

LITERACY AND LIBERATION: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF FOUR  
ANTEBELLUM SLAVE NARRATIVES AS SITES OF CRITICAL LITERACY

by

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*This dissertation is dedicated to Henry Louis Gates, Jr and Ernest Morrell, whose scholarship led me to examine slave narratives as sites of critical literacy.*

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Johnnie Romon Blunt

## ABSTRACT

### LITERACY AND LIBERATION: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF FOUR ANTEBELLUM SLAVE NARRATIVES

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This dissertation examines the roles of literacy and literacy education in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century autobiographies of four fugitive African American slaves: Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb, and Harriet Jacobs. Also known as antebellum slave narratives, these autobiographies regularly depicted the dehumanization many African Americans endured in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. As such, slave narratives provide critical information about the origins and development of racism in the United States. These stories illustrate how race in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century became a significant marker of one's humanity and how people of African descent were perceived as slightly less than human and thus deemed suitable for subjugation. I argue that literacy and literacy education enabled these authors (and by extension, millions of other African Americans) to establish their humanity through their engagement with the debates and conversations about the institution of slavery. Antebellum slave narratives were part of global abolitionist efforts to end slavery immediately. These narratives countered proslavery arguments about the naturalness and logic of slavery and were often the end results of fugitive slaves having given oral accounts of their lives on lecture tours. In

short, literacy and literacy instruction enabled Douglass, Brown, Bibb, and Jacobs, as critical literacy theorist Paulo Freire argued, to become more fully human. That is, literacy and literacy instruction enabled the authors to fight oppression and establish agency in a world that frequently denied them their humanity and human agency.

Using content analysis as the method of data collection and analysis, I coded textual data according to 12 categories James Olney (1985) argued were common themes in the narratives. After reducing redundant data, I concluded that the contextual phenomena that best described the data were critical literacy, material conditions, and human rights. Douglass, Brown, Bibb, and Jacobs used literacy and literacy education to engage in the national debates and conversations for the immediate and unconditional end of slavery in the United States. The main implication of this conclusion is that literacy and literacy instruction are pivotal to developing crucial citizenship attitudes and skills that will maintain a healthy democracy.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

### **Overview**

This dissertation examines the roles of literacy and literacy education in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century autobiographies of four fugitive African American slaves: Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb, and Harriet Jacobs. Also known as antebellum slave narratives, these autobiographies regularly depicted the dehumanization many African Americans endured in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. As such, slave narratives provide critical information about the origins and development of racism in the United States. These stories illustrate how race in the early 19th century became a significant marker of one's humanity and how people of African descent were perceived as slightly less than human and thus deemed suitable for subjugation.

Although often defined in terms of technical skills in current educational debates, literacy and literacy education were social and political issues in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Restricted access to literacy was an important mechanism in the subjugation of African slaves (Barrett, 1995; Cornelius, 1991; Gates, 1987, Monaghan, 1998, Williams, 2005). Unlike "inferior" species, humans could read and write. As such, to restrict access to literacy was to deny African Americans their humanity. Thus, for many Africans in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century United States, literacy was not merely the acquisition of technical skills; it was a social justice issue. It was their very humanity at stake.

It is important to examine slave narratives from the standpoint of literacy issues. Arguably, the main objective of slave narratives was to highlight the humanity of all African Americans and thus facilitate the abolition of slavery. Humans are the only

species that can write their own history and thus leave written traces of their own existence (Belt-Beyan, 2004; Foster, 1994; McHenry, 2002, Monaghan, 2005, Starling, 1988). I argue that literacy largely served this purpose in antebellum slave autobiographies. In other words, fugitive slaves were able to write and read their own histories and thus confirm their existence as human beings.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In the scholarship about antebellum slave narratives, literacy and literacy education were often referenced as important tropes (Cutter, 1996; Davis & Gates, 1985; Gates, 1987; Olney, 1985; Starling, 1988; Stepto, 1979). However, most of this scholarship lacked articulated theoretical frameworks to adequately explain the presence and the significance of these tropes. For instance, James Olney (1985) claimed that a common trope in slave narratives was a “record of barriers raised against slave literacy and the overwhelming difficulties encountered in learning to read and write” (p. 153). But Olney and other scholars did not articulate a theory to explain why access to literacy and literacy education was difficult for the slave narrative authors and for many other Blacks in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century United States. Between 1740 and 1834, literacy and literacy education for Africans in the United States was considered so seditious that Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Missouri, North Carolina, and South Carolina enacted anti-literacy laws to suppress any potential rebellions (Belt-Beyan, 2004; Blassingame, 1977; Foster, 1994; McHenry, 2002; Monaghan, 1998, 2005). Sociocultural literacy theories provide plausible, data-driven explanations for this suppression and for the significance of literacy and literacy education in slave narratives.

### **Significance of the Research**

The significance of this research project is twofold. First, it fills in significant gaps in our understanding of literacy and literacy education for African American slaves in the early to mid-1800s and for their descendants. I expand on the implications of this research on current literacy education practices in chapter five. Second, it expands the theoretical frameworks and methods in which to explore these texts. In his cultural analysis of African Americans and literacy in slave narratives, Lindon Barrett (1995) noted that two disciplinary methodologies dominated the scholarship: literary interpretations and historical analyses. James Olney (1985), Robert Stepto (1979) Frances Smith Foster, (1994) and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1985) et al examined slave narratives as literary artifacts. Elizabeth McHenry (2002), Marion Wilson Starling (1988), and John W. Blassingame (1977, 1979) et al analyzed slave narratives as historical documents. With this dissertation, I add a theoretical framework and a research method of literacy education scholars to provide new interpretations and to perhaps chart new territory in the literature.

### **Critical Literacy Theoretical Framework**

The connections among literacy, identity, and freedom were common themes in the literature about early African American literacy and literacy education. As such, I chose Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo's (1987) critical literacy theory as the theoretical lens. Critical literacy theory describes the use of reading, writing, and comprehending texts to develop a critical consciousness towards dominant cultures and their frequent use of language and discourse to oppress minority populations. In the context of this dissertation, critical consciousness refers to a mindset that analyzes and

critiques uneven, often exploitative sociocultural relationships. Freire and Macedo (1987) argued that critical consciousness transformed oppressed people from exploited objects to thinking subjects who reflect on and strive to change their lived experiences and material conditions. Critical consciousness freed oppressed people from the ideological submersion to dominant cultures.

Critical consciousness is developed through the use of generative themes and the process of praxis. Freire (2015/1971) posited that

an epoch [era] is characterized by a complex [network] of ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values, and challenges in dialectical interaction with their opposites, striving toward plenitude. The concrete representation of many of these ideas, values, concepts, and hopes, as well as the obstacles which impede the people's full humanization, constitute the themes of that epoch. . . . The complex of interacting themes of an epoch constitutes its "thematic universe." (p. 101)

Generating themes are themes that "contain the possibility of unfolding into . . . many themes, which in turn call for new tasks to be fulfilled" (p. 102, fn. 19). In the early American republic, generative themes included "democracy," "human rights," "freedom," "property," and their opposites, "bondage," "tyranny," and "oppression." From these themes, arguments for and against slavery were produced. Abolitionists, fugitive slaves, and proslavery forces participated in conversations and debates within the context of these generative themes.

Critical literacy was an appropriate theoretical lens in which to examine antebellum slave narratives. The theory's basic tenets mapped perfectly to the sociopolitical goals of antebellum slave narratives. The main purpose of slave narratives

was to help abolish slavery. In this case, literacy was in service to the liberation of millions of African American slaves. Moreover, authors of slave narratives engaged in dialectical struggles with various stakeholders, including abolitionists, sponsors, readers, and slaveholders. Arguably, these dialectical relationships enabled these authors to gain critical consciousness and the resultant transformations.

### **Research Questions**

A review of the literature informed the choice of a theoretical framework, which in turn prompted two research questions:

(RQ1): What roles did literacy and literacy instruction play in former slaves' autobiographies?

(RQ2) How did literacy help slaves to critique slavery and the dominant culture that supported it?

Literacy is a contested and complex phenomenon (Barton, 1994; Belt-Beyan, 2004; Cornelius, 1991; Davis & Gates, 1985; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Gates, 1987; Monaghan, 1998, 2005). Within the context of slave narratives, literacy plays a number of roles and forms a variety of contexts that demonstrate the political and potentially subservice nature of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. This current study explored those roles and contexts. One of the more salient roles of literacy is the formation of a critical consciousness, which is explored in depth in chapters four and five.

### **Research Methods**

To gain a rich description of the textual data and to produce nuanced analyses of slave narratives, I chose content analysis as the research method. Content analysis allows for the replicable study of large amounts of texts in order to determine the context that



gives meaning to these texts. Open coding and constant comparison are often the preferred approaches to content analysis. Researchers read large amounts of texts in order to determine common themes. For this study, however, I utilized a closed coding approach based on the work of James Olney (1985). Olney argued that slave narratives almost invariably contain 12 tropes. Because Olney's research informed much of the scholarship, I utilized his tropes to code the narratives.

### **Definitions**

#### *African Americans*

An ethnic group consisting of Americans with partial or total ancestry from sub-Saharan Africa. The term "African American" generally denotes descendants of enslaved Africans who are from the United States. Because the importation of slaves from Africa to the United States legally ended in January 1808, I use "African Americans" as an umbrella term that covers both pre-Civil War slave and their descendants.

#### *Ante Bellum*

Within the context of this dissertation, antebellum refers to the 16-year period prior to the American Civil War. The four examined narratives were published between 1845 and 1861.

#### *Coffle*

A group of enslaved people chained together and marched from one slave state to another. These enslaved people were usually bought for low prices from Mid-Atlantic slave states (Virginia and Maryland) and then sold for profit in deep South slave states (South Carolina, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, and Louisiana).

### *Critical Literacy*

The ability to use literacy skills to critique and to combat sociopolitical oppression. Critical literacy and literacy are not synonymous. One can be critically literate without being functionally literate. A person does not have to be functionally literate to fight oppression. Harriet Tubman was a prime example of a critically literate person who was functionally illiterate. However, as Henry Giroux (1987) suggested, functional literacy is usually the precondition for critical literacy.

### *Literacy*

The ability to read, write, and interpret printed or handwritten texts and to speak and to listen effectively. In the context of this study, functionally literate people can accomplish these tasks at the fourth-grade level in the United States.

### *Slave Narratives*

Autobiographies written by literate fugitive African American slaves from 1845 to 1861.

## **Study Limitations**

This study has several limitations. First, it uses a sample of only four slave narratives. Although Olney (1985) and Starling (1988) argued for the repetitiveness of slave narratives, four narratives are not enough data to make inferences on the general population of 6,000 extant narratives that Starling (19) comprehensively studied.

Second, this study uses only one literacy theory. Using two or more literacy theories would have possibly allowed for more nuanced and comprehensive descriptions of literacy and literacy education in antebellum slave narratives. However, within the

context of the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century abolitionist movement and within slave narratives, critical literacy fits the data so well that the use of other theories is redundant.

### **Chapter Summary: Introduction**

In this dissertation, I have closed a significant theoretical gap in the literature on the role of literacy in antebellum slave narratives. Although Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1985, 1987), James Olney (1985) and other scholars argued that literacy and literacy education were closely connected to freedom for 19<sup>th</sup>-century African American slaves, these scholars almost never examined these stories within the contexts of literacy education theoretical frameworks that enable scholars to define literacy, to describe how people become literate, and to predict the consequences of literacy education within various sociocultural contexts. Without literacy education theoretical frameworks, discussions of the role of literacy in antebellum slave autobiographies may repeat unfounded assumptions about the nature of literacy education and its impact on the lives of former slaves in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

To address these significant gaps, I examined antebellum slave narratives within the context of critical literacy theory. Formulated by Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (1987), critical literacy theory describes the use of reading, writing, and comprehending texts to develop a critical stance towards dominant cultures and their frequent use of language and discourse to oppress minority populations. Freire and Macedo (1987) argued that critical consciousness transformed oppressed people from exploited objects to thinking subjects who reflected on their lived experiences and material conditions. Critical consciousness freed oppressed people from ideological submersion to dominant cultures. As a site of empowerment, literacy education may lead to a critical

consciousness—a psychological transformation that enables oppressed populations to read, write, and comprehend printed texts to interpret and challenge oppressive sociopolitical ideologies.

CHAPTER TWO  
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

**Introduction**

In this dissertation, I examined the roles of literacy and literacy education in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century autobiographies of four fugitive African American slaves in the United States. The four book-length narratives are in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Slave Narratives Analyzed in This Research*

Author	Publication Date	Title
Frederick Douglass	1845	<i>Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself.</i>
William Wells Brown	1847	<i>Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself.</i>
Henry Bibb	1849	<i>Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave. Written by Himself. With an Introduction by Lucius C. Matlack.</i>
Harriet Jacobs	1861	<i>Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself. Edited by L. Maria Child.</i>

Other than Ernest Morrell's brief exploration of slave narratives in his 2008 book *Critical Literacy and Urban Youth: Pedagogies of Access, Dissent, and Liberation*, reading education scholars have not explored this topic. This lack of exploration is not surprising. Most reading education scholars are professors in teacher education programs. They teach future K-12 instructors how to effectively teach reading and writing strategies to their students. Historical examinations of 19<sup>th</sup>-century African American literacy practices seem relatively unrelated to the pedagogical problems that current K-12 teachers may encounter in their classrooms. Nonetheless, I hope this dissertation demonstrates that current teachers are part of history and that their current problems are part of a historical strand that stretches across several centuries.

Because I explored relatively new territory in reading education scholarship, I reviewed scholarly literature outside the field. A substantial number of scholars examined early African American literacy and literacy education (Belt-Beyan, 2004, Bly, Cornelius, 1991; McHenry, 2002; Woodson, 1968/1919). These studies provided the crucial context for understanding literacy and literacy education within slave narratives. I followed this examination with an exploration of several key scholars in the field of critical literacy: Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (1987). Having reviewed critical literacy, I then examined the scholarship about slave narratives. Scholars examined slave narratives mainly from two disciplinary perspectives: literary (; Gates, 1985; Olney, 1985; Stepto, 1979) and historical (Blassingame, 1977, 1979; McHenry, 2002; Starling, 1988). Finally, I explored how several scholars applied critical literacy assumptions to their examinations of antebellum slave narratives enslaved Africans' literacy practices

and how this dissertation extended and complicated these discussions about critical literacy and antebellum slave narratives.

### **Themes in the Scholarly Literature**

As I examined the literature, I noticed that several themes informed previous scholarship about early African American literacy practices and the depiction of such practices in a variety of contexts, including those depicted in antebellum slave narrative. First, literacy has almost always been linked to freedom and liberation for African Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Bly, 2011, Cornelius, 1991; Gates, 1987; Monaghan, 1998; Nichols, 1949). The ability to read and to write translated to an ability to understand and to express complex concepts about basic human rights.

Second, literacy is linked to the ontological project of being human (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Gates, 1987; McHenry, 2002; Monaghan, 1998, 2005). Gates (1987) observed that during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Hegel, Kant, and other European philosophers believed the defining trait of humans were their ability to situate themselves in a continuum of historical events. In other words, to read and to write one's history and one's place in that history largely constituted one's humanity.

Finally, literacy is deemed a political act (Bly, 2011; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Schiller, 2008). The ability to read and to write is closely linked to the ability to shape one's mindset and thus one's approach to one's sociopolitical worlds. The consequences of being literate does not necessary translate to successful political revolutions or immediate changes in the status quo. As Schiller (2008) argued, a literate slave is still bounded by the restrictions of chattel slavery. However, that slave has the mindset to

implicitly challenge the status quo through various rhetorical strategies, such as indirectness and ironic deference to the status quo.

### **Literacy and Liberation**

Within the literature about 19<sup>th</sup>-century Africans in American literacy practices and education, scholars frequently linked literacy to liberation (Belt-Beyan, 2004; Gates, 1987; McHenry, 2002; Olney, 1984; Starling, 1988, Williams, 2005). Although the definition depends on epoch and region, I defined basic literacy as the ability to read, write, and comprehend printed and handwritten texts and the ability to speak and to listen. Apart from Gates (1987), most scholars do not argue a direct relationship between literacy and freedom. Instead, they posited that basic literacy afforded many early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Africans America degrees of freedom that were often denied to their illiterate colleagues. Carter G. Woodson's (1968/1919) *Negro Education Prior to 1861* outlined these degrees of freedom in his complex history of literacy education for African in America before the Civil War. Woodson observed that this history often contained huge contradictions depending on region and era. In the late 1700s and early 1800s, functionally literate enslaved Africans proved to be beneficial to at least some plantation owners. Woodson commented:

With all of these new opportunities Negroes exhibited a rapid mental development. Intelligent colored men proved to be useful and trustworthy servants; they became much better laborers and artisans, and many of them showed administrative ability adequate to the management of business establishments and large plantations. (pp. 5-6)



During this period, a literate enslaved African American was considered an efficient and productive servant in several regions of colonial America and the newly founded United States—including Virginia and other slave-holding states (Woodson, 2004/1919). As Woodson observed, literate African American slaves were afforded certain degrees of freedom that translated to respected positions within the plantation system. Although this privilege was not equal to immediate and total emancipation, it was often a liberation from the physical and mental tortures of working in the fields.

Nonetheless, as Woodson (1968/1919) suggested, this attitude, especially among southern slaveowners took a radical turn by the 1830s. Woodson noted that

the contrast of conditions at the close of this period with those of former days is striking. Most slaves who were once counted as valuable, on account of their ability to read and write the English language, were thereafter considered unfit for service in the South and branded as objects of suspicion. (p.10)

By the 1830s, the relationship between literacy and liberation became that of subversion and rebellion. Nat Turner and other literate slaves had led several failed insurrections. As such, many slave holders in Virginia and other southern states associated literacy and literacy education for Africans in America with subversion (Bly 2011; Monaghan, 1998; Williams, 2005). Slave holders feared that literate slaves would read abolitionist literature and thus plot mass rebellions and escapes. Equally important, they feared that literate slaves would write their way to liberation by forging “freedom passes,” documents slaveholders created that allowed certain entrusted slaves to travel with relatively few restrictions (Blassingame, 1979; Gates, 1987; McHenry 2002).

These connections between literacy and liberation inform Janet Duitsman Cornelius' book, *When I can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery and Religion in the Antebellum South* (1991). Frequently cited in subsequent monographs and journal articles, Cornelius' (1991) work centers on the relationships between slavery, literacy, identity, and liberation. The scholar argued,

For enslaved African Americans, literacy was more than a path to individual freedom—it was a communal act, a political demonstration of resistance to oppression and of self-determination for the black community. Through literacy the slave could obtain skills valuable in the white world, thereby defeating those whites who withheld the skills, and could use those skills for special privileges or to gain freedom. Scholars of literacy have charted the impact a few literate people can make in a culture of illiterates; they serve as mediators and translators into a wider world for those who do not read. (p. 3)

The implications of literacy go beyond the usual technical skills-based concept. For Cornelius, literacy takes on sociopolitical aspects that many reading education and literacy scholars promoted during the early 1990s. In the case of enslaved African Americans, the ability to read and especially the ability to write created a new identity bounded neither by oral accounts nor by interpretations of others.

Cornelius (1991) described a complex relationship between literacy and liberation for early 19<sup>th</sup>-century African Americans. She posited that Biblical literacy was especially condoned in order to render African American slaves more submissive to the dominant slave culture. Cornelius noted contradictions in this aspect of their reading instruction. She commented that enslaved Africans in America translated Biblical

narratives to artistic expressions of oppression and freedom. Cornelius argued that African American spirituals began as literate enslaved Africans' interpretation of their own lived experiences in the United States.

### **Literacy as an Ontological Marker**

Literacy as liberation is closely linked to another theme in the literature: literacy as an ontological marker (Gates, 1987; Monaghan, 1998, 2005; Woodson, 1968/1919). Ontology is the philosophy of being. In this case, literacy is a marker of being human (*homo sapiens*). Homo sapiens roughly translates to “knowledge maker.” To be human is to participate in the world of abstract concepts and philosophies (Gates, 1987). Literacy was connected to creating, receiving, and interpreting knowledge (Bly, 2011; Davis & Gates, 1985; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Gates, 1987; McHenry, 2002; Schiller, 2008; Williams, 2008; Woodson, 1968/1919). Although oral traditions had been the main mechanism of knowledge creation and transmission for most of human history, print literacy was the most privileged form of knowledge creation and transmission during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Belt-Beyan, 2004; Gates, 1987; McHenry, 2002).

Scholars have examined literacy as an ontological marker within several specific sociopolitical contexts. In *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies*, Elizabeth McHenry (2002) surveyed the ontological aspects of literacy for all 19<sup>th</sup> century African Americans. Through an examination of African American literary clubs from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, McHenry argued that

to better understand the various ways Black Americans have acquired and used literacy, we must further complicate our understanding of early African American

literacy by considering the literary activities of free Blacks and the legacy of the antebellum institutions that they built to promote reading and [to] share texts.

(McHenry, 2002, p.3)

McHenry reminded readers that all African Americans were considered subhuman by much of the dominant culture. Through the creation of literacy clubs, African Americans sought to prove that they were human and thus worthy of human rights established by the United States Constitution, including the right of bodily autonomy.

Phyllis Belt-Beyan (2002) expanded McHenry's argument to demonstrate how family and community efforts informed and facilitated 19<sup>th</sup>-century African American reading and writing instruction and practices. In *The Emergence of African American Literacy Traditions: Family and Community Efforts in the Nineteenth Century*, the author argued that literacy and the acquisition of literacy among African Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a heroic venture. Literacy allowed African Americans to determine their own humanity, inside and outside of confines of dominant culture.

### **Literacy as a Political Act**

Literacy as a political act informs much of the literature. Within the context of this dissertation, I define a political act as one that either empowers or oppresses groups of people. I use political in the most basic sense of the word. From the ancient term for the city-state, *polis* refers to the city-state and its citizens. Anything related to the *polis* was inherently political. In the early American republic, political referred to actions for and by citizens. Literacy was connected to the actions for and by enfranchised citizens who not only voted but participated in the conversations and debates that affect the entire *polis*. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, African American literacy and literacy instruction

was highly political and contested. Until the 1830s and the passage of several anti-literacy laws, reading was often considered compatible with the practice of slavery (Bly 2011; Cornelius, 1991; Monaghan, 1998; Woodson, 1968/1919). This aspect of literacy was acceptable for religious reasons. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and the Associates of Doctor Thomas Grey often taught enslaved Africans in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century to read the Bible and other Christian texts (Bly 2011, Cornelius 1991; Monaghan, 1998, 2005). This literacy education was meant to further oppress enslaved men and women. However, as slave rebellions demonstrated, literacy could also be a tool for rebellion and liberation. Like many other literate enslaved men, Nat Turner did not just read the Bible and accept slavery as a system ordained by God. A devout Christian, Turner violently challenged slavery. In other words, literacy could be subversive.

Heather Andrea Williams (2005) also identified literacy as a political act. In *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*, Williams confirmed and extended previous scholarship to argue about the urgency and implications of literacy for enslaved African Americans shortly before the Civil War. Like her predecessors, Williams (2005) observed that the ability to write was especially considered subversive. Analyzing notices of runaway enslaved African Americans, Williams asked:

Why was literacy so sought after and so forbidden? The motivations on each side were very much the same. Whites feared that literacy would render slaves unmanageable. Blacks wanted access to reading and writing as a way to attain the very information and power that whites strove to withhold from them. Literacy had practical implications for enslaved people. When James Fisher's owner sold him away from his mother in Nashville, Tennessee, Fisher quickly decided that he

must learn to write in case he ever had the opportunity to forge a pass and escape.  
(p. 29)

Williams demonstrated that reading and writing for James Fisher and many other antebellum African American slaves was more than just technical skills; it was a pre-condition to freedom and to being (as Paulo Freire often argued) more fully human.

Williams (2005) frequently concluded that the humanizing effect of literacy was so intense that enslaved African American sometimes secretly taught themselves how to read and, in some cases how to write. Equally important, Williams posited many of these literate men and women would become teachers whose efforts helped educate formerly enslaved African Americans after the Civil War. Williams' argument contradicts previous historical accounts that education for formerly-enslaved African Americans was the domain of white female instructors from the Freedmen's Bureau and the American Missionary Association. In short, Williams decentered whiteness and white women as the loci of literacy for formerly enslaved African Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Williams' decentering of whiteness will prove important in my reading of slave narratives, which often centers its African American authors as their own centers or foci of literacy. In sum, Williams argued that the African American themselves were responsible for their own use of literacy as a fundamental condition for freedom.

Subsequent scholars challenged this notion and thus complicated the political aspects of literacy and literacy instruction. Case in point is Ben Schiller's (2008) "Learning Their Letters: Critical Literacy, Epistolary Culture, and Slavery in the Antebellum South." Analyzing a group of letters from literate enslaved men and women to various people in dominant positions, Schiller observed that literacy did not

necessarily translate to freedom. As such, he challenged what he termed, “the literacy as liberation” paradigm and nuanced the history of anti-literacy laws in the antebellum South.

Instead of looking at the tensions between anti-literacy laws and the literacy efforts of some enslaved African Americans, Schiller (2008) argued that “it is more productive to consider the way in which literate slaves’ writings served as a medium for the expression of tensions between owner and owned which were hallmarks of master/slave relationship” (p.14). Using Freire and Macedo’s critical literacy theory, Schiller claimed that these tensions documented “ways in which colonial/post-colonial subjects must learn to decode and critique the discursive tactics by which the dominant disempower the subordinate” (p. 14). In other words, although literacy does not translate to liberation, it may facilitate a critical consciousness about one’s historical position in a nexus of power relations. I explore critical consciousness more thoroughly in the section about critical literacy. At this point, it is sufficient to say that critically literate African American slaves may have often critiqued and interrogated the status quo, if only indirectly.

In the context of this dissertation, Schiller’s (2008) article is important for several reasons. First, it is one of the two articles in the literature to have examined early African American literacy and literacy education within a critical literacy theoretical framework. As such, it explicitly connected literacy practices of the past with current theoretical concerns. Arguably, this use of critical literacy may not have comprehensively explained apparent ideological tensions in the narratives, but it did add new and very useful knowledge to the literature. Second, it complicated the very common “literacy equals

liberation” paradigm that is prevalent in the scholarship about early African American literacy and literacy education practices. Schiller demonstrated that literacy, *per se*, is not freedom in a physical sense. However, he demonstrated that literacy was (as Henry Giroux argued) a precondition for liberation. These people may have been enslaved, but their minds were freed. Finally, Schiller’s article promoted a more theoretically informed reading of past literacy practices and provided a model for future critical readings of 18- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century African American literacy practices and reading instruction.

Like Schiller (2008), Anthony Bly (2011) examined literacy as a political act. Bly examined the literacy practices and reading instruction of enslaved African in colonial Virginia. Bly conducted a case study of Isaac Bee, a literate biracial enslaved man who attempted to escape his Virginia plantation several times. Bly’s sources included a “runaway slave” notice placed 3 September 1774 in the Virginia Gazette. Bly argued that Bee’s attempts may have been the consequence of his literacy. Being able to read and write, Bee was able to follow current political events in newspapers. Bly suggested events would eventually lead to the American Revolution just two years later. In any case, Bly connected Bee’s literacy to the political act of self-empowerment.

Bly (2011) also suggested that literacy in the context of Christian religious instruction sometimes produced unintended political consequences. The scholar noted that Isaac and other literate enslaved African Americans most likely read the Bible within a more radical and emancipatory frame than their teachers anticipated:

As theirs was a world in which their very ability to move about freely was limited, proscribed literally by words on paper, enslaved black Virginians more than likely understood the prophet Isaiah’s injunction to read more seriously, perhaps even



more intimately than their white counterparts had bargained. For reading held the promise of writing and writing the opportunity for freedom. Although reading and writing were taught as separate skills in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the number of literate runaways demonstrate (overwhelmingly one might add) that they mastered both. (pp. 446-447)

Bly observed that many runaway notices mentioned the literacy status of the fugitives. This reference was very important. Literate fugitives could forge passes for themselves and other enslaved Blacks. Although Bly's study cannot be generalized to the entire population of colonial American slaves, it demonstrated that early African American literacy practices and instruction can to a critical consciousness and a desire for self-sufficiency and freedom. In other words, Bly demonstrated that for at least some slaves of African descent, literacy was a highly charged political act.

Literacy as a political act informed Christopher Hager' (2013) *Word and Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing*. The author examined the previously unpublished writings of enslaved and formerly enslaved African Americans and noted that

The act of writing always involves a convergence of voices, a mixture of conformity and originality, a balance of structure and play. In theoretical dimensions and in nineteenth-century American culture at large, but to an unparalleled degree among enslaved and newly freed people, writing encompasses both a submission to norms and the assertion of new meanings. (p.21)

Having referenced Bakhtin's heteroglossia (the often-contradictory perspectives and forms of speech and language), Hager (2013) recognized that literacy, although a pre-

condition to liberation, always consists of specific cultural constraints. These constraints were especially important to the literacy education and literacy practices of enslaved and newly freed African Americans. In other words, reading and writing's politically empowering and idiosyncratic traits were always tempered by conformity. In learning to read and write, people usually in part submitted to the political and cultural norms of their times. I argue that slave narratives are not exempt; they typically were embedded within and constrained by the literary and cultural norms of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In short, literacy (as a political act) is embedded in a nexus of sociopolitical tensions.

This embeddedness informed the work of Gholdy Muhammad (2020), whose book *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*, contains the literacy as political act theme. Using the scholarship of Elizabeth McHenry (2002), Muhammad drew on the activities of 19<sup>th</sup> century African American literary societies to formulate the Historically Responsive Framework to help current literacy educators provide successful learning environments for and relationships with African American and marginalized K-12 students. Although Muhammad's book focused on free African American in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its conclusions and implications resonate with this current study. Muhammad argued that for current African American students, literacy and literacy instruction are political acts that extend beyond the acquisition of technical skills. As with African Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, literacy and literacy instruction provide current students with the language and rhetoric to become, politically active citizens who are fully engaged in the conversations and debates that affect their lives, their communities, and their world. In short, literacy and literacy instruction are political acts that empower citizens.

In their preface to *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, Freire and Macedo (1987) examined this nexus of sociopolitical tensions and argued that literacy is never politically neutral. They posited that literacy is a political act “according to whether it serves to reproduce existing [oppressive] social formation or serves as a set of cultural practices that promotes democratic and emancipatory change” (p. vii). Reading and writing are not merely technical skills; they are pathways to either submission to a dominant power structure or a critical consciousness that interrogates and works against that structure. As Henry Giroux (1987) commented,

literacy for Freire is inherently [a] political project in which men and women assert their right and responsibility not only to read, understand, and transform their own experiences, but also reconstitute their relationship with the wider society. In this sense, literacy is fundamental to aggressively constructing one’s voice as part of a wider project of possibility and empowerment. (p. 7)

Antebellum slave narratives were part of a larger political project to end the practice of American slavery before the Civil War (Gates, 1985, 1987; Olney, 1985; Starling, 1988). Although these narratives usually served the rhetorical and propagandistic interests of white abolitionists, the act of writing and of sharing their stories allowed formerly enslaved men and women to use literacy to understand their “existence as part of a historically constructed practice within specific relations of power” (Giroux, 1987, p. 7). Within this context, the ability to read and write, was the precondition to an emotional and psychological transformation that allowed formerly enslaved men and women to critically examine their lives in relationship to 19<sup>th</sup>-century capitalism and slavery.

## **Chapter Summary: Literature Review**

The literature on 19<sup>th</sup>-century African American literacy events and practices has focused on three interrelated central themes:

- Literacy and Liberation
- Literacy as Ontological Marker
- Literacy as a Political Act

Throughout the literature, 19<sup>th</sup>-century African American literacy events and practices have been associated with liberation. To be literate was to be freed psychologically, if not physically. Secondly, literacy was constructed as the ontological marker of being human. Lastly, literacy was often argued as a political act that either empowered or disenfranchised African Americans.

These central themes asides, antebellum slave narratives are primarily historical documents. Historical approaches to these documents should be expected. Yet, as Davis and Gates (1985) demonstrated, slave narratives are also texts subject to literary analyses. Slave narratives are narratives. Just like other types of narrative, they have characters and plotlines and are thus literary in these aspects.

That being said, the literature seems to under-theorize a common theme in slave narratives: literacy and literacy instruction. Although many scholars have examined the role of literacy within early African American experiences and within slave narratives, they have usually lacked literacy theoretical frameworks that inform the nature of literacy and how it affects certain populations. Even E. Jennifer Monaghan (1998), a reading education specialist and historian, seemed to have privileged historical theoretical frameworks over explicit literacy theory. To examine literacy outside of its proper

theoretical framework is to render literacy a vague and often overdetermined concept. In sum, many scholars seem to have assumed that literacy is such a well-understood and defined concept that theoretical assumptions about it are redundant.

This lack of literacy theory in the literature led me to examine antebellum slave narratives within a critical literacy framework. Although slave narratives preceded Freire and Macedo's theory (1987) by more than 100 years, they seem to fit the theoretical model well. Critical literacy theory centers on ways in which reading and writing can facilitate liberation for oppressed groups. Slave narratives are stories in which literacy plays a major role in authors' transformation and liberation.

The review of the literature and the choice of critical literacy as a theoretical framework led me to ask the following research questions:

(RQ1): What roles did literacy and literacy instruction play in former slaves' autobiographies?

(RQ2) How did literacy help slaves to critique slavery and the dominant culture that supported it?

If (as the scholarship has suggested) literacy and literacy instruction were linked to freedom and the formation of a critical consciousness for 19<sup>th</sup>-century former African American slaves, then this link should inform the context of the autobiographies written by some of these former slaves. To answer the research questions and to recover the implicit context of these autobiographies, I employed content analysis as the method to collect and analyze historical textual data. In next chapter, I outlined this research method.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

In this dissertation, I examined the roles of literacy and literacy education in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century autobiographies of four fugitive African American slaves in the United States. These narratives are in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Slave Narratives Analyzed in This Research*

Author	Publication Date	Title
Frederick Douglass	1845	<i>Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself.</i>
William Wells Brown	1847	<i>Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself.</i>
Henry Bibb	1849	<i>Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave. Written by Himself. With an Introduction by Lucius C. Matlack.</i>
Harriet Jacobs (aka Linda Brent)	1861	<i>Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself. Edited by L. Maria Child.</i>

I used the following criteria to select these texts. They had to be novel-length autobiographies. Starling (1988) recorded over 6,000 extant slave narratives that range

from one-page interviews to novels. I chose novels because these texts would contain more relevant data. Second, these novels had to have “written by himself/herself” in the title. I needed textual evidence that these authors wrote their own narratives and did not dictate their stories to an editor or secretary. In other words, I wanted to ensure that these author wrote their own stories and did not rely on abolitionists and allies to write their stories for them. I needed to hear the authors’ authentic voices.

I interpreted these texts within the theoretical framework of critical literacy. According to Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (1987), critical literacy is the use of reading, writing, and comprehending texts to develop a critical consciousness to name the world in order to change it. In the slave narratives, fugitive slaves used their ability to read and to write in order to name oppression (slavery) and to change their world through the abolition of slavery. Critical literacy, therefore, is the use of reading and writing skills and literacy instruction to fight oppression.

Next, I proposed two interrelated research questions:

- (RQ1): What roles did literacy and literacy instruction play in former slaves’ autobiographies?
- (RQ2): How did literacy help slaves to critique slavery and the dominant culture that supported it?

These research questions and theoretical framework led to content analysis as method of data collection and analysis.

### **An Overview of Content Analysis**

Because antebellum slave narratives are complex textual artifacts (Blassingame, 1979; Davis & Foster, 1994; Gates, 1985; Nichols, 1949, 1959, 1971; Starling, 1988;

Stepito, 1979) and because my research questions required detailed explanations and interpretations, I chose content analysis as the research method. According to Krippendorff (2004), content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (p. 18). As such, content analysis enables other researchers to replicate this study and thus validate its findings. Researchers have used content analysis to conduct quantitative and qualitative research. For instance, I could count how frequently words associated with critical literacy (writing, oppression, reading) were used in slave narratives. As such, I would conduct a frequency analysis as part of a quantitative content analysis. If, for example, I noticed that reading and freedom were often mentioned in the same sentence, I could reasonably conclude that for the authors, there was a relationship between the two terms. Perhaps the authors equated literacy with liberty or even assumed a causal relationship. In any case, the higher frequency of these two terms in close conjunction in the slave narratives would warrant further investigations.

For this project, I chose qualitative content analysis for two reasons. First, it enables me to discover an often obscured and often implied context that gives a significant and uniform meaning to a diverse set of textual data (Krippendorff, 2004). For example, in my reading of a diverse set of fugitive slave autobiographies, I may conclude that critical consciousness is the probable context that gives meaning to the texts, although that term may not have been available to the authors. Because I concentrate on probable context and not necessarily the authors’ explicit intentions about their texts, qualitative content analysis is an appropriate method for collecting and analyzing data in this study. Second, qualitative content analysis is a rigorous, empirical research method.



One major critique of the method is that it is labor intensive and time-consuming. It is time-consuming because it requires researchers to collect and analyze data through several stages:

- Unitizing
- Sampling
- Coding
- Reducing Data
- Abductively Inferring Contextual Phenomena
- Narrating the Answers to the Research Questions

### **Unitizing**

Defining units is the first phase of qualitative content analysis. The purpose of defining units is “to decide what is to be observed as well as how observations are to be recorded and therefore considered data” (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 97). Two important units in research design are the unit of analysis and the unit of observation. The unit of analysis is the major entity under observation or the major topic of a research study. The unit of observation is the data researchers collect to learn something about the unit of analysis (DeCarlo, 2018).

### **Unit of Analysis and Unit of Observation for this Study**

In this study, the unit of analysis is the genre of historical documents called slave narratives. The unit of observation is each of the four individual slave narratives.

### **Sampling**

Sampling refers to limiting research to the smallest number of observations that allow valid and meaningful inferences (DeCarlo, 2018; Krippendorff, 2004).

### **Sampling for this Study**

For this study, I chose a non-probabilistic, convenience sample of four book-length narratives published between 1845 and 1861. Two criteria informed this selection. First, the narrative had to have “written by self” in title. This distinction is important. I chose autobiographical narratives that claimed to have been composed by the author themselves and not dictated to another person or written by another person on behalf of the authors. Second, the narrative had to have been published during the genre’s “golden age” that arguably commenced with Frederick Douglass’ 1845 autobiography and ended with the start of the Civil War (Foster, 1994; Starling, 1988; Stepto, 1979). Finally, the narrative had to be well-known and extensively covered in the literature. I chose the four narratives because they fit these criteria.

### **Coding**

Coding consists of “identifying themes across qualitative data by reading and rereading (and rereading again) transcripts until the researcher has a clear idea about what themes emerge” (DeCarlo, 2018, p. 389). That is, researchers reread data to discover commonalities that may be grouped under specific labels or themes. As Krippendorff (2004) wrote, “coding bridges the gap between unitized texts and someone’s reading of them, between distinct images and what people see in them, or between separate observations and their situational interpretations” (p. 84). In qualitative content analysis, open coding is an iterative process that requires researchers to closely read the data and to record emerging themes.

## **Coding for this Study**

For this study, I deviated from the use of open coding and used a closed coding system. Because antebellum slave narratives were usually written and published in the service of the abolitionist movement and because abolitionists emphasized a consistent argument against slavery, these stories have shared tropes or themes. James Olney (1985) claimed that “one can imagine a sort of master outline drawn from the great narratives and guiding the lesser ones” (p. 152). The use of tropes should not be surprising in what is largely considered didactic literature (Foster 1994; Olney, 1985; Starling, 1988; Stepto, 1979).

Table 3 represents Olney’s (1985) list of these tropes. Olney noted that antebellum slave narratives usually contain a “record of barriers raised against slave literacy and the overwhelming difficulties encountered in learning to read and write” (p. 153). However, all four narratives do not depict this trope. For example, outside of a brief mention of his receiving an education while he worked for a printer, William Wells Brown did not depict any literacy instruction. Quite the opposite, he demonstrated that his apparent illiteracy made him dependent on literate people in crucial episodes of his narrative. Ironically, William Wells Brown was the only author in this sample who became a professional writer later in life. He is often credited to being the first African American to have a novel published and a play produced. Apparently between his enslavement and the writing of his narrative, Brown became fully literate. Unlike his predecessor Frederick Douglass, who continued to write and speak as part of his human rights activism, Brown did not describe his pathway to literacy, and he did not connect

literacy with liberation. Nonetheless, Brown found a modicum of financial independence because of his literacy skills later in his life (Greenspan, 2014).

Olney's list serves as an effective code sheet for a content analysis using critical literacy as the theoretical framework. It is a litany of oppression and attempts to fight that oppression. Slaves are dehumanized through violence and torture. They are considered chattel whose birthdates are often considered unimportant to record. They are sold like commodities. Their family lives are shattered, often on the whims or by the economic exigencies of the slave masters. By writing their stories, fugitive slaves accomplished an important critical literacy goal: critical consciousness. Through the act of writing and having that writing published, fugitive slaves named the world of slavery in hopes of changing the world.

Olney's (1985) tropes are connected to critical literacy through the concept of material conditions. In *The Communist Manifesto* (2005/1888), Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels claim that material conditions of society are the foundation of our intellectual development. Their theory of material dialectical materialism states that the notions we have about society are formed by our underlying social conditions. Olney's tropes or categories focus on the material conditions of many enslaved African Americans. An intellectual descendent of Marxism and Marxist Theory, critical literacy emphasizes the same dialectical materialism in its approach to knowledge and literacy. Freire (2015/1971) posited that historical eras are composed of conflicting ideas and concepts (themes) that inform lived experiences. Freire wrote that "the complex [network] of interacting themes of an epoch [era] constitutes its thematic universe" (p. 101). In 19<sup>th</sup>-century United States, this thematic universe of conflicting ideas included

“freedom/slavery,” “private property/ social good,” “literacy/ illiteracy,” and “human rights/exploitation.”

**Table 3.**

*Master List of Slave Narrative Tropes (Olney, p. 153)*

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1. A first sentence beginning, “I was born . . .,” then specifying a place but not a date of birth;
2. A sketchy account of parentage, often involving a white father;
3. Description of a cruel master, mistress, or overseer, details of first observed whipping and numerous subsequent whippings, with women very frequently being the victims;
4. An account of one extraordinary strong, hardworking slave—often “pure African”—who, because there is no reason for it, refuses to be whipped;
5. Record of barriers raised against slave literacy and the overwhelming difficulties encountered in learning to read and write;
6. Description of a “Christian” slaveholder (often of one dying in terror) and the accompanying claim that “Christian” slaveholders are invariably worse than those professing no religion;
7. Description of the amounts and kinds of food and clothing given to slaves, the work required of them, the pattern of a day, a week, a year;
8. Account of a slave auction, of families being separated and destroyed, of distraught mothers clinging to their children as they are torn from them, of slave coffles being driven South;
9. Description of patrols, of failed attempt(s) to escape, of pursuit by men and dogs;
10. Description of successful attempt(s) to escape, lying by during the day, traveling by night guided by the North Star, reception in a free state by Quakers who offer a lavish breakfast and much genial thee/thou conversation;
11. Taking of a last name (frequently one suggested by a [white] abolitionist) to accord with the new social identity as a free man, but retention of the first name as a mark of continuity of individual identity;
12. Reflections on slavery

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## **Reducing Data**

Because previous phases often generate large amounts of information, researchers often streamline or reduce data. The purpose of reducing data to several main themes or

connections is to minimize saturation or data redundancies. Krippendorff (2004) posited that “reducing data serves analysts’ needs for efficient representations, especially of large volumes of data” (p. 84).

### **Reducing Data in this Study**

James Olney’s (1985) list reduced the data to twelve facets the scholar claimed to have been present in all slave narratives. I accepted Olney’s data reduction as authoritative and thus appropriate for this study. Olney was a respected scholar whose list was cited in numerous books and articles about slave narratives.

### **Abductively Inferring Contextual Phenomena**

Abduction consists of using existing knowledge to make predictions and to draw conclusions (inferences). Abductive reasoning starts with a set of observations that results in a hypothesis (explanation) for those observations.

I hypothesized that the context that give meaning to all four texts are the links between critical literacy, critical consciousness, and human rights. I did not expect authors to explicitly mention this connection because critical literacy and critical consciousness are expressions that most likely would not have been available to the authors. Apart from Frederick Douglass, I did not expect authors to claim that learning to read and to write engendered a critical consciousness. But I did expect to read critiques of slavery. This expectation is valid considering that these narratives were part of a larger human rights project to eliminate slavery in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century United States. Equally important, these narratives were part of a larger literacy-based project that included newspaper editorials and speaking tours. Within this context, literacy and literacy education demonstrated that African American slaves were humans and thus entitled to

human rights, including the right to bodily autonomy. As the literature review demonstrated, literacy for many 19<sup>th</sup>-century African Americans was an ontological marker of being human. The acquisition of functional, technical skills, while important, seemed subordinate to the goal of liberating an enslaved population.

### **Narrating the Answers to the Research Questions**

Narrating the answers to the research questions is the final phase of qualitative content analysis. This phase consists of summarizing, synthesizing, and explaining results as answers to research questions. As Krippendorff (2008) posited, study results become comprehensible through cohesive and compelling texts.

### **Narrating the Answers to the Research Question for this Study**

I answered each research question with a narrative that incorporates coded textual data as evidence. The following example served as a model:

*(RQ1): What roles did literacy and literacy instruction play in fugitive slaves' autobiographies?*

The data demonstrate that literacy and literacy instruction play several key roles in slave narratives. Among the most salient is the formation of a critical consciousness. Frederick Douglass' 1845 autobiography contains several scenes in which the author connected his ability to read with a growing awareness and dissatisfaction with the ideological contradictions of early 19<sup>th</sup>-century American democracy. While contrasting his own bondage with the relative freedom of the poor young white boys who served as his informal literacy tutors when he was 12 years-old, Douglass noted:

I used to talk this matter of slavery over with them. I would sometimes say to them, I wish I could be as free as they would when they got to be men. 'You will

be free as soon as you turn twenty-one, but I am a slave for life! Have not I as good as right to be free as you have?’ These words used to trouble them; they would express for me the liveliest sympathy, and console with the hope that something would occur by which I might be free. (p. 307)

Douglass placed this statement in a chapter that emphasizes his efforts to learn to read and to write. The placement demonstrates that as he gained access to literacy, Douglass became more critical of the sociopolitical contradictions of a democracy in which many people were marginalized and oppressed. In this episode, literacy was not simply a set of functional skills; it demonstrated the transformation of his mindset and of his relationship with the wider American society.

### **Chapter Summary: Methods**

In this dissertation, I used content analysis to collect and analyze data from four antebellum slave narratives. Through a series of six stages, content analysis enables researchers to empirically investigate latent themes that underly large sets of data. These stages are:

- Unitizing
- Sampling
- Coding
- Reducing Data
- Abductively Inferring Contextual Phenomena
- Narrating the Answers to the Research Questions

The unit of analysis is the genre called slave narratives. I chose a convenient, non-probabilistic sample of four narratives—which is appropriate for an exploratory study that does not generalize to an entire population. Because the narratives are formulaic, I



utilized James Olney's (1987) twelve tropes as a coding scheme. Reducing data was not necessary, due to the nature of the narratives and the coding scheme used. I abductively inferred that the contextual phenomenon was critical literacy. I narrated the answers to the research questions in chapter five.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

#### Introduction

In this dissertation, I conducted a context analysis to explore how fugitive slaves used literacy and literacy instruction in antebellum slave narratives to critique slavery (Blassingame, 1979; Davis & Gates, 1985; Foster, 1994; Starling, 1988; Stepto, 1979). The four book-length narratives are in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Slave Narratives Analyzed in This Research*

Author	Publication Date	Title
Frederick Douglass	1845	<i>Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself.</i>
William Wells Brown	1847	<i>Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself.</i>
Henry Bibb	1849	<i>Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave. Written by Himself. With an Introduction by Lucius C. Matlack.</i>
Harriet Jacobs (a.k.a. Linda Brent)	1861	<i>Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself. Edited by L. Maria Child.</i>

## **Pseudonyms and Name Changes**

During this period, it was not unusual for fugitive slave to take on a new last name, “to accord as a free man, but the retention of the first name as a mark of continuity of individual identity” (Olney, 1985, p. 153). Harriet Jacobs, however, had her autobiography published under the pseudonym “Linda Brent.” As such, other characters in the narrative call her Linda,” not Harriet. For fugitive slaves, pseudonyms were often necessary to prevent them from being captured and returned to their former owners. (Brown & Sims, 2015; Davis & Gates, 1985; Gates, 1987)

To examine these texts, I asked two interrelated research questions:

- (RQ1) What roles did literacy and literacy instruction play in former slaves’ autobiographies?
- (RQ2) How did literacy help former slaves critique slavery and the dominant culture that supported it?

Except for Frederick Douglass, no author in this sample makes an explicit causal link between literacy, literacy instruction and a critical consciousness. According to Freire and Macedo (1987), a critical consciousness is the ability to name the world to change it. In the slave narratives, fugitive slaves used their ability to read and write to name oppression (slavery) and to change their world through the abolition of slavery. Critical literacy, therefore, is the use of reading and writing skills and literacy instruction to fight oppression. Through the writing and publication of these narratives, the authors, editors, promoters, preface writers and publishers fought a specific type of oppression.

Naming the world and changing it are crucial elements in the slave narratives. Most likely, none of the authors wrote their autobiography to simply relate their life

stories. Almost no company published these stories to simply sell a book. The four selected narratives were part of an overall campaign led by William Lloyd Garrison and other abolitionists for the immediate emancipation of slaves in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century United States (Foster, 1994; Hirshman, 2022). Fugitive slaves were often invited to speaking tours on behalf of white abolitionists. By the 1830s, newspaper and journal articles arguing for the abolition of slavery were common in Boston and other New England cities. William Lloyd Garrison's newspaper, *The Liberator* (founded in 1831), is often cited as the spark of the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century abolitionist movement (Foster, 1994; Hirshman, 2022). In this sociopolitical context, literacy and literacy instruction were not merely technical skills in service to a dominant culture. They were the tools for liberation.

Because antebellum slave narratives were usually written and published in the service of the abolitionist movement and because abolitionists emphasized a consistent argument against slavery, these stories have shared tropes or themes. James Olney (1985) claimed that "one can imagine a sort of master outline drawn from the great narratives and guiding the lesser ones" (p. 152). The use of tropes should not be surprising in what is largely considered didactic literature (Foster 1994; Olney, 1985; Starling, 1988; Stepto, 1979).

Table 5 represents Olney's (1985) list of these tropes. Olney noted that antebellum slave narratives usually contain a "record of barriers raised against slave literacy and the overwhelming difficulties encountered in learning to read and write" (p. 153). However, all four narratives do not depict this trope. For example, outside of a brief mention of his receiving an education while he worked for a printer, William Wells

Brown did not depict any literacy instruction. Quite the opposite, he demonstrated that his apparent illiteracy made him dependent on literate people in crucial episodes of his narrative. Ironically, William Wells Brown was the only author in this sample who became a professional writer later in life. He is often credited as the first African American to have a novel published and a play produced. Apparently between his enslavement and the writing of his narrative, Brown became fully literate. Unlike his predecessor Frederick Douglass, who continued to write and speak as part of his human rights activism, Brown did not describe his pathway to literacy, and he did not connect literacy with liberation. Nonetheless, Brown found a modicum of financial independence because of his literacy skills later in his life. He is the only author in the sample who became a professional novelist and playwright and is often credited with being the first African American to have a play produced in the United States (Greenspan, 2014).

Olney's list serves as an effective code sheet for a context analysis using critical literacy as the theoretical framework. It is a litany of oppression and attempts to fight that oppression. Slaves are dehumanized through violence and torture. They are considered chattel whose birthdates are often considered unimportant to record. They are sold like commodities. Their family lives are shattered, often on the whims or by the economic exigencies of the slave masters. By authoring their own stories, fugitive slaves accomplished an important critical literacy goal: critical consciousness. Through the act of writing and having that writing published, fugitive slaves named the world of slavery in hopes of changing the world.

**Table 5**

*Master List of Slave Narrative Tropes (Olney, p. 153)*

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1. A first sentence beginning, “I was born . . .,” then specifying a place but not a date of birth;
2. A sketchy account of parentage, often involving a [white] father;
3. Description of a cruel master, mistress, or overseer, details of first observed whipping and numerous subsequent whippings, with women very frequently being the victims;
4. An account of one extraordinary strong, hardworking slave—often “pure African”—who, because there is no reason for it, refuses to be whipped;
5. Record of barriers raised against slave literacy and the overwhelming difficulties encountered in learning to read and write;
6. Description of a “Christian” slaveholder (often of one dying in terror) and the accompanying claim that “Christian” slaveholders are invariably worse than those professing no religion;
7. Description of the amounts and kinds of food and clothing given to slaves, the work required of them, the pattern of a day, a week, a year;
8. Account of a slave auction, of families being separated and destroyed, of distraught mothers clinging to their children as they are torn from them, of slave coffles being driven South;
9. Description of patrols, of failed attempt(s) to escape, of pursuit by men and dogs;
10. Description of successful attempt(s) to escape, lying by during the day, traveling by night guided by the North Star, reception in a free state by Quakers who offer a lavish breakfast and much genial thee/thou conversation;
11. Taking of a last name (frequently one suggested by a [white] abolitionist) to accord with the new social identity as a free man, but the retention of the first name as a mark of continuity of individual identity;
12. Reflections on slavery

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Because, as Olney argued (1985), slave narratives are repetitive and homogenous, I utilized Olney’s list as a comprehensive code sheet. As such, the findings correspond to the previously listed tropes. I chose this strategy for two reasons. First, my goal was not to produce new theory grounded in these narratives. If the generation of a new theory

were my goal, I would have produced hundreds of pages of texts to support that theory. One of my goals was to interpret literacy and literacy instruction in antebellum narratives from a specific, well-established literacy theoretical framework. Second, I examined historical texts that are themselves grounded in specific sociopolitical contexts. These contexts largely set the parameters for the narratives' content (Blassingame, 1979; Foster, 1994; Starling, 1988, Stepto, 1979). Arguably, Frederick Douglass wrote two additional autobiographies because his white abolitionist publisher restricted what Douglass could say about his own life as a slave. Because of these restrictions, there are inherent tensions in the texts between what the authors may have wanted to express and what the largely white abolitionist movement needed and demanded from their fugitive slave authors (Davis & Gates, 1985; Foster, 1994; Starling, 1988).

### **Summary of Findings**

A review of the findings indicate that authors usually focused on the mental and physical traumas of being a slave in a nation that defines itself as a democracy based on the principle that all humans were created. Out of the twelve tropes, Trope 12:

Reflections on Slavery adequately sums up the findings in these four statements:

- Slavery as Mental Darkness (Frederick Douglass)
- Slavery and Religion (William Wells Brown)
- Slavery as Existential Crisis (Henry Bibb)
- Slavery as Dehumanization (Harriet Jacobs)

I fully explicate these statements in the section about trope twelve. Nonetheless, I can note here that for all authors, slavery was equivalent to a mental darkness that decimated their humanity and created an existential crisis for many slaves. Douglass (2000/ 1845)

noted that to normalize oppression for slaves, one must keep them ignorant so that they do not recognize the contradictions of being a slave in a democracy that apparently values human rights. Elaborating on this mental darkness, William Wells Brown noted how religion was used to oppress African American slaves. Slaveowners often used selections in the Bible to naturalize slavery and plantation violence. Henry Bibb noted how the mental darkness of slavery was often connected to an existential crisis among slaves. These slaves knew themselves as loathed “things” vulnerable to the wills of often cruel and capricious slave masters. Finally, For Jacobs, the mental darkness of slavery translated to a state so dehumanizing that Black men could not protect their own families. In many cases, these men were forced to be complicit in the exploitation of and violence against their own wives and children. In short, the authors routinely described the dehumanization and sociopolitical contradictions inherent in being a slave in early republic United States.

### **Findings within the Context of Critical Literacy**

These major findings aligned with the major assumptions of critical literacy. Douglass, Brown, Bibb, and Jacobs frequently perceived the sociopolitical contradictions of being a slave in a democracy and used literacy and literacy instruction to fight oppression. They often engaged in the process of critical consciousness and praxis to theorize the sociopolitical and to take action of resolving these contradictions. Moreover, as noted in chapter one, these authors were part of larger abolitionist effort to immediately and unconditionally. As such, these narratives provided both descriptions of the horrors of slavery (theory) and actively argued for its end (action). In short, critical literacy is the best explanation and description of the findings.



## Findings

The four narratives largely do not deviate from Olney's (1985) list. To help navigate these findings, I present data in the following format:

- Trope/Code
- Texts That Illustrate Trope/Code
- Tropes That Have Been Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy

I followed this format to facilitate readers' understanding of my arguments' logic and the decisions I made when selecting data. Because this is an exploratory study, I do not use all possible examples of a trope in these narratives. In fact, context analysis demands that I provide just enough data to support my conclusions, but not so much that it overwhelms readers with excessive redundancy (Carspecken, 1996; Krippendorff, 2009). I limited redundant data to passages that fit within more than one trope. For example, I repeated full passages to support tropes 3 (descriptions of a cruel master) and 4 (Christian slaveholders as worse than those professing no religion). This redundancy allows readers to encounter the data within a new context and to illustrate the relationship between the tropes.

**Trope 1: A first sentence beginning, "I was born . . .," then specifying a place but not a date of birth.**

**Text: Douglass (1845)**

I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot County, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen an authentic record containing it. By far, the larger part of the slaves know [*sic*] as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my

knowledge to keep slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall time. A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege. I was not allowed to make any inquires [*sic*] of my master concerning it. He deemed such all inquiries on the part of a slave improper and impertinent, and evidence of a restless spirit. The nearest estimate I can give makes me now between twenty-seven and twenty-eight years of age. I come to this, from hearing my master say, sometime during 1835, I was about seventeen years old. (p. 281)

### **Trope/ Code Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Douglass seemed to have understood that he must present a cogent argument against slavery at the start of his autobiography. From the first paragraph, Douglass demonstrated a critical consciousness. He illustrates how at least some slave owners dehumanized and oppressed slaves by keeping the most basic information about the slaves themselves a secret: the day of their births. According to sixteenth-century English philosopher Francis Bacon (1612), “Knowledge itself is a power” (para. 2). Knowing one’s birthdate is a fundamental piece of self-knowledge that many people currently take for granted. For instance, my birthday is December 20, 1963. My birth certificate issued by the State of Virginia officially proves that I was born in Norfolk, VA to Odessa Virginia Portlock Blunt. This document officially confirms my existence. Douglass argued that to take this power away from slaves was to reduce them to the level of cows

and other chattel that were ignorant of their own birthdates. Although they were born, these slaves never existed officially as humans.

Equally important, Douglass demonstrated how a slave's identity was intricately connected to specific seasons on a plantation. Douglass noted that slaves he met could only vaguely guess their birth dates according to the specific plantation-related seasons. By having the slaves' birthdates connected to seasons on the plantation, Douglass demonstrated how slaves' lives and identity were largely informed by the material conditions of the plantation. Even if slaves were to escape, an important part of their self-knowledge would still be connected to the plantation. Knowledge itself is power. If Douglass was correct, many slave owners kept that power to themselves. This critique of knowledge and power between slaves and slave owners demonstrates one type of oppression that at least some slave owners used to maintain control of the slave population. As Douglass argued, it was done "to keep their slaves ignorant" (p. 281). Douglass also noted that this power was not denied to white children, who "could tell their ages" (p. 281). Through this critical analysis of birthdates, Douglass illustrated how power was unevenly distributed along racial lines on a plantation. While we cannot generalize Douglass' observation to all plantations in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century United States, it does give us an important glimpse into ways oppression may have operated within specific sociopolitical environments.

In the context of critical literacy, Douglass engaged in two important strategies. First, Douglass reflected on his situation to accurately describe and explain it. In the broadest sense of the word "theory," Douglass theorizes slavery as he had experienced it. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (2015/1971) stated that a critical

consciousness is the result of praxis (practice and theory). For Freire, action without thought/theory would result in lost opportunities and mistakes. On the other hand, theory without action would result in “verbalism” or speculation without impact in the real world. Douglass engaged in praxis. He did not form theories or explanation and do nothing to fight oppression. On the contrary, the writing and publication of his autobiography were specific actions to help eradicate slavery.

Praxis was key to abolitionist and antislavery movements (Hirschman, 2022). Without a clear understanding of the nuances of slavery, abolitionists most likely would have engaged in campaigns based mainly on misinformed perceptions. These perceptions included the assumption that chattel slavery was a largely religious and moral issue (Clark, 1995; Harrold, 1995; Hirshman, 2022; Risley, 2008, Rosen, 2017). As such, the abolition of slavery should be abolished within the context of religious and moral arguments. William Lloyd Garrison and other Boston abolitionist held this assumption. However, the New York branch, in dialogue with their Bostonian colleagues, assumed that slavery was a legal and constitutional issue. As such, changes in the Constitution and laws would resolve the dilemma. Frederick Douglass was a leading proponent of constitutional and legal changes (Hirshman, 2022; Rosen, 2017). The legal and constitutional argument prevailed. After the Civil War, chattel slavery in the United States through constitutional amendments and legal remedies (Clark, 1995; Hirshman, 2022; Harrold, 1995, Risley, 2008). Theory informed action in both camps. In the Garrisonian camp, theory led to the publication of slave narratives, speaking tours, and other methods to convince readers that they could abolish slavery without legal or constitutional remedies. In the “Douglassian” camp, theory led to Frederick Douglass and

his colleagues to effect key government officials to change laws and the Constitution (Hirshman, 2022). In short, theories without actions most likely would have rendered the abolitionist moment impotent and therefore unable to affect sociopolitical change. In the four examined slave narratives, authors engaged in praxis in several ways. I explain their methods of praxis in subsequent findings.

**Text: Brown (1847)**

I was born in Lexington, KY. The man who stole me as soon as I was born, recorded the births of all the infants which he claimed to be born his property, in a book he kept for that purpose. My mother's name was Elizabeth. She had seven children, viz: Solomon, Leander, Benjamin, Joseph, Millford, Elizabeth, and myself [sic]. No two of us were children of the same father. (p. 377).

**Trope/ Code Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Through his description of his birth, Brown engaged in a brief but powerful critical literacy analysis. He announced his birth and therefore claimed his existence. Within a system of oppression, this announcement was a clarion call. With the use of the verb "stole" he also acknowledged his status as property in the slave system. "Stole" is a key word in this statement. People are kidnapped or abducted. Property is stolen. However, Brown immediately critiqued this objection in the next statement about genealogy. He named his mother and her children. In the context of his narrative, naming his mother and his stepsiblings was an act of rebellion. He reminded his readers that he and his family were oppressed human beings, not merely cattle for sale. Moreover, by acknowledging that his mother had children by different men, he implied that his mother lacked reproductive agency. Like many early 19<sup>th</sup>-century African American slave

women, Brown's mother may have been the victim of repeated sexual assaults that may have resulted in the births of her children who may have never known who their fathers were. In short, Brown engaged in the dialectical nature of critical literacy. He first acknowledged his status as property in the slave system and then critiqued that label and ontological position (as object) through naming his family. Through this short passage, he named his oppression and humanized himself and others who struggled under that oppression.

Equally important, Brown engaged in praxis. He theorized his experience with slavery and wrote his autobiography to help eradicate it. However, as historian Ezra Greenspan (2014) demonstrated, Brown engaged in a complicated praxis; he frequently blurred lines between genres.

[William Wells Brown] composed habitually in the autobiographical mode, no matter whether writing fiction or nonfiction. . . [He] so fictionalized "fact" and "history" that it is impossible to draw a single generic boundary around any of his works or to connect them simply to his actual life. Autobiography becomes history and history becomes autobiography; like their author, they are never quite what they seem. Nor are his books, which current scholarship is demonstrating he compiled, to one extent or another, by appropriating and remaking portions of other printed works, sometimes his but many other times not. (p. 2)

For William Wells Brown, his autobiography was so intimately connected to history and to other stories that he often blurred disciplinary lines. I argue that this blurring of genre enabled Brown to theorize his specific experiences more broadly in the abolitionist moment. Current feminists and other activists often proclaim that "the

personal is political.” Often attributed to feminist Carol Hanisch (2009), this statement underscores the connection between personal life and broader sociopolitical issues.

Brown seemed to have understood the connection between his personal experience and that of millions of other early 19<sup>th</sup>-century African Americans. While current scholars may question the authenticity of Brown’s autobiography as a factually accurate description of his life, I argue that Brown’s autobiography (like others in the slave narrative genre) was never simply an accurate description of a life. Brown’s narrative was theoretical, in the sense that it describes and interprets slavery from his experiences. This narrative may have borrowed from other slave experiences and other slave narrative to fully ground the theory and the subsequent actions. In short, Brown’s statement and his approach to autobiography demonstrated diverse ways of praxis.

**Text: Bibb (1849)**

I was born May 1815, of a slave mother, in Shelby County, Kentucky, and was claimed as the property of David White Esq. He came into possession of my mother long before I was born. I was bought up in the Counties of Shelby, Henry, Oldham, and Trimble. Or more correctly speaking, in the above counties, I was *flogged up*; for where I should have received moral, mental, and religious instruction, I received stripes without number, the object of which was to degrade and to keep me in subordination. I can truly say, that I drank freely of the bitter cup of suffering and woe. I have dragged down to the lowest depths of human degradation and wretchedness, by Slaveholders. (p. 441)

**Trope/ Code Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Unlike Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb knew the month and year of his birth. Because Bibb knew the month and year of his birth, some

readers may assume that he experienced a more humane slavery. However, Bibb quickly dispelled this assumption. He immediately described himself as “property of David White Esq, who owned Bibb’s mother long before Bibb was born. As human property, Bibb experienced physical and emotional degradation from an early age. He was “flogged up” or whipped regularly.

With this initial statement, Bibb engaged in the dialectical nature of critical literacy. Paulo Freire (2015/1971) wrote:

Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world. Hence, dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming—between those who deny others the right to speak and those whose right to speak has been denied them. Those who have been denied the primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggression.

If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings. (p. 88)

In his autobiography, Henry Bibb did not engage in dialogue with slaveholders who most likely wanted to silence him and thus keep him in a state of degradation. Instead, Bibb reclaimed his “primordial [human] right” to speak his truth and to engage in a more productive dialogue with abolitionists and those who supported the abolition of slavery.

In the context of early- to mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century abolitionism, Bibb’s opening statement is especially crucial in Bibb’s participation in his own liberation. As Paulo Freire (2015/1971) noted,



Critical and liberating dialogue, which presupposes action, must be carried on with the oppressed at whatever the stage of their struggle for liberation. The content of that dialogue can and should vary in accordance with historical conditions and the level at which the oppressed perceive reality. But to substitute monologue, slogans, and communiques for dialogue is to attempt to liberate with instruments of domestication. Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflection in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building; it is to lead them into the populist pitfall and transform into masses which can be manipulated.

At all stages of their liberation, the oppressed must see themselves as women and men in the ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human. (pp. 65-66)

Early 19<sup>th</sup>-century abolitionist leaders such as William Lloyd Garrison and Gerrit Smit often had paternalistic assumptions about and attitudes toward enslaved African Americans (Harrold, 1995; Hirshman, 2022; Newman, 2018). For instance, the alienation between Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison in early 1850s was largely due to Garrison's insistence that Douglass defer to him in matters of abolitionism (Hirshman, 2022). Despite their intentions, abolitionists often acted on behalf of enslaved African Americans and not in collaboration with them. By authoring their own stories, the featured writers are active in their own liberation efforts-just as they were when they fled enslavement. Although he was often constrained by the polemical and rhetorical strategies of white abolitionists, Bibb asserted his own agency in the first statement of his autobiography. In his own words, from his own perception of his lived experiences, Bibb

reclaimed his own story and his own humanity. In doing so, Bibb engaged in the crucial dialectical process of liberation and becoming more fully human. Like Douglass and Wells, Bibb engaged in praxis. He used personal experience to contribute to a description of slavery. This description facilitated the actions of abolitionists and other antislavery activists in the early-to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. However, as I demonstrate in the next findings, praxis among slave narrator was often influenced by gender—as in the case of Harriet Jacobs.

**Text: Jacobs/Linda Brent (1861)**

I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away. My father was a carpenter, and considered so intelligent and skilful [*sic*] in his trade, that, when buildings out of the common line were to be erected, he was sent for from long distances, to be head workman. On condition of paying his mistress two hundred dollars a year, and supporting himself, he was allowed to work at his trade, and manage his own affairs. His strongest wish was to purchase his children; but, though he several times offered his hard earnings for that purpose, he never succeeded. In complexion my parents were a light shade of brownish yellow, and were termed mulattoes. They lived together in a comfortable home; and, though we were all slaves, I was 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. (p. 751)

**Trope/ Code Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Unlike Douglass, Brown, and Bibb, Harriet Jacobs mentioned that she was born. But instead of noting a date or place, Jacob immediately described her father. This movement from self to familial context signals an important rhetorical difference

between Jacobs and her male counterparts. This positioning of her family within the first two sentences indicates that family and familial relationships were crucial to Jacobs' identity. The examined male authors positioned family and familial relationships in the context of their individuality. These authors replicated 19<sup>th</sup>-century gender tropes in the larger society where men were individuals and women belonged to their fathers or husbands. Jacob described herself within a familial relationship. Humans are social animals for whom family is a key relationship. If Jacobs were mere property or chattel, this relationship would be unimportant. This emphasis on family and relationships allowed Jacobs to declare her own humanity, while acknowledging her legal status as property.

Equally important, Jacobs (unlike her male colleagues) challenged the dominant American cultural assumption of "rugged individualism." An important aspect of critical literacy is to challenge dominant cultural assumptions that have been indoctrinated [into slave-holding society] as natural and true (Freire, 2015/1971). Within the first statement and throughout her narrative, Jacobs challenged the notion of the individual who survives and thrives outside the context of community and relationships. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (2015/1971) described traditional pedagogy as one in which students are passive receivers of knowledge. Freire argued that within traditional teaching environments,

the educator's role is to regulate the way the world "enters into" the students. The teacher's task is to . . . "fill" the students by making deposits of information which he or she considers to constitute true knowledge. And since people "receive" knowledge as passive entities, education should make them more passive still, and

adapt them to the world. The educated individual is the adapted person, because he or she is better fit for the world. Translated into practice, *this concept is well suited to the purposes of the oppressors, whose tranquility rests on how well people fit into the world the oppressors have created, and how little they question it.* [emphasis added] (p.76)

By the time Jacob's narrative was published in 1861, rugged individualism was a common term to describe the achievements of white pioneers on the American frontier west of Missouri. However, the American Founding Fathers championed individual rights in the previous century. In a newly formed and fragile republic, emphasis on individualism served the dominant culture (in particular, slaveholders) by de-emphasizing collective actions that may include rebellious acts against the government (Barlow, 2013). Douglass, Brown, and Bibb seemed to have adapted this notion in their autobiographies with little to no questions. Although these men work toward the betterment of a population, their narratives emphasize their own individual efforts. In short, by immediately positioning family and familial relationship in her "I was born" statement, Harriet Jacobs repositioned her autobiography from the self as individual to self within the context of a family and a community. In doing, so, Jacobs challenged the dominant culture and its seemingly accurate assumption about sociopolitical realities.

### **Trope 2: A sketchy account of parentage, often involving a white father**

#### **Text: Douglass (1845)**

My mother was named Harriet Bailey. She was the daughter of Isaac and Betsey Bailey, both colored, and quite dark. My mother was of a darker complexion than either my grandmother or grandfather.

My father was a white man. He was admitted to be such by all I ever heard speak of my parentage. The opinion was also whispered that my master was my father; but of the correctness of this opinion, I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me. My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant—before I knew her as my mother. It is a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age. Frequently, before the child has reached its twelfth month, its mother is taken from it, and hired out on some farm a considered distance off, and the child is placed under the care of an old woman, too old for field labor. For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child's affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result. (pp. 281-282)

#### **Trope/ Code Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

In recounting his parentage, Douglass engaged in critical literacy. He theorized or explained his conception and early childhood as products of an oppressive system. Douglass' limited knowledge of his family tree and his explanation of why slave mothers were often separated from their children illustrate the dehumanizing effect of the slave trade. As Jessica Millward (2015) noted, "American slave owners encouraged enslaved people in places like Maryland to form families so that as the enslaved population grew, so did the owners' wealth in human capital" (p. 16). As such, enslaved fertile African American women were treated like any other commodity. Their children were "human capital," commodities not afforded rights like other humans. Families are usually permanent relationships. However, for many enslaved African Americans, families were temporary means to increase slaveholders' assets. As with Douglass and his mother, this

family could be separated according to the economic exigencies of slaveowners. This dehumanizing perspective of families and motherhood among enslaved African Americans corroborates Douglass's lived experiences. For at least some slaveholders in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Maryland, separating mother and child was a method to protect their (dehumanized) assets.

To fight this dehumanization, Frederick Douglass names his mother and his grandparents. By doing so in his autobiography, he assures that this part of this lineage is not completely lost to history. Equally important, Douglass contradicted the paternalistic account of slavery often offered by slaveholders. In their study of paternalism among 19<sup>th</sup>-century southern slaveholders, Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (2011) wrote that "slaveholders equated paternalism with benevolence" (p. 2). Within this benevolent system, slaveholders concluded that "all labor, white and black, suffered de facto slavery or something akin to it . . . [and that they identified] 'Christian slavery' as the most humane, compassionate, and generous of social systems" (p. 1). For 19<sup>th</sup>-century slaveholders, all forms of labor were exploitative and thus a form of slavery. However, because southern slaveholders were Christians who fed, housed, and clothed their slaves and because they promoted the image of an extended family, these slaveholders considered their economic system the most benevolent and humane. Douglass demonstrated that it was inhumane to alienate mothers from their children.

According to Douglass, this alienation extended to children that may have been fathered by slaveholders. Douglass acknowledged that his father was white. Douglass had no doubt that he himself was the product of a bi-racial coupling. Douglass further mentioned that his master may have been his father. He had no way of confirming that

because his biological father alienated himself from Douglass and from Douglass' mother. According to critical literacy, to be human is to be part of the human family and to be in solidarity with others (Freire, 2015/1971). As such, the familial alienation experienced dehumanized him. It left him without familial affections to his immediate relations: his biological parents. This dehumanization is fully realized when Douglass heard of his mother's death. Douglass wrote:

Very little communication took place between [my mother and me]. Death soon ended what little we could have had while she lived, and with it her hardships and suffering. She died when I was about seven years old, on one of my master's farms, near Lee's Mill. I was not allowed to be present during her illness, at her death, or burial. She was long gone before I knew anything about it. Never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger. (p. 282)

Douglass appeared indifferent to his mother's death. He did not feel angry that he was not present during her illness and death. He did not express relief that his mother no longer suffered. Because slaveholders had alienated him from his mother and deprived him of a close mother/son relationship, he became emotionally numb and dehumanized.

**Text: Brown (1847)**

My father's name, as I learned from my mother, was George Higgins. He was a white man, a relative of my master, and connected with some of the first families in Kentucky. (p. 377)

## **Trope/ Code Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Paulo Freire (2015/1971) noted that a critically literate person understands that: Reading does not consist of merely decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world. Language and reality are dynamically interconnected. The understanding attained by a critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context. (p. 29)

With a simple account of his parentage, William Wells Brown demonstrated that he understood the relationship between text he created and the context that gave his text meaning. By claiming that his father was a white man, Brown insinuated a nexus of unequal power relationships that would not be lost on his original readership. Although Brown did not suggest that his conception and birth were the outcomes of sexual exploitation or rape, he did not confirm that his mother and father had a loving, consensual relationship. Moreover, Brown and his mother remained slaves, despite Brown being the biological son of a man “connected with some of the first families in Kentucky.” If Brown’s father had a loving, consensual relationship with Brown’s mother, he may have at least freed both mother and son. Perhaps he would have ensured that the son had an education. Slaveholders occasionally did both for the enslaved African American mother of their children and for their enslaved offspring (Genovese & Fox-Genovese, 2011; Hilde, 2020; Millford, 2015).

Another important context is Brown’s short statement is the name of the father. Unlike Frederick Douglass, Brown named his biological father and stated the importance of that name. Naming a member of a well-connected family among slaveholders was



tantamount to a formal accusation on the entire institution of slavery as practiced in the South. Historians Edgar D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (2011) noted that southern slaveholders considered their practice of slavery “as the most humane, compassionate, and generous of social systems” (p. 1). Slaveowners frequently used “family” as a metaphor for their relationships with their slaves. It was common for slaveowners to describe these relationships as “our family, white and black” (p. 1). In general, slaveholders were paternalistic. They saw themselves as good fathers that guided and when necessary disciplined their slaves. Yet as Genovese and Fox-Genovese noted, this paternalism did not necessarily translate to benevolence or obscure violence that often undergirds paternalism. In the case of William Wells Brown, his mentioning of a white father indicted an entire system that allow white male slaveholders to father children and then abandon them for whatever reason. Assumably, good fathers in early 19<sup>th</sup> century United States neither abandoned their children nor treated them as so much disposable personal property.

**Text: Bibb (1849)**

My mother was known by the name of Mildred Jackson. She is the mother of seven slaves only, all being sons, of whom I am the eldest. She was so fortunate or unfortunate, as to have some of what is called the slaveholding blood flowing in her veins. I know not how much; but not enough to prevent her children [,] though fathered by slaveholders, from being bought and sold in the slave markets of the South. It is almost impossible for slaves to give a correct account of their male parentage. All that I know about it is, that my mother informed me that my father[‘s] name was James Bibb. He was doubtless one

of the present Bibb family of Kentucky; but I have no personal recollection of him at all, for he died before my recollection. (p. 441)

### **Trope/ Code Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

In his introduction to Freire's and Macedo's (1987) *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, Henry Giroux noted that:

Critical literacy is both a narrative for agency as well as a referent for critique. As a narrative for agency, literacy becomes synonymous with an attempt to rescue history, experience, and vision from convention discourse and dominant social relations. It means developing the theoretical and practical conditions through which human beings can locate themselves in their own histories and in doing so make themselves present as agents in the struggles to expand the possibilities of human life and life. (pp. 10-11)

Bibb established agency and located himself in his own history through the naming of his white father, James Bibb, a Kentucky state senator. Because his mother shared this information, he had the power to name and critique patriarchal power through this specific mention. If a good father raises his children and provides for the mother, what is the status of a father who abandons both mother and child because the law allows such abandonment. What is the moral legitimacy of a legal system that allowed such offspring to be bought and sold as slaves? Although Bibb did not ask these questions, his text prompts such inquires and critiques the moral and legal foundations that girds slaveowner culture and by extension much of early 19<sup>th</sup>-century American culture. Bibb continued this critique through his identification and description of his bi-racial mother: Mildred Jackson. Although she is a blood relative of white slaveowners, she was not afforded

white privilege. Instead, she and her children were considered property. As Bibb explained, his mother's genetic connection to white slaveowner did not prevent these owners from selling his mother and the rest of her children. In short, Bibb dared to name his father and thus dared to speak truth to power. In doing so, he exposed the hypocrisy of slavery that often prided itself on being the most beneficial and benevolent of social orders (Genovese & Fox-Genovese, 2011).

Moreover, Bibb engaged in a type of praxis that requires a subtle reading of text and context. Bibb gave an account of his parentage that many of his original readers would have understood. Although not rampant, the sexual exploitation of enslaved African American women by white slaveowners was most likely common knowledge among abolitionists and anti-slavery supporters (Genovese & Fox-Genovese, 2011; Hilde, 2020, Hirshman, 2022; Millford, 2015).

**Text: Jacobs/Linda Brent (1861)**

My father was a carpenter, and considered so intelligent and skilful [*sic*] in his trade, that, when buildings out of the common line were to be erected, he was sent for from long distances, to be head workman. On condition of paying his mistress two hundred dollars a year, and supporting himself, he was allowed to work at his trade, and manage his own affairs. His strongest wish was to purchase his children; but, though he several times offered his hard earnings for that purpose, he never succeeded. In complexion my parents were a light shade of brownish yellow, and were termed mulattoes. They lived together in a comfortable home; and, though we were all slaves, I was 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. I had one brother, William, who was two years

younger than myself—a bright, affectionate child. I had also a great treasure in my maternal grandmother, who was a remarkable woman in many respects. She was the daughter of a planter in South Carolina, who at this death, left her mother and his three children free, with money to go to St. Augustine, where they had relatives. It was during the Revolutionary War; and they were captured on their passage, carried back, and sold to different purchasers. Such was the story my grandmother used to tell me; but I do not remember the particulars. She was a little girl when she was captured and sold to the keeper of a large hotel. (p. 751)

### **Trope/ Code Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

If, as Henry Giroux asserted, critical literacy “is synonymous with an attempt to rescue history, experience, and vision from conventional discourse and dominant social relationships” (p. 10), Jacob rescued her history by deviating from conventional discourse in several ways: First, her narrative does not contain an absent white slaveowner father that dominate the previous three slave narratives. Her bi-racial father was present in her life. More importantly, “whiteness” and white people, while important to her narrative do not dominate this passage. Familial relationships form the foundation of this account of parentage. Jacobs’ father, mother, brother, and maternal grandmother take center-stage.

**Trope: 3 Description of a cruel master, mistress, or overseer, details of first observed whipping and numerous subsequent whippings, with women very frequently being the victims;**

### **Text: Douglass (1845)--Mr. Hopkins**

[Mr. Hopkins’] chief boast was his ability to manage slaves. The peculiar feature of his government was that of whipping slaves in advance of deserving it. He always managed to have slaves to whip every Monday morning. He did this to alarm their fears, and strike

terror into those who escaped. His plan was to whip for the smallest offences, to prevent the commission of larger ones. Mr. Hopkins could always find an excuse for whipping a slave. . . . A mere look, word or motion,-- a mistake, accident or want or power,--are all matters for which a slave may be whipped at any time. Does the slave look dissatisfied? It is said, he has the devil in him, and it must be whipped out of him. Does he speak loudly when spoken to by his master? Then he is getting high-minded, and should be taken down a button-hole lower. Does he forget to pull off his hat at the approach of a white person? Then he is wanting in reverence and should be whipped for it. (p. 335)

**Text: Douglass (1845)--Master Thomas Auld**

I have said my master found religious sanctions for his cruelty. As an example, I will state one of many facts going to prove the charge. I have seen him tie up a lame young woman, and whip her with a heavy cowskin upon her naked shoulders, causing the warm blood to drip; and, in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of Scripture—"He that knoweth his master's will, and doth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes." Master would keep this lacerated young woman tied up in this horrid condition four or five hours at a time. I have known him to tie her up early in the morning, and whip her before breakfast, leave her, go to his store, return at dinner, and whip her again, cutting her in the places already made raw with his cruel lash. The secret of master's cruelty toward "Henny" is found in the fact of her being almost helpless. . . . She was to master a bill of expense; and as he was a mean man, she was a constant offence to him. He seemed desirous of getting the poor girl out of existence. He gave her away once to his sister; but, being a poor gift, [the sister] was not disposed to keep her. Finally, my benevolent master, to use his own words, "set her adrift to take care of herself." Here was a recently-

converted [Christian] man, holding on upon the mother, and at the same time turning out her helpless child, to starve and to die! Master Thomas was one of the many pious slaveholders who hold slaves for the very charitable purpose of taking care of them. (p. 319)

**Text: Douglass (1845)--Mrs. Hamilton**

Mr. Hamilton. . . own two slaves. Their names were Henrietta and Mary. Henrietta was about twenty-two years of age, Mary was about fourteen; and of all the mangled and emaciated creatures I ever looked upon, these were the most so. . . . The head, neck, and shoulders of Mary was literally cut to pieces. I have frequently felt her head, and found nearly covered with the festering sores, caused by the lash of her cruel mistress. I do not know if her master ever whipped her, but I have been an eye-witness to the cruelty of Mrs. Hamilton. I used to be in Mrs. Hamilton's house every day. Mrs. Hamilton used to sit in a large chair in the middle of the room, with a heavy cowskin always by her side, and scarce an hour passed during the day but was marked by the blood of one of these slaves. The girls seldom passed her without her saying "Move faster, you *black gip*!" at the same time giving them a blow with the cowskin over the head or shoulders, often drawing blood. (p. 305)

**Trope/ Code Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Whipping was a staple of discipline and control on slave plantations (Genovese & Fox-Genovese, 2011; Hilde, 2020; Morgan, 2005). Despite a myth of benevolence and paternalistic charity, slaveowners often resorted to violence as means to discipline and to oppress their slaves. As Douglass demonstrated, violence and the threat of violence was often used to maintain social order. Critical literacy, as Henry Giroux (1987) noted,

brings with it a critical attentiveness to the web of relations in which meaning is produced both as historical construction and as part of a wider set of pedagogical practices. . . . As part of the discourse of narrative and agency, critical literacy suggests using history as a form of liberating memory. As used here, history means recognizing the figural traces of untapped potentialities as well as sources of suffering that constitute one's past. To reconstruct history in this is to situate the meaning and practice of literacy in an ethical discourse that takes as its referent those instances of suffering that need to be remembered and overcome.

(p. 16)

In describing the cruelty of slaveowners, Douglass provided a theoretical framework to describe the cruelty of slavery and slaveowners. For Douglass, slavery was the "fatal poison of irresponsible power" (p. 303) that encouraged needless violence to control and oppress a population. Mr. Hopkins inflicted pain as a preemptive strike against disorder and chaos. It was his control mechanism. Master Thomas Auld whipped a disabled slave because that slave was not useful to him. Douglass did not explain why Mrs. Hamilton whipped her two slaves. But if, as Douglass argued, slavery was a fatal poison, she was poisoned to a degree that caused her to regard her slaves as outlets for her rage. In short, Douglass argued that slavery enabled the worse vices to come to surface.

Equally important, Douglass' descriptions allowed him to remember and to overcome suffering. Ernest Morrell (2008) described slave narratives as acts of care for the self. Although Douglass wrote his autobiography as part of an abolitionist agenda, he showed acts of care for himself and others. Through the writing and publication of his

narrative, Douglass revealed his own suffering and that of millions of other African American slaves. This revelation may have allowed Douglass to heal from his trauma.

**Text: Brown (1847)—Mr. Colburn (1)**

Mr. Colburn was very abusive, not only to his servants, but to his wife, who was an excellent woman, and one from whom I never knew a servant to receive a harsh word; but never did I know of a kind one to a servant from her husband. Among the slaves employed in the hotel, was one by the name of Aaron, who belonged to Mr. John F. Darby, a lawyer. Aaron was the knife-cleaner. One day, one of the knives was put on the table, not as clean as it might have been. Mr. Colburn, for the offence, tied Aaron up in the wood-house, and gave him fifty lashes on the bare back with a cowhide, after which, he made me wash him down with rum. After being untied, he went home to his master, and complained of the treatment which he had received. Mr. Darby would give no heed to anything he had to say, but sent him directly back. Colburn, learning that [Aaron] had been to his master with complaints, tied him up again, and gave him a more severe whipping than before. The poor fellow's back was literally cut to pieces; so much so, that he was not able to work for twelve days. (p. 382)

**Text: Brown (1847)—Mr. Colburn (2)**

There was also, among the servants, a girl whose master resided in the country. Her name was Patsey. Mr. Colburn tied her up one evening, and whipped her until several of the neighbors came out and begged him to desist. The reason for whipping her was this. She was engaged to be married to a man belonging to Major William Christy, who resided four or five miles north of the city. Mr. Colburn had forbid *[sic]* her to see John Christy. The reason of this was said to be the regard which he himself had for Patsey. She went to



meeting [*sic*] that evening, and John returned home with her. Mr. Colburn had intended to flog John, if he came within the inclosure [*sic*]; but John knew too well the temper of his rival, and kept at a safe distance;--so he took vengeance on the poor girl. If all the slave-drivers had been called together, I do not think a more cruel man than John Colburn,--and he too a northern man,--could have been found among them. (p. 382-383)

**Text: Brown (1847)—Mr. Broadwell**

When at Natchez the second time, I saw a slave very cruelly whipped. He belonged to Mr. Broadwell, a merchant who kept a store on the wharf. The slave's name was Lewis. I had known him for several years, as he was formerly from St. Louis. We were expecting a steamboat down the river, in which we were to take passage for New Orleans. Mr. Walker [to whom Brown was hired out] sent me to the landing to watch for the boat, ordering me to inform him on its arrival. While there, I went into the store to see Lewis. I saw a slave in the store, and asked him where Lewis was. Said he, "They have got Lewis hanging between the heavens and the earth." I asked him what he meant by that. He told me to go to the warehouse and see. I went in, and found Lewis there. He was tied up to a beam, with his toes just touching the floor. As there was no one in the warehouse but himself, I inquired the reason of his being in that situation. He said Mr. Broadwell had sold his wife to a planter six miles from the city, and that he had been there to visit her,--that he went at night, expecting to return before daylight, and went without his master's permission. The patrol had taken him up before he reached his wife. He was put in jail, and his master had to pay for his catching and keeping, and that was what he was tied up for.

Just as he finished his story, Mr. Broadwell came in, and inquired what I was doing there. I knew not what to say, and while I was thinking what reply to make, he

struck me over the head with the cowhide, the end of which struck me over my right eye, sinking deep into the flesh, leaving a scar which I carry to this day. Before I visited Lewis, he had received fifty lashes. Mr. Broadwell gave him fifty lashes more after I came out, as I was afterwards informed by Lewis himself. (pp. 391-392)

**Text: Brown (1847)—Major Freeland (1)**

My mother was hired out in the city, and I was also hired out there to Major Freeland, who kept a public house. He was formerly from Virginia, and was a horse-racer, cock-fighter, gambler, and withal an inveterate drunkard. There were ten or twelve servants in the house, and when he was present, it was cut and slash—knock down and drag out. In his fits of anger, he would take up a chair, and throw it at a servant; and in his more rational moments, when he wished to chastise one, he would tie them up in the smoke-house, and whip them; after which he would cause a fire to be made of tobacco stems, and smoke them. This he called “*Virginia play*.” (pp. 380-381)

**Text: Brown (1847)—Major Freeland (2)**

Major Freeland soon made this appearance, and took me out, and ordered me to follow him, which I did. After we returned home, I was tied up in the smoke-house, and was very severely whipped. After the Major had flogged me to his satisfaction, he sent out his son Robert, a young man of eighteen or twenty years of age, to see that I was well smoked. He made a fire of tobacco stems, which soon set me coughing and sneezing. This, Robert told me, was the way his father used to do to his slaves in Virginia. After giving me what they conceived to be a decent smoking, I was untied and again set to work. (p. 381)

## **Trope/ Code Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

In his discussion of dehumanization, Freire (2015/1971) posited:

Dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is the distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human. This distortion occurs within history; but it is not [a] historical vocation. Indeed, to admit of dehumanization as [a] historical vocation would lead either to cynicism or total despair. The struggle for humanization, for the emancipation of labor, for the overcoming of alienation, for the affirmation of men and women as persons would be meaningless. This struggle is only possible because dehumanization, although a concrete fact, is not a given destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turns dehumanizes the oppressed. (p.44)

Freire argued that dehumanization is the result of oppressive and unjust system, not an inevitable development in the evolution of societies and governments. Although William Wells Brown's narrative precedes Freire's text by 150 years, Brown's description of whippings illustrated that he understood dehumanization in a similar manner. In each episode, physical violence was not an inevitability, but a consequence of what Frederick Douglass termed "the fatal poison of irresponsible power" of many slave-owners (p. 303). Affected by this social toxin, some white slaveowners abused their spouses and their slaves. Mr. Colbert engaged in violence against wife, whom Brown described as the ideal plantation spouse: kind and loving even toward her slaves. To abuse such a person, Mr. Colburn must have been so infected by the fatal poison of irresponsible power that he directed his anger and violence towards anyone within his domain. His acts of anger and

violence can be described as directionless and irrational. In this sense, Mr. Colburn has become as dehumanized as the slaves and the spouse he oppressed.

Irrationality and the fatal poison of irresponsible power also seemed to have informed Mr. Colburn's action with Aaron. To savagely beat servants who did not perform their duties properly seemed excessive, even within the historical moment in which Brown wrote his narrative. If such cruelty were the accepted cultural norm in early 19<sup>th</sup> century United States, Brown most likely would have not included the episode in his narrative. Brown's depictions of often graphic and savage whippings and other violent acts against African American slaves must have served the theoretical and practical needs of early 19<sup>th</sup>-century abolitionists and other antislavery activists. By using graphic descriptions of violence, Brown engaged in a common 19<sup>th</sup>-century form of praxis: to evoke sympathy.

Elizabeth C. Clark (1995) posited that 19<sup>th</sup>-century abolitionists and other antislavery activists commonly used the trope of the suffering slave to evoke sympathy within their audience. In early- to mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century United States, sympathy translated to empathy—to feel the sufferings of others as if they were one's own. Clark (1995) wrote: “abolitionists. . . shared a core belief that the whipping of slaves by masters represented an indefensible exercise of arbitrary authority and that representation of such events should provide a sympathetic response from right-thinking Christians” (p. 465). In the case of brutalized slaves, sympathy was not merely the self-indulgent show of pity for an oppressed of people; it was a call to action to abolish slavery and the brutality that abolitionists believed was inherent in that institution. As Clark posited, “sympathy represented praxis” (p. 479). Brown and other slave authors used graphic depictions of

violence against African American slaves to arouse a moral sympathy that would translate to the immediate abolition of slavery. The desired goal was for the audience to empathize with African American slaves and thus recognize a shared humanity.

I conclude that this sympathy/empathy and recognition of an oppressed populations' humanity is a precursor to Paulo Freire's (2015/ 1971) assumption of liberation and solidarity. Freire wrote:

Solidarity requires that one enter the situation of those with whom one is solidary; it is a radical posture. If what characterizes the oppressed is their subordination to the consciousness of the master, as Hegel affirms, true solidarity with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality which has made them these "beings for another." The oppressor is [in solidarity] with the oppressed only when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor—when he stops making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love. True solidarity is found only in the plenitude of this act of love, in its existentiality, in its praxis. To affirm that men and women are persons and as persons should be free, and yet to do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality is a farce. (pp. 49-50)

For many 19<sup>th</sup>-century readers of slave narratives, abolitionists, and other antislavery activists, empathy translated to psychologically and emotionally placing themselves as the objects of whippings and other acts of violence (Cima, 2014). As Freire argued, sympathy/empathy was solidarity—to become one with the sufferer. Through his depictions of savage cruelty and violence, William Wells Brown provided a

transformative space to engage in a radical love that bridges self and other. The “us” and “them” become the “we.” As a solidary force, the “we” must liberate themselves from the oppression and suffering to become more fully human.

**Text: Bibb (1849)—Mr. Francis Whitfield, Deacon (1)**

My first impressions when I arrived on the Deacon’s farm, were that he was far more like what the people call the devil, than he was like a deacon. Not many days after my arrival there, I heard the Deacon tell one of the slave girls, that he had bought her for a wife for his boy Stephen, which office he forced by a threat. At first the poor girl neglected to do this, having no sort of affection for the man—but she was finally forced to do it by an application of the driver’s lash as threatened by the Deacon. (p. 503)

**Text: Bibb (1849)—Mr. Francis Whitfield, Deacon (2)**

Next a mulatto girl who [waits] about the house, on her mistress, displeased [her mistress], for which the Deacon stripped and tied her up. . . . He commenced on this poor girl, and gave her two hundred lashes before he had her untied.

After giving her fifty lashes, he stopped and lectured her a while, asking her if she thought that she could obey her mistress, &c. She promised to do all in her power to please him and her mistress, if he would have mercy on her. But this plea was all in vain. He commenced on her again; and this flogging was carried on in the most inhumane manner until she had received two hundred stripes on her naked quivering flesh, tied up and exposed to the public gaze of all. (pp. 303-304)

### **Trope/ Code Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

With these descriptions of a Mr. Whitfield and his use of corporal punishment, Bibb engaged in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century praxis of sympathy/empathy. Like William Wells Brown, Bibb provided a literary space where the readers become one with the oppressed to become the “we” who suffer oppression and violence within the slave system. Henry Giroux (1987) wrote that critical literacy “begins with the fact of one’s existence as part of a historically constructed practice within specific relations of power” (p. 7). Through his testimonies of violence against two female slaves, Bibb acknowledged the existence of himself and other slaves within a network of socially constructed, oppressive relationships. Equally important, because he and other slave narrative authors employed such images to excite sympathy and thus promote solidarity between readers and the oppressed, Bibb revealed his readers’ positions within the same relations of power. In other words, through the praxis of sympathy/empathy, Bibb encouraged readers to become active agents in the liberation of slaves and themselves in the nexus of specific oppressive sociopolitical relationships.

Henry Giroux (1987) posited that for Paulo Freire “literacy. . . is inherently a political project in which men and women assert their right and responsibility not only to read, understand, and transform their experiences, but also to reconstitute their relationship with the wider society” (p. 7). Like Douglass, Brown, and other slave narrative authors, Bibb reconstructed his relationship with the wider society of his readers. Bibb transformed himself from oppressed object (slave) to a freed teacher who through sympathy/empathy leads his readers to “understand the political nature of the limits *and* possibilities that make up the larger society” (Giroux, 1987, p. 7).

**Text: Jacobs/Linda Brent (1861) – Dr. Flint**

When I had been in the family a few weeks, one of the plantation slaves was bought to town, by order of his master. It was near night when he arrived, and Dr. Flint ordered him to be taken to the work house, and tied up to the joist, so that his feet would just escape the ground. In that situation he was to wait till the doctor had taken his tea. I shall never forget that night. Never before, in my life, had I heard hundreds of blows fall, in succession, on a human being. His piteous groans, and his “O, pray don’t massa,” rang in my ears for months afterwards. There were many conjectures as to the cause of this terrible punishment. Some said master accused him of stealing corn; others said the slave had quarreled with his wife, in presence of the overseer, and had accused his master of being the father of her child. They were both black, and the child was very fair.

I went into the work house next morning, and saw the cowhide still wet with blood, and the boards all covered with gore. The poor man lived, and continued to quarrel with this wife. A few months afterwards Dr. Flint handed them both over to a slave-trader. The guilty man put their value into his pocket, and had the satisfaction of knowing that they were out of sight and hearing. When the mother was delivered into the trader’s hands, she said, “You promised to treat me well.” To which he replied, “You have let your tongue run too far; damn you!” She had forgotten that it was a crime for a slave to tell who was the father of her child. (p. 759)

**Text: Jacobs/Linda Brent (1861) – Dr. Flint (2)**

During the first years of my service in Dr. Flint’s family, I was accustomed to share some indulgences with the children of my mistress. Though this seemed to me no more than right, I was grateful for it, and tried to merit the kindness by the faithful discharge of my



duties. But I now entered on my fifteenth year—a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import. I tried to treat them with indifference or contempt. The master’s age, my extreme youth, and the fear that his conduct would be reported to my grandmother, made him bear this treatment for many months. He was a crafty man, and resorted to many means to accomplish his purposes. Sometimes he had stormy, terrific ways, that made his victims tremble; sometimes he assumed a gentleness he thought would surely subdue. Of the two, I preferred his stormy moods, although they left me trembling. He tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother instilled. He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master. I was compelled to live under the same roof with him—where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. (p. 773).

**Text: Jacobs/Linda Brent (1861) -. Dr. Flint (3)**

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 recovered a little from the effects, I exclaimed, “You have struck me for answering honestly. How I despise you!”

There was silence 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.”

“Silence!” he exclaimed, in a thundering voice. “By heavens, girl, you forget yourself too far! Are you mad? If you are, I will soon bring you to your senses. Do you think any other master would bear what I have borne from you this morning? Many masters would have killed you on the spot. How would you like to be sent to jail for your insolence?”

“I know I have been disrespectful, sir,” I replied; “but you drove me to it; I couldn’t help it. As for jail, there would be more peace for me there than there is here.”

“You deserve to go there,” said he, “and to be under such treatment, that you would forget the meaning of the word peace. It would do you good. It would take some of your high notions out of you. But I am not ready to send you there yet, notwithstanding your ingratitude for all my kindness and forbearance. You have been the plague of my life. I have wanted to make you happy, and I have been repaid with the basest ingratitude; but though you have proved yourself incapable of appreciating my kindness, I will be lenient towards you, Linda. I will give you one more chance to redeem your character. If you behave yourself and do as I require, I will forgive you and treat you as I have always done; but if you disobey me, I will punish you as I would the meanest slave on my plantation. (pp. 785-786)

## **Trope/ Code Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Like Frederick Douglass (1845) Harriet Jacobs (1861) engaged in a praxis that demonstrated how cultural context informed cultural practices. For Douglass, the “fatal poison of irresponsible power” (p. 303) translated to inhuman practices. For Jacobs, this toxin translated into overt acts of violence (whippings and beatings) and psychological coercion. In other words, words can be violent. Jacobs observed that her puberty prompted a series of sexually inappropriate statements from her master, Dr. Flint.

Although Jacobs did not quote Dr. Flint, her audience of abolitionists already knew about the sexual exploitation of African American female slaves (Genovese & Fox-Genovese, 2011; Jennings 1990). Jacobs’ narrative was one of the few that described this exploitation from a slave woman’s perspective (Starling, 1988). As such, it is one of the few narratives that demonstrates how African American female slaves lived under the double oppressions of racism and sexism and how they could have gained agency in subtle ways. In patriarchal societies, frequently women are not considered individuals with rights of bodily autonomy. They are often considered property of either their fathers or their husbands. This proprietary relationship was especially true for African slave women. As property, African American slave women often lacked the ability to control their own bodies and to fight physical and psychological oppression (Jennings, 1990). Jacobs’s narrative demonstrated how one literate African American female slave subverted these dynamics to gain some agency in her life and within her community.

In the context of antebellum slave narratives and within the restrictions of slave plantation patriarchy, Jacobs’s actions were surprising. Instead of quietly enduring physical and emotional oppression, Jacobs fought back. She spoke truth to power. Henry

Giroux (1987) posited that for Paulo Freire “literacy. . . is inherently a political project in which men and women asserts their right and responsibility not only to read, understand, and transform their experiences, not also to reconstitute their relationship with the wider society” (p. 7). In her slave narrative, Jacob’s reconstruction of her experiences allowed her to understand her oppression and to demonstrate ways she actively fought it. Jacobs’s action cannot be overstated. As a slave, she found a way to fight oppression. As a former slave, she continued this fight.

**Trope 4: An account of one extraordinary, strong, hardworking slave—often “pure African”—who, because there is no reason for it, refuses to be whipped**

**Text: Douglass (1845)**

No findings

**Text: Brown (1847) – Randall**

Among the slaves on the plantation, was one by the name of Randall. He was a man about six feet high, and well-proportioned, and known as a man of great strength and power. He was considered the most valuable and able-bodied slave on the plantation; but no matter how good or useful a slave may be, he seldom escapes the lash. But it was not so with Randall. He had been on the plantation since my earliest recollection, and I had never known of his being flogged. No thanks were due to the master or overseer for this. I have often heard him declare, that no white man should ever whip him—that he would die first.

[The overseer] Cook, from the time that he came upon the plantation, had frequently declared, that he could and would flog any nigger that was put into the field to work under him. My master had repeatedly told him not to attempt to whip Randall, but

he was determined to try it. As soon as he was left sole dictator, he thought the time had come to put his threats into execution. He soon began to find fault with Randall, and threatened to whip him, if he did not do better. One day he gave him a very hard task,—more than he could possibly do; and at night, the task not being performed, he told Randall that he should remember him the next morning. On the following morning, after the hands had taken breakfast, Cook called out to Randall, and told him that he intended to whip him, and ordered him to cross his hands and be tied. Randall asked why he wished to whip him. He answered, because he had not finished his task the day before. Randall said that the task was too great, or he should have done it. Cook said it made no difference,—he should whip him. Randall stood silent for a moment, and then said, “Mr. Cook, I have always tried to please you since you have been on the plantation, and I find you are determined not to be satisfied with my work, let me do as well as I may. No man has laid hands on me, to whip me, for the last ten years, and I have long since come to the conclusion not to be whipped by any man living.” Cook, finding by Randall’s determined look and gestures, that he would resist, called three of the hands from their work, and commanded them to seize Randall, and tie him. The hands stood still;—they knew Randall—and they also knew him to be a powerful man, and were afraid to grapple with him. As soon as Cook had ordered the men to seize him, Randall turned to them, and said—“Boys, you all know me; you know that I can handle any three of you, and the man that lays hands on me shall die. This white man can’t whip me himself, and therefore he has called you to help him.” The overseer was unable to prevail upon them to seize and secure Randall, and finally ordered them all to go to their work together.

Nothing was said to Randall by the overseer, for more than a week. One morning, however, while the hands were at work in the field, he came into it, accompanied by three friends of his, Thompson, Woodbridge and Jones. They came up to where Randall was at work, and Cook ordered him to leave his work, and go with them to the barn. He refused to go; whereupon he was attacked by the overseer and his companions, when he turned upon them, and laid them, one after another, prostrate on the ground. Woodbridge drew out his pistol, and fired at him, and brought him to the ground by a pistol ball. The others rushed upon him with their clubs, and beat him over the head and face, until they succeeded in tying him. He was then taken to the barn, and tied to a beam. Cook gave him over one hundred lashes with a heavy cowhide, had him washed with salt and water, and left him tied during the day. The next day he was untied, and taken to a blacksmith's shop, and had a ball and chain attached to his leg. He was compelled to labor in the field, and perform the same amount of work that the other hands did. When his master returned home, he was much pleased to find that Randall had been subdued in his absence. (pp. 379-380)

### **Trope/ Code Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

According to Freire (2015/1971) dialogue is important part of praxis. With the anecdote about Randall, a strong and productive slave, Brown engaged in a praxis of empathy and a dialogue about the use of violence to maintain order on a slave plantation. Slave owners would often argue that corporal punishment was often necessary to maintain discipline and order. Otherwise, slaves would disobey masters and the entire institution of slavery would fall into chaos (Blassingame, 1972; Genovese & Fox-Genovese, 2011). As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1987) noted, slave narratives were written

against pro-slavery arguments. In the case of Randall, it was not necessary to assert violence to maintain order. Randall was the hardest working slave. He was a valuable asset whose only flaw was to think that his hard-work and strength exempted him from whipping. Nevertheless, the often violent and exploitative nature of plantation slavery rendered even the hardest-working, compliant slave subject to the racism and capriciousness of an overzealous, cruel overseer.

In his description of Cook's actions, Brown engaged in a dialogue and praxis of the impact of slavery on another oppressed group--propertyless, poor white men. Freire (1987, 2015/1971) argued that the oppressed often identify with their oppressors as a way to liberate themselves. As an overseer, Cook was not part of the ruling class. Overseers in the antebellum South were often poor, propertyless, illiterate white men who had limited opportunities. Citing K. L. Merritt (2017), Joe Regan (2021) noted that poor white southerners were often "part of a more comprehensive exploitation system that [characterized] the emerging global and capitalist division of [labor]. . . Poor working whites were often looked down upon by elite southerners" (pp. 203-204). As a member of a relatively powerless class, Cook exercised violent power in his employer's absence. In essence, attempted to rise above his oppression by inflicting pain on a blameless slave and thus pleasing the plantation owner. Although Cook succeeded in whipping Randall into submission, he did not free himself from the socioeconomic oppression of the slave system. He was still a powerless white man whose domain was restricted to his overseer position. In the other overall scheme of the plantation economy, he experienced a different level of oppression than the slaves he supervised. In short, Brown demonstrated how slavery dehumanized and demoralized various oppressed peoples within the system.

**Text: Bibb (1849)**

No findings

**Text: Jacobs/Linda Brent (1861)**

No findings

**Note on Findings**

Although I did not expect to find every trope in every narrative, especially in such a small sample size, I am surprised that three out of four narratives did not reference this particular trope. For rhetorical purposes, its inclusion in a slave narrative would demonstrate that the institution of slavery was so monstrous and so unjust that even an extraordinary, compliant slave would suffer unheeded violence.

**Trope 5. Record of barriers raised against slave literacy and the overwhelming difficulties encountered in learning to read and write**

**Douglass (1845) Mr. and Mrs. Auld**

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, “If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now,” said he, “if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it



could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy.” These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man’s power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it. Whilst I was saddened by the thought of losing the aid of my kind mistress, I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master. Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read. The very decided manner with which he spoke, and strove to impress his wife with the evil consequences of giving me instruction, served to convince me that he was deeply sensible of the truths he was uttering. It gave me the best assurance that I might rely with the utmost confidence on the results which, he said, would flow from teaching me to read. What he most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both. (p. 303-304)

### **Douglass (1845) – Random Literate Boys**

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent of errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge. I am strongly tempted to give the names of two or three of those little boys, as a testimonial of the gratitude and affection I bear them; but prudence forbids;—not that it would injure me, but it might embarrass them; for it is almost an unpardonable offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian country. It is enough to say of the dear little fellows, that they lived on Philpot Street, very near Durgin and Bailey's ship-yard. I used to talk this matter of slavery over with them. I would sometimes say to them, I wished I could be as free as they would be when they got to be men. "You will be free as soon as you are twenty-one, but I am a slave for life! Have not I as good a right to be free as you have?" These words used to trouble them; they would express for me the liveliest sympathy, and console me with the hope that something would occur by which I might be free. (p. 307)

**Douglass (1845) – Mr. Wilson**

While I lived with my master in St. Michael's, there was a white young man, a Mr. Wilson, who proposed to keep a Sabbath school for the instruction of such slaves as might be disposed to learn to read the New Testament. We met but three times, when Mr. West and Mr. Fairbanks, both class-leaders, with many others, came upon us with sticks and other missiles, drove us off, and forbade us to meet again. Thus ended our little Sabbath school in the pious town of St. Michael's (p. 319).

**Douglass (1845) – Henry and John**

Mr. Freeland was himself the owner of but two slaves. Their names were Henry Harris and John Harris. The rest of his hands he hired. These consisted of myself, Sandy Jenkins,[1] and Handy Caldwell. Henry and John were quite intelligent, and in a very little while after I went there, I succeeded in creating in them a strong desire to learn how to read. This desire soon sprang up in the others also. They very soon mustered up some old spelling-books, and nothing would do but that I must keep a Sabbath school. I agreed to do so, and accordingly devoted my Sundays to teaching these my loved fellow-slaves how to read. Neither of them knew his letters when I went there. Some of the slaves of the neighboring farms found what was going on, and also availed themselves of this little opportunity to learn to read. It was understood, among all who came, that there must be as little display about it as possible. It was necessary to keep our religious masters at St. Michael's unacquainted with the fact, that, instead of spending the Sabbath in wrestling, boxing, and drinking whisky, we were trying to learn how to read the will of God; for they had much rather see us engaged in those degrading sports, than to see us behaving like intellectual, moral, and accountable beings. My blood boils as I think of the bloody

manner in which Messrs. Wright Fairbanks and Garrison West, both class-leaders, in connection with many others, rushed in upon us with sticks and stones, and broke up our virtuous little Sabbath school, at St. Michael's—all calling themselves Christians! humble followers of the Lord Jesus Christ! But I am again digressing. (pp. 336-337)

### **Douglass (1845) -Sabbath School Scholars**

I held my Sabbath school at the house of a free colored man, whose name I deem it imprudent to mention; for should it be known, it might embarrass him greatly, though the crime of holding the school was committed ten years ago. I had at one time over forty scholars, and those of the right sort, ardently desiring to learn. They were of all ages, though mostly men and women. I look back to those Sundays with an amount of pleasure not to be expressed. They were great days to my soul. The work of instructing my dear fellow-slaves was the sweetest engagement with which I was ever blessed. We loved each other, and to leave them at the close of the Sabbath was a severe cross indeed. When I think that these precious souls are to-day shut up in the prison-house of slavery, my feelings overcome me, and I am almost ready to ask, "Does a righteous God govern the universe? and for what does he hold the thunders in his right hand, if not to smite the oppressor, and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the spoiler?" These dear souls came not to Sabbath school because it was popular to do so, nor did I teach them because it was reputable to be thus engaged. Every moment they spent in that school, they were liable to be taken up, and given thirty-nine lashes. They came because they wished to learn. Their minds had been starved by their cruel masters. They had been shut up in mental darkness. I taught them, because it was the delight of my soul to be doing something that looked like bettering the condition of my race. I kept up my school nearly the whole year I lived

with Mr. Freeland; and, [besides] my Sabbath school, I devoted three evenings in the week, during the winter, to teaching the slaves at home. And I have the happiness to know, that several of those who came to Sabbath school learned how to read; and that one, at least, is now free through my agency.(p. 337)

### **Trope/ Code Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

For Frederick Douglass and other African American slaves, access to literacy education was fraught with hinderances and difficulties. An important method of oppression in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was to restrict slave education (Rasmussen, 2010; Cornelius, 1991; Gates, 1987; Monaghan, 1998, 2005; Woodson, 1968/1919). From a critical literacy perspective, this restriction is not surprising. As Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (1987) noted, literacy “becomes a vehicle by which the oppressed are equipped with the necessary tools to reappropriate their history, culture, and language practices” (p. 157). Literacy, in other words, enabled African American slaves to reclaim or appropriate their humanity. As humans, African American slaves could reasonably champion for the unalienable human rights—as expressed in the Declaration of Independence. For Douglass, this reappropriation was the “pathway from slavery to freedom” (p. 304). Freedom, in this instance, was not a physical liberation. It was an emancipation of a mindset, the origins of a critical consciousness. As Douglass learned to read and to write, he became more critical and analytical of the sociopolitical conditions (slavery) that oppressed him and other African American slaves. Literacy allowed Douglass to transform from an object to a thinking subject whose mission was to fight oppression and change to society. Throughout his narrative, Douglass equated literacy with being human (*homo sapiens*, thinking man). Douglass insinuated that if learning to read and write

could transform him into a thinking subject, it could potentially transform millions of other African American slaves who would fight oppression and possibly lead rebellions.

Douglass' insinuations were supported by historical precedence. During the colonial and early republic eras, slave literacy was often considered a potential threat to the institution of American slavery. For instance, as Birgit Brander Rasmussen (2010) demonstrated, the 1740 South Carolina Negro Act that prohibited slave literacy education was in response to the Stono Rebellion on September 9, 1739. Twenty slaves killed over twenty settlers as the rebellion moved south towards St. Augustine, Florida. Under Spanish control, St. Augustine, Florida was a key destination of fugitive slaves. In 1733, the Spanish king issued a *cédula* (edict) that granted liberty to slaves who escaped from the British colonies. Rasmussen wrote, "the Spanish began to publicize the edict in late 1738 to encourage insurrection and undermine the stability of the [British] colony" (p. 202). Rasmussen concluded that the 1740 act targeted slave literacy "because written materials, like the Spanish *cédula*, could foment unrest among the colony's slaves only if some of them were literate. Those who were able to read such materials could spread the word to those who could not read" (p. 202). In the context of colonial American slavery, literacy was not merely a set of neutral technical skills. In the case of the Stono Rebellion, the ability to read and to write was associated with, as Douglass argued, "the pathway from slavery to freedom" (p. 304). I do not argue that literate slaves were more likely to lead violent rebellions. However, this example shows a connection between literacy, knowledge, and violent political action. If knowledge is power, then literate slaves in this instance used that power to briefly overpower oppression. In any case, the link between slave literacy and slave rebellion was perceived as such a threat to the status

quo in early 18<sup>th</sup> -century South Carolina that legal sanctions were put into place to eliminate it.

**Brown (1847)**

No findings

**Bibb (1849) – Miss Davis**

In 1833, I had some very serious religious impressions, and there was [*sic*] quite a number of slaves in that neighborhood, who felt very desirous to be taught to read the Bible. There was a Miss Davis, a poor white girl, who offered to teach a Sabbath School for the slaves, notwithstanding public opinion and the law was opposed to it. Books were furnished and she commenced the school; but the news soon got to our owners that she was teaching us to read. This caused quite an excitement in the neighborhood. Patrols were appointed to go and break it up the next Sabbath. They were determined that we should not have a Sabbath School in operation. For slaves this was called an incendiary movement. (p. 445)

**Bibb (1849) White Inmates**

Most of the inmates of this prison I have described, were white men who had been sentenced there by the law, for depredations committed by them. There was in that prison, gamblers, drunkards, thieves, robbers, adulterers, and even murderers. There were also in the female department, harlots, pick-pockets, and adulteresses. In such company, and under such influences, where there was constant swearing, lying, cheating, and stealing, it was almost impossible for a virtuous person to avoid pollution, or to maintain their virtue. No place or places in this country can be better calculated to inculcate vice of every kind than a Southern work house or house of correction.

After a profligate, thief, or a robber, has learned all that they can out of the prison, they might go in one of those prisons and learn something more—they might properly be called robber colleges; and if slaveholders understood this they would never let their slaves enter them. No man would give much for a slave who had been kept long in one of these prisons.

I have often heard them telling each other how they robbed houses, and persons on the high way, by knocking them down, and would rob them, pick their pockets, and leave them half dead. Others would tell of stealing horses, cattle, sheep, and slaves; and when they would be sometimes apprehended, by the aid of their friends, they would break jail. But they could most generally find enough to swear them clear of any kind of villany [sic]. They seemed to take great delight in telling of their exploits in robbery. There was a regular combination of them who had determined to resist law, wherever they went, to carry out their purposes.

In conversing with myself, [the convicts] learned that I was notorious for running away, and professed sympathy for me. They thought that I might yet get to Canada, and be free, and suggested a plan by which I might accomplish it; and one way was, to learn to read and write, so that I might write myself a pass ticket, to go just where I pleased, when I was taken out of the prison; and they taught me secretly all they could while in the prison. (pp. 491-492)

### **Bibb (1849) – Slave Traders**

But the most rigorous examinations of slaves by those slave inspectors, is on the mental capacity. If they are found to be very intelligent, this is pronounced the most objectionable of all other qualities connected with the life of a slave. In fact, it



undermines the whole fabric of his chattelhood [sic]; it prepares for what slaveholders are pleased to pronounce the unpardonable sin when committed by a slave. It lays the foundation for running away, and going to Canada. They also see in it a love for freedom, patriotism, insurrection, bloodshed, and exterminating war against American slavery.

Hence they are very careful to inquire whether a slave who is for sale can read or write. This question has been asked me often by slave traders, and cotton planters, while I was there for market. After conversing with me, they have sworn by their Maker, that they would not have me among their negroes; and that they saw the devil in my eye; I would run away, &c. (p. 496)

**Bibb (1849) – H. Bibb**

I have omitted to state that this was the second time I had run away from him; while I was gone the first time, he extorted from my wife the fact that I had been in the habit of running away, before we left Kentucky; that I had been to Canada, and that I was trying to learn the art of reading and writing. All this was against me.

It is true that I was striving to learn myself to write. I was a kind of a house servant and was frequently sent off on errands, but never without a written pass; and on Sundays I have sometimes got permission to visit our neighbor's slaves, and I have often tried to write myself a pass.

Whenever I got hold of an old letter that had been thrown away, or a piece of white paper, I would save it to write on. I have often gone off in the woods and spent the greater part of the day alone, trying to learn to write myself a pass, by writing on the backs of old letters; copying after the pass that had been written by Whitfield; by so

doing I got the use of the pen and could form letters as well as I can now, but knew not what they were.

### **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Bibb (1849) wrote that an 1833 attempt to teach slaves to read was “an incendiary movement”(p. 445). 1833 was just two years after two crucial points in slave history: the Nat Turner Rebellion and the publication of William Lloyd Garrison’s abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* (Hirshman, 2022). A literate slave from Virginia whose interpretation of the Bible translated to a violent attempt to liberate himself and other African American slaves, Nat Turner was representative of the “incendiary movement” that threatened to burn down an entire system of oppression. His August 1831 rebellion was the bloodiest slave revolt in American history. Nearly five dozen white women, children, and men were killed.(Breen, 2016). Garrison published the first edition of *The Liberator* on January 1, 1831. For the next 35 years, this publication advocated for the immediate emancipation of slaves. As Breen noted, Garrison argued that Turner’s Rebellion was the natural outcome of slavery.

The common link between the Turner Rebellion and Garrison’s *The Liberator* was critical literacy and liberation. Turner used his literacy skills to become a modern-day Moses who would lead his people from slavery (Williams, 2005; Woodson, 1968/1919). Paulo Freire (2015/1971, 1987) argued that a critical literate person reflected on their social, political, and economic status in the context of a dominating and often oppressive culture. Having reflected on their status and any oppression that may shape their lived experiences, a critical literate person takes action to change that world. In other words, Turner engaged in a praxis of emancipation. His reading of the Bible

plausibly led him to posit a theory of liberation based on stories in both the Old and New Testament. The story of Moses leading the Hebrews out of Egyptian bondage would have been relevant to him. His action was a violent rebellion based on his interpretation of the Bible.

The January, 1831 initial publication of William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator* signaled a more radical approach to abolitionism. Rather than a gradual emancipation, Garrison and his followers ("Garrisonians") argued for immediate liberation of all African American slaves. Because his newspaper commenced in the same year as the Turner Rebellion, proslavery activists often accused him of provoking the rebellion—with no proof that Turner even read *The Liberator* (Cain, 1995).

I analyzed the Nat Turner Rebellion and William Lloyd Garrison's founding of *The Liberator* at some length to contextualize the role of literacy in Bibb's narrative. Within this context, Bibb's struggle to learn to read and to write and his frequent denial of literacy skills emphasized the potentially subversive qualities that were associated with being able to read and to write. When questioned directly, Bibb often denied that he could read or right. His denial of literacy indicated a desire to disconnect himself from threatening literate African American men like Nat Turner. In other words, Bibb feared the repercussions of being perceived as a literate slave and thus as a threat. At the same time, Bibb desired the sociopolitical agency that being literate could have afforded him. As Heather Andrea Williams (2005) aptly noted

Literacy had the potential to help enslaved people articulate intellectual objections to the very existence of slavery. Reading catapulted some slaves beyond the sphere to which owners hoped to keep them restricted and enabled them to engage

vicariously in dialogues that raised moral challenges to the enslavement of human beings. (p. 23)

In other words, literacy enabled some slave to form a praxis. Reading and writing translated to the formulations of arguments and theories against their enslavement and the existence of slavery in 19<sup>th</sup>-century United States. This theory and reflection could lead to actions (slave rebellions, escapes, and work stoppages) that would cripple slave culture. Because these potentially subversive qualities of literacy and literacy education apply to all examined narratives, I offer an extended analysis in chapter five.

**Jacobs/ Linda Brent (1861) – Unnamed Mistress Who Taught Jacobs to Read**

After a brief period of suspense, the will of my mistress was read, and we learned that she had bequeathed me to her sister's daughter, a child of five years old. So vanished our hopes. My mistress had taught me the precepts of God's Word: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." "Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them." But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor. I would give much to blot out from my memory that one great wrong. As a child, I loved my mistress; and, looking back on the happy days I spent with her, I try to think with less bitterness of this act of injustice. While I was with her, she taught me to read and spell; and for this privilege, which so rarely falls to the lot of a slave, I bless her memory. (p. 754).

**Jacobs/ Linda Brent (1861) — Episcopal Clergyman**

The Episcopal clergyman, who, ever since my earliest recollection, had been a sort of god [*sic*] among the slaveholders, concluded, as his family was large, that he must go where money was more abundant. A very different clergyman took his place. The change was

very agreeable to the colored people, who said, "God has sent us a good man this time." They loved him, and their children followed him for a smile or a kind word. Even the slaveholders felt his influence. He brought to the rectory five slaves. His wife taught them to read and write, and to be useful to her and themselves. As soon as he was settled, he turned his attention to the needy slaves around him. He urged upon his parishioners the duty of having a meeting expressly for them every Sunday, with a sermon adapted to their comprehension. After much argument and importunity, it was finally agreed that they might occupy the gallery of the church on Sunday evenings. Many colored people, hitherto unaccustomed to attend church, now gladly went to hear the gospel preached. The sermons were simple, and they understood them. Moreover, it was the first time they had ever been addressed as human beings. It was not long before his white parishioners began to be dissatisfied. He was accused of preaching better sermons to the negroes than he did to them. He honestly confessed that he bestowed more pains upon those sermons than upon any others; for the slaves were reared in such ignorance that it was a difficult task to adapt himself to their comprehension. Dissensions arose in the parish. Some wanted he should preach to them in the evening, and to the slaves in the afternoon. In the midst of these disputings [sic] his wife died, after a very short illness. Her slaves gathered round her dying bed in great sorrow. She said, "I have tried to do you good and promote your happiness; and if I have failed, it has not been for want of interest in your welfare. Do not weep for me; but prepare for the new duties that lie before you. I leave you all free. May we meet in a better world." Her liberated slaves were sent away, with funds to establish them comfortably. The colored people will long bless the memory of that truly

Christian woman. Soon after her death her husband preached his farewell sermon, and many tears were shed at his departure. (pp. 817-818)

**Jacobs/ Linda Brent (1861) – Fred**

I knew an old black man, whose piety and childlike trust in God were beautiful to witness. At fifty-three years old he joined the Baptist church. He had a most earnest desire to learn to read. He thought he should know how to serve God better if he could only read the Bible. He came to me, and begged me to teach him. He said he could not pay me, for he had no money; but he would bring me nice fruit when the season for it came. I asked him if he didn't know it was contrary to law; and that slaves were whipped and imprisoned for teaching each other to read. This brought the tears into his eyes. "Don't be troubled, uncle[sic] Fred," said I. "I have no thoughts of refusing to teach you. I only told you of the law, that you might know the danger, and be on your guard." He thought he could plan to come three times a week without its being suspected. I selected a quiet nook, where no intruder was likely to penetrate, and there I taught him his A, B, C. Considering his age, his progress was astonishing. As soon as he could spell in two syllables he wanted to spell out words in the Bible. The happy smile that illuminated his face put joy into my heart. After spelling out a few words, he paused, and said, "Honey, it 'pears when I can read dis good book I shall be nearer to God. White man is got all de sense. He can larn [sic] easy. It ain't [sic] easy for ole black man like me. I only wants to read dis book, dat [sic] I may know how to live; den I hab [sic] no fear 'bout dying."

I tried to encourage him by speaking of the rapid progress he had made. "Hab [sic] patience, child," he replied. "I larns [sic] slow."

I had no need of patience. His gratitude, and the happiness imparted, were more than a recompense for all my trouble.

At the end of six months[,] he had read through the New Testament, and could find any text in it. One day, when he had recited unusually well, I said, “Uncle Fred, how do you manage to get your lessons so well?”

“Lord bress [*sic*] you, chile [*sic*],” he replied. “You nebber [*sic*] gibbs me a lesson dat [*sic*] I don’t pray to God to help me to understan’ [*sic*] what I spells and what I reads. And he does help me, chile [*sic*]. Bress [*sic*] his holy name!”

There are thousands, who, like good uncle Fred, are thirsting for the water of life; but the law forbids it, and the churches withhold it. They send the Bible to heathens abroad, and neglect the heathen at home. I am glad that missionaries go out to the dark corners of the earth; but I ask them not to overlook the dark corners at home. Talk to American slaveholders as you talk to savages in Africa. Tell them it was wrong to traffic in men. Tell them it is sinful to sell their own children, and atrocious to violate their own daughters. Tell them that all men are brethren, and that man has no right to shut out the light of knowledge from his brother. Tell them they are answerable to God for sealing up the Fountain of Life from souls that are thirsting for it. (pp. 819-820)

### **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Unlike Douglass (2000/1845) or Bibb (2001/1849) , Jacobs (2001/1861) did not record many “barriers against slave literacy and the overwhelming difficulties encountered in learning to read and to write” (Olney, p. 153). Jacob did not feature an episode in which slave owners and other white people overtly prevented her from

learning to read and to write. When she taught an older African American man, Fred, to read the Bible, she did not describe any obstacles other than her actions were illegal.

Yet, Jacobs insinuated the potentially subversive nature of literacy and literacy education in a lengthy description of a house search that occurred near the time of the 1831 Nat Turner Rebellion. Fearful that literate slaves would also provoke other slaves to a similar insurrection, groups of poor white and illiterate men randomly search the homes of African American slaves for signs of literacy. When they found personal letters in the house of Jacob's grandmother and asked her if these letters were free African Americans who would provoke insurrection, Jacobs nonchalantly replied, "Oh, no; most of my letters are from white people. Some request me to burn them after they are read, and some I destroy without reading" (p. 812). Even the sight of personal letters in an African American slave's home was cause for suspicion of treasonous activity.

Within this context, Jacobs teaching "Uncle Fred" to read the Bible complicated the role of literacy within her narrative. Like his counterpart, Nat Turner, Fred learned to read and to interpret written texts. Yet Fred did not exhibit any messianic tendencies to liberate "his people" as a result of his literacy. Fred indicated he wanted to be a better Christian through his personal reading and interpretation of the Bible. Unlike Douglass (2001/1845), Fred never displayed any dissatisfaction with his status as a slave. He displayed no signs of potentially leading a rebellion.

Nevertheless, Fred displayed his own type of subversion/ rebellion. He refused to give up his native dialect of English. Jacobs (2001/ 1861) claimed that Fred's prosody (ability to read printed text aloud) was flawless and that he had perfect knowledge of the Bible. He could find and read any passage of the New Testament with no problem. Fred



could read the language of the dominant culture without abandoning his culture. Within the context of current literacy research and education, Fred engaged in code-switching. This ability to read the dominant language and engage in the dominant culture without being submerged totally in that culture was a type of subversion. Although he sounded like any other African American slave on the plantation, he could understand and dialogue with ideas within dominant culture.

Fred's ability to engage in dialogue with dominant discourse and yet keep his own cultural identity and Jacobs's (and her editor's) unmediated use of that dialect align with a crucial concept in critical literacy. Freire and Macedo (1987) posited that educators need to use their students' cultural universe as a point of departure, enabling students to recognize themselves as possessing a specific and important cultural identity:

The successful usage of the students' cultural universe requires respect and legitimization of students' discourses, that is, their own linguistic codes, which different but never inferior. Educators also have to respect and understand students' dreams and expectations. In the case of [Black] Americans, for examples, educators must respect [Black] English. It is possible to codify and decodify [Black] English with the same ease as standard American English. The difference is that [Black] Americans will find it easier to codify and decodify the dialect of their own authorship. The legitimization of [Black] English as an educational tool does not, however, preclude the need to acquire proficiency in the linguistic code of the dominant group. (p. 127)

Jacobs and her editor could have transliterated Fred's dialect to that of the dominant culture. Yet they quoted Fred as is and thus respected his "lived experience in a given

historical moment” (Freire and Macedo, 1987, p. 127). I argue that this use of native dialect was intentional. To understand the humanity and the lived experiences of African American slaves, Jacobs and her editor had to allow their subjects to speak for themselves. Otherwise, pro-slavery activists could have easily argued that Jacobs’s text was a forgery created by abolitionists. Equally important, by describing that Fred could read “standardized English” as printed in the Bible, Jacobs indicates that Fred needed to acquire the proficient language skills in the dominant language.

**Trope 6. Description of a “Christian” slaveholder (often of one such dying in terror) and the accompanying claim that “Christian” slaveholders are invariably worse than those professing no religion**

**Text: Douglass (1845) – Thomas Auld**

In August, 1832, my master [Thomas Auld] attended a Methodist camp-meeting held in the Bay-side, Talbot [County], and there experienced religion. I indulged a faint hope that his conversion would lead him to emancipate his slaves, and that, if he did not do this, it would, at any rate, make him more kind and humane. I was disappointed in both these respects. It neither made him to be humane to his slaves, nor to emancipate them. If it had any effect on his character, it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways; for I believe him to have been a much worse man after his conversion than before. Prior to his conversion, he relied upon his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty. He made the greatest pretensions to piety. His house was the house of prayer. He prayed morning, noon, and night. He very soon distinguished himself among his brethren, and was soon made a class-leader and exhorter. His activity in revivals was great, and he proved himself an instrument in the hands of the church in

converting many souls. His house was the preachers' home. They used to take great pleasure in coming there to put up; for while he starved us, he stuffed them. We have had three or four preachers there at a time. The names of those who used to come most frequently while I lived there, were Mr. Storks, Mr. Ewery, Mr. Humphry, and Mr. Hickey. I have also seen Mr. George Cookman at our house. We slaves loved Mr. Cookman. We believed him to be a good man. We thought him instrumental in getting Mr. Samuel Harrison, a very rich slaveholder, to emancipate his slaves; and by some means got the impression that he was laboring to effect the emancipation of all the slaves. When he was at our house, we were sure to be called in to prayers. When the others were there, we were sometimes called in and sometimes not. Mr. Cookman took more notice of us than either of the other ministers. He could not come among us without betraying his sympathy for us, and, stupid as we were, we had the sagacity to see it.

While I lived with my master in St. Michael's, there was a white young man, a Mr. Wilson, who proposed to keep a Sabbath school for the instruction of such slaves as might be disposed to learn to read the New Testament. We met but three times, when Mr. West and Mr. Fairbanks, both class-leaders, with many others, came upon us with sticks and other missiles, drove us off, and forbade us to meet again. Thus ended our little Sabbath school in the pious town of St. Michael's.

I have said my master found religious sanction for his cruelty. As an example, I will state one of many facts going to prove the charge. I have seen him tie up a lame young woman, and whip her with a heavy cowskin upon her naked shoulders, causing the warm red blood to drip; and, in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this

passage of Scripture—“He that knoweth his master’s will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes.”

Master would keep this lacerated young woman tied up in this horrid situation four or five hours at a time. I have known him to tie her up early in the morning, and whip her before breakfast; leave her, go to his store, return at dinner, and whip her again, cutting her in the places already made raw with his cruel lash. The secret of master’s cruelty toward “Henny” is found in the fact of her being almost helpless. When quite a child, she fell into the fire, and burned herself horribly. Her hands were so burnt that she never got the use of them. She could do very little but bear heavy burdens. She was to master a bill of expense; and as he was a mean man, she was a constant offence to him. He seemed desirous of getting the poor girl out of existence. He gave her away once to his sister; but, being a poor gift, she was not disposed to keep her. Finally, my benevolent master, to use his own words, “set her adrift to take care of herself.” Here was a recently-converted man, holding on upon the mother, and at the same time turning out her helpless child, to starve and die! Master Thomas was one of the many pious slaveholders who hold slaves for the very charitable purpose of taking care of them. (pp. 318-319)

### **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Freire (2015/1971) posited that a critical literate person can examine their oppression within larger sociopolitical contexts. By highlighting the hypocrisy of Christianity as often practiced in the antebellum South, Douglass engaged in a critical dialogue about religion as a tool of oppression. Many slaveholders relied on the Old Testament story of Noah and his sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth—as related in Genesis 9: 18-29. After the floods waters receded, Noah planted a vineyard, became intoxicated with

wine, and passed out in his tent. Ham, who saw his father naked and unconscious, ran to inform his brothers. Shem and Japheth avoided seeing their father's nakedness by walking backwards into the tent with a garment draped on their shoulders. Without looking at their father, they covered him with the garment. When Noah regained consciousness, he intuitively knew that Ham has seen his nakedness. As a result, he cursed Ham and his descendants. Many antebellum slaveholders believed that African Americans were descendants of Ham and thus eternally cursed to slavery and damnation (Irons, 2008; Park, 2021). Because they were deemed eternally tainted with this sin, African American slaves were often treated with contempt that contradicted messages of love, grace, and salvation commonly associated with Jesus Christ. Douglass and other slave narrative authors frequently critiqued this religious contradiction. This critique is not surprising. White northern abolitionists often faulted slaveholders' practice of Christianity as the bedrock upon which slavery was founded (Irons, 2008; Park 2001).

Douglass' critique of slaveholder Christian practices were so extensive that he included an appendix to clarify that he condemned the religious practices of slaveholding, southern Christians and not the religion as a whole. He wrote:

I find, since reading over the foregoing Narrative, that I have, in several instances, spoken in such a tone and manner, respecting religion, as may possibly lead those unacquainted with my religious views to suppose me an opponent of all religion. To remove the liability of such misapprehension, I deem it proper to append the following brief explanation. What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the slaveholding religion of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this

land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity. I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels. Never was there a clearer case of “stealing the livery of the court of heaven to serve the devil in.” I am filled with unutterable loathing when I contemplate the religious pomp and show, together with the horrible inconsistencies, which everywhere surround me. We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who wields the blood-clotted cowskin during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus. The man who robs me of my earnings at the end of each week meets me as a class-leader on Sunday morning, to show me the way of life, and the path of salvation. He who sells my sister, for purposes of prostitution, stands forth as the pious advocate of purity. He who proclaims it a religious duty to read the Bible denies me the right of learning to read the name of the God who made me. He who is the religious advocate of marriage robs whole millions of its sacred influence, and leaves them to the ravages of wholesale pollution. The warm defender of the sacredness of the family relation is the same that scatters whole

families,—sundering husbands and wives, parents and children, sisters and brothers,—leaving the hut vacant, and the hearth desolate. We see the thief preaching against theft, and the adulterer against adultery. We have men sold to build churches, women sold to support the gospel, and babes sold to purchase Bibles for the Poor Heathen! All For The Glory Of God And The Good Of Souls! The slave auctioneer's bell and the church-going bell chime in with each other, and the bitter cries of the heart-broken slave are drowned in the religious shouts of his pious master. Revivals of religion and revivals in the slave-trade go hand in hand together. The slave prison and the church stand near each other. The clanking of fetters and the rattling of chains in the prison, and the pious psalm and solemn prayer in the church, may be heard at the same time. The dealers in the bodies and souls of men erect their stand in the presence of the pulpit, and they mutually help each other. The dealer gives his blood-stained gold to support the pulpit, and the pulpit, in return, covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity. Here we have religion and robbery the allies of each other—devils dressed in angels' robes, and hell presenting the semblance of paradise. (pp. 363-364).

Within this passage, Douglass noted the ideological and cultural contradictions that marked Christianity as frequently practiced by slaveholders. He argued that those who should be most Christ-like often fail to live up to moral standards of Christianity. In essence, Douglass critique the overall moral failures and contradictions within slavery. Douglass' condemnation of slaveholders' religious practices echo similar critiques in the narratives of William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb, and Harriet Jacobs.

**Text: Brown (1847) – D. D. Page**

One Sabbath, as we were driving past the house of D.D. Page, a gentleman who owned a large baking establishment, as I was sitting upon the box of the carriage, which was very much elevated, I saw Mr. Page pursuing a slave around the yard, with a long whip, cutting him at every jump. The man soon escaped from the yard, and was followed by Mr. Page. They came running past us, and the slave perceiving that he would be overtaken, stopped suddenly, and Page stumbled over him, and falling on the stone pavement, fractured one of his legs, which crippled him for life. The same gentleman, but a short time previous, tied up a woman of his, by the name of Delphia, and whipped her nearly to death; yet he was a deacon in the Baptist church, in good and regular standing. Poor Delphia! I was well acquainted with her, and called to see her while upon her sick bed; and I shall never forget her appearance. She was a member of the same church with her master. (pp. 388-389)

**Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Like Frederick Douglass, William Well Brown noted and critiqued the contradictory ideologies and practices of Christian slaveholders. In this episode, Brown noted that the oppressor was a leader in the local church and that both parties were Christians. This distinction is crucial when read in the context of the preface written for Brown by J. C. Hathaway. In the preface, Hathaway admonished readers to fight for the humanity of all humanity, including African American slaves:

Reader, are you an Abolitionist? What have you done for the slave? What are you doing in his behalf? What do you purpose to do? There is a great work before us! Who will be an idler now? This is the great [humanitarian] movement of the age, swallowing up, for



the time being, all other questions, comparatively speaking. The course of human events, in obedience to the unchangeable laws of our being, is fast hastening the final crisis, and

"Have ye chosen, O my people, on whose party ye shall stand,  
Ere the Doom from its worn sandal shakes the dust against our land?"

Are you a Christian? This is the carrying out of practical Christianity; and there is no other. Christianity is practical in its very nature and essence. It is a life, springing out of a soul imbued with its spirit. Are you a friend of the missionary cause? This is the greatest missionary [enterprise] of the day. Three millions of Christian, law-manufactured heathen[s] are longing for the glad tidings of the Gospel of freedom. Are you a friend of the Bible? Come, then, and help us to restore to these millions, whose eyes have been bored out by slavery, their sight, that they may see to read the Bible. Do you love God whom you have not seen? Then manifest that love, by restoring to your brother whom you have seen, his rightful inheritance, of which he has been so long and so cruelly deprived.

It is not for a single generation alone, numbering three millions—sublime as would be that effort—that we are working. It is for humanity, the wide world over, not only now, but for all coming time, and all future generations:—

"For he who settles Freedom's principles,  
Writes the death-warrant of all tyranny."

It is a vast work—a glorious [enterprise]—worthy the unswerving devotion of the entire life-time of the great and the good.

Slaveholding and slaveholders must be rendered disreputable and odious. They must be stripped of their respectability and Christian reputation. They must be treated as

"men-stealers—guilty of the highest kind of theft, and sinners of the first rank." Their more guilty accomplices in the persons of northern apologists, both in Church and State, must be placed in the same category. Honest men must be made to look upon their crimes with the same abhorrence and loathing, with which they regard the less guilty robber and assassin, until

"The common damned shun their society,

And look upon themselves as fiends less foul."

When a just estimate is placed upon the crime of slave-holding, the work will have been accomplished, and the glorious day ushered in—

"When man nor woman in all our wide domain,

Shall buy, or sell, or hold, or be a slave." (pp. 375-376)

Hathaway's preface contrasted the "good" and "true" Christianity (as practiced by abolitionists and their allies) against the self-serving and corrupt Christianity of many southern slaveholders. Hathaway wrote of a practical Christianity that required its followers to perform charity for other Christians (including African American slaves). He argued that it is their *Christian* duty to abolish slavery and thus liberate "three millions of *Christians*" who like the ancient Hebrews, were trapped in a system of oppression.

Because he wrote that there is no other type of Christianity, Hathaway insinuated that the religious practices of many slaveholders were not Christianity but a perverse cultural institution in the guise of Christianity. This emphasis on religious contradictions and perversions are common tropes for Henry Bibb and Harriet Jacobs.

**Text: Bibb (1849) - Francis Whitfield**

While waiting here to be disposed of, I heard of one Francis Whitfield, a cotton planter, who wanted to buy slaves. He was represented to be a very pious soul, being a deacon of a Baptist church. As the regulations, as well as public opinion generally, were against slaves meeting for religious worship, I thought it would give me a better opportunity to attend to my religious duties should I fall into the hands of this deacon.

So[,] I called on him and tried to show to the best advantage, for the purpose of inducing him to buy me and my family. When I approached him, I felt much pleased at his external appearance—I addressed him in the following words as well as I can remember:

"Sir, I understand you are desirous of purchasing slaves?"

With a very pleasant smile, he replied, "Yes, I do want to buy some, are you for sale?"

"Yes sir, with my wife and one child."

Garrison had given me a note to show wherever I went, that I was for sale, speaking of my wife and child, giving us a very good character of course—and I handed him the note.

After reading it over he remarked, "I have a few questions to ask you, and if you will tell me the truth like a good boy, perhaps I may buy you with your family. In the first place, my boy, you are a little too near white. I want you to tell me now whether you can read or write?"

My reply was in the negative.

"Now I want you to tell me whether you have run away? Don't tell me no stories now, like a good fellow, and perhaps I may buy you."

But as I was not under oath to tell him the whole truth, I only gave him a part of it, by telling him that I had run away once.

He appeared to be pleased at that, but cautioned me to tell him the truth, and asked me how long I stayed away, when I run off?

I told him that I was gone a month.

He assented to this by a bow of his head, and making a long grunt saying, "That's right, tell me the truth like a good boy."

The whole truth was that I had been off in the state of Ohio, and other free states, and even to Canada; besides this I was notorious for running away, from my boyhood.

I never told him that I had been a runaway longer than one month—neither did I tell him that I had not run away more than once in my life; for these questions he never asked me.

I afterwards found him to be one of the basest hypocrites that I ever saw. He looked like a saint—talked like the best of slave holding Christians, and acted at home like the devil.

When he saw my wife and child, he concluded to buy us. He paid for me twelve hundred dollars, and one thousand for my wife and child. He also bought several other slaves at the same time, and took home with him. His residence was in the parish of Claiborn, fifty miles up from the mouth of Red River.

When we arrived there, we found his slaves poor, ragged, stupid, and half-starved. The food he allowed them per week, was one peck of corn for each grown person, one

pound of pork, and sometimes a quart of molasses. This was all that they were allowed, and if they got more they stole it.

He had one of the most cruel overseers to be found in that section of country. He weighed and measured out to them, their week's allowance of food every Sabbath morning. The overseer's horn was sounded two hours before daylight for them in the morning, in order that they should be ready for work before daylight. They were worked from daylight until after dark, without stopping but [one-half hour] to eat or rest, which was at noon. And at the busy season of the year, they were compelled to work just as hard on the Sabbath, as on any other day. (pp. 500-502)

### **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Because Bibb had unique experiences with non-Christian Native American slaveholders and with white Christian slaveholders, he was one of the few authors who could have made comparisons between the two populations. For Bibb, his experience as a slave of Native Americans was more humane than any he had experienced with slaveholding Christians. After numerous escapes and returns, Henry Bibb is sold to gamblers who eventually sold him to Native Americans. Bibb compared the two types of slave culture:

The next morning[,] I went home with my new master; and by the way it is only doing justice to the dead to say, that he was the most reasonable, and humane slaveholder that I have ever belonged to. He was the last man that pretended to claim property in my person; and although I have freely given the names and residences of all others who have held me as a slave, for prudential reasons I shall omit giving the name of this individual.

He was the owner of a large plantation and quite a number of slaves. He raised corn and wheat for his own consumption only. There was no cotton, tobacco, or anything of the kind produced among them for market. And I found this difference between negro slavery among the Indians, and the same thing among the white slaveholders of the South. The Indians allow their slaves enough to eat and wear. They have no overseers to whip nor drive them. If a slave offends his master, he sometimes, in a heat of passion, undertakes to chastise him; but it is as often the case as otherwise, that the slave gets the better of the fight, and even flogs his master; for which there is no law to punish him; but when the fight is over that is the last of it. So far as religious instruction is concerned, they have it on terms of equality, the bond and the free; they have no respect of persons, they have neither slave laws nor negro pews. Neither do they separate husbands and wives, nor parents and children. All things considered, if I must be a slave, I had by far, rather be a slave to an Indian, than to a white man, from the experience I have had with both. (p. 527).

For Bibb, the “savages” were more Christ-like in their “heathen” customs than were the white Christian slaveholders. He was clothed and fed sufficiently. He was not treated with contempt. Because he was not Christian and therefore had no religious text to guide his interactions with slaves, the Native American slaveholder treated Bibb humanely. For the typical 19<sup>th</sup>-century reader, this civility among the “heathens” must have been shocking. By claiming that his time with Native American slaveholders was preferable to his time with white Christian slaveholders, Bibb condemned the contradictory nature of slavery in a Western/ European cultural context. Bibb saw no conflicts between dictates

of a religious text and the actions of a specific group of religious people. In other words, he compared civilized Western European and American cultures against “uncivilized” Native American culture and found the former uncivilized and inhumane in this enslavement of other humans. Although he was enslaved, he never lost his sense of his own humanity as a captive of Native Americans. Bibbs depiction was not unique. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, nonindigenous captives of Native Americans often spoke and wrote of the humane treated they received from their captors (Haas, 2022) .

**Text: Jacobs/ Linda Brent (1861) – Town Constable**

I well remember one occasion when I attended a Methodist class meeting. I went with a burdened spirit, and happened to sit next a poor, bereaved mother, whose heart was still heavier than mine. The class leader was the town constable—a man who bought and sold slaves, who whipped his brethren and sisters of the church at the public whipping post, in jail or out of jail. He was ready to perform that Christian office [anywhere] for fifty cents. This white-faced, black-hearted brother came near us, and said to the stricken woman, “Sister, can’t you tell us how the Lord deals with your soul? Do you love him as you did formerly?”

She rose to her feet, and said, in piteous tones, “My Lord and Master, help me! My load is more than I can bear. God has hid himself from me, and I am left in darkness and misery.” Then, striking her breast, she continued, “I can’t tell you what is in here! They’ve got all my children. Last week they took the last one. God only knows where they’ve sold her. They let me have her sixteen years, and then—O! O! Pray for her brothers and sisters! I’ve got nothing to live for now. God make my time short!”

She sat down, quivering in every limb. I saw that constable class leader become crimson in the face with suppressed laughter, while he held up his handkerchief, that those who were weeping for the poor woman's calamity might not see his merriment. Then, with assumed gravity, he said to the bereaved mother, "Sister, pray to the Lord that every dispensation of his divine will may be sanctified to the good of your poor needy soul!" (pp. 816-817)

### **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Within the context of the previous slave narratives, especially that of Henry Bibb's description of his treatment from Native American slaveowners, Harriet Jacob's description of the duplicitous southern Christian illustrated the claim that a Christian slaveholder was worse than one who holds no religion. Although the church leader in her example was not a slaveholder, his attitudes towards the suffering of slaves indicated what the Germans commonly termed *schadenfreude*, a pleasure derived from another person's misfortune and misery. As a Christian, this church leader should have embodied the charity that he apparently demonstrated to his flock. Nevertheless, his words did not match his actions.

From a critical literacy theoretical perspective, this contradiction is inherent in this system of oppression. As Freire (2015/1971) wrote, both oppressor and oppressed become dehumanized in systems of oppression. I argue that to secretly deride another person's misery while openly commiserating with their trauma is a sign of severe dehumanization. The Town Constable's hypocrisy demonstrated how, what Douglass called "the fatal poison of irresponsible power"(p. 303), contaminates and perverts people and their actions.



**Trope 7: Description of the amounts and kinds of food and clothing given to slaves, the work required of them, the pattern of the day, a week, a year**

**Text: Douglass (1845) - Colonel Lloyd**

The slaves . . .received their monthly allowance of food, and their yearly clothing. The men and women slaves received, as their monthly allowance of food, eight pounds of pork, or its equivalent in fish, and one bushel of corn meal. Their yearly clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers, like the shirts, one jacket, one pair of trousers for winter, made of coarse negro cloth, one pair of stockings, and one pair of shoes; the whole of which could not have cost more than seven dollars. The allowance of the slave children was given to their mothers, or the old women having the care of them. The children unable to work in the field had neither shoes, stockings, jackets, nor trousers, given to them; their clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts per year. When these failed them, they went naked until the next allowance-day. Children from seven to ten years old, of both sexes, almost naked, might be seen at all seasons of the year. (p. 287)

**Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Frederick Douglass's description of the material conditions of African American slaves on Colonel Lloyd's plantation provided the crucial context under which these slaves understood themselves on a daily basis. Formulated by 19<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher Karl Marx, material conditions refer to concrete (material) circumstances of one's life (Sparling, 2012). In the case of Douglass and other slaves on Colonel Lloyd's plantation, material conditions consisted of hard labor and the meager distribution of the necessities of life: food, clothing, and shelter. As Marx concluded, without the right material

conditions, the oppressed cannot think revolutionary thoughts. They are submerged within the realities of their own material conditions. In short, Douglass used his description of African American slaves physical existence to show how they were often submerged within the brutal realities of artificial scarcities and hard labor.

**Text: Brown (1847)**

No findings

**Text: Bibb (1849) – Cotton Planters**

The cotton planters generally, never allow a slave mother time to go to the house, or quarter during the day to nurse her child; hence they have to carry them to the cotton fields and tie them in the shade of a tree, or in clusters of high weeds about in the fields, where they can go to them at noon, when they are allowed to stop work for one half hour. This is the reason why so very few slave children are raised on these cotton plantations, the mothers have no time to take care of them—and they are often found dead in the field and in the quarter for want of the care of their mothers. But I never was eye witness to a case of this kind but have heard many narrated by my slave brothers and sisters, some of which occurred on the deacon's plantation.

Their plan of getting large quantities of cotton picked is not only to extort it from them by the lash, but hold out an inducement and deceive them by giving small prizes. For example; the overseer will offer something worth one or two dollars to any slave who will pick out the most cotton in one day, dividing the hands off in three classes and offering a prize to the one who will pick out the most cotton in each of the classes. By this means they are all interested in trying to get the prize.

After making them try it over several times and weighing what cotton they pick every night, the overseer can tell just how much every hand can pick. He then gives the present to those that pick the most cotton, and then if they do not pick just as much afterward they are flogged.

I have known the slaves to be so much fatigued from labor that they could scarcely get to their lodging places from the field at night. And then they would have to prepare something to eat before they could lie down to rest. Their corn they had to grind on a hand mill for bread stuff, or pound it in a mortar; and by the time they would get their suppers it would be midnight; then they would herd down all together and take but two- or three-hours rest, before the overseer's horn called them up again to prepare for the field (pp. 505-506)

### **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Henry Bibb's brief but insightful description of the material conditions on a cotton plantation provided an additional context that informed the lived experiences of African American slaves. Slaves worked long hours, often under brutal conditions. Although incentives were sometimes used to increase cotton production, violence was the main motivator. On this plantation, African American slaves were human capital, a means to generate profits for their masters. They were dehumanized. To showcase this dehumanization, Bibb included a revealing anecdote about the fragility of the slave mother/child relations under conditions that denied the humanity of both mother and child. Bibb posited that slave children rarely survived these brutal circumstances on cotton plantations because their mothers were not allowed to feed, nurture and protect them. Karl Marx believed that material circumstances and not ideas determine human

thought and action. Equally important, Marx determined that ideas and concepts were derived from materials conditions, from a cultural location (Sparling, 2012). In this case, the actions and thoughts of many African American slaves were shaped by the harsh and dehumanizing conditions that frequently forced them to exist on the same level as cattle: on instinct and reflexes. On some level, cattle were treated better than human slaves. Cattle had the freedom to nurse their young.

**Text: Jacobs/ Linda Brent (1861) – Slave’s New Year**

Hiring day at the south takes place on the 1st of January. On the 2d, the slaves are expected to go to their new masters. On a farm, they work until the corn and cotton are laid. They then have two holidays. Some masters give them a good dinner under the trees. This over, they work until Christmas eve. If no heavy charges are meantime brought against them, they are given four or five holidays, whichever the master or overseer may think proper. Then comes New Year’s Eve; and they gather together their little alls [*sic*], or more properly speaking, their little nothings, and wait anxiously for the dawning of day. At the appointed hour the grounds are thronged with men, women, and children, waiting, like criminals, to hear their doom pronounced. The slave is sure to know who is the most humane, or cruel master, within forty miles of him. (p. 760)

**Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

In this description, Harriet Jacobs illustrated that the lived experiences and material conditions of some African American slaves were marked by uncertainty. Their fate depended on who hired them for the next season. As Jacobs noted, it was like criminals awaiting sentencing. In addition to the frequent harsh labor conditions and scarcity of food and clothing, this uncertainty most certainly contributed to the

dehumanization and demoralization experienced by many African American slaves. One cannot plan a future, if one is uncertain of that future. One cannot plan a life, if one is uncertain what that life may entail. Critical literacy enabled Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb, and Harriet Jacobs to use the material conditions of their personal histories in order to fight for universal rights. Henry Giroux (1987) argued that “to be literate is. . . to be present and active in the struggle for reclaiming one’s voice, history, and future” (p. 11). By naming the material conditions that once informed the thoughts and voices of many African American slaves, Jacobs helped to reclaim that voice and that history.

**Trope 8: Account of a slave auction, of families being separated and destroyed, of distraught mothers clinging to their children as they are torn from them, of slave coffles being driven South**

**Text: Douglass (1845)**

No findings

**Text: Brown (1847) – Mr. Walker/ Desperate Slave Mother**

He soon commenced purchasing to make up the third gang. We took steamboat, and went to Jefferson City, a town on the Missouri river. Here we landed, and took stage for the interior of the State. He bought a number of slaves as he passed the different farms and villages. After getting twenty-two or twenty-three men and women, we arrived at St. Charles, a village on the banks of the Missouri. Here he purchased a woman who had a child in her arms, appearing to be four or five weeks old.

We had been travelling by land for some days, and were in hopes to have found a boat at this place for St. Louis, but were disappointed. As no boat was expected for some days, we started for St. Louis by land. Mr. Walker had purchased two horses. He rode

one, and I the other. The slaves were chained together, and we took up our line of march, Mr. Walker taking the lead, and I bringing up the rear. Though the distance was not more than twenty miles, we did not reach it the first day. The road was worse than any that I have ever travelled.

Soon after we left St. Charles, the young child grew very cross, and kept up a noise during the greater part of the day. Mr. Walker complained of its crying several times, and told the mother to stop the child's d——d noise, or he would. The woman tried to keep the child from crying, but could not. We put up at night with an acquaintance of Mr. Walker, and in the morning, just as we were about to start, the child again commenced crying. Walker stepped up to her, and told her to give the child to him. The mother tremblingly obeyed. He took the child by one arm, as you would a cat by the leg, walked into the house, and said to the lady,

"Madam, I will make you a present of this little nigger; it keeps such a noise that I can't bear it."

"Thank you, sir," said the lady.

The mother, as soon as she saw that her child was to be left, ran up to Mr. Walker, and falling upon her knees begged him to let her have her child; she clung around his legs, and cried, "Oh, my child! my child! master, do let me have my child! oh, do, do, do. I will stop its crying, if you will only let me have it again." When I saw this woman crying for her child so piteously, a shudder,—a feeling akin to horror, shot through my frame. I have often since in imagination heard her crying for her child:—

"O, master, let me stay to catch  
My baby's sobbing breath,

His little glassy eye to watch,  
And smooth his limbs in death,

And cover him with grass and leaf,  
Beneath the large oak tree:  
It is not sullenness, but grief,—  
O, master, pity me!

The morn was chill—I spoke no word,  
But feared my babe might die,  
And heard all day, or thought I heard,  
My little baby cry.

At noon, oh, how I ran and took  
My baby to my breast!  
I lingered—and the long lash broke  
My sleeping infant's rest.

I worked till night—till darkest night,  
In torture and disgrace;  
Went home and watched till morning light,  
To see my baby's face.

Then give me but one little hour—  
O! do not lash me so!  
One little hour—one little hour—  
And gratefully I'll go."

Mr. Walker commanded her to return into the ranks with the other slaves. Women who had children were not chained, but those that had none were. As soon as her child was disposed of, she was chained in the gang. (pp. 393-395)

## **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Brown's anecdote uses language that elicited sympathy and empathy to the material conditions of African American slave mothers. Because they were chattel, slave mothers and their children could be separated at whim. Brown appealed to the "maternal instincts" of his white, middle-class Victorian female readers who most likely never suffered the forced alienation of themselves and their children. Brown prompted his readers to imagine their child being taken by one arm and given away to a random stranger because the infant cried. In doing so, Brown encouraged an emotional empathetic response. Brown reinforced empathy with the inclusion of a sentimental poem that imagined the emotional turmoil of that slave mother.

Yet within this empathetic response, Brown emphasized sympathy-which assumed that one can be in solidarity with other people without having personal knowledge of their lived experiences or their oppression (Cima, 2014). In her book about affective performances of female abolitionists, Gay Gibson Cima argued that early 19<sup>th</sup>-century female abolitionists:

adapted everyday performances – after dinner conversations, neighborly visits, social events, and religious traditions – toward anti-slavery goals. They recited poems, transposed them into hymns, and sang them within family circles and at monthly "concerts" for the slave. They staged activist dialogues and plays, read essays aloud, gave speeches, and used silence productively onstage. (p. 1)

These interventions were designed to prompt actions from their audience, not to merely promote a virtual suffering among abolitionists. These activists wanted their audiences to



actively end slavery. Brown's engaged in anecdote and poetry within the context of these affective performances.

**Text: Bibb (1849) – Slave Auction: Mr. Young**

Mr. Young never was known to flog one of his slaves or sell one. He fed and clothed them well, and never over-worked them. He allowed each family a small house to themselves with a little garden spot, whereon to raise their own vegetables; and a part of the day on Saturdays [had] allowed them to cultivate it.

In process of time, he became deeply involved in debt by endorsing notes, and his property was all advertised to be sold by the sheriff at public auction. It consisted in slaves, many of whom were his brothers and sisters in the church. On the day of sale there were slave traders and speculators on the ground to buy. The slaves were offered on the auction block one after another, until they were all sold before their old master's face. The first man offered on the block was an old gray-headed slave by the name of Richard. His wife followed him up to the block, and when they had bid him up to seventy or eighty dollars one of the bidders asked Mr. Young what he could do, as he looked very old and infirm? Mr. Young replied by saying, "he is not able to accomplish much manual labor, from his extreme age and hard labor in early life. Yet I would rather have him than many of those who are young and vigorous; who are able to perform twice as much labor—because I know him to be faithful and trustworthy, a Christian in good standing in my church. I can trust him anywhere with confidence. He has toiled many long years on my plantation, and I have always found him faithful."

This giving him a good Christian character caused them to run him up to near two hundred dollars. His poor old companion stood by weeping and pleading that they might

not be separated. But the marriage relation was soon dissolved by the sale, and they were separated never to meet again.

Another man was called up whose wife followed him with her infant in her arms, beseeching to be sold with her husband, which proved to be all in vain. After the men were all sold they then sold the women and children. They ordered the first woman to lay down her child and mount the auction block; she refused to give up her little one and clung to it as long as she could, while the cruel lash was applied to her back for disobedience. She pleaded for mercy in the name of God. But the child was torn from the arms of its mother amid the most heart-rending shrieks from the mother and child on the one hand, and bitter oaths and cruel lashes from the tyrants on the other. Finally, the poor little child was torn from the mother while she was sacrificed to the highest bidder. In this way the sale was carried on from beginning to end.

There was each speculator with his hand-cuffs to bind his victims after the sale; and while they were doing their writings, the Christian portion of the slaves asked permission to kneel in prayer on the ground before they separated, which was granted. And while bathing each other with tears of sorrow on the verge of their final separation, their eloquent appeals in prayer to the Most High seemed to cause an unpleasant sensation upon the ears of their tyrants, who ordered them to rise and make ready their limbs for the [coffles]. And as they happened not to bound at the first sound, they were soon raised from their knees by the sound of the lash, and the rattle of the chains, in which they were soon taken off by their respective masters,—husbands from wives, and children from parents, never expecting to meet until the judgment of the great day. Then

Christ shall say to the slaveholding professors of religion, "Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these little ones, my brethren, ye did it unto me."

Having thus tried to show the best side of slavery that I can conceive of the reader can exercise his own judgment in deciding whether a man can be a Bible Christian, and yet hold his Christian brethren as property, so that they may be sold at any time in market, as sheep or oxen, to pay his debts. (pp. 561-562)

### **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Like William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass, Henry Bibb presented the separation of slave families as a material condition that elicited sympathy and thus warranted the immediate abolition of slavery. Slaves were personal property that could be “liquidated” if slaveowners became insolvent. In the process of liquidation, slave families could be permanently separated. Bibb described this scene as objectively and subjectively. As a former slave, he was required to give the facts and let the white abolitionists “take care of the philosophy” (Sinanan, p. 61). He described the scene with little sentiment, as if he were a journalist. Yet in his rendering of facts, Bibb engaged in rhetorical strategies that provoked a concrete response from his readers.

Equally important, because Bibb knew that this account was not part of his white, middle-class readers’ lived experiences, he had to re-create it as explicitly and as vividly as Victorian sensibilities would allow. Like the female abolitionists that Cima (2014) discussed, Henry Bibb “staged” this scene for maximum political impact. He had to demonstrate the inherent evil of slavery, even in the apparently best scenario. As an abolitionist, he needed his readers to sympathize with slaves and to act on that sympathy.

**Text: Harriet Jacobs/ Linda Brent (1861) – Failed Auction of Aunt Martha**

My grandmother's mistress had always promised her that, at her death, she should be free; and it was said that in her will she made good the promise. But when the estate was settled, Dr. Flint told the faithful old servant that, under existing circumstances, it was necessary she should be sold.

On the appointed day, the customary advertisement was posted up, proclaiming that there would be a "public sale of negroes, horses, &c." Dr. Flint called to tell my grandmother that he was unwilling to wound her feelings by putting her up at auction, and that he would prefer to dispose of her at private sale. My grandmother saw through his hypocrisy; she understood very well that he was ashamed of the job. She was a very spirited woman, and if he was base enough to sell her, when her mistress intended she should be free, she was determined the public should know it. She had for a long time supplied many families with crackers and preserves; consequently, "Aunt Marthy," as she was called, was generally known, and everybody who knew her respected her intelligence and good character. Her long and faithful service in the family was also well known, and the intention of her mistress to leave her free. When the day of sale came, she took her place among the chattels, and at the first call she sprang upon the auction block. Many voices called out, "Shame! Shame! Who is going to sell you, Aunt Marthy? Don't stand there! That is no place for you." Without saying a word, she quietly awaited her fate. No one bid for her. At last, a feeble voice said, "Fifty dollars." It came from a maiden lady, seventy years old, the sister of my grandmother's deceased mistress. She had lived forty years under the same roof with my grandmother; she knew how faithfully she had served her owners, and how cruelly she had been defrauded of her rights; and she resolved to

protect her. The auctioneer waited for a higher bid; but her wishes were respected; no one bid above her. She could neither read nor write; and when the bill of sale was made out, she signed it with a cross. But what consequence was that, when she had a big heart overflowing with human kindness? She gave the old servant her freedom. (pp. 757-758)

**Text: Harriet Jacobs/ Linda Brent (1861) – Desperate Slave Mother**

On one of these sale days, I saw a mother lead seven children to the auction block. She knew that some of them would be taken from her; but they took all. The children were sold to a slave-trader, and their mother was bought by a man in her own town. Before night her children were all far away. She begged the trader to tell her where he intended to take them; this he refused to do. How could he, when he knew he would sell them, one by one, wherever he could command the highest price? I met that mother in the street, and her wild, haggard face lives to-day in my mind. She wrung her hands in anguish, and exclaimed, “Gone! All gone! Why don’t God kill me?” I had no words wherewith to comfort her. Instances of this kind are of daily, yea, of hourly occurrence. (pp. 761-762)

**Text: Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent (1861) – Fanny**

I have stated that the first of January was the time for selling slaves, or leasing them out to new masters. If time were counted by heart-throbs, the poor slaves might reckon years of suffering during that festival so joyous to the free. On the New Year’s Day preceding my aunt’s death, one of my friends, named Fanny, was to be sold at auction, to pay her master’s debts. My thoughts were with her during all day, and at night I anxiously inquired what had been her fate. I was told that she had been sold to one master, and her four little girls to another master, far distant; that she had escaped from her purchaser,

and was not to be found. Her mother was the old Aggie I have spoken of. She lived in a small tenement belonging to my grandmother, and built on the same lot with her own house. Her dwelling was searched and watched, and that brought the patrols so near me that I was obliged to keep very close in my den. The hunters were somehow eluded; and not long afterwards Benny accidentally caught sight of Fanny in her mother's hut. He told his grandmother, who charged him never to speak of it, explaining to him the frightful consequences; and he never betrayed the trust. Aggie little dreamed that my grandmother knew where her daughter was concealed, and that the stooping form of her old neighbor was bending under a similar burden of anxiety and fear; but these dangerous secrets deepened the sympathy between the two old, persecuted mothers. (pp. 893-894).

### **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

As one of the few former African American female slaves who produced a book-length autobiography, Harriet Jacobs's scenes of auctions and separations were significantly invested in the trauma of slave motherhood (Earnest, 2007; Santamarina, 2007). As a mother and a former slave, Jacobs uniquely understood the material conditions that informed her life and the lives of millions of other African American slave mothers. In each of the findings, Jacobs focused on the psychological trauma that was a common occurrence within the institution of slavery. Previously I posited that Jacobs's autobiography differed from her male colleague in that Jacobs heavily focused on relationships. Scenes of ruptured mother/ child relationships enabled Jacobs to speak to a fear that would have been prevalent within her white, middle-class female readership: the loss of a child. In doing so, Jacobs emphasized a common trauma between

enslaved and free mothers. As such, she was able to build a solidarity between her and her readers based on motherhood.

Jacob's rhetorical use of ruptured motherhood would have been aligned with the concerns of 19<sup>th</sup>-century female abolitionists. As Cima (2014) noted, these activists used every rhetorical strategy of sympathy in order to achieve their goals of the immediate abolition of slavery.

### **Trope 9: Description of patrols, of failed attempt(s) to escape, of pursuit by men and dogs;**

#### **Section Note**

In the following section, I make connections between the American Revolution and early 19<sup>th</sup>-century African American slaves' struggles for freedom. While this comparison may seem unwarranted to many twenty-first century readers, it was quite common among early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Black abolitionists who were just two generations from the Revolutionary War era (Sinha, 2007).

#### **Text: Douglass (1845) – Attempted Escape**

At the close of the year 1834, Mr. Freeland again hired me of my master, for the year 1835. But, by this time, I began to want to live upon free land as well as with Freeland; and I was no longer content, therefore, to live with him or any other slaveholder. I began, with the commencement of the year, to prepare myself for a final struggle, which should decide my fate one way or the other. My tendency was upward. I was fast approaching manhood, and year after year had passed, and I was still a slave. These thoughts roused me—I must do something. I therefore resolved that 1835 should not pass without witnessing an attempt, on my part, to secure my liberty. But I was not willing to cherish this determination alone. My fellow-slaves were dear to me. I was anxious to have them

participate with me in this, my life-giving determination. I, therefore, though with great prudence, commenced early to ascertain their views and feelings in regard to their condition, and to imbue their minds with thoughts of freedom. I bent myself to devising ways and means for our escape, and meanwhile strove, on all fitting occasions, to impress them with the gross fraud and inhumanity of slavery. I went first to Henry, next to John, then to the others. I found, in them all, warm hearts and noble spirits. They were ready to hear, and ready to act when a feasible plan should be proposed. This was what I wanted. I talked to them of our want of manhood, if we submitted to our enslavement without at least one noble effort to be free. We met often, and consulted frequently, and told our hopes and fears, recounted the difficulties, real and imagined, which we should be called on to meet. At times we were almost disposed to give up, and try to content ourselves with our wretched lot; at others, we were firm and unbending in our determination to go. Whenever we suggested any plan, there was shrinking—the odds were fearful. Our path was beset with the greatest obstacles; and if we succeeded in gaining the end of it, our right to be free was yet questionable—we were yet liable to be returned to bondage. We could see no spot, this side of the ocean, where we could be free. We knew nothing about Canada. Our knowledge of the north did not extend farther than New York; and to go there, and be forever harassed with the frightful liability of being returned to slavery—with the certainty of being treated tenfold worse than before—the thought was truly a horrible one, and one which it was not easy to overcome. The case sometimes stood thus: At every gate through which we were to pass, we saw a watchman—at every ferry a guard—on every bridge a sentinel—and in every wood a patrol. We were hemmed in upon every side. Here were the difficulties, real or imagined—the good to be sought, and



the evil to be shunned. On the one hand, there stood slavery, a stern reality, glaring frightfully upon us,—its robes already crimsoned with the blood of millions, and even now feasting itself greedily upon our own flesh. On the other hand, away back in the dim distance, under the flickering light of the north star, behind some craggy hill or snow-covered mountain, stood a doubtful freedom—half frozen—beckoning us to come and share its hospitality. This in itself was sometimes enough to stagger us; but when we permitted ourselves to survey the road, we were frequently appalled. Upon either side we saw grim death, assuming the most horrid shapes. Now it was starvation, causing us to eat our own flesh;—now we were contending with the waves, and were drowned;—now we were overtaken, and torn to pieces by the fangs of the terrible bloodhound. We were stung by scorpions, chased by wild beasts, bitten by snakes, and finally, after having nearly reached the desired spot,—after swimming rivers, encountering wild beasts, sleeping in the woods, suffering hunger and nakedness,—we were overtaken by our pursuers, and, in our resistance, we were shot dead upon the spot! I say, this picture sometimes appalled us, and made us

“Rather bear those ills we had,

Than fly to others, that we knew not of.”

In coming to a fixed determination to run away, we did more than Patrick Henry, when he resolved upon liberty or death. With us it was a doubtful liberty at most, and almost certain death if we failed. For my part, I should prefer death to hopeless bondage.

Sandy, one of our number, gave up the notion, but still encouraged us. Our company then consisted of Henry Harris, John Harris, Henry Bailey, Charles Roberts,

and myself. Henry Bailey was my uncle, and belonged to my master. Charles married my aunt: he belonged to my master's father-in-law, Mr. William Hamilton.

The plan we finally concluded upon was, to get a large canoe belonging to Mr. Hamilton, and upon the Saturday night previous to Easter holidays, paddle directly up the Chesapeake Bay. On our arrival at the head of the bay, a distance of seventy or eighty miles from where we lived, it was our purpose to turn our canoe adrift, and follow the guidance of the north star till we got beyond the limits of Maryland. Our reason for taking the water route was, that we were less liable to be suspected as runaways; we hoped to be regarded as fishermen; whereas, if we should take the land route, we should be subjected to interruptions of almost every kind. Anyone having a white face, and being so disposed, could stop us, and subject us to examination.

The week before our intended start, I wrote several protections, one for each of us. As well as I can remember, they were in the following words, to wit:—

“This is to certify that I, the undersigned, have given the bearer, my servant, full liberty to go to Baltimore, and spend the Easter holidays. Written with mine own hand, &c., 1835.

“WILLIAM HAMILTON,

“Near St. Michael's, in Talbot County, Maryland.”

We were not going to Baltimore; but, in going up the bay, we went toward Baltimore, and these protections were only intended to protect us while on the bay.

As the time drew near for our departure, our anxiety became more and more intense. It was truly a matter of life and death with us. The strength of our determination was about to be fully tested. At this time, I was very active in explaining every difficulty, removing every doubt, dispelling every fear, and inspiring all with the firmness indispensable to success in our undertaking; assuring them that half was gained the

instant we made the move; we had talked long enough; we were now ready to move; if not now, we never should be; and if we did not intend to move now, we had as well fold our arms, sit down, and acknowledge ourselves fit only to be slaves. This, none of us were prepared to acknowledge. Every man stood firm; and at our last meeting, we pledged ourselves afresh, in the most solemn manner, that, at the time appointed, we would certainly start in pursuit of freedom. This was in the middle of the week, at the end of which we were to be off. We went, as usual, to our several fields of labor, but with bosoms highly agitated with thoughts of our truly hazardous undertaking. We tried to conceal our feelings as much as possible; and I think we succeeded very well.

After a painful waiting, the Saturday morning, whose night was to witness our departure, came. I hailed it with joy, bring what of sadness it might. Friday night was a sleepless one for me. I probably felt more anxious than the rest, because I was, by common consent, at the head of the whole affair. The responsibility of success or failure lay heavily upon me. The glory of the one, and the confusion of the other, were alike mine. The first two hours of that morning were such as I never experienced before, and hope never to again. Early in the morning, we went, as usual, to the field. We were spreading manure; and all at once, while thus engaged, I was overwhelmed with an indescribable feeling, in the fulness of which I turned to Sandy, who was nearby, and said, "We are betrayed!" "Well," said he, "that thought has this moment struck me." We said no more. I was never more certain of anything.

The horn was blown as usual, and we went up from the field to the house for breakfast. I went for the form, more than for want of anything to eat that morning. Just as I got to the house, in looking out at the lane gate, I saw four white men, with two colored

men. The white men were on horseback, and the colored ones were walking behind, as if tied. I watched them a few moments till they got up to our lane gate. Here they halted, and tied the colored men to the gate-post. I was not yet certain as to what the matter was. In a few moments, in rode Mr. Hamilton, with a speed betokening great excitement. He came to the door, and inquired if Master William was in. He was told he was at the barn. Mr. Hamilton, without dismounting, rode up to the barn with extraordinary speed. In a few moments, he and Mr. Freeland returned to the house. By this time, the three constables rode up, and in great haste dismounted, tied their horses, and met Master William and Mr. Hamilton returning from the barn; and after talking awhile, they all walked up to the kitchen door. There was no one in the kitchen but myself and John. Henry and Sandy were up at the barn. Mr. Freeland put his head in at the door, and called me by name, saying, there were some gentlemen at the door who wished to see me. I stepped to the door, and inquired what they wanted. They at once seized me, and, without giving me any satisfaction, tied me—lashing my hands closely together. I insisted upon knowing what the matter was. They at length said, that they had learned I had been in a “scrape,” and that I was to be examined before my master; and if their information proved false, I should not be hurt.

In a few moments, they succeeded in tying John. They then turned to Henry, who had by this time returned, and commanded him to cross his hands. “I won’t!” said Henry, in a firm tone, indicating his readiness to meet the consequences of his refusal. “Won’t you?” said Tom Graham, the constable. “No, I won’t!” said Henry, in a still stronger tone. With this, two of the constables pulled out their shining pistols, and swore, by their Creator, that they would make him cross his hands or kill him. Each cocked his pistol,

and, with fingers on the trigger, walked up to Henry, saying, at the same time, if he did not cross his hands, they would blow his damned heart out. "Shoot me, shoot me!" said Henry; "you can't kill me but once. Shoot, shoot,—and be damned! I won't be tied!" This he said in a tone of loud defiance; and at the same time, with a motion as quick as lightning, he with one single stroke dashed the pistols from the hand of each constable. As he did this, all hands fell upon him, and, after beating him some time, they finally overpowered him, and got him tied.

During the scuffle, I managed, I know not how, to get my pass out, and, without being discovered, put it into the fire. We were all now tied; and just as we were to leave for Easton jail, Betsy Freeland, mother of William Freeland, came to the door with her hands full of biscuits, and divided them between Henry and John. She then delivered herself of a speech, to the following effect:—addressing herself to me, she said, "You devil! You yellow devil! it was you that put it into the heads of Henry and John to run away. But for you, you long-legged mulatto devil! Henry nor John would never have thought of such a thing." I made no reply, and was immediately hurried off towards St. Michael's. Just a moment previous to the scuffle with Henry, Mr. Hamilton suggested the propriety of making a search for the protections which he had understood Frederick had written for himself and the rest. But, just at the moment he was about carrying his proposal into effect, his aid was needed in helping to tie Henry; and the excitement attending the scuffle caused them either to forget, or to deem it unsafe, under the circumstances, to search. So, we were not yet convicted of the intention to run away.

When we got about half way to St. Michael's, while the constables having us in charge were looking ahead, Henry inquired of me what he should do with his pass. I told

him to eat it with his biscuit, and own nothing; and we passed the word around, “Own nothing;” and “Own nothing!” said we all. Our confidence in each other was unshaken. We were resolved to succeed or fail together, after the calamity had befallen us as much as before. We were now prepared for anything. We were to be dragged that morning fifteen miles behind horses, and then to be placed in the Easton jail. When we reached St. Michael’s, we underwent a sort of examination. We all denied that we ever intended to run away. We did this more to bring out the evidence against us, than from any hope of getting clear of being sold; for, as I have said, we were ready for that. The fact was, we cared but little where we went, so we went together. Our greatest concern was about separation. We dreaded that more than anything this side of death. We found the evidence against us to be the testimony of one person; our master would not tell who it was; but we came to a unanimous decision among ourselves as to who their informant was. We were sent off to the jail at Easton. When we got there, we were delivered up to the sheriff, Mr. Joseph Graham, and by him placed in jail. Henry, John, and myself, were placed in one room together—Charles, and Henry Bailey, in another. Their object in separating us was to hinder concert. (pp. 338-344)

### **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Frederick Douglass described his failed escape attempt at length. He described not only his actions, but the emotions that informed those actions. Through these descriptions, Douglass set the stage in which his readers would engage in sympathy and empathy with him and those who remained in slavery. In essence, Douglass engaged in a literary/ print performance that echoed his speaking engagements. To heighten a sympathetic response from readers, Douglass “invited” his readers to enter the same

psychological space that he and his colleagues inhabited during their failed escape attempt. Had Douglass not described his psychological state during this failed attempt he would have risked alienating his readership. As a famous orator, abolitionist, and author, Douglass knew he had to “captivate” his audience in order to gain solidarity.

Equally important, Douglass staged his escape attempt within the context of liberty and revolution. Robert S. Levine (2007) argued that late 18<sup>th</sup>-and early 19<sup>th</sup>-century American autobiographies were linked rhetorically to the American revolutionary cause of freedom. Using the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin as an exemplar, Levine posited that slave narratives re-enact the Founding Fathers impulse to escape the constraints of being a British colony. Liberation is the key word. Just as the Founding Fathers fought to escape the chains of colonialism, Douglass and his colleagues fought to escape the chains of slavery. In describing his escape attempt as a cause that echoed the very founding of the United States, Douglass contextualized and legitimated the impulse of millions of African American slaves to seek freedom.

**Text: Brown (1847) – Attempted Escape with Mother -Part One**

I went to the jail again the next day, and Mr. Simonds, the keeper, allowed me to see my sister for the last time. I cannot give a just description of the scene at that parting interview. Never, never can be erased from my heart the occurrences of that day! When I entered the room where she was, she was seated in one corner, alone. There were four other women in the same room, belonging to the same man. He had purchased them, he said, for his own use. She was seated with her face towards the door where I entered, yet she did not look up until I walked up to her. As soon as she observed me, she sprung up, threw her arms around my neck,

leaned her head upon my breast, and, without uttering a word, burst into tears. As soon as she recovered herself sufficiently to speak, she advised me to take mother, and try to get out of slavery. She said there was no hope for herself,—that she must live and die a slave. After giving her some advice, and taking from my finger a ring and placing it upon hers, I bade her farewell forever, and returned to my mother, and then and there made up my mind to leave for Canada as soon as possible.

I had been in the city nearly two days, and as I was to be absent only a week, I thought best to get on my journey as soon as possible. In conversing with mother, I found her unwilling to make the attempt to reach a land of liberty, but she counselled me to get my liberty if I could. She said, as all her children were in slavery, she did not wish to leave them. I could not bear the idea of leaving her among those pirates, when there was a prospect of being able to get away from them. After much persuasion, I succeeded in inducing her to make the attempt to get away.

The time fixed for our departure was the next night. I had with me a little money that I had received, from time to time, from gentlemen for whom I had done errands. I took my scanty means and purchased some dried beef, crackers and cheese, which I carried to mother, who had provided herself with a bag to carry it in. I occasionally thought of my old master, and of my mission to the city to find a new one. I waited with the most intense anxiety for the appointed time to leave the land of slavery, in search of a land of liberty.



The time at length arrived, and we left the city just as the clock struck nine. We proceeded to the upper part of the city, where I had been two or three times during the day, and selected a skiff to carry us across the river. The boat was not mine, nor did I know to whom it did belong; neither did I care. The boat was fastened with a small pole, which, with the aid of a rail, I soon loosened from its moorings. After hunting round and finding a board to use as an oar, I turned to the city, and bidding it a long farewell, pushed off my boat. The current running very swift, we had not reached the middle of the stream before we were directly opposite the city.

We were soon upon the Illinois shore, and, leaping from the boat, turned it adrift, and the last I saw of it, it was going down the river at good speed. We took the main road to Alton, and passed through just at daylight, when we made for the woods, where we remained during the day. Our reason for going into the woods was, that we expected that Mr. Mansfield (the man who owned my mother) would start in pursuit of her as soon as he discovered that she was missing. He also knew that I had been in the city looking for a new master, and we thought probably he would go out to my master's to see if he could find my mother, and in so doing, Dr. Young might be led to suspect that I had gone to Canada to find a purchaser. We remained in the woods during the day, and as soon as darkness overshadowed the earth, we started again on our gloomy way, having no guide but the North Star. We continued to travel by night, and secrete ourselves in woods by day; and every night, before emerging from our hiding-place, we would anxiously look for our friend and leader,—the North Star. (pp. 402-404)

**Text: Brown (1847) – Attempted Escape with Mother -Part Two**

As we travelled towards a land of liberty, my heart would at times leap for joy. At other times, being, as I was, almost constantly on my feet, I felt as though I could travel no further. But when I thought of slavery with its Democratic whips—its Republican chains—its evangelical blood-hounds, and its religious slave-holders—when I thought of all this paraphernalia of American Democracy and Religion behind me, and the prospect of liberty before me, I was encouraged to press forward, my heart was strengthened, and I forgot that I was tired or hungry.

On the eighth day of our journey, we had a very heavy rain, and in a few hours after it commenced, we had not a dry thread upon our bodies. This made our journey still more unpleasant. On the tenth day, we found ourselves entirely destitute of provisions, and how to obtain any we could not tell. We finally resolved to stop at some farmhouse, and try to get something to eat. We had no sooner determined to do this, than we went to a house, and asked them for some food. We were treated with great kindness, and they not only gave us something to eat, but gave us provisions to carry with us. They advised us to travel by day, and lye by at night. Finding ourselves about one hundred and fifty miles from St. Louis, we concluded that it would be safe to travel by daylight, and did not leave the house until the next morning. We travelled on that day through a thickly settled country, and through one small village. Though we were fleeing from a land of oppression, our hearts were still there. My dear sister and two beloved brothers were behind us, and the idea of giving them up, and leaving them forever, made us feel sad. But with all this depression of heart, the thought that I should one day be free, and call my body my own, buoyed me up, and made my heart leap for joy. I had just been telling

mother how I should try to get employment as soon as we reached Canada, and how I intended to purchase us a little farm, and how I would earn money enough to buy sister and brothers, and how happy we would be in our own Free Home,—when three men came up on horseback, and ordered us to stop.

I turned to the one who appeared to be the principal man, and asked him what he wanted. He said he had a warrant to take us up. The three immediately dismounted, and one took from his pocket a handbill, advertising us as runaways, and offering a reward of two hundred dollars for our apprehension, and delivery in the city of St. Louis. The advertisement had been put out by Isaac Mansfield and John Young.

While they were reading the advertisement, mother looked me in the face, and burst into tears. A cold chill ran over me, and such a sensation I never experienced before, and I hope never to again. They took out a rope and tied me, and we were taken back about six miles, to the house of the individual who appeared to be the leader. We reached there about seven o'clock in the evening, had supper, and were separated for the night. Two men remained in the room during the night. Before the family retired to rest, they were all called together to attend prayers. The man who but a few hours before had bound my hands together with a strong cord, read a chapter from the Bible, and then offered up prayer, just as though God sanctioned the act he had just committed upon a poor panting, fugitive slave.

The next morning, a blacksmith came in, and put a pair of handcuffs on me, and we started on our journey back to the land of whips, chains and Bibles. Mother was not tied, but was closely watched at night. We were carried back in a wagon, and after four

days travel, we came in sight of St. Louis. I cannot describe my feelings upon approaching the city.

As we were crossing the ferry, Mr. Wiggins, the owner of the ferry, came up to me, and inquired what I had been doing that I was in chains. He had not heard that I had run away. In a few minutes, we were on the Missouri side, and were taken directly to the jail. On the way thither, I saw several of my friends, who gave me a nod of recognition as I passed them. After reaching the jail, we were locked up in different apartments. (pp. 404-405)

### **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Like Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown echoed the “revolutionary tradition of American autobiography” (Levine, 2007, p.99) by referencing the American Revolution in his escape attempt. As such, Brown’s use of “Democratic whips,” and “Republican chains” would have resonated with readers for whom the United States failed to live up to its reputation as the “land of liberty.” In doing so, Brown staged this scene within the broader sociopolitical contexts of the early American republic. Just as the Founding Fathers escaped the tyranny of British colonial rule so did Brown and millions of other fugitive slave escape the tyranny of American slavery. This comparison would not have been lost on Brown’s readership.

### **Text: Bibb (1849) – The Mob**

I prepared myself for the journey before named, and started back in the month of July, 1839.

My intention was, to let no person know my business until I returned back to the North. I went to Cincinnati, and got a passage down on board of a boat just as I did the

first time, without any misfortune or delay. I called on my mother, and the raising of a dead body from the grave could not have been more surprising to any one than my arrival was to her, on that sad summer's night. She was not able to suppress her feelings. When I entered the room, there was but one other person in the house with my mother, and this was a little slave girl who was asleep when I entered. The impulsive feeling which is ever ready to act itself out at the return of a long absent friend, was more than my bereaved mother could suppress. And unfortunately for me, the loud shouts of joy at that late hour of the night, awakened the little slave girl, who afterwards betrayed me. She kept perfectly still, and never let either of us know that she was awake, in order that she might hear our conversation and report it. Mother informed me where my family was living, and that she would see them the next day, and would make arrangements for us to meet the next night at that house after the people in the village had gone to bed. I then went off and concealed myself during the next day, and according to promise came back the next night about eleven o'clock.

When I got near the house, moving very cautiously, filled with fearful apprehensions, I saw several men walking around the house as if they were looking for some person. I went back and waited about one hour, before I returned, and the number of men had increased. They were still to be seen lurking about this house, with dogs following them. This strange movement frightened me off again, and I never returned until after midnight, at which time I slipped up to the window, and rapped for my mother, who sprang to it and informed me that I was betrayed by the girl who overheard our conversation the night before. She thought that if I could keep out of the way for a few days, the white people would think that this girl was mistaken, or had lied. She had told

her old mistress that I was there that night, and had made a plot with my mother to get my wife and child there the next night, and that I was going to take them off to Canada.

I went off to a friend of mine, who rendered me all the aid that one slave could render another, under the circumstances. Thank God he is now free from slavery, and is doing well. He was a messenger for me to my wife and mother, until at the suggestion of my mother, I changed an old friend for a new one, who betrayed me for the sum of five dollars.

We had set the time when we were to start for Canada, which was to be on the next Saturday night. My mother had an old friend whom she thought was true, and she got him to conceal me in a barn, not over two miles from the village. This man brought provisions to me, sent by my mother, and would tell me the news, which was in circulation about me, among the citizens. But the poor fellow was not able to withstand the temptation of money.

My owners had about given me up, and thought the report of the slave girl was false; but they had offered a little reward among the slaves for my apprehension. The night before I was betrayed, I met with my mother and wife, and we had set up nearly all-night plotting to start on the next Saturday night. I hid myself away in the flax in the barn, and being much rest broken I slept until the next morning about 9 o'clock. Then I was awakened by a mob of blood thirsty slaveholders, who had come armed with all the implements of death, with a determination to reduce me again to a life of slavery, or murder me on the spot.

When I looked up and saw that I was surrounded, they were exclaiming at the top of their voices, "shoot him down! shoot him down!" "If he offers to run, or to resist, kill him!"

I saw it was no use then for me to make any resistance, as I should be murdered. I felt confident that I had been betrayed by a slave, and all my flattering prospects of rescuing my family were gone forever, and the grim monster slavery with all its horrors was staring me in the face.

I surrendered myself to this hostile mob at once. The first thing done, after they had laid violent hands on me, was to bind my hands behind me with a cord, and rob me of all I possessed.

In searching my pockets, they found my certificate from the Methodist E. Church, which had been given me by my class leader, testifying to my worthiness as a member of that church. And what made the matter look more disgraceful to me, many of this mob were members of the M.E. Church, and they were the persons who took away my church ticket, and then robbed me also of fourteen dollars in cash, a silver watch for which I paid ten dollars, a pocket knife for which I paid seventy-five cents, and a Bible for which I paid sixty-two- and one-half cents. All this they tyrannically robbed me of, and yet my owner, Wm. Gatewood, was a regular member of the same church to which I belonged. He then had me taken to a blacksmith's shop, and most wickedly had my limbs bound with heavy irons, and then had my body locked within the cold dungeon walls of the Bedford jail, to be sold to a Southern slave trader.

My heart was filled with grief—my eyes were filled with tears. I could see no way of escape. I could hear no voice of consolation. Slaveholders were coming to the dungeon window in great numbers to ask me questions. Some were rejoicing—some swearing, and others saying that I ought to be hung; while others were in favor of sending both me and my wife to New Orleans. They supposed that I had informed her all about the facilities

for slaves to escape to Canada, and that she would tell other slaves after I was gone; hence we must all be sent off to where we could neither escape ourselves, nor instruct others the way. (pp. 484-486)

### **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

In his attempt to rescue his family from slavery, Henry Bibb was betrayed by other slaves and captured. When placed within the context of the American Revolution, this betrayal and capture transcended its narrative function for Bibb's readers. It became a moment of sympathy and empathy. His readers would have understood the importance of rescuing one's family from the bonds of slavery, just as they understood the American Revolution as a war against colonial tyranny. Even Bibb's betrayal would have been understood in the light of the Founding Fathers, who were betrayed by Benedict Arnold. In staging this episode as one of betrayal and capture, Bibb engaged in the "revolutionary tradition of American autobiography" (Levine, 2007, p. 99). However, as Levine suggested of other slave narratives, Bibb did not merely imitate that tradition. He echoed it with a twist. He transformed himself from fugitive slave/ property to freedom fighter who attempted to rescue his family.

### **Text: Harriet Jacobs/ Linda Brent (1861) – Fear of Insurrection/ Patrol**

Not far from this time, Nat Turner's insurrection broke out; and the news threw our town into great commotion. Strange that they should be alarmed, when their slaves were so "contented and happy!" But so it was.

It was always the custom to have a muster every year. On that occasion every white man shouldered his musket. The citizens and the so-called country gentlemen wore military uniforms. The poor whites took their places in the ranks in every-day dress, some



without shoes, some without hats. This grand occasion had already passed; and when the slaves were told there was to be another muster, they were surprised and rejoiced. Poor creatures! They thought it was going to be a holiday. I was informed of the true state of affairs, and imparted it to the few I could trust. Most gladly would I have proclaimed it to every slave; but I dared not. All could not be relied on. Mighty is the power of the torturing lash.

By sunrise, people were pouring in from every quarter within twenty miles of the town. I knew the houses were to be searched; and I expected it would be done by country bullies and the poor whites. I knew nothing annoyed them so much as to see colored people living in comfort and respectability; so, I made arrangements for them with especial care. I arranged everything in my grandmother's house as neatly as possible. I put white quilts on the beds, and decorated some of the rooms with flowers. When all was arranged, I sat down at the window to watch. Far as my eye could reach, it rested on a motley crowd of soldiers. Drums and fifes were discoursing martial music. The men were divided into companies of sixteen, each headed by a captain. Orders were given, and the wild scouts rushed in every direction, wherever a colored face was to be found.

It was a grand opportunity for the low whites, who had no negroes of their own to scourge. They exulted in such a chance to exercise a little brief authority, and show their subserviency to the slaveholders; not reflecting that the power which trampled on the colored people also kept themselves in poverty, ignorance, and moral degradation. Those who never witnessed such scenes can hardly believe what I know was inflicted at this time on innocent men, women, and children, against whom there was not the slightest ground for suspicion. Colored people and slaves who lived in remote parts of the town

suffered in an especial manner. In some cases, the searchers scattered powder and shot among their clothes, and then sent other parties to find them, and bring them forward as proof that they were plotting insurrection. Everywhere men, women, and children were whipped till the blood stood in puddles at their feet. Some received five hundred lashes; others were tied hands and feet, and tortured with a bucking paddle, which blisters the skin terribly. The dwellings of the colored people, unless they happened to be protected by some influential white person, who was nigh at hand, were robbed of clothing and everything else the marauders thought worth carrying away. All day long these unfeeling wretches went round, like a troop of demons, terrifying and tormenting the helpless. At night, they formed themselves into patrol bands, and went wherever they chose among the colored people, acting out their brutal will. Many women hid themselves in woods and swamps, to keep out of their way. If any of the husbands or fathers told of these outrages, they were tied up to the public whipping post, and cruelly scourged for telling lies about white men. The consternation was universal. No two people that had the slightest tinge of color in their faces dared to be seen talking together.

I entertained no positive fears about our household, because we were in the midst of white families who would protect us. We were ready to receive the soldiers whenever they came. It was not long before we heard the tramp of feet and the sound of voices. The door was rudely pushed open; and in they tumbled, like a pack of hungry wolves. They snatched at everything within their reach. Every box, trunk, closet, and corner underwent a thorough examination. A box in one of the drawers containing some silver change was eagerly pounced upon. When I stepped forward to take it from them, one of the soldiers

turned and said angrily, "What d'ye foller us fur? D'ye s'pose white folks is come to steal?"

I replied, "You have come to search; but you have searched that box, and I will take it, if you please."

At that moment I saw a white gentleman who was friendly to us; and I called to him, and asked him to have the goodness to come in and stay till the search was over. He readily complied. His entrance into the house brought in the captain of the company, whose business it was to guard the outside of the house, and see that none of the inmates left it. This officer was Mr. Litch, the wealthy slaveholder whom I mentioned, in the account of neighboring planters, as being notorious for his cruelty. He felt above soiling his hands with the search. He merely gave orders; and, if a bit of writing was discovered, it was carried to him by his ignorant followers, who were unable to read.

My grandmother had a large trunk of bedding and table cloths. When that was opened, there was a great shout of surprise; and one exclaimed, "Where'd the damned niggers git all dis sheet an' table clarf [table cloth]?"

My grandmother, emboldened by the presence of our white protector said, "You may be sure we didn't pilfer 'em from your houses."

"Look here, mammy," said a grim-looking fellow without any coat, "you seem to feel mighty gran' 'cause you got all them 'ere fixens. White folks oughter have 'em all."

His remarks were interrupted by a chorus of voices shouting, "We's got 'em! We's got 'em! Dis 'ere yaller gal's got letters!"

There was a general rush for the supposed letter, which, upon examination, proved to be some verses written to me by a friend. In packing away my things, I had

overlooked them. When their captain informed them of their contents, they seemed much disappointed. He inquired of me who wrote them. I told him it was one of my friends.

“Can you read them?” he asked. When I told him I could, he swore, and raved, and tore the paper into bits. “Bring me all your letters!” said he, in commanding tone. I told him I had none. “Don’t be afraid,” he continued, in an insinuating way. “Bring them all to me. Nobody shall do you any harm.” Seeing I did not move to obey him, his pleasant tone changed to oaths and threats. “Who writes to you? half free niggers?” inquired he. I replied, “O, no; most of my letters are from white people. Some request me to burn them after they are read, and some I destroy without reading.”

An exclamation of surprise from some of the company put a stop to our conversation. Some silver spoons which ornamented an old-fashioned buffet had just been discovered. My grandmother was in the habit of preserving fruit for many ladies in the town, and of preparing suppers for parties; consequently, she had many jars of preserves. The closet that contained these was next invaded, and the contents tasted. One of them, who was helping himself freely, tapped his neighbor on the shoulder, and said, “Wal done! Don’t wonder de niggers want to kill all de white folks, when dey live on ’sarves” [meaning preserves]. I stretched out my hand to take the jar, saying, “You were not sent here to search for sweetmeats.”

“And what were we sent for?” said the captain, bristling up to me. I evaded the question.

The search of the house was completed, and nothing found to condemn us. They next proceeded to the garden, and knocked about every bush and vine, with no better success. The captain called his men together, and, after a short consultation, the order to

march was given. As they passed out of the gate, the captain turned back, and pronounced a malediction on the house. He said it ought to be burned to the ground, and each of its inmates receive thirty-nine lashes. We came out of this affair very fortunately; not losing anything except some wearing apparel.

Towards evening the turbulence increased. The soldiers, stimulated by drink, committed still greater cruelties. Shrieks and shouts continually rent the air. Not daring to go to the door, I peeped under the window curtain. I saw a mob dragging along a number of colored people, each white man, with his musket upraised, threatening instant death if they did not stop their shrieks. Among the prisoners was a respectable old colored minister. They had found a few parcels of shot in his house, which his wife had for years used to balance her scales. For this they were going to shoot him on Court House Green. What a spectacle was that for a civilized country! A rabble, staggering under intoxication, assuming to be the administrators of justice!

The better class of the community exerted their influence to save the innocent, persecuted people; and in several instances they succeeded, by keeping them shut up in jail till the excitement abated. At last, the white citizens found that their own property was not safe from the lawless rabble they had summoned to protect them. They rallied the drunken swarm, drove them back into the country, and set a guard over the town.

The next day, the town patrols were commissioned to search colored people that lived out of the city; and the most shocking outrages were committed with perfect impunity. Every day for a fortnight, if I looked out, I saw horsemen with some poor panting negro tied to their saddles, and compelled by the lash to keep up with their speed, till they arrived at the jail yard. Those who had been whipped too unmercifully to walk

were washed with brine, tossed into a cart, and carried to jail. One black man, who had not fortitude to endure scourging, promised to give information about the conspiracy. But it turned out that he knew nothing at all. He had not even heard the name of Nat Turner. The poor fellow had, however, made up a story, which augmented his own sufferings and those of the colored people.

The day patrol continued for some weeks, and at sundown a night guard was substituted. Nothing at all was proved against the colored people, bond or free. The wrath of the slaveholders was somewhat appeased by the capture of Nat Turner. The imprisoned were released. The slaves were sent to their masters, and the free were permitted to return to their ravaged homes. Visiting was strictly forbidden on the plantations. The slaves begged the privilege of again meeting at their little church in the woods, with their burying ground around it. It was built by the colored people, and they had no higher happiness than to meet there and sing hymns together, and pour out their hearts in spontaneous prayer. Their request was denied, and the church was demolished. They were permitted to attend the white churches, a certain portion of the galleries being appropriated to their use. There, when everybody else had partaken of the communion, and the benediction had been pronounced, the minister said, "Come down, now, my colored friends." They obeyed the summons, and partook of the bread and wine, in commemoration of the meek and lowly Jesus, who said, "God is your Father, and all ye are brethren." (pp. 809-814)

### **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Harriet Jacobs demonstrated how a slave community responded to the 1831 Nat Turner Rebellion. Because Nat Turner was a literate slave and because slave literacy was

perceived as a necessary pre-condition to slave insurrections, local militia conducted searches for signs of literacy within the local slave population. According to the Fourth Amendment of the Constitution, Americans are protected against unreasonable search and seizure. Jacobs's inclusion of this episode demonstrated that the enforcement of such protections was sometimes provisional in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this case, a free African American woman, Jacob's grandmother (Martha), was subject to an illegal search and seizure. Equally important, Jacobs demonstrated how the right to privacy was disrupted for the general population at large, not only those in the African American community. In other words, Jacobs demonstrated that the oppression of slavery negatively affected entire community, even those who nominally benefitted from such oppression.

**Trope 10: Description of successful attempt(s) to escape, lying by during the day, traveling by night guided by the North Star, reception in a free state by Quakers who offer a lavish breakfast and much genial thee/thou conversation;**

**Text: Douglass (1845) – Apology for Vague Description of Successful Escape**

I now come to that part of my life during which I planned, and finally succeeded in making, my escape from slavery. But before narrating any of the peculiar circumstances, I deem it proper to make known my intention not to state all the facts connected with the transaction. My reasons for pursuing this course may be understood from the following: First, were I to give a minute statement of all the facts, it is not only possible, but quite probable, that others would thereby be involved in the most embarrassing difficulties. Secondly, such a statement would most undoubtedly induce greater vigilance on the part of slaveholders than has existed heretofore among them; which would, of course, be the means of guarding a door whereby some dear brother bondman might escape his galling

chains. I deeply regret the necessity that impels me to suppress [anything] of importance connected with my experience in slavery. It would afford me great pleasure indeed, as well as materially add to the interest of my narrative, were I at liberty to gratify a curiosity, which I know exists in the minds of many, by an accurate statement of all the facts pertaining to my most fortunate escape. But I must deprive myself of this pleasure, and the curious of the gratification which such a statement would afford. I would allow myself to suffer under the greatest imputations which evil-minded men might suggest, rather than exculpate myself, and thereby run the hazard of closing the slightest avenue by which a brother slave might clear himself of the chains and fetters of slavery. (pp. 350-351)

**Text: Douglass (1845) – Successful Escape**

Things went on without very smoothly indeed, but within there was trouble. It is impossible for me to describe my feelings as the time of my contemplated start drew near. I had a number of warmhearted friends in Baltimore,—friends that I loved almost as I did my life,—and the thought of being separated from them forever was painful beyond expression. It is my opinion that thousands would escape from slavery, who now remain, but for the strong cords of affection that bind them to their friends. The thought of leaving my friends was decidedly the most painful thought with which I had to contend. The love of them was my tender point, and shook my decision more than all things else. Besides the pain of separation, the dread and apprehension of a failure exceeded what I had experienced at my first attempt. The appalling defeat I then sustained returned to torment me. I felt assured that, if I failed in this attempt, my case would be a hopeless one—it would seal my fate as a slave forever. I could not hope to get off with [anything]



less than the severest punishment, and being placed beyond the means of escape. It required no very vivid imagination to depict the most frightful scenes through which I should have to pass, in case I failed. The wretchedness of slavery, and the blessedness of freedom, were perpetually before me. It was life and death with me. But I remained firm, and, according to my resolution, on the third day of September, 1838, I left my chains, and succeeded in reaching New York without the slightest interruption of any kind. How I did so,—what means I adopted,—what direction I travelled, and by what mode of conveyance,—I must leave unexplained, for the reasons before mentioned. (pp. 354-355)

### **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Although readers may have wanted the exact details of his escape, Frederick Douglass refused to provide such details for practical reasons. As he aptly noted, disclosing such confidential information would compromise escape plans for other slaves. As an abolitionist and fugitive slave, Douglass refused to compromise routes of freedom for millions of other slaves. With this move, he also refused to compromise control of his own narrative. Douglass decided what information he would freely give and what information he would keep confidential—even from other abolitionists. At the end of his narrative, Douglass wrote: “I subscribe myself” (p. 368). Borrowed from Latin, *subscribe* translates to under (sub) write (scribe). Mortgage underwriters assess financial risks for mortgage loans. If clients meet investor guidelines, underwriters approve the loan.. By saying he subscribed himself, Douglass claimed that he verified and approved himself. In other words, he claimed to have maintained control over his own narrative. As such, his refusal to give exact details of his escape, while practical, also indicated a need to control the narrative.

**Text: Brown (1847) – Successful Escape-Part One**

[The opportunity to escape had arrived] The boat landed at a point which appeared to me the place of all others to start from. I found that it would be impossible to carry anything with me, but what was upon my person. I had some provisions, and a single suit of clothes, about half worn. When the boat was discharging her cargo, and the passengers engaged carrying their baggage on and off shore, I improved the opportunity to convey myself with my little effects on land. Taking up a trunk, I went up the wharf, and was soon out of the crowd. I made directly for the woods, where I remained until night knowing well that I could not travel, even in the State of Ohio, during the day, without danger of being arrested.

I had long since made up my mind that I would not trust myself in the hands of any man, white or colored. The slave is brought up to look upon every white man as an enemy to him and his race; and twenty-one years in slavery had taught me that there were traitors, even among colored people. After dark, I emerged from the woods into a narrow path, which led me into the main travelled road. But I knew not which way to go. I did not know North from South, East from West. I looked in vain for the North Star; a heavy cloud hid it from my view. I walked up and down the road until near midnight, when the clouds disappeared, and I welcomed the sight of my friend,—truly the slave's friend,—the North Star!

As soon as I saw it, I knew my course, and before daylight I travelled twenty or twenty-five miles. It being in the winter, I suffered intensely from the cold; being without an overcoat, and my other clothes rather thin for the season. I was provided with a tinder-box, so that I could make up a fire when necessary. And but for this, I should certainly

have frozen to death; for I was determined not to go to any house for shelter. I knew of a man belonging to Gen. Ashly, of St. Louis, who had run away near Cincinnati, on the way to Washington, but had been caught and carried back into slavery; and I felt that a similar fate awaited me, should I be seen by [anyone]. I travelled at night, and lay by during the day.

On the fourth day, my provisions gave out, and then what to do I could not tell. Have something to eat, I must; but how to get it was the question! On the first night after my food was gone, I went to a barn on the road-side, and there found some ears of corn. I took ten or twelve of them, and kept on my journey. During the next day, while in the woods, I roasted my corn and feasted upon it, thanking God that I was so well provided for.

My escape to a land of freedom now appeared certain, and the prospects of the future occupied a great part of my thoughts. What should be my occupation, was a subject of much anxiety to me; and the next thing what should be my name? I have before stated that my old master, Dr. Young, had no children of his own, but had with him a nephew, the son of his brother, Benjamin Young. When this boy was brought to Doctor Young, his name being William, the same as mine, my mother was ordered to change mine to something else. This, at the time, I thought to be one of the most cruel acts that could be committed upon my rights; and I received several very severe whippings for telling people that my name was William, after orders were given to change it. Though young, I was old enough to place a high appreciation upon my name. It was decided, however, to call me "Sandford," and this name I was known by, not only upon my master's plantation, but up to the time that I made my escape. I was sold under the name of Sandford.

But as soon as the subject came to my mind, I resolved on adopting my old name of William, and let Sandford go by the board, for I always hated it. Not because there was anything peculiar in the name; but because it had been forced upon me. It is sometimes common at the south, for slaves to take the name of their masters. Some have a legitimate right to do so. But I always detested the idea of being called by the name of either of my masters. And as for my father, I would rather have adopted the name of "Friday," and been known as the servant of some Robinson Crusoe, than to have taken his name. So I was not only hunting for my liberty, but also hunting for a name; though I regarded the latter as of little consequence, if I could but gain the former. Travelling along the road, I would sometimes speak to myself, sounding my name over, by way of getting used to it, before I should arrive among civilized human beings. On the fifth or sixth day, it rained very fast, and it froze about as fast as it fell, so that my clothes were one glare of ice. I travelled on at night until I became so chilled and benumbed—the wind blowing into my face—that I found it impossible to go any further, and accordingly took shelter in a barn, where I was obliged to walk about to keep from freezing.

I have ever looked upon that night as the most eventful part of my escape from slavery. Nothing but the providence of God, and that old barn, saved me from freezing to death. I received a very severe cold, which settled upon my lungs, and from time to time my feet had been frost-bitten, so that it was with difficulty I could walk. In this situation I travelled two days, when I found that I must seek shelter somewhere, or die.

The thought of death was nothing frightful to me, compared with that of being caught, and again carried back into slavery. Nothing but the prospect of enjoying liberty could have induced me to undergo such trials, for

"Behind I left the whips and chains,

Before me were sweet Freedom's plains!"

This, and this alone, cheered me onward. But I at last resolved to seek protection from the inclemency of the weather, and therefore I secured myself behind some logs and brush, intending to wait there until [someone] should pass by; for I thought it probable that I might see some colored person, or, if not, [someone] who was not a slaveholder; for I had an idea that I should know a slaveholder as far as I could see him. (pp. 415-418)

**Text: Brown (1847) – Successful Escape – Part Two**

The first person that passed was a man in a buggy-wagon. He looked too genteel for me to hail him. Very soon, another passed by on horseback. I attempted speaking to him, but fear made my voice fail me. As he passed, I left my hiding-place, and was approaching the road, when I observed an old man walking towards me, leading a white horse. He had on a broad-brimmed hat and a very long coat, and was evidently walking for exercise. As soon as I saw him, and observed his dress, I thought to myself, "You are the man that I have been looking for!" Nor was I mistaken. He was the very man!

On approaching me, he asked me, "if I was not a slave." I looked at him some time, and then asked him "if he knew of anyone who would help me, as I was sick." He answered that he would; but again asked, if I was not a slave. I told him I was. He then said that I was in a very pro-slavery neighborhood, and if I would wait until he went home, he would get a covered wagon for me. I promised to remain. He mounted his horse, and was soon out of sight.

After he was gone, I meditated whether to wait or not; being apprehensive that he had gone for someone to arrest me. But I finally concluded to remain until he should

return; removing some few rods to watch his movements. After a suspense of an hour and a half or more, he returned with a two-horse covered-wagon, such as are usually seen under the shed of a Quaker meeting-house on Sundays and Thursdays; for the old man proved to be a Quaker of the George Fox stamp.

He took me to his house, but it was some time before I could be induced to enter it; not until the old lady came out, did I venture into the house. I thought I saw something in the old lady's cap that told me I was not only safe, but welcome, in her house. I was not, however, prepared to receive their hospitalities. The only fault I found with them was their being too kind. I had never had a white man to treat me as an equal, and the idea of a white lady waiting on me at the table was still worse! Though the table was loaded with the good things of this life, I could not eat. I thought if I could only be allowed the privilege of eating in the kitchen, I should be more than satisfied!

Finding that I could not eat, the old lady, who was a "Thompsonian," made me a cup of "composition," or "number six;" but it was so strong and hot, that I called it "number seven!" However, I soon found myself at home in this family. On different occasions, when telling these facts, I have been asked how I felt upon finding myself regarded as a man by a white family; especially just having run away from one. I cannot say that I have ever answered the question yet.

The fact that I was in all probability a freeman, sounded in my ears like a charm. I am satisfied that none but a slave could place such an appreciation upon liberty as I did at that time. I wanted to see mother and sister, that I might tell them "I was free!" I wanted to see my fellow slaves in St. Louis, and let them know that the chains were no longer upon my limbs. I wanted to see Captain Price, and let him learn from my own lips that I was no

more a chattel, but a man! I was anxious, too, thus, to inform Mrs. Price that she must get another coachman. And I wanted to see Eliza more than I did either Mr. or Mrs. Price!

The fact that I was a freeman—could walk, talk, eat and sleep as a man, and no one to stand over me with the blood-clotted cowhide—all this made me feel that I was not myself. (pp. 418-420)

### **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Like Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown did not divulge confidential information about his escape. Brown controlled his own narrative. Any details he rendered could have been given in any novel or newspaper account. Given that Brown was known to blur the line between fiction and non-fiction and that he appropriated the stories of other slaves and considered his own narrative a part of the whole (Greenspan, 2014), it is not surprising that his description may have been compelling, yet generic to his readers. The goal of slave narratives were to fight slavery, not to discuss exact details that may thwart that goal. If Brown had given exact details of his escape, he would have aided slave trackers and slaveowners in pursuit of fugitive slaves. Like Douglass, Brown controlled what he would and would not share with his readers. If anything, Brown gave the illusion of exact details within a compelling narrative. As such, Brown avoided creating an *apologia* or explanation for the lack of details.

### **Text: Bibb (1849) – Escape from Cherokee Indians -Part One**

Early in the morning I left the Indian territory as I have already said, for fear I might be pursued by the three white men whom I had seen there over night; but I had not proceeded far before my fears were magnified a hundred-fold.

I always dreaded to pass through a prairie, and on coming to one which was about six miles in width, I was careful to look in every direction to see whether there was any person in sight before I entered it; but I could see no one. So, I started across with a hope of crossing without coming in contact with any one on the prairie. I walked as fast as I could, but when I got about midway of the prairie, I came to a high spot where the road forked, and three men came up from a low spot as if they had been there concealed. They were all on horseback, and I supposed them to be the same men that had tried to get lodging where I stopped overnight. Had this been in timbered land, I might have stood some chance to have dodged them, but there I was, out in the open prairie, where I could see no possible way by which I could escape.

They came along slowly up behind me, and finally passed, and spoke or bowed their heads on passing, but they traveled in a slow walk and kept but a very few steps before me, until we got nearly across the prairie. When we were coming near a plantation a piece off from the road on the skirt of the timbered land, they whipped up their horses and left the road as if they were going across to this plantation. They soon got out of my sight by going down into a valley which lay between us and the plantation. Not seeing them rise the hill to go up to the farm, excited greater suspicion in my mind, so I stepped over on the brow of the hill, where I could see what they were doing, and to my surprise I saw them going right back in the direction they had just came, and they were going very fast. I was then satisfied that they were after me and that they were only going back to get more help to assist them in taking me, for fear that I might kill some of them if they undertook it. The first impression was that I had better leave the road immediately; so I bolted from the road and ran as fast as I could for some distance in the thick forest, and



concealed myself for about fifteen or twenty minutes, which were spent in prayer to God for his protecting care and guidance.

My impression was that when they should start in pursuit of me again, they would follow on in the direction which I was going when they left me; and not finding or hearing of me on the road, they would come back and hunt through the woods around, and if they could find no track they might go and get dogs to trace me out.

I thought my chance of escape would be better, if I went back to the same side of the road that they first went, for the purpose of deceiving them; as I supposed that they would not suspect my going in the same direction that they went, for the purpose of escaping from them.

So, I traveled all that day square off from the road through the wild forest without any knowledge of the country whatever; for I had nothing to travel by but the sun by day, and the moon and stars by night. Just before night I came in sight of a large plantation, where I saw quite a number of horses running at large in a field, and knowing that my success in escaping depended upon my getting out of that settlement within twenty-four hours, to save myself from everlasting slavery, I thought I should be justified in riding one of those horses, that night, if I could catch one. I cut a grape vine with my knife, and made it into a bridle; and shortly after dark I went into the field and tried to catch one of the horses. I got a bunch of dry blades of fodder and walked up softly towards the horses, calling to them "cope," "cope," "cope;" but there was only one out of the number that I was able to get my hand on, and that was an old mare, which I supposed to be the mother of all the rest; and I knew that I could walk faster than she could travel. She had a bell on and was very thin in flesh; she looked gentle and walked on three legs only. The young

horses pranced and galloped off. I was not able to get near them, and the old mare being of no use to me, I left them all. After fixing my eyes on the north star I pursued my journey, holding on to my bridle with a hope of finding a horse upon which I might ride that night.

I found a road leading pretty nearly in the direction which I wanted to travel, and I kept it. After traveling several miles I found another large plantation where there was a prospect of finding a horse. I stepped up to the barn-yard, wherein I found several horses. There was a little barn standing with the door open, and I found it quite an easy task to get the horses into the barn, and select out the best looking one of them. I pulled down the fence, led the noble beast out and mounted him, taking a northern direction, being able to find a road which led that way. But I had not gone over three or four miles before I came to a large stream of water which was past fording; yet I could see that it had been forded by the road track, but from high water it was then impassible. As the horse seemed willing to go in I put him through; but before he got in far, he was in water up to his sides and finally the water came over his back and he swam over. I got as wet as could be, but the horse carried me safely across at the proper place. After I got out a mile or so from the river, I came into a large prairie, which I think must have been twenty or thirty miles in width, and the road run across it about in the direction that I wanted to go. I laid whip to the horse, and I think he must have carried me not less than forty miles that night, or before sun rise the next morning. I then stopped him in a spot of high grass in an old field, and took off the bridle. I thanked God, and thanked the horse for what he had done for me, and wished him a safe journey back home.

I know the poor horse must have felt stiff, and tired from his speedy jaunt, and I felt very bad myself, riding at that rate all night without a saddle; but I felt as if I had too much at stake to favor either horse flesh or man flesh. I could indeed afford to crucify my own flesh for the sake of redeeming myself from perpetual slavery.

Some may be disposed to find fault with my taking the horse as I did; but I did nothing more than nine out of ten would do if they were placed in the same circumstances. I had no disposition to steal a horse from any man. But I ask, if a white man had been captured by the Cherokee Indians and carried away from his family for life into slavery, and could see a chance to escape and get back to his family; should the Indians pursue him with a determination to take him back or take his life, would it be a crime for the poor fugitive, whose life, liberty, and future happiness were all at stake, to mount any man's horse by the way side, and ride him without asking any questions, to effect his escape? Or who would not do the same thing to rescue a wife, child, father, or mother? Such an act committed by a white man under the same circumstances would not only be pronounced proper, but praiseworthy; and if he neglected to avail himself of such a means of escape he would be pronounced a fool. Therefore, from this act I have nothing to regret, for I have done nothing more than any other reasonable person would have done under the same circumstances. But I had good luck from the morning I left the horse until I got back into the State of Ohio. About two miles from where I left the horse, I found a public house on the road, where I stopped and took breakfast. Being asked where I was traveling, I replied that I was going home to [Perrysburg], Ohio, and that I had been out to look at the land in Missouri, with a view of buying. They supposed me to be a

native of Ohio, from the fact of my being so well acquainted with its location, its principal cities, inhabitants, &c.

The next night I put up at one of the best hotels in the village where I stopped, and acted with as much independence as if I was worth a million of dollars; talked about buying land, stock and village property, and contrasting it with the same kind of property in the State of Ohio. In this kind of talk they were most generally interested, and I was treated just like other travelers. I made it a point to travel about thirty miles each day on my way to Jefferson City. On several occasions I have asked the landlords where I have stopped overnight, if they could tell me who kept the best house where I would stop the next night, which was most generally in a small village. But for fear I might forget, I would get them to give me the name on a piece of paper as a kind of recommend. This would serve as an introduction through which I have always been well received from one landlord to another, and I have always stopped at the best houses, eaten at the first tables, and slept in the best beds. No man ever asked me whether I was bond or free, black or white, rich or poor; but I always presented a bold front and showed the best side out, which was all the pass I had. But when I got within about one hundred miles of Jefferson City, where I expected to take a Steamboat passage to St. Louis, I stopped over night at a hotel, where I met with a young white man who was traveling on to Jefferson City on horseback, and was also leading a horse with a saddle and bridle on.

I asked him if he would let me ride the horse which he was leading, as I was going to the same city? He said that it was a hired horse, that he was paying at the rate of fifty cents per day for it, but if I would pay the same I could ride him. I accepted the offer

and we rode together to the city. We were on the road together two or three days; stopped and ate and slept together at the same hotels. (pp. 532-536)

**Text: Bibb (1849) Escape from Cherokee Indians -Part Two**

The greatest of my adventures came off when I arrived at Jefferson City. There I expected to meet an advertisement for my person; it was there I must cross the river or take a steamboat down; it was there I expected to be interrogated and required to prove whether I was actually a free man or a slave. If I was free, I should have to show my free papers; and if I was a slave I should be required to tell who my master was.

I stopped at a hotel, however, and ascertained that there was a steamboat expected down the river that day for St. Louis. I also found out that there were several passengers at that house who were going down on board of the first boat. I knew that the captain of a steamboat could not take a colored passenger on board of his boat from a slave state without first ascertaining whether such person was bond or free; I knew that this was more than he would dare to do by the laws of the slave states—and now to surmount this difficulty it brought into exercise all the powers of my mind. I would have got myself boxed up as freight, and have been forwarded to St. Louis, but I had no friend that I could trust to do it for me. This plan has since been adopted by some with success. But finally I thought I might possibly pass myself off as a body servant to the passengers going from the hotel down.

So, I went to a store and bought myself a large trunk, and took it to the hotel. Soon, a boat came in which was bound to St. Louis, and the passengers started down to get on board. I took up my large trunk, and started along after them as if I was their servant. My heart trembled in view of the dangerous experiment which I was then about

to try. It required all the moral courage that I was master of to bear me up in view of my critical condition. The white people that I was following walked on board and I after them. I acted as if the trunk was full of clothes, but I had not a stitch of clothes in it. The passengers went up into the cabin and I followed them with the trunk. I suppose this made the captain think that I was their slave.

I not only took the trunk in the cabin but stood by it until after the boat had started as if it belonged to my owners, and I was taking care of it for them; but as soon as the boat got fairly under way, I knew that some account would have to be given of me; so I then took my trunk down on the deck among the deck passengers to prepare myself to meet the clerk of the boat, when he should come to collect fare from the deck passengers.

Fortunately for me there was quite a number of deck passengers on board, among whom there were many Irish. I insinuated myself among them so as to get into their good graces, believing that if I should get into a difficulty they would stand by me. I saw several of these persons going up to the saloon buying whiskey, and I thought this might be the most effectual way by which I could gain speedily their respect and sympathy. So I participated with them pretty freely for a while, or at least until after I got my fare settled. I placed myself in a little crowd of them, and invited them all up to the bar with me, stating that it was my treat. This was responded to, and they walked up and drank and I footed the bill. This, of course, brought us into a kind of a union. We sat together and laughed and talked freely. Within ten or fifteen minutes I remarked that I was getting dry again, and invited them up and treated again. By this time, I was thought to be one of the most liberal and gentlemanly men on board, by these deck passengers; they were ready to

do anything for me—they got to singing songs, and telling long yarns in which I took quite an active part; but it was all for effect.

By this time the porter came around ringing his bell for all passengers who had not paid their fare, to walk up to the captain's office and settle it. Some of my Irish friends had not yet settled, and I asked one of them if he would be good enough to take my money and get me a ticket when he was getting one for himself, and he quickly replied, "yes sir, I will get you a tacket." So, he relieved me of my greatest trouble. When they came round to gather the tickets before we got to St. Louis, my ticket was taken with the rest, and no questions were asked [of] me.

The next day the boat arrived at St. Louis; my object was to take passage on board of the first boat which was destined for Cincinnati, Ohio; and as there was a boat going out that day for Pittsburgh, I went on board to make some inquiry about the fare &c., and found the steward to be a colored man with whom I was acquainted. He lived in Cincinnati, and had rendered me some assistance in making my escape to Canada, in the summer of 1838, and he also very kindly aided me then in getting back into a land of freedom. The swift running steamer started that afternoon on her voyage, which soon wafted my body beyond the tyrannical limits of chattel slavery. When the boat struck the mouth of the river Ohio, and I had once more the pleasure of looking on that lovely stream, my heart leaped up for joy at the glorious prospect that I should again be free. Every revolution of the mighty steam-engine seemed to bring me nearer and nearer the "promised land." Only a few days had elapsed, before I was permitted by the smiles of a good providence, once more to gaze on the green hill-tops and valleys of old Kentucky, the State of my nativity. And notwithstanding I was deeply interested while standing on

the deck of the steamer looking at the beauties of nature on either side of the river, as she pressed her way up the stream, my very soul was pained to look upon the slaves in the fields of Kentucky, still toiling under their task-masters without pay. It was on this soil I first breathed, the free air of Heaven, and felt the bitter pangs of slavery—it was here that I first learned to abhor it. It was here I received the first impulse of human rights—it was here that I first entered my protest against the bloody institution of slavery, by running away from it, and declared that I would no longer work for any man as I had done, without wages.

When the steamboat arrived at Portsmouth, Ohio, I took off my trunk with the intention of going to Canada. But my funds were almost exhausted, so I had to stop and go to work to get money to travel on. I hired myself at the American Hotel to a Mr. McCoy to do the work of a porter, to black boots, &c., for which he was to pay me \$12 per month. I soon found the landlord to be bad pay, and not only that, but he would not allow me to charge for blacking boots, although I had to black them after everybody had gone to bed at night, and set them in the bar-room, where the gentlemen could come and get them in the morning while I was at other work. I had nothing extra for this, neither would he pay me my regular wages; so I thought this was a little too much like slavery, and devised a plan by which I got some pay for my work.

I made it a point never to blacken all the boots and shoes overnight, neither would I put any of them in the bar-room, but lock them up in a room where no one could get them without calling for me. I got a piece of broken vessel, placed it in the room just before the boots, and put into it several pieces of small change, as if it had been given me for boot blacking; and almost every one that came in after their boots, would throw some



small trifle into my contribution box, while I was there blacking away. In this way, I made more than my landlord paid me, and I soon got a good stock of cash again. One morning I blacked a gentleman's boots who came in during the night by a steamboat. After he had put on his boots, I was called into the bar-room to button his straps; and while I was performing this service, not thinking to see anybody that knew me, I happened to look up at the man's face and who should it be but one of the very gamblers who had recently sold me. I dropped his foot and bolted from the room as if I had been struck by an electric shock. The man happened not to recognize me, but this strange conduct on my part excited the landlord, who followed me out to see what was the matter. He found me with my hand to my breast, groaning at a great rate. He asked me what was the matter; but I was not able to inform him correctly, but said that I felt very bad indeed. He of course thought I was sick with the colic and ran in the house and got some hot stuff for me, with spice, ginger, &c. But I never got able to go into the bar-room until long after breakfast time, when I knew this man was gone; then I got well.

And yet I have no idea that the man would have hurt a hair of my head; but my first thought was that he was after me. I then made up my mind to leave Portsmouth; its location being right on the border of a slave State.

A short time after this a gentleman put up there overnight named Smith, from Perrysburg, with whom I was acquainted in the North. He was on his way to Kentucky to buy up a drove of fine horses, and he wanted me to go and help him to drive his horses out to Perrysburg, and said he would pay all my expenses if I would go. So, I made a contract to go and agreed to meet him the next week, on a set day, in Washington, Ky., to start with his drove to the north. Accordingly at the time I took a steamboat passage down

to Maysville, near where I was to meet Mr. Smith with my trunk. When I arrived at Maysville, I found that Washington was still six miles back from the river. I stopped at a hotel and took my breakfast, and who should I see there but a captain of a boat, who saw me but two years previous going down the river Ohio with handcuffs on, in a chain gang; but he happened not to know me. I left my trunk at the hotel and went out to Washington, where I found Mr. Smith, and learned that he was not going to start off with his drove until the next day. (pp. 537-541)

### **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Henry Bibb's escape narrative warrants special attention for two reasons. First, he escaped from a Native American tribe, and not a plantation. Bibb described slavery among the Cherokees as the most humane type of slavery. It would seem ironic that he would have escaped a humane type of slavery for an uneasy freedom among white Americans who may at any moment return him to plantation slavery. Second, Bibb relied heavily on his proximity to Whiteness to achieve his escape. Throughout his narrative, Bibb suggested that he could pass for Caucasian. Although both Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown were bi-racial, neither claimed to have been able to pass for a white man. Bibb's ability to pass may explain why he was able to frequently escape.

Bibb's racially ambiguous appearance may explain why he indulged so many details to his readers. Most African American slaves in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century could not pass for Caucasians. They could not blend in a crowd and go unnoticed. Bibb frequently acknowledged that his racially ambiguous appearance caused slave-traders to assume he was literate/ educated. Because he appeared white, Bibb could enter certain spaces with relative ease. Relative ease is the key word. As he noted, he did take precautions because

at least some slave-trackers would have recognized him as a bi-racial African American slave and thus would have captured him.

**Text: Harriet Jacobs/ Linda Brent (1861) – Escape with Fanny**

I never could tell how we reached the wharf. My brain was all of a whirl, and my limbs tottered under me. At an appointed place we met my uncle Phillip, who had started before us on a different route, that he might reach the wharf first, and give us timely warning if there was any danger. A row-boat was in readiness. As I was about to step in, I felt something pull me gently, and turning round I saw Benny, looking pale and anxious. He whispered in my ear, “I’ve been peeping into the doctor’s window, and he’s at home. Goodbye, mother. Don’t cry; I’ll come.” He hastened away. I clasped the hand of my good uncle, to whom I owed so much, and of Peter, the brave, generous friend who had volunteered to run such terrible risks to secure my safety. To this day I remember how his bright face beamed with joy, when he told me he had discovered a safe method for me to escape. Yet that intelligent, enterprising, noble-hearted man was a chattel! Liable, by the laws of a country that calls itself civilized, to be sold with horses and pigs! We parted in silence. Our hearts were all too full for words!

Swiftly the boat glided over the water. After a while, one of the sailors said, “Don’t be down-hearted, madam. We will take you safely to your husband, in ——.” At first I could not imagine what he meant; but I had presence of mind to think that it probably referred to something the captain had told him; so, I thanked him, and said I hoped we should have pleasant weather.

When I entered the vessel the captain came forward to meet me. He was an elderly man, with a pleasant countenance. He showed me to a little box of a cabin, where

sat my friend Fanny. She started as if she had seen a spectre [*sic*]. She gazed on me in utter astonishment, and exclaimed, "Linda, can this be you? or is it your ghost?" When we were locked in each other's arms, my overwrought feelings could no longer be restrained. My sobs reached the ears of the captain, who came and very kindly reminded us, that for his safety, as well as our own, it would be prudent for us not to attract any attention. He said that when there was a sail in sight he wished us to keep below; but at other times, he had no objection to our being on deck. He assured us that he would keep a good lookout, and if we acted prudently, he thought we should be in no danger. He had represented us as women going to meet our husbands in ——. We thanked him, and promised to observe carefully all the directions he gave us.

Fanny and I now talked by ourselves, low and quietly, in our little cabin. She told me of the suffering she had gone through in making her escape, and of her terrors while she was concealed in her mother's house. Above all, she dwelt on the agony of separation from all her children on that dreadful auction day. She could scarcely credit me, when I told her of the place where I had passed nearly seven years. "We have the same sorrows," said I. "No," replied she, "you are going to see your children soon, and there is no hope that I shall ever even hear from mine."

The vessel was soon under way, but we made slow progress. The wind was against us, I should not have cared for this, if we had been out of sight of the town; but until there were miles of water between us and our enemies, we were filled with constant apprehensions that the constables would come on board. Neither could I feel quite at ease with the captain and his men. I was an entire stranger to that class of people, and I had heard that sailors were rough, and sometimes cruel. We were so completely in their

power, that if they were bad men, our situation would be dreadful. Now that the captain was paid for our passage, might he not be tempted to make more money by giving us up to those who claimed us as property? I was naturally of a confiding disposition, but slavery had made me suspicious of everybody. Fanny did not share my distrust of the captain or his men. She said she was afraid at first, but she had been on board three days while the vessel lay in the dock, and nobody had betrayed her, or treated her otherwise than kindly.

The captain soon came to advise us to go on deck for fresh air. His friendly and respectful manner, combined with Fanny's testimony, reassured me, and we went with him. He placed us in a comfortable seat, and occasionally entered into conversation. He told us he was a Southerner by birth, and had spent the greater part of his life in the Slave States, and that he had recently lost a brother who traded in slaves. "But," said he, "it is a pitiable and degrading business, and I always felt ashamed to acknowledge my brother in connection with it." As we passed Snaky Swamp, he pointed to it, and said, "There is a slave territory that defies all the laws." I thought of the terrible days I had spent there, and though it was not called Dismal Swamp, it made me feel very dismal as I looked at it.

I shall never forget that night. The balmy air of spring was so refreshing! And how shall I describe my sensations when we were fairly sailing on Chesapeake Bay? O, the beautiful sunshine! the exhilarating breeze! And I could enjoy them without fear or restraint. I had never realized what grand things air and sunlight are till I had been deprived of them.

Ten days after we left land we were approaching Philadelphia. The captain said we should arrive there in the night, but he thought we had better wait till morning, and go on shore in broad daylight, as the best way to avoid suspicion.

I replied, “You know best. But will you stay on board and protect us?”

He saw that I was suspicious, and he said he was sorry, now that he had brought us to the end of our voyage, to find I had so little confidence in him. Ah, if he had ever been a slave he would have known how difficult it was to trust a white man. He assured us that we might sleep through the night without fear; that he would take care we were not left unprotected. Be it said to the honor of this captain, Southerner as he was, that if Fanny and I had been white ladies, and our passage lawfully engaged, he could not have treated us more respectfully. My intelligent friend, Peter, had rightly estimated the character of the man to whose honor he had intrusted [*sic*] us. The next morning, I was on deck as soon as the day dawned. I called Fanny to see the sun rise, for the first time in our lives, on free soil; for such I then believed it to be. We watched the reddening sky, and saw the great orb come up slowly out of the water, as it seemed. Soon the waves began to sparkle, and everything caught the beautiful glow. Before us lay the city of strangers. We looked at each other, and the eyes of both were moistened with tears. We had escaped from slavery, and we supposed ourselves to be safe from the hunters. But we were alone in the world, and we had left dear ties behind us; ties cruelly sundered by the demon Slavery. (pp. 902-904)

### **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Harriet Jacobs’s escape narrative (like much of her autobiography) focused on the relationships that enabled her to gain her freedom. Unlike Douglass, Brown, and Bibb

Harriet did not depict a solitary, heroic flight to freedom. She was accompanied by Fanny, another slave mother. Jacobs's entire escape was the result of her relationships within her community. Xiomara Santamarina (2007) wrote: "Slave women asserted their womanhood by appealing to a variety of cultural narratives about gender that included narratives of motherhood, labor, entrepreneurship, spirituality, and collective responsibility" (p. 234). For Jacobs, womanhood was intimately connected to collective responsibility. In her case, Jacobs' grandmother Martha, Peter (a friend) and other community members were responsible for her safe passage to freedom.

**Trope 11: Taking of a last name (frequently one suggested by a [white] abolitionist) to accord with the new social identity as a free man, but the retention of the first name as a mark of continuity of individual identity;**

**Text: Douglass (1845) – Frederick Bailey to Frederick Douglass**

On the morning after our arrival at New Bedford, while at the breakfast-table, the question arose as to what name I should be called by. The name given me by my mother was, "Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey." I, however, had dispensed with the two middle names long before I left Maryland so that I was generally known by the name of "Frederick Bailey." I started from Baltimore bearing the name of "Stanley." When I got to New York, I again changed my name to "Frederick Johnson," and thought that would be the last change. But when I got to New Bedford, I found it necessary again to change my name. The reason of this necessity was, that there were so many Johnsons in New Bedford, it was already quite difficult to distinguish between them. I gave Mr. Johnson the privilege of choosing me a name, but told him he must not take from me the name of "Frederick." I must hold on to that, to preserve a sense of my identity. Mr. Johnson had just been reading the "Lady of the Lake," and at once suggested that my name be

“Douglass.” From that time until now I have been called “Frederick Douglass;” and as I am more widely known by that name than by either of the others, I shall continue to use it as my own. (pp. 358-359)

### **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

For many fugitive slaves, changing one’s name was a matter of survival. The continued use of their “slave names” rendered them vulnerable to bounty hunters and slave catchers. As such, it should not have been surprising to 19<sup>th</sup>-century audiences that Frederick Bailey changed his names several times before settling on Frederick Douglass. For modern readers, however, Douglass conferring with a white abolitionist may seem baffling. For a man who changed his names several times without the aid of a white abolitionist, why did Frederick rely on another for his final name change? Henry Giroux (1987) posited, meaning is produced within “the intersection of subjectivities, objects, and social practices within specific relations of power” (p. 11). Frederick Douglass is a subject produced within the intersection of slavery, abolitionism, American democracy, and rugged individualism. Although John Stauffer (2007) argued that Douglass was a self-fashioned man, Douglass’s identity was shaped through his interactions with people and social practices. This naming scene with a white abolitionist is just one indicator of those “social practices within specific relations of power.” The white abolitionist had the power to re-name Douglass and to have that renaming accepted by Douglass.

### **Text: Brown (1847) – From Sandford to William Wells Brown**

The kind friend that had taken me in was named Wells Brown. He was a devoted friend of the slave; but was very old, and not in the enjoyment of good health. After being by the fire awhile, I found that my feet had been very much frozen. I was seized with a fever



which threatened to confine me to my bed. But my Thompsonian friends soon raised me, treating me as kindly as if I had been one of their own children. I remained with them twelve or fifteen days, during which time they made me some clothing, and the old gentleman purchased me a pair of boots.

I found that I was about fifty or sixty miles from Dayton, in the State of Ohio, and between one and two hundred miles from [Cleveland], on [Lake Erie], a place I was desirous of reaching on my way to Canada. This I know will sound strangely to the ears of people in foreign lands, but it is nevertheless true. An American citizen was fleeing from a Democratic, Republican, Christian government, to receive protection under the monarchy of Great Britain. While the people of the United States boast of their freedom, they at the same time keep three millions of their own citizens in chains; and while I am seated here in sight of Bunker Hill Monument, writing this narrative, I am a slave, and no law, not even in Massachusetts, can protect me from the hands of the slaveholder!

Before leaving this good Quaker friend, he inquired what my name was besides William. I told him that I had no other name. "Well," said he, "thee must have another name. Since thee has got out of slavery, thee has become a man, and men always have two names."

I told him that he was the first man to extend the hand of friendship to me, and I would give him the privilege of naming me.

"If I name thee," said he, "I shall call thee Wells Brown, after myself."

"But," said I, "I am not willing to lose my name of William. As it was taken from me once against my will, I am not willing to part with it again upon any terms."

"Then," said he, "I will call thee William Wells Brown."

"So be it," said I; and I have been known by that name ever since I left the house of my first white friend, Wells Brown. (pp. 420-421)

### **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

As I previously noted, fugitive slaves changing their names was a common practice that ensured their safety. Because identities and meanings are socially produced (Giroux 1987), William Wells Brown adopting his benefactor's name would seem to have follow social, if not narrative, conventions for fugitive slave authors. But within the context of early 19<sup>th</sup>-century abolitionism, what does this scene mean? Why was it important to have a white male abolitionist be central to a fugitive slave's new subjectivity? I argue that both Douglass and Brown, despite their emphasis on rugged individualism, recognize that their freedom and their subjectivities are "collective responsibilities" of the abolitionist community. In that case, Douglass and Brown are as community/ relations oriented as Harriet Jacobs.

### **Text: Bibb (1849)**

No findings

### **Text: Harriet Jacobs/ Linda Brent (1861) – From Linda Brent to Harriet Jacobs**

Reader be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true. I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary, my descriptions fall far short of the facts. I have concealed the names of places, and given persons fictitious names. I had no motive for secrecy on my own account, but I deemed it kind and considerate towards others to pursue this course. (p. 745)

## **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Harriet Jacobs changed the names of all characters in her autobiography, including her own. As a female fugitive slave author, Jacobs was especially vulnerable to harsh critiques of her characters and of the authenticity of her narratives (Santamarina, 2007; Smith, 2007). As such, she sought to protect herself and others involved in her narrative by providing pseudonyms. I do not know why Jacobs claimed to have “had no motive for secrecy on [her] own account,” when research and historical documents demonstrate she was highly vulnerable as an African American female abolitionist in the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Trope 12: Reflections on slavery**

#### **Text: Douglass (1845) – Slave Spirituals**

The slaves selected to go to the Great House Farm, for the monthly allowance for themselves and their fellow-slaves, were peculiarly enthusiastic. While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out—if not in the word, in the sound;—and as frequently in the one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone. Into all of their songs they would manage to weave something of the Great House Farm. Especially would they do this, when leaving home. They would then sing most exultingly the following words:—

“I am going away to the Great House Farm!

O, yea! O, yea! O!”

This they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do.

I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them. The mere recurrence to those songs, even now, afflicts me; and while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek. To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds. If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd’s plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the

sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul,—and if he is not thus impressed, it will only be because “there is no flesh in his obdurate heart.”

I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience. I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness. Crying for joy, and singing for joy, were alike uncommon to me while in the jaws of slavery. The singing of a man cast away upon a desolate island might be as appropriately considered as evidence of contentment and happiness, as the singing of a slave; the songs of the one and of the other are prompted by the same emotion. (pp. 289-291)

**Text: Douglass (1845) Slavery as Mental Darkness**

I have observed this in my experience of slavery,—that whenever my condition was improved, instead of its increasing my contentment, it only increased my desire to be free, and set me to thinking of plans to gain my freedom. I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible, to annihilate the power of reason. He must be able to detect no inconsistencies in slavery; he must be made to feel that slavery is right; and he can be brought to that only when he ceases to be a man. (pp. 349-350)

## **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Frederick Douglass's observations illustrated how slave narratives, as a whole, were "dynamic, responsive, hybrid writings that evolved within a range of diverse dialogues, debates, and arguments" (Sinanan, 2007, p. 61). Among these diverse dialogues were the pro-slavery arguments that slavery was the most humane system of labor and that enslaved African Americans were generally happy with their condition. Douglass posited that appearances can be deceiving. Slaves who sing during their labor may appear happy. But a careful examination of their impromptu songs often reveal an existential angst. As Douglass suggested, the happiest, most soul-stirring slave spiritual may mask despair and anger. These states of psychological and emotional extremes, as Marx would have noted, were the results of the material conditions under which many enslaved African Americans lived.

Among these material conditions was the lack of education. Douglass observed that slaves seemed content with their oppression and deemed it natural only if they remained in a state of mental and moral darkness. Douglass suggested that this lack of education rendered enslaved African Americans dependent on the institution of slavery and whatever racist, oppressive social norms and practices that undergird it. Douglass's observations seemed to explain (at least in part), why slave states like South Carolina and Virginia adopted anti-literacy laws from 1740 to the 1830s. Literacy and education were deemed threats to the institution of slavery.

### **Text: Brown (1847) – Slavery and Religion**

It was not uncommon in St. Louis to pass by an auction-stand, and behold a woman upon the auction-block, and hear the seller crying out, "How much is offered for this woman?"

She is a good cook, good washer, a good obedient servant. She has got religion!" Why should this man tell the purchasers that she has religion? I answer, because in Missouri, and as far as I have any knowledge of slavery in the other States, the religious teaching consists in teaching the slave that he must never strike a white man; that God made him for a slave; and that, when whipped, he must not find fault,—for the Bible says, "He that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes!" And slaveholders find such religion very profitable to them. (p. 410)

### **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

William Wells Brown observed that religion was often used as a tool for oppression and that the most religious slave would be the most compliant and thus the most valuable. Although Greenspan (2014) argued for Brown's anti-religious bias, Brown's observation about the oppressive use of religion among slaves seemed well-documented in the literature. E. Jennifer Monaghan (1998, 2005) noted that during the colonial period, enslaved African Americans were often given religious instruction and taught to read the Bible, in part, to facilitate submission among slaves. Brown would have agreed with Karl Marx infamous dictum argued that "[Religion] is the opium of the people" (Marx, 1843, para. 4). In other words, religion is the drug used to placate slave and to keep them submissive. As such, Brown would have also agreed with Frederick Douglass that religion, especially as it was practiced among slaveholder contributed to the mental darkness that kept many enslaved African Americans in captivity.

### **Text: Bibb (1849) – Slavery as Existential Crisis**

The term slave to this day sounds with terror to my soul,—a word too obnoxious to speak—a system too intolerable to be endured. I know this from long and sad experience.

I now feel as if I had just been aroused from sleep, and looking back with quickened perception at the state of torment from whence I fled. I was there held and claimed as a slave; as such I was subjected to the will and power of my keeper, in all respects whatsoever. That the slave is a human being, no one can deny. It is his lot to be exposed in common with other men, to the calamities of sickness, death, and the misfortunes incident to life. But unlike other men, he is denied the consolation of struggling against external difficulties, such as destroy the life, liberty, and happiness of himself and family. A slave may be bought and sold in the market like an ox. He is liable to be sold off to a distant land from his family. He is bound in chains hand and foot; and his sufferings are aggravated a hundred-fold, by the terrible thought, that he is not allowed to struggle against misfortune, corporeal punishment, insults, and outrages committed upon himself and family; and he is not allowed to help himself, to resist or escape the blow, which he sees impending over him.

This idea of utter helplessness, in perpetual bondage, is the more distressing, as there is no period even with the remotest generation when it shall terminate. (p. 444)

### **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Like Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb observed the material conditions that dehumanized enslaved African Americans. Bibb's observation focused on the commodification of him and millions of other African Americans. As Bibb noted, "A slave may be bought and sold in the market like an ox. He is liable to be sold off to a distant land from his family" (p. 444). A common argument within the slave narrative was that the institution of slavery reduced humans to things used to generate



profit. As things, enslaved African Americans often suffered from what Douglass termed, “the fatal poison of irresponsible power” (p. 303).

**Text: Harriet Jacobs/ Linda Brent (1861) – Slaveholder Propaganda**

Slaveholders pride themselves upon being honorable men; but if you were to hear the enormous lies they tell their slaves, you would have small respect for their veracity. I have spoken plain English. Pardon me. I cannot use a milder term. When they visit the north, and return home, they tell their slaves of the runaways they have seen, and describe them to be in the most deplorable condition. A slaveholder once told me that he had seen a runaway friend of mine in New York, and that she besought him to take her back to her master, for she was literally dying of starvation; that many days she had only one cold potato to eat, and at other times could get nothing at all. He said he refused to take her, because he knew her master would not thank him for bringing such a miserable wretch to his house. He ended by saying to me, “This is the punishment she brought on herself for running away from a kind master.”

This whole story was false. I afterwards staid [*sic*] with that friend in New York, and found her in comfortable circumstances. She had never thought of such a thing as wishing to go back to slavery. Many of the slaves believe such stories, and think it is not worthwhile to exchange slavery for such a hard kind of freedom. It is difficult to persuade such that freedom could make them useful men, and enable them to protect their wives and children. If those heathen in our Christian land had as much teaching as some Hindoos [*sic*], they would think otherwise. They would know that liberty is more valuable than life. They would begin to understand their own capabilities, and exert themselves to become men and women.

But while the Free States sustain a law which hurls fugitives back into slavery, how can the slaves resolve to become men? There are some who strive to protect wives and daughters from the insults of their masters; but those who have such sentiments have had advantages above the general mass of slaves. They have been partially civilized and Christianized [sic] by favorable circumstances. Some are bold enough to utter such sentiments to their masters. O, that there were more of them!

Some poor creatures have been so brutalized by the lash that they will sneak out of the way to give their masters free access to their wives and daughters. Do you think this proves the black man to belong to an inferior order of beings? What would you be, if you had been born and brought up a slave, with generations of slaves for ancestors? I admit that the black man is inferior. But what is it that makes him so? It is the ignorance in which white men compel him to live; it is the torturing whip that lashes manhood out of him; it is the fierce bloodhounds of the South, and the scarcely less cruel human bloodhounds of the north, who enforce the Fugitive Slave Law. They do the work.

Southern gentlemen indulge in the most contemptuous expressions about the Yankees, while they, on their part, consent to do the vilest work for them, such as the ferocious bloodhounds and the despised negro-hunters are employed to do at home. When southerners go to the north, they are proud to do them honor; but the northern man is not welcome south of Mason and Dixon's line, unless he suppresses every thought and feeling at variance with their "peculiar institution." Nor is it enough to be silent. The masters are not pleased, unless they obtain a greater degree of subservience than that; and they are generally accommodated. Do they respect the northerner for this? I [think] not. Even the slaves despise "a northern man with southern principles;" and that is the class

they generally see. When northerners go to the south to reside, they prove very apt scholars. They soon imbibe the sentiments and disposition of their neighbors, and generally go beyond their teachers. Of the two, they are proverbially the hardest masters.

They seem to satisfy their consciences with the doctrine that God created the Africans to be slaves. What a libel upon the heavenly Father, who “made of one blood all nations of men!” And then who are Africans? Who can measure the amount of Anglo-Saxon blood coursing in the veins of American slaves?

I have spoken of the pains slaveholders take to give their slaves a bad opinion of the north; but, notwithstanding this, intelligent slaves are aware that they have many friends in the Free States. Even the most ignorant have some confused notions about it. They knew that I could read; and I was often asked if I had seen anything in the newspapers about white folks over in the big north, who were trying to get their freedom for them. Some believe that the abolitionists have already made them free, and that it is established by law, but that their masters prevent the law from going into effect. One woman begged me to get a newspaper and read it over. She said her husband told her that the black people had sent word to the queen of 'Merica [*sic*] that they were all slaves; that she didn't believe it, and went to Washington city to see the president about it. They quarrelled; she drew her sword upon him, and swore that he should help her to make them all free.

That poor, ignorant woman thought that America was governed by a Queen, to whom the President was subordinate. I wish the President [were] subordinate to Queen Justice. (pp. 789-791)

## **Trope Unpacked in the Context of Critical Literacy**

Harriet Jacobs made compelling arguments through general observations about the material conditions that informed the mindset and morals of enslaved African Americans. For instance, Jacobs argued that slavery had dehumanized enslaved African Americans to a point that enslaved African American men negated their natural paternal duties to their wives and daughters: “Some poor creatures have been so brutalized by the lash that they will sneak out of the way to give their masters free access to their wives and daughters” (p. 790). She argued that if humans were kept in deplorable situations, they would most often devolve into brutes. As an abolitionist, Jacobs used these images of dehumanization to encourage her readers to actively fight for the immediate abolition of slavery. Like other female abolitionists, she staged a performance in which sympathy and empathy prompted her readers to act immediately. In conclusion, she used her compelling observations to liberate millions of her colleagues who remained in the grips of slavery.

### **Chapter Summary: Findings**

All findings were based on James Olney’s (1985) list of twelve slave narrative tropes listed on pages 31 and 40. Because of the small, non-representative sample size for this study, not all four slave narratives had all twelve tropes. Nonetheless, all findings focused on the material conditions that informs people’s concepts of reality and their place within it. Douglass, Brown, Bibb, and Jacobs were fugitive slaves who were born and raised in a system of oppression within a culture that celebrated its unique status as a land of liberty. As such, each narrative focused on the contradictions of living under such material conditions.

In the final chapter of this dissertation, elaborate on how material conditions for these authors related to role of literacy in their narratives and how literacy enabled them to engage in a critical examination of the contradictions and tensions within the early republic of the United States.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSIONS

#### Introduction

In this dissertation, I conducted a content analysis to explore how fugitive slaves used literacy and literacy instruction in antebellum slave narratives to critique slavery (Blassingame, 1979; Davis & Gates, 1985; Foster, 1994; Starling, 1988; Stepto, 1979).

The four book-length narratives are in Table 6.

**Table 6.**

*Slave Narratives Analyzed in This Research*

Author	Publication Date	Title
Frederick Douglass	1845	<i>Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself.</i>
William Wells Brown	1847	<i>Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself.</i>
Henry Bibb	1849	<i>Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave. Written by Himself. With an Introduction by Lucius C. Matlack.</i>
Harriet Jacobs (a.k.a. Linda Brent)	1861	<i>Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself. Edited by L. Maria Child.</i>

Critical literacy is the theoretical framework that informed this dissertation. Freire and Macedo (1987) posited that critical literacy is the use of reading and writing to facilitate a critical consciousness or the ability to reflect on the sociopolitical and economic structures that inform one's life. Critical literacy theorists frequently investigate issues of oppression and subjection. In this dissertation, I investigated 19<sup>th</sup>-century slave narratives as sites of critical literacy.

To examine these texts, I asked two interrelated research questions:

- (RQ1) What roles did literacy and literacy instruction play in former slaves' autobiographies?
- (RQ2) How did literacy help former slaves critique slavery and the dominant culture that supported it?

To collect and analyze data, I used content analyses, a qualitative research method that allows for the efficient and systematic investigation of large chunks of printed texts. A goal of content analysis is to discuss the implied historical context that gives meaning to the data. Krippendorff (2004) noted that abductive inferences are the core of content analysis because they proceed from texts to the analyst's questions (p. 36). In this section, I complete the final stage of content analysis: Narrating the answers to the research questions.

Just as I did in the previous four chapters (especially in Chapter Four), I used my theoretical framework to contextualize and thus give meaning to these inferences. A substantial use of a theoretical framework at this stage added rigor to the discussion because I am able to "take other variables (contributing factors) into account"(Krippendorff, 2004, p.36). In this section, I answered questions with data from

the texts. Unlike in chapter four, however, I did not use separate headings for each text. Rather, I answered the questions by quoting all narratives to show relationships among texts. I cited the narratives in the answers to minimize confusion.

### **Abductively Inferring Contextual Phenomena**

Abduction consists of using existing knowledge to make predictions and to draw conclusions (inferences). Abductive reasoning starts with a set of observations that results in a hypothesis (explanation) for those observations. Krippendorff (2004) posited that this stage is crucial because:

a hypothesis. . . if true, would explain the data. No other hypothesis can explain the data as well as the chosen one does. Therefore, the hypothesis is probably true and can be used to deduce other entailments—that is answer [the] research questions. (p. 37)

In chapter three, I hypothesized that the narratives are connected by links between critical literacy, critical consciousness, and human rights. The findings teased out an additional hypothesis: material conditions. Slave narratives were part of an overall global campaigns to immediately end slavery. To effect that goals, abolitionists usually focused on the inhumane material conditions that reduced African American slaves to beasts of burden. (Gates, 1987; Hirshman, 2022; Olney 1987; Sinanan, 2007; Williams, 2005) In short, these hypotheses explain the data, just as the theoretical framework (critical literacy) fits the data. In the next section, I used findings and the abductively inferred contextual phenomena to narrate the answers to the research questions.



## **Narrating the Answers to the Research Questions**

According to James Olney (1985), fugitive slave autobiographies almost invariably contain twelve tropes or images that distinguish them from other types of autobiographies. As described in chapter four, these tropes described the material conditions that circumscribed slaves' mindsets about themselves and the world in general. Although all four narratives did not contain all twelve tropes, each narrative reflected the majority of tropes to answer the research questions sufficiently.

### **(RQ1) What roles did literacy and literacy instruction play in former slaves' autobiographies?**

Literacy and literacy instruction played complex and nuanced roles in former slaves' autobiographies. First, literacy and literacy instruction enabled the authors "[to make themselves] present as part of a moral and political project that links the production of meaning to the possibility for human agency, democratic community, and transformative social action" (Giroux, p.18). Human agency, democracy community, and transformative action are the key words. Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb, and Harriet Jacobs wrote their autobiographies as part an international antislavery movement (Gates, 1987; Dickson, 2007; Hirshman, 2022;Sinanan, 2007) . By making themselves present to a global audience, they engaged in a moral and political project to end slavery immediately. For these authors and their abolitionist colleagues, it was possible to expand the meaning of the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century American democratic community to include those who were currently oppressed. Through literacy and literacy education, Douglass, Brown, Bibb, and Jacobs, demonstrated human agency to help liberate themselves and millions of other African Americans. In conclusion, literacy and

literacy instruction enabled these authors and their collaborators to transform the early American republic to better reflect its democratic principles.

Secondly, literacy and literacy instruction enabled Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb, and Harriet Jacobs (and by extension, millions of enslaved African Americans ) to participate effectively in the dialogues and debates between antislavery and pro-slavery forces. Bruce Dickson (2007) wrote:

The primary political impulse behind slave narratives grew out of nineteenth-century debates over slavery. Proslavery arguments took the form they did in large part because slavery's defenders had to respond to abolitionist attacks; abolitionism had to answer proslavery as well. The ex-slaves who recounted their experiences entered self-consciously into this debate. (p. 29)

Paulo Freire (1971, 1987), Henry Giroux (1987), and other critical literacy theorists posited that the ability to read and to write on a critical level enabled people to work in solidarity with others to bring out social transformations. Although there were often tensions within these collaborations (Hirshman, 2022; Sinanan, 2007), ex-slaves actively and self-consciously engaged in the vital debates and dialogues about slavery. They provided the real-life examples, the lived experiences that validated early to mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century abolitionism and wrote vivid responses to the racist rhetoric of proslavery forces. In short, literacy and literacy education enabled Douglass, Brown, Bibb, and Jacobs to actively participate as knowledge makers and knowledgeable actors in the debates and dialogues about slavery.

Moreover, literacy and literacy instruction served as bellwethers of larger sociopolitical issues within the early republic. Frederick Douglass demonstrated in his

narrative that slave literacy and literacy instruction were often considered threats to the status quo in slave states. Slaveowners would discourage it and several slave states (Virginia, Georgia, and South Carolina) would legally penalize slave literacy and literacy instruction. Douglass's master, Thomas Auld warned his wife Sophia not to teach the young Douglass to read because "it would forever unfit him to be a slave" (p. 303). In other words, slaveowners worried that literacy and literacy instruction would undermine the power and authority of the institution of slavery and thus lead to slave insurrections.

The perceived links between literacy, literacy instruction and slave insurrections were especially potent in the late 1820s and early 1830s. In September 1829, African American abolitionist David Walker (1830) published the first edition of *Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles, Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizen of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States, Written in Boston, State of Massachusetts, September 28, 1829*. The first edition is extremely rare. The 1830 edition is the most common version of this document. Walker appealed to his readers to take immediate and direct action to end the oppression of Black people globally, especially of those in the United States. *Walker's Appeal* was a seminal text that sparked the abolitionist movement of the 1830s. Written in imitation of the Declaration of Independence, Walker's Appeal challenged the racism of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and called for equal rights (Hirshman, 2022, pp. 52-53). As Linda Hirshman (2022) noted, the pamphlet reach the office of William Lloyd Garrison, who printed the first issue of *The Liberator*, a newspaper dedicated to the immediate abolition of slavery, on January 1, 1830. Slaveowners feared that literate slaves would read *Walker's Appeal* and *The Liberator*, then transmit their revolutionary ideas to other slaves and thus incite slave

rebellions (Hirshman, 2022). Their fears were confirmed with the 1831 Nat Turner Rebellion. Nat Turner, a literate slave from Virginia, led a band of over 25 slaves who killed 50 white men, women and children. Although we have no evidence that Nat Turner ever read *Walker's Appeal* and or *The Liberator*, his status as a literate slave fueled the perception of slave literacy and literacy instruction as potentially subversive.

Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown Henry Bibb, and Harriet Jacobs described and negotiated slave literacy and literacy instruction within this sociopolitical context. For Douglass, literacy and literacy instruction were the “pathway from slavery to freedom” (p. 304). In Brown’s narrative, literacy is associated with independence. If Brown could have read the note that contained instructions for him to be whipped, he would not have depended on the kindness of literate strangers to read this note for him. In Bibb’s narrative, slave literacy and literacy instruction were considered “an incendiary movement” (p. 445) that threatened to burn down the institution of slavery. In Jacobs’s narrative, literacy and literacy instruction were associated with the Nat Turner Insurrection. Jacobs described the search and seizure of letters from her grandmother’s house. These letters were considered proof of her literacy and thus of her potential threat. Instead of displaying fear, Jacobs showed defiance. When a powerful plantation owner asked if the letters were from free African Americans with potentially subversive ideas, Jacobs replied “O, no; most of my letters are from white people. Some request me to burn them after they are read, and some I destroy without reading” (p. 812). Jacobs did not hide her literacy in the face of power. She told the truth, despite potential consequences.

Finally, my research has shown that these authors’ view of literacy aligned with the following themes found in the literature review:

- Literacy and Liberation
- Literacy as Ontological Marker
- Literacy as a Political Act

Douglass, Brown, Bibb, and Jacobs connected literacy with liberation. For each author, literacy facilitated an existential freedom that enabled each to survive the often-horrific conditions of slavery. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1987) posited, “the command of written language . . . was mean act in the life of a slave. Learning to read. . .was an irreversible step away from the cotton field toward a freedom larger even than physical manumission” (p. 4). Learning to read, write, speak, and listen was, as Douglass famously claimed, “the pathway from slavery to freedom” (2000/1845, p. 304). Furthermore, literacy served as an ontological marker of being human and not things to be exploited and abused. By writing their own stories, each author demonstrated their common humanity. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Kant, Hegel and other European philosophers considered written history as a significant indicator of one’s humanity (Gates, 1987). By writing their own histories, Douglass, Brown, Bibb, and Jacobs demonstrated their humanity. Finally, these four authors considered literacy a political act. As (marginalized) citizens of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century American polis, they used their literacy skills to access the debates and conversations that affected all citizens.

**(RQ2) How did literacy help former slaves critique slavery and the dominant culture that supported it?**

For the purpose of the current study, literacy is defined as the ability to read, write, listen, and speak. Within this definition and context, literacy helped former slaves to critique slavery and the dominant culture that supported it by providing these former

slaves with the rhetorical tools and public spaces to engage in dialogues and debates. For instance, Frederick Douglass described how his reading of *The Columbian Orator*, a reader used in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to teach young boys the art of rhetoric (Ganter, 1997), transformed him intellectually and emotionally. Douglass wrote that readings from the book enabled him “to utter [his] thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery” (p. 308). He further noted that the book demonstrated a “powerful vindication of human rights” (p. 308). Although William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb, and Harriet Jacobs did not have similar revelations, literacy, nonetheless enabled them to engage in the public sphere in the dialogues and debates about slavery.

Among the four authors, William Wells Brown had the most compelling story of literacy, politics, and the and public sphere. Functionally illiterate throughout his narrative, Brown transformed himself to a powerful orator and writer by 1847. According to his biographer Ezra Greenspan (2014), Brown and Douglass were the two most prominent orators on the abolitionist circuit in the late 1840s. Equally important, Brown became one of the most prolific African American writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He is often credited with having written the first widely published novel, *Clotel or the President's Daughter* by an African American (Greenspan, 2014). Like Douglass, Brown was continually involved with civil rights for African American throughout his life. In short, literacy and literacy instruction transformed William Wells Brown emotionally and intellectually.

Nevertheless, the writing and publication of their narratives indicate that literacy and literacy instruction enabled all four authors to critique slavery and the dominate culture that supports the institution of slavery. Slave narratives were written and

published within the wider context of abolitionist literacy activities. Fugitive slaves usually wrote their narrative after they had related them orally on an abolitionist speaking tour. Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, lectured on the same abolitionist circuit (Cooper, 2000). Although not a famous speaker on the abolitionist tour, Harriet Jacobs was an active member of William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist group (Medeiros & Mitchell, 2020). Without the ability to read, write, speak, and listen most likely Douglass, Brown, Bibb, and Jacobs would not have effectively critiqued slavery to a global audience. Each may have been able to articulate some forms of critiques orally in their own communities. But the impact of those oral critiques would have been limited at best.

### **Implications for Current Literacy Educators**

This research has shown that literacy and literacy instruction for African Americans have historically been connected with larger social and political issues. As Frederick Douglas, William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb, and Harriet Jacobs demonstrated in their respective narratives, literacy and literacy instruction encompassed more than just the acquisition of technical skills. For many African Americans in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, learning to read, write, speak and listen marked a transition from silent and passive objects to active and speaking subjects. It was about gaining human agency in a democracy that frequently refused to acknowledge the humanity of African Americans.

Critical literacy theorists Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (1987) posited that literacy and literacy education can be tools for either oppression or liberation. By studying literacy and literacy education in antebellum slave narratives, current educators can reflect on how their teaching practices either engender a critical consciousness within students or submerge these students within what I term "the calculus of capitalism": they

train students to become good workers who unquestionably frame themselves and their lives based on the economic needs of corporations. In a democratic republic, we need students prepared to actively participate in a democracy beyond simply—and mindlessly—voting (Hoffert, 2001). Antebellum slave narratives provide excellent models on the use of literacy and literacy instruction to prepare students to engage with others for the common good.

In terms of classroom instruction, middle and high school teachers may incorporate sections of slave narratives as literature and discuss how literacy and literacy instruction, especially for African Americans, have been sites of political and moral engagement. As Ernest Morrell (2008) noted, slave narratives are acts of self-care. Teachers can use these narratives to demonstrate that literacy and literacy instruction are paths to self-reflection in which students reflect on their status in their immediate and global contexts. This act of self-care immediately makes literacy and literacy instruction relevant to both students and teachers. For instance, students can learn how Frederick Douglass, denied access to literacy and literacy instruction, fought to learn to read, write, speak and listen so that he could articulate his lived experiences at the local and global levels. In other words, teachers can use Douglass's narrative as an example of how literacy and literacy instruction enables young students to gain agency and voice in a world that often denies them both.

Moreover, as Gholdy Muhammad (2020) demonstrated, middle and high school teachers may use the literacy practices of 19<sup>th</sup>-century African Americans to create lesson plans that attend to student identity, skill building, intelligence building, and criticality. In other words, teachers can use the past to help build a better future for their students.



### **Implications for Historical Research**

This current study adds a significant contribution to historical research through its use of a critical literacy theoretical framework to examine literacy as a phenomenon in slave narratives and through its use of content analysis as its method of data collection and analysis. Because I am not a historian, I do not claim that my theoretical framework and method are superior to current analytical frameworks and methods used in historical research. But my dissertation makes manifest connections among literacy, oppression, and power in ways that only hinted at in historical research. For instance, when Linda Hirshman (2022) discussed the power of David Walker's 1829 *Appeal* as a catalyst for William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist movement and its possible relationship with slave insurrections, she does not theorize why these relationships exist. As a theoretical framework, critical literacy provides a plausible description and explanation of the relationship among literacy, politics, and oppression.

### **Implications for Future Research**

In this study, I examined a small non-representative sample of slave narratives. Future scholarship may incorporate considerably more narratives to test James Olney's assertion that this genre of autobiography is highly formulaic. Other scholars may want to take a quantitative approach to test the importance of literacy and literacy education in these narratives. Quantitative researchers may find significant correlations between literacy and liberation in the texts. In any case, I hope that this exploratory study has opened up more opportunities for literacy scholars and practitioners to use historical documents in order to improve current literacy education practices.

### **Summary: Conclusions and Implications**

For fugitive slaves, reading, writing, listening and speaking were ways of engaging in the global debates and conversations about slavery. In other words, literacy and literacy instruction went beyond issues of technical instructions and debates about the efficacy of various methods of teaching literacy. As Frederick Douglass famously wrote, literacy and literacy instruction were the "pathway from slavery to freedom" (p. 304). That is, they were synonymous with political empowerment and active participation in the democratic process. As critical literacy theorist Paulo Freire would argue, they engaged in the human vocation of becoming more fully human.

In the twenty-first century, elementary, middle, high school, and university students are faced with a number of issues that threaten their present and their future, including global warming and corporate capitalism. We need to teach students to read, write, speak, and listen in ways that effectively resolve these issues and thus enable them to save their lives and those of the next generations.

Students need more than an ability to function competently in the workplace. They need to be critically conscious of the world and their place in it. Fugitive slaves learned to read, write, speak, and listen in a fight for their humanity and their lives. Current students are in a similar fight.

Teachers can help students in this crucial fight by incorporating lesson plans that focus on genuine dialogue between students and teachers, based on Freire's concepts of praxis and problem-posing. The slave narratives demonstrate that literacy and literacy instruction become important tools of self-empowerment and democratic engagement

when they are tied to important issues to learners and not simply to the needs of corporations.

Fugitive slaves in the 19<sup>th</sup> century did not learn to read, write, speak, and listen just to function competently in the job market or to read the latest best-selling novel. Literacy and literacy instruction enabled them to establish their humanity and to gain human agency in a world that frequently denied them both. In the last 50 years, education has been tied to high-stakes tests and fulfilling the human resources needs of corporations. In short, students have been educated to become obedient employees. Just as Frederick Douglass used literacy and literacy instruction as pathway out of slavery, our students need these tools to escape the oppression of what I term "the corporate calculus" and a definition of life based on consumerism and working to enhance corporate profits. They need to become more fully human and thoughtful citizens.

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