

The Transformation of the South as Presented in the Literature of Southern African American Women: Harriet Jacobs, Octavia Rogers, and Zora Neale Hurston

by

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Abstract

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Jacobs, *The House of Bondage* (1890) by Octavia Rogers Albert, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston provide accounts of historical time periods as represented in literature that give more detail than history books alone ever could. The memoir of Jacobs, written under the pseudonym "Linda Brent", documents the horrors of slavery and shows that female slaves were considered of no value. It also provides a firsthand account of the harsh mistreatment endured, and the breakdown of the family structure. Jacobs also discusses the moral discrepancies that existed between slave owners and Christian practices. Albert also discussed religion and plight of slaves in the Southern United States and showed that the conditions existed not for one, but for many, through interviews with former slaves. Hurston's work shares many of the same themes, but presents them with a new style of writing that shows blacks in the South were more than their past; that they were humans with emotions and desires. When one looks at the works of Jacobs, Albert, and Hurston, one can, through analysis based on theoretical perspectives of New Historicism, Feminism and Realism, recognize commonalities of theme and symbolism that are unique and enlightening blue-prints for a better understanding of slavery and its aftereffects.



The Transformation of the South as Presented in the Literature of Southern African American  
Women: Harriet Jacobs, Octavia Rogers, and Zora Neale Hurston

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## Introduction

Identity, like many things, is multi-faceted and complex. Southern identity comes with murky water: a past as heavy as mud on boot bottoms and a present and future often as slippery as the river banks every Southerner comes to know. The works of female African American writers from the American South are so valuable because they provide unmatched historical accounts of a time understandable to want to move on from because of the horrible atrocities committed, and yet necessary to fully understand the time, the circumstances, the cruelty, and the strain put on race relations in the South for so many years to follow after slavery was long abolished. From the brave personal stories in Harriet Jacob's autobiographical account, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), to the realism of Octavia Rogers' accounts of what others were experiencing in *The House of Bondage* (1890), and the rich imagery and voice of Zora Neale Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), readers are carried through time, tribulations, and transformations with a deeper sense of appreciation for the literary works of these early female writers born in the South. These selected texts serve as the foundation for this thesis that argues that the work of these early authors, Jacobs and Rogers, illuminates the history of slavery in literature and makes it possible for future female authors, like Hurston, to develop a new Southern style that was able to transform from nonfiction to a plethora of possibilities. Although Harriet Jacobs and Octavia Rogers may not have seen themselves as feminists, they fit the description well and their works helped to make it possible for future writers like Zora Neale Hurston to write texts such as *Their Eyes were Watching God*, often known as a feminist manifesto. Feminist theory aims to highlight and understand the inequalities that exist between genders, and particularly the focus here is on the production, distribution, and experience with literature that is available in a time dominated by men.



Women writers have a unique voice that can connect to other women, of any race, in a way that facts and statistics simply cannot. Jacobs, Rogers, and Hurston lead readers on literary journeys through Southern history that are still relevant today and they did so despite the difficulties of being published as African American female writers. The true state of race relations in America cannot accurately be perceived by examining only the present and so the words of these three authors provide a more complete picture of how society existed in the midst of racial strife and how literature moved beyond it as historical changes occurred.

It's important to recall the events of the United States surrounding slavery to get a complete picture of the magnitude of what Jacobs, Rogers, and Hurston experienced and challenged in the South. Much of the history is increasingly forgotten. Many people aren't aware of all that happened in the past and many organizations, like Freedom Roads in North Carolina, are trying to revive and preserve Southern History. As reported by North Carolina Congressman George Kenneth Butterfield, in 1808 there were one million slaves in the United States, and 200,000 of those were in North Carolina. Although there was a ban placed on the importation of new slaves from Africa, the slave population increased to three million in the United States by 1830. Slave owners had figured out that they needed slaves to have large numbers of children in order to grow their numbers after the importation ban. In 1830, 98% of blacks in the South were slaves and 2% were free people of color. When 1858 came along and the Dred Scott decision said that blacks had zero rights, there were four million slaves in the United States at that time. After the bloody Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 by Abraham Lincoln, North Carolina became the twenty-sixth state to ratify the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment on December 4<sup>th</sup>, 1865. When ratification reached seventy-five percent, four million slaves instantly became free (Butterfield, "Finding Freedom"). They had instant access

to a new life, yet were expected to build it with little to nothing of their own. Learning to read and write and being able to use those skills helped the plight of all slaves and free people of color, particularly women, as they begin to craft personal narratives that could traverse color lines and speak about the need for equal rights and opportunities. According to Deborah L. Madsen:

A key element of Black women's liberation is the acquisition of literacy. The twin issues of education and literacy have always been prominent in Black American writing. Slaves were strictly forbidden access to education, because whites saw education as potentially empowering; they were forbidden to read and write because these skills may enable slaves to communicate their stories to other slaves and to abolitionist whites. The slave narrative, an autobiographical account of real life under slavery, often dictated by an escaped slave to a white abolitionist, was a very popular literary form in the nineteenth century and an effective weapon in the fight to abolish slavery in America.

(227)

Madsen also discusses texts written by minority women and says that when reading, there is an "...insistence that the reader work hard to understand the specialised racial or ethnic references included in text..." (220). I would challenge this thought. Those who are likely to be reading texts clearly written by minority women by choice are probably not those who need their perspectives and beliefs questioned or challenged. People with prejudices seemingly would not choose such readings in order to work hard at understanding them. This is what makes the works of Jacobs, Rogers, and Hurston so valuable and unique. Despite the challenges of having their work published, they were successful, and their works have become far reaching into homes and schools where all kinds of people have access to them. Whether someone would

choose to read the work and try to understand it or not, they can't help but be exposed to the authors and the texts because of their prevalence and significance. The authors are straightforward in their descriptions and accounts, and the reader is left trying to figure out how a society could have functioned in such a way and how people's conscience could have allowed the system of slavery to exist. Readers are not intentionally left trying to understand unfamiliar references that pose cultural or racial symbolism, but rather pondering a connectedness as they see the similarities with the people in the texts. Those with different skin color become someone not so different after all, as readers begin to relate to the texts and see themselves or their mother or sisters in the lives of the women and imagine being in their situation. Madsen said, "The second wave of feminism in America did little to recognise the interdependence of racism and sexism as symptomatic of a culture of oppression. Coloured women were excluded from positions of public influence in both the black male-dominated Civil Rights movement and the Women's Movement which was dominated by white women" (215). Considering this, it makes the publication and distribution of the literature written by the Southern African American female authors discussed here even more impressive.

In the South, there are overarching common occurrences that are noticeable, questionable, and relatable to the time of slavery and discrimination of African American people. Take for instance churches in the rural South. If a visitor went to attend a service, he/she would likely find churches for Caucasians and churches for African Americans. While churches are not designated by race, it can be rare to find a church that is not predominately filled with one race or the other rather than a mix of people with different skin colors. If someone stops in to visit public schools in rural towns, he/she will likely find that those who can afford to leave have left and gone to private schools, leaving public schools overwhelmingly less racially

diverse. When students look around, they see fewer and fewer people who are different and they miss crucial opportunities to interact with children who are different from themselves. Perhaps visitors would notice a few birthday parties in people's homes or where people are seated in a few restaurants and look for a pattern. Some would argue there is nothing wrong with going to churches, schools, events, or businesses where they feel comfortable. Is it an issue of comfort or is it more than that? And don't we often grow when we begin to feel a bit uncomfortable?

A teacher where I work, new to the profession and new to North Carolina from Pennsylvania, asked if it was okay to talk about Martin Luther King in his seventh grade English Language Arts class. He had never been to the South before, not even for a visit. His sincere question was humorous to many of us at the school and the instructional coach replied, "We don't hate black people here." Martin Luther King died in 1968. This new teacher, in 2018, voiced what many in the South prefer to keep quiet and pretend doesn't exist. There is still tension, and there is still racism. "Blacks interpret their experience in terms of the historical context of slavery", according to Madsen, and while careful consideration should be given to prescribing one belief to an entire race of people who have many varying personal perspectives, the effects of slavery are far reaching and long lasting.

These female writers were laying planks on a bridge just being built. Could Jacobs imagine what Rogers and Hurston would pen on paper? Could she imagine what the South would eventually become? It would become a place where no person was bought or sold ever again, where there was no auction block and no hiding in an attic, and no more desperation of a mother seeing her child raised as a slave. It was not a comfortable choice to endure what Jacobs endured, but it laid a plank and nailed it down. Rogers documented not one account of the horrors of slavery, but dozens. She gave voice to people as she documented history. Her work

became another plank, nailed down. By 1937, Hurston was in a much different South than what Jacobs and Rogers experienced, and it wasn't time to tell about slavery but to tell it all, to show that African Americans were able to feel and live and write passionately and beautifully. Jacobs and Rogers worked to show us that to be a woman by nature brought certain barriers and hardships to be endured. Hurston went even deeper, showing relationships of her main character Janie that any woman can relate to, no matter their skin color. Hurston did this because the way had been prepared. Other African American female authors had begun to tell their own stories seventy-six years before in the midst of great, mounting odds. Were they uncomfortable? Readers become uncomfortable even now reading their accounts, and so we can assume they were as well. They could have chosen to be safer and to be silent and to do nothing and never write their stories. Their choices provide us the possibility of a literary journey through the South, from one plank to the next, where we can see a bridge take shape and maintain its form as every Southerner builds an identity tangled with past and the present. When one looks at the works of Jacobs, Albert, and Hurston, one can, through analysis based on theoretical perspectives of New Historicism, Feminism and Realism, recognize commonalities of theme and symbolism that are unique and enlightening blue-prints for a better understanding of slavery and its aftereffects.

## Chapter One: The Voice of Harriet Jacobs Exposes the Destructive Reality of Slavery

Southern trees bear a strange fruit, blood on the leaves and blood at the root.

Black bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze, strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant South, the bulgin' eyes and the twisted mouth.

Scent of magnolias sweet and fresh, then the sudden smell of burnin' flesh.

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck, for the rain to gather, for the wind to suck.

For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop. Here is a strange and bitter crop.

~Written by Abel Meeropol, sung by Billie Holiday

History shapes us, and it is one of those things in life that encompasses both good and bad. To take pieces away or to forget them would be to create a false reality and change the identity and the story, of those involved. The introductory notes of the novel *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* remind readers that they are about to embark on a journey through history and experience it through someone else's eyes. The notes say, "By 1860...nearly one-sixth of the total population of the so-called "land of the free" consisted of slaves. In America, the institution of slavery was based solely on race – not religion, not class. Thus, from the very start, it defined one of the dominant themes in our nations' history" (v). Jean Yelling reports that Harriet Jacobs was born into slavery in 1813 in Edenton, North Carolina. Jacobs' name is one that many native North Carolinians do not know, or choose to downplay, despite the significance it holds for the entire nation. Research by scholars has exposed more about who Jacobs was and the value of what she added to the documentation of history with her descriptive, first-hand accounts of the institution of slavery. Yelling wrote:

She is the only woman I know of who was held in slavery, who was a fugitive both in the South and in the North, an antislavery activist who wrote and published her life story and then, during the Civil War, went back south to work with the black refugees behind the Union lines and report what she saw in the northern press.... Astonishingly, Jacobs

managed both to author her own book and get it published before Emancipation. (xv) Jacobs was taught to read and spell by her slave mistress Miss Margaret (12) and enjoyed a relatively carefree childhood until Miss Margaret passed away. Unfortunately, Jacobs was not granted her freedom and, instead, was given to Dr. Norcom. There is some question as to whether or not Dr. Norcom falsified documents to get Jacobs as his slave because Miss Margaret never actually signed her name in agreement to that and may have thought that Jacobs would stay with her grandmother (15). It is at Dr. Norcom's house where Jacobs' story begins to show the destructive reality of slavery for female slaves.

Leaving a lasting legacy with glimpses into a past foreign to so many, Jacobs wrote a memoir under the pseudonym "Linda Brent." She begins the preface with, "READER, BE assured this narrative is no fiction" (2). Her words paint a picture of a less than perfect South and her words are bold, constructing a literary piece that is straightforward and leaves nothing to the imagination. At the time she was writing, this style was necessary. Jacobs had to present information clearly so that there was no question as to whether she was describing possible occurrences, but rather ones she had witnessed for herself. Perhaps she had an inclination that years later her work would be questioned. People wondered if a black female slave at that time could write so well. Did she really write her story or did a white abolitionist write it? If she didn't author it, was it true? Thomas H. Haddox reviewed a work by Peggy Prenshaw on the autobiographies of Southern women. Haddox writes, "If, as Prenshaw suggests, readers expect from autobiographers an effort to tell the truth in good faith, then it follows that we typically judge such writing according to whether we believe the truth has been told" (*Composing Selves: Southern Women and Autobiography* by Peggy Whitman Prenshaw (review)). For those who believe Jacobs did, indeed, write truthfully the words cannot be ignored. Yellin explained that as segregation became a way of life across the United States, Harriet Jacobs was forgotten. She writes:

Her book survived in a few collections, but it remained unread. The story it tells was perhaps not, in Toni Morrison's words, "a story to pass on." Male turn-of-the-century readers, it might be supposed, found it a "women's book." White female readers were perhaps put off by "Linda's" account of her scandalous sexual history. Even if black women readers valued the book, they did not command the attention of the publishing industry. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was not republished. By the 1950s and 1960s, at the birth of the modern civil rights movement, it was generally held that the work was a fiction by the white abolitionist L. Maria Child. But today, Jacob's prayer is being answered and her legacy understood. She left her book - finally acknowledged as her autobiography - now recognized as a key nineteenth-century American text. ...She left her papers - the only papers of a woman held in American slavery known to have survived - now being prepared in a scholarly edition that maps out relationships among feminist and abolitionist reformers before, during, and after the Civil War. (262)

The terrible accounts presented in the autobiography provide the evidence one needs to understand why many Southerners would hope that it was not a true account, and possibly why the story isn't more well known. Even today, there are many residents in Edenton, the town Jacobs wrote about, who do not believe the book is true. Yellin reported that Elizabeth Van Moore of the Edenton Historical Society shared information with her, although she believed the book to be false and furthermore, that it was not even authored by Harriet Jacobs (xviii). You can, however, go to the local visitor's center and take a Harriet Jacobs tour, recommended for eighth grade students and up. It is quite informative, from visiting the graveyard where Dr. Norcom is buried to viewing a representation of the hiding space where Jacobs lived for six years and eleven months. The space was so small Jacobs experienced "sensory deprivation" and "...stretched her muscles and crawled around the tiny space each day" in fear that she would



completely lose the use of her legs (50-51). Estimates of the space are “nine feet long, seven feet wide, and at the peak of its sloped roof, some three feet high” (49). You can still walk into St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Edenton and sit in the pews for worship. At St. Paul’s, Jacobs was “disgusted” and “repelled by the contemptuous manner in which African Americans were offered communion” (86). She also felt “revolted” because Dr. Norcom, who treated her so awfully, was a member of St. Paul’s and his tombstone is nearby the church even today. He was, in fact, appointed senior warden of the church (53). He had status in the town, despite his private horrendous behavior and wrote on the wanted ad when Jacobs ran away that she did so “...without any known cause or provocation” (45). Jacobs was “...sickened at seeing ministers of the gospel buying and selling slaves.” She said, “The whole service seemed to me a mockery and a sham” (86). I’ll never forget when the tour guide shared with me that she was the only one at the center who actually wanted to give the tour. That spoke volumes to me, knowing all that she could have said in explaining why that was likely the case, but choosing not to elaborate.

Edenton prides itself in being a beautiful, friendly Southern town. People are friendly and African Americans and Caucasians work together, attend events together, but like in many Southern towns, they are seldom found in the same churches on Sunday and rarely allow their children to spend the night at each other’s houses. Many people in Edenton, and the surrounding communities, believe that if people stop talking about racism, then it will not be a problem. As a high school American Literature teacher I was told once by a parent that if teachers like me would stop talking about racism then it would go away. Oddly enough, it brings to mind the words of WM. Lloyd Garrison from the preface of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, published in 1845. Garrison wrote, "So profoundly ignorant of the nature of slavery are many persons, that they are stubbornly incredulous whenever they read or listen to any recital of the cruelties which are daily inflicted on its victims. They do not deny that the slaves are held as property; but that terrible fact seems to convey to their minds no idea of

injustice, exposure to outrage, or savage barbarity" (x). Yellin reports, "By 1840, Chowan County would contain more slaves than whites" (47). The magnitude of the history is not going to go away. It is quite chilling to read about African Americans condemned in the *Edenton Gazette* for moving north to Philadelphia and offering help to fugitive slaves (65). It is, no doubt, wrenching to imagine a place you call home the location where people were once treated so inhumanely. Jacobs own family was subject to a mandatory death penalty if they were caught assisting a slave to escape from North Carolina (49). Tourism for a town doesn't work well if you talk about slaves captured, whipped, imprisoned within a cotton press mechanism until death, gnawed by rats (62) or a slave decapitated in a canoe a mile from Edenton (41). This torture is what Jacobs was desperately fighting against and running away from, and why her family was willing to risk their own lives to save her.

Harriet Jacobs confronted the ugly side of what slavery was: not tea and flowers and front porches and nice crops growing in fields and pride and prosperity. Confronting an issue head on often makes people feel uncomfortable, but not doing so surely does not make it cease to exist. Yellin talks about the "dividing line" for housing for blacks and whites during the time Harriet lived, and it remains that way in every small town in Northeast North Carolina I have seen (239). There is usually a main street with large, old, historical houses often inhabited by Caucasians and behind or beside that street are the homes of poorer citizens, often African American. There are some exceptions, of course, but the overall structure remains in place.

There was also a dividing line between the sexes. Being a white man was a position of power and being a female slave held no such favor. Take this excerpt, for example, from Jacobs's autobiography. She wrote:

Women are considered of no value, unless they continually increase their owner's stock. They are put on a par with animals. This same master shot a woman through the head, who had run away and been brought back to him...The master who did these things was

highly educated, and styled a perfect gentleman. He also boasted the name and standing of a Christian, though Satan never had a truer follower. (44)

How bold it was for a slave to say these things! To call a white, upstanding citizen a follower of Satan was unheard of. She wrote, "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....Tell them it is wrong to traffic in men. Tell them it is sinful to sell their own children, and atrocious to violate their own daughters" (75).

According to Michael Delahoyde, "New Historicism seeks to find meaning in a text by considering the work within the framework of the prevailing ideas and assumptions of its historical era." Jacobs was writing what no one else was writing. She was direct and not withholding in what she wanted to reveal. She writes about her own struggles as Dr. Norcom cuts all her hair off and throws her down stairs (66). She writes about other slaves being framed for things they had not done and getting "five hundred lashes" (56), mothers not being allowed to nurse their babies (15), and a mother leading all seven of her own children to the auction block (17). She makes it clear that the rumors of plantation owners having sexual intercourse with slaves, against the will of the slaves, were no rumors, but the truth. I have heard this still debated today in the South, despite evidence presented in texts such as Jacob's that confirm it happened frequently. Jacobs wrote about slaves being sold because the mother "...had forgotten that it was a crime for a slave to tell who was the father of her child" (15). When Jacobs was the age of only fifteen, Dr. Norcom began to make advances at her and followed her everywhere she went. She had nowhere to go for help and Dr. Norcom threatened to kill her if she told anyone. "Even the little child...will learn," she wrote, "...before she is twelve years old, why it is that her mistress hates such and such a one among the slaves." A particularly eerie scene includes two children playing together, one a white child and one the white's child own slave, also her sister. Jacobs said, "I would rather drudge out my life on a cotton plantation till the grave opened to give me

rest, than to live with an unprincipled master and a jealous mistress” (28-29). Dr. Norcom was the father of eleven slaves (32). She even goes so far as to talk about daughters of plantation owners becoming pregnant by slaves and the newborn baby being smothered to death (46). K. Patton mentioned Jacobs in her work on the legacy of slavery for women:

The desire to protect one’s child from slavery is seen in Linda Brent’s narration of her repeated desire to free her children. “I knew the doom that awaited my fair baby in slavery, and I determined to save her from it, or perish in the attempt.” Although Linda does not kill her children, she often wishes for their death that they might be spared the horrors of slavery. Thus female as well as male slaves had no parental rights; they were breeders, not parents. (13)

Slavery’s effects on families were incomprehensible. Jacobs' descriptions appeal to the hearts of all women, regardless of skin color. New Historicism helps readers to look into the past and attempt to process the prejudice that would have been present to allow such things to happen.

Who can imagine a child not allowed to nurse for days? Who can imagine seven children removed at once from a mother, to be sold wherever to whomever with no regard to family separation? Who can imagine contemplating murdering your own newborn baby by suffocation to save him/her from the life at hand? Or asked as Stephanie Li from the University of Rochester did, “What is motherhood for a woman deprived of the ability to care for and protect her child? How are we to conceptualize maternal identity under conditions of enslavement?” (14). Li highlights that the “destruction of familial bonds” is the “fundamental evil of slavery” (15). Children were caught between a slave master whom they had to obey at all costs and their own parents. The children were not supposed to question or rail against anything the master did. Yet sometimes, master and father were one in the same. Frederick Douglass wrote:

Whether this prophecy is ever fulfilled, or not, it is nevertheless plain that a very different-looking class of people are springing up at the south, and are now held in

slavery, from those originally brought to this country from Africa; and if their increase will do no other good, it will do away the force of the argument, that God cursed Ham, and therefore American slavery is right. If the lineal descendants of Ham are alone to be scripturally enslaved, it is certain that slavery at the south must soon become unscriptural; for thousands are ushered into the world, annually, who, like myself, owe their existence to white fathers, and those fathers most frequently their own masters." (5).

Jacobs words are not disproven by other African American writers, but confirmed.

Thelma Townsend, from Alabama A & M University, views Jacob's autobiography as a "tool of self-determinism" and believed, "...Jacob's narrative is addressed to white women in the North. Her aim is to persuade her audience that they have the power as a unified group to put an end to slavery and racism" (1423). Some people did not realize how awful slavery could be and some knew but chose to ignore this reality. Jacobs was confronting the apathy of those who weren't directly impacted and asking for empathy based on what was morally right for a society. Autobiographies can be powerful works of literature. The University of Nevada Media Relations invited a speaker on the importance of autobiography writing, Charles Kempthorne, because they believed, "For the writer, the autobiography provides an opportunity for seeing patterns in one's life. For the reader, such writings provide an opportunity for remembering, appreciating, and learning." Autobiographies give secrets no one else can give. They are direct sources into the mind of the writer. Townsend writes, "The historical and literary importance of Jacob's text is well-documented in historical and literary studies...for the first time, details about the institution of American slavery are told from the perspective of an African-American female who retains control of her own text" (1423). Townsend calls the work "revolutionary" (1426). An autobiography in the case of Harriet Jacobs isn't just a personal story, but a powerful tool for documentation and explanation of a time period.

The power of the autobiographical account of Harriet Jacobs is unique in several ways. It

is unique among other writings of the time, especially for women and for someone in slavery. It illuminates that which was supposed to be kept in darkness. The truths she presents are awful and it's no wonder many did not want to believe that they could be true. Jacobs said that the "secrets of slavery are concealed like those of the Inquisition" (32) and as people say in the South, don't air your dirty laundry out in public. It uses bold language that leaves no question as to what the writer meant to say. It provides an account and while there are pleas for help with the moral degradation of slavery in the South, there are no openings for denials available in the text. The notion of good people, small town morals, outward social standing, and honorable character sharply contrast with realities presented by Jacobs. It is as other autobiographical accounts do report, though, like those in *The Independent* magazine where it is said, "Everything is forgiven in the South except color."

The clear writing style of Jacobs is peppered with beautiful stylistic features like the final line: "Yet the retrospection is not altogether without solace; for with those gloomy recollections come tender memories of my good old grandmother, like light, fleecy clouds floating over a dark and troubled sea" (164). These are impressive for someone who first learned to read and spell as a slave. The vocabulary and sentence structure is complex rather than simplistic as one might expect. There is symbolism like "ignited the torch" (31) and detailed description that brings the story to life. You can almost hear the chains (23) and see the "mother clinging to her child" (23). It is important to note the sophistication of the writing because the authenticity of slave narratives were doubted and abolitionists were often accused of secretly writing them themselves. A piece of history now valued once again, Jacobs' autobiography reminds readers that voices from the past help piece puzzles together and whether pleasant or unpleasant, we cannot rewrite what has already taken place. Personal narratives can take many shapes and forms. Some writers may choose to leave out sorrowful moments, while others include everything in their lives that came together to make the whole. With Jacobs' approach, we have a

more complete picture of joy and sorrow that made her life significant. The choice to write her autobiography leaves an early firsthand account of what the South was like during slavery, and though some may choose to refute the autobiography's authenticity, it remains a glimpse into the history of the South. Extensive research by authors like Yellin make it almost impossible, and arguably uneducated, to hold claims that the account is untrue or written by anyone other than Harriet herself.

Harriet fought her entire life against an evil man who wanted her to remain a slave. Even after his death, he wanted his heirs to hold her in slavery, and his wife agreed. Dr. Norcom's daughter and son-in-law went searching for Harriet and the only thing that saved her was checking the newspaper for the latest arrivals into town. She saw their names, Mr. and Mrs. Dodge, and fled her house (160). Harriet was hidden, again, by her new friend Mrs. Bruce who paid Mr. Dodge to end the slave hunt once and for all. Jacobs wrote:

"The bill of sale!" Those words struck me like a blow. So I was *sold* at last! A human being *sold* in the free city of New York! The bill of sale is on record, and future generations will learn from it that women were articles of traffic in New York, late in the nineteenth century of the Christian religion. It may hereafter prove a useful document to antiquaries, who are seeking to measure the progress of civilization in the United States. I well know the value of that bit of paper; but much as I love freedom, I do not like to look upon it. I am deeply grateful to the generous friend who procured it, but I despise the miscreant who demanded payment for what never rightfully belonged to him or his. I had objected to having my freedom bought, yet I must confess that when it was done I felt as if a heavy load had been lifted from my weary shoulders. When I rode home in cars I was no longer afraid to unveil my face and look at the people as they passed...When I reached home, the arms of my benefactress were thrown round me, and our tears mingled. As soon as she could speak, she said, "O Linda, I'm *so* glad it's all over! You wrote to me as

if you thought you were going to be transferred from one owner to another. But I did not buy you for your services. I should have done just the same, if you had been going to sail for California tomorrow. I should, at least, have the satisfaction of knowing that you left me a free woman." My heart was exceedingly full. I remembered how my poor father had tried to buy me, when I was a small child, and how he had been disappointed. (163-64)

Jacobs stayed with Mrs. Bruce and believed that God had ordered circumstances to keep her there. She also believed she was bound to her by "love, duty, gratitude" (164). She wrote beautifully about Mrs. Bruce, saying, "Like other good and beautiful things, it may be tarnished by careless handling; but when I speak of Mrs. Bruce as my friend, the word is sacred" (164). Their difference in race did not equate to a difference of opinion or agreement of values. A friendship born from uncomfortable circumstances secured Jacobs' freedom once and for all.

Jacobs wrote herself that her bill of sale would "...prove a useful document to antiquaries, who are seeking to measure the progress of civilization in the United States." She was not writing and publishing her story carelessly or without purpose and intention. There are still mysteries that remain from her story, like all the details of her escape after hiding for almost seven years that she did not disclose in the book. While various speculations can be made, scholars believe she wanted it to remain a mystery (Yellin 63). She understood the magnitude of what the country had experienced, and the danger of what she was penning on paper for herself and for others who had assisted her in her escape. She knew that there was work toward progress that had to carry on. Her perseverance against all odds, to keep avoiding the hindrances of a slave system and to document and publish her life story, helped to make it possible for other African American women to do the same.



## Chapter Two: Octavia Rogers' Documentation of Slavery Gives Voice to Others

"If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong."

"Whenever I hear anyone arguing for slavery, I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally."

~Abraham Lincoln

Unlike Harriet Jacobs, Octavia Victoria Rogers Albert did not write her own story but rather the stories of others. While Jacobs showed how horrible slavery could be, Albert showed that it was not isolated to the experience of one individual in the South. Slavery was a part of the South itself and the system of economics that had been created. The stories of many African Americans living in the South were harrowing and worthy to be told and heard. It was the stories of others that Albert told that made her famous. *The House of Bondage* was published posthumously in 1890. It gave a voice that was far reaching to people who otherwise would not have been able to spread their stories. Typical for accounts written by slaves, *The House of Bondage* also begins with a confirmation of its accuracy. A.E.P. Albert and Laura T.F. Albert, both from the editorial room of the *South-western Christian Advocate* in New Orleans, write "The conversations herein given are not imaginary, but actual, and given as they actually occurred. No one can read these pages without realizing the fact that "truth is often stranger than fiction." As such we present it to the public as an unpretentious contribution to an epoch in American history that will more and more rivet the attention of the civilized world as the years roll around" (VI).

Albert's life is both mysterious and interesting. She was the daughter of slaves, born as such herself, yet attended Atlanta University at the age of seventeen among the first students to ever be enrolled there. According to the American National Biography, Albert became more interested in the lives that former slaves had lived after interacting more closely with several people in her home. She decided to write their stories (1-2). The initial, complete title that Albert

proposed was *The House of Bondage; or, Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves: Original and Life-Like, as They Appeared in Their Old Plantation and City Slave Life; Together with Pen-Pictures of the Peculiar Institution, with Sights and Insights into Their New Relations as Freedmen, Freeman, and Citizens*. She believed, as Harriet Jacobs did, that “none but those who resided in the South during the time of slavery could testify accurately to its horror” (2). The interviews she had with former slaves would “set the record straight” about what the immoral system was really like (2). When Albert’s work was first published, it was found in the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* as a series and was extremely popular among readers, leading to its future publication in book form. Albert’s husband was an ordained Methodist Episcopal minister. Like Harriet Jacobs, Albert possessed a strong background in religion and wielded confidence in those values to expose and draw attention to the wrongs of slavery.

In the introduction to *The House of Bondage*, Willard F. Mallalieu wrote, “The story of slavery has never been and will never be fully told” and that it “...will remain forever impossible to adequately portray its unspeakable horrors, its heartbreaking sorrows, its fathomless miseries of hopeless grief, its intolerable shames, and its heaven-defying and outrageous brutalities” (XII). Albert was not afraid to speak directly, both in sharing her opinion and in sharing the stories of others she presents. Immediately in Chapter One she wrote that Southern slave masters were the ones responsible for the condition of slaves, both for any immorality and any illiteracy (1). She speaks of condemnation that may come to a Christian nation that doesn’t uphold Christian values toward and for all, just as Harriet Jacobs did. Albert even quotes a slave woman, Charlotte Brooks, saying “I was sorry for marster. I wanted to tell him sometimes about how sweet Jesus was to my soul; but he did not care for nothing in this world but getting rich” (33). This would be in contrast to what some historical accounts would have people to believe, that overwhelmingly Southern slave owners treated their slaves well and were Christians.

Another similarity between the two writers is the plight of female slaves. Albert shares

the story of Charlotte Brooks and how her master would make her leave her young children all day long while she worked in the fields. Brooks would not be able to nurse her baby while she was away, of course, and she described the baby's hunger and cries when she finally got back to it (3). And even more heartbreaking was the disclosure Brooks gave when Albert asked what happened to the baby. Brooks said, "...my poor child died when it was two years old. Old marster's son was the father of my child." Albert proceeds to ask if the father helped with the child and Brooks replied, "Why, no; he never noticed my child" (14). All of the children Brooks ever had, in fact, died. She said, "La, me, child! They died for want of attention. I used to leave them alone half of the time...I was glad the Lord took them, for I knowed they were better off..." (14-15). Another example of a child being left to tend to itself at an age totally inappropriate to do so came from a man known as Uncle John. He shares the story of his baby brother, Jim, who was left alone all day long as a two year old in a cradle while their mother worked in the field as a slave. A rainstorm came and washed the baby right out of the house, one fourth of a mile away, but his mother found him and he was alive (62-64). He also described his own little girl of ten years old being beaten "half to death" (67).

As one reads her work, the stories begin to feel endless. The atrocities committed get worse and worse, and one wonders how such cruelty existed unchecked for so long. There are stories of a woman going through labor while hiding in the woods from her master who was beating her repeatedly; ultimately, the child dies, and she buries it on her own. This woman, known as Hattie, had become pregnant three times by her master's son (72). The irony of a slave not being seen as capable enough or good enough to stand alone in life and be free, yet capable enough and good enough to have sexual intercourse with, is a long unexplained question of Southern history. Some deny these things ever happened, but the accounts are clear both in Jacobs' work and Albert's work that this was a common occurrence. Some romanticize Southern history and say that most whites treated their slaves very well, and a few were guilty of the

accounts of beatings and cruelty. Yet in *The House of Bondage*, the slaves say that it was “not often” to find whites who treated slaves good (62). This sentiment aligns well, again, with the reports of Harriet Jacobs. Lumen Learning reports:

Following the prohibition placed on the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the early nineteenth century, some slave owners attempted to improve the living conditions of their existing slaves in order to deter them from running away. Some proslavery advocates asserted that many slaves were content with their situation. African-American abolitionist J. Sella Martin countered that the apparent contentment was merely a psychological reaction to the exceedingly dehumanizing brutality that some slaves experienced, such as witnessing their spouses sold at auction or seeing their daughters raped. (Humane Treatment)

*The House of Bondage* also includes the story of Nellie Johnson, described as “almost white” (20). One can assume her whiteness is due to interracial sexual relations, likely between master and slave, not openly discussed at that time and definitely not accepted by white women. Nellie was a slave and once had a baby who was given away instantly to a white woman. When Nellie leaves, likely to try to see her baby once again, she is caught by the “white barbarous, creatures who evidently were without human nature” (21). In 2019, most people of any race agree that taking a child from its mother, regardless of race or other irrelevant factors, is wrong. How different was the rationale of thinking during slavery! The family unit is what supports the fabric of society, woven together with moral values, hard work, and love for others. Mother Teresa once said, "If you want to change the world, go home and love your family." Slavery destroyed this right and opportunity for many across the South as family units were intentionally broken.

There is an account in Albert’s book of a twelve-year old slave girl named Ella, given

through Aunt Charlotte:

I want to tell you about poor Ella, old mistress's house-servant. She was only twelve years old. Ella's mother did not live with her. Mistress had no more feeling for her than she had for a cat. She used to beat her and pull her ears till they were sore. She would crack her on the head with a key or any thing she could get her hands on till blood would ooze out of the poor child's head. Mistress's mother give Ella to her, and when Ella got to be about eighteen mistress got jealous of her and old marster. She used to punish Ella all sorts of ways. Sometimes she tied her up by her thumbs. She could do nothing to please mistress. She had been in the habit of tying Ella up, but one day she tied her up and left her, and when she went back she found Ella dead. (29-30)

Slavery disrupted the normal familial systems where parents could protect their children, and children were forced to work and serve others in ways totally unfit for their age. In Ella's case her mother was not there and even if she had been, what could she have done? A parent who was a slave would risk their own life and the life of their child if they acted in an authoritative role. Slaves were to listen to masters first, even above their own parents. The strength that it would have taken to deal with a situation like this is unimaginable.

There is an account of a slave named George being beaten for talking about freedom. He was given "...nine hundred lashes" and then made to wash in salt water. One of his eyes was put out during the beating (40-41). Affliction fell on men, as it did on women, but not always in the same ways. Albert quotes Charlotte Brooks saying, "I tell you, I have seen black people, in slave-time, drove along – may be one hundred in a drove – just like hogs to be sold. Sometimes men were sold from their wives and mothers from their children. I saw a white man in Virginia sell his own child he had by a colored woman there" (50). Children were slaves of their very own fathers (120). There are accounts of slaves bitten by dogs, repeatedly (78). Men and women were stripped naked for slave auctions and "...they used to switch them on the legs to make them

jump around so that buyers could see how supple they were” (105). Blacks were shot down when attempting to vote (139). Interestingly, there is an account that originally the stars on the American flag were intended only for whites and the stripes only for blacks and it changed that the stars would always be for both and the stripes only given to those who deserved them (141). In Frederick Douglass' 4th of July speech, he said:

I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought light and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn..." (Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture).

All of these circumstances prompted Albert to write something quite similar to what we read from Harriet Jacobs. Albert wrote:

If missionary preachers and teachers are needed in the heart of Africa they are needed in this Southland too ... It is, indeed, a mystery to those who have witnessed the cruelty of the whites in the South toward the poor, ignorant, innocent, degraded, and helpless people whom God, in his own good time, has liberated. (57-59)

Uncle John said that where he lived slaves were allowed to attend church, and their master attended also, but separately. He said that church attendance "...did not keep our white people from beating us through the week” (79). The hypocrisy of church attendance and dedication paired with the cruel behavior that existed outside the church walls was deplorable, yet justified by many whites. Slave owners would use text from the Bible, changing or interpreting it at their own discretion. The article, "*How Christian Slaveholders Used the Bible to Justify Slavery,*"

written by Noel Rae, reports that the common biblical passages used to condone slavery were Genesis 9:18-27 and Ephesians 6:5-7, largely ignoring the New Testament altogether (TIME). The Genesis passage tells the story of the sons of Noah, but some accounts completely remove Canaan, and make Ham and his descendants Africans. Ephesians does instruct servants to obey their masters, yet also implies that slavery cannot break the spirit because a slave is a person and not a piece of property or equated even to an animal. Bits of Biblical text were used to justify a system at odds with the teachings of Christ. In the words of Douglass:

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, slave-holding, 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...” (Rea)

Another account from a slave by the name of Uncle Stephen Jordon that talks about the harsh realities of being separated from family and being sold helps to illustrate the hypocrisy between church going, Christian claiming slave owners and their behavior. The frustration that Douglass and other slaves must have felt experiencing these contradictions is better understood by reviewing firsthand accounts of what was occurring. Jordon reported to Albert:

The negro trader bought me and the calf together for five hundred and thirty dollars. Next day all of us who had been sold to buyers living in and along the coast toward New Orleans were shipped on a steam-boat going that way. My mother was on that boat. That night we reached New Orleans. Mother was taken to her new owner's house to be house

servant, and I was taken to the arcade, or negro traders' yard. From that day until peace was declared after the war I never laid my eyes on my dear mother; that was nearly twenty years. I tell you, people were miserable in that old slave-pen. Every day buyers came and examined such slaves as they desired to buy. They used to make them open their mouths so that they could examine their teeth; and they used to strip them naked, from head to foot, to see whether they were perfectly sound. And this they did to women as well as men. I tell you, my dear child, it used to seem to me so brutal to see poor women treated in that way by brutal and heartless men. I declare, child, I can't understand it, although I've been right in it. (105)

Although the South was changing when many of those interviewed shared their stories with Albert, there was still a long ways to go toward equality. The Civil War had taken place and slaves were freed. Some had only known slavery and with no money and no job, they chose to stay on at their master's plantation if it was an option. Albert presents evidence of the terrible side of slavery, like Jacobs, that becomes difficult both to refute or defend. Merriam-Webster defines realism in this way, "The theory or practice of fidelity in art and literature to nature or to real life and to accurate representation without idealization." While realism is usually attributed to fiction novels, it is interesting that the timing of this type of literature matches the time of *The House of Bondage*. Donna Campbell, from Washington State University, reports:

As the United States grew rapidly after the Civil War, the increasing rates of democracy and literacy, the rapid growth in industrialism and urbanization, an expanding population base due to immigration, and a relative rise in middle-class affluence provided a fertile literary environment for readers interested in understanding these rapid shifts in culture...Realism was a movement that encompassed the entire country, or at least the



## Midwest and South.

It is through realism that Albert unfurls powerful firsthand accounts, although they are much shorter pieces as compared to those of Harriet Jacobs. The number of stories gives the text a different kind of appeal; an overwhelming sense of frustration and call to action when one sees how widespread the moral discrepancies of slavery in the South really were. Real people with real lives and families torn apart are found on every page. To refute Albert's book is to deny not one person, but almost a dozen people's accounts of what life was as a Southern slave.

Both Jacobs and Albert provide historical evidence through literature that is worthy of more recognition and inclusion in coursework, at the high school and college levels. As a public school educator for thirteen years, I am well aware that controversial material, no matter how true, is frowned upon and discouraged in many places. This leads to a lack of knowledge, and arguably, a lack of compassion for history and the people who experienced unthinkable cruelties. When there is a lack of teaching, the stories are easier to blur and they become less known and easier to mold into something more pleasant and less real. English professor Emily Rutter, from Ball State, said "The first Africans arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619, centuries before ancestors of most citizens of European descent. Thus, African American literature is an essential part of American literature, and should be included in any course or text with that title. Yet, because of institutionalized racism, black literature was excluded from the American literary canon until quite recently" (Stidham 1). In fact, David G. Holmes reported, "...the National Council of Teachers of English published a survey indicating that through the 1950s, a person could presumably do an extensive study of the body of American literature without reading one African American writer" (94).

Many schools have moved toward more contemporary novels and more nonfiction articles to comply with state testing requirements, but there is still a place for classic readings and historical ones. Andrew Simmons, a high school English teacher, wrote an article about why

teachers should continue to teach challenging texts that provide opportunities for students to illuminate and analyze social issues. He says:

English teachers don't teach these important stories because they want to batter students with the darkness in human nature. Or because they want to remind them of history's hideous chapters or emphasize the absurdity of existence. Academic goals aside, fellow teachers told me they want to help students cope with real life - even when portions of that reality are unpleasant and disturbing. In the right hands, the important stories, grim plots and all, do that. Researchers who have studied emotion and cognition extensively, Patrick Hogan of the University of Connecticut and Keith Oatley of the University of Toronto, further suggest that literature can play a vital role in helping people understand the lives and minds of others, and that individuals and communities can benefit from that ability along with literacy and analytical prowess. (Literature's Emotional Lessons, 2-3)

I would argue that the literary works of Jacobs and Albert fit the mold of literature that does precisely what Andrew Simmons describes. Their works can be valued for their merit, both literary and historical, as they add to the understanding of the past that still affects the South today. One of the hymns Albert references is still sung today in churches across the South and across the color line and was made famous on Christian radio, sung by Jeremy Camp. Sallie Smith told Albert that she "heard them sing many times this hymn":

In the morning when I rise,  
In the morning when I rise,  
In the morning when I rise,  
Give me Jesus, give me Jesus,  
Give me Jesus!  
You may have all this world;  
Give me Jesus! (93)

The personal stories told draw readers in and dwell long enough to provoke difficult questions about humanity, some which aren't explicitly asked in the text itself. How could people be treated so harshly, specifically children and their mothers? How can a white father never recognize his own children, yet see them every day in poor conditions and use them for personal profit with no moral regret? How is it possible for a person to not be seen as a person at all? These authors completed foundational work in a trying time period so that other authors could build upon the past and break into new genres never seen before for African American women, such as Zora Neale Hurston.

### Chapter Three: Zora Neale Hurston, The Voice and Imagery of a New Southern Style

"Was hers a dream of empire? was it sin? And is it well that all was borne in vain? She knows no more than one who slow doth win, after fierce fever, conscious life again, too tired, too weak, too sad, by the new light to be stirred or glad."

~The South by Emma Lazarus

Zora Neale Hurston is arguably much more well known than both Harriet Jacobs and Octavia Rogers Albert, but she did not become famous until after she had passed away, very similar to Jacobs and Albert. According to Deborah G. Plant, "In the discipline of literature, Zora Neale Hurston has received a good deal of critical attention, but only since the 1970's." What lacked in early attention contrasted with Alice's Walker's term for Hurston – "a genius of the South" (1). Also raised in the South, Hurston's work shows what had been accomplished in time that passed since Jacob's and Albert's works were published and showcases gaps that still existed between the past and the future of race relations in the United States. Hurston's work is more expansive. Rather than just one autobiography or one account of slavery through the eyes of many, Hurston has published numerous novels and short stories that have captivated readers in a new way. She was a novelist, folklorist, and anthropologist. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "A graduate of Barnard, where she studied under Franz Boas, Zora Neale Hurston published seven books - four novels, two books of folklore, and an autobiography - and more than fifty shorter works between the middle of the Harlem Renaissance and the end of the Korean War, when she was the dominant black woman writer in the United States" (196). The National Endowment for the Arts shares this about Hurston's most popular novel, "First published amid controversy in 1937, then rescued from obscurity four decades later, the novel narrates Janie Crawford's ripening from a vibrant, but voiceless, teenage girl into a woman with her finger on the trigger of her own destiny. Although Hurston wrote the novel in only seven weeks, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* breathes and bleeds a whole life's worth of urgent

experience.”

While slavery had ended at the time when Hurston published *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Jim Crow laws had not, and Hurston lived under such conditions where African Americans were constantly undermined and mistreated. According to Charles Legge, the origin of the term Jim Crow dates back to before the Civil War. It refers back to a popular minstrel act where a white man, Thomas Rice, painted his face black and pretended to be an ignorant black slave. He called himself "Jim Crow." The name was applied to anti-black laws that never ended until 1954 and left a daunting legacy long after (Legge, "Life Under Jim Crow"). In regards to Hurston's position on racism, Plant reports:

Some critics continue to criticize Hurston for not directly or substantively addressing the racial issues of her day, claiming she ignored them or denied them. Hurston did address issues of race, however, subtly in her fiction works and directly in her autobiography and journalistic writings. She considered race consciousness to be the scourge of humanity and observed such dispositions as the preoccupation of little minds. She was inspired by the possibilities of greatness within the human spirit, and how that greatness might be achieved, and focused her attention accordingly. Furthermore, Hurston conceived of the human spirit as a part of a greater, divine, universal spirit. (2)

The approach that Hurston took, while different from other African American female authors before her, was no less effective. Her difference in writing style does not mean that she ignored or approved of racism. Again, like Jacobs and Albert, Hurston found solace in religion and she was able to continue to write despite the turmoil she found around her. She showed that African Americans could write about what they wanted to write about and not only what Jim Crow laws had given them permission to write about (Plant 195). Much of her personal life was recreated in her literature, like the town of Eatonville in Florida that Hurston talks about in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Eatonville was a fully functioning town, the first black community to be

planned and incorporated in fact, and “the first attempt at organized self-government on the part of Negroes in America” (11). Princeville, North Carolina was the oldest settled black community, in 1885, and Eatonville followed in 1887. While Princeville attracted residents after the Civil War and a community naturally began to form, Eatonville actively recruited African American residents (Creston). Hurston also wrote about a devastating storm and she had, in real life, survived a dangerous hurricane that flattened the home she was in. Another aspect of her literature that reflects her own life is the lack of a mother and a father present once she reached adulthood. Hurston’s mother passed away when she was only thirty-eight years old, leaving eight children behind (18). Hurston said, “Mama died at sundown and changed a world. That is, the world which had built out of her body and her heart. Even the physical aspects fell apart with a suddenness that was startling” (18). This led to the eventual separation of all Hurston’s siblings from their father as they moved in with other relatives or moved on to begin their own lives. Hurston also had a relationship with a man twenty years younger, when she was forty-four and he was twenty-three, inspiring the character of Tea Cake (194).

Plant writes that African Americans felt the need to justify that they were human beings and that they had worth and value within themselves (62). After reading the historical accounts of Jacobs and Albert, it is not difficult to believe that this would be true. Hurston’s beautiful prose and authentic voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* does just that. Though her style of writing is different, it connects with readers just as Jacobs and Albert did. The words are not easy to forget once they are read. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a love story. In the autobiographical account of Harriet Jacobs and the realistic documentation done by Octavia Rogers Albert, we see a society set up to avoid love stories among African Americans at all costs. After the time of slavery had passed, writers like Hurston are free to write about all the characteristics that make us human, characteristics that were suppressed throughout the South for so long. The writing showcases emotion, emotion that is possessed by all individuals regardless

of their skin color, and presents another opportunity for readers to connect to an author regardless of personal differences. In *Revisiting Racialized Voice*, Holmes wrote of the irony that some of Hurston's accounts had to be verified for authenticity by a white man, reminiscent of white abolitionists authenticating slave narratives like those of Harriet Jacobs and Octavia Rogers. New Historicism follows directly with Hurston's account, as the time of slavery had passed, but its ripple effects live on. Hurston's writing is complex and it poses questions for readers to consider. With New Historicism, history is more than facts. Hurston's work is ideal for review with this type of analysis.

Early on in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston's voice is strong and if a reader had any doubt that the novel they have picked up will be profound, they are quickly convinced. She presents Janie, a sixteen-year old African American girl living with her grandmother. Afraid Janie will fall in with the wrong type of man, her grandmother makes arrangements for Janie to marry a much older man. In response to Janie's dismay, Nanny explains:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd! (14)

First copyrighted in 1937, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* came nearly fifty years after the works by Jacobs and Albert referenced above. In fifty years' time, readers are confronted by changes that have not occurred as fully as one might expect. Hurston is writing about black women bringing treated unfairly, just as others did before her. Nanny recounts being a slave, becoming pregnant by her master and therefore angering the master's wife, running away to keep her child when the master's wife threatened to beat her and sell the baby, only later to have that

baby grow up and be raped as a teenager (16-19). The hardships of life written by Hurston roll off easily, beautifully constructed, not matter of fact like in Albert's work and even more provoking and arguably wider reaching than the words of Jacobs. Albert and Jacobs wrote with intentionality to spread the message of what slavery really was like to those who either did not know or were choosing to ignore. While Hurston touches on these things as well, her work feels like it is for every woman who is growing and changing within herself, creating a personal connection to the literature through the analysis of relationships and the roles men and women play in them. Hurston switches between dialect and regular English, bringing the characters to life and engulfing the reader in pondering for themselves. The novel begins with thoughts such as these, "Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board" (1), "There are years that ask questions and years that answer...Did marriage compel love like the sun the day?" (20), and later deep, haunting thoughts that reflect relationships and dying dreams of women. Janie left her first husband right after he threatened to kill her for a new, younger man, Joe Starks. The happy beginning with Joe was not to be a happy ending. Hurston writes:

She was twenty-four and seven years married when she knew. She found out one day when he slapped her face in the kitchen. It happened over one of those dinners that chasten all women sometimes. They plan and they fix and they do, and then some kitchen dwelling fiend slips a scorchy, soggy, tasteless mess into their pots and pans. Janie was a good cook, and Joe had looked forward to his dinner as a refuge from other things. So when the bread didn't rise, and the fish wasn't quite done at the bone, and the rice was scorched, he slapped Janie until she had a ringing sound in her ears and told her about her brains before he stalked on back to the store. Janie stood where he left her for unmeasured time and thought. She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside to see what it was. It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered. But looking at it she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her



dreams. Just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over...Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them. She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them. (71-72)

Some may read this as only a story about a young woman in an unhappy marriage. However, looking deeper at the text, it is rich in emotion and symbolism. Hurston is describing Janie holding thoughts and feelings inside but still displaying a strong persona on the outside that equates to survival. This parallels with what slaves were forced to do; obey commands of an authoritative figure, even though they were aware that the situation was wrong and not a true reflection of their character. After Janie is hit by her husband, she listens passively in silence as men discuss beating their wives on the porch of the store. They mention one man who does not beat his wife and says that hitting a woman would be like “steppin’ on baby chickens” (75). Every other man says that they would hit their wife and even that they would kill their wife if she embarrassed them. One can’t help but feel dismayed at these comments, not only because they are wrong and disturbing, but because after reading the works of Albert and Jacobs, I could see, sadly, that the history of women trying to get out from under mistreatment by whites only leaves them under the mistreatment by men of their same skin color. It reminds readers of Nanny’s earlier discussion with Janie when she said that she didn’t want to have to worry about any man, white or black, mistreating her (20). Janie cannot hold her silence and responds to all the men, including Joe: “Sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks His inside business. He told me how surprised He was ‘bout y’all turning out so smart after Him makin’ yuh different; and how surprised y’all is goin’ tuh be if you ever find out you don’t know half as much ‘bout us as you think you do. It’s so easy to make yo’self out God Almighty when you ain’t got nothin’ tuh strain against but women and chickens” (75). This criticism against black men did not make Hurston popular with many of the writers of her time, such as Richard Wright

who believed she was not supporting the movement of the New Negro. He felt that the hardships of life for African Americans needed to be written; whereas Hurston felt one should write about the humanity of African Americans in spite of all they were enduring from racial oppression.

Wright said:

Miss Hurston seems to have no desire whatever to move in the direction of serious fiction...The sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought. In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy. She exploits that phase of Negro life which is "quaint," the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the "superior" race. (Rubin and Casper, 22)

Hurston faced a sort of double criticism as others judged what she should be writing to represent African Americans and what she should be writing as a woman. Holmes wrote, "The formidable gender issues Hurston faced as a female author undoubtedly account partly for her reemergence during the 1960s and 1970s" (84). Edwidge Danticat put it this way in the foreword to the 75th anniversary edition of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: "Like all individual thinkers, Janie Crawford pays the price of exclusion for nonconformity, much like Hurston herself, who was accused of stereotyping the people she loved when she perhaps simply listened to them much more closely than others, and sought to reclaim and reclassify their voices" (xv).

Hurston was from the South, and came from a rural background, and she knew firsthand about the people who lived there and the struggles they faced. This firsthand knowledge and experience led to the detailed imagery and storytelling she was able to craft. Hurston wrote, "Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone" (8). The imagery Hurston used is remarkable. It's sprinkled throughout *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Janie "...lived between her hat and her heels, with her emotional disturbances like shade patterns in the woods – come and gone with the sun" (76). Ines Casas

Maroto from the University of Santiago de Compostela believes that Janie finds herself in different spaces and that, “The reliance on the strength of natural imagery to sustain significance is a distinct characteristic of black American women writers...” (71). Compostela analyzes how the imagery of trees and other natural elements develops Janie’s character. Hurston also uses the “Horizon” to represent possibility of what may come, according to Compostela (74). She writes the following about Janie:

Her imagination transforms the horizon from the object of longing and of genuine exploration into a metaphorical fishnet which she can pull in at will. Her imaginative power retains the horizon in a process that highlights the empowerment of women articulated in the novel’s opening...Janie is surrounded with imagery that evokes light and brightness. Natural symbols like the pine tree point toward the universe, and although she is enclosed in the protective warmth of her home, we understand that “within its walls is a place that shines with her own awakening and is brightened by the poetry of her spirit” (80).

The movement of Janie from one location and time in her life to another always uses imagery. The final male partner Janie ends up with is portrayed as natural and going with the flow, which flashes readers back to the beginning of the novel when Janie lay under a pear tree as a sixteen-year old and life was more carefree. Hurston filled the novel with so much symbolism; even her partner's names are significant. When Janie says that upon meeting the true love of her life that he never told her his name, he responds: "Ah sho didn't. Wuzn't expectin' fuh it to be needed. De name mah mama gimme is Vergible Woods. Dey calls me Tea Cake for short" (97). The nickname is fun, light-hearted, and a reflection on not only his youth but also the spiritedness and love of life that Janie still has as well. His given name, Vergible Woods, is a complement to Janie's tree, to her love of nature, and her passion that has not been squelched. Analyzing the character names makes it even more clear that Hurston was telling readers that Tea Cake was the

right man for Janie. She was never meant to be partnered with Logan Killicks or Jody Starks. One can't help but wonder if Hurston's description of Janie and her own shadow is somehow reminiscent of a time when slaves may have felt the same. Hurston writes, "Then one day she sat and watched the shadow of herself going about tending store and prostrating itself before Jody, while all the time she herself sat under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and her clothes. Somebody near bout making summertime out of lonesomeness" (77). It isn't that women or slaves were not mentally capable of rescuing themselves so to speak, or that they didn't have the desire to do so, but that systems were set up to prevent those desires from being possibilities. These societal systems that cast these shadows of oneself are what Hurston is describing, and showing that it takes time to move beyond what hardships you have experienced.

While the ending of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is far from simple or desirable, the story and the life it showcases are full. Janie is free in her thoughts even when she cannot be free in her actions and she loves strongly and has emotional responses as any human would, totally regardless of skin color. In both fictional writing and in Hurston's own life, she was not afraid to approach the topic of race. In the famous "How It Feels To Be Colored Me" she wrote:

Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the grand-daughter of slaves. It fails to register depression with me. Slavery is sixty years in the past. The operation was successful and the patient is doing well, thank you. The terrible struggle that made me an American out of a potential slave said "On the line!" The Reconstruction said "Get set!"; and the generation before said "Go!" I am off to a flying start and I must not halt in the stretch to look behind and weep. Slavery is the price I paid for civilization, and the choice was not with me. It is a bully adventure and worth all that I have paid through my ancestors for it. No one on earth ever had a greater chance for glory. The world to be won and nothing to be lost. It is thrilling to think – to know that for any act of mine, I shall get twice as much praise or twice as much blame. It is quite exciting to hold the center of the

national stage, with the spectators not knowing whether to laugh or weep...I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored. I am merely a fragment of the Great Soul that surges within the boundaries. My country, right or wrong. Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How *can* any deny themselves the pleasure of my company! It's beyond me. (Wall, 826-829)

Her words confirm that contrary to the opinions of many popular writers of the time, like Wright, she did reflect on slavery and she did understand its effects. She choose, however, to move forward and try to find success despite a past she could not change. Leaving lessons that reflect the past, the future, and everything in between for readers, Hurston wrote, "...It's uh known fact, Pheoby, you got tuh go there tuh know there. Yo' papa and yo' mama and nobody else can't tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody's got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got to find out about livin' fuh theyselves" (192). Her words ruminate and cross color lines. Everyone searches for their place and purpose in life, and Hurston understood that. She knew what the past had been like and what turmoil remained as an after effect of slavery, but she did not let it control her destiny. Although Henry Louis Gates, Jr. noted that she wrote "well when she was comfortable, wrote poorly when she was not" as a sign that she could not live fully the life she could write about. Hurston was well aware of her situation (205). She was bold. Gates acknowledged that her double voice in writing was to "celebrate the psychological fragmentation both of modernity and of the black American" (204). Hurston once said, "People can be slave-ships in shoes" (203). She believed strongly that until African Americans owned things for themselves they had progressed no more than when they were first granted freedom, or as she puts it, "...we are right back where we were when they filed our iron collar off" (205). There is much still to be reflected on from her works because they are so rich, but her impact on African American literature is undoubtedly profound.

## Conclusion

"All the sweetest winds, they blow across the South."

~Ryan Adams

In Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* these words are found: "You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots...Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. Dat's one of de hold-backs of slavery. But nothing can't stop you from wishin'. You can't beat nobody down so low till you can rob 'em of they will..." (16). The literary works of Zora Neale Hurston, Octavia Rogers Albert, and Harriet Jacobs represent the history of the South, indeed, but they represent more than that as well. They illuminate the struggles of a country and its people, particularly the struggles in the unequal relationships between African American females in the South whose gender and race became a reason for others to domineer over them and mistreat them. They make it possible for those who are ignorant to the horrors of slavery to be introduced to it, to recognize it for what it was, and to look at the after effects in a more understanding and realistic way. The degradation of a people doesn't simply vanish into thin air. The problems resulting from it don't cease to exist because we cease to discuss them, although some would fervently argue otherwise. I experienced this firsthand when I taught English, particularly American Literature, in a public high school six years ago. During a unit on African American literature a parent wrote to me that if people like me would stop talking about racism then it would go away and not be a problem. A white student wrote to me that they were tired of hearing about what bad things white people had done. I offered my sincerest apology to the whole class if any of my actions or teachings had been misunderstood and encouraged them to always let me know if they felt uncomfortable during my class. I called the parent, left a message, and was never called back. In my mind, I was teaching the literature and the history. I never anticipated people were going to get upset. I was wrong.

For many people, the South is a wonderful place, both to visit and to call home, and the history preserved through literature adds to what makes it so special. While a past may include treacherous times, no place is condemned forever based on the actions of those who once lived there. People, and places, can overcome odds stacked high against them. People can reflect on history, use it to analyze actions, and base new decisions on what is already known to be just and unjust. The South is filled with strong women who are leaders and who, like the three African American writers discussed, are not afraid to stand up for their own voice and for their own sons and daughters.

The work of earlier African American female writers like Jacobs and Albert tore roots from a hard, rocky ground that was not just steep to climb, but incredibly dangerous. They wrote true accounts of slavery despite the fact that some questioned the authenticity of the words and even the writers themselves. They made way for a clear path for Hurston to share experiences in a new way, where facts and emotions fused with fiction and well-woven ideas showcased that Southern African American women have a voice, a talent, and an identity that is powerful. The horrors of slavery past didn't quell the voices of those who were telling the stories and finding their own identities among times of turmoil. These women documented and preserved Southern history and they deserve recognition for both their contributions of historic preservation and their incredible works of literature.

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, The House of Bondage, and Their Eyes Were Watching God* show different time periods in history that have come and gone. Each time period left deep marks on Southern culture and on people's hearts that still endure today and the literature helps us to remember, to reflect, and to realize just how far the South has come. Through the lives and work of these women we are able to read firsthand accounts of slavery, brutality, a country at war, emancipation, desegregation, and restoration. Being able to match the history with the literature is powerful. We see transformation through time of systems that

seemed unchangeable. We see firsthand accounts of how those four million freed slaves started life again, and when Rogers shares their stories, they become real for us rather than just a number. They prompt us to question how this could have happened, what would we have done if we had been there, and what should we do now that we have freedom and have earned it through the hardships of others?

We gain hope for what those possibilities mean for the identity of those who call the South home today. People of different races can live and work together and do so passionately with fervor toward common goals – not ones that divide. One of those common goals is to preserve the literature and the history. *Freedom Roads* is one such initiative in North Carolina. The program operates with collaboration from six different state organizations, such as the North Carolina Arts Council and the African American Heritage Commission. They hold events and workshops in different regions of the state, highlighting not only history, but also history preserved through literature and other written documents like bills of sale, ads for runaway slaves, letters pleading for slaves to be granted freedom, etc. They partner with universities, historic sites, local government and other agencies and hope to create new ways to inform students and citizens of the state about the efforts of enslaved people seeking freedom. They bring stories to life with interactive trails, field trips, and dynamic performers. Innovative programs like these continue to tell the stories that Jacobs, Albert, and Hurston knew all too well.

Their legacies live on as the past is embraced in the South rather than ignored, and people from all walks of life learn together, celebrate positive changes, and look toward the future with excitement. Other African American female authors from the South like Alice Walker carry on the intriguing writing that draws readers of all genders and races into varying cultural elements and stories by choice, not reading to search for and figure out cultural codes somehow embedded in some analytical way but presented straightforwardly with honesty, bravery, and respect for what was and what is now. In 2004 National Public Radio reported, “In 1975, writer Alice



Walker wrote an essay about her search for Zora Neale Hurston. In the process, Walker helped lift from obscurity the work and life story of the most widely published black woman author of the 1930s Harlem Renaissance. Walker -- author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Color Purple* -- never met Hurston. But she says she feels a profound connection to her." Walker even purchased a tombstone for Hurston's grave when she found it without even a marker in Florida. The tombstone was inscribed, "A Genius of the South." Walker said, "The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any" and "No person is your friend who demands your silence, or denies your right to grow" ("Intersections: Crafting a Voice for Black Culture"). Another great writer of African American literature, Toni Morrison, recently passed away on August 5th. Morrison was the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, and leaves behind phenomenal works like "Beloved" and "The Bluest Eye." Women have always had to fight for progress, whether it was for gender and/or race equality. While each woman may present that fight differently, the Southern African American female authors presented here are the rule, and not the exception. Every generation provides new literature but the history and the links from one generation to the next should not be forgotten. The progress that has been made makes all of the literature more meaningful.

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