landlord’s son carries her home: “Before he left he promised to marry her, to come back when she was older... She whispered a secret in his ear. She told him
that she could not marry him because she had already promised the snake that they could live together forever near their favorite tree” (hooks 12). The persona “she” enhances the comic or playful effect in that it shifts the reader’s attention to the content instead of the person appearing in this story. What remains impressive and compelling is the past innocent age.

hooks often uses “she” to refer to herself when writing about all her family relationships except that with her grandmother. As hooks admits, “To them she is the problem child, the source of all their pain” (hooks 109). Clearly, it is also a pain for hooks to recreate her ties with her family, when she is ignored and emotionally rejected by them: “She [hooks] cries about not being able to do anything right, about not fitting in, about being unfairly punished, about being punished”(111). hooks feels alienated even at home: “They gave her [hooks] the boy’s room, not because she is the oldest of the youngest ... but because she is the problem, the no one can stand. She is to live in exile. They are glad to see her go, they feel as if some-thing had died that they had long waited to be rid of but were not free to throw away” (111). The persona “she” invites readers to experience the sadness and frustration of any rejected girl, and communicates a sense of lonely distance (even of hooks from herself) instead of a first-person self-pity. It isn’t hard for the reader to identify. In retrospect, hooks brings understanding to her frustration and loneliness.

The change of pronoun also signifies hooks’s relational distance with others. hooks refers to herself as “She” whenever her father appears. However, “I” is always used to denote hooks when her grandma is involved. hooks implies an emotional barrier between the father and children: “Taking care of children is not a man’s work. It does not
concern him” (hooks 145). The father seems distant from and unavailable for hooks: “In her own way she [hooks] grew to hate wanting his love and not being able to get it. She hated that part of herself that kept wanting his love or even just his approval long after she could see that he was never, never going to give it” (146). Emerging beneath from the words are hooks’ deep regret and sadness for lacking a close father-daughter relationship.

hooks feels comfortable to depict her parents’ marriage from the eyes of an outsider:

He is pushing, hitting, telling her [the mother] to shut up. She [hooks] wants her [the mother] to hit him with the table light, the ashtray, the one near her hand. She [hooks] does not want to see her [the mother] like this, not fighting back...She [hooks] refuses to move...She cannot leave her mama alone... She [hooks] asks the woman if it is right to leave her alone...She wants the woman to know that she is not alone. (146-47)

Her father’s rude behavior toward the mother leaves a deep scar in hooks’ childhood. In the above narrative, hooks is not talking to her mom as a child would; rather, she addresses her mother as a grown woman who understands the pain and sorrow this married woman is suffering. hooks here attempts to generate her readers’ anger and sympathy for victims of family violence.

By shifting pronouns, hooks is able to manipulate her readers’ focus. The pronoun “I” leads the audience into the private world of an innocent girl. hooks directs the reader’s attention to the lives and experiences of the black community through her story by the use of “we.” The personae “she” is a shrewd compromise between making a public confession and protecting her privacy. hooks recalls Anne Sexton: “Everyone has somewhere the ability to mask the events of pain and sorrow” (hooks 76). The pronoun “she” is a device that hooks applies to cover her pain in retrospection. Writing from “she” renders hooks an objective outsider’s perspective and frees her from the dangers of self-
involvement. Hence, hooks provides the audience with a panorama of herself and her people.

hooks pictures a world of manifold facets, which results in a cross racial audience. Through the stories delineated in Bone Black, a strong message is delivered: that people, regardless of skin color, need to know the poison and damage of racial discrimination. The human spirit is a victim of this outrageous practice. Eradication of racial injustice requires power from both the blacks and whites.

Unfortunately, children become aware of the privileges brought by lighter skin-color. Children with darker skin embrace a world of rejection and derision. hooks recalls that black children learn without explanation that “the world is more a home for white folks than it is for anyone else, that black people who most resemble white folks will live better in the world” (hooks 31). Even within the black community, as a response to the long-term oppression from racial discrimination, people with lighter and darker skin often feel antagonism toward one another. hooks has a grandmother who looks white. It is a pity that the vice of racial injustice causes the grandmother to abuse her grandchildren: “They [hooks and her sisters and brother] cannot wait to get away from this grandmother’s house when she calls one of them blackie in a hating voice...they want to protect each other from all forms of humiliation but cannot...They are children. They are black. They are next to nothing” (32). hooks is denouncing the mortification and trauma engendered by people of her own race. Lured by the silky luster of privilege, black people are hurting themselves instead of unifying. At this moment, hooks is warning her own people that they could also be initiators of racial injustice. It has evolved into an idiosyncrasy that racial discrimination is only imposed by one race with prerogatives.
However, hooks attests with her experience that the vile of racial discrimination poisons all races as long as people grants privileges toward a particular race.

Due to the oppressive and humiliating policies of American apartheid, blacks, too, can be prejudiced against whites. When they attend integrated schools, black children are told that all white men are dangerous and all friendly gestures from whites are suspect. Black girls are firmly instilled with the idea that white men would only ruin, rape, and prostitute them. hooks does not hesitate to caution her black readers that such prejudice also deepens the gulf between black and white. She is “shocked to find that racial barriers exist in her house, disappointed, ashamed” (hooks 164).

hooks, however, wants her white audience to see just how thoroughly racial prejudice can affect the day-to-day lives of schoolchildren. Black children go to school from miles and miles away, because they are black. In contrast, white kids can attend schools near their homes without being bussed. The racial segregation policy concentrates black children in areas away from schools of whites. Some children have to leave home sometimes in the dark. Appallingly, the buses for white kids are not allowed to give rides to passing black children. At home in black neighborhoods, children learn not to answer the door for white men. While walking on the street connecting the white and black communities, black children learn to be vigilant about white men nearby, and they “feel afraid” (hooks 163). White men’s infamous and vicious behavior toward blacks is the reason for fear: “In black neighborhoods white men can do as they please” (163). hooks aims at making her white audience realize the impact of white atrocities on black communities.

hooks makes it clear that even the suburbs are only partially emancipated.
Distinctive lines still remain between the whites and the blacks. “Although black and white attend the same schools, blacks sit with blacks and whites with whites. In the cafeteria there is no racial mixing...School is a place where we came face to face with racism” (hooks 156). Solely for the purpose of enforcing the law, in the beginning, hooks and some black girls—but not boys—are chosen to sit in the classes with white students, standing between “the white administration and the black student body” (155). hooks attests that “We discuss with them knowing all the while that they want us to do something, to change...so that they can forget we are here, so that they can forget the injustice of their past. They are not prepared to change” (156).

In the mental hospital, while singing spirituals for the sick, hooks notices that “nearly all the people locked in are white”(134). Later, hooks’s parents explain that “white folks do not want black people in their mental institutions” (134). Skin color affects black people’s opportunities to receive adequate medical care. The superficially integrated does not smooth the tension, fear, and prejudice among them: “They [white folks] are not the good white folks, the ones who look at you with sugary smiles. They are the peckerwoods, the crackers, the ones who look at black folk with contempt and hate” (32-33). Stipulated regulations alone will not eliminate the hatred and fear between the two races. hooks advocates that the removal of racial injustice requires the support of law and the change of biased preconceptions or ideologies conceived by people of both races.

Under the influence of a white supremacist patriarchy, women are regarded as inferior. Black women are doubly marginalized, and hooks comments that not enough is known and written about the experience of black girls. According to hooks, some
traditional feminists often suggest that black girls, more outspoken, have more self-esteem than their white peers (hooks xii-xiii). hooks argues, though, that in traditional Southern-based black life, girls are expected to be assertive. An outspoken girl may still feel worthless because of her dark skin. White “standards” are not accurate and appropriate to measuring the self-esteem of black girls: “to see the opposite [being assertive] in different ethnic groups as a sign of female empowerment is to miss the reality that the cultural codes of that group may dictate a quite different standard by which female self-esteem is measure” (xiii).

hooks is never hesitant to assert and defend her rights as a girl. Her big brother’s insistence on her pulling him in a red wagon, encourages hooks to assert her female right to tell him that “he was the boy and should pull her” (hooks 20). On Sundays, her father exclusively dominates the television when sports games are on, and girls have to play outside. Only the boy has playthings for indoors. hooks always wants to join her brother to play marbles. Unfortunately, the boy rejects her every time. One night, angry at her brother’s refusal to let her play, hooks finally stomps on his marbles. The price for this daring behavior is to be hit with a board by her dad and sent to bed without dinner. hooks rationalizes that children in her family are “always being told to share” (29). Grievously, the tenet only applies to boys’ rights. hooks often reveals how people often dock the rights of girls.

In protest to the preconception of warriors only as males, hooks elaborates on her dream of turning herself into a warrior: “Using the smoke [she] turns herself into a male...[She] must be male to be a warrior. There are no women warriors. [She] fights fiercely against her enemies...When they try to capture her alive [she] takes the
smoke...and turns the smoke into a snake that devours her enemies” (hooks 50). hooks still sticks to the pronoun “she” even after she turns herself into a male by magic. hooks tries to illustrate that female identity does not distinguish itself from that of a male, and that women are capable of acquiring qualities only reserved for men by conventional society.

Restrictions on women extend to the church, of course. In the Baptist church in hooks’ neighborhood, women are not supposed to preach, and are not holy and worthy enough to cross the threshold of god’s space--the pulpit. hooks explicitly reveals her objection: “I want to go to the churches where women can preach, where god is calling women to come and talk” (hooks, 74). In rebellion, hooks attends a tent meeting, which claims to encourage women to preach. To her great disappointment, the preacher is a man who is talking about moneylenders in the temple. Men still dominate the church. hooks has now touched one ignored aspect that women demand: uplifting female’s marginal position in the institution of the church, and respecting women as church members with thoughts and ideas.

hooks is indignant that women must follow rules, whereas men have the right to do whatever they want to do. Women are rejected when they show signs of being homosexual: “When grown-ups talk about women who are funny [homosexual]...Their voices are harsh and unforgiving...They talk about them as unnatural, strange, going against god”(hooks 138). Women are not allowed to violate the social taboos that their counterparts are violating. Differences in gender have created such a gigantic and shocking gulf between the privileges of men and the lives of women. This degradation originates from people’s pure stereotypical ideologies. Men are not encouraged to share
burdens that women shoulder. In hooks’s community, people often blame mothers who teach their sons to do house chores that “real men should never learn” (137). hooks shows her intense rebellion against this rule. She hates ironing, which is only done by women in her family. Threatening and yelling are punishments for hooks’ refusal to iron. To avoid it, hooks once even puts a hot iron under her arm. Nevertheless, her family cares more about the clothes which need to be ironed than about her pain. Although hooks’ attempt to assert her female’s right fails, she is never intimidated.

hooks, a progressive feminist, recognizes race and class to be factors that shape the social status of women. Unlike white females, black females suffer the additional discrimination based on skin color. However, hooks does not highlight the gap between white and black women. Premised on the fact that women of both races are oppressed under the same patriarchal system, hooks encourages white and black women to forge together for their sacred quest and fight for freedom and equity. She does this most effectively in *Bone Black* through her use of a chorus of female voices, represented by a series of pronoun shifts, who by the end, are in harmony.
IV
Chapter Three

The publication of poetry in 1773 by Phillis Wheatley, a female slave, marks the birth of the African-American literary tradition. Indeed with this publication, Wheatley launches two traditions at once: the black American literary tradition and the black woman’s literary tradition. It was first of many important achievements by black women writers. Black women writers dominated the final decade of the nineteenth century in black literature, for instance, a fact that seems to have escaped most scholars. William Andrews laments that “the writings of nineteenth-century Afro-American women in general have remained buried in obscurity, and even the most curious and diligent scholars knew very little of the extensive history of the creative writings of Afro-American women before 1900” (xvi, ix). An essential constituent of the black tradition in literature will remain silent unless black women’s works receive ample and due examination.

Writing an autobiography involves the process of inventing a mirror, but men and women have different ways of looking in the mirror. Jacobs and hooks face specific challenges of writing autobiography as women, for men’s “egoistic secular archetype” (Mason 210) is inappropriate as a model for women’s life writing. Their language must evidence their femaleness as well as their blackness. Anna Julia Cooper, a pioneering black feminist and the author of A Voice From the South (1892), argues that “just as white men cannot speak through the consciousness of black men, neither can black men fully and adequately... reproduce the exact Voice of the Black Woman” (Andrews xiii). In this chapter, I would like to juxtapose Jacobs’ and hooks’ autobiographical strategies.
Most importantly, I want to show that Jacobs’ community of personae and hooks’ use of polyptoton are complementary strategies. Jacobs’ approach grows out of historical, political and legal exigencies. hooks’ approach reflects her historical situation as well, with its “partially” emancipated outlook on race and gender. Both writers, however, move—and insist upon the importance of moving from the singularity of personal experience to the life of the community.

Jacobs’ slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, offers a prototypical and newly emancipated female voice. hooks’ *Bone Black* evidences a mature, black, and female sensibility. Historians have used Jacobs for as a case-study in slavery; hooks however clearly stands on her own as an artist. Olney observes that “[until] fairly recently, black writing in general was barely mentioned as literature...autobiography received much the same treatment” (Olney 15).

During the period of slavery, black female slaves confronted, to say the least, a harsh and inhospitable literary environment. Phillis Wheatley had to undergo an arduous examination by eighteen august citizens, in order to have her poetry published. Black literacy was illegal in slave states, and to teach reading to a slave was a punishable crime. Writing before emancipation, Jacobs had to assume a pseudonym in order to protect herself from the Fugitive Slave “Law.” The hostile environment for black female writers has only moderated in more recent times. Dominated by literature of whites, black literary works remained unrecognized for decades. The very marginalization of these works by black women, however, suggests that they have something dangerous, if not “outlaw,” to teach.

Jacobs recreates her dramatic flight for freedom as autobiography: her freedom
and the text constitute each other. She declares her gender from the title, and relives herself as daughter, sister, granddaughter, mother, friend, and anti-slavery fighter. All of these roles are gendered in significant ways. As we saw in chapter one: Her minimal description of her parental relationship, especially with her mother, explains the predicament faced by slave parents who had little access to their slave children. In contrast, Linda’s fervent efforts to protect and gain freedom for her children build the image of a strong and defiant mother. In recreation, Jacobs is able to construct a double “self,” both public and private self. From the title, Jacobs explicitly denotes that only some pieces of her personal experience are included. The public self partially demonstrates the real self: “The influence of slavery had had the same effect on me that they had on other young girls...I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation” (Jacobs 54). The phrase “deliberate calculation” cleverly glosses over the details of the master’s sexual harassment, and pictures a shrewd slave girl. Jacobs creates a heroic public self out of a victim of slavery. Determined to shield her children from being degraded as slaves, Linda launched her heroic journey by fleeing from the plantation, concealing in her grandmother’s coffin-like garret for nearly seven years, escaping to the North, and engaging in buying freedom for her children. Linda and her people’s afflictions testify to the experience of slaves in the South.

In contrast to Jacobs’ struggle with emotional and physical torture and oppression, hooks recreates a black girl with innocence, fantasy, rebellion, and courage. In the course of reinvention, hooks depicts herself from dynamic perspectives of both outsider and insider by playing with shifting pronouns. Therefore, hooks can present her public self from within and without. Women who write out their inner life in autobiographies
“define, for themselves and for their readers, woman as she is and as she dreams” (Spacks 27). hooks introduces her fantasy world by describing her dreams, converting a private self into a public self. In the dream, hooks fulfills what is unattainable in a real world, such as being a warrior. In this regard, hooks renders more artistic effects to her narrative.

Conflict is one crucial element by which hooks reconstructs her girlhood. The themes of conflict involve family, gender, and race, blended with each other. Through family conflict, hooks exposes how she deals with alienation, loneliness, and misunderstanding. A picture emerges of an innocent, fragile, lonely, and stubborn black girl. hooks confesses that “I am a pain to her[my mother]...I want so much to please her and yet keep some part of me that is myself...not just a thing I have been turned into that she can desire, like...” (hooks 140). hooks is acute in perceiving injustice caused by the difference of gender within her community and within the family. She is amazed that her mother, without complaining, is driven out by her father, and her uncle astonishingly acquiesces: “The woman does not protest. She moves like a robot, hurriedly throwing things into suitcases...When he finally comes, her mother’s favorite’s brother, she [hooks] cannot believe the calm way he lifts suitcase, box, sack, carries them to the car without question. She [hooks] cannot bear his silent agreement that the man is right, that he has done what men are able to do” (149-50). The race issue penetrates every aspect of hooks’ and her people’s lives. At home, children are inculcated with the evils that whites have perpetrated upon blacks. At school, people with lighter skins have privileges, and those with darker skin hurt. Partial integration at school and within communities constantly reminds people of the insurmountable gulf between the two races. Strained economic
circumstances and the governmental indifference exacerbate the gap caused by skin color. Using these many conflicts, hooks reinvents her black girlhood from diverse dimensions.

In both writers' narratives, sense of pride is conspicuous. Jacobs, a former slave, is proud of her slave culture, of being a mother, and of her successful struggle for freedom. hooks, a contemporary black writer, is proud of being a black woman of the rich and unique Southern black culture.

During the dark and suffocating slave period in the South, blacks were prohibited from learning to write and read on most of the slave plantations. Withholding the blacks' access to literacy led the whites to assume that the black was without culture. However, Jacobs' narrative verifies it.

Being deprived the right of an education, oral folk tales or stories turn out to be the prevailing discourse for creating and maintaining black culture. The language most often used by slaves is different in spelling and pronunciation from the standard English spoken by whites. Sometimes, Jacobs documents in black English her people's conversation, such as the conversation by Jacobs's slave friend, Betty. Therefore, Jacobs is, in her own way, paying tribute to the language to which she is intimate.

There is a strong tie in Jacobs's family. She considers her grandmother a trustworthy, compassionate, dependable friend, and "mother." Her grandmother shelters her whenever Jacobs is in peril, such as risking her life to provide a hiding place to Jacobs. Jacobs' Aunt Nancy and brother William are willing to stay in jail to protect Jacobs's children.

Slaves are deeply religious. Jacobs has her two children christened. The slaves
usually compose their religious songs and hymns, “and they do not trouble their heads much about the measure” (Jacobs 71). Without describing how whites celebrate Christmas, Jacobs elaborates on the celebration slaves held for Christmas in order to distinguish the black culture: “Every child rises early on Christmas morning to see the Johnkanaus...They consist of companies of slaves from the plantation...Two athletic men, in calico wrappers, have a net thrown over them, covered with all manner of bright-colored stripes...Cows’ tail are fastened to their backs...For a month previous they are composing songs, which are sung on this occasion” (121). For Jacobs, this is the real celebration of Christmas.

Slave status does not deter Jacobs from being proud of her motherhood. Pride as a mother is related to pride of the anti-slave fighter. Being a mother implies a victory over the sexual oppression inflicted by her master, Dr. Flint. Instead of succumbing to the master’s salacious desire, Jacobs chooses her lover, a white gentleman. She has “a feeling of satisfaction and triumph in the thought of telling him” (Jacobs 57) about her pregnancy. Actually, Jacobs’ children inspire her to fight for their freedom: “I had a woman’s pride, and a mother’s love for my children; and I resolved that out of the darkness of this hour a brighter dawn should rise for them” (87). Determined not to let her children be reduced to chattel, Jacobs jeopardizes her life by escaping from the plantation. Her children would not be sold as long as Jacobs is not found. Not every slave mother has the nerve and perseverance to hide in a den for rats and mice for years, suffering from cramps, limb numbness, and of fresh air. After landing in the North, Jacobs reunites with her children and eventually can breathe the fresh air as a free human being: “I and my children are now free! We are as free from the power of slaveholders as
are the white people of the north” (207). The pride glows from Jacobs’ words. From a slave girl, to a slave mother, to a free person, Jacobs fulfills miracles with her determined will in a world filled with injustice and brutality. Her sense of pride as a woman and mother penetrates her narrative.

bell hooks, growing up in a ghetto, pictures a rich “magical world of Southern black culture that was sometimes paradisical and at others terrifying” (hooks, xi). Culture persists and flourishes regardless of economy and politics. Here we are reminded of Olney’s observation, that “autobiography occupies a central place as the key to understanding the curve of history, every sort of culture manifestation, and the every shape and essence of human culture itself” (Olney 8). Through her experience, hooks tries to illuminate that people of color can and should be proud of their own culture.

Quilt making is popular among the black women. According to hooks’s grandma, in the old days every black woman would learn how to quilt before marriage. They would sew their spirit, faith, and love into the quilts. Looking at the quilt with stars at her grandma’s sewing room, hooks imagines that “each part of the star, each different bit of cotton, has been stitched with the intensity of her [grandma’s] love and will to make this marriage work, make it complete and fulfilling like the quilt” (hooks 54). Quilt making resembles the matrix of true womanhood for the blacks.

Food is a distinguishable product of culture. Saru, hooks’s grandma, makes the food that hooks likes best, like greens, corn bread, and fried corn. Saru prepares the corn bread in an old fashioned way, “with a little animal fat, hot water, and salt mixed together then deep-fried” (hooks 60).

Getting hair pressed is regarded as a ritual in hooks’ family. Young girls wear
braids and plaits, symbols of innocence and youth. Combing hair is not a sign of a desire to be white, nor a sign of the quest to be beautiful. Rather, hooks writes that it is a sign of girls’ desire to be women: “It is a gesture that says we are approaching womanhood—a rite of passage” (hooks 92). This is the time when men are excluded, and women are intimate with each other, feeling the smell of oil, sharing pains and joys, and meeting each other’s needs by combing.

Jazz, the music of African America is arguably America’s single contribution to world culture. To hooks, black people compose music with the most intense passion. Jazz, the black men’s music, bears witness to a black past. On communion Sundays, people sing in choir, lamenting pain and cheering happiness. It is the music that “expresses everything” (hooks 127). At home, they enjoy listening to jazz on the radio on Saturdays, and this is the only time they can hear “a whole program with black music” (127).

At this moment, the magic of music breaks the barriers of race, intoxicating people with the beauty of notes. hooks is proud of her black culture, blended with black people’s blood, tears, intelligence, and history. Black is a color of beauty and pride. hooks longs to be older to wear black clothes while still young, because “black is a woman’s color” (hooks 180).

Jacobs and hooks are passionate about the mind. The ability to read and write is important to the lives of both writers. Jacobs considers intellectual enlightenment an effective and powerful weapon against white slave masters; hooks finds solace and comfort from reading books and writing poems.

Enslavement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries involved both physical
and spiritual bondage. Slaves toiled as chattel for white masters. The law forbade blacks to receive education. Even churches restrained from teaching slaves how to read the Bible. This spiritual oppression indeed enabled whites to possess the mace of power. In consequence, the masters could, as they desired, instill and dominate the imaginations of the blacks. Slaves were deceived that the South was a paradise. White masters often told their slaves how deplorable run-away slaves had been, thus coaxing the blacks to be submissive. Jacobs strips the whites’ beguiling rationalizations by questioning: “What would you be, if you had been born and brought up a slave, with generations of slaves for ancestors? I admit that the black man is inferior. But what is it that makes him so? It is the [ignorance] in which white men compel him to live” (Jacobs 43).

Fortunately, thanks to the help of a generous mistress, Jacobs learns how to read and spell at the age of twelve. Benefiting from literacy, hooks acquires a deeper understanding of the inhumane slave system. As chance permits, Jacobs would read newspapers to educate her people in ideas about freedom and the North. Jacobs conceals herself in a coffin-like garret, and she derives much pleasure from reading: “by holding my book or work in a certain position near the aperture I contrived to read and sew. That was a great relief to the tedious monotony of my life” (Jacobs 119-20). At one point Jacobs relies upon her ability to read and write to outwit her master. In order to persuade him that she is out of reach in the North, she finds a New York address in a newspaper and writes him a letter ostensibly from that place. The master falls for the ruse and does not suspect that Jacobs is in fact nearby. Her intellectual aptitude allows Jacobs to win her freedom.

As a “problem” child, hooks always feels that she is on the outside. During
childhood, hooks is sad, for she feels she is not able to do anything right. She is often times punished for not ironing properly or for wearing shoes incorrectly. Unlike her sisters, hooks does not like the color pink and often cries while sleeping. She is exiled at home, and no one talks to her, except her grandma and grandpa. Reading is a balm to hooks’ lonely heart: “Escaping into the world of novels is one way she learns to enjoy life” (hooks, 131). In that world, hooks is “a little less alone” (77). To have more books to read, hooks once picks books from trash: “They smell of mold and decay but to me they are a treasure” (78). hooks discovers a resemblance between her and Jo while reading Alcott’s Little Women. Biographies invite hooks into the lives of great writers such as Mary McLeod Bethune. Later, hooks finds her final solace in poetry: “novels only ease the pain momentarily...It is poetry that changes everything” (131). hooks not only reads poetry, she also memorizes them. She learns to free her spirit from reading poems. Gradually, hooks starts writing her own poems secretly, easing her pain in life and encouraging her to keep on living. hooks’ fervent enthusiasm for poetry and books leads to her final destiny--writing: “I belong in the place of words. This is my home. This dark bone black inner cave where I am making a world for myself” (183).

Writing from different historical contexts defines the differences between Jacobs’ and hooks’ narratives. Jacobs is concerned about freedom for blacks. hooks deepens Jacobs’ quest to the equality of human rights. The underlying goal for Jacobs’s narrative is to arouse the white abolitionists in the North to fight against an abominable institution—slavery in the South. Therefore, the slave narrative serves as a live testimony against the atrocities of slavery. hooks attracts people’s attention to the life experiences of black people and advocates adjustments for the unfair treatment based on race and gender.
Jacobs, a slave writer, is responsible for exposing the inferno imposed upon blacks by white masters. Thus, Jacobs has to replicate the torturing scenes of her people: “Never before, in my life, had I heard hundreds of blows fall, in succession, on a human being” (Jacobs 11). To her enormous indignation, Jacobs finds out that her mistress has the nerve to see a woman whipped “till the blood trickle from every stroke of the lash” (10). Jacobs here is writing to disclose the brutality of slave masters and the crooked human spirit poisoned by slavery.

Although slavery has been abolished for a century, blatant racial discrimination still exists. In the world of hooks’ autobiography, blacks are still seen as inferior because of their skin color. Through the eyes of a black girl, hooks warns her readers of the venom of racial discrimination: “They [children] learn without understanding that the world is more a home for white folks than it is for anyone else” (hooks 31). hooks’ elucidation of rich black culture affirms that for no reason should black people feel ashamed about themselves. hooks observations also extend to discrimination based on gender. Influenced by the white patriarchal system, women occupy a lower social status than men: “He [hooks’s father] reaches the porch yelling and screaming at the woman inside—yelling that she is his wife, he can do with her what he wants” (146). hooks tries to illuminate the connection between male dominion and misogyny.

Varying writing purposes determine that Jacobs and hooks cater to different groups of readers. Jacobs targets white abolitionists in the North. The audience of hooks’s narrative is a more open, multi-racial America and includes both sexes.

Because she reinvents her slave experience, Jacobs’ audience is directly confined to the white abolitionists. Supported by the law, slave masters in the South usually
prevented slaves from learning how to read and write. Jacobs is among the few lucky slaves who are exposed to books. Not surprisingly, slaves in the South could hardly read Jacobs's narrative. In addition, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was published a year before the enforcement of emancipation and after the enactment of the fugitive slave law; therefore, the chance is extremely slim that this biography could be circulated in the South. In the cause of struggling freedom for the blacks, assistance from both the blacks and whites was necessary, especially for people in the North unaware of injustice in the South. To entertain her white audience, Jacobs, to some degree, had to comply with the values and standards of whites.

We see an instance of this when Jacobs confesses to her audience how guilty and shameful she feels to be pregnant as a teenager: "Now, how could I look them in the face? My self-respect was gone!...I had resolved that I would be virtuous, though I was a slave...And now, how humiliated I felt!" (Jacobs 57) We soon see, however, that her remorse is tempered by the triumph she feels for not surrendering her master's sexual designs upon her. This contrition is solely written for the white readers. The astonishment expressed by Jacobs' white friends in Philadelphia proves the effectiveness of this confession: "It [disclosing her motherhood] might give some heartless people a pretext for treating you with contempt" (166). Pregnancy as a teenager would certainly contaminate the virtue of a lady, judged by the values held by the whites.

hooks directs her narrative to any reader regardless of color and gender. The racial discrimination and partial integration suggested by hooks rest in both races. hooks is telling her multiracial audience that it is imperative for them to extinguish the flame of hatred based on skin color. In hooks' world, during the sixties and early seventies, the
whole society condoned and celebrated the oppressing of people of color, and even the law indulged and sheltered depravities against the blacks. In hooks’ neighborhood, no legal punishment was imposed on white men perpetrating vicious crimes against blacks. Black children were frequently taught to fear whites. Fear prevented blacks from making any contact with whites, either around black or white communities. Racial integration was just a joke. Both whites or blacks bore enmity toward each other.

hooks’ presentation of racial prejudice suggests that the public be aroused to fight for an equal living environment, and to realize that it requires the efforts of both races. Similar to racial discrimination, women’s social status is a battlefield that needs to be confronted by both men and women. Miserably, black women are situated on the lowest rung of the patriarchal system, oppressed by gender and racial discrimination. Women are fettered by various conventions and rules, which demand complete compliance and inferiority to their male counterparts. Relying on her personal experience, hooks aspires to incite women to fight for their own rights. Men, too, should recognize the injustice and pain they have inflicted on women. hooks’ unyielding stance and her mother’s submissive behavior form distinct contrasts. hooks dares to challenge her brother and father for asserting her own rights; however, her mother, shackled by female convention, silently endures her husband’s abuses. There is no happiness for her mother here; she cries at night for being mistreated. Surely, hooks’s female audience will be touched and awakened by their sisters’ suffering.

While employing personae to voice their life experience, Jacobs and hooks reveal different strategies. Jacobs uses the “I” persona, while hooks narrates with shifting pronouns “I,” “we,” and “she.” The “I” persona in Jacobs’ slave narrative can easily
entice her white readers to read her sufferings as their own experience. The reader identifies with Linda and feels her disgust at her master’s sexual torture: “He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of...I was compelled to live under the same roof with him-where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature” (Jacobs 26). Jacob’s “I” brings authenticity to her historical witness.

Jacobs’ “I,” however, is never alone. Morgan argues that female slave narrators like Jacobs organize “their narratives around their relationships with meaningful people in their lives” (Morgan 81). The experience of “I” is always related to Linda’s enemies, relatives, friends, and peer female slaves. Mason echoes this relationship network in female slave narratives by saying: “this grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other, seems...to enable women to write openly about themselves” (Mason 210). Through a dissipating relational connection triggered from “I” persona, Jacobs is able to shift her readers to concentrate on the general situations for female slaves. Therefore, Incidents is not just about Jacobs herself; instead, it is the accusation charged by all female slaves against the pernicious slavery in the South.

Mason observes that one element that differentiates women’s from men’s lifewriting is “the sort of evolution and delineation of an identity by way of alterity” (Mason 231). hooks achieves alterity by shifting the narrative pronoun. Her “I” presents the reader with an innocent and fragile girl’s fantasy world. It is a subjective world in which the audience is mainly influenced by the emotions and perceptions displayed by an naive, stubborn, and frank girl: “She tells me that I must never ever as long as I live raise my hand against my mother. I tell her I do not have a mother” (hooks 152). hooks shifts the
audience's focus from herself to others by narrating with "we:" “School is a place where we came face to face with racism. When we walk through the rows of national guardsmen with their uniforms and guns we think that we will be the first to die, to lay our bodies down” (156). At this moment, the reader encounters the feeling of black children who are ignored and alienated in a partially integrated school.

When hooks uses the third person, “she” assumes a detached, objective perspective on her life experience. From this safe distance, she can retrieve an alienated, lonely, and rebellious girl: “Her wilderness, unlike the one the goat is led into, is a wilderness of spirit. They abandon her there to get on with the fun things of life...No one hears her crying. Even though she is young she comes to understand the meaning of exile and loss” (hooks 130). This stance also offers a less painful, or at least less sentimental approach to a sad period. hooks' use of polyptoton is always purposive in these ways.

While recreating themselves, Jacobs and hooks have broken the established images for a nineteenth-century slave girl and a twentieth-century black girl respectively. Intelligence, enhanced by acquiring literacy, fundamentally defies the prevailing assumption about slave girls, because slaves can hardly gain opportunities to learn how to read and write. Aided by literacy, Jacobs wins value for herself: “Women are considered of no value, unless they continually increase their owner’s stock” (Jacobs 49). She could destroy slave masters’ schemes by explaining from her reading to her people the truth, and by teaching slaves how to write. Her intelligence even defeats that of her masters. Linda, Jacobs’s pseudonymous name in the narrative, is never intimidated by her masters:

[Dr. Flint] “Do you know that I have a right to do as I like with you,—that I can kill you, if I please?”
[Linda] “You have tried to kill me, and I wish you had; but you have no right to do as you like with me.” (39)
Linda here protests being diminished as property of her master. Linda in the *Incidents* is not submissive and weak; rather, she is strong and determined: "My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each" (Jacobs 87). Nearly all female slaves married slaves, arranged by their masters. However, Jacobs not only chooses her lover - a white gentleman, but also bears his children. Two taboos are overthrown: interracial relationships and pregnancy as a teenager. She bravely takes charge of fate. Linda demonstrates her rebellious disposition when she peels off the hypocritical veil of the whites' disseminating Christian religion among slaves: "These God-breathing machines are no more, in the sight of their masters, than the cotton they plant or the horses they tend" (6). Linda, a representative slave girl, defends her human rights and challenges a cruel institution as best she can.

This image of the black girl as critical-thinking intellectual runs counter to the racist stereotype. Due to long-term oppression, black women were generally engaged in farm and domestic work. hooks’ predecessors learned on the sly, either at home or in the field; hooks learns at school and spends a lot of time reading. She especially loves reading novels, biographies, and poetry. Her family does not understand her thirst for spiritual nourishment: "When I become the problem child they blame it all on the books...They make me stop reading to go outside and play. They snatch the book out of my hand and throw it away because I am not listening when someone is talking to me" (hooks 77). Conventions and rules still confine black women. Although hooks is angry that men can do as they please, she is not afraid of asserting her rights as a female. She dares to provoke her father and brother by insisting upon her rights, often at the price of punishment: "She hated the way he [hooks’ brother] could assert these boy rights and not
include them in games...She hesitated only a few seconds before stomping her feet onto
his marbles. Jumping from his chair the father began to hit her” (29).

hooks shows her rebellious nature by confessing her sexuality and auto-erotic
exploration. She is not ashamed to display indifference to boys: “She is disgusted by the
grabbing, the pleading that she let them do this and that” (hooks 157). Her family is
concerned that she might turn out to be “funny” (homosexual). Her making friends with a
white girl also arouses anxiety within her family. hooks does not care what her family
thinks of her behavior, yet she only cares that “she is left alone” (157) by boys. hooks is
rebellious to taste the pleasure forbidden to girls by conventions. More unconventionally,
hooks actually confesses about her experiments of playing with herself: “This pleasure is
her secret and her shame...There she finds a certain contentedness and bliss” (113).
V

Conclusion

Autobiography nourishes black literature. From Frederick Douglass to Malcolm X, from Olaudah Equiano to Maya Angelou, the form has provided primary documents of the African-American experience. As John Blassingame has observed, “Black history was preserved in autobiographies rather than in standard histories because black writers entered into the house of literature through the door of autobiography” (Olney 15). Black women have been remarkable contributors to this literature, from the slave period to the contemporary world. Autobiographies by Harriet Jacobs, a former slave, and bell hooks, a contemporary African-American feminist, epitomize the evolution of black autobiography.

Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is a complex narrative, marked by introspective analysis, participant observation, and internalized documentation. Jacobs reconstructs the material circumstances of her personal life in order to critique conventional notions of black female behavior in slavery, and to provoke sympathy among Northern abolitionists for victims of slavery. Jacobs' autobiography is a stark denunciation of the dehumanizing and brutal institution. The entire narrative is overwhelmed with the burning desire for freedom. “Brent” (Jacobs' pseudonym in the narrative) means “to burn” in German, suggests she is both setting fire to a “peculiar institution” and lighting the way for others. In this quest for freedom she establishes a universal bond among all her readers. Writing of female concerns and motherhood,
Jacobs establishes a proto-feminist sisterhood of women. In both these ways, Jacobs exerts moral influence on her readers for the emancipation of her people.

Nevertheless, Jacobs is a reluctant autobiographer. As *Incidents*, the first word of her title suggests, Jacobs only presents fragments of her life experience, with the goal of putting her life in the service of emancipation. (Jacobs’ experience as a housemaid in the North, for example, is not central to her narrative.) Jacobs’ *bios* enter the autobiography to a limited extent then, and even here, she must sometimes distance the reader and herself from the story. Legal and personal constraints lead her to adopt personae and other “masking” strategies. Her *slave-narrative* is authentic, but historical circumstances put a very tight frame around it.

Given its different historical circumstances, *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* by bell hooks strikes us as more fully an example of *life-writing*. Signified by the title, a black girl’s experience is recreated. hooks uses the trope of polyptoton to document her experience from multi-layered perspectives. hooks’ readers are, thus, able subjectively and objectively, to speculate with her. Although both Jacobs and hooks adopt the “I” narrative, Jacobs’ narrator is presented under a pseudonym “Linda Brent” and through different personae. The self is presented as a *collectivity*. hooks, on the other hands, uses different rhetorical means to give us a *diffracted* self.

In the context of the black literary tradition, hooks’ autobiography is a continuation of Jacobs’ effort to “adopt and adapt dominant conventions and to challenge racist sexual ideologies” (Carby 61). The transition from slavery to freedom did not liberate black women from the political and ideological constraints placed on their lives. *Bone Black* stands as a protest against the linked oppressions of racism and patriarchy.
The material is various but the polemics are similar: "Jacobs's attempt to develop a framework in which to discuss the social, political, and economic consequences of black womanhood prefigured the concerns of black women intellectuals after emancipation" (61). Perhaps most importantly, the language of the self in these two writers, as seen in their rhetorical strategies and tropes, shows they are sisters in the most significant sense.
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