

## Social Constructs as Instruments of Freedom

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### Abstract

*Nineteenth century African American authors penned slave narratives which utilized assimilationist rhetoric to fight for abolitionist causes. Olaudah Equiano, author of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, perpetuated the contemporary cultural construct of the white, masculinity identity in order to prove his worth and fight for freedom. Similarly, Harriet Jacobs highlighted her dedication to the domestic lifestyle most white women were accustomed to in American society in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Jacobs also sought to prove her humanity by uniting white and black women through their shared motherhood. The perpetuation of white, American social constructs, whether positive or negative, were necessary to build the argument that black Americans share the same values as white Americans, and are therefore part of the same human race and nation. Assimilationist rhetoric is still utilized today in African American cultural production to fight for black equality in the contemporary United States.*

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Black authors working toward the abolition of slaves in the United States, like Olaudah Equiano and Harriet Jacobs, perpetuated the contemporary social norms of white males and females to advocate for their cause. These social constructs, whether positive or negative, were necessary to build the argument that black Americans share the same values as white Americans, and are therefore part of the same human race and nation. Both authors highlighted their shared, innate characteristics, which were valued by white people during their time period. In their narratives, Jacobs emphasized her motherhood while Equiano demonstrated his intellectual, self-made livelihood to convince white readers of the injustice of slavery.

Harriet Jacobs utilizes the universal female experience of motherhood as a tool to disprove the notion that slave women were not as human as white women. She especially focuses on the white readers in the North. In chapter three of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs directly asks white women to contrast their holidays with that of a slave mother. She writes that white children belong to their mothers and “only the hand of death can take them” away from their mothers (Jacobs, 2016). However, slave mothers dread News Year’s Day because her children “may all be torn from her” and put into chains (Jacobs, 2016). “Hiring-day” in the South “takes place on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January” as Jacobs elaborates (Jacobs, 2016). Slaves are expected to report

to their new masters the following day, and for some, that may be the last day families are together. Jacobs feeds into the stereotype that black people are “ignorant creature[s],” but she aligns with white women and asserts their humanity as they all share “a mother’s instincts” and ability to feel “a mother’s agonies” (Jacobs, 2016).

Stephanie Li’s article, published by the University of Nebraska Press in 2006, quotes noted literary critic and professor of English and African American Studies, Claudia Tate. She states that for slaves, motherhood “was an institution to which they had only biological claim” rather than an innate right to bond and protect their children as white women did (Li, 2006). Li highlights Jacobs’ refutation of the notion that black women had no human emotional connection to their children by emphasizing her “maternal sentiments” and associating herself with common “domestic ideologies” (Li, 2006). Still on the subject of New Year’s Day, Jacobs says a mother “sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the day dawns. She may be degraded by the system that has brutalized her from her childhood; but she has a mother’s instincts, and is capable of a mother’s agonies” (Jacobs, 2016). This validates that Jacobs embraced the white social construct of maternity to prove that black people were just as human as white people. Black women experience all the emotions and anxieties of white mothers, and should have equal opportunity to protect and care for her children. In proving their humanity, she validated the abolitionist view that the institution of slavery was unjust and evil. Li notes that Jacobs attempted to prove that motherhood “crosses race and class boundaries” (Li, 2006).

Olaudah Equiano, author of *The Interesting Narrative of The Life of Olaudah Equiano*, also attempts to prove that intellectual abilities are innate in all races and classes. He demonstrated his intelligence and self-made attitude to appeal to his white male readers who valued those characteristics in themselves. For example, in chapter seven, Equiano mimics the rhetoric of Enlightenment men when he says that he would rather “die a free man than suffer myself to be scourged by the hands of ruffians” (Equiano, 1988). The charged words and language of liberty echo Patrick Henry’s *Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death* speech. Equiano is emphasizing his self-taught vocabulary and his knowledge of American values. Perhaps more effective and impressive for the time, Equiano details his voyages to astounding places like the North Pole and England. Although he is sure to include, in chapter seven, that he chooses the United States over London given that there were still some resentment toward the British after the American Revolution: “struggling between inclination and duty” (Equiano, 1988). Equiano buys himself from his master by working on the side, and eventually, at the end of his narrative, Equiano becomes the captain of his own ship. His autobiography asserts many times over that it was by his own hardworking hands that he became a successful man.

Kimberly Drake’s article, published in the Oxford Journals in 1997, investigates how ex-slaves “write [themselves] into an existence recognized by the dominant American society” to prove their worth to that society (Drake, 1997). Equiano needed to portray himself as an educated and self-made man because those traits were valued in white, American men. The self-made man, according to Drake, was “a construct that most male ex-slaves embrace[d]” (Drake, 1997). Equiano needs to construct,

or as Drake suggests “imitate,” what American society would deem “normal” in order to prove their humanity in a way that would be “acceptable to white readers” (Drake, 1997). Equiano attempted to build similarities between himself, a black man and ex-slave, and his white readers. Harriet Jacobs did the same with her readers.

Black men and women did not have the luxury to argue that their differences should be respected prior to the Emancipation Proclamation, instead their only hope for abolition was to exemplify American social norms and use those similarities to prove their humanity. Harriet Jacobs and Olaudah Equiano were some of the first written examples of this technique, which is now studied as a part of history and literature. However, American society still puts an unfair demand on the black community to embrace and exemplify traditionally white social norms in order to prove their worth. For example, black men are stereotyped as being unable or unwilling to provide for their families. To combat this misconception, rappers often overemphasize their excessive wealth in their music. In Big Sean’s song, “Blessings,” he says that he is “the man of he house/So every mornin' [he is] up 'cause [he] can't let them down.” He also stresses that “the family never goin' anorexic/ [He] pay [his] mortgage and electric.” Bryson Tiller is another rapper who uses the self-made motif in contemporary music. His song, literally entitled “Self-Made,” depicts the rapper as a “seven-figure, self-made” black man whose neighbors question how he can afford his lifestyle. The techniques used by ex-slave authors are still used today as both past and present African American cultural production utilizes assimilationist rhetoric to fight for black equality.

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