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Yipu Su

Yipu.Su.GR@Dartmouth.edu

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Unended Middle Passage: The Exhausted Flesh of a Resistant Enslaved Woman

Yipu Su

The famous image of the *Brookes*, the British slave ship from Thomas Clarkson's abolitionist pamphlet, is essential for understanding how the supine position that characterized the existence of shipped captive Africans haunted the two women in the two narratives of enslavement this essay discusses, both of whom were born on the land of antebellum North America and thus never sailed the "Middle Passage" (see Appendix 1). The series of figures in this image demonstrate the business intelligence of white colonizers to flatten and compress their human cargo to maximize profits. The economic consideration extended to influence the social position of the Africans and their descendants after they landed in the New World. The forced stillness of the lying Africans on this ship was not a form of relaxation; on the contrary, it caused desperate exhaustion to the human body.¹ Harriet Jacobs, referred to by the pseudonym of Linda Brent in her narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), knew about the agonies of this supine position, probably even more keenly than her shipped ancestors, because she hid in a narrow garret for seven years to avoid the persecution of her enslaver. In the garret, "[t]he air was stifling; the darkness total" and she could only lie down, and every time she turned her sides, she would hit the ceiling (Jacobs 92).² Bad weather would

¹ Stillness cannot summarize the situation of the captive Africans on slave ships since there was physical violence, including sexual offenses and even murder, during their journey.

² I read *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as Harriet Jacobs's autobiography instead of a novel about a fictional character Linda Brent, first because Jacobs claims in her preface

exacerbate her pains. Linda reflects, during the winter, “[m]y limbs were benumbed by inaction, and the cold filled them with cramp” (Jacobs 97). In another autobiographical work, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave* (1850), Sojourner Truth describes how she worked extremely hard to avoid punishment, and since she was young, she slept by sitting in a chair or sometimes even by standing against the wall, “fearing that if she sat down, she would sleep too long” (Truth 33). Either horizontal or perpendicular, to resist slavery in their ways, Jacobs and Sojourner Truth pushed their back against a two-dimensional plane, flattening their existence, as if floating in the “Middle Passage,” returning to the historical point of departure of the enslavement of their ancestors.

My essential question is why these two women, Sojourner Truth and Linda Brent/Harriet Jacobs, the two protagonists of *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, adopted this supine position that echoes the exhausting captive position in Middle Passage, in their resistance to enslavement. I argue in this essay that in the face of sexual violence, Sojourner Truth and Linda Brent/Harriet Jacobs both suspended (in Spillers’ term, though she does not argue for a self-ungendering) their female identity by exhausting their flesh to the degree that they rendered their gender inscrutable; one by laboring harder than men, and the other by

“be assured that this narrative is no fiction,” and the editor of the first edition, Lydia Maria Child refers to the book as “autobiography” (Jacobs 5). On the other hand, I follow Carby who refers to Jean Fagan Yellin, Jacobs’ biographer to affirm “the authenticity of Jacob’s narrative” (Carby 46). Carby comments that Jacobs used the pseudonym “as a mechanism of self-protection” because when the novel was published Jacobs was still an enslaved runaway (Carby 50).

hiding from visibility at all. This strategy did not avoid capitalistic exploitation and it also caused irreversible harm to their bodies. However, it was efficient in the meaning that it helped decrease the possibilities of suffering sexual violence, created some chances that finally led to their escapes, and opened a narrow opportunity for identity reinterpretation that brought a reversal to the racialized gendered image shaped by their enslavers.

Supine Position and Capitalistic Calculations

To hold captive Africans in a supine position on slave ships was to dehumanize, objectify, and capitalize them as commodities, which immediately affected their flesh. Their “use value” as commodities, in the Marxian term, was forced labor extracted from them. I argue that forced labor differed from free labor in the meaning that the former was an activity of propelling commodities to produce commodities. Therefore, the reproduction of commodities included two aspects: first the reproduction of forced laborers, and second the reproduction of their products. This difference decided the way the captive Africans as commodified laborers were transported in the “Middle Passage” and also determined the position, which is to say the unpaid laborer forced to replicate the repressed experience for generations, of the enslaved African and African American women in the economic institution of slavery.

The question of the relationship between slavery and capitalism have drawn growing scholarly attention but still demands more specific research. In the 1980s, Cedric J. Robinson, who develops W. E. B. Du Bois’ thoughts about slavery and capitalism,

argued that “American slavery was a *subsystem* of world capitalism” because the labor of captive Africans created the primitive accumulation of world capitalism (Robinson 200). Orlando Patterson also cautiously affirmed that American slavery was crucial to “the rise of the West European economies” (xxviii). Recent scholars have been trying to substantiate these theories. The “Slavery’s Capitalism” conference held in 2011 intended to “provide the most multidimensional account to date of slavery as a constitutive element of American capitalism” (Beckert and Rockman, 5). This essay focuses on how the relationship between slavery and capitalism affected female flesh, in particular, and how enslaved women might have reclaimed agency over their exhausted flesh as a mode of resistance to racial capitalism’s construction of gender.

The human figures in the image of *Brookes* are separated into two sizes, the smaller ones represent women and children and the larger ones represent men, indicating two calculations made by slave traders: first, the individual economic value of these two categories, and second, the ratios of two sexes. Hortense Spillers, in her influential article, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987), explains how the owner of the *Brookes* “recommended that ‘five females be reckoned as four males, and three boys or girls as equal to two grown persons’” (Spillers 72). By referring to this historical detail of counting a captive woman as a 4/5 man, Spillers argues the passage was a process of ungendering because the ship was not within the confine of domesticity of African families, which was necessary for “gendering” to take place because it assigned social roles such as mothers, sisters, and wives, believed as only

women could play (Spillers 72). It is reasonable for Spillers to argue that regarding women as incomplete men in terms of commodification was to ungender them, but this does not indicate they were un-sexualized. Jennifer L. Morgan, in *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*, writes that “[a]t its most utilitarian level, African women’s presence among the enslaved—the presence or absence of enough women to make natural increase possible—affected the rate at which slaveowners needed African imports to maintain the enslaved population” (Morgan 6). Through this “sex math,” enslavers could save more money by counting on the free natural growth of their human chattel. Initially, the sex ratios on the slave ship determined how the enslaved population would develop. Michael A. Gomez mentions in *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* that “the North American market was distinguished by its relatively balanced sex ratios” (Gomez 18). Therefore, when evaluating the reproduction of *material commodities* such as cotton and rice, enslavers treated enslaved women as laborers qualitatively identical to men. However, when considering the reproduction of *commodified laborers*, they viewed enslaved women in terms of the female reproductive organs.

The two calculations thus reflect the capitalist logic that supported the exploitation of the enslaved women simultaneously as non-sexualized laborers and sexualized reproductive organs, both of which were calculations made about the usage of the flesh, to use Spiller’s term. In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Spillers distinguishes between the flesh and body of the African captives. Spillers argues that by traveling across the

Middle Passage between the Atlantic coasts, African people lost their original social and gender identity because the slave traders treated them as cargo, commodities without “human personality and cultural institutions,” flattening their existence into flesh, a physical being; while when they landed on the New World, the enslavers renamed and revaluated them as a racial group of enslavement, clothing their flesh with a cultural and social identity that completed the revision of their body (67-8). By making this differentiation, Spillers highlights the flesh, rather than body, as the actual site of violence and wounding that lied beneath the following racialized identity; and this site existed with no difference in individuality or sex (Spillers 68).

“Middle Passage,” thus, exposed and prepared Africans as flesh. Spillers gives a poetic and precise description of the captives on the slave ship:

Those African persons in “Middle Passage” were literally **suspended** in the “oceanic,” if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy for undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet “American” either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere* at all. (Spillers 72; emphasis added)

Here the notion of being suspended refers to the state of having an “undifferentiated identity,” which Spillers explains as defined by cultural and social uncertainty. In other words, the suspended Africans were flesh, not yet *embodied* in the American society. I agree with Spillers about her flesh/body distinction. However, I question whether the

state of suspension in what she calls Middle Passage was a state of existing as flesh without cultural marks and whether the Africans were indeed culturally and socially “*nowhere* at all.” The moment the Africans embarked on the slave ship, they were at the heart of capitalistic calculation, which was the economic foundation of American society. Moreover, I wonder whether such a moment of suspension would appear outside of Middle Passage. If capitalistic calculation continued, Middle Passage would symbolically extend as an unended existence. Both *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* show such to be the case.

I categorized forced human sexual reproduction, which is to say rape, as sexual violence but not a component of what we could consider gender construction because sexual violence was only the premise of gender construction, about which Saidiya V. Hartman makes a solid argument in her book *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997). Hartman refers to a series of nineteenth-century American legal cases of white men raping (or attempting to rape) enslaved women to discuss the definition of women applied to enslaved female people. She points out that neither common law nor slave codes recognized such offense as a crime in nineteenth-century America. The legislative explanation interpreted sexual exploitation in slavery as “the legitimate use of property,” and moreover, the enslaved women consented due to their intrinsic lasciviousness (Hartman 80-1).³ In this way,

³ Hartman also considers the sexual offense done to enslaved men and argues that their experience lacks enough scholarly attention (Hartman 81).

Hartman argues that the law “asserted that the captive female was both will-less and always willing” (Hartman 81). Here, being will-less meant to be vulnerable and defenseless in the face of sexual violence while being willing to deny the violence as violent. Hartman further articulates that gender construction lies in the legislative explanation rather than in sexual violence:

By interrogating gender within the purview of “offenses to existence” and examining female subject-formation at the site of sexual violence, I am not positing that forced sex constitutes *the* meaning of gender but that the erasure or disavowal of sexual violence engendered black femaleness as a condition of unredressed injury, which only intensified the bonds of captivity and the deadening objectification of chattel status. (Hartman 101)

Hartman here illustrates the essence of sexual violence as different from normative gender construction, echoing Spiller’s flesh/body antithesis. To paraphrase Hartman, sexual violence against enslaved women was an action already done, thus being an undeniable reality. However, the construction of gender for enslaved women was the interpretation of these realities, or more precisely, the justification of sexual violence that hid the harms done to the enslaved flesh, rendering the white as moral and guiltless dominators who could arbitrarily treat their human property. The boundaries of their arbitrariness, as Hartman argues, were “determined by base conditions necessary for functioning of an effective laborer” (Hartman 95). Namely, the limited protection that the law could provide for enslaved people was only to maintain their contribution to capital

creation. Therefore, recognizing sexual violence done to enslaved women as a crime contradicted the capitalistic logic in slavery. Because such violence did not jeopardize their capitalistic function but, on the contrary, helped increase the capital. To categorize forced reproduction as sexualization rather than gender construction highlights the existence of trauma and hurt that remained unshaken by ideological encoding.

To synthesize Spillers and Hartman: captivity and forced labor was non-sexual violence that encroached on the enslaved flesh, and forced sex was sexual violence on the flesh; the gendered depiction of enslaved women was the justification of sexual violence, and the construction of race was the systematic justification of both sexualizing and non-sexualizing violence. Enslavement was an ongoing circle of violation, interpretation of violation, and more violation encouraged, approved and justified by the interpretation. Spillers clarifies how the captors ungendered captive Africans in the “Middle Passage” by uprooting them from their indigenous confine of domesticity, which first meant family ties and further metaphorically referred to “a common origin of cultural fictions” (Spillers 72). In other words, gender construction was a social and cultural construction, and gender disappears with the loss of the social and cultural identity, which in Spillers’ theory indicates the loss of the “body,” or the status of suspension. Hartman specified how the suspended female flesh was reembodyed, or *re-gendered*, in the racial society of antebellum America, especially by law which defined the subjectivity of enslaved women as unrapable due to their assumed lasciviousness.

It is important to distinguish sexual exploitation from gender construction because

it helps clarify what un-gendering, a concept at the core of the intersection of Black feminist thinking, means, especially the difference between intended un-gendering of resistant enslaved women and the forced re-gendering of white enslavers. Forced un-gendering in the “Middle Passage” was the result of captors displacing captive Africans, which exposed them to bare exploitation of their flesh. Being re-gendered by enslavers after the “Middle Passage” did not stop the exploitation but by hiding the essence of exploitation exacerbated it. Therefore, forced un-gendering and racializing re-gendering both functioned as the mechanism to aggravate the sexual violation of the enslaved female flesh. On the contrary, intended un-gendering of resistant enslaved women aimed at canceling the racialized gender forced on them. However, they could not retrieve their indigenous gender because they cannot return to their African families and domesticity, nor could they avoid stepping into a status similar to the un-gendered suspension in the “Middle Passage” because their captive status did not alter.

What then did resistant enslaved women achieve by intended un-gendering? They restrained the exacerbation of sexual violence defended by racializing re-gendering to some degree. In both *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, there were moments when accusations and justification of sexual violence became invisible. In both autobiographical narratives, the jealousy that the white wives of male owners had for the raped enslaved women replaced the role of law in domestic life and enabled them to accuse enslaved women of immorality when they were sexually offended. The Justification of sexual violence thus became more of a debate

within the white enslaving husband and wife, which raised the potential of exposing enslaved women to violence because the violation of their flesh was not only driven by rational capitalistic calculation but also emotional contentions.

The exhaustion of the flesh was the symptom of non-sexualized violence such as captivity and forced labor, and the protagonists of the two narratives ungendered themselves by the intended exhaustion of their flesh, such as Linda/Harriet Jacob's hiding and Sojourner Truth's excessive work, which not only metaphorically but physically refers back to the supine position in the "Middle Passage." Spillers refers to Valerie Smith's argument that the narrative of Linda Brent was "a tale of 'garretting,'" and by using the noun garret as a verb, she argues that the gender of enslaved women was caught in embarrassing spaces of American domesticity (Spillers 77). Sojourner Truth's similar experience made her narrative a valuable text to compare with Harriet Jacobs's, to discuss the meaning of the intended exhaustion of their flesh for their resistance to enslaving sexual violence.

Sexual Violence, Jealousy, and Racial Gender Construction

Strictly speaking, neither of these two autobiographers (I will use *Narrative* and *Incidents* as shorthanded titles in this essay for *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave*, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*) were able to protect themselves from sexual exploitation in slavery, which exceeded forced sex with the male enslavers, such as the assigned marriage between enslaved people and the threat from the jealous wives of male

enslavers. Both figures had an unfruitful love experience. Sojourner Truth accepted the husband that her enslaver chose for her after witnessing her lover Robert, an enslaved man belonging to another enslaver, be beaten almost to death. Their separation was the result of bare capitalistic consideration. Since the children of an enslaved woman were the properties of her enslaver, Robert's enslaver wanted Robert to "take a wife among his fellow-servants" (Truth 34). In *Incidents*, Linda Brent could not be together with her lover, a free man of color, because Linda's enslaver threatened to send her to his plantation in Louisiana if she did so. Linda's later liaison with another white gentleman was primarily a strategy for some limited protection. However, as long as she remained enslaved, according to the slave code, her children were born into slavery. As to the threat of forced sex with the enslaver, both texts were implicit when addressing this question, even for *Incidents*, which aimed to reveal the sexual exploitation in slavery. Last but not least, the violence, such as being sold or punished, induced by the jealousy of white wives was one of the major threats in both *Narrative* and *Incidents*, even though neither of the protagonists belonged to the wives of their enslavers. I consider jealousy-driven violence sexualization-related because of its inseparability from treating enslaved women as reproductive tools. Hartman's argument that the racialized definition of enslaved women clarifies that the gender of enslaved African American women primarily emerged in the accusations of interracial sex. Jealousy replaced law in quotidian domestic life as the accusation of lasciviousness made against enslaved women.

Narrative is a third-person semi-autobiography of Sojourner Truth, narrated by

Olive Gilbert, Sojourner Truth's white abolitionist amanuensis; Sojourner Truth's voice is heard through quotations of her conversations with Gilbert (Painter 468-9). According to the autobiography, Sojourner Truth, first named Isabella, was born in a Dutch-speaking enslaving family in New York State in 1797, sometimes referred to in the text as Isabel by Gilbert. She had worked as an enslaved laborer for thirty-two years and then as a wage worker for fourteen years since she escaped from slavery. She renamed herself Sojourner Truth when she set out on a pilgrimage in 1843 as a self-claimed itinerant preacher (Truth 100).⁴

Isabella describes how she was quickly caught in the middle of the contentious relationship with her male enslaver Mr. Dumont and his wife when she was sold to Mr. Dumont at the age of thirteen. The situation was complicated further by the involvement of the Irish free laborers in the household. Mrs. Dumont, born in a wealthy non-slaveholding family, preferred to hire white domestic workers, while the wealthy Mr. Dumont, who had been "nursed in the very lap of slavery" was more used to life with enslaved people (Truth 30). The household was thus divided into two parties, with Mrs. Dumont and her white helpers on the one side, on the other, Isabella, the domestic enslaved girl, and Mr. Dumont. Gilbert, the amanuensis, explains in *Narrative* that Mrs. Dumont could not tolerate "the listless manners and careless, slovenly habits" of enslaved

⁴ In the following discussion, the author will be referred to as Sojourner Truth. However, for narrative continuity, her old name Isabella will be used in the analysis of the text when referring to her experience before 1843.

people, especially Isabella, in contrast to the efficiency of hired workers motivated by salary (Truth 30). On the contrary, Mr. Dumont always defended Isabella by “praising her readiness and ability to work” (Truth 31).

Narrative includes a dramatic scene in which Isabella and Mrs. Dumont’s Irish servant, Kate, confronted each other as the power agents of their respective dominators. Isabel was working on multiple tasks, leaving the potato kettle to boil. At Mrs. Dumont’s command, Kate secretly dashed ashes into the kettle to ruin the potato. She did it for a few days to make sure that the blame fell on Isabella until the eldest daughter of Mr. Dumont offered to watch over the kettle in a corner for Isabella and discovered the plot (32). With the plot revealed, Isabella’s “mistress looked blank, and remained dumb—her enslaver muttered something which sounded very like an oath—and poor Kate was so chopfallen [...] to conceal her mortified pride and deep chagrin” (Truth 32-3). The revealed plot proved that Isabella was a qualified domestic worker. Meanwhile, it also proved that Mrs. Dumont knew about her working capability; otherwise, she would only need to point out her mistakes in working rather than secretly ruin her work.

This dramatic scene highlights Isabella’s racialized gender as the cause of the domestic and gender dynamics between Mr. and Mrs. Dumont. Mrs. Dumont was unsatisfied with Mr. Dumont’s preference for Isabella as an enslaved woman, but not an enslaved laborer. If Mrs. Dumont’s genuine concerns were how good the domestic work was done, it would be unreasonable for her to hold animosity toward Isabella. The latter could do multiple domestic tasks efficiently at the same time. Mrs. Dumont must have

been angry with Isabella for another reason, and more importantly, she could not point out this reason in her husband's face. Moreover, she wanted her husband to keep a distance from Isabella. To fulfill all the three premises, the only possible explanation for Mrs. Dumont's animosity was her belief that Isabella had a sexual relationship with Mr. Dumont or that there was such potentiality. Gilbert, the narrator of the autobiography, said that for "a long series of trials in the life of our heroine" happening in Mr. Dumont's household, she "must pass over in silence...from motives of delicacy" because they were "not all for the public ear, for their very nature" (Truth 30, 81-2). Nell Irvin Painter describes these events as sexual abuses by Mr. Dumont in a footnote of his article on *Narrative* without further clarification (Painter 463). Painter's assumption makes sense, otherwise this dramatic scene would be incomprehensible.⁵ It does not matter whether Mrs. Dumont believed Mr. Dumont forced Isabella or Isabella seduced Mr. Dumont.

What matters is that no matter whose fault she believed it was, she blamed Isabella for it.

⁵ There are more reasons for approving this assumption. First of all, these repressed memories are less likely to be about non-sexualizing violent punishment since the text already gives depictions such as "[h]e whipped her till the *flesh* was deeply lacerated" (Truth 27). Moreover, Mr. Dumont was the most possible person that Gilbert was afraid to harm, which she claims was for the sake of Sojourner Truth's affection, and meanwhile the person who would have been defamed if there was revealed sexual relationship. *Sojourner Truth* ends with Sojourner Truth forgiving Mr. Dumont after he confessed to her that slavery was "the wickedest thing in the world" when they met, both old, in 1849, one year before *Sojourner Truth* was published (Truth 124). Gilbert closes the narrative with a glad comment, "A slaveholding master turned to a brother! Poor old man, may the Lord bless him, and all slaveholders partake of his spirit!" (Truth 125). As a white abolitionist, Gilbert was hesitant to criticizing a white enslaver who had converted to be abolitionist, indicating her worries for losing the audience of enslavers who had loosely changed their opinion of slavery. Therefore, there are great chances that Isabella had suffered sexual abuse from Mr. Dumont, which was the reason for Mrs. Dumont's jealousy of her, though remaining untold due to Gilbert's intervention.

Isabella was simultaneously the victim of forced sex and the bearer of culpability. Both Mr. Dumont and Mrs. Dumont treated her “black femaleness as a condition of unredressed injury,” as Hartman argues what racial gendering was (Hartman 101).

Based on her previous experience, Isabella anticipated more “unredressed injury” in addition to forced sex, significantly when the tension exacerbated between Mr. and Mrs. Dumont, the former muttering “an oath” and the latter turning “blank...and...dumb” (Truth 32-3) when the dramatic scene closed. Isabella had a traumatizing experience due to the husband-and-wife tension between her earlier enslavers, the Nealy couple, who later sold her to Mr. Dumont. Because Mrs. Nealy was always dissatisfied with Isabella, Mr. Nealy frequently whipped Isabella to appease his wife’s jealousy, sometimes very harshly. “He whipped her till the *flesh* was deeply lacerated, and the blood streamed from her wounds—and the sears remain to the present day, to testify to the fact” (Truth 27). Sojourner Truth must have shown Gilbert the scars which remained after about four decades. “‘And now,’ she said, ‘when I hear ‘em tell of whipping women on the bare *flesh*, it makes my *flesh* crawl, and my very hair rise on my head!’” (27; emphasis added). When telling this story to Gilbert, Sojourner Truth’s word choice of “flesh,” instead of “body” here evokes the experience of nakedness and the corresponding vulnerability of the young girl, which literally illustrates Spillers’ argument that flesh was the real site of violence.

Beating and whipping were not the major forms of punishment in *Incidents* but it did not mean the potential was lower. Unlike *Narrative* which mainly narrates sporadic

events happening in sixty years, *Incidents* focuses on Linda's decades-long resistance to the sexual persecution, covering Linda Brent's story from her birth in 1813 to 1859, approximately before Jacobs published the book.⁶ Dr. Flint was a medical doctor who nevertheless was not her legitimate owner because Linda's old mistress in her will gave Linda to Mr. Flint's five-year-old daughter when Linda was about twelve.⁷ However, as the head of the family, Dr. Flint dominated his daughter's property and thus became a threat to Linda. Scholars addressing issues of black womanhood in slavery, such as Carby, Hartman, and Spillers, often cite and discuss *Incidents* because it depicts the sexual violence that an enslaved woman faced in slavery with a depth and abundance of details that no other slavery narratives, such as *Narrative* and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* can have, let alone fictions by white authors, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in which there are few plots about the jealousy of a white female enslaver.

Situations of racial gender construction, especially the jealousy of female enslavers, about which *Incidents* only allows for assumptive interpretations, were expressed with clearer but still quite suggestive terms in *Incidents*. Linda, the narrator of *Incidents*, comments, “[e]ven the little child, who is accustomed to wait on her mistress and her children, will learn, before she is twelve years old, why it is that her mistress

⁶ In the following discussion, the author will be referred to as Harriet Jacobs, but again, for the sake of clarity, the pseudonym Linda will be used in the analysis of the text and protagonist.

⁷ According to Hazel V. Carby's studies, even though white female heirs were usually inaccessible to the heritage of the land property, they could inherit human chattel (Carby 24).

hates such and such a one among the slaves. Perhaps the child's own mother is among those hated ones'" (Jacobs 26). As Linda points out, the jealousy and hatred were not universal to all the enslaved women, but only to a certain one among them who was suspectable for interracial sex with her male owner. However, the sexual relationship was tacit knowledge. Linda further explains how the knowledge became comprehensible to the enslaved women and white wives. The little enslaved girl, whom her mistress believed would become a persecuted object of her husband, "listens to violence outbreaks of jealous passion, and cannot help understanding what is the cause" (Jacobs 26). The term "cannot help" implies that the knowledge of the cause of jealousy was learned by deduction. It is reasonable to assume that the content for deduction was false accusations and criticism about a mistake that did not exist, such as in *Narrative's* dramatic scene of the potato soup.

As to white female enslavers, Linda says, "the young wife soon learns that the husband in whose hands she has placed her happiness pays no regard to his marriage vows. Children of every shade of complexion play with her own fair babies, and too well she knows that they are born unto him of his own household" (Jacobs 32). In the case of Mrs. Flint, she was a second wife to Dr. Flint, who was older than fifty when they married. Linda mentions, "My master was, to my knowledge, the father of eleven children," and even though the mothers dared not tell others who the father of their children was, everyone, including Mrs. Flint, knew it (Jacobs 31). Though silence was the code for discussion of such things in slavery, *Incidents* gave many examples of how Mrs.

Flint tried to interrogate Linda and even Dr. Flint yet without directly asking whether there was a sexual relationship between them, when she noticed that Linda was the object of Mr. Flint's persecution. Mrs. Flint's reaction to this potential insult to her marriage was hysterical weeping and groanings, and "she pitied herself as a martyr; but she was incapable of feeling for the condition of shame and misery in which her unfortunate, helpless slave was placed" (Jacobs 30). Furthermore, her apathy for Linda transformed into intense hatred that lasted even after Linda escaped slavery.

As a result of the dynamics between the husband and the wife concerning the former's illicit sexual behavior in an enslaving family, the husband would try to balance the couple's relationship at the price of the offended enslaved women, which affirmed their forced racial gender image. Such is the case in both *Narrative* and *Incidents*. The traumatic physical punishment that *Narrative*'s Isabella received from Mr. Nealy due to Mrs. Nealy's dissatisfaction was one example. Besides, the protection that Isabella gained from Mr. Dumont by strategically passing over the dramatic tension between him and his jealous wife was to be whipped less by Mr. Dumont, who became Isabella's rapist, protector, and punisher at the same time. In *Incidents*, Linda tried to avoid such a dilemma. She knew that Dr. Flint protected her from physical punishment, which Mrs. Flint wanted to impinge on her, but only due to his sexual purposes. Linda knew that Dr. Flint "never allowed his offspring by slaves to remain long in sight of himself and his wife" and had witnessed his raped female enslaved be sold with their children "at the breast" (Jacobs 47), labelling them as the true and only criminals of interracial sex and

condemning them of more unpredictable danger and threats in strange hands.

Linda hardened her forced racial gender in her first resistance against Dr. Flint. Dr. Flint, as Linda narrated, believed that Mrs. Flint's jealousy was the biggest reason why Linda would not consent, so he began building a small cottage outside town as his secret place with Linda (Jacobs 45). Linda checked Dr. Flint by having an affair with an influential unmarried white gentleman Mr. Sands and getting pregnant before Dr. Flint carried out irreversible sexual offenses. Linda believed that if Dr. Flint was enraged and sold her and her child away, Mr. Sands would manage to buy them. However, after Dr. Flint interrogated Linda and knew that the father of her child was a white man, Dr. Flint said he was never to sell her so that the man would buy her (Jacobs 50). Dr. Flint continued to pursue his sexual purposes by making his old "kind offers," and threatened to sell Linda's child away when she refused. As Linda remembered, he "had sworn that he would make me suffer, to my last day, for this new crime against him, as he called it; and as long as he had me in his power he kept his word," after he learnt that Linda was pregnant again (Jacobs 64). Dr. Flint grasped the privilege of interpreting Linda's gender. He termed his persecutions as "kind offers" when he wanted to corrupt Linda. However, when Linda did the same thing with another white man, he accused her of committing a "crime against him" and claimed a right to punish her by threatening her more with asserted sexual intention. In different contexts, sexual violence Dr. Flint planned to encroach on Linda registered opposite values, sometimes generosity and kindness, and sometimes punishment and revenge. In Dr. Flint's interpretation, Linda was accused of

ingratitude to the kindness and of wickedness for deserving punishment. Mrs. Flint chimed in with her husband to define Linda's womanhood as unclean and immoral. Linda narrates, "I have not returned to my master's house since the birth of my child. The old man raved to have me thus removed from his immediate power; but his wife vowed, by all that was good and great, she would kill me if I came back; and he did not doubt her word" (Jacobs 63). Even though Linda was sexually associated with another white man, Mrs. Flint understood that Mr. Flint still maintained his old purposes. However, now she could accuse Linda outspokenly and even claimed the right to execute Linda in the name of defending the morality of her household without exposing herself to insult.

Suspended Gender in Intended Exhaustion

As described in the last section, racial gender construction complicated the situations of sexual exploitation for Isabella and Linda in slavery. Racial gender construction prolonged the effects of un-gendering the enslaved women in the "Middle Passage" in the way of making it easier to violate their flesh by giving them a racialized version of female gender. It also worsened the situations by putting enslaved women in a complicated relationship involving practical thinking of capitalistic calculations and the triangular emotional contention deriving from the former, which frequently led to more brutality. In such complex settings, it was nearly impossible for enslaved women to adopt a method of resistance that was neither reactionary nor internally racial, because forthright confrontations would incur severe consequences.

In *Narrative*, the dramatic scene with Mrs. Dumont triggered her traumatizing experience of physical punishment, to which Isabella reacted by intentionally exhausting her flesh in excessively labor. After the dramatic scene discussed above, Isabella

became more ambitious than ever to please her master. In turn, her master stimulated her ambition through his commendations, and by boasting of her to his friends, telling them that “that wench (pointing to Isabel) is better to me than a man—for she will do a good family’s washing in the night, and be ready in the morning to go into the field, where she will do as much at raking and binding as my best hands.” Her ambition and desire to please were so great, that she often worked several nights in succession, sleeping only short snatches, as she sat in her chair; and some nights she would not allow herself to take any sleep, save what could get resting herself against the wall, fearing that if she sat down, she would sleep too long. (Truth 32-33)

Isabella learned her lesson. In order to avoid more false accusations by Mrs. Dumont on her working capability, she made it an admitted fact that she was the best laborer.

In this quotation, Isabella’s racial gender became less tangible, which did not mean that her flesh was un-sexualized. When Mr. Dumont commented that Isabella “is better to [him] than a man,” he did not regard her as a man nor redefine the meaning of enslaved women. He treated her as a non-sexualized laborer more profitable than his other enslaved people, just as the slave trader who counted a woman on the slave ship in Middle Passage as a 4/5 man. The detail that Mr. Dumont boasted of Isabella’s capability

in front of his other enslaver friends was crucial. Because by doing so, he claimed in public that Isabella mattered to him only as a non-sexualized existence, implicitly defending himself against possible accusations of having a sexual relationship with Isabella. However, this did not change the realities—if the assumption about their sexual relationship is valid, that the sexual violence had happened and would continue happening to Isabella's violated flesh.

Isabella ungendered herself because she made it happen that in the context of Mr. and Mrs. Dumont's conflict, they no longer addressed her as a lascivious African American woman but as lacking of gender. In *Narrative*, the intended exhaustion of the excessively worked flesh posited Isabella as not accusable, thus, un-gendered. Sleeping perpendicularly against the wall, Isabella refashioned herself into a supine captive African woman on the slave ship in Middle Passage. The benefit Isabella gained by exhausting her flesh to such an extreme was Mr. Dumont's protection against Mrs. Dumont's jealousy and potential violence thus incurred. Because by claiming that Isabella was better to him than any man, he silenced Mrs. Dumont from making any more suggestive accusations concerning their interracial sexual relationship using the excuse of doubting Isabella's working capability.

In *Incidents*, hiding in the garret supinely as a captive African in Middle Passage slave ship meant to hide from visibility, and since to be seen only meant for Linda to be exposed to racialized gender construction, the act of hiding ungendered Linda to some degree. The garret was under the roof of a small shed attached to the home of Linda's

grandmother, who lived not far away from Dr. Flint's house. Linda describes, "[t]he garret was only nine feet long and seven wide. The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor. There was no admission for either light or air" (Jacobs 91-2). The size of nine feet high plus seven feet wide plus less than three feet high was the minimum space for secret invisibility allowed for an enslaved adult.⁸ A larger space would catch attention and cause suspicion.

Linda's situation was compatible with the capitalistic calculation in Middle Passage which allowed for a minimum space that restrained the existence of an enslaved individual not to exceeding the limit of their flesh. Dr. Flint continued to search for Linda, so she had to be secluded in the 9 feet x 7 feet x 3 feet of invisibility, which resembles being buried alive in a casket. Orlando Patterson in *Slavery and Social Death* defines the living status of enslaved people as "socially dead" because they were "[a]lienated from all 'rights or claims of birth'" and thus "ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order" (Patterson 5). Patterson's argument explains the underpinning connection between Linda's supine position in the garret and that of the captives on the slave ship. They were both socially dead individuals, deprived of access to their indigenous culture and family ties.

However, by intending to seclude in the minimum space allowed to an enslaved individual, Linda hide from both racializing and gendering visibility, unlike the captives

⁸ McKittrick in *Demonic Grounds* demonstrates the size of Linda's garret with a picture of reconstruction (McKittrick 38 see Appendix 2).

on the slave ship who were exposed to white surveillance. Linda protected herself from sexual harassment, rape, and possible murder by Mrs. Flint, which were the major threats that Linda had to face under gender construction in the institution of slavery.

Invisibility characterized the intended exhaustion of the flesh as Isabella's and Linda's method of resistance to the gaze of gender construction. *Narrative's* thirteen-year-old Isabella forced herself to work excessively to the degree of exhausting her flesh to stand out among all the enslaved people in terms of working capability. The marked visibility as a laborer allowed for a certain degree of invisibility of her gender. It would be impossible to gain invisibility if not for the white womanhood of Mrs. Flint. It retrained the latter from directly addressing the sexual relationship of Isabella and her husband but could only express her jealousy by criticizing Isabella for lacking value as a laborer instead of a reproductive tool. As to fifteen-year-old Linda in *Incidents*, her physical invisibility provided her with the alibi against Mrs. Flint's accusation of potential immoral sexual actions with her husband. However, Linda remained accused of her amoral relationship with Mr. Sands.

Even though they primarily *purchased* the un-gendering invisibility with their exhausted flesh, which was inevitable given they were dominated by capitalistic logic, they achieved a degree of transgression of the capitalistic principle. In *Narrative*, Isabella contributed labor and produced excessive value more than her owner expected, so that he praised her as better to him than any man. In *Incidents*, Linda was voided of forced labor by being physically absent from her worksite. Nevertheless, the inevitable exhaustion of

her flesh resulting from the abnormal life she led in the garret was the invisible labor she paid for her absence. Dr. Flint's incessant pursuit forced her to hide, and hiding was just another form of labor, not different from other ways of exploitation of her flesh. Either as present as Isabella or as absent as Linda, the existence of enslaved flesh could never avoid exhaustion as long as it remained in the capitalistic society, which was built on exploiting the captive flesh, beginning from Middle Passage slave ships. Isabella and Linda were able to avoid some, if not all, sexual or sexualization-related assault, preserving their flesh from arbitrary commodifying deposition. By avoiding being sold out at the slave auction, Isabella and Linda negated the exchangeability as human commodity. Moreover, even though Linda could not avoid the exhaustion of her flesh as a replacement for her absence from forced labor, this invisible labor was not profitable for her enslaver at all but, on the contrary, caused him a loss. Unprofitable labor for an enslaver signified the success of a certain degree of resistance from the side of the enslaved woman.

Unaccused and Redefined Flesh as Free Women

As discussed in the previous section, intended ungendering of Isabella and Linda differed from forced ungendering in the "Middle Passage" in the way that it resisted against racializing re-gendering, which the forced ungendering served as its preparation. Intended ungendering though in a way fell prey to capitalistic calculations, violated it in other ways such as avoiding being exchanged as commodities and from allowing the enslaver

profit from their labor. What succeeded intended ungendering was the redefinition of their gender which deviated from both the indigenous African female gender and the racialized gender in the white gaze, because they pursued freedom after experiencing enslavement.

Reinterpretation of their physical exhaustion/non-exhaustion played an essential role in the escape of both Isabella and Linda. In *Narrative*, when Isabella was thirty-two years old, Mr. Dumont promised that he would emancipate her one year before New York's abolition law enactment. However, he later found an excuse that Isabella did not fulfill her expected duty since one of her fingers was hurt and could not work as efficiently as before; thus, he broke the promise when the time came. Isabella was very indignant at his dishonesty and escaped from him by walking away at dawn one day (Truth 39-42). This act of escaping was primarily performative: "she resolved not to go too far from him, and not put him to as much trouble as looking her up—for the latter he was sure to do—as Tom and Jack had done when they ran away from him a short time before" (Truth 43). When Mr. Dumont found Isabella at the home of a white working-class couple, the Wageners, and said, "Well, Bell, so you've run away from me," she replied, "No, I did not run away; I walked away by day-light, and all because you promised me a year of my time" (Truth 43). Here, Isabella carefully handled every detail, from her actions to words. She was not afraid that she might enrage Mr. Dumont by escaping shortly after Tom and Jack. However, Isabella took advantage of his fresh memory to highlight the contrast between her considerateness by not running too far and

their arrogance by thinking they could go beyond his reach. She interpreted the difference between “run away” and “walked away” as the degree of tiredness. In this way, Isabella implied to have immediately exhausted her flesh when laboring for him. When leaving him, she saved her exhaustion. The meaning of exhaustion changed from loyalty into disloyalty in her rhetoric when the situation shifted. Moreover, in front of a white working-class audience, she hinted that she walked away only to politely remind Mr. Dumont to maintain his honor as a trustworthy gentleman, which she did out of her loyalty. Since in slavery, enslaving class not only exerted their superiority over the enslaved people but also over the white slaveless class, Mr. Dumont compromised. He accepted the offer that Isabella stay at the Wageners’ as a domestic laborer (though he only made this compromise with the condition that Mr. Wagener paid him for Isabella’s one-year labor).

Linda reinterpreted her hiding by pretending that she was in the north, which provided a good chance for her to escape. After almost seven years, when Linda realized that she had to escape, she wrote faked letters to Dr. Flint and had them sent from New York with the help of her relatives and friends, successfully convincing him that she lived in Boston. “The fact that Dr. Flint had written to the mayor of Boston convinced me that he believed my letter to be genuine, and of course that he had no suspicion of my being any where in the vicinity” (Jacobs 104). Linda had ensnared Dr. Flint by literally reinterpreting the exhaustion of her flesh in seven-year-long hiding as freedom in the north with a place of her own. Katherine McKittrick in *Demonic Ground* argues that by

doing so, “Brent is everywhere and nowhere, north and south, invisibly across the landscape” and the “garret can be conceptualized as usable paradoxical space, which opens up a different way to observe slavery” (McKittrick 42). As McKittrick argues, the garret was a paradoxical place because it accommodated Linda to achieve invisibility, which paved the way for Linda to depict her virtual visibility of living in the north. By presenting her future in advance to Dr. Flint, she protected both her presence and her future, because Dr. Flint failed to find her in the north when she was actually hiding in the south, and when she finally escaped in the north, Dr. Flint would be less confident to believe her being there due to his previous failure. Linda would be not only omnipresent spatially as McKittrick argues, but also temporally everywhere.

Since intended exhaustion of their flesh paved the way for their freedom from slavery, it further defined their self-reception as free women. Having worked fruitlessly for ten more years after getting freedom, Isabella realized that a lowly paid job was just another form of capitalistic exploitation “in a great drama, which was, in itself, but one great system of robbery and wrong” (Truth 98). In 1841 Isabella renamed herself Sojourner Truth, meaning a wanderer with/for truth, and left her job to begin a pilgrimage. During her pilgrimage, Sojourner attended church events and was surprised to hear that God works by day and needs to rest: ““why then it seems that God cannot do as much as I can; for I can bear the sun at noon, and work several days and nights in succession without being much tired”” (Truth 107). Then she sorted this out by reasoning, ““No, God does not stop to rest, for he is a spirit, and cannot tire; [...] And if “God is all

in all,” and “worketh all in all [...],” it is impossible that he should rest at all; for if he did, every other thing would stop and rest too” (Truth 107). She compared herself with God to see who was a better worker, and she comprehended omnipotence as being able to work incessantly without feeling tired. The phrase here, “work several days and nights in succession,” immediately echoes the description of her working experience in slavery. In this way, she reframed her memory of forced labor and intended exhaustion as the evidence of her potency, stripped of the context of sexual violence she faced back then.

As a free woman, Sojourner Truth did not consider her gender until she was involved in feminist and abolitionist movements. After the publication of *Sojourner Truth*, she gradually gained some popularity and often delivered speeches on abolition and feminist movements. In a speech in 1851, she articulated, “[a]nd ar’n’t I a woman? Look at me. Look at my arm,’ and she bared her right arm to the shoulder, showing its tremendous muscular power” (Gage 491). According to Frances Dana Gage’s record, Sojourner Truth roused passionate plaudits in the hall with her sweeping feministic argument.⁹ The intended exhaustion of her flesh had found new ways in reinterpreting her gender. She had established self-esteem in the retrospection of her memories of excessive work during her enslavement. Her intended ungendering, a retaliatory strategy to protect her from violence generated from racializing gender construction during

⁹ Gage’s rendering of Sojourner Truth’s speech is controversial. Due to the limit of essay length, it will not be discussed here. There is another version of this speech by Maurice Robinson, who published his record shortly after Sojourner Truth delivered it. Scholars regard Robinson’s version as more credible than Gage’s because she published her rendering twelve years after the speech.

slavery, had become the proof of her challenging and transcending the binary gender that assumed women as weak and fragile. And by asserting this argument of her gender in public as a free woman, she attempted to shaken the gender construction that repressed her.

Similar to Sojourner Truth, who first reconceptualized her gender through introverted reflection and then attempted to persuade her audience, Linda's gender reconstruction began from introversion to extraversion. In *Incidents*, when Linda defended her sexual association with Mrs. Sands, she appealed to her white audience that, "[s]till, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others" (Jacobs 48). About this reflection, Hartman argues, "the narrator's humble appeal to the reader covertly forwards her own desires and secures a recognition of those desires. The identification of the slave girl as 'victim' does not negate her role as agent" (Hartman 107). As Hartman suggests, Linda seemingly granting her reader the right to judge negated their capability for justness. Moreover, she implies that she should educate and impact the public opinion of her white audience held for the African American women. She garreted, to use the word as a verb like Spillers, her writing under a pseudonym, which protected her flesh, while by presenting her interpretation of the gender of enslaved women, she challenged the normative image of racial gender held by her white audience.

Gender construction and ungendering took place repetitively from the "Middle Passage" to antebellum American slavery, as revealed in the two autobiographies. The

indigenous notion of gender of captive Africans was erased during the social and cultural suspension on the slave ship. When the captive Africans were reembodyed in the enslaving society, racial ideology re-assigned a new version of gender to the enslaved women. By resisting this racializing gender construction, enslaved women such as Isabella and Linda intentionally ungendered themselves, which made it possible to reinterpret their gender. Every time when gendering happened, the meaning of gender varied based on its agency, context, location, and time. Gender construction and sexualization did not coincide because both ungendering and gendering could serve as mechanisms for aggravating sexual violence, as in the “Middle Passage” and the enslaving domesticity, which were imposed on enslaved women by capitalist calculations that maximized both sexual and non-sexual exploitation of their flesh. The supine position that Isabella and Linda adopted became a metaphor of their intended exhaustion, which mirrored the plight of captive Africans on the slave ship in terms of inescapable domination of capitalism that calculated the lowest cost to sustain human commodity. In contrast to forced ungendering, which exposed enslaved flesh under the white vigil, intended exhaustion allowed Isabella and Linda to retreat in invisibility from the white gaze, which took the form of gender construction that threatened the lives of the enslaved women with violence and death while accused them of being responsible for what they suffered. To retreat invisibly from white gender construction assisted Isabella and Linda in reducing violence such as being sold to strange hands at the slave auction, being killed by female enslavers, or being severely whipped by male enslavers, which also challenged

their forced status as commodities by negating the exchangeability and profitable labor required for human chattel, cutting short the effects of the “Middle Passage.”

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Appendix of Pictures

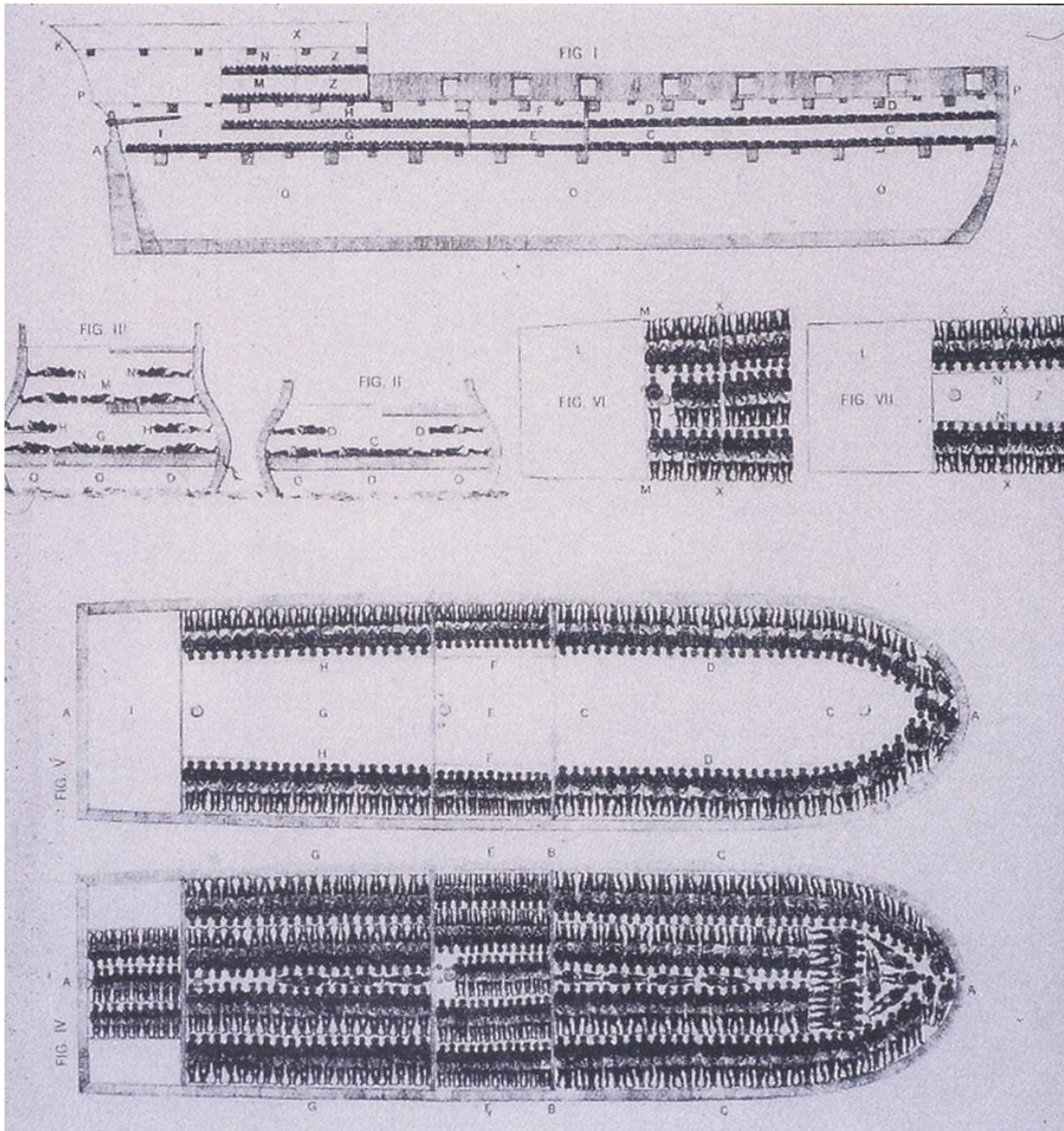


Figure 1. Plan of the Slave Ship Brookes

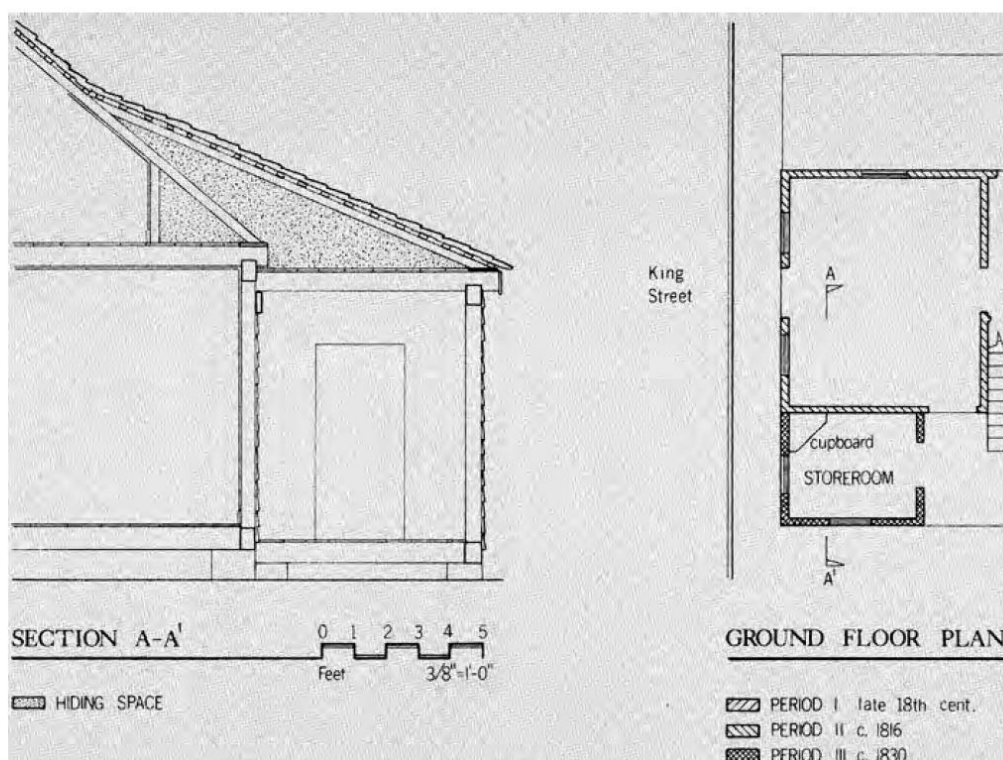


Figure 1. Reconstruction to scale of Harriet Jacobs's hiding place. Drawing by Carl R. Louns

Figure 2. Reconstruction to Scale of Harriet Jacobs's Hiding Place