

TWO FEMALE PERSPECTIVES ON THE SLAVE FAMILY
AS DESCRIBED IN
HARRIET JACOBS' INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL
AND MATTIE GRIFFITH'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A FEMALE SLAVE

by

Kimberley J. Lystar

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of the requirements for the degree of

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in the Department of History

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ABSTRACT

Two Female Perspectives on the Slave Family as
Described in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a
Slave Girl* and Mattie Griffith's *Autobiography of a Female Slave*

By: Kimberley Lystar
Department of History

This thesis will explore an issue in the history of American slavery: the importance of the slave family to individual female slaves. The slave families examined in this thesis do not consist exclusively of blood relations. They also include groups of individuals who came together and depended on and loved one another as much as blood relations. These bonds of affection also constituted family.

In the main part of the thesis two sources will be examined in great detail: Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, published in 1861; and Mattie Griffith's *Autobiography of a Female Slave*, published in 1856. The main issue to be discussed is how these two women described the interaction of members of slave families. Jacobs was a fugitive slave living in the North when she wrote her slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in the 1850s. In *Incidents*, Jacobs discussed her life in slavery prior to her escape North. One of the central themes in her book was the centrality of family members, especially those related by blood. Griffith, on the other hand, was a white woman who wrote a slave novel entitled *Autobiography of a Female Slave* in 1856. Griffith

spent her childhood on a plantation in the slave South and moved North after she joined the abolitionist movement. *Autobiography* was written from the point of view of a female slave named Ann. Through Ann's eyes, Griffith, like Jacobs, described the importance of family in the slave community. Unlike Jacobs, however, the establishment of surrogate kin in *Autobiography* was just as important as those family members related by blood.

The first chapter will deal with the historiography of the slave family. The main issues to be discussed are the historical reaction to E. Franklin Frazier's matriarchy theory and the development of the matrifocal theory. In Chapter Two, the genres of the slave narrative and the slave novel will be defined and explained. Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* will then be discussed in terms of its representativeness of the slave narrative genre, as well as its uniqueness in the new aspects it introduced, such as the attack on the sexual double-standard. The focus will then be placed on Mattie Griffith's *Autobiography of a Female Slave* to demonstrate the ways in which it was representative of the slave novel genre, as well as for the new aspects it introduced, such as her white eye-witness account of slavery. In the third chapter, Jacobs' *Incidents* will be explored in great detail. After first establishing the facts of Jacobs life, they will be compared to the information revealed in *Incidents*. It will be proved that there were numerous similarities between Jacobs' life and, *Incidents'* main character, Linda Brent's life. In Chapter Four, the words of Linda Brent will be consulted to examine the way

in which Jacobs, through Brent, described her family life. The fifth chapter will explore the known facts of Mattie Griffith's life. Though many details were never documented, through the correspondence of some of Griffith's acquaintances, the main events of Griffith's life prior to the publication of *Autobiography of a Female Slave* in 1856 will be chronicled. In Chapter Six, the life of Ann, the main character in *Autobiography* will be explored. As Ann was separated at a young age from her only family, her mother, Ann's account primarily was concerned with the manner in which individual slaves could establish surrogate family ties. It will be shown how the bonds of affection and dependence were just as strong as those based exclusively by blood. In the seventh chapter, the similarities and differences between the described family lives of Linda Brent and Ann in *Incidents* and *Autobiography* will be discussed. Attention will then return to the questions and issues raised in the first chapter.

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Though it is not entirely female in its gender orientation, this is my kin support group, without whose help I would not be the self-reliant (?) person that I am today!

With my heart-felt gratitude.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis will explore an issue in the history of American slavery: the importance of the slave family to individual female slaves. The slave families examined in this thesis do not consist exclusively of blood relations. They also include groups of individuals who came together and depended on and loved one another as much as blood relations. These bonds of affection also constituted family. Within this context, particular emphasis will be placed on self-reliance through the help of female kinship networks.¹ In this respect, this thesis will chronicle how two slave women, one "real" and the other "fictional", were able to overcome the obstacles of life in slavery primarily through the establishment of a female kinship support base.

In the main part two sources will be examined in great detail: Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*; and Mattie Griffith's *Autobiography of a Female Slave*.² The major issue to be discussed is how these two women described their lives in reference to the female members of their slave families. Jacobs was a fugitive slave living in the North when she wrote her slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in the 1850s. In *Incidents*, Jacobs discussed her life in slavery prior to her escape North. One of the central themes in her book was the centrality of blood relatives, particularly during the moments of great crisis in her life. Griffith, on the other hand, was a white woman who wrote a slave novel entitled *Autobiography of a Female Slave* in 1856. Griffith spent her

childhood on a plantation in the slave South and moved North after she joined the abolitionist movement. *Autobiography* was written from the point of view of a female slave named Ann. Through Ann's eyes, Griffith, like Jacobs, described the importance of family ties, be they fictional or real, to female slaves. Unlike *Incidents*, however, *Autobiography*'s treated surrogate kin as being just as important as blood relatives.

Though Jacobs and Griffith were the authors of each respective work, they presented their stories through fictional characters. Jacobs' narrator was a woman named Linda Brent, a woman, as shall later be demonstrated, whose life followed many, if not all, of the events of Jacobs' life. Griffith's narrator was a female slave named Ann. Since Griffith was a white woman, the events of her life did not parallel the events of Ann's life. Griffith, however, did grow up on a plantation and, though not a slave, she was, at the very least, a witness of the effects of slavery on the slave family.

In analysing both *Incidents* and *Autobiography*, the words of the main characters will be explored in great detail. How each work described the importance of the slave family to individual female slaves, as well as the place of the female slave within this family unit, will be examined and compared to the findings of historians, both to establish representativeness as well as differences in how other studies portrayed the role of women in the slave family.

The first chapter will examine the historiography of the

slave family in the early to mid-nineteenth century. In particular, historians have much debated the presence of a matriarchy in the slave family. Starting with the theories of E. Franklin Frazier, the progression and ultimate demise of the matriarchy theory will constitute the bulk of the chapter. By the 1980s, the term "matriarchy" gave way to "matrifocality". This new trend is especially relevant to this thesis. "Matrifocality", by definition, tends to place more primacy on women's relationships with other women.³ This perspective, therefore, will provide a starting point upon which to assess the primary sources and to develop the main theme of this thesis.

The second chapter will discuss the genre of the slave narrative and the slave novel. It is necessary when discussing the works of Jacobs and Griffith to explore the issue of genre since the importance of these sources lies not only in their contents concerning descriptions of the slave family, but also in their style. Both works were very similar in style and shared many elements in common with all the slave narratives and slave novels published prior to the Civil War. The first issue to be explored is the creation of the slave narrative as a literary genre. After an examination of the ways abolitionists helped slave narratives to be written and published, the formulaic contents of the slave narrative will be described. The events in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Autobiography of a Female Slave* will then be applied to this criteria to determine to what extent both works followed the conventions of the slave

narrative. However, due to the formulaic nature of the slave narrative, as well as the extent to which abolitionists edited these works, the discussion next will turn to the problem of authenticity; specifically whether or not the events recounted in these works are to be believed as fact. The reader also should be aware of the problems created due to the male authorship or direction of almost all of the slave narratives. This issue is decidedly important as the thesis will examine two female accounts that were written independently of men. In this respect, the significance of Jacobs' work is even more appreciated as her is the only slave narrative exclusively written by a female slave prior to the Civil War that discusses the issues relevant to this thesis.

In Chapters Three and Four, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* will be discussed in detail. The first pages will address the known facts of Jacobs' life prior to and inclusive of the events described in *Incidents*. The events immediately preceding the publication of *Incidents* will be examined in greater detail; for example, Jacobs' problems both in writing and then finding a publisher for *Incidents*. After looking at reviews in the abolitionist press to measure contemporary reaction to *Incidents*, present historical scholarship on *Incidents* will be discussed. Prior to 1981, most historians doubted the authenticity of *Incidents*. In 1981, however, historian Jean Fagan Yellin established that the facts of Jacobs' life directly paralleled the events described in *Incidents*. It is

therefore important for this thesis to compare and contrast the established facts of Jacobs' life to the events she described through her main character, Linda Brent. In doing so, the plot of and characters in *Incidents* will be laid out in detail.

Once the issue of authenticity has been resolved, the scholarly interpretations of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* will be examined. In these works, the main focus has been upon the issues of control, self-autonomy, purity and motherhood as they applied to the described events in Linda Brent's life. Chapter Four will conclude by mentioning a largely ignored issue in the historical study of *Incidents*; that of Brent's family life, as a whole, and her views concerning the centrality of family in her life. By focusing on moments of crisis in Brent's life, the theme of self-reliance through the help of a female kinship support network will be addressed.

In Chapters Five and Six, the focus will shift to Griffith's *Autobiography of a Female Slave*. First to be explored are the events in the life of *Autobiography*'s main character, Ann. Next, the history of *Autobiography* will be discussed. In November 1856, *Autobiography* was published anonymously. In the following months, reviews were published that chronicled the reaction of the abolitionist community to *Autobiography* and that speculated about the identity of its author. It was not until months later that Griffith was revealed to be the author of *Autobiography*.

Aside from the contemporary reviews, little attention has been given to Griffith's work. In fact, only two historians have

examined *Autobiography* in any detail: Estelle Jelinek and Barbara Jean Ballard. In Chapter Five, other possible, though previously not examined, interpretations of *Autobiography* will be mentioned, including its importance as abolitionist propaganda. The chapter will then conclude by introducing the issue of Ann's family life. Unlike Brent's family life in *Incidents*, Ann's story centred on her attempts to establish surrogate kin after her separation from blood relatives at an early age. Nonetheless, *Autobiography* is important to this thesis as it chronicles Griffith's eye-witness account of how female slaves relied on female kinship networks during the major moments of their lives.

The seventh and last chapter will bring out the parallels of Linda Brent's and Ann's experiences as Harriet Jacobs and Mattie Griffith respectively described. After discussing the similarities between the two works, the differences, or what was particular to each account, will be explored to establish the distinctiveness of the perspective of each character and author. It will be shown that though each author brought different life experiences to each character, the central theme of self-reliance through the help of female kin networks was present in both works. The chapter then will return to the issues of patriarchy and matrifocality that were raised in the first chapter and will attempt to further address them in terms of their applicability to Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and Mattie Griffith's *Autobiography of a Female Slave*.

NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION

1. For the articulation of this theory, I have drawn from the suggestions of two black feminist scholars: Filomina Chioma Steady, ed., *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishers, 1981), Introduction; and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "Through an African Feminist Theoretical Lens: Viewing Caribbean Women's History Cross-Culturally", in Verena Shepherd, Bridget Brereton, and Barbara Bailey, eds., *Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), pp. 3-19.

2. Jean Fagan Yellin, ed., *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987 (1861)); and Mattie Griffith, *Autobiography of a Female Slave* (New York: Redfield, 1857 (1856), rept., Miami: Mnemosyne Publishing Co., 1969).

3. For a discussion of the term "matrifocality", see Deborah Gray White, "Female Slaves: Sex Roles and Status in the Antebellum Plantation South", in Ellen Carol DuBois and Vicki L. Ruiz, eds., *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, first edition (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1990), p. 28.

CHAPTER ONE:

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE SLAVE FAMILY

The thesis will focus on how Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and Mattie Griffith's, *Autobiography of a Female Slave* described the role of women in the broader context of the slave family. Both *Incidents* and *Autobiography* represent eye-witness accounts of the effects of slavery on the family lives of two individual women. Through the eyes of the main characters in each book, the role and function of slave family members will be discussed. As Jacobs and Griffith offered interpretations of the nature of the slave family, they thus even could be considered among the first historians to examine the slave family. This chapter, however, mainly will explore the historiography of the slave family as it has developed throughout the course of the twentieth century. It is important to discuss the historiography of the slave family, both for purposes of context and comparison. In particular, this chapter will explore the debate over the presence of a slave matriarchy and, next, of matrifocality in the slave family. These debates are relevant to the thesis, especially the theory of matrifocality as it presents an interpretation of the structure of the slave family that can be tested against *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Autobiography of a Female Slave*.

In the historiography of antebellum slavery, historians have widely debated the structure of the slave family. Among the first

historians of slavery to take up this issue was Ulrich B. Phillips. Phillips argued that blacks were inherently inferior to whites. In *American Negro Slavery*, Phillips portrayed slaves as children and the plantation as a "school constantly training and controlling pupils who were in a backward state of civilization".¹

Nearly twenty years after Phillips had presented this approach, historian and sociologist E. Franklin Frazier wrote *The Negro Family in the United States*. Frazier did not follow Phillips' belief in the inferiority of black slaves. Focusing on the slave family, Frazier described how it was the slaves, and not their masters, who controlled slave family relations. Frazier argued that the slave family was based on a system of matriarchy. This term inferred that women were the sole heads of their families. To prove this theory, Frazier summed up the role of the slave mother, claiming that she was "the dominant, most dependable and important figure in the slave family".²

Twenty years later, historians still discussed the slave family from Frazier's perspective. In the 1950s, Stanley Elkins argued that not only did slavery create a matriarchal slave family structure, but that it also emasculated all slave men and reverted them to childlike "Sambos". The full implications of this arrangement were apparent in the way in which slave children experienced their childhood:

For the Negro child, in particular, the plantation offered no really satisfactory father-image other than the master. The real father was virtually without

authority over his child since discipline, parental responsibility and control of rewards and punishments all rested in other hands.... For that matter, the very etiquette of plantation life removed even the honorific attributes of fatherhood from the Negro male who was addressed as, "boy"- until, ... he was allowed the title of "uncle".³

Where Elkins described the psychological effects of slavery on the African-American family, another historian of the 1950s, Kenneth Stampp, expanded on Frazier's claim of the matriarchal structure of the slave family. Though Stampp agreed with Frazier that "the typical slave family was matriarchal in form", he took this argument to its extreme and stated that gender roles in the slave community were such that "the male slave's only crucial function within the family was that of siring offspring".⁴

In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan issued a report to the Federal government that precipitated a change in the direction of historical scholarship on the slave family. In his report, Moynihan explained that the problems of the contemporary African-American family were rooted in slavery.⁵ To prove that the slave family was "pathological" in nature Moynihan used Frazier's thesis of the slave matriarchy. Stating that "the very essence of the male animal ... is to strut", Moynihan explored how a matriarchal family structure inherently emasculated slave men. It then was the imbalance of power in the slave family that provided for the twentieth century problems of the African-American community.⁶

The main significance of the Moynihan report was the historical reaction that it provoked. Where Frazier's work

provided the model for historians decades after its publication, historians of the 1970s were to base their theories on the refutation of both Moynihan's and, correspondingly, Frazier's arguments. Writing in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and the ideology of Black Power, African-American historians of the 1970s sought to assert how, as much as possible, slaves were agents in maintaining their own familial structures. These historians began to stress the, at least, equal power of African-American men in the slave family. For example, historian John Blassingame stated that men were indispensable to the slave family. By providing their families with food, furniture and a masculine presence, Blassingame argued that the slave community recognized the importance of the contributions slave men made to their families:

There were several avenues open to the slave in his effort to gain status in his family. Whenever possible, men added delicacies to their family's monotonous fare of corn meal, fat pork, and molasses by hunting and fishing.

Likewise, historian Eugene Genovese stated that "slave men provided for their families to a greater extent than has been appreciated".⁸ Genovese also argued that slave women acknowledged this role and "displayed not merely a willingness but a desire to defer to their husbands".⁹ That did not mean, however, that he directly refuted the matriarchy thesis. According to Genovese, there was some truth in the claim:

Enough men and women fell into the pattern to give rise to the legends of the matriarchy, the emasculated but brutal male, and the fatherless children. These legends did not merely arise from contemporary proslavery

propagandistic fantasies or from the ethnocentricity of later historians and social societies; they rest on unquestionable evidence, which, being partial, has misled its interpreters.¹⁰

The work of Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman also addressed the matriarchy theory. In fact, Fogel and Engerman's argument went to an extreme to debunk the matriarchy thesis. Fogel and Engerman stated outright that "it is not true that the typical slave family was matriarchal in form".¹¹ They then argued that "the dominant role in slave society was played by men".¹² Since, they asserted, it was the slave man who held managerial positions in the field, initiated courtship and gained the permission of the masters to marry, husbands were thus to be considered the sole heads of their families.¹³

The most important work to come out of this generation of historians was Herbert G. Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*. To debunk the matriarchy thesis, Gutman demonstrated that both a mother and father, more often than not, headed the slave family. In these slave families, the role of the father was acknowledged and much appreciated. In fact, Gutman argued that though the threat of sale was always prevalent, most masters respected the bonds slaves felt for their families. Thus, according to Gutman, the slave family was essentially stable in nature, with a slave mother and a slave father bringing up their children together.¹⁴ Gutman based this theory in part on slave naming patterns. In the slave community, male children were named after their fathers thus proving the importance of slave fathers

to their families:

The naming of children for their fathers was a particular slave naming practice [that] ... strongly disputes frequent assertions that assign a negligible role to slave fathers.¹⁵

After a reign of over thirty years, it appeared that the matriarchy thesis had been discarded. Historians no longer considered Frazier's work as the definitive explanation of the structure of the slave family. The historical work of the 1970s presented new ways of studying the slave family that furthered scholarship on the slave family into the 1980s and beyond. By the 1980s, feminist historians responded to the scholarship of the previous decades and began to criticize these findings. Like their 1970s counterparts, these feminist historians put forth alternative theories of their own.¹⁶

Like her 1970s counterparts, Deborah Gray White directly challenged Frazier's matriarchy thesis. Her emphasis, however, was not on the role the male slave performed in his family but rather on the role of the female slave. White argued that it was not a question of power relations. Slave women merely did what they had to do to preserve their families:

Slave women did not dominate slave marriage and family relationships; they did what women all over the world have done and been taught to do from time immemorial. Acting out a very traditional role, they made themselves a real bulwark against the destruction of the slave family's integrity.¹⁷

White also criticized the revisionist historians of the 1970s. White argued that the change in historical focus trivialized the role of the slave woman in her family and relegated them,

inappropriately to a "submissive" role.¹⁸ White instead proposed that the slave family more closely followed the model of matrifocality. By this term, White meant that slave women were the central focus of the slave family. As field labourers, child-bearers and home-makers, White argued that slave women were inextricably linked to their families and each other.¹⁹

The historiography on the slave family thus is quite complex. It is important that historians no longer think of the slave family exclusively in terms of a debate between whether or not patriarchy ruled. Nonetheless, the debate over the patriarchy theory is important in that it affected the ways in which the nature and structure of the slave family has been studied. Past historical attention on roles in the slave family, and behaviour within these roles, has been quite extensive. Also important in interpreting and understanding the history of the slave family, however, is the sense of community and mutual responsibility that women fostered in the slave family. In this respect, both White and Terborg-Penn's work provide the theoretical jumping off point for this thesis.

In her discussion of matrifocality, White also raised the issue of female self-reliance. Her analysis linked this phenomenon to the establishment of female networks, specifically in the work lives of female slaves.²⁰ Most relevant to this thesis, however, is White's argument that within the theory of matrifocality, women are central to the slave family's continuity and survival as a unit.²¹ White recognized that cooperation

within the domestic sphere was an element of female solidarity, though she did not elaborate.²² In this respect, one of the aims of this thesis is to expand on White's argument. Where White focused on the work lives of female slaves in the establishment of female networks, I will examine how this phenomenon can be applied to the dynamics of self-reliance through female kinship networks in the slave family.

Still, the problem of reconciling history and theory remains. Though she did not intend her work as such, White's approach quite nicely fits into the African feminist model that Terborg-Penn's article outlines. In "Through an African Feminist Lens", Terborg-Penn argues for the application of Steady's theoretical model to African-descended women throughout the diaspora.²³ This model proposes that slave women used networks to overcome obstacles placed in the way of survival.²⁴ White's work demonstrated the applicability of this theory in regards to the work experiences of slave women. Yet to be examined is how this theoretical model can be applied to the family lives of female slaves. In particular, this thesis will examine the importance of female kinship networks in the lives of two female slaves who struggled against all odds to become self-reliant. Also, to be discussed is how female kin members, especially the older generation, provided a stable support system upon which younger slave women could rely in order to overcome the unique obstacles that, as women, slavery placed in their way. Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Female Slave* and Mattie

Griffith's *Autobiography of a Female Slave* will help to demonstrate how female slaves turned to female kin members for help and support. As such, it will be important to keep in mind that, in some slave families at least, female slaves did not envision their role in the slave family in terms of a matriarchy, or even in terms of matrifocality. These do not represent the main point. For the purposes of this paper, the issue of importance is not who ruled over whom, but rather how did female members of slave families interact with one another.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

1. Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1966; orig. pub. 1918), p. 291.

2. E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966; orig. pub. 1936), pp. 32, 49.

3. Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, third edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976; orig. pub. 1959), p. 130.

4. Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968; orig. pub. 1956), pp. 343-344.

5. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action", in Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy: A Trans-Action Social Science and Public Policy Report* (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1967), p. 62.

Moynihan here stated: "There is no one Negro community. There is no one Negro problem. There is no one solution. Nonetheless, at the centre of the tangle of pathology is the weakness of the family structure.... It was by destroying the Negro family under slavery that white America broke the will of the Negro people."

6. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

7. John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, revised edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 179.

Blassingame here continued: "The husband could also demonstrate his importance in the family unit by making furniture for the cabin.... The slave who did such things for his family gained not only the approbation of his wife, but he also gained status in the quarters."

8. Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), p. 486.

9. Genovese, p. 500.

Genovese then stated: "A remarkable number of women did everything possible to strengthen their men's self-esteem and to defer to their leadership".

10. *Ibid.*, p. 491.

11. Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1974), p. 141.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 141, 142.

14. Herbert G. Gutman, "Legacy", Paper given at a conference at the University of Guelph, p. 65.

Gutman stated: "Most slave marriages lasted until the death of a spouse. Most slave children grew up knowing a slave mother and a slave father. Most slave women had all their children by the same slave father. Pre-nuptial intercourse and childbirth occurred often, but most unmarried slave mothers later took husbands and remained with them until death. Some slave mothers never married.... Obligations based on blood and marital ties, finally, became the basis of enlarged slave conception of social obligation."

15. Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), p. 190.

16. Christie Farnham best summed up the explicit problem. She criticized the reaction to the Moynihan Report as being entirely one sided: "The thrust of the research has been an effort to refute Moynihan's position by documenting the presence of males." Farnham, as well as other feminist historians, found fault with this approach because it had "the unfortunate effect of trivializing the importance of the female headed household".

Christie Farnham, "Sapphire?: The Issue of Dominance in the Slave Family, 1830-1865", in Carol Groneman and Mary Beth Norton, eds., *"To Toil the Livelong Day": American Women at Work, 1780-1980* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 73.

17. White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, p. 160.

18. Deborah Gray White, "Female Slaves: Sex Roles and Status in the Antebellum Plantation South", in Ellen Carol DuBois and Vicki L. Ruiz, eds., *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1990), p. 23. Specifically, White stated: "With the reinterpretation of male roles came a revision of female roles. Once considered dominant, slave women were now characterized as subordinated and sometimes submissive.... [This] suggests that, at least in relation to the slave family, too much emphasis has been placed on what men could not do rather than on what women could do and did."

19. White, "Female Slaves", p. 28.

White then asserted that this argument did not necessarily preclude the importance of slave men in their families: "Matrifocality is a

term used to convey that women in their role as mothers are the focus of familial relationships. It does not mean that fathers are absent; indeed two parent households can be matrifocal. Nor does it stress a power relationship where women rule men. When mothers become the focal point of family activity, they are just more central than are fathers to a family's continuity and survival as a unit."

20. White, "Female Slaves", p. 23.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

23. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "Through an African Feminist Theoretical Lens: Viewing Caribbean Women's History Cross-Culturally", in Verena Shepherd, Bridget Brereton, and Barbara Bailey, eds., *Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), pp. 3-5.

As previously mentioned, Terborg-Penn based her comments on the proposed theoretical model of anthropologist Filomina Chioma Steady in the introduction to her edited volume *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishers, 1981).

24. Terborg-Penn, "Through an African Feminist Theoretical Lens", p. 4.

CHAPTER TWO:

SLAVE NARRATIVE AND SLAVE NOVEL: THE LITERARY GENRE

When an ex-slave wrote the story of his/her life, it was not a solitary action. During the antebellum period, from 1830 to 1860, hundreds of these so-called slave narratives were published. Not only were many slaves writing about their own personal experiences, but many white people also were writing about their interpretation of the slave experience. For purposes of identifying the differences between the two types of works, the ex-slave's account is referred to as a slave narrative, while the white person's fictional account is labelled a slave novel. Harriet Jacobs wrote a slave narrative written in the style of the domestic fiction novel of the nineteenth century. Mattie Griffith attempted to write the same type of book, but the fact that she was white made it a slave novel, not a slave narrative.

Before dealing with the contents of the books, it is necessary to discuss their style or genre. In this chapter, both the genre of the slave narrative and the genre of the slave novel will be examined. First, the style and conventions of the slave narrative will be discussed. At this point, the role of the abolitionists in the creation of the genre of the slave narrative will be explored. After explaining how Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* fit into this genre, our attention then will turn to Mattie Griffith's *Autobiography of a Female Slave* as an example of a slave novel. It is relevant when

discussing both genres to keep in mind both their value and limits as historical evidence.

In 1856, an article ran in *The National Anti-Slavery Standard* discussing the recent history of abolitionist literature. At the time, slave narratives and slave novels were among the most popular forms of this literature. Though still writing at the height of their popularity, the author was able to offer an important perspective on the literary genre and its growth over the past decade:

One of the incidental advantages of the great contest of principle which is now going on in this country between freedom and slavery, is its effects upon our national literature....

A few years ago there was no anti-slavery literature, and a book devoted to the subject could scarce find a publisher who dared issue it, and it lay under the ban of public opinion when issued. Now, every publisher and every press pours out anti-slavery books of every form and description, lectures, novels, tracts, biographies. Not among the least interesting of these are the biographies of former slaves written by themselves.

There is often only one major difference between a slave narrative and a slave novel: the race of its author. That is to say that a slave narrative was written by someone who formerly had been a slave and a slave novel was written by a white person who often claimed to be as familiar with slavery as the ex-slave. In all other categories, the distinctions are minimal. It is, in fact, impossible to discuss the one without at the very least mentioning the other. It is also impossible to discuss either without placing them in the context of abolitionism. The abolition movement in the United States flourished from 1830 to

1860. It is no coincidence that slave narratives and slave novels reached their zenith of popularity at the same time.² Though the personal experiences of the authors of each genre were different, the end result in print often was the same. Abolitionists played a major role in the establishment of the formulaic style of the slave narrative. As such, the abolitionist who wrote a slave novel would write in the same genre. The goal of both the slave narrative and the slave novel was to convince Americans of the necessity of abolishing slavery. The public's reaction to both genres was so positive that there was no need to change the formula.

By definition, the antebellum slave narrative was "a personal account of a life in bondage and the struggle to be free".³ Being able to write this account was no easy accomplishment. Much more was required of the slave narrator than just the written word. In order for a narrative to exist, the ex-slave had to have first escaped from slavery. If the ex-slave arrived in the North alive, the next obstacle was to keep oneself alive. Since the North, on the whole, was every bit as racist as the South, this was no easy feat. The best option available to the fugitive slave was to develop ties with the abolitionist community.⁴ The abolitionists, during this period, consistently provided assistance to the ex-slave trying to establish him/herself in the North.

The abolitionists' help did not always come without its price. This community was essential to the survival of the

fugitive slave, a fact of which all were well aware. Abolitionists were not above using their influence over the ex-slave to further the "cause". To the radical abolitionist, the "cause" was everything. What mattered most was the complete abolition of slavery as an institution. In that goal, fugitive slaves often were used like pawns; the ends were to justify the means. The most accessible option was the slave narrative. By convincing the fugitive slave to share his/her story of a life in bondage, the abolitionist was able to capture and mould public attention. Indeed, slave narratives were the most important factor in the growth of the abolition movement. Northern views of slavery were largely based on information read in these narratives.⁵ What better way for a white, middle-class Northerner to learn the truth about slavery than from one who was well aware of its realities?

Many ex-slaves were apprehensive about writing a narrative. In the first place, since literacy was, more often than not, illegal for the Southern slave, the vast majority of ex-slaves did not know how to read or write.⁶ In order for them to write a narrative, they needed to find an abolitionist who was willing to take the dictation.⁷ More often than not, however, it was the abolitionist who went to the slave with this proposition. In fact, a large portion of the slave narratives were directed or actually written by whites.⁸ This method was not always in the ex-slave's best interests. The one who could write had final control over what was written. In addition, the ex-slave did not

always get to choose the direction in which the narrative went. Abolitionists were known to lead interviews, choosing to write only about the aspects of the story that would help to further the "cause".

The interview Lydia Maria Child, a noted abolitionist from Boston, held with Charity Bowery, a fugitive slave, in 1848 provides the best example of this phenomenon. Bowery related her story to Child, but in the printed manuscript, Child would add such descriptions as to how Bowery told her story in order to enhance the sympathy factor; for example, "The poor creature's voice had grown more and more tremulous, as she proceeded, and was at length stifled with sobs."⁹ As Alice Deck illustrated in reference to this interview, the performance and the emotional appeals were more important than the narratives themselves.

For those slaves who could read and write, the options were more numerous. It was possible, however rare, for the fugitive slave to write his/her own narrative without any help from the abolitionists. Former slave Frederick Douglass' narrative, the most celebrated of the slave narratives, was one such example. This phenomenon, however, was very uncommon. Where the majority of slave narratives were dictated, the next in percentage were those written by ex-slaves that abolitionists, at the very least, heavily edited.

The genre of the slave narrative is easy to identify due to its conformity of content and style. The ex-slave was not encouraged to demonstrate his/her individuality on his/her own

terms when writing the slave narrative. There were certain stock ways that a slave could present his/her individuality, so long as they conformed to the established style. This too, gave the abolitionists greater control over the content of the slave narratives. The abolitionists were not alone in this demand. The public read the slave narratives to become better acquainted with the institution of slavery. To them, the life and feelings of the individual slave were only of secondary importance.¹⁰ This reality becomes evident when one analyzes the contents of the slave narratives. As Jean Fagan Yellin illustrated, all the slave narratives were episodic in nature, and even discussed similar episodes:

In structure, the narratives generally follow a standard pattern. They begin with a portrayal of life under slavery.... Through a series of incidents they build to a climactic escape. They end with a portrayal of life in freedom, frequently commenting on racial divisions and discussing the narrator's work in the anti-slavery movement.

The narrator characteristically reveals his inner life: his alienation resulting from his first encounter with brutality, and inevitable, his separation from his mother (often the only functional family for the slave child); his crucial decision to attempt his escape; his devising a plan and concealing it from those around him; his fears during his escape; his triumph at his success; and his response to his new life in freedom. What emerges most strongly from each of these works is a sense of the character of the narrator- his energy, his resourcefulness, and courage.¹¹

James Olney also discussed a number of criteria necessary in the slave narrative. His list was very similar to Yellin's. To paraphrase, and list, Olney set up the contents of the slave narrative as follows:

1. There must be a title page, including the author's

name followed by "written by Himself".

2. There must be included testimonials and prefaces by well known abolitionists establishing the credibility of the author.
3. The narrative itself must include the following:
 - the first sentence, "I was born"
 - a sketchy description of parenthood, ie: the author does not know who his/her father is, or where his/her mother was sold
 - descriptions of a cruel master
 - an account of how the slave was a strong, hard-working individual
 - a description of the barriers against the slave attaining literacy, and his/her ultimate success in that battle
 - a description of the food the slaves ate, the work they performed, and yearly activities
 - an account of a slave auction
 - a description of white patrols set up to catch runaway slaves
 - a description of a successful escape
 - the slave's reflections on slavery
4. There must be an appendix attached to the end of the narrative.¹²

In applying these criteria to Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, there are very few deviations from the lists of Yellin and Olney. The only items missing are a sketchy description of parenthood and a description of herself being a hard-worker. All the other criteria were met, in almost the same order as Olney's list. Thus, Jacobs' *Incidents* definitely was a slave narrative. In applying the same criteria to Mattie Griffith's *Autobiography of a Female Slave*, there were more deviations from the lists. There was neither a title page, nor testimonials included in the beginning of the book. In fact, for the first few months after publication, the name of the author

was not known. As well, there was no description of a successful escape, nor an appendix that followed the narrative. Though there were more items missing from the list in *Autobiography* than in *Incidents*, these items were not among the most important on the list. The narrative itself followed the exact same pattern as other slave narratives, with the only exception being that the slave in the narrative did not attempt to escape. These items alone, however, would not exclude *Autobiography* from the ranks of the slave narrative. The most important item missing from Griffith's narrative is an account written by a former slave. Though initially assumed to be an authentic narrative, Griffith subsequently was identified as a white woman. That fact alone made *Autobiography* a slave novel.

What does all of this mean to the scholar of the slave narrative? Due to the confusion as to the true identities of the authors of most slave narratives, the great debate in this field necessarily has been concerned with the question of authenticity. Authenticity in the slave narrative can be defined as the degree to which it reflected the slave's own experiences, as opposed to being the creation of the abolitionists who sponsored and often wrote it. Since very few slave narratives were written without the collaboration of abolitionists, a close examination of their role and actions is essential. It, obviously, is no easy task to prove either the amount of input the ex-slaves really provided, nor the extent of editorial control.

Past historians, such as Ulrich B. Phillips, unilaterally

dismissed the slave narratives' authenticity as being "doubtful".¹³ Present historians, at the very least, are attempting to resolve the issue. One such historian, Charles Nichols, defended the authenticity of the slave narrative and its editors on numerous points. Nichols first stated that "only superficial aspects of narratives have been challenged and even fictionalized accounts are striking in their essential truths".¹⁴ Perhaps even more importantly, Nichols defended the editors themselves. Political motives included, Nichols argued that these "slave amanuenses" were "persons of proved integrity". If the "cause" was most important to the abolitionists, they would not want their works to be exposed as frauds. Abolitionist editors thus were very aware of what they wrote and of how much they edited.¹⁵

In addition to the problem of authenticity affecting all slave narratives regardless of gender, female slave narratives present particular problems of interpretation. Not only were the slave narratives similar in style and content, but they also were similar in ideology, or tradition. The vast majority of the slave narratives were written by, or about, male slaves. What little individuality the protagonist manifested was on male terms. Qualities like physical strength were exalted, while dependence on others was shunned. As such, the tradition of the male slave narrative often excluded the experiences of female slaves. The plot of these male narratives was similar in that they all chronicled the slave's realization of the immorality of slavery,

his physical fight to escape slavery and his solitary flight to the North to ultimately gain his freedom.¹⁶ The male slave narrator built his story on qualities that whites respected such as courage, mobility, and physical strength.¹⁷ These qualities were not always shared in the narratives of female ex-slaves and this reality created problems for those few women who did write narratives.

The fact that very women even wrote, let alone dictated, their slave narratives makes them of particular interest to the historian. Why did so few women write slave narratives? One explanation has been that fugitive female slaves very rarely were encouraged to write a narrative.¹⁸ In a culture that ignored the voice of black women, the existence of even one female slave narrative, let alone the dozen or so that have survived to this day, should be appreciated.¹⁹ For those few women who overcame the obstacles, the presence of the male tradition was yet another hurdle to jump. For example, in writing *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the only precedent upon which Harriet Jacobs could draw was the male slave narrative.²⁰ Jacobs, however, did not intend to follow that pattern. As Frances Smith Foster illustrated, *Incidents* diverged from the model of the male slave narrative and dealt with issues that only the female slave experienced:

Harriet Jacobs' treatment of conflict, dominion and power is more complex and varied than that of the male narrators. As in most narratives, the resisting protagonist does flee to the North, but in Harriet Jacobs' version, flight is neither the first nor the

only available option for resistance.²¹

Though, like her male counterparts, Jacobs quickly established the immorality of slavery, as Valerie Smith explained, she did so not to describe her emancipation in terms of the "triumph of the individual will", but rather as the "triumph of the self-in-relation".²² As a woman, Jacobs realized that she could not match her master's physical strength. Thus, though her successful freedom may have been only to her benefit, she did not obtain it on her own. By relying on the members of her family and community, Jacobs instead recounts her successful escape as both a personal and collective victory:

Jacobs' tale is not the classic story of the individual will; rather it is more a story of a triumphant self-in-relation.... Most of the narratives by men represent the life in slavery and the escape as essentially solitary journeys... Under different, equally restrictive injunctions, Jacobs readily acknowledges the support and assistance she received.²³

It is in examining *Incidents* that the argument for gender as a separate category of analysis is strengthened. Minrose C. Gwin argued that as a black woman, Jacobs had to deal with the tensions between her role as both a "communal and individual self", in that "in this process of self-definition she must also accept the demands of the genre that she become the Everywoman of the slave experience."²⁴ Jacobs resolved this tension by stating that though she was writing about her own personal experiences, they were, at the same time, also representative of the experiences of all enslaved women:

I have not written my experiences in order to attract

attention to myself; on the contrary, it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history. Neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings. But I do honestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse.²⁵

What makes Jacobs' *Incidents* so invaluable to the historian is her frank discussion of her life, in a style that one could only call a feminist perspective. Aware of the pressures to conform her writing to the established style of the slave narrative, Jacobs nonetheless challenged the ideology of the cult of true womanhood and its exclusion of the black female slave.

The dominant nineteenth-century ideology concerning women was the "cult of true womanhood". Under the aegis of this "cult", all women were expected to be pure, chaste and self-effacing wives and mothers.²⁶ However, the "cult of true womanhood" applied only in principle to black slave women. While being encouraged in theory to adopt the conventions of "true womanhood", black women came to realize that they were subjected in reality to different gender expectations than their white female counterparts.²⁷ Defined as sexually insatiable, black women were caught in a paradox. How were they to remain "pure" in a racist, patriarchal society that saw them only as "animals"? Historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, in discussing the context of *Incidents*, dealt with this reality of this unique problem in reference to slave women:

A slave woman, in contrast, remained caught between the gender conventions of southern society and the gender

relations of the slave community. She never enjoyed- or was never entirely imprisoned by- a definition of womanhood so all-pervasive that it constituted the core of her identity. Her relations with members of the slave community and, in lesser measure, with whites offered her interlocking networks of gender relations and gender role, but both networks were subject to constant violation.²⁸

Jacobs was the only female slave autobiographer of the nineteenth century to describe the hypocrisy of these southern sexual dictates. As pointed out before, the slave woman was subjected to gender expectations that she could never fulfil. Jean Fagan Yellin heralded *Incidents* for the manner in which Jacobs described "the failure of her efforts to adhere to the sexual pattern she had been taught to endorse".²⁹ Jacobs thus can be seen as the first black woman to challenge "the standard notion that a woman's self-esteem is a simple function of her adherence to conventional sexual mores".³⁰ Recognizing the problematic nature of this contradictory image of black women, some historians have even argued that Jacobs' criticism voiced the need for a separate category of analysis for black women. The following is the passage from *Incidents* that historians have most often quoted to prove this point:

I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others.³¹

Arguing that her experiences were not comparable to those of either black men or white women, Jacobs thus introduced to American society the concept of the uniqueness of the black

female slave experience.

Incidents fits the category of a slave narrative, but it also shares much in common with other genres. As the story of her life, it is an autobiography. As an expose of the sexual double-standard, it is a feminist manifesto. As a descriptive account, it is heir to the domestic fiction novel. While it is true that its formulaic style is similar to that of the vast majority of slave narratives, its written style and messages are vastly different, not to mention that *Incidents* is among the very few slave narratives actually written by a woman.

Having discussed the qualities of the slave narrative and how *Incidents* fits into the genre, a comparison with the slave novel is rather quick and easy. The style and content of the slave novel is very similar to that of a slave narrative. In fact, many historians have had difficulty when attempting to discuss the differences between the two. The only real difference is that the slave novel was not written by a former slave, and therefore was not a first-hand account of life in slavery. Trying to discuss the slave novel without explaining its relevance to the slave narrative is therefore impossible. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., illustrated the difficulty of even defining the slave narrative genre without keeping in mind the influence of the slave novel:

The matter of defining this genre is complicated by the many novels, printed before 1865, which imitate the form of the slave narrative, and pretend to be first person accounts of bondage in the south. Though an anathema to the historian these are the very delight of

the literary critic, since they enable him more readily to discern both the repeated structure of the genre itself and the pervasiveness of these texts as literary models.³²

Mattie Griffith's *Autobiography of a Female Slave* provides a perfect model of contrast and comparison between the slave narrative and the slave novel. In comparison, as historians of the slave narrative and slave novel, like Marion Wilson Starling, have found, *Autobiography* was virtually indistinguishable from a real slave narrative: "The anonymous *Autobiography of a Female Slave* was probably the most successfully disguised of the slave novels. It was long believed to be an actual autobiography."³³

When first published, the status of *Autobiography* as a slave narrative was not established as fact. *Autobiography* was published anonymously and was initially believed to be a legitimate slave narrative.³⁴ It was not until a few months after publication that the true identity of *Autobiography's* author was revealed. Upon discovering that it was Griffith who wrote *Autobiography*, further confusion was cast. In that *Incidents* was in some ways an anomaly to the slave narrative, so was *Autobiography* to the slave novel. Though eventually proved not to be a slave narrative, that did not necessarily make this book a slave novel like the others. Griffith was nothing like the typical author of the slave novel. Such a typical slave novelist was Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe was born and bred in the North, having had no personal contact with slavery other than interviews with ex-slaves. By contrast,

Griffith did not hail from the North. Griffith was born and raised on a slave plantation outside of Louisville, Kentucky. Unlike other slave novelists, Griffith grew up surrounded by slaves and completely immersed in the culture of slave society. The life Griffith lived in the South, prior to moving North and becoming an abolitionist, requires that *Autobiography*, at the very least, be regarded as an eye-witness account of what it meant to be a black female slave.

In Griffith's writing, it is obvious that she was well acquainted with both the personalities of the slave, as well as the slave-owner. Griffith's main character, Ann was a black female slave quite like Harriet Jacobs' Linda Brent. For example, in the description of one event in Ann's life, the unique plight of the female slave was identified. Ann's master, Mr. Peterkin was going to beat her for some offense. Ann was ordered to disrobe and prepare to be punished. Though she thought that having to do so was unnecessary, she also recognized her inability to question her master's dictates:

I knew that resistance was vain; so I submitted to have my clothes torn from my body; for modesty, so much commended in³⁵ a white woman, is in a negro pronounced affectation.

Like Brent, Ann knew both the vulnerability of the female slave and the hypocrisy of sexual dictates. Though Ann's story did not revolve around her sexual victimization, her descriptions of herself as a female slave, at least, did acknowledge that that was a present threat in the lives of all female slaves. Unlike

Brent, Ann was able to maintain her sexual purity, despite all threats against her virtue. When a fellow slave was to be sold to a trader, the trader attempted to buy Ann for his own pleasure. Ann was aware of how tenuous her hold was on her virtue, yet she guarded it at all costs:

Though I had been cruelly treated, yet had I been allowed to retain my person inviolate; and I would rather, a thousand-fold, have endured the brutality of Mr. Peterkin, than those loathsome looks which I felt betokened ruin.³⁶

On one occasion, Ann almost had to lay down her life to protect her virtue. Peterkin's daughter hired a man to beat Ann and he informed her that not only would she be beaten, but that she also would be raped. Thinking that offering Ann a dress or ear-rings would make her amenable to their union, this man, Monkton, was surprised when Ann attacked with all force to save herself.³⁷ After beating Monkton, Ann was sent to jail and only narrowly escaped a death sentence.

Like Jacobs, Griffith directly appealed to white women in her novel. Jacobs did so in order to awake Northern white women to the realities of life for the female slave. When Griffith appealed to white women, however, she did so in order to castigate. Griffith attacked the white woman who witnessed the plight of the female slave and did nothing to help her. Ann's relationship with a white woman sympathetic to slaves, but unwilling to help them, was illustrative of Griffith's disdain for the hypocrisy of some white women who preferred material stability to human kindness:

How much I longed to fling aside the servility at which my whole soul revolted, and tell her, with a proud voice, how poorly I thought she supported the dignity of a true womanhood, when thus, for the poor reward of gold, she could smile at, and even encourage a system which is at war with the best interest of human nature.³⁸

Both *Incidents*, written in the mid-1850s though not published until 1861, and *Autobiography*, published in 1856, are perfect examples of a slave narrative and a slave novel that attempted to give a public voice to the black woman. William L. Andrews discussed how slave autobiographies should now be examined to enhance the study of the "life, times and sense of themselves" that these authors exhibited.³⁹ Historians also have started to explore how this definition should be specifically applied to *Incidents*. Given the uniqueness of *Incidents* as one of the few autobiographies written by a female slave in the nineteenth century, Beth Maclay Doriani sought to prove how *Incidents* was both a representative account of slavery, as a slave narrative, and an account of the personal memories of its author, as an autobiography.⁴⁰

These type of findings concerning Griffith's *Autobiography* have yet to be written. To date, Griffith's life and work have been nothing more than a footnote in discussions of the slave narrative and the slave novel. When *Autobiography* was published, it was predicted to supersede *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in popularity and influence. Though that did not prove to be the case, her words survive in print to this day, and remain a present link to the powerful and personal message she had to give.

In the next four chapters, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Mattie Griffith's *Autobiography of a Female Slave* will be examined in detail. In chapters Four and Six, the words of the main characters of each book will be consulted in reference to the portrayal of female slave self-reliance and family life through the aid of female kinship networks.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

1. *The National Anti-Slavery Standard* (Boston), March 8, 1856.
2. Blyden Jackson, *A History of Afro-American Literature*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), p. 128.
3. Frances Smith Foster, *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African-American Women, 1746-1892* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 95.
4. For further information, see James Olney, "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature", in Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds., *The Slave's Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 148-168.
5. Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), pp. 44-62.
6. It has been estimated that by 1860, only 5% of slaves had learned to read. See, W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York, 1962 (1935)), 638.
7. Jackson, *A History of African-American Literature*, p. 130.
8. Stephen Butterfield, *Black Autobiography in America* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974), p. 6.
9. Alice A. Deck, "Whose Book is This? Authorial versus Editorial Control of Harriet Brent Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*", *Women's Studies International Forum*, 10(1), (1987), pp. 37-38.
10. Beth Maclay Doriani, "Black Womanhood in Nineteenth Century America: Subversion and Self-Construction in Two women's Autobiographies", *American Quarterly*, 43(2), (June 1991), p. 200.
11. Jean Fagan Yellin, *The Intricate Knot: Black Figures in American Literature, 1776-1863* (New York: New York University Press, 1972), pp. 128-129.
Yellin also listed the elements found in this portrayal of slave life: [These include] "facts about food, clothing, shelter, relationship between master and slave, and information about slavery as an economic system- working conditions, organization of agriculture under the plantation system, methods of servile control, and slave trade", p. 128.
12. James Olney, "'I was Born'", in Davis and Gates, *The Slave's Narrative*, pp. 150-155.

13. Ulrich B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston: Little and Brown Publishing, 1957), p. 218.
14. Charles Nichols, *Many Thousand Gone: The Ex-Slaves' Account of their Bondage and their Freedom* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), p. xii.
15. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
16. Foster, *Written by Herself*, p. 95.
17. Doriani, "Black Womanhood", pp. 199-201.
18. William L. Andrews, "Introduction", in *Six Women's Slave Narratives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. xxxii.
19. The reader should keep in mind here that very few of these female slave narratives were written by female ex-slaves themselves. Also, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Female Slave* was the only full-length female slave narrative that was published in the United States prior to the Civil War.
20. Valerie Smith, "Three Slave Narratives", in *Self-Discovery and Authority in African-American Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 32.
Smith here argued that "the plot of the slave narrative does not adequately accommodate differences in male and female development."
21. Foster, *Written by Herself*, p. 95.
22. Smith, *Self-Discovery and Authority*, pp. 33-34.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.
24. Minrose C. Gwin, "Green-Eyed Monsters of the Slavocracy: Jealous Mistresses in Two Slave Narratives", in Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers, eds., *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and the Literary Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 43-44.
25. Jacobs, "Preface", in Jean Fagan Yellin, ed., *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 1.
26. For a further discussion, see Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood", in Welter, ed., *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens, Ohio, 1977), pp. 21-41.
27. Though black women were subjected to different expectations, Beth Maclay Doriani explored how that did not exclude black women from aspiring to the ideal: "The formulation of womanhood was so

powerful in nineteenth-century America that not only did white, middle-class women aspire to this standard but so did many black women."

Doriani, "Black Womanhood", p. 205.

28.Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), p. 373.

Fox-Genovese next stated that: "Slave women and men developed their own model of gender relations, but never in isolation from the conditions of their enslavement. And they lacked the power to develop gender roles that derived from their gender relations."

29.Jean Fagan Yellin, "Texts and Contexts of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*", in Davis and Gates, *The Slave's Narrative*, p. 270.

30.*Ibid.*, p. 273.

31.Jacobs, *Incidents*, pp. 55-56.

As Jean Fagan Yellin stated, this was a "unique passage in which Jacobs is asserting that an alternative standard should be applied in judging the actions of slave women like herself".

Jean Fagan Yellin, "Text and Contexts", p. 274.

32.Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Introduction", in Davis and Gates, *The Slave's Narrative*, p. xxii.

33.Marion Wilson Starling, *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History* (Boston: B.K. Hall, 1981), p. 308.

Prior to this point, Starling stated: "Slave narratives were closely imitated by the abolitionist authors of slave novels after 1852 and it was frequently impossible to tell one from the other when the author was not publicly known."

34.Vernon Loggins, *The Negro Author: His Development in America to 1900* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1964), p. 228.

35.Mattie Griffith, *Autobiography of a Female Slave* (New York: Redfield, 1857; rept. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), p. 48.

36.*Ibid.*, p. 170.

37.*Ibid.*, p. 282.

In describing this event, Ann stated: "This was too much for further endurance. What! must I give up the angel-sealed honor of my life in traffic for trinkets? Where is the woman that would not have hotly resented such an insult?

I turned upon him like a hungry lioness, and just as his wanton hand was about to be laid upon me, I dexterously aimed and

hurled the bottle directly against his left temple."

38. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

39. William L. Andrews, "Introduction", in *Two Centuries of African-American Autobiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 3.

40. She states: "Harriet Jacobs creates an identity that defies nineteenth century stereotypes and exploits autobiographical forms to teach her reader about the black female self. She defines a womanhood different from the definitions advanced by the white world, and she demonstrates that autobiography can have as its aim historical messages as well as the creation of an identity." Doriani, "Black Womanhood", p. 218.

CHAPTER THREE:

HARRIET JACOBS, *INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL*

Very little is known about the life of Harriet Jacobs prior to the publication of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Though *Incidents* was the story of her life, the names were changed, and the dates and places were not mentioned. By searching through archives and county records, historian Jean Fagan Yellin has been a pioneer in discovering the basic facts of Jacobs' life. In a revised edition of *Incidents*, Yellin chronicled the life of Jacobs in notes following the text. In her research, Yellin discovered that most, if not all, of the events that Jacobs described through Linda Brent, in fact had occurred in her own life.

Harriet Ann Jacobs was born around October 1813 in Edenton, North Carolina. Her brother, John S. Jacobs was born two years later. Harriet and John were the only two children born to Delilah and Daniel Jacobs. Jacobs' mother was the daughter of Molly Horniblow and slave of Margaret Horniblow. Her father was a carpenter and the slave of Dr. Andrew Knox.¹

Although Yellin found little else concerning the lives of Jacobs' parents, she was able to chronicle the life of Jacobs' family while recounting the events of their owners' lives. Molly Horniblow (1771-1853), Jacobs' grandmother, was owned by Elizabeth Horniblow. Molly Horniblow's daughter, Delilah, and her grand-children, Harriet and John Jacobs had been given to

Margaret Horniblow, Elizabeth's daughter, sometime prior to Margaret Horniblow's death in 1825. The death of Delilah Jacobs was not registered, but since she was not listed in Margaret Horniblow's probate inventory, it can be assumed that she had died some years before her mistress.² Upon Margaret Horniblow's death, Harriet Jacobs was left to Horniblow's niece Mary Matilda Norcom. John Jacobs, however, was willed back to Margaret Horniblow's mother, Elizabeth. With Elizabeth Horniblow's permission, John Jacobs was given to Mary Matilda Norcom's father, Dr. James Norcom, where he worked as a shop-boy.³ Molly Horniblow remained the property of Elizabeth Horniblow until Elizabeth's death in 1827. As a result of the division of the estate of her deceased mistress, Molly Horniblow was sold at an auction to Elizabeth Horniblow's sister, Hannah Pritchard. The latter successfully petitioned the judge of the Superior Court of North Carolina for permission to free Molly.⁴ After being given her freedom, Molly Horniblow received help from a Congressman, Alfred Moore Gatlin, to buy a house and set up her own business.⁵ Throughout her life as a slave, and following her manumission, Molly Horniblow worked as a baker.⁶

By 1827, when Harriet Jacobs was willed to Mary Matilda Norcom, both of her parents were deceased.⁷ Her new mistress was only three, so the fourteen year-old Jacobs essentially became the slave of Mary Norcom's father, Dr. James Norcom (1778-1850).⁸ Dr. James Norcom was a physician and husband of Mary Horniblow Norcom, Margaret Horniblow's sister. Accounts of Dr.

Norcom's personality attest to his famous quarrels with his neighbours and his "admitted passionate responses to women".⁹ As she was Dr. Norcom's slave, however, no legal evidence can be found to prove that he sexually assaulted Jacobs.

Two years after relocating to the Norcoms' residence, the birth of Harriet Jacobs' first child, Joseph Jacobs was recorded in 1829.¹⁰ Jacobs was then sixteen years old. The father of her child was not listed. In 1833, the birth of Jacobs' second child, Louisa Matilda Jacobs was recorded.¹¹ As was the case with Joseph, Louisa's father was not listed. The man Jacobs claimed to have been the father of her two children was Samuel Tredwell Sawyer (1800-1865). Sawyer was a white lawyer who practised in Edenton and lived down the street from Molly Horniblow. In 1837, Sawyer was elected to Congress.¹² As Sawyer's name was not on the birth certificates, however, it cannot be proved that he was Joseph and Louisa's father.¹³

In 1835, Harriet Jacobs ran away from the Norcom residence. From June 30 to July 13, 1835, Dr. Norcom ran ads in the *American Beacon* (Norfolk, Va.) offering one hundred dollars for the return of his runaway slave.¹⁴ Two years later, Dr. Norcom still had not found Jacobs, and he sold her children to Samuel Tredwell Sawyer.¹⁵ Jacobs' son Joseph accompanied Sawyer to Washington, D.C. during his time as a Congressman and then returned live in Edenton.¹⁶ Jacobs' daughter Louisa was sent to live with Sawyer's first cousin James Iredell Tredwell in Brooklyn.¹⁷

Seven years after going in to hiding, Jacobs finally left

the South. In June 1842, she arrived in Philadelphia.¹⁸ Shortly thereafter, Jacobs relocated to New York and was hired to work for Mrs. Mary Stace Willis, the wife of Nathaniel Parker Willis, a noted publisher. Correspondence between Jacobs and friends of hers from New York, like Amy Post, proves that Jacobs lived in New York from 1842 until the publication of *Incidents* in 1861.

Around 1850, approximately eight years after her arrival in the North, Jacobs began writing her life story. At least two articles appeared in the *New York Tribune*, starting in 1853, chronicling her experiences in slavery. In the preface to *Incidents*, however, Jacobs stated that she was first approached with the idea of writing a narrative in 1842. "When I first arrived in Philadelphia, Bishop Paine advised me to publish a sketch of my life".¹⁹ It was during this period, years after her escape, that Jacobs took up past encouragements and began to write what she would later describe as "a true and just account of [her] own life in slavery."²⁰ Jacobs' position as a former female slave who had established herself in the North made her useful to the abolitionist cause. Friend and abolitionist, Amy Post described her own responsibility and goals for encouraging Jacobs to write her autobiography:

I repeatedly urged her to consent to the publication of her narrative; for I felt that it would arouse people to a more earnest work for the disenthralment of millions still remaining in that soul-crushing condition.²¹

Jacobs' decision to write an autobiography was not easy. In the first place, she hesitated to bring back all of the painful

memories that the writing would entail:

Your proposal has been thought over and over again but not without some most painful remembrances. Dear Amy, if it was the life of a Heroine with no degradation associated with it. Far better to have been one of the starving poor of Ireland whose bones had to bleach on the highways than to have been a slave with the curse of slavery stamped upon yourself and Children.²²

Finally agreeing with her abolitionist friends, Jacobs determined that if her story could help other women currently enslaved, it would be "selfish and unchristian of [her] to keep it back".²³ As a domestic servant in New York, however, Jacobs encountered another problem. Too busy to write full-time, Jacobs only could write at "irregular intervals" at night. The demands on her time made it such that it took Jacobs three years to complete the first draft of *Incidents*:

Since I have been at the North, it has been necessary for me to work diligently for my own support, and the education of my children. This has not left me much leisure to make up for the loss of early opportunities to improve myself; and it has compelled me to write these pages at irregular intervals, whenever I could snatch an hour from household duties.²⁴

When *Incidents* was finished, the only thing Jacobs had left to do was find a publisher for her book.

Just as members of the abolitionist community were involved in Jacobs' decision to write *Incidents*, so would they be involved in the final version of the autobiography. After being rejected numerous times, Jacobs discussed with Post the possibility of enlisting the help of Harriet Beecher Stowe to get a publisher for *Incidents*.²⁵ Stowe was a well-known and respected writer and

abolitionist, and it was thought that her involvement in the publication of *Incidents* would help to increase its credibility, thus enabling *Incidents* to be read by as many people as possible:

Mrs. Willis thinks it would do much good in Mrs. Stowe['s] hand but I could not ask her to take any step....
My dear friend would you be willing to make this proposal? I would rather have you do it than anyone else.²⁶

Unfortunately, this plan did not come through. Stowe was not enthusiastic about the idea of merely editing *Incidents* and instead proposed that Jacobs' story be included in her forthcoming *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Both Jacobs and her boss, Mrs. Willis, felt that Jacobs' book was much better suited to be published separately from Stowe's *Key*.²⁷

Jacobs thus was forced to renew her search for a publisher. Stowe's ultimate refusal to help Jacobs publish *Incidents*, as a complete work on its own, led Jacobs to attempt to find a publisher on her own. Jacobs finally was successful in her goal. The firm of Thayer and Eldredge, however, agreed to publish *Incidents* only if Jacobs could obtain a preface from noted abolitionist Lydia Maria Child. Remembering her experiences with Stowe, Jacobs initially was not receptive to this idea:

I had never seen Mrs. Child. Past experience made me tremble at the thought of approaching another satellite of so great magnitude, but I resolved to make my last effort.²⁸

With Jacobs' approval, Child agreed to write an introduction to the autobiography and also suggested a few changes to the manuscript.²⁹

The extent to which Child edited *Incidents* is important to the question of the authenticity of this source. Historians have arrived at the conclusion that *Incidents* was indeed the life story of Jacobs, and not just a fictional account written by Child. Despite the tendency of other slaves to submit to the will of the abolitionists' editing, Alice A. Deck has found evidence, in Jacobs' correspondence with Child, that she did not do so.³⁰ Deck determined that though many of Child's suggestions were adopted, Jacobs nonetheless showed "an unwillingness to completely surrender her manuscript without being consulted on any changes".³¹ Though much can be assessed in looking at Jacobs' and Child's personal correspondence, it nonetheless has been virtually impossible for historians to determine exactly what Jacobs wrote and what Child edited. Where historians have questioned the true extent of Child's editing, they most often referred to a passage in a letter Child wrote to Jacobs:

I have been busy with your M.S. ever since I saw you; and have only done a third of it. I have very little occasion to alter the language, which is wonderfully good, for one whose opportunities for education have been so limited. The events are interesting, and well told; the remarks are also good, and to the purpose. But I am copying a great deal of it, for the purpose of transposing sentences and pages, so as to bring the story into continuous order, and the remarks into appropriate places. I think you will see that this renders the story much more clear.³²

Close attention to the words of both the editor and the author, however, reveal the authenticity of *Incidents*. In the same letter as mentioned above, Child told Jacobs that she would send her a copy of the manuscript, presumably so that Jacobs could have the

final say on the outcome of the edited text.³³

Child, in the introduction, as well as in her letters to Jacobs, also repeatedly stated that the only changes she made were ones of synthesis.³⁴

In 1861, the first full-length female slave narrative finally was published.³⁵ Titled *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, this autobiography was unique in many respects. To date, *Incidents* is the only known slave narrative that discusses the sexual exploitation of female slaves, identifies its audience as female, and is written both in the style of slave narrative and sentimental fiction.³⁶ When *Incidents* was published, contemporaries rushed to assert Jacobs' authorship and to herald it as an important addition to the slave narrative genre.

Since Jacobs was a woman and her autobiography dealt with issues that were "sensitive" in nature, some readers doubted its authenticity. An anonymous acquaintance of Jacobs, however, published a review of *Incidents* that established his personal knowledge of the events Jacobs described in her autobiography:

We have read this work with no ordinary interest for we are acquainted with the writer; we have heard many of the incidents from her own lips, and have great confidence in her truthfulness and integrity.³⁷

The abolitionist community also was aware of the need to convince the public of the importance of *Incidents* to the abolitionist cause, especially since it was published just as the Civil War was starting. In a letter to William Lloyd Garrison at

The Liberator, abolitionist William C. Nell wrote to announce the publication of *Incidents* and to argue for its timely importance and truthfulness:

I feel confident that its circulation at this crisis in our country's history will render a signal and most acceptable service....

It presents features more attractive than many of its predecessors purporting to be histories of slave life in America, because, in contrast with their mingling of fiction with fact, this record of complicated experience in the life of a young woman... surely need not the charms that any pen of fiction, however gifted and graceful, could lend. They shine by the lustre of their own truthfulness....

In furtherance of the object of its author, Lydia Maria Child has furnished a graceful introduction, and Amy Post a well-written letter; and wherever the names of these two devoted friends of humanity are known, no higher credentials can be required or given.³⁸

Even though *Incidents* ultimately was recognized as an authentic and important document in its own time, future historians were to debate these two issues. The first such historian, Vernon Loggins, criticized all slave narratives published between 1840 and 1865, including Jacobs' work.³⁹ In the only specific reference to *Incidents*, Loggins was equally sceptical of its merit: "Linda Brent's story... is fairly readable, probably because of the 'editing' of Lydia Maria Child."⁴⁰ A later historian, Arna Bontemps, adopted Loggins' viewpoint, including *Incidents* as an example of a "told to account". Assumed to be the creation of Child, *Incidents* and the issue of its authorship thus were questionable.⁴¹

Next among *Incidents*' detractors was historian John Blassingame. In analysing *Incidents* as it fit into the example the male slave

narrative provided, Blassingame concluded that *Incidents* was "too melodramatic; miscegenation and cruelty, outrage virtue, unrequited love and planter licentiousness appeared on practically every page."⁴²

It was not until 1981 that the debate concerning Jacobs' authorship of *Incidents* was resolved once and for all. To prove *Incidents'* authenticity, Jean Fagan Yellin unearthed both the correspondences of Jacobs, Child and Post, as well as the early letters Jacobs wrote to the *New York Tribune* before she began writing her autobiography.⁴³ Since then, some historians have switched the nature of their scepticism from debating *Incidents'* authenticity to questioning the extent to which Child edited *Incidents*.⁴⁴ The vast majority of historians, however, finally have accepted *Incidents'* authenticity and have, as historian Joanne Braxton stated, "begun to ask the kind of questions that allow for a continued study of the importance of both Harriet Jacobs as well as *Incidents*".⁴⁵

In the end, what is most convincing is Yellin's documentation of the facts of Harriet Jacobs' life. In almost every way, the events of Jacobs' life concur with the events described by the main character of *Incidents*, Linda Brent. Where there are differences, they are mainly ones of descriptive detail. There were many events in Brent's narrative that cannot be proved to have happened to Jacobs; for example, the nature of her relationship with her master, Dr. Norcom. Where Jacobs legally could not prove that he had assaulted her, through

Brent's words, the story came to life.

Linda Brent began her story by recounting the events of her childhood. Describing her family in terms of loving parents who sheltered her and her younger brother William, Brent only had happy memories. At the age of six, however, Brent's mother died and she was taken into her mistress' home to live for the next six years. At the age of twelve, her mistress died and Brent was willed to her niece, Emily Flint. At the same time, Brent described the death of her grandmother's mistress. Brent asserted that her grandmother had been promised her freedom upon her mistress' death. After her death, however, Brent's grandmother learned she was to be sold at an auction. Brent then described how everyone was too ashamed to buy Brent's grandmother, knowing that she was to be set free. In the end, Brent's grandmother's former mistress' sister, Miss Fanny, bought Brent's grandmother and set her free.

Brent's new master, Emily Flint's father, Dr. Flint, was a prominent physician in the area. His position of power made it difficult for Brent to refuse the sexual advances he began to make toward her when she was around fourteen. Refuse him she did though and, to avoid succumbing to her master's demands, Brent then became pregnant with another white man's child. Brent and this man, Mr. Sands, had two children together, Benjamin and Ellen. Around the time Brent was twenty-one, Dr. Flint propositioned her again and threatened to make her children work in the plantation fields if she did not comply with his wishes.

Brent then decided that if she ran away, Dr. Flint would lose interest in her and sell her children to their father.

Brent spent the next seven years in hiding in the attic of her grandmother's house. For seven years, she waited both for the emancipation of her children and a chance to escape North. Though their father ultimately was able to buy his children from Dr. Flint, he did not set them free. At the time of Brent's escape, when she was twenty-eight, Benjamin still was living with his great-grandmother and Ellen had been sent to New York to be a hand-maid to her father's cousin's family.

After safely arriving in the North, Brent made contact with Ellen, and arranged to have Benjamin sent to live up North with her brother William who had escaped from slavery a few years prior to Brent. Brent described her goal, after obtaining her freedom, to be that of reuniting her family, meaning herself and her children, and providing them with a home. Brent's work as a nanny, however, hindered these attempts. In the concluding pages of *Incidents*, Brent described how her son Benjamin left the North with his uncle, William, to look for gold in California, while her daughter Ellen remained in New York with Brent.

The events that Jacobs described, through the character of Linda Brent, concur with the known facts of Jacobs' life. Like Brent, Jacobs lost both of her parents before the age of fourteen. Like Brent, Jacobs' grandmother had been freed by the sister of her former owner and had bought her own house where she baked for a living. Like Brent, she was willed upon the death of

her mistress to her former mistress' niece. Like Brent, the father of Jacobs' mistress was a doctor with a reputation for meanness. Like Brent, Jacobs gave birth to two children, first a boy and then a girl around three years later. Like Brent, the father of Jacobs' children was a white lawyer who was later elected to Congress. As Brent described, the father of Jacobs' children ultimately bought them. Like Brent, Jacobs escaped from slavery and hid for seven years. Like Brent, Jacobs first arrived in Philadelphia and then moved to New York. Like Brent, Jacobs worked in New York as a nanny for a woman and her publisher husband. Like Brent described, Jacobs' grandmother died around the time she was finishing writing *Incidents*, in 1853. All in all, these coincidences provide strong evidence that Harriet Jacobs and Linda Brent are one and the same.

In discussing *Incidents* as a unique text, the focus first will be placed on the issues that historians have most commonly examined. The autobiographical content of *Incidents* will be discussed by examining the words of Linda Brent, *Incidents'* pseudonymous narrator.⁴⁶ Before *Incidents* or Linda Brent were created, there was Harriet Jacobs. Writing as Linda Brent, Jacobs first and foremost left behind an account of her life and her thoughts. Though using a pseudonymous narrator could raise doubts as to the reliability of her source, Jacobs quickly explained the reasons behind this decision:

I have concealed the names of places, and given persons fictitious names. I have no motive for secrecy at my own account, but I deemed it kind and considerate towards

others to pursue this course.⁴⁷

Jacobs also assured her readers that her purpose in writing was for the benefit of others, not herself.⁴⁸

In giving primacy to issues of external context, such as the role of editing, historians need to realize that they have preempted the written voice of Jacobs as presented through Brent. As a female slave, Brent described how her life did not conform to the prevalent stereotypes of nineteenth century American society. Though she recognized the need to challenge racist stereotypes, Brent instead focused on racism as it applied specifically to the doubly oppressed black woman. Thus, the value of both Brent's individual personality, as well as family ties will prove to be most recognizable when discussing how Brent described the issues of control, responsibility, and self-definition as they applied to the most important incidents in her life.

When Brent addressed the issue of control, she did so not to argue for her right to have control over others, but rather to defend her right to self-determination.⁴⁹ The vast majority of historians who have examined *Incidents* have mentioned this control of self as a goal to which Brent constantly aspired. As a female slave, Brent was supposed to be completely subject to the demands of her master and mistress, as well as to the members of her own family and community. Raised in an atmosphere that demanded complete obedience on all of these fronts, Brent showed how she struggled to assert her right to control her own life.

Nowhere was this issue more important than in Brent's description of her relationship with her master, Dr. Flint.

Brent described her childhood as a slave only in terms of happiness. Having experienced her childhood never fully aware of being a slave, it was with deep resentment that Brent had to describe how this situation changed:

I was born a slave but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away....
When I was six years old, my mother died; and then for the first time, I learned by the talk around me, that I was a slave.⁵⁰

Thus, at the age of six, her mother died and Brent was taken away from her family and sent to live with her mistress. At the age of twelve, her mistress died. Though deeply saddened by her mother's death, it was the death of her mistress that was most catastrophic. Assuming that her former mistress would keep the promise she had made to Brent's mother to emancipate her child, Brent was shocked to discover that she had been willed to her former mistress' niece.⁵¹ Since her new mistress was still a child, Brent was to be under the control of the child's father, Dr. Flint. As Brent began to develop physically, Flint became increasingly attentive to his daughter's slave. Whispering "foul words" in her ear, Dr. Flint made it quite clear that he expected Brent to be his concubine. From the outset, however, Brent resolved never to be conquered.

In analysing *Incidents*, historians consistently point to this battle of wills as a major event in Brent's life and personal development. As Thomas Doherty has argued, Brent's

refusal to compromise her will to that of her master ultimately created a psychological equality between Brent and Flint.⁵²

Joanne Braxton also took this argument one step further to illustrate how Brent both preserved her self-esteem and increased the psychological distance between herself and Dr. Flint through the use of "sass".⁵³ As an example of sass, Braxton remarked how each time Flint attempted to intimidate Brent with both physical and verbal threats, Brent countered his words with equally strong words of her own. The following passage from *Incidents* best illustrates this point:

He sprang upon me like a tiger, and gave me a stunning blow. It was the first time he had ever struck me; and fear did not enable me to control my anger. When I had recovered a little from the effects, I exclaimed, "You have struck me for answering you honestly. How I despise you!"

There was silence for some minutes. Perhaps he was deciding what should be my punishment; or, perhaps, he wanted to give me time to reflect on what I had said, and to whom I had said it. Finally, he asked, "Do you know what you have said?"

"Yes, sir; but your treatment drove me to it."

"Do you know that I have a right to do as I like with you, - that I can kill you, if I please?"

"You have tried to kill me, and I wish you had; but you have no right to do as you like with me."⁵⁴

Still, in asserting her right not to be controlled, Brent's resistance manifested itself only in words where male slaves used physical violence.⁵⁵

Unfortunately, Brent came to realize that she could not keep Flint at bay forever with words. Resolving never to submit to the desires of her master, Brent decided on another alternative. In keeping with her quest for self-determination, Brent became the

mistress of a single white man, Mr. Sands.⁵⁶ Brent described her ultimate success over Flint when she announced to him that she was carrying another man's child. In choosing for herself another man besides Flint to father her children, Brent heralded her initial triumph over her master.⁵⁷ When Brent revealed her condition to Dr. Flint, however, she also had to do the same to her family. Brent's descriptions of triumph soon turned to ones of shame. When Brent told her grandmother of her condition, she was disowned.⁵⁸ After begging for her forgiveness, Brent finally told her grandmother that she really had not had any other choice.

As historians of *Incidents* have noticed, any feelings Brent may have had of shame were short lived. Though Brent was now considered a "fallen woman", she quickly justified her decision while, at the same time, taking complete responsibility for her actions:

I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation....
I wanted to keep myself pure but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery.⁵⁹

Brent stated that though society would condemn her for her behaviour, she would never doubt this decision as being the best one that she could have made, given the circumstances. Jean Fagan Yellin argued that Brent thus relinquished her purity in an effort to maintain her self-respect.⁶⁰ In other words, Brent made this decision in order to assert her autonomy as a human being and to avoid being "entirely subject to the will of

another".⁶¹ Also, by informing her readers of the inappropriateness of their judging her actions, Jacobs thus sought both to avoid their condemnation, as well as to assert that the only women who could judge her actions had to have had lived through similar experiences.⁶²

In the historical analysis of *Incidents*, the events that followed the birth of Brent's children have been the most problematic. While acknowledging Brent's individuality in her decision to have these children, historians have described the relationship between motherhood itself and personal autonomy as being more intricate. Most historians argued that after the birth of her children, Brent came to define herself no longer in terms of her individuality, but rather exclusively in terms of her motherhood.⁶³ Beth Maclay Doriani asserted that during this period, Brent could not be considered a lone hero since she defined herself exclusively in terms of her home and her children.⁶⁴ According to this argument, she then ceased being Linda Brent, the individual person, and became Linda Brent, mother of Benjamin and Ellen. Joanne Braxton further argued that where Brent formerly resisted her master to keep her "self-esteem", she was now the epitome of the "outraged mother" who resisted slavery and her master only on behalf of her children.⁶⁵

While not denying the importance of any of the aforementioned issues, there is an overlying theme that historians have not yet fully explored. As previously discussed,

some historians have discussed, in isolation, the role of Brent with regard to either her master or her children. These two issues, however, are merely part of a greater whole. In writing *Incidents*, Jacobs continually described the centrality of her family, including her extended family, at the major moments of transformation in her life. Of particular significance to this thesis, however, is the emphasis Jacobs placed on the importance of the support of female family networks. Future scholarship on *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* requires that Brent's descriptions of this kinship network in terms of her family life be examined in greater detail.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

1. Jean Fagan Yellin, "Legacy Profile: Harriet Ann Jacobs (c. 1813-1897)", *Legacy*, 5(2), p. 56.

2. Jean Fagan Yellin, ed., *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), note number 14, p. 261.

3. *Incidents*, note number two, p. 262.

4. *Incidents*, note number five, p. 262.

5. *Incidents*, note six, p. 262; and note one, p. 263.

6. *Incidents*, note number six, p. 261.

In this note, Yellin cited letters written by Dr. James Norcom listing Molly Horniblow's occupation as a baker.

7. *Incidents*, note number one, p. 260; and note number four, p. 262. As mentioned before, the date of Delilah Horniblow Jacobs' was not registered. The death of Daniel Jacobs, however, was listed as 1826.

8. *Incidents*, note number eleven, p. 261.

9. *Incidents*, note number two, p. 274.

10. *Incidents*, note number two, p. 269.

11. *Incidents*, note number three, p. 273.

12. *Incidents*, note number one, p. 279.

13. *Incidents*, note number one, p. 268.

14. *Incidents*, note number one, p. 274.

15. *Incidents*, note number five, p. 276.

16. *Incidents*, note number one, p. 280.

17. *Incidents*, note number two, p. 281.

18. *Incidents*, note number one, p. 282.

19. Jacobs, "Preface", in *Incidents*, p. 1.

20. "Jacobs to Post, June 21, 1857", in *Incidents*, p. 242.

In the appendix to her edition of *Incidents*, Yellin included letters written by and to Jacobs during the time she was writing and trying to publish *Incidents*.

21."Post to Child, October 30, 1859", in *Incidents*, pp. 203-204.

22."Jacobs to Post, 1852-1853", in Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1984), p. 75.

In a later letter, Jacobs further described the personal problems she encountered in writing *Incidents*: "There are some things that I might have made plainer- woman can whisper her cruel wrongs into the ear of a dear friend much easier than she could record them for the world to read."

"Jacobs to Post, June 21, 1857", in Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters*, p. 81.

23."Jacobs to Post, 1852", in *Incidents*, pp. 231-232.

24.Jacobs, "Preface", in *Incidents*, p. 1.

25.Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was among the most popular books of the 1850s. Its abolitionist message converted many new members to the "cause".

26."Jacobs to Post, 1852", in *Incidents*, pp. 232-233.

27."Jacobs to Post, April 4, 1853", in *Incidents*, p. 235.

Jacobs stated to Post that: "Mrs. Willis wrote her a very kind letter begging that she would not use any of the facts in her key, saying that I wished it to be a history of my life entirely by itself which would do more good and it needed no romance, but if she wanted some facts for her book, that I would be most happy to give her some. She never answered the letter. She wrote again, and I wrote twice with no better success. It was not lady-like to treat Mrs. Willis so. She would not have done it to any one. I think she did not like my objection. I can't help it."

28."Jacobs to Post, October 8, 1860", in *We Are Your Sisters*, p. 82.

Jacobs then recounted the outcome of this meeting: "I met Mrs. Child at the A.S. [Anti-Slavery] Office. Mrs. Child is like yourself a whole souled woman. We soon found the way to each other's heart."

29."My object in writing at this time is to ask you to write what you can recollect of the outrages committed on the colored people, in Nat Turner's time.... I think the last chapter about John Brown, had better be omitted. It does not naturally come into your story, and the M.S. is already too long. Nothing can be so appropriate to end with, as the death of your grandmother."

"Child to Jacobs, August 13, 1860", in *Incidents*, p. 244.

30. Alice A. Deck, "Whose Book is this?: Authorial versus Editorial control of Harriet Brent Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*", *Women's Studies International Forum*, 10(1), 1987, p. 35.

Deck here used the example of Child's interview of the fugitive slave Charity Bowery published in the *Emancipator* in April, 1848 to illustrate how slaves were "forced to subjugate a self-image in order to be true to a cause".

31. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

32. "Child to Jacobs, August 13, 1860", in *Incidents*, p. 244.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 244.

In this letter Child added: "I suppose you will want to see the M.S. after I have exercised my bumps of mental order upon it; and I will send it wherever you direct, a fortnight hence."

34. Child, "Introduction", in *Incidents*, p. 3.

Child herself stated: "At her request, I have revised her manuscript; but such changes as I have made have been mainly for purposes of condensation and orderly arrangement. I have not added any thing to the incidents, or changed the import of her very pertinent remarks."

35. Jean Fagan Yellin, "Text and Contexts of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*", in Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds., *The Slave's Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 263.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 263.

37. Anonymous, "Linda: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*", *The Anti-Slavery Advocate* 53(2), May 1, 1861, p. 1; reprinted in Davis and Gates, eds., *The Slave's Narrative*, p. 32.

38. William C. Nell, "Linda, the Slave Girl", *The Liberator*, January 25, 1861, p. 15.

39. Vernon Loggins, *The Negro Author: His Development in America to 1900* (1931; Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1964), p. 226.

Loggins stated that: "The narratives published between 1840 and 1865 of Negroes who apparently did nothing else deserving public notice except to get out of slavery run into the hundreds."

40. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

41. Arna Bontemps, "The Slave Narrative: An American Genre", in Arna Bontemps, ed., *Great Slave Narratives* (Boston, 1969), p. xv. Bontemps stated: "A comparable publication [to one previously established as a "fraud"] by Harriet Jacobs called *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was presented as "edited" and "arranged" by the well-known Lydia Maria Child."

42. John Blassingame, "Critical Essay on Sources", in *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, revised ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 373.

In the original edition of *The Slave Community* (1972), Blassingame even stated that "the work is not credible", pp. 233-234.

I presented a rough draft of this paper to Dr. Margaret Kellow, professor of History at the University of Western Ontario. As a former student of Dr. Blassingame's, she told me that he "later recanted this view" to her.

43. See Jean Fagan Yellin, "Written by Herself: Harriet Jacobs' Slave Narrative", *American Literature*, 53 (November, 1981), pp. 479-486.

44. See, Alice A. Deck, "Whose Book is this?", pp. 33-40; and Bruce Mills, "Lydia Maria Child and the Endings to Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*", *American Literature* 64(2), June 1992, pp. 255-272.

45. See Joanne Braxton, "Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: The Re-Definition of the Slave Narrative Genre", *Massachusetts Review*, 27 (1986), pp. 379-387.

In this article, Braxton first stated that: "The treatment of the slave narrative genre has been one of the most skewed in Afro-American literary criticism. It has been almost always the treatment of the narratives of heroic male slaves." Braxton then asked: "How would the inclusion of works by women change the shape of the genre?"

46. Jean Fagan Yellin, "Texts and Contexts", in *The Slave's Narrative*, p. 272.

Jean Fagan Yellin advanced a theory as to why "Linda Brent" was created: "Its special focus and its confessional aspects- the account of sexual error, guilt, rejection and at least partial acceptance- are, I think, unique. Jacobs' decision to create a pseudonymous narrator, instead of revealing herself as the author of her book, can perhaps be explained by this sensational aspect of her autobiography."

47. Jacobs, "Preface", in *Incidents*, p. 1.

48. "I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself; on the contrary, it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history."

Ibid., p. 1.

49. Frances Foster, *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 95.

Foster stated: "Jacobs depicts herself as the young and feisty Linda Brent, a slave girl who knows herself to be an individual of value and who is decidedly aggressive in defending her right to self-determination against those who claimed otherwise."

50. *Incidents*, pp. 5, 6.

51. "She had promised my dying mother that her children should never suffer for anything; and when I remembered that, and recalled her many proofs of attachment to me, I could not help having some hopes that she had left me free.... But alas! we all know that the memory of a faithful slave does not avail much to save her children from the auction block.... We learned that she had bequeathed me to her sister's daughter, a child of five years old."

Ibid., pp. 7-8.

52. Thomas Doherty, "Harriet Jacobs' Narrative Strategies: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*", *Southern Literary Journal* 19(1), 1986, p. 88.

Doherty stated here: "Linda's refusal to compromise, and insistence on asserting, her 'self' makes the slave girl's relationship with her obsessed master more nearly one of psychological equality."

53. Joanne Braxton, "Outraged Mother and the Articulate Heroine: Linda Brent and the Slave Narrative Genre", in *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), p. 31.

Braxton explained that: "Whenever Linda is under sexual attack, she uses sass as a weapon of self-defense.... Sass preserves the slave girl's self-esteem and increases the psychological distance between herself and the master."

54. *Incidents*, p. 39.

55. Braxton, "Outraged Mother", p. 32.

Braxton stated: "In short, Linda uses sass the way that Frederick Douglass used his fists and his feet, as a means of resistance."

56. "I would do any thing, every thing, for the sake of defeating him.... I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favoured another".

Incidents, pp. 53-55.

57."It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion.... There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment.... As for Dr. Flint, I had a feeling of satisfaction and triumph in the thought of telling him."
Ibid., pp. 55-56.

58.Brent's grandmother exclaimed: "'Oh Linda! has it come to this? I had rather see you dead than to see you as you now are. You are a disgrace to our dead mother.'... 'Go Away! and never come to my house again.'"
Ibid., pp. 56-57.

59.*Ibid.*, p. 54.

60.Jean Fagan Yellin, "Text and Contexts", in *The Slave's Narrative*, p. 273."
 Yellin stated here: "Denied the protection of the laws, denied even an extra-legal marriage to a man she loved, she writes that in a desperate attempt to prevent her hated master from forcing her into concubinage, she relinquished her 'purity' in an effort to maintain her 'self-respect'."

61.*Ibid.*, p. 273.

Hazel Carby discussed the further implications of this decision: [Brent was able] "to deflect any judgemental response of moral condemnation through consistent narrative reminders to the reader that the material conditions of a slave woman's life were different."

Hazel Carby, "Hear my Voice, Ye Careless Daughters: Narratives of Slave and Free Women before Emancipation", in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-american Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 58.

62."But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely!"

Jacobs, *Incidents*, p. 54.

63.In fact, of all of the works consulted, Thomas Doherty was the only historian who argued against the positive role of motherhood in Brent's life: "Linda is handicapped in her battle- and Jacobs in her narrative- by the female's usual complication, children. The slave husband or father who left his family to escape North could justify his desertion as a necessary tactical and personal move.... A woman who did likewise was not granted the same latitude.... If Linda is to escape slavery unburdened by guilt, and if Jacobs is to retain the reader's unqualified sympathy, she must first faithfully discharge her maternal responsibilities."

Doherty, "Harriet Jacobs' Narrative Strategies", p. 89.

64.Dorioni, "Black Womanhood", p. 211.

Dorioni stated: "Her ultimate goals are true freedom and a good home for her children and herself. Like the white women fiction-writers of the nineteenth century, Jacobs defines herself in terms of her home and her children."

65.Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, p. 14.

Braxton first defined what she meant by the term "outraged mother": "She is a mother because motherhood was virtually unavoidable under slavery; she is outraged because of the intimacy of her oppression." She then stated that: "Much of the narrative action, especially after the birth of Benjamin and Ellen, is motivated by Linda's concern for their freedom and well-being", p. 25.

CHAPTER FOUR:

THE FAMILY LIFE OF LINDA BRENT

Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* chronicles the life of a female slave named Linda Brent. As proved in the previous chapter, the events of Jacobs' life mirrored the events described in *Incidents*. In this chapter, the family life of Brent, as portrayed by Jacobs, will be explored. In particular to be examined are Brent's experiences in slavery to establish the applicability of the theory of self-reliance through female kinship networks. In this case, the members of Brent's kinship network all were related by blood.

In the first chapters of *Incidents*, Brent described her parents. This description was brief, however, since Brent's parents died when she was still young. Taking over the role of Brent's mother and father was Brent's maternal grandmother. Throughout *Incidents*, Brent's grandmother was the stabilizing influence in the family. Despite all the disappointments she had witnessed over the years, like her children being sold away from her, Brent's grandmother still remained in her place of birth, trying to maintain whatever control she could over her remaining enslaved family members. When Brent was willed to Dr. Flint's daughter, it was her grandmother who looked after her and her brother. In fact, throughout all of the incidents in Brent's life, she described the central role that her grandmother played. The bulk of this chapter, therefore, will chronicle this

relationship.

A few years after Brent became the slave of Dr. Flint, she gave birth to her first child, Benjamin. This event, followed by her second child three years later, was among the most important in Brent's life. Before the birth of her children, Brent did not describe any goal in her life besides that of ensuring that Dr. Flint did not make her his concubine. After the birth of Benjamin and Ellen, however, Brent had a tie to a family all her own. Even though her children had a father, Brent claimed her children as her own and dedicated the rest of her life to being the best mother she could. It was because of her children that Brent ultimately decided to escape from slavery. Before the birth of her children, Brent listened to her grandmother when she told Brent that escape was not to be considered. After the birth of her children, however, even the strong words of her grandmother could not dissuade her. When Brent determined that she could not allow her children to live out their lives as slaves, the decision to escape irrevocably was made. After escaping, Brent spent seven years in hiding. There had been opportunities for her to escape earlier, but she had vowed from the beginning that she would not leave the South until both of her children were free.

Most of *Incidents* chronicles Brent's relationship with her grandmother and her children. To her, these three people were all the family she really needed; however, they were not her only family members. As mentioned before, Brent began *Incidents* with a description of her childhood with her brother and her parents.

Though her parents died when she was young, she referred to them at crucial moments in her life throughout the book. Brent's brother William often was described as a comforting presence in Brent's life. Brent also referred to her aunt Nancy, her mother's sister. Nancy was an alternative maternal figure for Brent. Unlike her mother, Nancy was not free and lived with the Flints as Mrs. Flint's handmaid. During her years living with the Flints, Brent occasionally mentioned her aunt Nancy and the words of encouragement she would give to Brent when she was most discouraged. All in all, these people represented the primary and secondary family members in Brent's life.

In her earliest childhood memories, Brent remembered only happiness. In fact, Brent described her childhood as just that: "happy". A good reason for that could be explained by the fact that Brent grew up in a stable, two-parent family. Brent's mother was a house slave and her father was a carpenter. Though her parents were owned by different masters, they lived on neighbouring plantations and managed to raise their daughter and son together as much as possible. As slave parents, the Brents were aware of what the future held for their children. Instead of scaring Linda and her brother, William, with tales of cruel masters and hard labour, their parents raised them as if they were not slaves. In looking back at her parents and her early childhood, Brent remembered that her parents' goal was to keep her and William oblivious to their status as slaves.¹

When she was six years old, Brent's mother died. At that

time, she was sent to live with her mother's, and likewise her, mistress. While living there, Brent learned how to read and write, and love her mistress. For the next six years, Brent's life only revolved around her mistress. Unfortunately, her mistress died when Brent was twelve and her world was changed forever. Despite how close Brent and her mother had been, the loss of her mistress was most catastrophic. Willed to her mistress' niece, Brent was forced to move into a new home.

Shortly after moving in with her new masters, the Flints, Brent's father passed away. With both of her parents dead, Brent came to depend even more on her grandmother. With neither a mother nor a kind mistress to help her, Brent had to rely on her grandmother. Upon her mother's death, it had been Brent's grandmother, not her father or her mistress, who vowed "to be a mother to her grandchildren, so far as she might be permitted to do so".² In many respects, she was the only family Brent had. Brent's masters, the Flints, were negligent of their young charge. Over the years, Brent and her brother depended on their grandmother to be more than just as a substitute for their dead parents. Their grandmother was the only one who made sure they were loved and fed.³ The Flints resented the closeness that existed between Brent and her brother, and their grandmother. Over the next few years, they would forbid Brent from even going to visit her grandmother. Brent disregarded these orders, risking a beating not only to see her grandmother but also to be properly fed and clothed.⁴

In the next two years, Brent's life went from bad to worse. As Brent approached the age of puberty, her master began to torture her young mind. Whispering "foul words" in her ear and propositioning her, Flint left Brent confused and frightened. Brent felt that the nature of her problem was such that she could not confide in her only friend, her grandmother: "I was very young, and felt shamefaced about telling her such impure things."⁵ Brent was also aware of how protective her grandmother could be. Once, she had threatened a man with a gun because he had insulted one of her daughters.⁶ To protect her grandmother from a "violent outbreak", Brent remained silent. At the same time, however, a new problem occurred. Brent fell in love with a slave. Flint became quite angry and jealous when he learned of this attachment, and refused to grant his permission for the two to marry. Brent finally went to her grandmother for help, but nothing could be done to save her young love. Though Brent was broken-hearted at the loss of her love, nevertheless, as a survivor, she at least was thankful she still had her family.⁷

Though nothing was more powerful in Brent's life than her family, that did not mean that they always could be there for her. In other words, though Brent's self-reliance was based on a female kinship support network, there were times when her problems were even too great to consult this source. For example, as Dr. Flint escalated his sexual demands, Brent began to realize that she would have to deal with the situation alone. Her grandmother already had gone to speak to Flint, but to no avail.

Brent thus resolved to solve the problem on her own terms. She knew that no good would come of any union between herself and her master. During her years with the Flints, Brent had witnessed women and their children by Flint being sold away separately for no other reason than that Flint did not want them around to serve as reminders of his guilt.

At this time of crisis, Brent befriended a single white man, Mr. Sands, and decided to cast her lot with him. Bearing his children seemed to be the only way to escape from Flint's ever increasing demands and to ensure the freedom of her herself and her unborn child.⁸ This decision weighed heavily on Brent. She had been raised to be chaste and save herself for marriage. Though she realized that that never would have come to pass with Flint as her master, Brent still wished that she could have had another choice. It was not for herself that Brent mourned, however, but rather for her grandmother. The life of a slave was hard, but Brent's grandmother firmly believed that good would always triumph over evil; she never would have understood Brent's choice. Out of a sense of guilt and shame, Brent kept her union with Sands a secret from everyone. Just as before when Flint first started propositioning her, Brent was not able to confide her problems to her grandmother:

I secretly mourned over the sorrow I was bringing on my grandmother, who had so tried to shield me from harm. I knew that I was the greatest comfort of her old age, and that it was a source of pride to her that I had not degraded myself, like most of the slaves. I wanted to confess to her that I was no longer worthy of her love; but I could not utter the dreaded words.

Not long after her relationship with Sands had begun, Brent discovered that she was pregnant. Unaware of this situation, Flint built a home for Brent in which she was to become his concubine. Flint gave Brent an ultimatum and when he returned to find out whether or not she would choose to live in his newly-built cabin with him, she was forced to tell him of her condition. Flint threw himself into a rage and Brent was aware that she finally had triumphed over her master; but at what price? After telling Flint, Brent came to the horrible realization that her family soon would learn the truth. Any personal sense of satisfaction was gone:

I thought I should be happy in my triumph over him. But now that the truth was out, and my relatives would hear of it, I felt wretched. Humble as were their circumstances, they had pride in my good character. Now how could I look them in the face? My self-respect was gone! I had resolved that I would be virtuous, ^{thought} I was a slave... and now, how humiliated I felt!¹⁰

Brent resigned herself to the role of the fallen woman, but was not prepared for her grandmother's reaction. Brent was ready to accept that what she had done might have been wrong, but not that it was bad enough to lose her family. To Brent, the battle between herself and Flint had been over her individual honour; thus, her decision was to do what was best for herself. If she had thought that the outcome would have cost her her family as well, perhaps the decision would have been different. Regardless, the choice had been made and everyone had to live with it. Flint had to accept that Brent would not bow to his will at that time, Brent's family had to accept that she was no longer pure, and

Brent herself had to accept that she could not control the anger and disappointment both felt toward her.

Brent was devastated when her grandmother banished her from her home upon learning of her condition. No longer able to protect her grandmother from the truth, Brent confessed what had been going on for the past few years. Though her grandmother finally understood why Brent had made the choice she had, that did not mean that their relationship returned to normal:

She listened in silence. I told her I would bear any thing and do any thing, if in time I had hopes of obtaining her forgiveness. I begged of her to pity me, for my dead mother's sake. And she did pity me. She did not say, "I forgive you".¹¹

The same was true for Brent's relationship with the other members of her family. Brent's entire family had managed, against the odds, to marry and bear children in wedlock. The family was devastated that Brent was not able to do the same. Brent was aware of their loss, but still wondered why they put all of their hopes on her. The fate of the female slave was not always of her own choosing.¹²

The disappointment of her family was not the only problem Brent had to face. A new life was taking shape inside of her, and Brent was not entirely sure that she was ready for such a responsibility. During her pregnancy, Brent harboured thoughts of suicide, thinking that death was better than bringing a new slave into the world. After the birth of her first child, Benjamin, Brent could not help but feel the same way. Before long, however, feelings of love began to emerge, but still, every time she

looked at her new baby, she was reminded of her guilt.¹³

It is most interesting that considering the way she felt, and was treated, before and after the birth of her first child, that Brent would become pregnant again. Of course, it is entirely possible that Brent had no control over the situation. Having cast her lot, and all chances of freedom, with Sands, she would have been powerless to refuse him. A little over a year after Benjamin was born, Brent gave birth to a daughter, Ellen. The guilt she had felt after the birth of Benjamin was nothing compared to her feelings of guilt concerning Ellen. It was not her second "fall from grace" that tormented Brent, but rather the sex of her new-born infant. When Brent learned that her second child was a girl, she mourned her child's future, knowing that it would bring Ellen nothing but pain and sorrow, like it had for her mother.¹⁴

Perhaps because her second child was a girl, Brent's thoughts at that time began to turn to her mother. When she was pregnant with Benjamin, Brent only thought of the shame she was bringing upon her grandmother. After giving birth to Ellen, Brent thought of what effect her actions would have had on her parents, if they still had been alive. The guilt and self-hatred that Brent had felt for causing her grandmother pain was nothing compared to the sense of loss she felt when thinking of her mother. The full reality of her situation and its consequences hit Brent in the church as she waited for her second child to be baptized:

When I entered the church, recollections of my mother came over me, and I felt subdued in spirit. There she had presented me for baptism, without any reason to feel ashamed. She had been married, and had such legal rights as slavery allows to a slave. The vows had at least been sacred to her, and she had never violated them. I was glad she was not alive to know under what different circumstances her grandchildren were present for baptism.¹⁵

Still, despite the self-recriminations and other reactions, Brent's family, particularly her grandmother, stood by her. There came a time when neither could mourn her lost innocence any longer. As a single-mother with two young children to take care of, Brent did not have time to dwell on the past; all of her energies had to be directed toward her children. Brent vowed to ensure that her past would not be visited on her children's lives. Brent's maternal instincts made her obsess over protecting her children from harm. The first threat she, and her children, encountered was Flint. Years after the fact, Flint still had not recovered from his loss in the battle. Even after Brent gave birth to two children that were not his own, Flint still believed he could make her his mistress. Ironically, Brent's children were his weapons of choice against Linda. Flint threatened Brent's children in order to convince her to accept him.

Up to that point, Flint had allowed Brent and her children to live at Brent's grandmother's home. One day, Flint came to the house to inform Brent that if she did not consent to be his concubine, he would send her children to work on the plantation fields. Brent's first reaction was to wish again for the death of her children: "It seemed to me I would rather see them killed

than have them given up to his power."¹⁶ This thought was short-lived and she seriously began to consider her options. The decision Linda was to make at this time irrevocably would alter her family's lives. Reasoning that Flint's offer was a "snare", Brent resolved, once again, to take matters into her own hands.

The importance of this battle was evident in the fact that Brent did not back down and run to her grandmother for help. This does not mean, however, that Brent's female kinship network was any less significant in her life. What it does mean is that through the past help of her female support base, namely her grandmother, Brent had started to develop her individual sense of self-reliance. With this in mind, Brent came to believe that the only way she could save her children was to escape. Brent alone made the decision to escape and she held fast to that decision. For the first time in her life, Brent was prepared to face the future alone, without the help of her family, if that were necessary:

My grandmother was much cast down. I had my secret hopes; but I must fight my battle alone. 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. My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each.¹⁷

Before making her first move toward freedom, Brent thought of her parents. It was important to her that not only she, but also her parents, thought that escape was the best choice. Returning to their grave-site, Brent sought the advice of her dead parents. Her parents, like her instincts, told her escape as

soon as possible: "I seemed to hear my father's voice come from it, bidding me not to tarry till I reached freedom or the grave."¹⁸ Though her decision already had been made, Brent felt reassured that she was doing the right thing for herself and her children. Before taking final leave of her parents, she sat in the graveyard and reflected on the role they had played in her life while they both still were alive. At this time, Brent was torn between her fond memories of her parents and her fear that her parents, and in the future her children, would not share such fond memories of her.¹⁹

There was one last confrontation before Brent could plan her escape. It would not be until after she put the past behind her, that she would be ready to execute her plan of escape. Having sheltered her grandmother from her secret plans, Brent was not prepared for the reaction when her grandmother discovered her intentions. Brent's grandmother did not share her confidence in the plan to escape. She always had believed that God would protect her and her loved ones, if they only would keep the faith. It was inconceivable to her that Brent could leave her children, even if she truly believed that doing so ultimately would save them all. Brent's grandmother warned her, as a mother, of the consequences of abandoning her children:

- "Do you mean to leave your little, helpless children? I am old now, and cannot do for your babies as I once did for you."

I replied, that if I went away, perhaps their father would be able to secure their freedom.

- "Ah, my child, don't trust too much to him. Stand by your own children, and suffer with them till death. Nobody respects a mother who forsakes her children; and

if you leave them, you will never have a happy moment. If you go you will make me miserable the short time I have to live."²⁰

The importance of Brent's decision stopped her from letting guilt take over after her grandmother's speech. No matter how much she loved and respected her grandmother, Brent alone was responsible for three lives and had to think of what was best for all of them, even if she had to risk her grandmother's disapproval: "Nothing less than the freedom of my children would have induced me to disregard her advice."²¹ Where the entire family always had been most important to Brent, now that she had two children to think about, the most important consideration became that, when she escaped, she could take her children with her.²²

Despite Brent's belief that what she was doing was for the best, she still mourned for the pain her actions would bring to her children. She knew they would think she had abandoned them and that she also might never see them again, but the chance of freedom was worth the risk. Brent found that saying good-bye to her children, without them being aware of what was going on, was to be even harder than the actual escape. The only thing that kept her going was the love that she alone felt for them.²³

Brent's decision, however, was the only solitary action she had to make. In order to accomplish the goal of freedom for both herself and her children, Brent would require the assistance of everyone she knew and trusted. Thus, it was not until this point that Brent's self-reliance became truly based on her female kin

network. It was impossible to think that Brent could escape without help. Alone, she would have been caught and returned to Flint before the sun came up the next day. Brent thus planned to take refuge at a friend's house and stay there until her master stopped looking for her. Brent naively believed that after a few days, Flint would tire of the search and consent to sell both her and her children to Mr. Sands.²⁴

Unfortunately, the escape did not go as Brent planned. Instead of giving up, Flint relentlessly pursued her. As she hid at her friend's house, Flint threatened her family. Brent was torn; on the one hand, there was her goal of freedom for herself and her children, and on the other hand, she did not want to be the cause of any further troubles for her family. In the end, she decided to stick to her goal and to have faith in herself, even after her family tried to convince her that all hope was lost.²⁵ Brent almost lost her resolve when she learned that Flint had locked her children in jail. Her first impulse was to go to them. After years of subconsciously willing their death, the realization that that just might come to pass now was unimaginable to her. Nothing short of her brother's constant reassurances could stop Brent from turning herself in to Flint. She thus steeled herself against all feelings of guilt and proceeded with her plan.

After spending weeks at her friend's house, it soon became evident that Brent no longer could remain there. Having no other alternative, she was convinced to move back to her grandmother's

house. Brent initially was apprehensive about the situation, not wanting to cause any further disturbances for her family and her children. Her grandmother convinced her that the crawl space in the attic was the perfect hiding spot. Flint never would think to look in such an obvious location. Once again, Brent thought this hiding place was to be only temporary. Seven years later, she still was in the attic, not sure when the chance for escape would arise.²⁶

Despite the inconveniences, there were some advantages to this hiding spot. In the first place, close to her family, Brent could monitor Flint's vigilance. Flint routinely returned to Brent's grandmother's house in attempt to learn of her whereabouts. If Flint ever suspected that she was hiding so close, Brent would be aware of the situation and more ready to escape. The other advantage to this hiding place was that Brent still could be a parent to her children, though at a distance. While Brent did not communicate directly with her children during her years in hiding, she still could watch them play and hear them speak to each other. Living in cramped conditions, ever fearful of discovery, the moments that she could witness her children's lives were the most precious. They might not have been safe from slavery yet, but at least Brent was reassured that they were happy and oblivious to what was going on.²⁷

While Brent was hiding in the attic, part of her dream came true. Flint did not want to be bothered with Brent's children and allowed them to be sold to a trader. His one condition was that

they not be sold to Mr. Sands. By the time Flint discovered that the trader had been working for Sands all along, it was too late. The children already had been sold to their father. Brent rejoiced in her children's freedom from Flint. She was thankful to Sands for purchasing her children, but was not entirely convinced that love for his children was the motivating factor. In her mind, no one could love Benjamin and Ellen more than she. At last, Brent acknowledged that, at the very least, Sands had feelings of affection for his children and took pleasure in giving them their freedom.²⁸ To Brent's horror, however, Sands did not free her children.

Shortly after purchasing Benjamin and Ellen, Sands was elected to office in Washington. As Sands recently had married a white woman, Brent feared for the future of her children. She also was well aware that if anything should happen to Sands, her children would become the property of their father's heirs. It became obvious to her that instead of treating Benjamin and Ellen like his children, Sands acted as if they were his slaves. Brent soon realized that she would have to act if she wanted to ensure that her children be set free. Risking exposure, Brent arranged for Sands to come to her hiding spot. She threw herself at his feet, not for herself, but in the hopes that he would save her children.²⁹ Sands promised Brent that he would free her children. Secure that Sands would keep his promise this time, Brent prepared to escape North to freedom. Not sure how long it would take to establish herself in the North, Brent

worried about the care of her children. At her father's request, Ellen was sent to Brooklyn, New York to live with a relative of her father's. Brent knew that there, in the North, her daughter would be safe until she was ready to care for her herself. Benjamin, on the other hand, still was living with Brent's grandmother. Without the help of her grandmother in looking after her eldest child, Brent never could have finally resolved to make her move. Brent also reasoned that as long as Benjamin remained in the South, the threat was always there that he might be returned to his former slave status. Fearing the worst, and knowing that she would be too far away to prevent it, Brent initially thought of cancelling her escape.³⁰ Though Sands still owned Benny, jurisdiction over his son, and slave, had been given to Brent's grandmother. After Sands bought his son from Flint, he sent Benny to live with his great-grandmother. It was then, with as much confidence as any slave had, that Brent's grandmother promised her that Benjamin would be sent to live with his uncle in Boston as soon as Brent safely arrived in the North. Finally secure in the knowledge that both she and her children would be free, Brent, for the last time, prepared to leave home.

Brent's uncle found a place for her to hide on a boat that was leaving for the North in a few days. When she was sure that she would be on that boat, Brent decided to say good-bye to her children herself. Her family feared that the children could not be trusted to remain silent, but she had watched her children mature over the past seven years and knew that they would never

betray their mother.³¹ In turn, Brent divulged her secret to Benny and Ellen.

When Brent finally arrived safely in the North, she quickly learned that freedom was little more than a word. The people of the North were every bit as racist as those in the South. Apart from some abolitionist friends, Brent was not impressed by life in the "free" states. What most exasperated Brent, however, was her inability to provide a home for her children. Working night and day for the Bruces, a prominent publishing family, in New York, Brent dreamed of being reunited with her children. In New York, she met up with her daughter but was unable to bring Ellen home with her. In the first place, Brent did not have a home of her own, and though her boss, Mrs. Bruce, offered to let Ellen move in with the family, Brent could not take her up on that offer. The family with which Ellen was staying were aware that Brent was a fugitive slave. Brent feared that if she offended them by taking away her daughter, and their hand-maid, they would inform Dr. Flint of her whereabouts. The decision to let Ellen stay with the Hobbs was all the more difficult for Brent because she knew they mistreated and neglected her daughter. It broke Brent's heart to refuse her daughter when she came to her mother and asked when they would be together.³² Brent's despair over the situation with Ellen soon turned to joy when she learned that Benny had arrived safely in Boston. Being able to stand with her two children in the middle of the streets suddenly made all the sacrifices worthwhile. All the pain and suffering was forgotten

when the three of them were reunited after over seven years of separation.³³

As much as Brent loved her children and rejoiced in their reunion, she was caught in a no-win situation. Without a home, her children could not live with her. Benny left Boston and went to school in England. While in England, some children there taunted Benny, so he decided to leave on a whaling voyage. Brent feared for his safety and blamed herself for not being able to look after him herself. Benny's future was now out of her hands, and she prayed to God to protect him.³⁴ There was nothing, however, that Brent could do about Ellen, at that time. Brent thus decided that the only way she could provide a home for herself and her children was if she could truly be free. It angered her that she would have to purchase her freedom. Brent felt that she had already paid her dues and that her hard earned money should not have to go to Flint.³⁵

It was then that a new form of kinship network became a presence in Brent's life. Her boss, Mrs. Bruce, was sympathetic to Brent's plight and desirous to be of some assistance. Unbeknownst to Brent, Mrs. Bruce purchased her freedom. Though Brent was relieved upon discovering that she finally was free, she still resented having to have her freedom purchased: "I am deeply grateful to the generous friend who procured it, but I despise the miscreant who demanded payment of what never rightfully belonged to him or his."³⁶ Though without Mrs. Bruce's help, Brent could not have freed herself and achieved the

ultimate slave goal of self-reliance, she still resented that a non-family member bought her freedom. Mrs. Bruce assured Brent that she did not expect any repayment, but that did not stop her from feeling as if she had passed from the hands of one master to another. In the end, however, Brent reasoned that freedom was worth any price.³⁷

Throughout her life, Brent described her love for her family as one of the most powerful influences. Without the love and support of her family, even freedom itself was not as sweet. It was love that allowed Brent to run to freedom, and it was the support of her female kinship network that made it all possible. In the end, Brent could recognize the good that came out of her hard times. After a life-time of guilt, it was the love and support Brent's daughter had for her mother that finally set her free. Two years after gaining her freedom, her brother, William offered to send Ellen to boarding school. This was an offer Brent could not refuse, but she still did not want her daughter to leave before she knew the truth about her parentage. Brent's new life as a free-woman required that she, once and for all, leave the past behind. In order to do just that, however, she needed forgiveness from someone she loved. Brent's grandmother could only pity her, but her daughter was the first to forgive her. In fact, after Brent told Ellen that Mr. Sands was her father, Ellen confessed that she had always known the truth and that it had never mattered. All the love she had, she always had given to her mother: "I know all about it, mother. I am nothing to my father,

and he is nothing to me. All my love is for you."³⁶ It was through this unconditional love and support that Brent finally was set free.

Though free, Brent still could not provide a home for her children. When writing her life story, it was this fact that tormented her. Perhaps this was because without a home, which symbolized a stable base, she could not provide the same type of support to her children as she had received from her grandmother. It was, after all, in her grandmother's home that she had evaded returning to her former slave status. Though ending her book grateful to be free, Brent still mourned her lack of true freedom. Brent's story, however, was one of love, determination, and ultimate success. Love of family and the support she received from them were the most important factors in Brent's life. Though she said she wrote the book to help other women who were still enslaved, it seems that her love of family and the debt of gratitude she owed to her female kin network, particularly her grandmother, were the real motivating factors.

While she was living in the North, Brent's grandmother died. The last time she had seen her grandmother, both were unaware of what the future held in store. By writing a memoir, Brent was able to assure her grandmother that all her efforts had not been not in vain. She finally was able to acknowledge that her grandmother's support had awarded her the ultimate in self-reliance for a female slave: freedom. After all the pain, Brent was free and looking after her family in the best way she knew

how. In her grandmother's eyes, that would have been more than enough to repay the debt.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

1. "They lived together in a comfortable home; and though we were all slaves, I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise, trusted to them for safe keeping, and liable to be demanded of them at any moment."

Jean Fagan Yellin, ed., *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 5.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

3. "My brother Willie and I often received portions of the crackers, cakes and preserves she made to sell; and after we ceased to be children we were indebted to her for many more important services." *Ibid.*, p. 6.

4. "I was frequently threatened with punishment if I stopped there; and my grandmother, to avoid detaining me, often stood at the gate with something for my breakfast or dinner. I was indebted to her for all my comforts, spiritual or temporal. It was her labor that supplied my scanty wardrobe." *Ibid.*, p. 10.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

7. "For his sake, I felt that I ought not to link his fate with my own unhappy destiny.... Still, I was not stripped of all. I still had my good grandmother and my affectionate brother. When he put his arms around my neck, and looked into my eyes, as if to read there the troubles I dared not tell, I felt that I still had something to love." *Ibid.*, p. 42.

8. "I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favoured another; and it was thought he would revenge himself by selling me, and I was sure my friend, Mr. Sands, would buy me. He was a man of more generosity and feeling than my master, and I thought my freedom could be easily obtained from him. The crisis of my fate now came so near that I as desperate. I shuddered to think of being the mother of children that should be owned by my old tyrant. I knew that as soon as a new fancy took him, his victims were sold far off to get rid of them; especially if they had children.

Of a man who was not my master I could ask to have my children well supported; and in this case, I felt confident I should obtain the boon. I also felt quite sure that they would be made free. With all these thoughts revolving in my mind, and seeing no other way of escaping the doom I so much dreaded, I made a head long plunge." *Ibid.*, p. 55.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

12. "But why, thought I, did my relatives ever cherish hopes for me? What was there to save me from the usual fate of slave girls? Many more beautiful and more intelligent than I had experienced a similar fate, or a far worse one. How could they hope that I should escape?"

Ibid., p. 60.

13. "The little vine was taking deep root in my existence, though its clinging fondness excited a mixture of love and pain. When I was most sorely oppressed I found a solace in his smiles. I loved to watch his infant slumbers; but always there was a dark cloud over my enjoyment. I could never forget that he was a slave. Sometimes I wished that he might die in infancy.... Death is better than slavery."

Ibid., p. 62.

14. "When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women. Super-added to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own."

Ibid., p. 77.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

19. "I knelt by the graves of my parents, and thanked God, as I had often done before, that they had not lived to witness my trials, or to mourn over my sins. I had received my mother's blessing when she died; and in many an hour of tribulation I had seemed to hear her voice, sometimes chiding me, sometimes whispering loving words into my wounded ear. I have shed many and bitter tears, to think that when I am gone from my children they cannot remember me with such entire satisfaction as I remembered my mother."

Ibid., p. 90.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

22."I could have made my escape alone; but it was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom. Though the boon would have been precious to me, above all price, I would not have taken it at the expense of leaving them in slavery. Every trial I endured, every sacrifice I made for their sakes, drew them closer to my heart, and gave me fresh courage to beat back the dark waves that rolled and rolled over me in a seemingly endless night of storms."

Ibid., p. 89.

23."I feared the sight of my children would be too much for my full heart; but I could not go out into the uncertain future without one last look. I bent over the bed where lay my little Benny and baby Ellen. Poor little ones! Fatherless and motherless! Memories of their father came over me. He wanted to be kind to them; but they were not all to him, as they were to my womanly heart."

Ibid., p. 96.

24.*Ibid.*, p. 91.

25."I had succeeded in cautiously conveying some messages to my relatives. They were harshly threatened, and desiring of my having a chance to escape, they advised me to return to my master, ask his forgiveness, and let him make an example of me. But such counsel had no influence with me. When I started upon this hazardous undertaking, I had resolved that, come what would, there should be no turning back."

Ibid., p. 99.

26."Dark thoughts passed through my mind as I lay there day after day. I tried to be thankful for my little cell, dismal as it was, and even to love it, as part of the price I had paid for the redemption of my children. Sometimes I thought God was a compassionate father, who would forgive my sins for the sake of my sufferings. At other times, it seemed to me there was no justice or mercy in the divine government."

Ibid., p. 123.

27."But I was not comfortless. I heard the voices of my children. There was joy and there was sadness in the sound. It made my tears flow. How I longed to speak to them! I was eager to look on their faces; but there was no hole, nor crack, through which I could peep."

Ibid., p. 114.

28."The father was present for a while; and though such a "parental relation" as existed between him and my children takes slight hold of the heart or consciences of slaveholders, it must be that he experienced some moments of pure joy in witnessing the happiness he had imparted."

Ibid., p. 107.

29."I was too proud to ask Mr. Sands to do any thing for my own benefit; but I could bring myself to become a supplicant for my children. I resolved to remind him of the promise he had made me, and to throw myself upon his honour for the performance of it."
Ibid., p. 138.

30."I was going to answer him with a joyful yes, when the thought of Benny came to my mind. I told him the temptation was exceedingly strong, but I was terribly afraid of Dr. Flint's alleged power over my child, and that I could not go and leave him behind."
Ibid., p. 150.

31.Brent first went to her daughter: "I told her I couldn't go now; but sometime I would come to her, and then she and Benny and I would live together and have happy times. She wanted to run and bring Benny to see me now.... I took her in my arms and told her I was a slave, and that was the reason she must never say she had seen me. I exhorted her to be a good child, to try to please the people where she was going, and that God would raise her up friends."

Brent then went to her son and promised him that she would do everything in her power to ensure that they would be reunited: "I told him I was now really going to the North and if he was a good, honest boy, and a loving child to his dear old grandmother, the lord would bless him, and bring him to me, and we and Ellen would live together."

Ibid., pp. 140, 155.

32."I tried to comfort her, by telling her that I had laid up a hundred dollars, and that before long I hoped to be able to give her and Benjamin a home, and send them to school. She was always desirous not to add to my troubles more than she could help."
Ibid., p. 179.

33."The day after my arrival was one of the happiest of my life. I felt as if I was beyond the reach of the bloodhounds; and, for the first time during many years, I had both my children together with me. They greatly enjoyed their reunion, and laughed and chatted merrily. I watched them with a swelling heart. Their every motion delighted me."
Ibid., p. 182.

34.*Ibid.*, p. 186.

35."The money I had earned, I was desirous to devote to the education of my children, and to secure a home for them. It seemed not only hard, but unjust, to pay for myself. I could not possibly regard myself as a piece of property. Moreover, I had worked many years without wages, and during that time had been obliged to depend on my grandmother for many comforts in food and clothing. My children certainly belonged to me.... I knew the law would decide that I was his property, and would probably still give his daughter

a claim to my children; but I regarded such laws as the regulations of rovers, who had no rights that I was bound to respect."
Ibid., p. 187.

36.*Ibid.*, p. 200.

37."My heart was exceedingly full.I remembered how my poor father had tried to buy me, when I was a small child, and how he had been disappointed. I hoped his spirit was rejoicing over me now. I remembered how my good old grandmother had laid up her earnings to purchase me in later years, and how often her pleas had been frustrated. How that faithful, loving old heart would leap for joy, if she could look on me and my children now that we were free. My relatives had been foiled in all their efforts, but God had raised me up a friend among strangers, who had bestowed on me the precious, long-desired boon."
Ibid., p. 200.

38.*Ibid.*, p. 189.

CHAPTER FIVE:

MATTIE GRIFFITH, *AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A FEMALE SLAVE*

Autobiography of a Female Slave chronicles the life of Ann, a female slave from Kentucky. Ann begins her story by describing her happy childhood. Her master was a kind man who treated his slaves well. Ann lived in her master's home with her mother, Keziah, the cook. Keziah was a mulatto slave with a privileged position in the "big house". Of her father, Ann writes only that he was, she supposed, a white man who deserted both herself and her mother "with the most unpaternal feeling".¹

Living in her master's house, Ann was taught how to read and write. As she was so light-skinned that she could pass for white, Ann was treated as if she was better than the other, darker-skinned, slaves. Ann's idyllic, albeit slave, life ended abruptly after the death of her first master. Due to the insolvency of her former master's estate, all of the slaves were sold at an auction. Ann was separated from her mother and sold to a cruel master, Mr. Peterkin. Not hours after this sale, Ann was aware that her life would never be the same. Mr. Peterkin believed in beating his slaves to keep them "in their place". Peterkin's daughters, Jane and Matilda, shared their father's feelings on slave discipline. For the next few years, Ann lived her life in fear of the next beating she would receive.

While living with the Peterkins, Ann befriended a few of her fellow slaves. The cook, Aunt Polly, became Ann's substitute

mother and Amy the younger sister she never had. Unfortunately, not all of her fellow slaves became Ann's friends. Lindy, a fellow house slave, in order to escape punishment, betrayed Ann by blaming her for breaking a dish that, in fact, Lindy had broken. Ann received a whipping at the post that almost killed her. Ann also befriended a couple of her white acquaintances. Mr. Peterkin's son, John, was unlike the rest of his family. John believed that the souls of black and white were equal in the eyes of the Lord. Ann came to respect her young master and deeply mourned his passing from consumption a few years after her arrival at the Peterkin house. Mr. Peterkin also employed a white school-mistress from the North. Miss Bradley introduced Ann to the existence of the "Abolition Society" and convinced her that some white people were working to help the slaves. Ann next befriended a lawyer from Boston, Mr. Trueman. Ann respected him for his conviction that slavery was wrong and must be abolished.

A few years later, Ann was sent to live in Louisville with her newly married mistress, Jane. Compared to life at the Peterkin household, living in a hotel in the "big city" was a luxury. While living there, Ann became friends with an employee of the hotel, Louise. Louise was a former slave who had been emancipated after the death of her master. Ann also became close to a male slave whose master hired him out to the hotel. Henry was a hard-working slave who was saving up to buy his freedom. A few months after their meeting, Ann and Henry became engaged to be married.

Though it finally looked as if Ann could be happy, after a few months of paradise, her life began to disintegrate. For some small offense, Ann's mistress, Jane, wanted to punish her. Since it was not acceptable to punish one's own slave in the city, Jane hired a Mr. Monkton to perform the whipping. Mr. Monkton attempted to seduce, and then rape Ann. Instead of acquiescing, Ann fought back to save her virtue. After beating Mr. Monkton with a bottle, Ann was sent to jail to await further punishment. At this time, Mr. Trueman came to her rescue. Though Mr. Trueman offered Ann a brilliant defense full of abolitionist rhetoric, the court found her guilty and sentenced her to two hundred lashes.

After serving her sentence, Ann returned to live with Jane Peterkin Summerville. A few months later, however, Ann was sold to a slave trader. Mr. Atkins made it quite clear that he intended to sell Ann to a brothel. Ann's friends, Louise and Henry, scoured the city to find someone who would buy Ann before she was to be sold down South. At the last minute, Henry came rushing in to inform Mr. Atkins that Ann was to be bought by a woman named Miss Nancy. Unlike her former mistress, Ann's new mistress treated her slave well. When Henry informed Ann and Miss Nancy that he had saved enough money to buy his freedom, Miss Nancy told him that she and Ann would follow him to the North so that Ann and Henry would not have to be separated.

It seemed that nothing could go wrong for Ann. She had a close friend and a beloved fiance, and a wonderful mistress to

whom she was completely devoted. It was at this time, however, that everything began to go wrong. Lindy, Ann's former nemesis at the Peterkin plantation, was living in Louisville, determined to steal Henry away from Ann. The day before Henry was to purchase his freedom, Lindy went to Henry's master and told him that Henry was planning to escape. Henry's master did not wait to find out if that was the truth, and decided to sell Henry to a trader. When Henry went to buy his freedom the next day, he was informed that it was too late. After years of saving, Henry realized that he had lost all hope of ever being free and committed suicide. Ann was completely devastated.

Not long after this incident, another catastrophe befell Ann. It had been years since Ann had seen or heard from her mother. One day, Ann heard of a slave who had been beaten almost to death. Hurrying to see if she could be of any assistance, Ann was horrified to discover that it was her mother who had been beaten. Arriving at the scene just before her mother died, Ann was able to exchange last words with her mother. After her mother died, however, Ann was left almost all alone. A few months later, Miss Nancy died, and Ann truly was alone. In her will, Miss Nancy gave Ann her freedom and a trust fund of four thousand dollars. Ann took the money and her freedom and moved North. Staying true to Henry's memory, she never married, and became a teacher, devoting the rest of her life to her pupils.

Though the title of the novel might suggest that *Autobiography of a Female Slave* was an autobiography, it was, in

fact, written by a white woman, Mattie Griffith. If little is known about the life of Harriet Jacobs before the publication of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, almost nothing is known about the life of Mattie Griffith. No mention of Griffith's life or authorship was made in print until months after the publication of *Autobiography*. *Autobiography* was published anonymously in November 1856. For all anyone knew, *Autobiography* could have been written by a former slave. Passages in *Autobiography* directly claimed that the author, in fact, had been a female slave:

This book is not a wild romance to beguile your tears and cheat your fancy. No; it is the truthful autobiography of one who has suffered long, long, the pains and trials of slavery. And she is committing her story, with her own calm deductions, to the consideration of every thoughtful and truth-loving mind.⁴

With no proof as to who the real author was, it could not immediately be assumed that *Autobiography* was not a slave narrative. This, later revealed, slave novel was so true to life that no real assumptions could have been made.

William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator* was the first newspaper to publish a review of *Autobiography*. The review of *Autobiography* itself was short and vague:

This attractive volume of 400 pages makes its appearance anonymously, and with such lack of presence and perfect modesty as to be without preface or explanation.⁵

The reason for this brief description was that not much was known about either the book or its author. In this review, only

speculation could be made as to who wrote the novel:

We are impressed to recognize it as the production of an elevated mind and a philanthropic heart, admirable in narration and powerfully descriptive, characterized by artistic skill, and full of stirring incident, and as worthy to take its place in the first rank of anti-slavery publications. We cannot even surmise the name of its author.⁴

On January 9, 1857, *The Liberator* ran two reviews of *Autobiography*. The first review was from the *Christian Inquirer*. In this review, Griffith's identity was still not known. Unlike the first review, however, further speculation was made as to who the author may have been:

We have not learned the name of the author of this book, but know as much as this, that it was written by a lady born, bred and educated at the South, a close and inevitable observer of the institution whose working she portrays. This fact is alone sufficient to stamp the volume with a peculiar character, and to attach to it a peculiar importance and interest. Here is the voice, not₅ of a Northern "romancer," but of a Southern witness.⁵

The author of the review never explained how he/she came to this assumption about *Autobiography*. There is nothing in the book itself that would lead the reader to draw these conclusions. What is most important about this review, however, is the prediction made about the future of *Autobiography*. The reviewer claimed that *Autobiography* would supersede Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in popularity and importance. Given the impression that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had made on American society at large, this was high praise for *Autobiography*.⁶ Following this review, William Lloyd Garrison revealed the identity of the author. For the first time, the public was made aware of Mattie Griffith's authorship

of *Autobiography*. Though Griffith's identity was discovered, at last, not much was revealed as to who she really was:

The author of this remarkable work is Miss Mattie Griffith, of Kentucky, the daughter of a deceased slaveholder, a young lady of rare personal accomplishments and of brilliant promise, who, ignorant of the racial abolition movement at the North, out of the depths of her own soul brought forth the thrilling testimony against the hideous slave system. Most of the incidents recorded in this "Autobiography" came within her own personal knowledge.⁷

On January 23, 1857 the last two reviews of *Autobiography* were run in *The Liberator*. The first was from the *Louisville Journal*. This review still maintained the anonymity of the author.⁸ This assertion as to the anonymity of *Autobiography's* author is surprising in that the co-editor of the *Louisville Journal* was Griffith's cousin.⁹ Perhaps, this was perhaps a tactic of Griffith's slaveholding relatives to deny Griffith's authorship of *Autobiography*. The *New York Christian Examiner* published the last review of *Autobiography*. Printed following the review from the *Louisville Journal* in *The Liberator*, it mentioned nothing new about the identity of Griffith.¹⁰

After the final review was published in *The Liberator*, nothing further was revealed about Griffith's life, in print at least. If it were not for the correspondences of Lydia Maria Child, William Lloyd Garrison and Charlotte Forten Grimke, all three noted abolitionists, the facts of Griffith's life might never have been known. From Charlotte Forten Grimke, only a little was learned about Griffith. Writing in her journal on February 8, 1857, Grimke did not mention Griffith by name but

discussed her reaction to *Autobiography* and the kind of person who would write such a book:

Finished "The Autobiography of a Female Slave." To me it is deeply interesting. The writer's style has not, perhaps, that perfect elegance and simplicity which distinguishes the best writers, but she evidently feels deeply on the subject, and her book is calculated to awaken our deepest sympathies. I thank her for writing it. Hers must be a brave, true soul thus to surmount all obstacles, to soar above all the prejudices, which, from childhood must have been instilled into her mind, and take upon herself the defense of a down-trodden and degraded race!¹¹

In her second, and last, entry concerning Griffith on June 17, 1857, Grimke only mentioned having met with Griffith and having discussed their abolitionist views.¹²

William Lloyd Garrison referred to Griffith in a number of the letters he wrote to his wife, Helen. In the first letter that mentioned Griffith, Garrison, like Grimke, discussed his reaction to having read *Autobiography*:

I found it to be a most touching and soul-harrowing description of the unescapable horrors of slavery, surpassing any thing of the kind yet presented to the public; and my heart was as heavy as lead when I got through with it, and the world seemed to be clothed in funereal drapery.¹³

In any other letters Garrison wrote concerning Griffith, she was mentioned only in passing.

It is to Lydia Maria Child that historians owe great thanks. If it had not been for her correspondence over the years concerning Griffith, indeed some with Griffith herself, next to nothing would be known about Griffith's life. Child wrote a letter to John Gorham Palfrey on January 28, 1857 in which she

first mentioned her acquaintance with Griffith. Child's goal in this letter was to introduce *Autobiography* to the abolitionist community:

Have you read *Autobiography of a Female Slave*? It is a book of unmitigated horrors.... [T]he book appears to me to indicate greatness of soul, both moral and intellectual; and being written by a Kentucky woman, who describes the "patriarchal institution" as she says it exists in that best of the slave states; it is an invaluable acquisition to our cause. The author is Miss Mattie Griffith, who is about nineteen years of age. Though belonging to an excessively aristocratic and pro-slavery family, she has always felt about the system, as if she were doing wrong to be a silent accomplice in it.¹⁴

In a letter on February 8, 1857, Child wrote to her friend Louisa Gilman Loring attesting to the importance of *Autobiography* in the movement toward the abolition of American slavery.¹⁵

Upon meeting Griffith shortly thereafter, Child was deeply impressed by her moral character. In many of her letters, Child described how noble she considered Griffith to be. What most impressed Child, was Griffith's deep affection for all slaves, but especially for her former slaves. In fact, Child was intrigued by the amount of feeling Griffith would manifest whenever her former status as a slaveholder was mentioned:

For some reason or other, she seems very shy of talking about her slaves. Today, when we asked her some questions about them, she shed tears, and was very silent for several hours after.¹⁶

Child also heralded Griffith's ability to overcome her childhood, rooted in a slaveholding culture, and join the abolitionist movement. According to Child, not only did that require a strong character, but also a good heart. In a letter written to Lucy

Osgood sometime in 1857, Child marvelled at Griffith's accomplishments.¹⁷

In the same letter, Child provided the first glimpse into Griffith's childhood. Child recounted a story Griffith told her of how she resisted racism even as a child. There is no proof, aside from Child's reference, that this incident ever occurred, but the telling of the story provided a perfect background for the reason why Griffith ultimately would write *Autobiography*:

When she went to school, she was a great pet with a wealthy lady, a friend of her grandfather's. The lady hired a slave of the grandfather, and caused her to be whipped for some offence. Mattie heard of it, on her way from school, and rushed into the lady's house to pour forth her bound indignation. She called her a "cruel monster," and told her that "the blue flames of hell were preparing for those who treated poor people so!" The lady tried to pacify her, and asked her to sit down and have some cake. "I don't want to sit down in you house!" she exclaimed; and off she went. The grandfather tried to make her apologize to the lady for her rudeness. Finding persuasion useless, he kept her in the garret three days on bread and water. It was of no use, the child always had the same answer. "She is a cruel monster. It is the truth. I am not sorry I said it and I can't say I am sorry." The grandfather's will gave up to the firmness of her conscientious convictions. M. never apologized. That early incident shows that she is of the stuff martyrs are made of.¹⁸

Griffith's life was never documented in print until after the publication of *Autobiography*. Even after this event, little was revealed of her past. In reviews and letters, much was learned of the impact *Autobiography* had on the abolitionist community, but little else was revealed. What then is known for sure about the life of Mattie Griffith? Martha Griffith was born in Kentucky to Thomas Griffith and Martha Young Griffith.¹⁹ That

much, at least, has been proved. As for her birth date, no record was made of the fact. Child wrote in 1857 that Griffith was nineteen, which would mean that she was born in 1836. In a note appended to the letters of William Lloyd Garrison, however, Griffith's birth year was listed as 1833.²⁰ Griffith's parents do not seem to have recorded the birth of their child, so no date definitively can be proved. From Garrison's and Child's letters, it was also learned that Griffith had a sister.²¹ It was not until a letter that Griffith wrote in 1863 to a family friend, Elizabeth Peabody, however, that any further information about this sister was learned. Griffith's older sister was named Kate. It can be presumed that Kate was older than Griffith as, in 1863, Kate had two children of school age, one of whom was named Henry. No mention was ever made of where the children's father was at this time.²²

It also has been stated that Griffith's parents died and she then was left to the care of her father's female slaves in Louisville, Kentucky.²³ Her parents left her six slaves upon their death. As for the year of her parents' death, that was never mentioned. During her teenage years in Louisville, Griffith published a volume of poems in 1853, dedicated to the people of Louisville. In the next few years, Griffith would be introduced to the abolitionist movement and converted to the "cause". Before leaving her native South, Griffith liberated her slaves. Shortly thereafter, *Autobiography* was published. Child was the only person to document these last two events. In a lengthy article

that appeared in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* on April 5, 1862, Child recounted all she knew of Griffith's childhood, her conversion to abolitionism, the liberation of her slaves, and her ultimate decision to move North.²⁴ In a letter to Mrs. Porter on July 9, 1862, Child presented an abridged version of this story:

She was born in Kentucky. Her family was intensely aristocratic, and she lived all through her childhood and young womanhood in a slave-holding community, all her own property being in slaves, yet she had a noble, humane and generous nature, and from a deep conviction of the sin of slavery, she, despite the opposition of relatives, at the early age of eighteen, freed her slaves, and gave up all her property to go "forth penniless and almost friendless" into the world to earn her living. She wrote me, "I shall go forth to earn my own living with a light heart, because I have a clear conscience."

When she freed her slaves, they danced and sang and sobbed, and would have kissed her feet if she would have allowed it. Then they insisted on sending their wages to her. When she refused they pleaded hard to do so. Previous to her resolution to free her slaves, she had never read any abolition book or heard any anti-slavery speech. She was deeply impressed with the wrongs of the iniquitous system, and determined to be rid of her share in it.²⁵

A distinct passage in *Autobiography* seems to attest to the truth of Child's former descriptions. In *Autobiography*, the main character, Ann, mentioned a woman she knew who was a slaveholder against her will. During an overheard conversation between this woman and a fellow slave holder, Ann recounted the story of this woman's life in a manner quite similar to that which had been attested to the life of Griffith.²⁶

After freeing her slaves and moving North, Griffith worked in Boston, writing for the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. During this time, Griffith wrote *Autobiography* and, by the next year,

faded back into obscurity. This fact is evident not only in the very infrequent references to Griffith in print following 1858, but also in the way historians have treated her work. It would seem that, so far in the twentieth century, only four historians have mentioned Griffith or her work in any detail. The first, Vernon Loggins, dismissed *Autobiography* as a "pale tale of blacks and mulattoes parading as creatures of sentimental romance".²⁷ The next historian, Charles Nichols, only stated that *Autobiography* was an example of those fake narratives "which read like novels, replete with reconstructed dialogue and false sentiment".²⁸

The next historian, Estelle Jelinek, discussed Griffith and *Autobiography* in more detail. The merit of Jelinek's study, however, is limited as she distorted many of the events and facts. In the first place, Jelinek stated that "it is highly questionable that *Autobiography of a Female Slave* was written by Mattie Griffith".²⁹ Jelinek came to this conclusion because Griffith did not place her name on the cover of *Autobiography*, and also because the main character referred to herself as "Ann", not Mattie Griffith. If Jelinek had properly conducted her research, she would have learned that there is absolutely no proof to substantiate this claim. All evidence points to Griffith as the only possible author of *Autobiography*. When continuing her analysis, Jelinek seemed to have forgotten her dismissal of Griffith as the author. In further discussing *Autobiography*, Jelinek referred to the events as having been lived by Griffith.

Instead of relating the events as Ann described them, Jelinek erroneously made Griffith out to be the main character:

There can be little doubt about the factual accuracy of this life story in its descriptions of the brutality and degradation experienced by Griffith, and other slaves in the house where she worked. However, what casts doubt upon her autobiography, is the improbability inherent in her presentation.³⁰

Nearly one hundred forty years after the publication of *Autobiography*, no historian, aside from Child's contemporary discussion, had yet presented a complete analysis of *Autobiography* and its author. In 1992, however, Barbara Jean Ballard defended a Ph.D. dissertation that discussed *Autobiography* in one of its chapters. Although she distorted a few of the facts and neglected to consult important documents like the correspondence of Lydia Maria Child, she still presented the most comprehensive analysis of *Autobiography* published to date.³¹ In her study, Ballard sought to "determine how black and white abolitionists responded in their mid-nineteenth century anti-slavery writings to the prevailing assumptions about the nature of racial differences".³² She studied *Autobiography* to analyze Griffith's perceptions of black women. According to Ballard, Griffith was "ahead of many of her counterparts" in her descriptions of female slaves.³³ Griffith believed in, and argued for, the inherent equality of blacks and whites. That did not mean, however, that Griffith always presented her black characters in this light. Though she may have believed in racial equality, Griffith still made "correlations between physical

descriptions and moral, intellectual and emotional traits of her characters."³⁴ Evil whites and blacks were both described as having a darker complexion than the "good" characters. For example, Ann, the main character, was the perfect heroine. Despite all attempts on her virtue, Ann still maintained her virginity. Ann's skin colour was closely related to her innate goodness. Since Ann was almost white in appearance, she thus was morally superior to other slaves with darker skin tones. Stating that "there were no models or ideals of feminine beauty that included black women", Ballard demonstrated Griffith's inability to "depict a [noticeably] black woman who is beautiful".³⁵

Though this thesis will examine how Griffith's main character in *Autobiography*, a female slave named Ann, described her family life and the importance of female extended kin relationships in her quest for family and self-reliance, there are other ways to interpret the text. As one example, Ballard analyzed *Autobiography* for its presentation of racial stereotypes. As a slave novel, *Autobiography* also could be examined for its abolitionist statements. An underlying theme in *Autobiography* is the importance, as well as the greatness, of the abolitionists. From her description, Ann experienced a sense of real joy when she first learned of the existence of the "Abolition Society". In the narrative, Griffith also interjected on a few occasions to further praise the abolitionist community.³⁶ Throughout the novel, Griffith also interrupted the narrative with direct appeals to the sentiments of her white

audience. These exclamations proved that Griffith's ultimate goal in writing *Autobiography* was to proclaim her dedication to the complete abolition of slavery. In order to do so, Griffith warned slaveholders of their approaching doom if they did not liberate their slaves.³⁷

As it is with most literary works, there are many interpretations of *Autobiography* that can be made. When discussing Griffith's *Autobiography*, however, almost all interpretations are new and unchallenged. Given the lack of analysis where Griffith and *Autobiography* are concerned, no one theme has emerged as the most important in the study of *Autobiography*. Thus, historians must forge their own path and discover new meanings behind this work. One such example is the major theme of this thesis: female slave self-reliance through the support of female kinship networks. To date, no one has examined this issue. For the purpose of this thesis, the matter of Ann's family life was chosen not only because of its applicability to the central theme of the thesis, but also because of its complexities. At an early age, Ann was separated from all family members directly related by blood. That did not mean, however, that Ann did not have a family life or a kinship support base. With no other alternative available to her, Ann developed her own family based not on blood, but on the ties of love and support.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

1. Mattie Griffith, *Autobiography of a Female Slave* (New York: Redfield, 1856, rept., Miami: Mnemosyne Publishing Co., 1969), p. 10.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

3. *The Liberator* (Boston), November 28, 1856.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *The Liberator*, January 9, 1857.

6. "Many, knowing the above-mentioned circumstances respecting its authorship, will be more deeply impressed and moved by the story than by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. We are confident of this, that if the *Autobiography of a Female Slave* could fall into the hands of people not interested in the Anti-Slavery cause, if any such can at this day be found, it would do admirable service for the Abolitionists. If a tenth part of it be true, it ought to make Abolitionists of us all."

Ibid., January 9, 1857.

7. *Ibid.*

8. "The *Autobiography of a Female Slave* was published anonymously, but it is evidently the work of a female writer, and the dialogue in the negro dialect are far more true to nature than any we have yet seen. The writer displays an unusual accuracy of knowledge of the disposition of our slaves."

The Liberator, January 23, 1857.

9. See Lydia Maria Child, "To Maria Weston Chapman, July 26, 1857", in Patricia G. Holland and Milton Meltzer, eds., *Lydia Maria Child: Selected Letters, 1817-1880* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), p. 311.

10. "Of all the books which have yet appeared, this seems to glow with the most impassioned indignation. It seems to come from the heart and soul, and even blood of the author."

Ibid., p. 311.

11. Brenda Stevenson, ed., *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 190-191.

12. "We came down in the afternoon with Miss Griffith.... Our conversation was almost entirely about prejudice. The ladies expressed themselves very warmly against it."

Ibid., pp. 229-230.

13. William Lloyd Garrison, "To Helen E. Garrison, December 17, 1856", in Walter Merrill and Louis Ruchames, eds., *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, volume iv: *From Disunionism to the Brink of War, 1850-1860* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 415.
14. Lydia Maria Child, "To John Gorham Palfrey, January 28, 1857", in Patricia G. Holland and Milton Meltzer, eds., *The Collected Correspondence of Lydia Maria Child, 1817-1880* (Milwood, N.Y.: KTO Microform, 1979), fiche 35, letter 985.
15. "I have no doubt it will be extensively read at the South. The moral tone of the work is very elevated and the style, with all its imperfections, indicates a bright, early and poetic mind." Child, "To Louisa Gilman Loring, February 1857", in *Collected Correspondence*, 35/990.
16. Child, "To David Lee Child, July 1857", in *Collected Correspondence*, 36/1011a.
17. "More and more I become convinced that there is a natural difference in the organization of people. There is Mattie, brought up in a slave-holding community, and under the influence of an intensely aristocratic family, yet, from her earliest years, spontaneously giving all her sympathies to the poor." Child, "To Lucy Osgood, 1857", in *The Letters of Lydia Maria Child* (AMS, 1883; rept. 1971), p. 89.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.
19. Walter Merrill and Louis Ruchames, eds., *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, note on Mattie Griffith, p. 417.
20. *Ibid.*, volume five, note, p. 117.
21. Garrison, "To Helen, May 18, 1857", in *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, volume four, p. 441; and Child, "To Sarah Shaw, October 25, 1857", in *Collected Correspondence*, 37/1026.
22. Mattie Griffith, "To Elizabeth Peabody, June 21, 1863", in *The Peabody Letters*, Collection held at Antioch College, Yellow Springs, Ohio, letter 2341.
23. *Ibid.*, note, p. 117.
24. The bulk of the article can be found in Appendix One.
25. Lydia Maria Child, "To Mrs. Porter, July 9, 1862", in Maria S. Porter, "Lydia Maria Child", *National Magazine: An Illustrated American Monthly*, 14, (May 1901), p. 165.

26."In later years I remembered to have overheard a colloquy between a lady and gentleman (both slaveholders) in Kentucky. The gentleman had vast possessions, about one-third of which consisted of slaves. The lady's entire wealth was in six negroes, some of them under the age of ten. They were hired out at the highest market prices, and by the proceeds she was supported. She had been raised in a strongly conservative community.... Yet she, despite the force of education and the influence of domestic training, had broken away from old trammels and leash-strings.... On the occasion of this conversation, I heard her say that she could not remain happy whilst she detained in bondage those creatures who could claim, under the Constitution, alike with her, their freedom; and so soon as she attained her majority, she intended to liberate them."

Griffith, *Autobiography of a Female Slave*, p. 129.

27.Vernon Loggins, *The Negro Author: His Development in America to 1900* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1964), p. 228.

28.Charles H. Nichols, *Many Thousand Gone: The Ex-Slaves' Account of their Bondage and their Freedom* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), p. xv.

29.Estelle C. Jelinek, *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography: From Antiquity to the Present* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), p. 80.

30.*Ibid.*, p. 80.

31.Barbara Jean Ballard, "Nineteenth-Century Theories of Race, the Concept of Correspondences, and Images of Blacks in the Antislavery Writings of Douglass, Stowe, and (Griffith)Browne", Ph.D. dissertation (Yale University, 1992), p. 147.

In her discussion of the plot of *Autobiography*, for example, Ballard stated that Ann was sentenced to receive fifty lashes. In fact, Ann was sentenced to receive two hundred lashes. See Griffith, *Autobiography of a Female Slave*, p. 300.

32.Ballard, "Nineteenth-Century Theories of Race", p. 196.

33.*Ibid.*, p. 204.

34.*Ibid.*, p. 165.

35.*Ibid.*, pp. 186-187.

36."Freed from calumny, the names of Parker, Seward and Sumner, will be ranked, as they deserve to be, with Washington, Franklin and Henry. All glory to the American abolitionists."
Griffith, *Autobiography*, p. 31.

37."The day of God's wrath is at hand! They who have coldly forbidden our indulging the sweet humanities of life, who have destroyed every social relation, seared kith and kin, ruptured the ties of blood, and left us more lonely than the beasts of the forest, may tremble when the avenger comes!"
Ibid., p. 74.

CHAPTER SIX:

THE FAMILY LIFE OF ANN

Mattie Griffith's *Autobiography of a Female Slave* chronicles the life of a female slave named Ann, born and raised in Kentucky. In this chapter, the issues of Ann's family life in the broader perspective, and her quest for self-reliance through a predominantly female kinship support network will be explored. Unlike as was found with Linda Brent, the majority of family members that Ann described were not related by blood. The major influence in Ann's early childhood, however, was her biological mother. As she did not know who her father was, Ann came to depend on her mother, Aunt Keziah, as the only family she had as a child. While living with her mother on the Nelson plantation, however, Ann also became quite close to her master's family. Ann was light-skinned and could pass for white; a fact that endeared her to the hearts of her white masters. At a young age, however, Mr. Nelson died and his estate was divided. At a slave auction, Ann was sold to a Mr. Peterkin, thus being separated from her mother for, what she presumed would be, the rest of her life.

During her years on the Peterkin plantation, Ann befriended a few of her fellow slaves. In particular, Ann came to accept one female slave, Aunt Polly, as a substitute mother figure. Unlike at the Nelson plantation, Ann was not popular with her white masters. The only white person that Ann befriended at Mr. Peterkin's was the school-mistress, Miss Bradly. Miss Bradly's

significance, however, was largely symbolic; Miss Bradly was important to Ann's life because she introduced Ann to the existence of the Abolition Society. This information gave Ann her first glimpse into the abolition movement. Not long after she had developed a surrogate mother in Aunt Polly on the Peterkin plantation, Ann had to leave to accompany her newly married mistress, Jane Peterkin Summerville, to Louisville, Kentucky. While living in a hotel in Louisville, Ann befriended two people: Louise and Henry. Louise was a former slave who had been freed upon the death of her master and was working at the hotel in which Ann was residing. Louise's role in Ann's life was like that of a big sister. When Ann needed help, Louise was there to come to the rescue. Henry, a slave whose master hired him out to the same hotel, was a friend and more to Ann. During her stay in Louisville, Ann came to love Henry and hoped that they could one day be married.

While in Louisville, disaster struck Ann's life again. Jane Peterkin Summerville's husband decided to sell Ann to a slave trader. Louise and Henry searched the city for someone who would buy Ann before she was to be sold "down South". At the last minute, they found Miss Nancy. Miss Nancy was the last member of Ann's surrogate family. Miss Nancy was a kind and benevolent mistress who was willing to relocate in the North so that Ann and Henry could marry and live as free-people. Not long after Ann was sold to Miss Nancy, however, she was separated from her newly established family forever. Henry committed suicide after

learning that his master would not let him buy his freedom, and Miss Nancy died. Miss Nancy's will left Ann free and provided her with enough money to move to the North and set up a school for black children. Though Ann described her pupils fondly, the real and, most important, support base were the surrogate members of her family that now were only memories. Her mother, she later discovered, was dead, Aunt Polly was dead, Louise was living somewhere in the North, Henry was dead and, finally, Miss Nancy was dead. All in all, the members of Ann's family were largely transient, but nonetheless provided a stable support base for Ann during the moments of crisis in her life. In examining Ann's story, however, the emphasis will be placed on how Ann overcame all the obstacles to attempt, time after time, to establish both a sense of self-reliance while enslaved, as well as some kind of family life or kinship network, for however long it could last.

One can never forget that the master was a very important figure in the life of a slave. From birth, the slave's circumstances depended almost entirely upon the master. It should be no surprise then, but still interesting to note, that Mattie Griffith began *Autobiography of a Female Slave* with a discussion of Ann's vague memories of her first master. The first words of *Autobiography* concern Ann's master, not her family.¹ To imply, however, that the master definitely was not family would be wrong. Ann, as a slave, would spend just as much time with her master and his family than she would her own. In fact, Ann loved her master and his family as much as she did her own, and it

appeared that her attraction was returned. Mr. Nelson's widowed sister taught Ann how to read and treated her as she would a favoured neighbourhood child, not as she would her slave. As a favourite in her master's house, Ann had much to gain from this love; she was spared "nearly all the work" and allowed to spend most of her time with her mother, Keziah.

Though her master's family was important to her development and treatment as a child, Ann placed an even greater emphasis on her slave family. Ann had little to say concerning the identity of her father. In fact, Ann did not know who he was.² Convinced her father had deserted her and her mother, Ann did not mention any possibilities for fatherhood, such as her first master. Ann's love for her mother, however, was well developed in the novel. Ann's mother, like her daughter, sought to possess white qualities. Aunt Keziah, the cook, though not as light-skinned as her daughter, decided not to speak in the same dialect as the other slaves. To lay claim to her white heritage, Keziah attempted to adopt as many "white" qualities as she could.³

It seemed that all the people who surrounded Ann's childhood at the home of her first master, were paradoxes. Like her black mother who acted white, Ann described Miss Betsey, Mr. Nelson's widowed sister, as an enigma. The woman who selflessly taught Ann far beyond the level of the vast majority of slaves was, at the same time, a violent advocate of slavery. Ann's love for the woman and hatred for her belief in the institution of slavery led Ann to reminisce in ambiguous terms about her former mistress.⁴

Nevertheless, because of her mainly positive recollections of her contacts with whites, Ann passed through her childhood unaware of the full implications of her condition as a slave. Since she always had been treated as if she were a white child with no responsibilities, Ann was quite shocked when she first learned that she was just as much a slave as the darkest person on the plantation. As in the case of Linda Brent, it took a cataclysmic event like the death of the master both to make them aware of their condition as slaves and to change the idyllic situations of their childhoods in slavery.⁵ It was not, however, until two and a half years after the death of her master that his estate was divided. Like her life experiences to that point, the events that followed the death of her master were, as Ann stated, "confused".

In the division of the estate, all of Mr. Nelson's slaves were to be sold at an auction. Not realizing that she was to be sold to a new owner, the situation initially did not phase Ann. She still had no idea what was going on, even after a stranger tested and purchased her.⁶ Ann only began to suspect something was not right when her mother next approached her. Handing Ann a wallet, her mother then proceeded to break down, exclaiming, "No, no, I can't do it. I can't do it."⁷ Here was among the first instances of the importance of a female-based support network in Ann's life. Keziah, unable to explain the situation to her daughter, turned to another black woman, called Aunt Kitty, and implored her to tell Ann what was happening, for she claimed to

tell her daughter would drive her mad.⁸ When Aunt Kitty finally told Ann that she was "gwine to leave [her] mother", it was an unimaginable, complete shock.⁹ Having been brought up believing herself to be the next best thing to being white, one could imagine her incomprehension. This event provided a most powerful lesson. Ann thus had to face the fact that she and her mother were not only merely the property of white people they had truly loved, but also that these whites were to give their slaves less consideration than their cattle. From this event, Ann first learned how to express her growing resentment toward the institution of slavery and how it affected the white people involved.

The next white person with whom Ann came into contact was the man who purchased her. This man, Mr. Peterkin, was the opposite in behaviour and manner than the whites Ann had previously known. It was only within minutes of learning she was to be permanently separated from her mother that Ann received her first beating from Mr. Peterkin.¹⁰ This was the final blow for Keziah. Left with no other alternative to save her child, Keziah was forced to beg the former master who had just separated mother and child for any assistance that was in his power.¹¹ Following this action, Ann's grandfather came over to provide his daughter with support. This was the only reference Ann made to her grandfather. Like his grand-daughter, Ann's grandfather could not even consider that mother and child were to be parted: "Young massa only playin' trick now; come Kais' don't be makin' fool of

yourself, young massa not gwine to separate you and the chile."¹² Keziah believed what her father said to her, and even apologized to young master Eddy for distrusting him. Surrounded by family members who were expecting young Edward to break into a smile, it was Ann, "the child", who first realized that the situation was no joke: "*I knew my doom.*"¹³

All Master Edward's attempts to repurchase Ann failed. Mr. Peterkin made it quite clear that he already had violent plans for his new slave.¹⁴ With thoughts only of fear for what was to happen to her mother in her mind, Ann attempted to resign herself quietly to her new fate:

Young as I was, my first dread was for my mother; I forgot my own perilous situation, and mourned alone for her. I would have given worlds could insensibility have been granted her.¹⁵

Unfortunately, Mr. Peterkin, once again, showed Ann that a life filled with violence was to be her destiny. Instead of mourning her fate, Ann turned to her mother and worried about the effect her situation was having on her family.¹⁶

Breaking from her new master, Ann ran back to her old master to make one final appeal for her reunion with her mother. When Peterkin advanced to punish again his new slave, Ann's mother performed a last act of sacrifice for her only child:

Mother saw him rapidly approaching to recapture me, and, with the noble, maternal instinct of self-sacrifice, sprang forward only to receive the heavy blow of his uplifted whip. She reeled, tottered and sank stunned upon the ground.¹⁷

Even after witnessing the beatings of Ann and Keziah, Master

Edward still approached Ann with recommendations of acquiescence to "this gentleman". Promising her that she would have a "kind, nice home" and that her new master would allow Ann to visit her mother, Edward bade farewell to Ann, advising her to be a "good [and] obedient girl".¹⁸ This event, as a whole, would prove to have a significant impact on Ann's future attempts to establish family ties. Here was an example of men breaking the sacred bonds of family. In the future, though she never stated so explicitly, this situation can help explain why Ann sought out women when attempting to reconstruct a kinship support base.

The young child, who formerly had been spoiled was forced to grow up within minutes. Now an orphan with no ties to the only life she had ever known, Ann hardened herself against whatever the future would bring.¹⁹ With no other alternative available, Ann was forced to establish her own self-reliance. In the future, this largely would manifest itself through her attempts to establish a female kinship support network.

Ann's new life was at first based on her fear and hatred of her new master, Mr. Peterkin. Her first night, she was sent to stay in the quarters of a fellow slave named Polly. Polly was no more pleased than Ann at this arrangement. With five children of her own to take care of, Polly did not want the responsibility of another. For her part, Ann, accustomed to more luxurious accommodations, dismayed at having to live in "this wretched pen" with "these dirty-looking children [as] my associates".²⁰ All comparisons of the new with Ann's old home only escalated her

sense of alienation. There seemed to be no commonalities between the two. Even their dialect of speech was uncomprehensible to Ann.²¹

The next morning, Ann was introduced to her new master's family. Peterkin's daughters, Jane and Matilda, immediately professed to taking a liking to Ann, but they also expressed concern over her skin colour. Where being light-skinned formerly had been an asset, at the home of her new master, Ann's whiteness was taken to be a sign of impending impudence. The education Ann had formerly received created further tensions with her new mistresses. The eldest daughter, Jane, felt that "a literary negro was disgusting, not to be tolerated."²² That same daughter was also known to brag about the number of slaves that she had whipped. All in all, the situation did not look good for Ann.

Ann wrote nothing more about her initial reactions to her new home and, in the next chapter, continued her story three years in the future. Ann first described her acquaintance with a woman named Miss Bradly, a northern woman earning a living in the slave South; Miss Bradly tutored Peterkin's daughters. She was kind to Ann and professed to believe in the abolitionist cause. On the other hand, Miss Bradly earned her living in the slave South, and did not want to alienate her employers with abolitionist talk. Though Ann condemned the hypocrisy of Miss Bradly's anti-slavery views with her non-interventionist actions, she could not help but be intrigued by the woman.²³

One day, Miss Bradly approached Ann, telling her that she

was truly her friend. After three years of abuse, with only memories of her past life to sustain her, Miss Bradly forced open a dam of emotions in Ann. Had she finally found a potential support base upon which she could rely? Ann decided to tell Miss Bradly the story of her life so far. Miss Bradly expressed both her sorrow and her indignation at the news. Then, Miss Bradly introduced Ann to the existence of the "Abolition Society". Though overcome by this news and grateful for a friend, Ann still felt that she could not fully trust Miss Bradly.²⁴ Ann was well aware of her condition as a slave and, with this in mind, began to seek out other female slaves to form the base of her new family life.

Almost ironically, the one whom Ann had come to trust completely was Aunt Polly, the same woman whom she had scorned upon her arrival at Peterkin's three years earlier. Ann came to relate to Polly as a second, or substitute mother. In the kitchen, Polly, the cook, would open up somewhat to Ann tell her the story of her life. What most affected Ann was Polly's accounts of her children, sold away from their mother.²⁵ Even three years later, the loss Ann felt for her mother had not abated. Out of pity and love for both herself and Polly, Ann one day exclaimed, "I will be kind to you; I will be you daughter."²⁶ To Ann's surprise, Polly responded to her in much the same manner as Ann had responded to Miss Bradly's kindness:

"No, No, you ain't my darter. You comes to me with soft words, but you is just like Lindy and all the rest of 'em; you'll go to the house and tell tales to the white folks on me. No, I'll not trust any of you."²⁷

Ann did not allow these words to settle the issue; she responded to Polly's cynicism with interest in and encouragement of Polly's talents and bravery. Determined to be a daughter, Ann set out to convince Polly that she wanted to be a mother again.

Given the atmosphere of slave relations at the Peterkin residence, it is a wonder that Ann could learn to love again, yet no wonder that Polly was wary of returning that love. The Peterkins dealt harshly with their slaves. Nary a day passed when a slave was not whipped. Instead of bringing the slaves closer together, this treatment encouraged a selfishness in most slaves that even went so far as betrayal. In fact, one could even say that it fostered female self-reliance on an individual basis. For example, one of the female slaves, Lindy, fell victim to this phenomenon. While clearing the dishes with Ann one evening, Lindy dropped a saucer. Not wanting to be punished, Lindy quickly blamed the error on Ann. Ann pleaded with Lindy to tell the truth, but Lindy merely laughed at her and said, "Well, you is crazy, you know dat I never touched de sacer."²⁸ Betrayed by a fellow slave, Ann alone was punished. To add to the tragedy of the situation, Lindy enthusiastically helped Mr. Peterkin in his punishment by stripping Ann as she was chained to the whipping post.

This event, however, was not as tragic as it could have been. In particular, it established that Ann was to overcome Lindy's approach and create not an individual support base, but one based on female kinship networks. Beaten unconscious and

unable to care for herself, it was Aunt Polly who came to her rescue. All distrust, on Polly's part, was gone after she saw how badly Ann had been beaten, and was replaced with an uncharacteristic concern and kindness.²⁹ Ann was surprised and deeply touched by this show of affection. Once again, she reached out to Aunt Polly for support, wishing, at the same time, that someone was there to extend the same feelings to her mother.³⁰ This time, Aunt Polly did not refuse her. Polly then told Ann what had happened during the four days following the beating. Ann was presumed to have been beaten to death, so Polly took her body to be cleaned up. Discovering that she was still alive, Polly nursed her back to life as if Ann were her own child. This knowledge sealed the growing bond between these two women who were learning how to love again as a mother and as a daughter.

This love, like the first Ann had experienced with her mother, was not meant to last. Though she was able to establish a female kinship support network, Ann's life was subject to a "higher" authority, namely that of her master. Ann was the property of Peterkin's eldest daughter Jane. Jane talked of getting married to a certain gentleman, Mr. Summerville, and of moving with him to town. Ann dreaded this moment and feared losing what familial-like ties she had made:

This though set me to speculating. Here, then, was the prospect of another change in my home. The change might be auspicious; but it would take me away from Aunt Polly, and remove me from Miss Bradley's influence; and this I dreaded, for she had planted hopes in my breast, which must blossom, though at a distant season, and I wished to be often in her company, so that I might gain many important items from her.³¹

That moment, however, was not so soon in coming. Much occurred during the time of Jane's engagement, and all was not for the best. While Ann was waiting for her mistress to get married, her former nemesis, Lindy, ran away. All of the slaves were afraid of the repercussions of her actions, including Ann. Mr. Peterkin was enraged and demanded to know who was aware of Lindy's plan of escape. One slave, Jake, pointed to Ann and said that she had been aware of the plan prior to its execution. Ann was dismayed at yet another betrayal and, once again, it looked as though she could do nothing to help herself. This time, however, Ann was not alone and her support network proved to be of invaluable assistance. In a protective and maternal manner, Polly hurried to Ann's defense:

I asseverated, in the most solemn way, that I knew nothing of Lindy's flight.
"You are a liar," he cried out, and enforced his words with another blow.
"She is not," cried Aunt Polly, whose forbearance had now given out. This unexpected boldness in one of the most humble and timid of his slaves, enraged him still farther, and he dealt her such a blow that my heart aches even now, as I think of it.³²

After over three years living with the Peterkins, Ann finally had found a new family and established a female support base. Ann was moved that Polly would risk a beating to rush to her defense. To Ann's horror, however, the blow Polly received from Peterkin knocked her senseless. Ann urged her master to send for the doctor, but Peterkin would not waste his money on a slave. Ann then decided to send for the doctor herself. The doctor agreed to help Polly only if he received payment for his

services. The only thing Ann had of any value was a half-dollar coin that Master Edward had given her when she was sold away from her mother. The thought of giving up this coin was almost unimaginable to Ann. The coin was all she had left to remind her of her happy childhood when she still had a family.³³ Finally, Ann gave the doctor the coin. Remembering all that Polly had done for her and that Polly had become like a second mother, Ann decided that it was the least she could do. In effect, by giving up the coin to help Polly, Ann was relinquishing her hold on the past and making room for the possibility of creating a new family for herself. Ann's act of selflessness in order to help Polly demonstrated that her love for Polly was equal to that of her "real" family. At long last, Ann had reclaimed a mother by love, if not by blood.

Even after her sacrifice, Polly did not get better. Hours after the doctor had left, Ann discovered that Polly was dead. This realization was just as traumatic as losing her mother. Included with a sense of loss was a feeling of overwhelming guilt. Ann mourned the passing of her new mother blaming herself, not Mr. Peterkin, for Polly's death. It was a source of deep pain to Ann that Polly had died defending her. On the other hand, Ann also realized the significance of this action. Polly had received many a whipping trying to save her real children. By defending Ann, Polly proved that her feelings for Ann were no different than the ones she had for her real children and also proved that her trust could be returned.

After Polly's passing, Ann entered a period of deep depression. She had no one to turn to and no one to love: "One by one, my friends had been falling around me, and now I stood alone. There was no kind voice to cheer me on."³⁴ It was during this time that Jane Peterkin finally married Mr. Summerville. Ann's reaction to the news of the marriage was much different than to the engagement. When Jane had become engaged, Ann had at least one friend whom she considered to be family. At the time of Jane's marriage, however, there was nothing and no one tying Ann to Mr. Peterkin's plantation. When Ann learned that she was to accompany her newly married mistress to live in Louisville, Kentucky, she responded to this news with a sense of adventure. With no one at the Peterkin household with whom to establish further kinship ties, who knew what should would find in Louisville?

Upon her arrival in Louisville, Ann's dreams came true. Staying with her new masters in a hotel, Ann's duties were very light. For the first time since she was sold to the Peterkins, Ann was able to enjoy herself and the people around her. Ann's first friends in Louisville were both hotel employees. Louise was a mulatto woman who had once been a slave. After her master's death, Louise was freed and left to make her own way. Moving to Louisville, Louise got a job working for the hotel and enjoyed her status as a servant, not a slave. Ann's other new friend was Henry. Henry was a slave whose master hired him out to the hotel. Henry's wages went directly to his master, but through evening

and weekend jobs, Henry hoped to earn extra money to buy his freedom. Over time, Louise became like the sister Ann had never had and proved to be an invaluable source of support. Henry, however, was not like a brother to Ann; a few months after their meeting, Ann and Henry became engaged to be married.

At this point, when Ann was at her happiness, tragedy decided to strike. For some unknown offense, Jane decided to beat Ann. Her husband, Mr. Summerville informed her that masters did not beat their slaves in the city. Determined to see Ann whipped, Jane hired a Mr. Monkton to carry out the punishment. When Mr. Monkton arrived to beat Ann, he first tried to seduce, and then rape, her. Over the years, Ann had vigorously defended her purity, and was determined not to let Mr. Monkton ruin her honour. Here, as in Linda Brent's decision to avoid concubinage with her master, Ann had to face the situation alone. Strengthened by her contact with strong women like her mother and Polly, Ann fought back against Mr. Monkton's advances and left him unconscious on the floor. Ann then was arrested and thrown in jail to await sentencing at trial. As a slave was not permitted to defend him/herself against a white person, the outcome of the trial was predictable. Ann was sentenced to two hundred lashes and returned to her master after the punishment was carried out. Upon her return to the Summerville house, Jane greeted Ann by saying, "I trust you are somewhat humbled, Ann, and will in future be a better nigger."³⁵

For the next few months, Ann's life returned to the same

routine as that previous to the trial. Louise was a constant companion and made sure that Ann was not mistreated. Even more importantly, Ann's feelings for Henry deepened into true love. Though they were both slaves, Ann and Henry planned for the day that they would earn their freedom and start a life, in freedom, together.³⁶ Mr. Summerville, however, was determined to ruin Ann's happiness. Not convinced that Ann had reformed after her time in jail, Mr. Summerville decided to sell Ann to a trader. Ann was devastated. Though she had truly loved Polly and mourned their parting, Ann could not imagine living without her new-found friends, and loved ones. In Ann's own words, it was like having to part "from life itself". Having lost all expectations of living her life as she chose, Ann was amazed when Louise and Henry showed up minutes before she was to be sent South with a man willing to buy her and let her stay in Kentucky. Here was a case not of female self-reliance, but of the power of the support base that Ann had established during her time in Louisville. Louise and Henry convinced Mr. Moodwell to buy Ann to help his invalid sister, Miss Nancy. This was almost more than Ann could ever have wished for.³⁷

Ann initially was too shy to go to Miss Nancy's room. Afraid of what the future held in store for her, Ann dreaded having to face a new mistress. Upon finding the courage to go and see Miss Nancy, Ann determined that she had "one of the sweetest and most benign faces that I ever beheld".³⁸ Ann's love for Miss Nancy soon overshadowed any love she had ever felt for a white person.

Ann's love for Miss Nancy even caused problems in her relationship with Henry. One day, Henry asked Ann to approach Miss Nancy with the possibility of buying her freedom. Due to Ann's love and attachment to Miss Nancy, this request was out of the question. Miss Nancy was in ill-health, and, to Henry's disappointment, Ann had no intention of ever abandoning the woman who had saved her when all hope was lost.³⁹

Ann's love for Miss Nancy was further justified when she offered to solve Ann and Henry's problem. When Miss Nancy learned that Henry almost had saved up enough money to buy his freedom, she offered to give him the rest of the money. Miss Nancy also promised Ann and Henry that after Henry had bought his freedom and moved North, Miss Nancy would bring Ann with her and the three of them would live together. This was more than either could have wished for, and they were both very grateful to Miss Nancy.

As in the past, just when things were going well for Ann, disaster struck. One day, Ann was doing her chores with Louise when she heard of a slave that had been beaten almost to death by her master. Hurrying to the site of the crime to see if she could provide any assistance, Ann was horrified to discover that the victim was her long-lost mother.⁴⁰ Prior to her mother's death, Ann was able to see and to talk to her mother for the first time since they both were sold. In this conversation, Ann's mother expressed her concern that Ann was leading a happy life. In this context, Keziah wanted to be assured that Ann had a stable

kinship base upon which she could rely. At that point, except for her mother's imminent demise, Ann could only respond that things had worked out for her better than she ever had hoped. This news provided Ann's mother with consolation enough to die in peace. Ann held her mother's hand as she died, and did not know what to do with herself when she was forced to realize that her mother was gone forever.⁴¹

It took Ann quite a long time to recover from the shock. She could not accept that, after finally being reunited with her mother after over a decade of separation, her pain was rewarded with the further trauma of having to witness her mother's death minutes after their reunion. After finally dealing with her mother's death and her subsequent breakdown, Ann came to focus on the positive aspects of her life. Though her mother was gone forever, Ann was grateful that she still had Louise, Henry and Miss Nancy in her life. Unfortunately, more bad times were yet to come. In the telling of the tragedy that was to follow, Ann bore her soul. Her mother's death deeply grieved her, but Henry's death left her bitter and disillusioned forever. Just prior to Henry's death, Ann and her fiance were never happier. Henry left Ann one night, prepared to buy his freedom the next day and move North with Ann and Miss Nancy. What neither of them had anticipated, however, was the return of Ann's nemesis, Lindy. At this time, Lindy also was living in Louisville and had become acquainted with Henry. Not wanting Ann to be happy, Lindy went to Henry's master and told him that Henry was planning on running

away instead of buying his freedom. Henry's master was so enraged that he decided to sell Henry to a trader, to avoid any financial loss. When Henry arrived at his master's house the next day to pay for his freedom in full, he was horrified to discover what his master had done. After years of saving to buy his freedom, Henry realized that his dream would never be fulfilled. In utter despair, Henry decided to kill himself. Louise was there to witness Henry's suicide and was charged with the responsibility of breaking the news to Ann. In her role as Ann's only support system, Louise did all she could in the situation.

Though kinship was essential in her development, Ann felt that it still could not entirely take the place of a "real" family through which she could become the support base for her own children. As such, Henry's death symbolized the end of that dream. When Ann learned of Henry's suicide, her world came to a crashing halt: "I did not scream. I did not speak. I shed no tears. I did not even close my eyes."⁴² There was no consoling Ann. All that Henry left her were his dying words, related to Louise: "Tell Ann not to grieve for me; but she mustn't forget me... I have loved her well!"⁴³ After Henry's death, Ann no longer thought of freedom and decided to spend the rest of her life thinking only of Miss Nancy. Unfortunately, that plan also was thwarted. Just months after Henry's suicide, Miss Nancy took ill and died. Even the realization that Miss Nancy had left Ann her freedom, as well as four thousand dollars, was of no consolation to her. Ann took the money and moved North. While in

the North, Ann became a teacher and dedicated the rest of her life to her pupils. Ann never married and never formed familial ties or another female support network with any of her friends following Henry's death. All of Ann's hopes and dreams died with Henry and she lived the rest of her life as she imagined she would have if Henry was still alive. So strong was her love for and devotion to Henry that all her actions following Miss Nancy's death were in accord with Henry's past wishes.⁴⁴

The story of Ann's life in *Autobiography of a Female Slave* was a tragedy. Never knowing who her father was, and being separated from her mother through sale, it would have appeared that Ann's family life and support system were removed at an early age. Though Ann was dealt blow after blow, she still rebounded, hoping that love would help to guide her in her quests for family and self-reliance. Instead of giving up after she lost her blood family, Ann persisted over the years to develop a new family and support system that was as strong as blood. At every turn, death was there to meet her. By the end of her life, despite all the catastrophes, it was amazing that Ann still had any love to give. In devoting her life to her pupils, Ann was able to find another family and, at least, try to support them as she had once been supported. Though Ann did not describe her students in as devoted a manner as she did her blood family and her female kinship network in slavery, the fact that she chose this life in rural Massachusetts attested, at the very least, to Ann's desire to try again. At the end of her story, Ann looked

back on her past and mourned her losses; but more than that, Ann recognized that she had loved, and had been blessed enough to have that love returned, for however long it lasted. Though her time for great love and established kinship ties might have been over, Ann realized the importance of the events in her life. In writing her life story, Ann was trying to show other slaves that love and support were possible for the female slave and worth all the risks. Just as importantly, however, Ann wanted her white readers to accept that slaves were capable of love and of recognizing the bonds of this emotion as strongly as whites. The message for all was that a family support system was essential and that if a "real" family could not be maintained, it still could be made: "And so, my history, go forth and do thy mission!... My work is done."⁴⁵

NOTES TO CHAPTER SIX

1. "I was born in one of the southern counties of Kentucky. My earliest recollections are of a large, old fashioned farm-house, built of hewn rock, in which my old master, Mr. Nelson, and his family, consisting of a widowed sister, two daughters and two sons, resided."

Mattie Griffith, *Autobiography of a Female Slave* (New York: Redfield, 1856, rept., Miami: Mnemosyne Publishing Co., 1969), p. 9.

2. "My father, I suppose, was a white man, though I known nothing of him; for, with the most unpaternal feeling, he deserted me." *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

3. "My mother, Keziah the cook, commonly called Aunt Kaisy, was possessed of an indomitable ambition, and had, by the hardest means, endeavoured to acquire the rudiments of an education; but all that she had succeeded in obtaining was a knowledge of the alphabet, and orthography in two syllables. Being very imitative, she eschewed the ordinary negroes' pronunciation, and adopted the mode of speech used by the higher classes of whites." *Ibid.*, p. 10.

4. "I have since been puzzled how to reconcile this with her otherwise Christian character; and though she professed to love me dearly, and had bestowed so much attention upon the cultivation of my mind, and expressed it as her opinion that I was too pretty and white to be a slave, yet, if any one had spoken of giving me my freedom, she would have condemned it as domestic heresy." *Ibid.*, p. 12.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

6. "A tall, hard-looking man came up to me, very roughly seized my arm, bade me open my mouth; examined my teeth; felt of my limbs; made me run a few yards; ordered me to jump; and, being well satisfied with my activity, said to Master Edward, 'I will take her.'" *Ibid.*, p. 13.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

8. What was to follow had a deep impact on Ann's future memories of her mother: "Then rocking her body back and forward in a transport of agony, she gave full vent to her feelings in a long, loud, piteous wail. Oh, God! that cry of grief, that knell of a breaking heart, rang in my ears for many long and painful days." *Ibid.*, p. 13.

9. "With perhaps an idle, listless air, I received this astounding news; but a whirlwind was gathering in my breast. What could she mean by new friends and a new home? Surely I was to take my mother with me! No mortal power would dare sever US. Why, I remember that when master sold the gray mare, the colt went also."

Ibid., p. 14.

10. "I was too much startled to fully understand the words, and stood vacantly gazing at him. This strange manner he construed into disrespect; and raising his riding-whip, he brought it down with considerable force upon my back. It was the first lash I had ever given to me in anger. I smarted beneath the stripe, and a cry of pain broke from my lips."

Ibid., p. 14.

11. "Mother sprang to me, and clasping my quivering form in her arms, cried out to my young master; "Oh, Master Eddy, have mercy on me, on my child. I have served you faithfully. I nursed you. I grew up with your poor mother, who now sleeps in the cold ground. I beg you now to save MY CHILD"; and she sank down at his feet, whilst her tears fell fast."

Ibid., p. 14.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

14. "It will do me good to thrash the evil out of her."

Ibid., p. 15.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

16. "Roughly catching me by the arm, he hurried me off, despite the entreaty of Master Ed, the cries of mother, and the feeble supplication of my grandfather. I dared to cast one look behind, and beheld my mother wallowing in the dust, whilst her frantic cries of 'save my child, save my child,' rang with fearful agony in my ears. Master Ed covered his face with his hands, and old grandfather reverently raised his to Heaven, as if beseeching mercy. The sight of this anguish-stricken group filled me with a new sense of horror, and forgetful of the presence of Peterkin, I burst into tears; but I was quickly recalled by a fierce and stinging blow from his stout riding-whip."

Ibid., pp. 15-16.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

19."I had nerved myself, and now that the parting from mother was over, I felt that the bitterness of death was past, and I could meet anything. Nothing now could be a trial."

Ibid., p. 17.

20.*Ibid.*, p. 20.

21."All this was perfect jargon to me; for at home... though our fare was simple, coarse and frugal, had we been kindly treated and our manners trained into something like the softness of humanity... I stood all agape, looking on with amazement."

Ibid., pp. 24-25.

22.*Ibid.*, p. 29.

23.Ann's curiosity was furthered as she came to believe that her interest was returned: "I had often observed her attentively watching me, yet I could not interpret the look; sometimes I thought it was of deep, earnest pity. Then it appeared only an anxious curiosity; and as commiseration was a thing which I seldom met with, I tried to guard my heart against anything like hope or trust."

Ibid., p. 32.

24.*Ibid.*, p. 35.

25." 'This ar' scar,' and she pointed to a very deep one on her left shoulder, 'masser gib me kase I cried when he sold my oldest son; poor Jim, he was sent down the river, and I've never hearn from him since.' She wiped a stray tear from her old eyes.... This brought fresh to my mind recollections of my own mother's grief, when she was forced to give me up, and I could not restrain my tears."

Ibid., p. 39.

26.*Ibid.*, p. 40.

27.*Ibid.*, p. 40.

28.*Ibid.*, p. 46.

29." 'Well, bress your heart, I'll talk wid you smack, till de rise ob day,' she said in such a kind, good-nature tone, that I was surprised, for I had regarded her only as an ill-natured, miserable beldame.... She bent her head upon her poor old worn hands, and by the pale, blue flicker of the lamp, I could discern the rapidly-falling tears."

Ibid., p. 50.

30.*Ibid.*, p. 52.

31.*Ibid.*, p. 59.

32.*Ibid.*, p. 102.

33."I did not value it for the simple worth of the coin, for I had sense enough to know that its actual value was but slight; yet what a wealth of memories it called up! It brought back the times when I had a mother."

Ibid., p. 143.

34.*Ibid.*, p. 233.

35.*Ibid.*, p. 304.

36."Henry was to buy himself, then go North, and labor in some hotel, or at whatever business he could make the most money; then he would return to buy me. This was one of our plans."

Ibid., p. 312.

37."When I saw the writings drawn up, and became aware that I had passed out of the trader's possession, and could remain near Henry, I lifted my eyes to Heaven, breathing out an ardent act of adoration and gratitude."

Ibid., p. 338.

38.*Ibid.*, p. 355.

39."'Oh, Henry, I cannot leave her, even if I were able to pay down every cent that she demands for me.' ...'I will stay with her as long as she lives, and do all I can to prove my gratitude'."

Ibid., p. 364.

40."Oh, God have mercy on me! In those worn, bruised, anguish-marked features, in the glance of that failing, filmy eye, I recognized my long-lost mother! With one loud shriek I fell down beside her! After years of bitter separation, thus to meet! Oh that the recollection had faded from my mind, but no, that awful sight is ever before my eyes! I see her, even now, as there she lay bleeding to death! Oh that I had been spared the knowledge of it!"

Ibid., p. 371.

41."When I became conscious that the last spark of life was extinct in that beloved body, I gave myself up to the most delicious grief. As I looked upon that horrid, ghastly, mangled form, and thought it was my mother, who had been butchered by the whites, my very blood was turned to gall, and in this chaos of mind I lost the faculty of reason."

Ibid., p. 372.

42.*Ibid.*, p. 387.

43.*Ibid.*, p. 389.

44.[Mr. Trueman] "strongly urged me to take up my residence in Boston; but I remembered that Henry's preference had always been for a New England village; and I loved to think that I was following out his views, and so I removed to a quiet puritanical little town in Massachusetts."
Ibid., p. 399.

45.*Ibid.*, p. 401.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

COMPARISONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This final chapter will synthesize the findings of the previous chapters. First, parallels will be drawn between Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Mattie Griffith's *Autobiography of a Female Slave*; mainly in reference to those issues that are not directly related to the main theme of the thesis. Still, these issues can be examined within the context of the theme of self-reliance through female kin support networks. After establishing what both works had in common, they will then be re-examined to explore their differences. The second half of the chapter will return to the issues and questions raised in the first chapter on the historiography of the slave family and then will discuss the broader manifestations of the thesis as a whole. For example, the previous chapters examined *Incidents* and *Autobiography* to discover what they had to say about two female slaves' lives in the context of their family lives; this chapter will attempt to discover how these individual experiences can provide a base for establishing the representativeness of the theory of self-reliance through female kinship networks. Thus, the scope of both *Incidents* and *Autobiography* was much broader than the theory raised in the first chapter might suggest.

On the surface, the similarities between Linda Brent's life as described in *Incidents* and Ann's life as described in

Autobiography were quite extensive. Both Brent and Ann described their childhoods as happy, as well as a time when they were sheltered from the realities of life as a slave, as has been explored in the previous chapters. As children, both Brent and Ann experienced the death of their first masters. Following these deaths, both protagonists were sold to new masters who were cruel in comparison to their predecessors. These similarities, however, occurred only in the descriptions of Brent's and Ann's early lives, and they were not that significant in the analysis of Brent and Ann's family lives as a whole.

Still, there are some significant points that can be made about what similarities there are. For example, another similarity was their slave occupations. Both were protected house-slaves who never had to work on the plantation fields. This issue has broader occupations, especially when one takes into account Brent and Ann's descriptions of themselves as being very light-skinned. *Autobiography*, in particular, explored the significance of skin colour in regards to the treatment of slaves. Ann herself recognized that the reason for her preferential treatment as a child was the colour of her skin. Ann's mother was a mulatto and her father, she assumed, was white. Ann described herself as near-white and established this as a trait for all slaves to desire. This identification of light-skin colour with rewards was reinforced in many ways, among which was learning to read. A kind mistress taught Ann how to read Ann, an experienced shared with Brent. Presumably, these

women took such a special interest in them because they were lighter than the other slaves.

Most interestingly, because of her skin colour, Ann identified herself more with her young mistress than with other slaves.¹ Perhaps Ann reacted this way because whites considered her more "worthy" than other slaves, based on her light skin colour alone. Thus, Ann's childhood obviously influenced both how she saw herself and how she interacted with both races. From early on, Ann did not see herself as black. This, in and of itself, is extremely interesting. According to Ann's descriptions of white behaviour toward her, it would seem that the surrounding white community encouraged, if not inspired, this belief: "In my rambles through the woods, many caresses have I received from wayside travellers; and the exclamation, 'What a beautiful child!' was quite common."² If Ann did not see herself as black, then what was she? Despite her belief in her whiteness, no one would go so far as to say that Ann was white; Ann realized that she was a slave and had no problem referring to herself as such. Still, Ann mentioned her "condition" almost as if race was not an implied element of the term.³

Despite these similarities, for the most part, it must be concluded that the family lives of Brent and Ann were quite different. For example, Brent's account of her family life described only those family members who were related by blood. Despite death and sales, Brent's slave family fought to remain intact. Fortunately for them, this was a possibility. Brent was

born to two parents who were married, as much as slaves were permitted to be married. Upon the death of her parents, the care of Brent and her brother William reverted to Brent's maternal grandmother. In fact, Brent's grandmother oversaw the care of the entire clan. It was due to the efforts of Brent's grandmother that the members of her family were cared for and protected. All in all, Brent described a family that was as stable and as intact as any slave family could expect.

At an early age, Brent became a mother to two children, Benjamin and Ellen. The addition of two new family members provide an intriguing glimpse into the life of the slave mother, one that was not provided in the events described in *Autobiography*. This issue will be addressed in more detail later in the chapter, but for purposes of comparison, Brent's role as a mother must be mentioned. When Brent became a mother, the basis for her entire existence was called into question. No longer could Brent merely depend on her grandmother to run the family. After the birth of her children, Brent came to realize that she alone was responsible for their lives. Every decision she would make from that point on would have to be done with the future of her children in mind.

When Brent's children still were very young, she decided to escape from slavery. This decision, however, was not made for Brent's exclusive benefit; she determined that escape was the only way she could keep her family together. After hiding for seven years, waiting for her children to be free, Brent finally

escaped North. Among the greatest joys in her life was knowing that she and her children were free and would never be torn apart against their will. Brent's account of her family life heralded the ability of slave families, related by blood, to stick together and look out for each other. Incidents thus explored, from a female slave's point of view, the ways in which a slave family could triumph over adversity.

Ann's account of her family life, on the other hand, was quite different from that of Brent. In the first place, Ann did not grow up in a two-parent family. Not only did Ann not know who or where her father was, unlike Brent, she also was not surrounded by blood relatives. During her childhood, the only family members that Ann mentioned were her mother and, in passing, her maternal grandfather. Because many of Ann's family members were absent in her life, her interpretation of the slave family was quite informative. With her mother being, for all intents and purposes, the only blood relative Ann had, the role of Ann's mother was quite important. Though Ann was separated through sale from her mother at an early age, Ann's thoughts often returned to her mother over the years. In her memories, Ann's mother came to represent the epitome of family to her.

While Ann fondly remembered her mother, she also realized that she could not live entirely alone; memories of her mother, though at times fulfilling and at other times painful, were not enough. Over the years then, Ann came to establish ties with other slaves that were as important to her as any "real" family

members could have been. Where Brent's account demonstrated the bonds of blood kin, Ann's account demonstrated the bonds of surrogate kin. Ann's attempts to establish a family life, against all odds, attested to her desire to establish a family that she could call her own.

On the whole, differences aside, Brent and Ann's described family experiences can add much to the ongoing debates in the historiography of the slave family. In particular, both *Incidents* and *Autobiography* can be examined for the manner in which they addressed the issues of matriarchy and matrifocality. First, what both sources revealed was that the matriarchy thesis was not a real consideration in the family lives of these female slaves. Though the female family members in their lives were important, it was not an issue of power but rather of support that enabled these slave women to overcome the obstacles that their status as slaves created. Brent's grandmother did not dominate over her family, she merely tried her hardest to keep the family together. As Brent's grandmother was the oldest member of the family, and free, she was in a good position to look out for the best interests of the entire family.

Ann's account of her life in *Autobiography* debunked the matriarchy thesis on numerous accounts. In fact, since Ann's mother, Keziah, was the only parent she had, the issue of matriarchy was pretty much irrelevant. Keziah raised Ann on her own not because she wanted to have sole control over Ann's life, but due to the fact that she had no other choice. Though her

mother was a single-parent, Ann did not portray Keziah as a domineering matriarch. After being separated from her mother, Ann established surrogate kinship ties mainly with other women. Of these women, the only one who resembled a mother figure was Aunt Polly. Aunt Polly did not exercise any authority over Ann's life but rather provided Ann with a support base that helped her to cope with her status as a slave. As such, the issue of matriarchy does not apply on any level to the events described in *Autobiography*.

One issue raised in the debate over the presence of a matriarchal system in the slave family was the emasculation of the male slave. Both *Incidents* and *Autobiography* offered interesting perspectives on this phenomenon. As both Brent's mother and father raised her, much can be learned by examining the role of her father in her family. Though Brent's father's ability to parent his children was limited, that was not due to the influence of Brent's mother, but rather due to the restrictions that slavery placed on his role. Brent's masters, the Flints, constantly undermined Brent's father's role as a father. Still, Brent described her father as a strong male figure in her life who fought to raise his children as he desired. In one specific incident, Brent described how the Flints even sensed that Mr. Brent "had more of the feelings of a freeman than is common among slaves".⁴ More importantly, however, Mr. Brent did not allow this interference to completely undermine his authority. Though limited as to what influence he could exert

over his children, Mr. Brent had no intention of giving up what he felt was his natural right to control and, on at least one occasion, Mr. Brent directly challenged the orders of his son's mistress.⁵

Despite the Flints' attempts to limit Brent's father's role in his children's lives, he still was an effective parent to his children. Brent described her father as a strong man who refused to stay "in his place". By informing his son that he was to obey his father first, Brent's father proved that the male slave could be a very important figure in the lives of his children. Though her father died shortly after this incident, when she was around thirteen, his example and lessons to his children were not forgotten. With such occurrences in mind, Brent recalled her father with loving memories. In fact, future problems that Brent would have with her master ultimately would be solved with the sprit of Mr. Brent in mind.

The only male slave mentioned in any detail in *Autobiography* was Ann's fiance Henry. Though Henry saved to buy his freedom, it was denied to him and consequently left him broken. Unlike in Brent's account, however, Ann's story provided no direct attacks on the emasculation of the male slave. Henry's suicide was not so significant because he was a male being denied his freedom; the significance lay in the fact that he was a slave being denied his freedom.

At the conclusion of the first chapter of the thesis, it was observed that the current historiography of the slave family

seemed to be directing further scholarship to the issue of matrifocality. In both *Incidents* and *Autobiography*, matrifocality was a prevalent issue. Both Brent and Ann were female slaves who described family lives that consisted almost entirely of female members. As has been argued, this reality was not connected to the issue of patriarchy, nor was it due to the emasculation of the male slave. For whatever reason, these two female slaves lived their lives surrounded by women; as such the issue of matrifocality is of particular interest. As the term matrifocality suggests, women were central to the lives of both Brent and Ann.

The African feminist theory also plays a role within the issue of matrifocality. At this point, these works should be analyzed in terms of their applicability to this theory. Despite all the differences in the family lives of Brent and Ann, the theme of self-reliance through female kinship networks was present in both works. How then does this change the focus of scholarship on the slave family? In *Incidents*, the work of a former female slave, this theory was found to permeate the text. The same also can be said of *Autobiography*. Still, the important distinction to make here is that Griffith was not a former female slave. Though Griffith was sympathetic to the plight of the female slave, that does not mean that Ann's experiences can be evaluated on equal footing with Brent's. Still, though the intent of this comparison never was to assume that Griffith's descriptions were fact, her experiences as an eye-witness

nonetheless should afford her with some degree of authority. In the end, what is most significant is that, despite the different perspectives of both authors, the main theme of self-reliance through female kinship networks was presented in both works. Thus, this African feminist theory can be applied to the autobiography of a former female slaves to prove its viability, as well as to the fictional account of an eye-witness to this phenomenon to only further validate the applicability.

In the end, it also is important to examine the contributions of *Incidents* and *Autobiography* in the context of female slave narratives as a whole. In the first place, *Incidents*, as one of the few female slave narratives, provides an invaluable glimpse into the life of a female slave. For example, one of *Incidents*'s main contributions to the history of the slave family was Brent's description of her role as a slave mother. Brent consciously made the choice to have an affair with a white man, all the time realizing the potential outcome of her actions. After Brent gave birth to her two children, Benjamin and Ellen, she had many observations to make into the role of the slave mother.

Very few of the female slave narratives provide a first-hand account of the realities of life as a slave mother. Though some of the other female slave narratives address the issue of motherhood, they do not deal with the implications of motherhood within the broader context of the slave family. For example, in *Incidents*, Brent's descriptions of her motherhood were important,

not only for how she described her role as a mother, but also for how she reacted to being a slave mother. Brent introduced the concept of guilt in the life of every slave mother. Not only did Brent have to live her life as a slave, but she also had to deal with the fact that her actions brought two new slaves into the world. After the birth of both of her children, Brent lamented their fate and claimed that their death was preferable to living as slaves. In the end, Brent came to terms with her status as a slave mother but she still refused to accept the limits of her role. Instead of allowing her master to control the lives of her children, Brent risked her life by escaping from slavery in the hopes of providing a better life for her children.

As for the other female slave narratives, many begin by discussing how slave sales, most often of the mother, disrupted their family lives. Later, they might mention whether or not they later had children, but no further details were mentioned, such as how the absence of a complete family had an impact on their later status as mothers. This issue stands out in contrast to *Autobiography* as none of these female slave narratives explore if/how these women attempted to establish a new kinship support base during the course of their lives. While it is possible that they did not do so, it seems more likely that this just was not a direction in which the male-directed interview was lead.⁶

With is in mind, it can be concluded that *Autobiography's* exploration into the theme of extended kinship support groups provides a major contribution to the history of the slave family.

As has been argued, the bulk of the historiography on the slave family and the primary sources themselves have concentrated on issues that affected slave family members related by blood. In discussing the relevance of the matriarchy thesis, for example, historians have sought to document the prevalence of the nuclear slave family. In *Autobiography*, however, blood relations were not the focus of Ann's description of her family life. While the historiography on the slave family has addressed the problem of slave sales in the slave family, not enough attention has been placed on the numerous ways that slave sales could have an impact on the individual slave's future family life. When Ann was sold from the only family she had ever known, the remainder of her life story was uncharted territory. Historians have yet to examine the ways in which solitary slaves fought to establish surrogate kinship when they were no longer surrounded by blood relatives. *Autobiography* thus should be considered an invaluable source for the manner in which Griffith, through Ann, introduced this new issue into the history of the slave family.

In the "big picture", the importance of both *Incidents* and *Autobiography* does not rest merely in the issues examined in this thesis. There are many other contributions that each source can provide for historians. In particular, *Incidents* introduced many issues relevant to the life of the female slave that other slave narratives did not discuss; for example, *Incidents* was the only slave narrative to discuss the issue of sexuality as it applied to the female slave. *Autobiography* also had its own insights into

the plight of the female slave.

Despite all these contributions, the one most explored in this thesis was the application of these works to the tenets of the African feminist theory. Though referred to numerous times in the course of the thesis, it bears repeating that both *Incidents* and *Autobiography* fit into this theoretical model of self-reliance through female kinship networks. After analysing Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Mattie Griffith's *Autobiography of a Female Slave* from this perspective, however, it should be obvious that recapturing the voice of the female slave is no easy task. In part, the choice of comparing these two sources is illustrative of this phenomenon. One resource that historians have yet to exploit in this pursuit of reconstructing the voice of female slaves, and indeed all black women, is feminist theory. For the purposes of this thesis, the African feminist theory was applied to these texts. In the future, this theoretical approach very well may revolutionize historical scholarship in the United States, and throughout the African diaspora, on the slave family and the role of women in these families.

NOTES TO THE CONCLUSION

1. "My skin was no perceptible shade darker than that of my young mistress. My eyes were large and dark, while a profusion of nut-brown hair, straight and soft as the whitest lady's in the land, fell in showery redundancy over my neck and shoulders. I was often mistaken for a white child."

Mattie Griffith, *Autobiography of a Female Slave* (New York: Redfield, 1856, rept. Miami: Mnemosyne Publishing Co.), p. 10.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

3. "I was technically termed in the family as 'the child,' as I was not black; and, being a slave, my masters and mistresses would not admit that I was white. So I reached the age of ten, still called a child."

Ibid., p. 12.

4. Jean Fagan Yellin, ed., *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 9.

5. "My brother was a spirited boy; and being brought up under such influences, he early detested the name of master and mistress. One day, when his father and his mistress had happened to call him at the same time, he hesitated between the two; being perplexed to know which had the strongest claim upon his obedience. He finally concluded to go to his mistress. When my father reproved him for it, he said, 'You both called me, and I didn't know which I ought to go to first.'

-- 'You are my child,' replied our father, 'and when I call you, you should come immediately, if you have to pass through fire and water.'

Ibid., p. 9.

6. See, for example, the narratives of Mary Prince, Old Elizabeth, Mattie J. Jackson, Lucy A. Delany, Kate Drumgold, and Annie Burton in William L. Andrews, ed., *Six Women's Slave Narratives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

Appendix One:

Lydia Maria Child, "To Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, April 5, 1862", in Patricia G. Holland and Milton Meltzer, eds., *The Collected Correspondence of Lydia Maria Child, 1817-1880* (Milwood, N.Y.: KTO Microform, 1979), fiche 52, letter 1400.

The article began with Lydia Maria Child introducing Mattie Griffith as the author of Autobiography of a Female Slave. Child then recounted the story of Griffith's decision to emancipate her slaves. The story began by mentioning Griffith's relationship with one of her favourite slaves.

The most valuable article of her human property was an intelligent slave named Henderson. Some wealthy gentleman tried to tempt her from her purpose by offering a very high price for this man; but she shook her head, saying; "I could not enjoy spending the money." Henderson's wife belonged to another family, and her master's will had enjoined that none of his slaves should be sold 'till his youngest child, then six years old, was of age. But he husband was bright and industrious, and stimulated by the hope of buying her some day, he made the utmost of faculties for earning money, which his kind mistress had tried to afford him.

In a letter to me, Miss Griffith described the emancipation of her slaves. It was not intended for publication, but it is well calculated to serve the cause of Freedom, and as it contains no remarks that can be personally offensive to any one, I think I am not guilty of any impropriety in sending it to you without her knowledge; I therefore subjoin the following extracts:

"Immediately upon my arrival in Kentucky, I sent for the servants and informed them of my intention. I explained the laws as simply as I could, and told them it would be necessary for them to leave the State, as soon as they were free. They listened with emotion, and earnestly inquired whether there was no way of evading the law, so that they could remain on their native soil among old home influences. I warned them of the inevitable danger of staying, or of returning, under any pretext whatsoever. When they were made to understand this, they became resigned to the hard conditions, and said, with an eloquent sigh, "All places are alike to the negro."

"It was delightful to watch their countenances, as they slowly received the idea of personal freedom. It seemed as if they underwent some heavenly transfiguration. Their faces, even their bodies, appeared to glow. "What!" they exclaimed, "are we

going to be FREE! To belong to ourselves! Oh, it seems like a dream." They laughed and they wept, they sang and they danced, alternately. Indeed, I almost feared Henderson was crazy, he was so bewildered with joy. It was a blissful moment for me when I placed the deeds of manumission in their hands. I never expect to experience such a thrill of happiness again. Poor creatures! They embraced my knees, they kissed my hands, they would have covered my very feet with caresses, if I would have permitted it. They called me by every exalted name in the English language. But when these draft(?) ebullitions of feeling were over, they began to think more of me than of themselves. They returned with downcast looks, and said, "But, Miss Mattie, you can't afford to do this. You will have to work. You ain't need to work, and we don't want you to work. Take us back, Miss Mattie. We are all willing to keep on working for you." Now, wasn't this very touching! Poor, faithful, loving creatures! I can never be forgetful of my duty to their race. When I declined their generous offer, they urged me at least never to want for anything, but to send for them, and they would always divide their earnings with me, or give me the whole."

"The separation of Henderson and his wife was extremely affecting. It was to her as if the light of life had gone out, for she has little hope of obtaining her freedom, though he thinks he shall manage to buy her before long. You see he is not such an ultra Abolitionist as to refuse to buy a slave. She is a beautiful and intelligent Quadroon, with nice little hands fitted for dainty work. With all a woman's tender spirit of self-sacrifice, she rejoiced in her husband's good fortune, and tried to forget the cloud under which her own life rested. She endeavoured to conceal her emotions from him, and told him she would try to bear her bereavement as well as she possibly could. I tell you, my dear friend, that few people know how to appreciate the beauty of the African character."

"Henderson had \$500 in money, and the others had all more or less which they had laid up, besides some livestock and other articles. They wished to dispose of some of these before they left the state, so I made provision in the deeds of emancipation for their remaining until the 1st of March, when they must leave, or be liable to be sold into slavery again."

"Henderson accompanied me to Cincinnati, where he obtained a situation on a New Orleans boat. He preferred that employment, because it would give him an opportunity to see his wife occasionally, or at least to hear from her, as the boat touched at Louisville. They are most fondly attached to each other. It was amusing to see how soon he adopted Free State modes of expression. After four hours sojourn in Ohio, he began to speak of 'colored gentlemen,' and 'colored ladies.' I was glad to hear it. It argued a proper respect for his race. The others thought of getting situations in or near Cincinnati. They are all sober,

industrious, economical people; so, with a little friendly advice, I left them to their own judgement in the choice of occupations. I did not wish to act as if I were their mistress after I had given them their freedom."

The noble young Kentuckian who wrote the above letter, always disclaims any credit for her righteous proceedings. She says quietly, "Why do you praise me for generosity? It appears to me a very simple act of justice. What right had I to their earnings any more than I have to yours?" It seems very strange to her that Northern minds are generally so slow to recognise this principle. That a man should be robbed of his wages on account of a black skin, seems to her as wrong and absurd as it would be if he suffered the same injustice on account of black eyes or hair. In common with several other emancipated slaveholders, with whom I have talked, she marvels at Northern apathy concerning an institution whose baneful effects extend to everybody and everything connection with it.

You will be interested to know that, notwithstanding Henderson's eager desire to purchase his wife, he repeatedly urged Miss Griffith to take the money he had laid by; and, when she refused, he begged her to accept at least of half of it; saying, "I earned it when my time belonged to you, and you have given me what is worth more than money." The answer was, "No, no, I thank you, Henderson; but I have already taken your wages too long." Then he brought a young brother, who said, "Miss Mattie, let me work for you till I am of age; for surely that is no more than right."

It is now four years since this emancipation took place. A few months ago I heard that all these redeemed ones were behaving well and getting a comfortable living. Henderson has succeeded in buying his beloved wife, and both are doing well. The oldest woman, generally called "Mammy," sometimes pines for a sight of old friends and relatives in Kentucky, but even she thinks freedom is worth that painful sacrifice. In view of these facts, I would ask any candid person what reason there is to apprehend danger in emancipating the slaves. It is surely time for us to stop repeating stereotyped falsities invented for the convenience of slaveholders.

It is worthy of remark that Miss Griffith's moral sense received no aid from Abolitionists. She manifested sympathy with the slaves from her very childhood; and as she grew older, she uttered many an earnest protest against the system. She never read an anti-slavery tract or newspaper, and never talked with an abolitionist. She wrote to me, "I was always taught to regard the Abolitionists of the North as wolves in sheep's clothing; as violent, bad men, who decoyed slaves away from their homes with false promises; but since I have come to the Free States, I know and honor the Abolitionists." I wrote her in reply that it would

be much nearer the truth to describe them as sheep in wolves' clothing.

When Mr. Sumner was nearly assassinated in the senate, the news excited her greatly. She sent for the speech which caused the outrage, and she told me that was the first anti-slavery document she ever read. The purpose which had long been latent in her mind ripened at once. She sent for Henderson, and said, "I am going to give you your freedom." In answer to his exclamations of surprise and gratitude, she replied, "Don't thank me, Henderson. It is Mr. Charles Sumner who sets you free."

Appendix Two:

Jacobs and Griffith: Life after Publication

Another feature, not mentioned in the thesis, that united these two very different women was the fact that both of their lives passed into oblivion shortly after the publication of their books. Though the reaction to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was not as widespread as that of *Autobiography of a Female Slave*, both authors were seldom heard of in the years following their short-lived fame. In the secondary literature, there are no accounts of these details. It is as if history was only interested in what they had to say, if indeed that was the case, and not who these individual authors were.

After all the effort she went through to publish her book, Jacobs had to face the fact that *Incidents* did not even survive its first printing. The firm of Thayer and Eldridge went bankrupt before any copies of the book were sold. Jacobs bought the rights to the book but, since its publication followed so closely to the outbreak of the Civil War, little attention was paid to the book. There were only a couple of published reviews. Though the situation obviously was disappointing to Jacobs, she too became caught up in the politics of Civil War. Taking her daughter Louisa with her, Jacobs returned to the South. Jacobs' work among the contraband during the war, and her work with the freedpeople of the South following the Civil War until her death in 1897, was known only through letters Jacobs exchanged with Lydia Maria Child.

The facts of Mattie Griffith's life following the publication of *Autobiography of a Female Slave* also were known only through the letters Griffith exchanged with Child, as well as other letters in which Child referred to Griffith. Although contemporaries heralded *Autobiography* as a great novel, Griffith's writing career did not flourish after its publication. In 1859, Child referred, in a letter, to a new book that Griffith had written entitled "Madge Venter" (?). There is no record of this book ever having been published.

For the next ten years of her life, following the publication of *Autobiography*, Griffith lived in New York City with her sister Kate and Kate's two children. To make a living, Griffith and her sister opened a boarding house. In 1867, Griffith left New York forever and moved to Boston where she married Albert Browne, a former reporter for the *New York Tribune*. Following her marriage to Browne, Child lost contact with Griffith and made no further mention of the facts of

Griffith's life in her letters. The only other event in Griffith's life that was chronicled was her death in Boston on May 23, 1906.

Information compiled from:

Patricia G. Holland and Milton Meltzer, eds., *The Collected Correspondence of Lydia Maria Child, 1817-1880* (Milwood, N.Y.: KTO Microform, 1979), letters concerning the lives of Harriet Jacobs and Mattie Griffith from the years 1857 to 1869, in fiches 36-96.

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