

INTRODUCTION

Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts: African American Women's Voices Raised for Freedom

From the outset of their enterprises, Louisa Picquet, Mattie Jackson, and Sylvia Dubois probably never imagined their life stories would be read and studied more than a century after they related them. Picquet and Jackson told their stories to reach specific pecuniary objectives, while Dubois diffidently related her narrative in response to Cornelius W. Larison's request. Yet Dubois's response reflects an overarching attitude held by many women as ordinary individuals who know the value of lived experience, particularly the experiences of devalued, dismissed people. Dubois proclaims, "Most of folks think that niggers ain't no account but, if you think what I tell you is worth publishing, I will be glad if you do it. 'T won't do me no good but maybe 't will somebody else. I've lived a good while, and have seen a good deal, and if I should tell you all I've seen, it would make the hair stand up all over your head" (150–51). Implicit in her statement is the confirmation that her experience is worth knowing and may offer lessons for others. In spite of the pejorative value that she realizes many Americans hold for African Americans, Dubois acknowledges Larison's appreciation of her life. Moreover, she suggests both the scenes she witnessed and the manner in which she will construct her narrative are so powerful that readers/listeners will experience a physical reaction. All three women display conscious narrative power: the power of experiential testimony, oral manifestation, and commitment to and

demand for justice by African American women. Without the benefits and privilege of reading and writing literacy (and in collaboration, sometimes uneasy, with amanuenses), these women left documents of their lives and of the challenges of African American women to make their voices heard. This volume ensures that early-twenty-first-century readers “hear” these voices to gain not only historical knowledge, but to understand the dynamics of literacy and self-representation and locate oral narratives in the spectrum and tradition of African American literary production.

Speaking Lives is an edited volume of three orally related nineteenth-century African American women’s slave experiences, *Louisa Picquet, The Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life* (1861), *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson* (1866), and *Silvia Dubois, A Biography of The Slav Who Whipt Her Mistress and Gand Her Freedom* (1883). Because these are oral texts, scholars have failed to sufficiently study and consider them in the genre of slave narratives. As a form of writing, slave narratives have received considerable scholarly attention, particularly in the last thirty years. According to Charles Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr., slave narratives allowed ex-slaves to “write themselves into being” by exercising the act of literacy, thereby evidencing intellectual abilities that refuted arguments for Black inferiority. However, this concentration on written slave narratives obscures and dismisses the significance of oral slave narratives, thousands of which were recorded by amanuenses from the antebellum period through the Great Depression.¹ In fact, oral narratives were so prolific that Philip Gould confirms, “Abolitionist newspapers and periodicals published and reviewed as many, if not more, oral testimonies against slavery and ex-slave speeches as ‘written’ narratives” (20). Davis’s and Gates’s claim is representative of the focus of much of the scholarly research on and textual recoveries of African American lives and literary works in the last few decades. Many of the recently published oral slave narratives are considered as only oral history, without acknowledging their literary value. Publication of volumes like *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves* (2008), a collection of oral narratives recorded by writers of the Federal Writer’s Project in the 1930s; Norman Yetman’s *When I Was a Slave: Memoirs from the Slave Narrative Collection* (2002), and Alan B. Govenar’s *African American Frontiers: Slave Narratives and Oral Histories* (2000) include oral narratives to explicate historical records of African American experiences. Alternately, McCarthy’s and Doughton’s *From Bondage*

to *Belonging: The Worcester Slave Narratives* (2007) and David W. Blight's *A Slave No More: Two Men Who Escaped to Freedom, Including Their Own Narratives of Emancipation* (2007) showcase narratives written by ex-slaves that have seen scant scholarly attention or have been recently recovered. Although the authors and editors of these volumes appreciate the literariness of their respective narratives, they do not include any oral narratives.

This concentration on written slave narratives obscures and dismisses the significance of oral slave narratives as texts *authored* by their narrators. Examining the plethora of critical analysis of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass* and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl*, John Ernest notes this separation of studying slave narratives as historical texts (content) or literary rhetoric (style). Ernest argues, "to separate style from content is to undermine the authority of the slave narrative *as a text* and of the writers of slave narratives *as authors*" (emphasis in original, 224). Although Ernest focuses on written texts, his point is relevant for orally related narratives, too. By ignoring oral narratives, not only do scholars of African American literature silence a substantial number of voices, multiple conceptualizations of identity and representations of resistance to injustice are elided in favor of literary representations that do not fully reflect the multiplicity of African American lives and experiences as well as the manifold rhetorical styles found in African American oral traditions.

This volume brings together three slave narratives orally transmitted by women who—under various circumstances—escaped physical slavery and the discursive bondage of illiteracy. At the center of each of these liberating acts is the practice of Black feminist orality, which is discussed in DoVeanna S. Fulton's *Speaking Power: Black Feminist Orality in Women's Narratives of Slavery*.² Fulton explains,

On one level, Black feminist orality can be understood as related to the African American women's tradition of "sass" in which one responds with independence, knowing, and force to an individual in authority. On another level, Black feminist orality is a more abstract notion with features of circularity and multiplicity that counter the hegemony of writing. Black feminist orality in these texts demonstrates a combination of theory and practice commonly identified in Black women's work. (13)

This volume counters the idea of oral histories as merely “anecdotal” tales. Rather, it shows a fundamental function of oral histories as frameworks through which Black women view themselves and the world in which they live. These frameworks are crucial to their identity development and to social and cultural analyses. “These narrators demonstrate a speaking subject’s ability to theorize concepts and language within a writing environment that could silence non-writers,” posits Fulton, “Picquet’s, [Jackson’s, and Dubois’s] narratives diffuse the primacy of Western logic and writing as the definitive form of intellectual communication” (26). Instead they substantiate the power of orality as a pragmatic philosophical approach to survival and self-representation.

The editors of *Speaking Lives* are indebted to the *Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers* series (1988) in which each of these narratives was reprinted. However, the circumstance of their separate publications obviates their significance to one another and the impact of orality in African American literary study. Each of the editors of the Schomburg editions analyzes the narratives with different approaches. In his introduction to the Schomburg edition of *Louisa Picquet*, Anthony G. Barthelemy insightfully identifies the omissions and avoidances of personal details offered by ex-slaves in oral narratives. Barthelemy writes, “In their narratives, events are reported, but the personal lives are withheld or veiled in a struggle to preserve their already compromised privacy” (xxxv). Barthelemy recognizes the contentious relationship between Picquet and her interviewer demonstrated by her resistance to his invasive questions. Yet he states, “The fact that Picquet’s is not *really* a narrative does not diminish the importance of her omissions” (emphasis added, xli). This statement suggests that the question and answer structure of the text and its as-told-to nature undermines Picquet’s position as the author of her story. In his introduction to *Six Women’s Slave Narratives*, in which *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson* is published, William Andrews finds, “Perhaps the most dramatic scenes in the autobiographies of Jackson, [Lucy A.] Delaney, and [Annie L.] Burton are those that depict the herculean (and usually successful) efforts of slave mothers to keep their families together in slavery or to reunite them after emancipation” (xxxix). Jared Lobdell, editor of the *Sylvia Dubois* Schomburg edition, is primarily concerned with confirming or refuting the historical record that Dubois relates. As an alternative to approaching these narratives from different standpoints,

Speaking Lives concentrates on their major commonality, namely, oral as-told-to narrative, which proves the capacity of orality to control textual representations and establishes Picquet, Jackson, and Dubois as genuine authors of their texts.

In presenting these narratives, the editors have endeavored to maintain, as much as possible, the integrity of the original texts; thus, notes and comments by amanuenses remain, as does unique punctuation that demonstrates textual dynamisms.³ In this manner, each narrator's voice remains undisturbed, substantiating Fulton's argument that "African American women consistently employed African American oral traditions . . . to relate not only the pain, degradation and oppression of slavery, but also to celebrate the subversions, struggles, and triumphs of Black experience in the midst of slavery and afterwards" (3). These oral traditions are the foundation of a literary tradition grounded in African American lived experiences. The experiences in these narratives reveal the means by which these women develop self-defined identities, challenge injustice, and articulate political and civil rights as they tell their life stories and authorize their texts. The narratives in this volume exemplify this discursive practice of resistance and self-representation through orality born of struggles to articulate and own themselves via African American oral traditions.

AFRICAN AMERICAN ORAL TRADITIONS FUNDAMENTAL TO BLACK FEMINIST ORALITY

Oral traditions are central to African American culture and are seen in many forms with multivalent qualities. Through Spirituals, works songs, folktales, speeches, and oral ethnographies, African Americans protested injustice and created a record of the "peculiar institution" that contradicted the master narrative of benign slavery with slaves who were both intellectually inferior and unable to adopt the behaviors and values of Western civilization. The musical form of this oral discourse, seen chiefly in Spirituals and works songs, grew out of the slave experience of pain and struggle. African American slaves first created the sacred music known as Spirituals in rural spaces of plantation slave communities. In opposition to their owners who forbade slave worship, African American slaves met in "praise houses" or "hush

harbors,” which might have been a cabin in the slave quarters or even a secluded area under a tree in the woods. These clandestine places became sacred spaces where slaves worshipped stealthily but freely. Frederick Douglass believed “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” (57). More than fifty years later, W. E. B. Du Bois called Spirituals “sorrow songs” that expressed the soul of African American slaves and were “not simply . . . the sole American music, but . . . the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas” (156). Representing a worldview that sees little distinction between the sacred and the secular, enslaved African Americans sang Spirituals to transcend their physical environment when laboring in plantation fields and homes as well as meeting for worship.

Spirituals are a uniquely African American art form in that they are grounded in oral traditions from West and Central African cultures and the American experience of the slave institution.⁴ Spirituals combined work songs of slaves, field hollers, and Christian hymns. Robert Darden maintains, “It is important to remember that both the field hollers and work songs could also be religious at the same time. As in Africa, the slave made no distinction between the ‘religious’ and ‘non-religious’ aspects of his or her life” (44). Work songs wed sound and movement to produce labor and were performed where work was done, in field and domestic spaces. They are reflective of a political economy based on subjugation and repression. Field hollers—shouts, solo exclamations, half-sung, half-yelled, half-yodeled fragments of songs, sometimes sung in falsetto—could be heard during the limited free time slaves enjoyed and were used to communicate messages, make one’s presence known, or just to express emotion. These oral traditions provided emotional outlets manifest in music and are the foundation of later forms of Blues, Jazz, and Gospel.

Although many enslaved Africans adopted the tenets of Christianity for moral and spiritual guidance, their religious worship practices and beliefs reflected African rhythms, structures, and worldviews. For instance, many Spirituals are adaptations of Protestant lined-out hymns in which one person leads with the words of the song and the group repeats the line in drawn out melody. This practice was particularly effective for African American oral culture, for not only were oral traditions central to African American slave

culture, but with the prohibition of literacy, a person did not have to read in order to participate in musical worship.

In the African American Spiritual tradition, hymns are infused with distinctly African characteristics. These elements include: call and response, which demonstrates a relationship between the leader and the group; complex rhythms with syncopation and polyrhythms of hand-clapping, foot-tapping, exclamations, and percussive sounds; often a five-note pentatonic scale that is African-based as opposed to the eight-note scale found in much of European music; an existentialist religious outlook concerned with day-to-day lived experience; abstractions that are made concrete such as death viewed in everyday experience; a lack of distance between God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and humans, which, though blasphemous by European standards, is reflective of an African worldview of gods not being “Sunday gods” but involved in everyday situations; and a philosophy in which feeling takes priority over meaning, that is, religion is not only a philosophical or theological system, it is an emotional experience as well.⁵

The significance of the African aspects of Spirituals culminates in the yearning for liberation they express. The oral tradition of Spirituals is embedded in the slave experience and the desire for freedom and deliverance—freedom to own the self, to worship and live autonomously, and deliverance from the dehumanizing practices of forced labor, rape, familial separation, and arbitrary violence of slavery. Some Spirituals contain lyrics explicitly about freedom, like the traditional song “Oh Freedom.” Other lyrics are more covert and implicit, such as biblical stories of deliverance and freedom often sung to express faith in ultimate justice. The complexity of these allusions renders powerful speech acts of agency and insurgence. For example, “Mary Don You Weep” combines two seemingly disparate stories, Jesus’ resurrection of Lazarus in the New Testament, and the Old Testament’s story of the Israelite’s deliverance from Egyptian slavery—a situation commonly paralleled with African American enslavement—in a celebration of life (freedom) and triumph of justice (defeat of an enemy):

Mary, don you weep and Martha don you moan.
Mary, don you weep and Martha don you moan.
Pharaoh’s army got drown-ded,
Oh Mary don you weep.

I thinks every day and I wish I could,
 Stan on de rock whar Moses stood.
 Oh Pharaoh's army got drown-ded,
 Oh Mary don you weep. (Ward 5)

The lyrics are consoling, celebratory, and subversive. Rather than the seeming incongruence of the biblical stories, the song combines resurrection of the body with active insurgent resistance to oppression. With the subjective "I" the lines "I thinks every day an I wish I could, / Stan on de rock whar Moses stood," suggest slaves take an active role in the defeat of slavery. Just as Moses was empowered by God to destroy Pharaoh and his army, so, too, does this Spiritual express a desire for, and calls enslaved African Americans to be agents in, slavery's abolition. This philosophical multivalent quality of Spirituals pervades both Louisa Picquet's and Mattie Jackson's narratives. These narrators demonstrate their cognizance of double-voiced language that, like "Mary Don You Weep," expresses faith in divine retribution for slavery's injustices and illustrates subjective resistance to those injustices.

For women, this orality became an effective medium to express both their own demands for liberation and to relate a history that placed themselves at the center of representations and experiences they conveyed. In spite of the work of abolitionists and women's rights activists, generally women and African Americans—African American women in particular—were excluded from the public sphere in which they could have told their stories. Moreover, large-scale illiteracy among antebellum Africans precluded writing history, even in the private forms of letters and diaries used by white women. Yet Black women able to read and write still incorporated oral traditions into their texts, showing the fluidity of orality and its power to inform.

For African American women the power to read and write did not supersede the power of orality. Maria W. Stewart exemplified this merging of writing and orality in speeches for freedom. Stewart was the first African American woman to speak before a mixed-gender audience and to leave texts of her speeches. She was much more than an abolitionist, as she addressed varied subjects like religion, anticolonization, political and economic exploitation, Black self-determination, and women's rights. Like many nineteenth-century African American abolitionists, Stewart's discourse displayed a fundamental concern with Black civil rights and self-

determination. Moreover, by choosing to present her views to “promiscuous” audiences, Stewart’s oratory marked her radical resistance to gender and racial circumscriptions. Editors Carol B. Conaway and Kristin Waters contend, “[Stewart] can be seen to stand squarely in the camp of radical politics, carefully traversing the dangerous terrain of limited speech for women and blacks with a message of uplift but also of treasonous rebellion. As someone whose work is beginning to command its own canon of interpretation, her sophisticated analysis is emerging as the founding voice of black feminist theory” (5). In the genre of the slave narrative, African American women employed orality for empowerment as well. Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the only book-length slave narrative authored by a Black woman, uses a form of orality, found in written and as-told-to narratives, in which history is passed on orally.

Prohibitions against reading and writing literacy disregarded or failed to recognize other forms of literacy, forms that facilitated slave agency, resistance, and freedom. Oral literacy—that is, the capacity to verbalize and understand uses of the voice for self-expression and to represent the world—provided a cogent means for slaves and ex-slaves to challenge authority and for empowerment both in slavery and freedom. Oral literacy includes employing and comprehending various orally discursive practices and styles like repetition, intonation, inflection, rhyme, alliteration, parallelism, and even inversion and omission. Although many narratives were actually written by ex-slaves themselves, many others were orally dictated to amanuenses and published in the abolitionist press. In spite of laws against literacy, by 1860 thousands of slave narratives had been published.⁶ Although Douglass’s *Narrative* is considered the paradigmatic slave narrative because it contains the most famous example of a man who attained freedom through reading and writing, oral literacy, too, serves a significant function in the *Narrative*. A case in point is the preface written by William Lloyd Garrison, in which the abolitionist relates his initial encounter with Douglass at an antislavery convention when Douglass gives a speech on his slave experience. While he admits Douglass “gave utterance to many noble thoughts and thrilling reflections,” Garrison’s description of the incident places himself at the center of the action and the subsequent audience fervor, thereby minimizing Douglass’s agency (Douglass 35). At the end of the *Narrative*, Douglass writes of the same incident; however, his description attests to both his oral literacy and sophisticated literary skills.

Douglass's narration omits Garrison's role (his name is never mentioned) and locates Douglass as the initiator and author of his oratory. In this instance Douglass uses his literary skills to refuse Garrison's exploitation and assert authority over himself and his work. Instead of understanding that oral literacy works in tandem with reading and writing literacy, scholars have privileged Douglass's reading and writing literacy over his oral literacy skills. Elizabeth McHenry observes, "The limited definition of black literacy associated with Frederick Douglass fails to take into account the extent to which the spoken word offered many black Americans access to written texts" (13). African American women had to face comparable struggles for authorship, and similar assertions of authority are found in the narratives in this volume.⁷

Ex-slave women without sufficient writing skills to produce their own narratives employed oral literacy skills that were, in Bernice Johnson Reagon's words, "learned in the womb" from their foremothers. Lack of reading and writing literacy did not keep these women silent or in chains. Oral literacy offered generations of women in Black communities an effective instrument to educate and arm their daughters and granddaughters for survival in a world in which, as Audre Lorde proclaims, "we were never meant to survive" (42). McHenry corroborates the value of oral literacy. She finds, "Many early nineteenth-century literary societies endorsed a broader notion of oral literacy that did not valorize the power of formal or individualized literacy over communal knowledge" (13). Just as Harriet Jacobs's appropriation of her grandmother's oral history enhanced her narrative, the narrative experiences of Louisa Picquet, Mattie J. Jackson, and Sylvia Dubois contain speech acts of resistance and liberation in both their real-life and rhetorical experiences.⁸ Although the three narratives were recorded by three different amanuenses, the narrative subjects illustrate how nonliterate freed-women used orality to control the representation of their lives and to express their strength, perseverance, and humanity. The varied circumstances and structures of each text demonstrate the mediation of African American women's voices and how they have resisted and/or negotiated that mediation.

The unique relationship each narrator had with her amanuensis is a factor in her voice mediation and points to the method of "speaking in tongues," as articulated by Mae Henderson, that African American women writers consistently employ. Henderson uses the phrase "speaking in tongues" to denote both glossolalia—the ability given by the Holy Spirit to speak in

unknown languages—and heteroglossia—a discourse that communicates in known multiple languages simultaneously—to analyze writings by Black women that “account for racial difference within gender identity and gender difference within racial identity. . . . Through the multiple voices that enunciate her complex subjectivity, the black woman writer not only speaks familiarly in the discourse of the other(s), but as Other she is in contestorial dialogue with the hegemonic dominant and subdominant or ‘ambiguously (non)hegemonic’ discourses” (120). Like Black women writers, Picquet, Jackson, and Dubois, as speaking subjects, “speak in tongues,” yet their voices are mediated by amanuenses who are hegemonic (Hiram Mattison and C. W. Larison) and (non)hegemonic (L. S. Thompson). These amanuenses’ intercessions in the narratives vary in degrees. It is through the orality in these texts that we hear “the multiple voices that enunciate [their] complex subjectivit[ies].” These narratives offer examples of nonliterate Black women’s negotiated mediation and their self-assertion through—and sometimes despite—scribes who have their own subjective aims. The ex-slave women of these narratives are in dialogue with their amanuenses and the larger society whose social constructs of race, gender, and class marginalize them. At times their language can be unknown to the interviewer. Other times they speak in multiple languages, which offer multivalent narrativity that seemingly satisfies inquiries of one audience while speaking more covertly to another.

Louisa Picquet, The Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life (1861)

In 1860, Louisa Picquet traveled throughout Ohio and New York to raise money to purchase her mother’s freedom.⁹ She agreed to relate her life story to publish a slave narrative for fundraising purposes and as a tool for the abolitionist cause. Louisa was born some time around 1830 to a mulatto slave woman, Elizabeth Ramsey, and her white owner on a plantation in Lexington County, South Carolina, just outside the capital city of Columbia. Elizabeth was a house slave, a seamstress, who was evidently a quadroon, or of one-fourth African ancestry, and was lighter-skinned than most slaves. Working as a domestic slave, Elizabeth was probably under the constant scrutiny of her owner, a man Picquet refers to in the narrative as “John”

Randolph, but who was more likely James Hunter Randolph (1792–1869), a lawyer and planter farming with his father Isaac Fitz Randolph in Columbia during this period.¹⁰ Still in her infancy, Louisa and her mother were sold because baby Louisa looked too much like the mistress's child. Later when Louisa was thirteen she and her mother were sold separately, her mother as a cook to a Mr. Horton of Texas, Louisa as a concubine to a Mr. Williams of New Orleans. At Williams's death Louisa and her children were freed, after which the family moved to Cincinnati, Ohio. Louisa gave birth to four children fathered by Williams, but only two survived enslavement. One child died soon after the family moved to Cincinnati, leaving only her daughter, Elizabeth—named for her absent grandmother—alive. Three years after arriving in Cincinnati, Louisa married Henry Picquet, a single father raising his four-year-old daughter, Harriet. A native of Augusta, Georgia, Henry was the eldest (but only son) of five mulatto children of an Alsatian-born farmer and gunsmith by one of his slaves. After being freed, Henry and his family moved to Cincinnati. Together Louisa and Henry produced Sarah and Thomas. Later Henry joined the Union army and served in Tennessee. After the end of the war, Henry, claiming service-related injuries, spent almost fifteen years in an attempt to receive a military pension, which was ultimately granted. During that period, the Picquet family moved from Cincinnati to the town of New Richmond, Ohio where they would live for the rest of their lives. Louisa received his military pension until her death in 1896.¹¹

Louisa Picquet has a question and answer structure that allows the interviewer, Hiram Mattison, a white Methodist minister, to determine the nature of the questions. Mattison's questions reveal his preoccupation with miscegenation and the abuse, both sexual and physical, of slave women. With his initial description of Picquet, Mattison conflates illiteracy with slavery, and femininity with whiteness. He writes, "A certain menial-like diffidence, her plantation expression and pronunciation, her inability to read or write, together with her familiarity with and readiness in describing plantation scenes and sorrows, all attest the truthfulness of her declaration that she has been most of her life a slave . . . But, notwithstanding the fair complexion and lady-like bearing of Mrs. Picquet, she is of African descent on her mother's side" (45). For Mattison, Picquet's illiteracy verifies her status as slave, even as her whiteness and "lady-like" behavior contradict her blackness. From the start, Picquet's body and self are a paradox Mattison simply

cannot resolve. Picquet's octoroon status firmly situates her within the realm P. Gabrielle Foreman delineates as "Mulatto/a-ness[,] . . . a representational trope [that] often designates a discursive mobility and simultaneity that can raise questions of racial epistemology, while it also functions as a juridical term that constrains citizenship by ante- and postbellum law and force" (506). Thus for Mattison, and presumably his readers, Picquet's octoroon status and body crosses color-line boundaries—and in fact destabilizes those boundaries—yet maintains and reinscribes assumptions of limited Black intellectual capacity.

To tell her story Picquet must wade through his preconceptions with Black feminist oral literacy superior to Mattison's written literacy. Using what Zora Neale Hurston called "featherbed resistance," Picquet cunningly both answers and evades the questions in a discursive manner that permits her own subjective representation. In the introduction to her folklore collection, *Mules and Men*, Hurston uses this term to describe the manner in which African Americans resist cultural, communal, and psychological intrusion, penetration, and appropriation by whites. She explains, "The theory behind our tactics: 'The white man is always trying to know into somebody's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind'" (2). With Picquet's "featherbed resistance" Mattison reads the writing of her cultural body but, as the narrative reveals, he fails to read—and comprehend—her will and agency to control her representation and to obtain her mother's freedom. These textual dynamics expose the practice by which a nonliterate freedwoman wrests narrative agency from the amanuensis and creates a subjective representation.

Picquet chooses to evade Mattison's intrusive questions regarding physical abuse. For example, Mattison asks, "Did your master ever whip you?" (46). Picquet answers, "Oh, very often: sometimes he would be drunk, and real funny, and would not whip me then. He had two or three kinds of drunks. Sometimes he would begin to fight at the front door, and fight everything he come to. At other times he would be real funny" (46). Clearly, Mattison's question demands a response that describes Picquet's whippings in detail. However, not only does Picquet not describe the whippings, or their number, for that would leave the impression of a passive victim, she conveys her master's (Mr. Cook's) character and uses language that strongly

suggests how actively she resisted him. By relating Cook's intemperance, Picquet constructs an immoral image of him, which is particularly significant given the concern and activism of temperance advocates during this period.

In fact, in the same issue of the *Cincinnati Gazette*, the newspaper in which Picquet's notice announcing the manumission of her mother appears, a chapter of a serialized temperance novel, *A Tale of New England Life: A Mother and Her Son or Sowing and Reaping* is published. The object of the temperance movement was to promote moderate consumption of alcoholic beverages or total abstinence. Temperance activists identified the root cause of social crises like spousal abuse, indolence, and domestic impoverishment as stemming from the "demon drink." For many white abolitionists and temperance advocates—although these groups were not mutually inclusive—slaveholding and drunkenness occasioned similar disapprobations; both constituted transgressions of Christian principles. Even though the *Gazette* was not exclusively concerned with abolition and temperance, its pages reveal the editor's sympathy with these movements. The readers of *Louisa Picquet*, who, it is safe to assume, were potentially the audience for the *Gazette*, and, therefore, interested in abolition *and* temperance, would find Cook's inebriation vulgar and disgraceful.

Picquet rhetorically controls the narrative by using the word "fight," implying two or more persons in active combat, instead of "whip" (which Mattison uses), and illustrating her rejection of the victim status Mattison would ascribe to her. She dismisses Cook's threatening image with her description of him as "real funny." Instead of fear and terror, Cook inspires Picquet's disdain and contempt. This exchange displays Picquet's integrity and strength more effectively than either Cook's menace or Mattison's literary intrusion.

Picquet asserts her agenda throughout the narrative in spite of Mattison's often vacuous inquiries that trivialize her experience and objectify her. Throughout the text he often intercepts Picquet's detailed narration of emotional experiences that fail to meet his abolitionist agenda. Rebecca Anne Ferguson finds that "such disruptions of what was probably a much fuller conversation show Mattison determined to report only the facts he considers relevant to his agenda and sometimes less responsive to all that Picquet might have wanted to tell" (60–61). While recounting the sales and separation of her mother and herself, Mattison asks, "It seems like a dream, don't

it?" (56). She replies, "No; it seems fresh in my memory when I think of it—no longer than yesterday" (56). She goes on to describe how her mother prayed for her while she was on the auction block, and says, "I often thought her prayers followed me, for I never could forget her. Whenever I wanted any thing [*sic*] real bad after that, my mother was always sure to appear to me in a dream that night, and have plenty to give me, always" (56). Picquet refuses to trivialize and temper the gravity and import of the emotions caused by the forced separation. The reality of the auction block produces the dream of maternal sustenance. She redefines the word "dream"—which Mattison uses to depict something lost and intangible—and imbues it with strength and immediacy that emphasize her connection to her mother rather than the separation. Picquet's language exemplifies African characteristics of oral tradition in which abstract concepts take on concrete qualities. For Picquet, her mother's prayers stand in for the missing mother. That mother materializes in dreams and sustains Picquet in reality. Her emphasis on the maternal bond that remains in spite of the physical severing is a discursive maneuver to promote her self-representational agenda, which is to increase the sales of her narrative in order to raise money to buy her mother's freedom. Thus, the intangible dream becomes the tangible reality: the boon of freedom.

Extraliterary forms of prayer, song, and humor spiritually sustained slave women to assert agency, empowerment, and freedom. When Picquet is troubled by her position as Williams's mistress and fears divine retribution for her sins, Williams entreats her that as long as she maintains her fidelity to him God would not hold her responsible. With more theological perception than Williams suspects, Picquet dismisses his entreaty and "begin[s] then to pray that he might die, so that I might get religion; and then I promise the Lord one night, faithful, in prayer, if he would just take him out of the way, I'd get religion and be true to Him as long as I lived" (59). Soon after this prayer Williams contracts a lingering illness that proves fatal. Picquet's confidence in the power of prayer supersedes her fear of Williams's wrath. She maintains the very faithfulness and fidelity insisted on by Williams, only she is faithful to herself and her beliefs, not to him. Even though she is sympathetic to Williams's plight, she never regrets praying for his death, and instead prays for his redemption before death. For Picquet freedom for the soul through religious conversion is only possible with

physical freedom from slavery. It is significant to note that her desire for freedom is articulated in the context of spirituality.

Picquet's emphasis on redemption places the narrative in the tradition of spiritual narratives. In addition to her journey to freedom, Picquet narrates her journey to religious conversion. At Williams's death, Picquet and her children were emancipated, and around 1847 she moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, where she married Henry Picquet in September 1850 at the Zion Baptist Church. The officiating minister was the Reverend Wallace Shelton. Louisa Picquet's religious conversion came as a result of attending a meeting at Zion Baptist Church, where Shelton pastored. Zion Baptist, the second oldest African American church in Cincinnati, and Shelton took a firm anti-slavery stance in which Picquet found solace. When Mattison inquires if Zion communed with slaveholders, she firmly replies, "*No sir; they will not. The Union Baptist Church does. When white ministers come from the South, they let them break the bread of Communion; but in our church, if they come there, they don't do it, unless they come with a lie in their mouth. . . . No slaveholder, or apologist for slavery, can preach in that church; that was the foundation when they first started*" (emphasis in original, 65). Zion's abolitionist policy informed and sustained Picquet's spirituality. Zion nurtured a culture of resistance in which Picquet eagerly participated. The members risked their lives for freedom, not only for themselves, for others as well. Perhaps because this image does not fit his agenda Mattison fails to probe the fact that Picquet was actively involved in the Underground Railroad, hiding in her home from authorities fugitive slaves. She was a personal friend of Levi Coffin, one of the foremost Underground Railroad agents, and received his endorsement for her fundraising mission at the outset. As a result of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, which required citizens to assist in the recapture of escaped slaves, church services offered forums to warn fugitives and disseminate information. Picquet's description of this antislavery activity amounts to her chronicle of African Americans performing their civic duties; as one hundred years later Martin Luther King Jr. declared, they had "a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws" (1857).

Picquet's narrative demonstrates the relationship between spirituality and freedom. Yolanda Pierce contends, "The courage and the liberty to speak, preach, evangelize, and witness in word and in letter are at the heart of the sanctification experience" (93). When the mental and emotional strain of

her mother's enslavement overwhelms Picquet—what she calls a “troubling” in her spirit—prayer and her commitment to follow Christ provide relief and inspire action. She declares, “I prayed hard that night. . . . And the moment I believe that the Lord would relieve me, the burden went right off; and I felt as light as if I was right up in the air” (64). After this conversion Picquet begins to search in earnest for her mother and work to free her. Her description mirrors other descriptions of sanctification experience—the religious experience in which a person feels consecration and possession by God and sometimes includes speaking in tongues as glossolalia (unknown language)—about which Pierce writes. Yet the promise of heaven in the afterlife does not preclude Picquet from striving for what Douglass called “the heaven of freedom” on earth (113). Although Picquet recognizes her conversion and adherence to Christianity will ensure reunion with her mother after death, the prospect of eternal reunion does not negate the desire for freedom and meeting her mother in this life. “Sanctification’s promise,” Pierce maintains, “is not located in some future time and place, but in the now” (98). The belief of freedom in eternity and freedom from sin inspires the determination for freedom on earth. Consequently, unlike traditional spiritual narratives that “[foreswear] the temporal to revere the eternal,” in Picquet’s text the temporal is not dismissed in favor of the eternal (Moody 104–05). The temporal is made possible because of the eternal. In this instance, Black feminist orality, manifested in prayer and faith, empowers Picquet to achieve freedom for her mother, her children, and herself. Thus Picquet “speaks in tongues” to both readers interested in her religious conversion and those who understand that physical liberation is necessary for and sustains spiritual redemption.

The Story of Mattie J. Jackson (1866)

Mattie Jane Jackson was nineteen when she brought her eleven-year-old half-brother to Lawrence, Massachusetts to live with his father (once known as George Brown, but after escaping from slavery, was known as John G. Thompson), and stepmother, Lucy Susan Prophet Schuyler Thompson. Thompson had recently lost her last child, a Civil War soldier, and no doubt was more than curious about meeting her new husband’s eldest surviving

stepdaughter. In 1866, Jackson, a nonliterate twenty-year-old ex-slave woman, related her slave experiences to her stepmother who, as the title page informs us, went by the title Dr. L. S. Thompson. The resultant narrative can be viewed as these women's act of bonding—each was looking for something—Jackson for her father and trying to finish her education, Thompson to regain a family. The primary purpose of publishing the narrative was to raise funds for Jackson's education. Evidence shows she was able to finish her education and move back home to St. Louis, rejoining her mother, Ellen, and her mother's third husband, Sam Adams. The 1870 Census lists the Adams's household as including Mattie (called Martha) and the missing Jackson sister Hester. Ellen Adams appears in the 1880 census with her married daughter "Mattie Dyer."¹²

Jackson (sometimes she appears in the public record as Martha) in 1869 married William Reed Dyer, a native of Warrenton, Missouri, who was employed as a porter on steamboats plying the Mississippi River.¹³ Eventually, they moved into their own home in the city of St. Louis. Out of their eight children, only four boys and a girl reached maturity. Her eldest son was William Henry Dyer. He worked as an elevator operator at the St. Louis City Hall and died before he was forty, leaving a widow and three children.

Jackson remembered Lucy Thompson and named one son after her stepmother's last surviving child: Arthur Thomas Dyer became a cook on a Pullman dining car and lived in Denver and Chicago. Married twice, Arthur had a son named for his father by his first wife. Another son, Albert L. Dyer, went to Idaho and died young. Jackson's youngest surviving child, Warren Charles Dyer who, despite a lifetime spent working on factory assembly lines, held U.S Patent #1,437,296 for a "bathing appliance," essentially a back scrubber. Warren died in St. Louis in 1945. Her only daughter, Edith, married an oil field worker named Milton C. Slaughter and lived in Alton, Illinois, just upriver from St. Louis, where she ran a boardinghouse. They soon separated, and Edith, employed as a seamstress and domestic, moved back to St. Louis, dying of tuberculosis at a young age.

There were four grandchildren, two of whom served in World War I. A great-grandson, after being rebuffed in repeated attempts to enlist in the Marines after Pearl Harbor, subsequently served in the United States Army during World War II. Marrying twice, his only child by his first marriage was the last direct descendant of Mattie Jackson. Willetta Dyer Reed, a thirty-

seven-year-old administrator for the Census Bureau, known as a poet, community activist, gourmet cook and caterer, died childless in Los Angeles in 1981.¹⁴

Through Jackson's narrative, we see slavery in St. Louis, just before the end of the Civil War. Her description of the taking of Camp Jackson by Union soldiers, for instance, provides a unique perspective of military action from an enslaved woman's point of view, a perspective that was at odds with her slave mistress's view. "I told my mistress that the Union soldiers were coming to take the camp," Jackson states (108). "She replied that it was false, that it was General Kelly [*sic*] coming to reinforce Gen. Foster. In a few moments the alarm was heard. I told Mrs. L. the Unionist had fired upon the rebels. She replied it was only the salute of Gen. Kelley [*sic*]. At night her husband came home with the news that Camp Jackson was taken and all the soldiers prisoners" (108). She continues, "there was not a word passed that escaped our listening ears. My mother and myself could read enough to make out the news in the papers. The Union soldiers took much delight in tossing a paper over the fence to us. It aggravated my mistress very much. My mother used to sit up nights and read to keep posted about the war" (108). Not only is Jackson better informed than her mistress, she has a more realistic outlook on the war than Mrs. Lewis as well. This battle was the first major Civil War action in Missouri and was the only combat operation that took place within the boundaries of St. Louis.¹⁵ Jackson offers a historical narrative from the vantage point of enslaved Black women and foregrounds their political consciousness. Moreover, her account suggests various levels of literacy among slaves and that enslaved African Americans were more literate and informed than what has been previously thought.

Jackson begins the narrative with a description of her paternal heritage and her parents' marriage and forced separation due to slavery. Jackson tells of her family's multiple attempts to escape and eventual recapture. The narrative concentrates on the machinations Jackson and her family endure to obtain freedom. Both Jackson and Thompson assume positions as authors of the text through discursive means—Thompson as the actual literate writer, and Jackson through the orality expressed in her critique of slavery and slave mistresses and her projection of a virtuous young woman striving for self-improvement and personal growth.

Thompson's authorship is plainly stated on the title page, "Written and Arranged by Dr. L. S. Thompson (formerly Mrs. Schuyler), as given by

Mattie.” In addition to the authority Thompson claims through literacy, conveyed with the phrase “written and arranged by,” she assumes added credibility and authority as a professional with the title of doctor and use of initials. The formality indicated through the initials is compounded by the parenthetical note, “formerly Mrs. Schuyler.” First, the phrase (printed in small type) is the only indication of Thompson’s gender, and thus disrupts the reader’s assumption that the author is male. Second, the title, “Mrs.,” signifies respectability. The transition from “Mrs.” to “Dr.” suggests the narrative is produced by an upwardly mobile, respectable, educated woman who, the reader later learns, is also African American. Joycelyn Moody contends, “*The Story of Mattie J. Jackson* is indeed a narrative that ‘tests’ readers’ amenability to accepting the discursive authority of a nineteenth-century black woman” (124).

Jackson’s stepmother was herself a formidable woman. Born Lucy Susan Prophet in the western Massachusetts town of Rutland, she was the daughter of a family of African Americans and Native Americans of the Pequod tribe who inhabited the Connecticut River valley. Evidence suggests she learned to read and write in the common schools of her hometown where she earned her title of “Doctor” due to her knowledge of herbal remedies used for medical purposes. She moved to Worcester, Massachusetts, and, sometime around 1837, married the Reverend Peter Schuyler, originally from Albany, New York, and an itinerant preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He joined her medical practice, and was known as an “Indian Doctor.”¹⁶

Of their seven children, only two survived their father, who died circa 1850, Rodney J., about aged eleven, and Arthur Thomas, about aged three. Rodney Schuyler evidently did not long survive his father, and Lucy was soon left alone with her youngest son. This situation did not stop her from being involved in antislavery activity in and around the city of Worcester, and subsequently in the city of Lawrence, Massachusetts, where they moved circa 1855. In 1857, when Lewis Sweet brought his wife, child and slave woman Betty from Tennessee to Lawrence, Lucy Schuyler engaged a local attorney to serve a writ of habeas corpus on Betty, who had allegedly expressed a desire to stay in the free North. The Sweets also engaged local counsel and the matter was brought before Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw, who declared that Betty, having been brought into a free state, was herself free;