

**REPRESENTING SLAVE AGENCY:
AGENCY AND ITS LIMITATIONS IN SLAVE NARRATIVES
AND CONTEMPORARY SLAVERY FICTION AND FILM**

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Introduction

Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013) was a great success: the film received a lot of attention in the media, stimulated public debate, and won several awards. In March 2014, the film won three of the nine Academy Awards it was nominated for at the Oscars, among which the awards for "Best Picture" and "Writing (Adapted Screenplay)." The narrative on which the film is based, Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), also received much attention as a result. Penguin published a "movie-tie-in" edition of the narrative before the film was released and people interested in the film started reading the narrative. Slave narratives were a popular read for white audiences until about sixty years after the American Civil War ended (Drake xxii). The narratives were rediscovered in the 1960s, and from the 1980s widely studied by literary scholars and taught in literature courses (Drake xxi). Before the release of the film adaptation of Northup's narrative, however, the reading audience of slave narratives consisted mostly of scholars or students in high school or college. Even the director of the film stated that he had never heard of Northup prior to making the film and that other people he spoke to about the narrative did not either (McQueen xiii).

The film brought the narrative to new, large audiences. The narrative even entered the *New York Times* Best Sellers List in mid-December 2013 and attained the first place on that list in March 2014, three weeks after the Academy Award ceremony took place. Although the narrative left the top 20 in May (*New York Times* Best Sellers), it is likely that the narrative will receive renewed scholarly attention. It will certainly receive more attention in American public high schools, as the makers of the film have joined forces with the National School Boards Association (NSBA), New Regency, Fox Searchlight and Penguin Books to make free "educator toolkits" available (which include the film, narrative and a study guide) for teachers who have been granted permission by the board of their public high school to teach the narrative ("NSBA").

It is striking that this particular slave narrative has received so much attention recently, since Solomon Northup's narrative differs significantly from widely read and taught slave narratives such as Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Telling the story of a free man captured into slavery, Northup's narrative offers a different perspective and agency than expressed in the narratives of Douglass and Jacobs, who escaped from the bondage they were born in. While the renewed interest in Douglass's and later in Jacobs's narratives in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement was sparked by the resistance

they showed, McQueen stated that he started his film project by looking for a narrative with a protagonist that “any viewer could identify with: a free man who is captured and held against his will” (McQueen viii). The limitation of agency by slavery drew McQueen to the narrative as it would help him emotionally affect audiences.

The underlying factor in this interest in slave narratives is the agency shown by the narrators. Agency is central in these narratives, as the narrators decide to escape the limited conditions of slavery in order to live a life in which they are free to make their own decisions. The restricted conditions slaves lived in can best be understood through Orlando Patterson’s concept of “social death.” According to Patterson, (the threat of) violence is used by slaveholders to dominate and control their slaves, and “the slave was usually powerless in relation to another individual” (Patterson 4). Patterson furthermore argues that a “slave’s powerlessness originated ... as a substitute for death, usually violent death” (5) and he defines slavery as “the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons” (13). However, the narrators of slave narratives act against this repression and attain freedom, and thus show agency. Slaves can only attain freedom through some form of rebellion against their masters, which could lead to severe punishment or death.

As so many aspects of slaves’ lives are affected by agency or the lack of it, the research of slave agency is of great importance in gaining an understanding of slave narratives. What has to be taken into account when researching these narratives is the mediated nature of slaves’ experiences and agency, and that agency may therefore be presented in an indirect manner. These representations are influenced by the socio-political environment at the time and place of writing and publication of the narrative. This environment includes editors, the intended audience and the dominant gender constructions and expectations in society at that time.

The genre of the autobiographical slave narrative has influenced the literature about slavery that has followed it, as can be seen in the autobiographies of former slaves published after the emancipation of all slaves in 1865 and in the genre of the neo-slave narrative that appeared in the 1970s. These later autobiographies and fictional narratives, as well as McQueen’s recent film adaptation of Northup’s narrative, present their view of agency and the road to freedom or improved circumstances for slaves. As is the case with autobiographical slave narratives, the socio-political environment at the time of writing and publication of the narratives influenced the representation of agency in these works. Since the autobiographies, fictional narratives and McQueen’s film are made in different times, their representations of agency differ from each other, as well as from the autobiographical slave

narratives that have influenced them. Whereas autobiographies of former slaves offer a softened version of slavery and an optimistic view of the future that can be achieved through hard work, neo-slave narratives emphasise the rebellious agency of slaves, and contemporary films dwell on the ways slavery limits slave agency and thus make every act of rebellion heroic. This thesis will argue that the forms of agency that are represented in contemporary novels and film dealing with slavery differ from those in the nineteenth-century autobiographical narratives that have influenced them, as all are influenced by the socio-political environment of the narrator and/or author. I focus on slave agency as I believe agency to be central in all these forms of literature and film.

In order to research the theme of agency, I will look at slave narratives and works written in different periods that show different forms of agency. The autobiographical slave narratives used are Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). My research will commence with an analysis of the representations of the experiences and agency of male and female slaves and the particular threats they encountered in Douglass's and Jacobs's narratives. This will be followed by an analysis of Northup's representation of the experience of slaves and their agency, which will be compared with Douglass's and Jacobs's narratives. Booker T. Washington's well-known autobiography *Up From Slavery* (1901) will be used to view the representation of agency of a slave freed by the emancipation of all slaves and how his environment influenced his presentation of his agency, a representation that received and continues to receive mixed reviews. After this post-Reconstruction autobiography, I will discuss the agency expressed in a neo-slave narrative. Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986) has been chosen as an example of a neo-slave novel that includes a protagonist with a different kind of agency than that of historical figures and will therefore be compared to the autobiographical slave narratives previously mentioned. Finally, Steve McQueen's film *12 Years a Slave* (2013) will be used to analyze the representation of slave agency in a twenty-first-century adaptation of a nineteenth-century slave narrative.

The *OED* defines agency as the "ability or capacity to act or exert power." This ability allows people to make their own decisions and set their own goals, react to what is happening around them and influence others. This ability is influenced by the environment of the agent.

Chapter 1: Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

At first glance, Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) may simply seem two historical narratives written by former slaves. Like other antebellum autobiographical slave narratives, Douglass's and Jacobs's narratives show their lives from birth to freedom and the experiences and agency of slaves. However, Douglass's and Jacobs's narratives are not at all ordinary; they are among the most well-known and widely read slave narratives, and they represent their agency in a certain manner. This chapter will argue that the representation of slavery and agency in Douglass's and Jacobs's narratives is influenced by the gender constructions and expectations in white society at the time. In order to analyze Douglass's and Jacobs's agency, I will place the narratives within the genre of autobiographical slave narratives, look at the dominant notions of gender in white society in the nineteenth century, and explore the agency expressed in the narratives. Jacobs's description of the experience of black females in slavery will be compared with descriptions of female slaves in Douglass's narrative and Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853).

Douglass's and Jacobs's narratives are two of the many narratives that describe the life of a slave in a slave state before the American Civil War (1861-1865). As William L. Andrews points out, most autobiographical slave narratives were written between 1760 and 1865. In 1760 *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, A Negro Man* was published, described by Andrews as "the first discrete narrative text in which an Afro-American recounts a significant portion of his life" (Andrews 18). The period ended with the abolition of slavery in 1865, which freed many slaves and caused significant changes in the African American autobiographical narratives that were published afterwards (Andrews 18).

Andrews argues that the aim of many narratives published until 1810 was to prove that a "slave" was "a man and brother" of the white readers of the narratives, and that the narrators told the truth and were representative of the slaves (Andrews 1). This changed after 1810 as authors began to put greater emphasis on their individual identity and the ways they differed from the white audience of their narrative (Andrews 1-2). The narratives of Douglass, Northup and Harriet Jacobs were published in this part of the period. However, according to Toni Morrison, the main aim of slave narratives in general was to convince the white middle-class audience of the narratives of the validity of the abolitionists' argument that slaves

deserved to be free (Morrison 86). Whereas white authors were considered equals and trustworthy by white readers, African American authors could not make the same assumptions (Andrews 2). Their narratives had to counter virulent racial prejudice and prove that black people were capable of learning and of writing their own narrative, and were not as incompetent and intellectually inferior as public opinion and racial science in the nineteenth century would have it (Morrison 89). In order to convince the audience, the narrative had to appear to be written from a neutral standpoint and to solely present facts (Andrews 6). As a result narratives left certain things unspoken; they did not dwell on cruelty and violence, and, according to Morrison, showed little of the “interior life” of the author (Morrison 91). There was the danger of “alienating white sponsors and readers” if authors “[spoke] too revealingly of the individual self, particularly if this did not correspond to white notions of the facts of black experience or the nature of the Negro” (Andrews 6).

James Olney describes slave narratives as generally being “cumulative,” “invariant,” “repetitive,” and “much alike” (46), arguing that this is caused by the shared purpose of the narratives: to “reveal the truth of slavery and so to bring about its abolition” (52). Moreover, the narratives were, as Olney puts it, “sponsored” by abolitionists (Olney 52). Abolitionists helped the former slaves to get their narratives published and asked them to speak at abolitionist meetings. The “content,” “theme” and “form” of the narrative therefore had to fit the abolitionists’ agenda (56). Besides, abolitionists edited the narratives, wrote introductions or prefaces for the narratives and provided authenticating documents. Since the authors of slave narratives had a common goal, knew who their audience was and had abolitionists as their sponsors, the slave narrative became “most often a non-memorial description fitted to a pre-formed mold” (Olney 49). The “mold” that Olney distinguishes consists of the incorporation of certain elements into the paratext and the form of the narratives that aimed to convince the readers of the narrative’s authenticity.

Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) was born a slave and escaped slavery when he was twenty years old and was living in Baltimore. He published his narrative with the help of Garrison’s abolitionist society and his narrative therefore contains many of the elements that Olney distinguishes. Among the elements included are Douglass’s portrait and autograph (Douglass [1847]), a title page that states that the narrative is “Written by Himself”, and the narrative starts with the phrase “I was born” (Douglass 17). Furthermore, white abolitionists provided “testimonials” in the form of a Preface by William Lloyd Garrison and a “Letter from Wendell Phillips, Esq.” to introduce the narrative, to claim that Douglass shows a true picture of slavery and to condemn slavery (Olney 50). In the narrative, Douglass wrote that he

could not publish all the details of his escape nor the names of those who had helped him, since that would endanger them and make that route of escape unavailable for other slaves. Until Douglass's freedom was bought in 1846, he himself was also in danger of being caught, since the Fugitive Slave Act legally allowed the recapture of fugitive slaves into slavery while they resided in the U.S. and punished those who helped the slaves escape to the free states in the North or to Canada ("Fugitive Slave Act 1850").

Douglass's uncertain state as a fugitive slave did not prevent him from presenting himself as a strong-willed individual determined to change his circumstances in his narrative. He shows his independence in slavery is shown by not dwelling on his relationships with other slaves and he mentions being separated from his mother early on. When he hears his mother has died he therefore experiences "the same emotions I should probably have felt at the death of a stranger" (Douglass 19). Douglass does have some attachment to other slaves, however, as parts of the narrative show. For example, in 1835, when he decides to try to escape from the plantation of Mr. Freeland in Maryland where he was secretly teaching a group of fellow slaves to read the Bible, he is "anxious to have them participate with me in this, my life-giving determination" since "my fellow-slaves were dear to me" (Douglass 86). This attempt also shows Douglass's agency, since he is the initiator of both the reading class and the escape plan and convinces others to join him. He tells of "[imbuing] their minds with thoughts of freedom" and "[bending] myself to devising ways and means for our escape, and ... to impress them with the gross fraud of slavery" (86).

Douglass's individuality and desire for freedom is closely connected to literacy. In the narrative, he often dwells on the great importance of being able to read and write. Slaves were generally given no education, as teaching them to read and write was illegal in many slave states. This made acquiring these abilities quite a struggle. Douglass is taught the principles of reading by Mrs. Auld, the wife of his second owner, until Mr. Auld forbids further education for Douglass, arguing that slaves should only learn to obey their owners and that education "spoils" them (Douglass 45). This convinces Douglass that education was "the pathway from slavery to freedom" (45). He is not allowed to read in the house, as "nothing seemed to make [Mrs. Auld] more angry than to see [him] with a newspaper" (49). Douglass is determined to continue his education, as he finds several ways to learn to read and write without his owners finding out. Although he is still quite young, he already has his own mind and resists his owner's wishes. After learning to read, Douglass thinks of the ability to write as aiding him in achieving freedom, since if he was able to write, "[he] might have occasion to write [his] own pass" to help him escape (53). This plan is carried out by Douglass in preparation for his first

attempt to escape slavery when he writes free passes for himself and others. Though this plan is betrayed and therefore fails, it would not have been possible without Douglass's determination to be free and his ability to write.

A life-changing moment lies between Douglass's efforts to educate himself and this attempt to escape. While sent to work for Mr. Covey, a slave breaker, Douglass falls ill and is mistreated by Covey. Douglass then leaves the plantation to complain about Covey to his owner, and is attacked by Covey when he returns. Whereas "[Douglass's] strength failed [him]" before (73), and he "made up [his] mind to let [Covey] do his worst" (74) as he "was wearied in body and broken in spirit" (75), Douglass now decides to fight back. He calls this fight with Covey "the turning point in [his] career as a slave," for "[his] long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact" (78). Douglass rebels against Covey and restores his agency in the process. The fight has a permanent effect, since Douglass says that "from this time I was never again what might be called fairly whipped, though I remained a slave four years afterwards" (78).

Besides energizing his spirit, the fight also "revived within [him] a sense of [his] own manhood" (78). This is not the only mention of manhood in the narrative. For example, Douglass introduces his description of the day on which he fights Covey with "You have seen how a man is made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (Douglass 73). Moreover, one of the ways Douglass tries to convince others to join him in an escape plan is by "[talking] to them of our want of manhood, if we submitted to our enslavement without at least one noble effort to be free" (Douglass 86). Douglass believed manhood to be subdued while a man remains in slavery. Douglass furthermore argues that "to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one" (98). Slaves will not think of freedom if they are kept in a situation that requires them to constantly think of survival, a situation in which Douglas could "think of nothing, scarcely, but my life" (98). Furthermore, a slave "must be able to detect no inconsistencies in slavery; he must be made to feel that slavery is right; and he can be brought to that only when he ceases to be a man" (98).

Manhood and individualism were closely intertwined in American culture before the Civil War. It was believed that a man should strive to rise in life by his own means and that American society, more than any other society, provided the opportunity to do so, since there was no historical system of social classes to which people had to abide. Every man therefore had the opportunity to rise in life if he worked hard enough (Leverenz 74-75). This idea is central in Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* and Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance"

(1841), which both influenced the way Douglass presents himself in his *Narrative* (NAAL 2061). Emerson's "Self-Reliance" promotes individualism, independence and manhood and connects them. He prefers "a sturdy lad from New Hampshire or Vermont," who is strong, independent and hardworking over "the young merchant" who dwells on what he has lost. The strong man will always "[fall] on his feet" and "with the exercise of self-trust, new powers shall appear" (1175). As a man born a slave, escaping his bondage and building a successful career, Douglass fits this ideal and is therefore introduced in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* as a man who "[presents] himself as a representative American whose rise in the culture attested to the possibilities inherent in the nation's egalitarian ideology" (2061).

Whereas Douglass's narrative and agency are presented in a way to strengthen the image of Douglass as an independent man, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* presents a female's experiences and agency in slavery. It is one of the few historical narratives by a female slave narrator and the most well-known female slave autobiography. Jacobs's narrative focuses on the specific threats females encountered in slavery. As Jacobs puts it, "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women" (Jacobs 218). For example, Jacobs relates the sexual advances of her master and she constantly fears for the safety and future of her slave-born children. Since Jacobs's master 'attacks' her in a way that differs from the violent attacks of Douglass's and Northup's master, her resistance and the way she represents her agency also differs.

Jacobs narrative was published in 1861, years after Jacobs's freedom was bought and while the U.S. was a year into the American Civil War. Like other slave narratives, Jacobs's narrative begins with the sentence "I was born a slave" and a description of Jacobs's family, and includes an "Introduction by the Editor," in which the latter, Lydia Maria Child, claims that she "[has] not added any thing to the incidents, or changed the import of [Jacobs's] very pertinent remarks" (Jacobs 127). However, until the 1980s, Child's claim that she had not substantially altered Jacobs's narrative was questioned, and the narrative was generally considered to be fiction, as it contains similarities with the popular sentimental novel of the period. However, in her introduction to Jacobs's narrative in 1987, Jean Fagan Yellis proved that Child was merely the editor of the narrative, and from that point onwards the narrative has been considered an autobiographical slave narrative (NAAAL 280).

In her narrative, Jacobs relates the ways slave owners take advantage of their female slaves, a subject that is briefly mentioned or hinted at in other slave narratives by male slaves. For example, Douglass's narrative includes the punishment of his aunt Hester, who was

whipped by her master after defying her master's order to stay at the plantation at night and refrain from meeting a certain male slave. Douglass leads his audience to wonder about the reason Hester is ordered to stay away from another slaves, as Douglass mentions, "Why master was so careful of her, may be safely left to conjecture," followed by a short description of Hester's beauty (Douglass 21). Seeing Aunt Hester get whipped had a great impact on Douglass as a child; he describes this event as introducing him to "the hell of slavery" (21). However, Douglass is a bystander in this scene and expresses regret that he cannot share all his emotions in his narrative as "[he wishes he] could commit to paper the feeling with which I beheld it" (21). Though Jacobs was rarely whipped as a girl, she experiences a similar scene as her master forbids her from marrying a free black man and he says, "if I ever know of you speaking to him, I will cowhide you both; and if I catch him lurking about my premises, I will shoot him as soon as I would a dog" (Jacobs 174). This instance is followed by a note from her master asking her to come to Louisiana with him, where Jacobs fears she would have little protection and would be forced to be his mistress.

Jacobs's narrative is filled with scenes that show this "sexual victimization" of female slaves (*NAAAL* 279). Compared to Douglass and other authors of slave narratives, Jacobs is much more explicit about sexual abuse as she gives detailed accounts of the sexual harassment she suffered from her master. These accounts are detailed, but presented in veiled terms. For example, after Jacobs turns fifteen years old, her master Dr. Flint starts trying to "corrupt the pure principles [Jacobs's] grandmother had instilled" in her and "[h]e peopled [Jacobs's] young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of" (Jacobs 158). Jacobs uncovers "secrets of slavery" in her narrative, as she reveals that her master had eleven slave-born children (167). The mothers of these children kept the identity of the father a secret as "[t]hey knew too well the terrible consequences" of the disclosure of this information (167). Jacobs further argues that "[n]o pen can give an adequate description of the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery" (187). Slave girls cannot resist the harassments of "her owner, or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them," as they will ultimately "[whip] and [starve]" her "into submission to their will" (187).

Jacobs expected these matters to be a sensitive subject. Firstly, sexual behaviour was not openly discussed in society and non-fictional literature in general at the time. According to Frances Smith Foster, this was a result of "the Victorian standards of the age" that required authors to be "less graphic" in their descriptions (Foster 109). Secondly, at the time of publication, it was not generally accepted for women to be speaking of such matters. White middle-class women at the time were expected to be chaste, and when married, selfless and

devoted to their children and husband. However, this is impossible to achieve for Jacobs while she is a slave (Epstein 81, 86). Thirdly, Jacobs's story would be especially sensitive for her intended audience, which consisted mostly of white Americans, as Jacobs had a relationship with an unmarried white man, whom she calls Mr. Sands in the narrative. Jacobs therefore still presents her narrative in veiled terms to make it more acceptable to white audiences. She also published her narrative under the pseudonym "Linda Brent" and changed the names of other people in her narrative. The reason she gives for changing the names in the "Preface by the Author" is that "[she] deemed it kind and considerate towards others" (Jacobs 125).

Besides fearing her master, Jacobs also feared her mistress, who suspects that Jacobs is her husband's slave concubine. This is similar to the situation of a female slave character, Patsey, in Solomon Northup's narrative, who is described as being "the enslaved victim of lust and hate" and "had no comfort in this life" because of the way she was treated by her master and jealous mistress (Northup 143). Like Jacobs who "was accustomed to share some indulgencies with the children of [her] mistress" when she was a child (Jacobs 158), Patsey used to be treated well by her master and mistress; she even was a "favorite" and "had been petted and admired for her uncommon sprightliness and pleasant disposition" (Northup 151). However, by the time Northup arrives at Epps's plantation, Patsey is a subject of "lust" of her master's and is therefore hated by the mistress (143). Jacobs's mistress is kind at first when she asks Jacobs about her husband's behaviour. However, she grows more and more suspicious and "spent many a sleepless night to watch over [Jacobs]," and Jacobs "began to be fearful for [her own] life" (166). When Jacobs's mistress starts accusing her husband in Jacobs's presence and tells him that Jacobs is her source, Dr. Flint believes Jacobs would only tell if "you tortured her into exposing me" (166). Jacobs realizes that Dr. Flint says this so that Jacobs knows "[she] gained nothing by seeking the protection of [her] mistress; that the power was still all in his own hands" (166). She therefore has to look for help to escape her master elsewhere, as her master will not sell her. Patsey is in a similar situation as Mr. Epps will not sell her because "Patsey was equal to any two of his slaves in the cotton field. He could not replace her with the same money she would bring" (152). However, whereas Jacobs manages to escape, Patsey is too afraid to run away and remains in slavery when Northup leaves.

Northup's narrative contains a short description of a similar scene in which the mistress confronts the master about his behaviour towards a female slave. According to Northup, when Mrs. Epps quarreled with her husband about his behaviour, "Patsey trembled

with fear, and cried as if her heart would break, for she knew from painful experience, that if mistress should work herself to the red-hot pit of rage, Epps would quiet her at last with a promise that Patsey should be flogged – a promise he was sure to keep” (152). Jacobs does not have to fear the same treatment, as she mentions that “the doctor never allowed any one to whip me” as “the application of the lash might have led to remarks that would have exposed him in the eyes of his children and grandchildren” (166-167). She is happy that “[she lives] in a town where all the inhabitants knew each other” and not “on a remote plantation, or lost among the multitude of a crowded city,” because in that situation “[she] should not be a living woman in this day” (167). Patsey, however, lives in an isolated place in the bayou and can therefore be treated violently without outsiders noticing it. Northup focuses on the violence inflicted on Patsey as a result of Mr. Epps’s “lustful eye” that continuously falls on Patsey, instead of sharing the extent of Mr. Epps’s relation with Patsey (Northup 143). However, Mr. and Mrs. Epps fought “for days together” over Patsey’s presence on the plantation, which suggests that Mr. Epps’s attachment to Patsey may have gone further than watching her with a “lustful eye” (143).

Jacobs’s narrative also shows her agency, though Jacobs’s agency differs from that of Northup and Douglass. Whereas Northup and Douglass engage in a physical fight with their masters when they are attacked, Jacobs resists the advances of her white master who wants to make her his mistress by speaking with him and hiding from him. As she spends most of her time in slavery working in the house of her master, it is even more difficult to rebel against this man, whom she calls Dr. Flint in her narrative. One of the most life-changing decisions Jacobs makes and a clear act of resistance, after Dr. Flint refuses to let her marry a free black man, is to take an unmarried white man as her lover. At the time Jacobs’s narrative was published, it was deemed extremely imprudent to speak of these matters, and Jacobs introduces this “period in [her] unhappy life” with many expressions of “sorrow and shame” and a possible explanation for her behaviour. Nevertheless, Jacobs acknowledges that she “knew what [she] did” and that she “did it with deliberate calculation” (191) as “[she] knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favored another; and it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way” (192).

According to Deborah McDowell, Jacobs’s narrative is the opposite of Douglass’s very individualistic narrative. Douglass does not dwell on his relationships with others and strives for a better future for himself, whereas Jacobs focuses on her children, her grandmother and other family. Though Jacobs is relieved to flee slavery after hiding in an attic for seven years, she can only be happy when her children’s freedom is bought and they

are reunited in the North (McDowell 153-54). Douglass, on the other hand, did not have children of his own when he was in slavery and Northup had the reassurance that his children were born free and were safe in the North.

Obviously, Jacobs's gender heavily influenced her experience in slavery. Jacobs acts of resistance are not as physical or violent as those of Douglass or Northup, but these acts would be unimaginable for a slave woman who tries to protect and free her children and perform her gender in a way that is accepted by society. Jacobs rebels by refusing her master's indecent offers and choosing the father of her children herself. Relating and publishing her story is in itself an act of resistance, as it was not generally accepted for women to speak about sexual behaviour. Jacobs's gender and dominant white culture thus affects the representation of her agency, but her narrative nonetheless demonstrates that she had some agency over her life, both before and after her escape.

Modern readers may be puzzled by the indirect way Douglass and Jacobs narrate some events and present their agency, as they omit or vaguely describe events that modern readers can now openly discuss without severe consequences. However, as much as modern literature is a product of our time, Douglass's and Jacobs's narratives are a product of theirs and their representation of agency is influenced by the dominant notion of gender in white society at the time.

Chapter 2: Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*

Solomon Northup's narrative is one of the few slave narratives about free blacks who were kidnapped and sold into slavery. Northup was born a free man of slave descent who was tricked into travelling to a slave state and robbed of his free papers, and subsequently had to spend the next twelve years in slavery trying to regain his freedom. For this reason, Northup's agency is limited by slavery and differs from that of slave-born narrators, who do not experience life as a free person until they escape slavery. Northup enters slavery as a mature, independent and educated man, which would seem to be to his advantage compared to others who are slave-born, but it still takes him twelve years to return to the North. This chapter will explore the agency presented in Northup's narrative and argue that Northup's agency is limited, but since these limitations are explained in great detail in the narrative, they do not affect the positive image audiences have of Northup as an active agent. Northup's agency will be analyzed by placing his narrative within the genre of the autobiographical slave narrative and analyzing the circumstances around the writing and printing of the text, and analyzing the events in Northup's life. These events will be compared with the most well-known slave narrative, Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*.

2.1 Writing and publishing the narrative and its paratext

Northup's narrative includes most of the elements listed by Olney as characteristic for slave narratives, but it also makes some changes. The narrative does start at the moment and place of birth, but instead of beginning with the sentence "I was born," the narrative starts with "Having been born a freeman ..." (Northup [1968] 3; Olney 69). The narrative's paratext also includes features typical of the genre, such as Northup's portrait and autograph, a poetic epigraph, and testimonials. However, the paratext does not incorporate all of the characteristics of slave narratives Olney mentions. The title page, for example, does not make a claim about who has written the narrative, indicating only the dates and places of Northup's captivity and rescue from slavery. Northup's portrait is captioned "Solomon in his plantation suit" and resembles the pictures of characters found in novels. Other illustrations are found in the narrative, which are also captioned and listed in the table of contents of the book.

In interviews about the film adaptation of *Twelve Years*, scriptwriter John Ridley refers to Northup's narrative as a memoir, as does literary critic Ginger Jones. Jones defines a memoir as "a work that transforms memory into a universal experience instead of simply reciting the facts about a particular time and place" (Jones 31). Jones views Northup's

narrative as a memoir because it includes much more of his interior life and detailed descriptions of the life on plantations in the South than autobiographical slave narratives do (32, 34). Jones's other arguments are that Northup is not as focused on abolishing slavery as other narratives are and is able to reflect on the situation that he is in. According to Jones, "Northup, not the abolition of slavery, becomes the hero of the story; he is transformed from free man to slave and back to free man" (37).

Jones's observations are not incorrect; Northup's narrative differs from Olney's description of the slave narrative as a "non-memorial description fitted to a pre-formed mold" (49). As a free-born man, Northup perceives his circumstances as a slave differently and can compare them to those of a free man. His skin is coloured, but he is educated and therefore has less to prove to his audience than slave-born narrators. His narrative is focused on receiving justice for free men wrongly kidnapped into slavery, rather than the abolition of slavery. The narrative therefore not only ends with Northup coming home to his family, but also with the attempt to convict Burch and his men for kidnapping a free man. However, the question remains whether Jones's arguments to consider Northup's narrative as a memoir are convincing. There is a fine line between autobiography and memoir and the definitions of memoir differ. Also, though Northup's narrative deals with memory and feeling, the text is presented as an autobiographical slave narrative and includes elements that are typically used in slave narratives. References to the genre of autobiographical slave narratives could have been included in the hope that the narrative would gain from the popularity of the genre at the time. However, as Northup's story was published in period in which slave narratives were showing more individuality, and the core of Northup's story is that of a man sharing the details of his life until his freedom from slavery, I consider Northup's story a slave narrative.

The most important difference between the paratext of the autobiographical slave narratives of Douglass and Jacobs and that of Northup is that Northup did not write his narrative himself. The title page of the narrative does not state who wrote the narrative, but the "Editor's Preface" implies that the narrative was not simply edited, but actually written by the editor of Northup's narrative, David Wilson. Wilson was a "local lawyer," "member of the state legislature," and member of the Whig party who had written prior to Northup's narrative (Eakin and Logsdon xiii). According to Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon, the books that Wilson had previously written are, "like Northup's narrative, ... obvious attempts to capitalize on rather sensational stories of local interest" that "demonstrate Wilson's interest in quick profits" but "they do not show any abiding concern in antislavery propaganda" (xiv). Although most white editors and amanuenses of slave narratives were abolitionists, Wilson was not involved

in that cause (xiii). Eakin and Logsdon note that, although the narrative is written in the writing style Wilson used for his earlier work, there is no reason to believe Wilson made great changes to the story that Northup told him. They do not call Wilson's statement in the "Editor's Preface" into question, that "unbiased, as he conceives, by any prepossessions or prejudices, the only object of the editor has been to give a faithful history of Solomon Northup's life, as he received it from his lips" (Northup xxxvii; Eakin and Logsdon xiv).

The Editor's Preface states that "It is believed that the following account of his experience on Bayou Boeuf presents a correct picture of Slavery, in all its lights and shadows, as it not exists in that locality" (xxxvii). Wilson further claims that Northup "has adhered strictly to the truth He has invariably repeated the same story without deviating in the slightest particular." Moreover, Northup "has also carefully perused the manuscript, dictating an alteration wherever the most trivial inaccuracy has appeared" (xxxvii). Almost all former slaves were dependent on white abolitionists or editors to publish their narratives and these men helped make the narrative successful, but they also had a great deal of control over the narrative. The reception of the narrative depended on the "editorial prefaces, footnotes, and appended commentary" and "institutional contexts (aesthetic, philosophical, or moral, for instance)" provided by the editor (Andrews 20). Although Eakin and Logsdon do not distrust Wilson's statements in the Editor's Preface, Wilson had, as Northup's editor and amanuensis, great power over Northup's narrative and future (Andrews 21).

It is striking that Northup chose to dictate his narrative, as most narratives written by amanuenses were dictated by illiterate former slaves and the narrative suggests that Northup *was* literate and capable of writing himself, as will be shown later in this chapter. Eakin and Logsdon show that Northup and Wilson began writing Northup's narrative very shortly after his return from slavery. Unlike fugitive slaves, Northup regained his status as a free man after returning to his family and therefore did not need to wait to publish his narrative or leave facts and names out of his narrative in order to protect himself or others. Eakin and Logsdon also suggest that there was a lot of profit to be made from a slave narrative as slave narratives were extremely popular after Harriet Beecher Stowe's bestselling novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) was published (Eakin and Logsdon xii). Northup's decision to dictate the narrative could therefore have been influenced by his desire or need to earn money. The quick and wide spread of the narrative had further benefits, as it led to the trial against Northup's kidnappers (xvii-xix).

Northup did not write his narrative himself nor did he escape by his own means, but this did not affect its popularity after it was published. By the 1850s, slave narratives had

already become quite popular and after the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and “over thirty thousand copies were sold” of Northup’s narrative in three years’ time (Eakin and Logsdon xiv). Northup’s narrative received a great deal of attention in the press (xiv). Newspapers from 1853 onwards published advertisements and reviews of the narrative. *The Ohio Star* of 31 August 1853 published excerpts from reviews of the narrative in the *New York Tribune* and the *New York Independent* in its advertisement “Fourteen thousand now ready.” Frederick Douglass had described Northup’s narrative as “a strange history, [whose] truth is stranger than fiction” (Eakin and Logsdon ix), and the article therefore has the subtitle “Truth Stranger than Fiction” (“Fourteen Thousand now ready”). The review given in the *Buffalo Courier* predicted that “The narrative will be read with interest by any one who can sympathise with a human being struggling for freedom,” and other reviewers praised the narrative for presenting facts in a sober manner and revealing the true nature of slavery (“Fourteen Thousand now ready”). The review of the *Cincinnati Journal* stated that “Such a tale is more powerful than any fiction which can be conceived and elaborated. There are no depicted scenes in ‘Uncle Tom’ more tragic, horrible, and pathetic than the incidents compassed in the twelve years of this man’s life in slavery” (“Fourteen thousand now ready”).

The *Cincinnati Journal* was one of the many newspapers that made references to Stowe’s *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in their reviews of Northup’s narrative. There are several reasons for this. Published a year before Northup’s narrative, Stowe’s novel was an enormous international bestseller and caused a lot of discussion, and, as I will show, there are similarities between Stowe’s novel and Northup’s narrative. The narrative is also dedicated to Harriet Beecher Stowe, “whose name, throughout the world is identified with the great reform” and situates the narrative as “another Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin” (Northup, Eighth thousand ed; xxvii). Whereas the “eighth thousand” printed version of the narrative in 1853 presents only this dedication, the “thirteenth thousand” print in the same year by the same publisher also presents a quote on the dedication page, which reads:

It is a singular coincidence, that Solomon Northup was carried to a plantation in the Red River Country – that same region where the scene of Uncle Tom’s captivity was laid – and his account of this plantation, and the mode of life there, and some incidents which he describes, form a striking parallel to that history.

Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, p. 174

(Northup, Thirteenth thousand ed; i)

The quote was added after Stowe's *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853) appeared.

Eakin and Logsdon point out that a comparison with Stowe's novel was already made in the first article that appeared on Northup's story on 20 January 1853 in *The New York Times* and which was based on an interview with Northup which was held as he was travelling home after his liberation (xii). In the article, details are given of Northup's capture, release and the recent arrest and trial of James H. Burch, the man who bought Northup from his kidnappers and sold him again in Washington D.C., on 17 and 18 January 1853. The bayou around the Red River, Louisiana, where Northup stayed at slave owner Epps's plantation is described as a "land of heathenism, where slavery exists with features more revolting than those described in 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.'" The reporter further described Northup's life at Epps's plantation as being "of a character nearly approaching that described by Mrs. Stowe, as the condition of 'Uncle Tom' while in that region" ("The Kidnapping Case"). This article had a great effect; it was widely read and spread Northup's story before he had even met Wilson (Northup xvi). Northup arrived home on 20 January 1853 and soon after that started working on the narrative with Wilson. Northup and David Wilson tried to profit from the popularity of Stowe's novel by dedicating the narrative to her (Eakin and Logsdon xii-xiii).

The references to Stowe are not limited to the paratext; Northup himself also mentions Uncle Tom in the narrative when he describes the way he performs his job at the Epps plantation: "If Epps was present, I dared not show any lenity, not having the Christian fortitude of a certain well-known Uncle Tom sufficiently to brave his wrath, by refusing to perform the office. In that way, only, I escaped the immediate martyrdom he suffered, and withal, saved my companions much suffering, as it proved in the end" (Northup 172). Northup also refers to Stowe's *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, to point out that only part of the letter eventually sent to Northup's acquaintances to tell them of his whereabouts was included in Stowe's book and that some of the names are misspelled (Northup 213). Though the references to Stowe's novel helped sell copies of the book, too close an association with fiction could have led to the story being perceived as fictional.

One reason why Northup's narrative could be perceived as fiction are the illustrations included in the narrative. Whereas it is not uncommon for portraits to be included in slave narratives, Northup's portrait in the narrative shows his whole figure, is captioned "Solomon in his plantation suit," and resembles the drawn pictures of characters found in novels of the nineteenth century. Northup's portrait is not the only illustration in the narrative; other illustrations are included as well, and they are also captioned and listed in the table of contents

of the book. The illustrations are captioned “Scene in a Slave Pen at Washington,” “Separation of Eliza and her last child,” “Chapin rescues Solomon from Hanging,” “The Staking-out and Flogging of the girl Patsy,” “Scene in the Cotton Field,” and “Arrival Home and first meeting with his wife and Children” (Northup, Thirteenth thousand ed; xiv). The first edition of the narrative even has a “List of Illustrations.” The publishers of Northup’s narrative advertised “Fourteen Thousand Now Ready” by calling it “Truth stranger than fiction” and using part of the quote by Stowe that was featured on the dedication page of the narrative, a short description of the narrative, the “List of Illustrations,” and the reactions of reviewers (“Fourteen Thousand Now Ready”). It was not uncommon for a novel to be promoted by stating it had illustrations; Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was promoted by its publishers by stating it had “six elegant illustrations” (“5000 Copies in one week”), and more illustrations were added as the novel became more successful leading to an “elegantly illustrated edition ... with about 100 beautiful illustrations” (“Uncle Tom’s Cabin”).

Most slave narratives include a portrait of the narrator, but there are but few with additional illustrations. The 1850 “Thirteenth Thousand” edition of the *Narrative of William Wells Brown, A Fugitive Slave* (1847) includes several illustrations, as does *The Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* (1849), but they are exceptions. The illustrations in *Twelve Years a Slave* were left out in later printings. Whereas the versions printed between 1853 and 1859 include a list of illustrations and the sheet music of the song “Roaring River,” the version printed in 1895 does not include these elements.

Stowe referred to Northup’s narrative in her *Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to prove her claim that she based her novel on real circumstances and events; though Northup’s narrative insists that it is based on facts, it also shows awareness of recent literary developments (Andrews 182). On the first page of the narrative, the narrator states that he “[has] not failed to perceive the increasing interest throughout the Northern States, in regard to the subject of Slavery. Works of fiction, professing to portray its features in their more pleasing as well as more repugnant aspects, have been circulated to an extent unprecedented, and, as I understand, have created a fruitful topic of comment and discussion” (Northup [1968] 3). The narrator further asserts that he will give “a candid and truthful statement of facts ... leaving it for others to determine, whether even the pages of fiction present a picture of more cruel wrong or a severer bondage” (Northup 3).

With this last statement Northup confirms Andrews’ argument that, from 1840 onwards, the narrator of a slave narrative assumed that the audience would “judge him according to a set of norms, both moral and aesthetic, that text and author – not the

predominant culture – require[d]” (Andrews 30). Andrews mentions Ephraim Peabody, an abolitionist who reviewed slave narratives and explained their popularity by comparing slave autobiographies to the fiction of that time. In an 1849 review, Peabody calls fictional characters “dull,” “tame,” and “ordinary” in comparison with the former slaves who are determined to change their lives (Andrews 98). Peabody and other liberals “embraced and celebrated the fugitive slave as a kind of culture-hero who exemplified the American romance of the unconquerable ‘individual mind’ steadily advancing toward freedom and independence” (Andrews 98).

2.2 Northup’s free-born status and independence

As a freeman captured into slavery, Northup’s perspective and agency differ from that of narrators born into slavery, as most were. However, Northup was influenced by the dominant view of male gender present in antebellum society and the emphasis on independence and individualism. Northup starts his narrative by speaking of the way his father rose in life and of his own employment previous to his capture. Mintus Northup, Solomon’s father, was born a slave of the Northup family and was freed in his owner’s will. Mintus was a man “respected for his industry and integrity” who provided for his family through agricultural work on his farm, “never seeking employment in those more menial positions, which seem to be especially allotted to the children of Africa” (Northup 5). He was able to grant his children “an education surpassing that ordinarily bestowed upon children of our condition” and “he acquired, by his diligence and economy, a sufficient property qualification to entitle him to the right of suffrage” (5). As Eakin and Logsdon point out, until 1821, a man in the state of the New York had the right to vote if his property was worth more than a hundred dollars (5, n.2).

In comparison with Douglass, Northup does not mention manhood as often in the narrative. Northup also expresses more emotion and weakness in the narrative than Douglass does. As emotional outbursts were not considered part of the behaviour of the ideal strong male and could negatively affect the readers’ view of the narrator as objective, Douglass refrains from showing much emotion. There are instances in which Douglass shows emotion, for example when he sees the ships sail through Chesapeake Bay and he delivers a passionate apostrophe in which he exclaims “O that I could also go! Could I but swim! If I could fly! O, why was I born a man, of whom to make a brute!” (Douglass 72). However, Douglas generally refrains from showing emotion, while Northup frequently shows his despair, sadness, and determination. Northup even admits to crying multiple times in his narrative, for

example upon discovering that he is a slave and when Tibeats and two other men try to hang him after he fights back when attacked by Tibeats. In this last instance, the men deride Northup for his tears, which “afforded a subject of insulting comment” (83).

Northup’s show of emotion can be the result of his free-born status. This position allows him to take more liberties in his narrative compared to slave-born narrators who had more to prove to the readers. Manhood is not mentioned in the descriptions of Northup’s youth. Whereas Douglass struggled while growing up since he felt he could not be both a slave and a man, Northup was free-born and therefore had little trouble reaching manhood. However, Northup does emphasise his individuality; he frequently mentions his skills and the ways he earns money both before his capture and as a slave. Although Northup’s narrative is not organized in a way that emphasises his self-sufficiency as Douglass’s narrative is, Northup’s list of employments show that he has striven to be an independent man. Whereas Douglass wants to be free, Northup wants to provide for his family and lead a comfortable life. After his marriage to Anne Hampton, Northup is aware that he has “a wife dependent upon [him] for support” and he therefore “resolved to enter upon a life of industry; and notwithstanding the obstacle of color, and the consciousness of my lowly state, indulged in pleasant dreams of a good time coming, when the possession of some humble habitation, with a few surrounding acres, should reward my labors, and bring me the means of happiness and comfort” (7). To realize his middle-class aspirations, he worked hard and speaks of “toiling laboriously in the field” and “[performing] many hard days’ labor upon [his violin]” (9).

Before his capture Northup had various jobs: he worked in repairing the Champlain Canal, on a farm, as a violin player, “driving a hack,” and in hotels (9). Northup’s decision to leave his hometown in New York with Merrill Brown and Abram Hamilton, his kidnappers, is both inspired by the desire to see Washington D.C. and the desire to earn money, as they would pay him for “each day’s services” and for playing the violin during their circus performances (13). Northup enters slavery as a thirty-three-year-old husband and father, and this is the first scene in which his individuality is oppressed, as he is no longer able to exercise his own will or speak his mind. However, the education and skills that Northup acquired as a free man help him acquire some individuality as a slave. For example, he is able to use his past experience of working at the Champlain Canal to build a raft to transport Ford’s lumber through the bayou and he is made overseer of the project as a result. Northup takes great pride in his victory over Adam Taynor, a white man who deemed the project impossible and “whose half-malicious ridicule had stung [Northup’s] pride” (71).

Although Northup's pride is not mentioned again in the text, the text does suggest that Northup considers himself superior to the other slaves and some of the white men. After he proves Adam Taynor wrong, Northup compares his achievement to those of the eighteenth-century American inventor Robert Fulton by pronouncing himself "the Fulton of Indian Creek" (71) and proudly asserting that he "[astonished] the simple-witted lumbermen on the banks of the Bayou Boeuf" (8). Northup's view of his fellow slaves is shown earlier in the narrative, as they are described as "the simple beings with whom my lot was cast" (6). A similar perspective is expressed in the description of the fish trap Northup invented. Besides claiming that he invented the trap himself and had not previously seen a similar trap, Northup points out that through his invention "a new resource was developed, hitherto unthought of by the enslaved children of Africa, who toil and hunger along the shore of that sluggish, but prolific stream" (155). The narrative also falls back on racial stereotypes occasionally: when Northup is rescued by Henry Northup and the other slaves hear about Northup's past, Northup describes the other slaves looking at him with "open mouths and rolling eyes indicating the utmost wonder and astonishment" as none of them "had the remotest suspicion of my true name, or the slightest knowledge of my real history" (237). Northup's pride and feeling of superiority and the racial stereotypes may have been added to the narrative by Northup's white editor, David Wilson, in order to emphasise Northup's intelligence compared to the uneducated slaves. However, as Wilson claims that he wrote down what Northup told him, the perspective can also be Northup's, whose free-born status and education have made him feel superior to his fellow slaves.

As a slave, Northup works as a carpenter, among other jobs. He is given a violin by Master Epps in order to entertain his wife, and is also able to earn some money by playing at parties. He is allowed to keep part of the money made at these parties, and is for that reason "looked upon by my fellows as a millionaire" (149). Making money gives Northup pleasure, as "through all rose the triumphant contemplation that [he] was the wealthiest 'nigger' on Bayou Boeuf" (149). Besides earning him some money, playing the violin offers Northup relief during his time in slavery. According to Northup, it "relieved me of many days' labor in the field – supplied me with conveniences for my cabin – ... and oftentimes led me away from the presence of a hard master, to witness scenes of jollity and mirth" (166).

Northup's ability to play the violin is part of the education he received as a free man and was made possible by his free-born status, but Northup does not benefit from his free-born status otherwise while in slavery. On the contrary, shortly after being made a slave, Northup decides to stop telling white men that he was born a free man, since it "would but

expose [him] to maltreatment, and diminish the chances of liberation” (35). This idea is inspired by the first punishment he receives as a slave. Northup receives this punishment from James H. Burch, a slave dealer, after Northup has woken up in chains in Washington D.C. As Burch informs Northup that he is now Burch’s slave and will be sent to New Orleans, Northup protests by telling Burch that he is a free man. Burch first tries to “hush [Northup], as if he feared [Northup’s] voice would be overheard” (23). As hushing Northup has no effect, Burch starts calling Northup “a black liar, a runaway from Georgia” and instructs his companion, Ebenezer Radburn, to fetch him a paddle and a “cat o’ ninetails” (23).

At first, Northup refuses to surrender, stating that “all his brutal blows could not force from my lips the foul lie that I was a slave” (25). When Burch throws away the paddle that had broken during Northup’s punishment and starts using the cat-o’-ninetails, Northup is no longer able to answer Burch’s question whether he is a free man, since Northup’s feelings are “[compared] to nothing else than the burning agonies of hell” (25). During this punishment, Radburn does nothing to help Northup. On the contrary, he is present to keep Northup’s chains to the ground so that Northup cannot move. Before Burch leaves, he tells Northup “that if ever I dared to utter again that I was entitled to my freedom, that I had been kidnapped, or any thing whatever of the kind, the castigation that I had just received was nothing in comparison with what would follow. He swore that he would either conquer or kill me” (26). Burch reminds Northup of this threat after they have arrived in Richmond and slave trader Goodin asks Northup where he comes from. Northup accidentally answers that he is from New York and tries to cover his mistake, but Burch has heard it and tells Northup that “If I ever hear you say a word about New-York or about your freedom, I will be the death of you – I will kill you; you may rely on that” (38). From this point onwards, Northup does not mention his free-born status in any conversations in the narrative until he meets Bass, who writes the letters that lead to his freedom, since Burch has effectively silenced part of Northup’s voice with these threats and the punishment. Northup brings up Burch near the end of the narrative, as he mentions people asking him how he was able to keep his real identity a secret. Northup explains that “the terrible lesson Burch taught me” that “impressed indelibly upon my mind the danger and uselessness of asserting I was a free man” (211). Burch’s threat of violence has thus made Northup focus on survival instead of freedom, and confirms Douglass’s notion that slaves will not be able to think of anything but survival if they are kept in a situation of extreme suppression.

After arriving in the South, Northup does not tell his owners or the other slaves he meets about his past. He did consider telling Ford about his real identity and background

while he was Ford's slave, but he never did "through fear of its miscarriage" until it was too late and Ford's financial troubles led to his sale to Tibbeats (63). Northup did not even consider telling his following owners as he "knew well enough the slightest knowledge of my real character would consign me at once to the remoter depths of Slavery" (63). Northup further mentions that Epps never asked about Northup's background. Mrs. Epps, who does "cross-[examine] Northup "about Washington ... more than once remarked that I did not talk nor act like the other 'niggers' and she was sure I had seen more of the world than I admitted" (175). After Northup is rescued, Mrs. Epps speaks with Northup and "wondered why I have not told her who I was. She expressed her regret, complimented me she had rather lose any other servant on the plantation" (240). However, Northup believes she is only sad because there is no other slave left on the plantation who could do certain chores that she desired. This gives the impression that Northup does not believe that Mrs. Epps really cares about him or that telling Mrs. Epps about his past would have made a difference. Northup does not confide in other slaves either, because "there was no possibility of any slave being able to assist me, while, on the other hand, there *was* a possibility of his exposing me" (211).

Another reason Northup gives for keeping his real identity and background to himself is that revealing them would stop him from having "the few personal privileges I was permitted to enjoy" (212), and increase the chance that "[he] would be taken farther on, into some by-place, over the Texan border, perhaps, and sold; that I would be disposed of as the thief disposes of his stolen horse, if my right to freedom was even whispered" (63). Northup also believes his true identity will lead to freedom, as he writes that he strongly believed that his "final escape" depended upon "the secret of my real name and history" (175). As Northup's real identity does not benefit him in his daily life as a slave and the only thing that can confirm his free-born status while in a slave state are free papers or the aid of a white male confirming his identity, it is striking that Northup uses the word "escape." "Escape" invokes a sense of agency, whereas Northup has limited agency as a slave and "rescue" would have been more fitting. Earlier in the narrative, Northup does not yet connect his real identity with his road to freedom, as he mentions keeping his identity a secret and "trusting in Providence and my own shrewdness for deliverance" (63). An explanation for this change is that, as Northup's plans of escaping by his own means fail, he has to start depending on his background. As his free-born status can only be confirmed with the help of others, his agency is severely limited and he has to depend on the help of others.

2.3 Northup's attempts to escape

As a slave, Northup cannot leave the plantation without permission or risking punishment and therefore the only people he can ask for help are the people on the plantation. This would be either the slaves, slave-owners or people visiting the plantation. The plantation is surrounded by other plantations and the wild bayou, the nearest town being a few miles away; Northup describes the area as a “distant and inaccessible region” (212). Northup had to make sure he trusted the person he asked for help, as they could easily betray him and this would lead to a severe punishment. Northup has a narrow escape from such a punishment after Armsby, Epps's white employer, told Epps that Northup had asked him to post a letter though he promised Northup that he would not betray him. Epps then enters Northup's cabin in the middle of the night carrying “his rawhide in his hand,” and asks Northup whether he asked Armsby to post a letter (177). Northup saves himself by lying to Epps, saying that Armsby only said that because he is after a position as overseer on Epps' plantation. Afterwards, Northup is convinced that another failed attempt will kill him, as “a few years more . . . would consign me to the grave's embrace, to moulder and be forgotten” (179).

Besides the difficulty of finding someone to help him, Northup's literacy alone can get him into trouble. Similar to Douglass's experiences in the Auld household, Northup's literacy did not help him in his day-to-day life as a slave. After Northup was bought by Edwin Epps and Epps learned that Northup was literate, Epps threatened Northup that “if he ever caught [Northup] with a book, or with pen and ink, he would give [him] a hundred lashes” and that “he bought ‘niggers’ to work and not to educate” (175). It is striking that both Douglass and Harriet Jacobs teach other slaves to read while they are slaves: Douglass holds a Bible study group and Jacobs teaches a man to read the Bible. Northup, however, does not mention teaching others while on the plantation. He does show other slaves he can write while he is on the steamer to New Orleans and carves his name into his mug. Other slaves request their name to be carved into their cups as well and Northup “gratified them all, of which they did not appear to be forgetful” (40). As Northup is the property of a slave trader while on the steamer, there is not as strict a watch over him and his literacy as there is on Epps's plantation. In contrast, Mrs. Ford gives one of their slaves, Sam, a Bible and Northup frequently reads to him while he is living on Ford's estate. Ford is clearly much more lenient than Epps when it comes to literacy and more concerned about religion. Visitors on Ford's estate therefore thought of Ford as “not fit to own a nigger” because he let his slaves carry Bibles (69).

Northup plans to use his literacy to attain his freedom, by writing a letter to his acquaintances to send him free papers or help him in some way (175). The first letter Northup

writes from captivity, sent by the sailor John Manning, whom he meets on the steamer heading south, reaches its addressees, but does not contain enough information on Northup's whereabouts to aid his rescue, as Northup did not know where he was going when writing the letter. From that point onwards, it is extremely difficult for Northup to write and send a letter without others finding out, as he "cannot leave his plantation without a pass, nor will a post-master mail a letter for one without written instructions from his owner" (175). Both acquiring paper and creating writing utensils were equally difficult for Northup; as he writes, "I was in slavery nine years, and always watchful and on the alert, before I met with the good fortune of obtaining a sheet of paper" (175). Northup also had to make his own pen and ink out of a duck feather and maple bark. The process enabling the writing of the letter is therefore as much an act of resistance as writing and sending the letter.

The second attempt to send a letter is made in the time that Northup is working for Epps. Armsby, Epps's white employer, betrays Northup's plan after he asked Armsby to send a letter. The letter that leads to Northup's rescue is the first not written by himself, but by Samuel Bass, the Canadian carpenter who is temporarily employed by Epps, after the men prepared the letter together. Bass sends letters to three different addressees in order to increase the chances of rescue and writes part of the letter from Northup's perspective, though indicating that Northup is not the letter writer; it states that he "[has] never been able to get any one to write for me until now; and he that is writing for me runs the risk of his life if detected" (213). Eventually, the "postscript of the letter more than ... the body of communication" leads to Northup's rescue, as his rescuers encounter Bass and he can tell them where Northup, then called Platt, lives. As a slave, Northup is called Platt, a name given to him by Burch and by which he goes after his arrival in New Orleans. Bass is the only man in that area who knows of Northup's secret true identity, and therefore the only who can help locate Northup.

Northup's rescue is conducted by Henry Northup, a "relative of the family in which my forefathers were ... held to service, and from which they took the name I bear. To this fact may be attributed the persevering interest he has taken in my behalf" (4). It is striking that Northup is rescued by a member of the family who owned his ancestors. However, Northup had to depend on the aid of a white man for his rescue, as his direct family would also run the risk of unjust capture when travelling South without enough protection. Moreover, his family did not have the means to come and rescue Northup. The second appendix added to the narrative is the "Memorial of Anne," which is a letter directed to the governor of New-York by Northup's wife, Anne Northup, and others that "entreats" the governor "to employ such

agent or agents as shall be deemed necessary to effect the restoration and return of said Solomon Northup” as “your memorialist and her family are poor and wholly unable to pay or sustain any portion of the expenses of restoring the said Solomon to his freedom” (257).

Northup’s dependence on others to rescue him makes clear that his agency is much more limited than that of slaves like Douglass, who managed to escape by themselves. However, Northup does make many plans to escape. In the narrative, Northup writes that he thought of escaping every day during the ten years living under Epps’s rule. He writes that he “laid many plans, which at the time I considered excellent ones, but one after the other they were all abandoned” (183). Northup starts making “a hundred plans of escape” as soon as he is taken captive, and is “fully determined to make the attempt the first desperate chance that offered” (35). Besides by means of writing letters, he makes plans to escape from the steamer heading to New Orleans with a few other slaves. He successfully tests part of the plan by secretly sleeping on the deck one night, but the plan is abandoned after one of the slaves dies of the small-pox.

When Northup has been a slave for some time, he asks a captain of a steamer permission to hide on his boat, but the captain refuses since it is impossible to hide Northup from the inspection that takes place in the harbors and detection would lead to punishment for both Northup and the captain. Northup also thinks of running away or escaping from his master in the bayou, and for that reason whips Epps’s bloodhounds, so that they would not attack him during his escape. Northup is successful in escaping an attack from Tibeats by hiding in the bayou. Unlike other slaves, he is able to swim and can therefore make his way through water, which causes the dogs to lose his scent. Slaves who were not able to swim “can go in no direction but a little way without coming to a bayou, when the inevitable alternative is presented, of being drowned or overtaken by the dogs” (101). However, Northup is not safe in the bayou either, as the swamp is “for thirty or forty miles ... without inhabitants” and filled with “wild beasts” (103).

Northup’s greatest act of defiance is similar to Douglass’s rebellion against Covey. After Tibeats accuses him unjustly of something he has done wrong and orders him to strip, Northup becomes very angry and refuses, saying “I will *not*” (80). When Tibeats attacks him, Northup decides to fight back: “my fear changed to anger, and before he reached me I had made up my mind fully not to be whipped, let the result be life or death” (80). Northup is able, “in the frenzy of his madness [to snatch] the whip from his hand” and whips Tibeats until his arm starts hurting (80). So far, this scene shows that Northup’s voice has not been silenced by slavery and that his agency is sparked when he becomes angry. However, this act of rebellion

does not exempt him from being punished again, as it did for Douglass. After he wins the fight with Tibeats, Tibeats returns with two other men and tries to hang Northup. Northup says and does nothing to stop him; he only says: “You need not bind me, Master Tibeats, I am ready to go with you anywhere” (82). Northup is not able to save himself, and is rescued by overseer Chapin. However, Chapin leaves Northup standing in the position he found him in for the rest of the day until Ford comes to cut him loose. Northup “[remained] in agony the whole weary day” and only a fellow slave named Rachel comes to his aid him by bringing him some water.

Northup and Tibeats have a second violent encounter shortly after the first, which starts the same way as their first fight, namely with Tibeats finding fault in Northup’s work. Tibeats then grabs an ax “swearing he would cut [Northup’s] head open” (98) and the only way Northup thinks he can survive the attack is by jumping towards Tibeats. Northup is able to throw away the weapons that Tibeats is trying to use and manages to almost strangle Tibeats. As Northup realizes that both killing Tibeats and letting him live would lead to Northup’s own death, since “if he lived, my life only would satisfy his vengeance” (100), he decides to run away. Tibeats leaves and returns with two other men and bloodhounds, forcing Northup to flee the plantation and enter the swamp. From this point onwards, Northup’s actions become similar to those of Douglass after he runs away from Covey, as Northup travels through the swamp to the home of his former master, William Ford. Whereas Douglass’s master does not help Douglass and asks him to return to Covey, Ford helps Northup by returning to Tibeats with him and speaking with Tibeats. Interestingly, Northup is able to defeat his master twice in a direct fight and survives both of Tibeats’s attempts at revenge which Tibeats executes with the help of two other men. Northup’s survival is a result of his strength, as he “[is] the stronger of the two” (99), and his intelligence, as his “good genius, which thus far through life has saved me from the hands of violence, at that moment suggested a lucky thought” of jumping to Tibeats when he attacked Northup with an ax (99).

As Northup’s act of resistance leads to his nearly being hanged and his plans of escape fail, Northup stops jumping at every “desperate chance offered” to escape (35). He is still planning to escape and is always “cautious and on [his] guard” (212), but becomes increasingly pessimistic as one after another attempt fails. Northup sometimes finds himself in a discussion among the slaves about the possibility of a rebellion of the slaves, in which “a word from me would have placed hundreds of my fellow-bondsmen in an attitude of defiance” (190). However, Northup is not supportive of a slave rebellion as “without arms or ammunition, or even with them I saw such a step would result in certain defeat, disaster and

death” (190). After Armsby betrays Northup’s plan to have him post a letter, Northup “knew not now whither to look for deliverance” and is convinced that a few more years in slavery would kill him (179). He also shares the stories of slaves who tried to escape and failed. For example, Augustus, a slave on a neighbouring plantation, ran away after being whipped by an overseer. He was tracked down and attacked by hounds, and died of his wounds the following day (185-6). Another example is the story Northup tells about Wiley, a slave with an “exuberance of ... self-reliance” (180). Wiley was caught by patrollers while he was outside the plantation at night without a pass. He is returned to the plantation and punished, but flees the plantation again. After three weeks, he is found out, spends time in jail and is sent back to the plantation, where he is whipped again. These stories show that self-reliance, though effective for Douglass throughout his life, does not aid every slave.

It is striking that Northup almost immediately reclaims his agency when he sees Henry Northup at the plantation and knows that he is a free man again. Though he still obediently answers the questions the sheriff asks him, because he knows they will lead to his freedom, he behaves like a free man as he “[pushes] past [the sheriff], unable longer to restrain myself” and grasps the hands of Henry Northup (237). A slave would be punished for ignoring a demand and has to suppress his own wishes, but as a free man Solomon Northup can do as he pleases. But though Northup’s actions show a free man’s agency, the language used to describe the scene signals that Northup’s agency is still somewhat restricted, as Northup “obeys” Henry Northup’s request to stop what he is doing and come with him (237) and Northup still calls Epps “master” when the men move inside the house (238). However, when Epps scolds Northup for not telling him that he was free, Northup “[answers] in a somewhat different tone than the one in which [he] had been accustomed to address [Epps]” and refuses to tell Epps who wrote and sent the letter that led to his rescue (239).

Northup shares this information with the readers, however, as he tells how he met Bass and how their acquaintance developed. Many of the people Northup met while in slavery are described in the narrative, as well as their stories. Northup’s narrative thus contrasts with Douglass’s narrative, which is much more focused on Douglass’s experiences. One of the people whose story Northup relates in the narrative is Mary, a slave he meets on the steamer to New Orleans. Northup’s acquaintance with Mary is quite short and he does not suggest that he has a close friendship with her, but he still recounts her story and with compassion relates that “she scarcely knew there was such a word as freedom” and “was one of those ... who fear nothing but their master’s lash, and know no further duty than to obey his voice” (39). A reason why Northup shares these names and stories with the reader is to give an accurate

portrayal of slavery; as he argues, “It is necessary in this narrative, in order to present a full and truthful statement of all the principal events in the history of my life, and to portray the institution of Slavery as I have seen and known it, to speak of well-known places, and of many persons who are yet living” (29). Northup also shares this information since Northern readers would be interested in learning about the South; slave narratives therefore also often functioned as travel narratives. For this reason, Northup also describes details of various aspects of his life, for example, the process of planting, growing, and picking cotton, sugar cane cutting, and assembling his dinner. He introduces such subjects by saying, for example, “in as much as some may read this book who have never seen a cotton field, a description of the manner of its culture may not be out of place” (123).

As we have seen, another element of slavery that is included in the narrative is the treatment of female slaves. Northup describes Patsey’s life on Epps’s plantation in some detail, as she is lusted after by her master and therefore hated by her mistress. Northup tries to protect Patsey against mistress Epps’s jealousy by refusing her orders to flog Patsey and “saying that I feared my master’s displeasure, and several times ventured to remonstrate with her against the treatment Patsey received” (195). Northup thus has some control over Mrs. Epps and enough power to protect a vulnerable female slave. However, Northup cannot protect Patsey from Mr. Epps. Over time, Epps becomes more jealous and when Patsey returns after visiting Harriet, the black wife of a master on a neighboring plantation, Epps believes “that it was not Harriet she desired to meet, but rather the unblushing libertine, his neighbor,” Mr. Shaw (195). When Patsey denies that she went to visit Mr. Shaw, Epps orders Northup to whip her. At that time, Northup is the driver at the plantation and therefore in charge of whipping slaves in order to make them work hard. Whereas Northup could sometimes reason with Mrs. Epps, he cannot refuse his master and is “compelled to obey him” (195). Epps orders Northup to strike harder and when Northup tries to stop “with bitter oaths and threats, [Epps] ordered me to continue” (198). The third time that Northup pauses and Epps “ordered me to go on, threatening me with a severer flogging than [Patsey] had received, in case of refusal”, Northup “[risked] the consequences” and “absolutely refused to raise the whip” (198). Epps continues whipping Patsey, who “from that time forward was not what she had been” as her “bounding vigor” and “sprightly laughter-loving spirit of her youth, were gone” (199).

The scene of Patsey’s whipping shows how extreme violence can leave a permanent mark on one slave’s agency, but also evoke the agency of another. Northup is forced to participate in Patsey’s whipping and he does not dare to refuse Epps at first. However, after

many whippings Northup's "heart revolted at the inhuman scene" and Northup rebels against Epps's order by refusing to whip Patsey any further and risks punishment (198). Another way Northup and other slaves quietly rebel against Epps is during Northup's work as a driver. Whereas Northup dared not "[refuse] to perform the office" of driver because he fears Epps's "wrath," Northup and his fellow slaves are sometimes able to deceive Epps (172). Northup knows that Epps is only pleased with Northup's work as a driver if he whips other slaves frequently, and would therefore "handle [his] whip with marvelous dexterity and precision, throwing the lash within a hair's breadth of the back, the ear, the nose, without, however, touching either of them" (172). The other slaves would participate in this deceit by making sounds as if they were being whipped. When they knew Epps was listening, they would mumble that Northup whipped them so harshly and often.

One important difference between the narratives of Northup and Douglass has not yet been mentioned, which is the difference in location in the U.S. This difference greatly affected the possibilities for escape for Douglass and Northup. Douglass was a slave in the city of Baltimore, and therefore closer to the Mason Dixon line and freedom. He calls his move to Baltimore as Mr. and Mrs. Auld's slave "a special interposition of divine Providence in my favor" (Douglass 43), as this move introduced Douglass to the life in a city with a mistress who would teach him the principles of reading, which created Douglass's hunger for freedom. Douglass also noted that life in the city differed greatly from that on the plantation. According to Douglass, "a city slave is almost a freeman, compared with a slave on the plantation. He is much better fed and clothed, and enjoys privileges altogether unknown to the slave on the plantation" (46). While in the city, Douglass is able to hire himself out and is allowed to keep a portion of his pay, and when he is mistreated by other workers on the dock, he is able to find a different employer. In contrast, Northup resided in the bayous of Louisiana, far away from cities and people who could help him escape. According to Douglass, being more comfortable makes him think about freedom again, whereas when he was in more difficult circumstances "[he] could think of nothing, scarcely, but [his] life" (98).

During his years in slavery, Northup is transported deeper into the South. Starting as a resident of Saratoga, New York, he travels through New York City to Washington D.C., where he is made a slave. He is then brought to New Orleans and Avoyelles, Louisiana, where he moves from plantation to plantation, deeper into the bayou. The further Northup travels away from home and the more he changes owners, the more difficult it becomes for his family to find and recapture him. As Northup reaches the Pine Woods, in Red River country, he nears the border between Louisiana and Texas and fears being carried outside the Union and

into Texas, which was then a young independent republic, if he told anyone about being free-born. The fictional character of Uncle Tom, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, goes through a similar route, as he starts in Kentucky and moves deeper into the south until he also finds himself on a plantation in the Red River district in Louisiana. However, whereas Northup is rescued after twelve years of slavery and has no permanent physical injuries, Uncle Tom's rescue comes too late and he dies on the plantation. Very few slave narratives are known by slaves who survived and escaped from a life so deep in the south. Eakin and Logsdon note that "without the legal assistance due to him as a citizen of New York, Solomon Northup would surely have died – silent – along the banks of the Red River in Louisiana. Unaided flight, as he himself discovered, was almost beyond possibility, and manumission was quite unlikely" (xi).

In conclusion, Northup's portrayal of slavery is very detailed and presents a different perspective from Douglass's narrative and other narratives. Northup's experiences show the vulnerability of free blacks and the limitations imposed on their right to live an independent, "manly" life. As a slave, Northup's agency is limited by the violence he encounters and the remote place in which he is a slave. Northup in the end may have an 'easier' escape from slavery than Douglass, as a friend travels to Louisiana to bring Northup to the North, but he has to spend twelve years in slavery before he regains his freedom. During this time, Northup does not give up on trying to regain his freedom, however, and extreme punishments and injustice only spark his resistance. Whereas Douglass's narrative and agency are presented in a way to strengthen the image of Douglass as an independent man, Northup's narrative shows that Northup's independence and intelligence do not result in his immediate escape from slavery, as the conditions he find himself in severely restrict his agency.

Chapter 3: Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery*

The form of slavery experienced by the authors of autobiographical slave narratives ended after the American Civil War (1860-1865). The enslaved were officially given their freedom with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution in 1865 that emancipated all slaves and abolished slavery in the U.S. Although there was no longer any need to publish slave narratives to convince white audiences that slavery should be abolished, a few former slaves continued to publish their experiences in slavery, as well as their experiences after emancipation. William Andrews argues that these post-Civil War narratives are “increasingly different” from those written in the antebellum period (Andrews 18) and therefore cannot be considered part of the genre of autobiographical slave narratives. The slave narratives thus were the beginning of the new genre of African American autobiography. Booker T. Washington (1856-1915) was one of the slaves freed by the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment who published an autobiography. Washington was a successful man who established his own school, as “a representative of the Negro race” was asked to speak at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1895 (Washington 151), and was an adviser of President Roosevelt (Harlan 306). In his autobiography, *Up From Slavery* (1901), Washington shows the difficulties he encountered as a free black man in his attempts to build a new life away from the plantation. What is striking about Washington's autobiography is the way he represents these difficulties and the way he rises in life; a way that differs greatly from the difficulties and agency expressed in Douglass's and Northup's narratives. Instead of directly challenging white authority, Washington's strategy is to seemingly accept the status quo, work hard, and slowly rise in life. This chapter will explore the agency in Washington's *Up From Slavery* and the way it is represented. In order to do this, Washington's agency will be analyzed, placed within its socio-political context and compared with the representation of agency in slave narratives. Though Washington's narrative does not belong to the genre of the autobiographical slave narrative, a comparison with this genre is made in order to analyze the differences between the genres.

Washington was born a slave in Richmond, Virginia, before the American Civil War and was freed when his owners read to their slaves what Washington later believed to have been the Emancipation Proclamation at the end of the Civil War. After the war, a period of Reconstruction began that lasted until 1877. This period was focused on rebuilding Southern society after the abolition of slavery, and came with a strong belief in the idea of “the American Dream of economic prosperity and social mobility” (NAAAL 545). In the beginning

of the Reconstruction Era, Northerners founded schools and other institutions for African Americans, including the Hampton Institute that Booker T. Washington attended (*NAAAL* 543). Amendments to the U.S. Constitution were passed that gave the former slaves civil and voting rights: the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) provided all inhabitants of the U.S., including former slaves, citizenship and legal protection by the government, and the Fifteenth Amendment (1870) stated that states could not deny former slaves or men of colour the right to vote (*NAAAL* 544). However, despite these positive changes, life was not easy for former slaves and other African Americans in the U.S. Robert Green Jr. and Harold Cheatham argue that “in Southern politics, White reaction against Black political participation that began with the re-establishment of the White power structure during and after Reconstruction culminated in the nearly complete disfranchisement of Blacks by the early twentieth century” (Green and Cheatham 3). Moreover, organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, founded in 1866, attacked non-white citizens and whites helping African Americans (Franklin 203). More and more states introduced ways and laws to separate the races in their public and private lives, which affected African Americans “politically, economically, and socially” (Green and Cheatham 3). These so-called Jim Crow laws were in effect until the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954, which eventually ended segregation in public schools, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which were major victories for Civil Rights Movement led by Martin Luther King Jr.

The autobiographical literature produced by African Americans from Emancipation onwards often focuses on the positive developments in their lives. The authors of these stories were heavily influenced by the American belief in progress that played a large role in society at the time. These narratives did not omit the difficulties the authors faced as free people of colour, but they “concentrated on the lessons learned from slavery and the progress made after emancipation” (*NAAAL* 549). Like autobiographical slave narratives, later narratives were presented in a certain way to deliver their message. Whereas slave narratives did not include many expressions of extreme emotions in order to make the author appear objective and worthy of the audience’s attention, the later autobiographies did not dwell on the violence and harshness in slavery in order to present their message of hope for the future (McDowell 151). They often aimed to show white audiences that former slaves and free blacks were capable of helping rebuild the country and to inspire others to strive for a better life (*NAAAL* 550).

Although the message of later autobiographies differed from that of autobiographical slave narratives, the presentation of slave narratives influenced the presentation of autobiographies. This influence is visible in Washington’s autobiography, as his

autobiography begins with the elements that, as Olney points out, are characteristic for autobiographical slave narratives: the sentence “I was born a slave,” followed by the estimated date of his birth, information about the place of birth, his ancestry, and a description of life on the plantation (Olney 50). Washington did not include other elements characteristic of autobiographical slave narratives. For example, the autobiography does not include a paratext that verifies Washington’s account of slavery and his life, as there is no necessity to convince audiences of his intelligence or of the need to abolish slavery, since Washington published his autobiography as a free man who made a name for himself after Emancipation as the founder of a black educational institution.

Another similarity with autobiographical slave narratives lies in Washington’s emphasis on literacy. When describing his childhood in slavery, Washington mentions being requested to carry his mistress’s books to school and “feeling that to get into a schoolhouse and study in this way would be about the same as getting into paradise” (5), for “[f]rom the time that I can remember having any thoughts about anything, I recall that I had an intense longing to learn to read” (18-19). This focus on education leads Washington to pursue an education and in 1881 he eventually founded his own school, the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.

What immediately strikes the reader of Washington’s autobiography is the difference in language that is used compared with that in slave narratives. Whereas Frederick Douglass’s narrative is written in a relatively formal style aimed to convince white audiences of Douglass’s intelligence, Washington’s autobiography is written in what Ishmael Reed describes as a “modern reader-friendly prose style” (Reed vii). This style may not be completely Washington’s own, as Washington hired Max Bennett Thrasher to write for him and “Thrasher wrote or partly wrote nearly all of the articles, books, and sometimes even letters that appeared over Washington’s signature” (Harlan 246). According to Harlan, Washington would “dictate autobiographical notes to Thrasher” from which he himself “wrote a draft of the autobiography ... and let Thrasher check the manuscript” (246). As Washington sometimes “dictated or wrote rough sketch of a chapter and Thrasher revised it and gave it to the publishers” (247), it can be assumed that Thrasher presented the narrative in a way he seemed fitting, but that the content was decided by Washington.

The degree of emotion shown by Washington is similar to that of Douglass; there are moments filled with emotion, but a relatively objective perspective is maintained throughout both the narratives. However, there is a great difference between the narratives with regard to the representation of violence. Washington either experienced less violence or describes fewer

violent scenes in his narrative, as there are barely any descriptions of physical violence in his autobiography. Washington does emphasise that he has to work hard on the plantation from an early age on, but the “most trying ordeal that [he] was forced to endure as a slave boy” was wearing a flax shirt (7). He describes the relationships between the slaves and their owners as mutually supportive; he describes slaves as being “anxious” to help care for their wounded owners when they returned from the Civil War (7) and being in turn treated with “decency” by their masters (8). Throughout the text, Washington often dwells on the generous nature of African Americans, claiming that the former slaves he met “entertain no feelings of bitterness against the whites before and during the war” (9) and are kind, hard-working, and loyal.

Washington’s objective perspective, emphasis on the generous nature of African Americans and the lack of violence in the text are all attempts to make the text appealing to the white audience that Washington tried to reach. This is in line with the aim of several autobiographies at the time, as McDowell argues that autobiographies published after the Civil War often had a “pragmatic perspective” on slavery and strategically “softened its horrors” (McDowell 155). Washington uses this strategy in order to promote the idea of his autobiography that through “self-reliance” and “racial solidarity” African Americans could rise in society (*NAAAL* 570). At the same time, Washington wanted to prove to white audiences that African Americans were a “resource ... for the United States as it entered the twentieth century” (571). In Washington’s address at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1895, he presented this idea and admonished both African Americans and white Southerners to “Cast down your bucket where you are;” he asked white Southerners to employ black workers and advised black Southerners to work hard in manual trades (Washington 152-53). The white audience was asked to help African Americans with “education of head, hand, and heart” (154). Whereas W.E.B. Du Bois, who heavily criticized Washington’s strategies, promoted social change for African American that would be implemented top-down through the “Talented Tenth,” that is, the black intellectual elite, Washington claims that “It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top. Nor should we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities” (Washington 153).

The speech Washington delivered at the Exposition in Atlanta became known as the “Atlanta Compromise Speech,” after the compromises Washington offers as a representative of African Americans in the South. Writing at a time in which racial violence was rampant in the South and Jim Crow laws institutionalized racial segregation and reinforced white supremacy, Washington did not expect immediate legal rights and privileges for African Americans; he argued that “It is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours, but

it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercises of these privileges” (Washington 155). Washington also accepted social segregation between races if that were to lead to improved circumstances for African Americans, by saying that “In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress” (Washington 154). W.E.B. Du Bois and other black activists and thinkers later heavily criticized Washington for these compromises as the Southern states implemented Jim Crow laws that legalized segregation between races (Reed viii). However, Washington’s “accommodationist approach”, instead of the “activist approach” Douglass, Du Bois and other African American leaders and thinkers propagated, was a pragmatic choice given the harshness of racial conditions in the South, as the Southern states were already implementing laws that severely curtailed the legal rights of African Americans (Green and Cheatham 27). This is not to say that an activist approach would have had no effect, but Washington believed that taking an accommodationist stance would be the only means of improving the circumstances in the South. Meanwhile, Washington tried to bring about change as he “clandestinely financed and directed a number of court suits challenging the grandfather clause, denial of jury service to blacks, Jim Crow transportation, and peonage” (Harlan ix).

The full text of the Atlanta Compromise Speech is included in Washington’s autobiography, and the autobiography itself promotes the values and strategies described in the speech. Washington worked hard as a child in slavery and continued to work hard ever since. Looking back on his life, Washington claims that “there was no period of my life that was devoted to play” and that “from the time that I can remember anything, almost every day of my life has been occupied in some kind of labour” (4). When Washington expresses his desire to learn to read to his mother, she is able to provide a spelling-book and Washington starts his pursuit of an education. He praises his mother for her character; “though she was totally ignorant, so far as mere book knowledge was concerned, she had high ambitions for her children, and a large fund of good, hard, common sense which seemed to enable her to meet and master every situation. If I have done anything in life worth attention, I feel sure that I inherited the disposition from my mother” (18-19). Washington continues to work hard throughout his life, thus adhering to the Protestant work ethic. This work ethic, also known as the Puritan work ethic, is used to describe the style of working in predominantly Protestant societies that believed it was the Christian’s duty to work hard and be selfless (Furnham 13).

Through an accommodationist approach that included many elements of the Protestant work ethic, Washington is able to present himself and other African Americans in a way that is non-threatening and easily acceptable to many white people in the U.S. It allows him to

establish a name for himself and gain support for his school, and creates opportunities to slowly change the circumstances of the African Americans in the South. Whereas slave narratives encourage readers to protest against slavery and narrators can only escape slavery through rebellion, Washington asks African Americans to use their agency to work instead of protest. Thus, the aim and the agency expressed in Washington's narrative differs greatly from those of autobiographical slave narratives and are heavily influenced by the socio-political circumstances they were written in.

Chapter 4: Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*

After the publication of *Up From Slavery* in 1901, slavery was rarely a topic in African American literature. This changed with the emergence of the genre of the neo-slave narrative from the mid-1970s onwards, in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. Neo-slave narratives are novels about slavery that often show aspects of slavery that are barely mentioned in historical plantation ledgers or autobiographical slave narratives. The authors of neo-slave narratives were influenced by historical autobiographical narratives, but also responded to the socio-political circumstances of their own time. This is visible in many elements of the neo-slave narrative, among which the emphasis on the agency of the characters. This presentation of agency differs from that of autobiographical slave narratives and autobiographies. Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986) is an example of a neo-slave narrative that includes slave characters whose degree of agency differs from that of historical figures. The novel's slave protagonist Dessa shows an agency that is unlike that of female slaves described in male slave narratives, but in some way resembles Jacobs's agency.

This chapter will focus on the representation of Dessa's agency in *Dessa Rose* in relation to the socio-political context of the 1980s. The agency in the novel will be compared with that in autobiographical slave narratives. The main slave narrative used for comparison is Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. As we have seen, Jacobs's gender strongly affected her experiences in slavery and her narrative is therefore a better source of comparison for *Dessa Rose*'s female-oriented fictional account of slavery than slave narratives presented from a male perspective.

According to Ashraf Rushdy, the neo-slave narrative genre emerged in response to William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) and as a result of the Black Aesthetic movement in the time of the "rise of the New Left" (Newman 28). The Black Aesthetic Movement emerged in the 1960s during the Civil Rights Movement and was defined by Hoyt T. Fuller in *Towards a Black Aesthetic* (1968) as "a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of black people which reflect the special character and imperative of black experience" (Fuller 8). This aesthetic was part of the Black Arts Movement that aimed to "transform the manner in which black Americans were represented or portrayed in literature and the arts" and therefore produced many works of art and literature (NAAAL 1837). African Americans were not the only ones who tried to change their perspective of themselves and the way they were represented. The New Left promoted the rewriting of "history from the bottom up," which caused the rewriting of "labor and working-class history, women's and ethnic

studies, and a revised respect for oral history and testimony” (Newman 28). Ethnic and other social groups who felt that their voices were not heard in society and included in the predominant notion of history started to speak up and “[write] back” (28). Autobiographical slave narratives became popular again and African American authors began to focus on “issues of power relations in the field of cultural production – what the forces are behind the creation of a literary tradition, how national narratives emerge, which groups get to tell their story as *the* story, and which stories are ‘minority’ or marginalized, controlled by cultural institutions” (28).

One of the works many African American scholars and authors wrote back to is Styron’s novel about Nat Turner’s slave revolt in 1831. African American scholars and authors felt that Styron, a white author, did not do justice to Nat Turner in his novel about the slave revolt. According to Rushdy, their critique was that Styron presented Turner’s story in “non-heroic terms,” “offered a conservative, traditional image of slavery,” was “historically uninformed” and “presumed that a white author could assume the voice of a slave” (28). African American scholars and authors therefore began to write stories they felt *did* justice to African American slaves. Toni Morrison, whose novel *Beloved* (1987) is the most well-known neo-slave narrative, compares writing novels about the slavery past to “literary archeology: on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply” (Morrison 92). In this way, neo-slave narratives try to imagine what Morrison terms the “interior life” of slaves (91). Autobiographical slave narratives generally did not include the interior life of slaves or certain scenes that were thought to distract the reader from the purpose of the narrative and would negatively alter the readers’ view of the narrator. For example, when Northrup reunites with his family after twelve years in slavery, he stops his emotional description of the scene with “but I draw a veil over a scene which can much better be imagined than described” (Northrup 251). As an author, Morrison, considers it her job to “rip that veil drawn over ‘proceedings too terrible to relate’” (Morrison 91). By using her imagination and creating works of fiction, Morrison believes she is able to show a greater truth than facts can present (92-94). Contemporary authors like Morrison do not only try to come to terms with the past through these stories; their stories about the past are also connected to the present. According to Valerie Smith, neo-slave narratives “illustrate the centrality of the history and the memory of slavery to our individual, racial, gender, cultural, and national identities” (Smith 168). Many of these novels, particularly those written by women writers, give voices to female slaves, who, as we have seen, often play but a marginal

role in historical slave narratives; Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* are exceptions to this rule.

Dessa Rose's author Sherley Anne Williams considers herself a "political writer" in the sense that she "[remains] ... a proponent of Black consciousness, of 'The Black Aesthetic'" and "[tries] to elucidate those elements in our lives on which constructive political change, those that do more than blackwash or femalize the same power structure, can be built" (*Meditations* 769-70). Williams included an "Author's Note" in her novel in which she explains that she was inspired to write the novel by her anger about Styron's novel about Nat Turner, but also by two historical accounts of a black and a white woman in the 1830s. The first historical account Williams mentions is the story of "a pregnant black woman" who "helped to lead an uprising on a coffle in 1829 in Kentucky," was "caught and convicted," and whose death sentence was delayed until her child was born (*Dessa Rose* 5). The second historical account is the story of "a white woman living on an isolated farm" who "was reported to have given sanctuary to runaway slaves" (5). Williams read about the first story in Angela Davis's 1971 essay "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" and while researching the story discovered the second historical account.

Angela Davis, an influential scholar and activist in the 1970s, presents a different notion of slaves' agency in "Reflections" from the way agency is presented in historical slave narratives. According to Davis, slaves were not as passive as they are sometimes made out to be, as there is "more than ample evidence that they consistently refused to succumb to the all-encompassing dehumanization objectively demanded by the slave system" (Davis 6). They evinced forms of agency besides "open rebellions," as "resistance expressed itself in other grand modes and also in the seemingly trivial forms of feigned illness and studied indolence" (6). Davis further believes that the role of the female slave has to be reconsidered and investigated, since "the unspoken indictment of our female forebears as having actively assented to slavery" is untrue (4). The female slave is not as passive as she is sometimes made out to be. Like male slaves, female slaves rebelled against their owners by neglecting to do their work, they participated in slave revolts, and there are even cases in which female slaves poisoned their owner's food. As mothers and caretakers, they knew many of the slaves in the slave quarters and were able to keep the spirit of resistance alive. Besides resistance, "survival-oriented activities were themselves a form of resistance" as many did not survive slavery (7). This attitude was possible because slave women were not restricted by the "myth of femininity" that required them to take care of the home and their family (7). Slave women

often worked alongside the men on the fields and worked hard, since “all had to ‘provide’ for the master” (7).

Although Williams only mentions in the “Author’s Preface” that she found the historical accounts in Davis’s article, the novel shows that Williams was influenced by Davis’s arguments as the (female) characters show a great deal of indirect and direct agency. What Williams mentions in the “Preface” is that she “loved history as a child” until someone told her that “there was no place in the past where [an African American] could be free” (Williams 5-6). However, Davis’s article opened her eyes to the fact that even in slavery there was a place for “heroism” and “love” and she created such a place in her novel (Williams 6). By combining two historical accounts, Williams created a new world that fills gaps both in the past and the present. Smith argues that late twentieth-century neo-slave narratives “provide a perspective of a host of issues that resonate in contemporary cultural, historical, critical, and literary discourses” (Smith 168). Some of the issues that Smith names are “the challenges of representing trauma and traumatic memories; the legacy of slavery (and other atrocities) for subsequent generations; the interconnectedness of constructions of race and gender,” “the agency of the enslaved,” and “the power of orality and literacy” (168-69).

Many of the challenging issues Smith mentions are addressed in *Dessa Rose*, and especially the agency of the enslaved plays a large role in the novel. The main slave character in the novel, Dessa, is strong-willed and quite outspoken when she is first introduced. Whereas slave narratives usually start in slavery, describe the slave’s life and struggles to become free and end in freedom, Dessa is introduced when she is in prison after she and a group of slaves in a slave coffle rebelled. They were discovered after running and hiding from patrollers for a few days and Dessa tries to help other slaves escape during the fights with the patrollers. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that the rebellion in the slave coffle is not Dessa’s first violent act, nor is it the last. Dessa was sold to the slave coffle after she attacked her owner, and actively participated in the rebellion of the slave coffle though she was pregnant. She is freed from prison by runaway slaves she met in the slave coffle and taken to Ruth Elizabeth Sutton’s house, a white woman who lets runaway slaves work for her while she awaits the return of her husband. Dessa despises this mistress and does not refrain from showing it. When Dessa has recovered from childbirth, she and other runaway slaves start planning to leave Ruth’s house and travel to a place where they can be free and independent. Even though Dessa is a runaway slave for most of the novel, the novel can be compared with antebellum slave narratives because it includes flashbacks to Dessa’s life in slavery in the antebellum period and shows Dessa’s path from slavery to freedom.

Dessa is introduced in the novel through the perspective of the white author Adam Nehemiah, who is preparing to write a handbook for slaveholders about slave rebellions and how to prevent them. In order to learn more about slave revolts, Nehemiah interviews Dessa, who has acquired the reputation of a “virago” and “she-devil” because of her behaviour in the coffle revolt and is sentenced to death for being the leader of the slave revolt (Williams 22). Many of the slaves that participated in the slave rebellion and in the fight with the slave holders have been executed or punished at this point; Dessa’s execution will take place after she delivers her baby so that the baby can be sold. The first part of the novel shows both Nehemiah’s diary entries and his contemplations as he writes them. Nehemiah’s writing alternates between his own ideas and what Dessa tells him, and there is a difference in style used to present these stories. Whereas Nehemiah is an educated man and presents his own thoughts in an elegant style, he spells Dessa’s story differently to represent her dialect and begins with “... I work the field and neva goes round the House, neitha House niggas” (18). It quickly becomes clear that Nehemiah feels superior to Dessa and dehumanizes her, as he refers to her as “the darky” whose execution is postponed “until after she whelped” and he refers to her lover Kaine as a “young buck” (17, 22, 20).

The content of Dessa’s story is also filtered through Nehemiah’s perspective, as “he deciphered the darky’s account from his hastily scratched notes and he reconstructed it in his journal as though he remembered it word for word” (18). At this point, Nehemiah has full control over Dessa’s story as he reconstructs it. This reconstruction is not a direct representation of what Dessa told him, since Nehemiah “hadn’t caught every word; often he had puzzled overlong at some unfamiliar idiom or phrase, now and then losing the tale in the welter of names the darky called” (18). Nehemiah tries to find the reason behind Dessa’s attack of her master and the slave coffle rebellion in order to share them with the readers of his book, but when he has “uncovered” the circumstances of Dessa’s attack, he does not believe her. He “[hesitates]; the ‘facts’ sounded like some kind of fantastical fiction” (39). Dessa has told him that her owner had smashed her lover’s banjo and that her lover, Kaine, therefore attacked him. Her owner then killed Kaine and Dessa attacked her owner. Nehemiah “didn’t for a minute believe that was all there was to the young buck’s attack on his master – a busted banjo!” (39).

Nehemiah does not believe Dessa either when she tells him about her mistress who accused Dessa of being pregnant with her owner’s baby. At first Nehemiah is surprised by what Dessa tells him, as “there had been no hint of anything like this in the court records” (41). Nehemiah calls the story about the mistress “bad business,” but decides not to believe

Dessa's story as he "[remembers] the darky's playfulness that afternoon" and "[finds] himself rather unwilling to credit her confession." He decides to believe that she must be "exaggerating ... egged on, perhaps, by the young buck's example and her own nerve in attacking the master" (42). Though Dessa's stories force him to pause his writing and reflect, Nehemiah is not strongly affected by her stories. He does not condemn a white man for taking advantage of his female slave as "a man must ... have some outlet for the baser passions" though he "[believes] that a race could not long prosper that sowed its seed so profligately" (42). He ends his diary entry enthusiastically by writing that in "one, perhaps two more sessions ... I will have learned all I need from her," that he will "have to think of a provocative title for the section in which I deal with the general principles apparent in her participation in this bloody business," and that "[t]ruly, the female of his species is as deadly as the male" (43). Ashraf Rushdy argues that Nehemiah's reconstruction of Dessa's story is "imaginary" and "willful" as Nehemiah "appropriates Dessa's story in order to incorporate it into a text containing an agenda for sustaining the present political program" (Rushdy 370). Furthermore, Rushdy argues that Nehemiah's reconstruction of Dessa's story is William's "critique" of Styron's version of Nat Turner's story in his novel (369).

Nehemiah's interviews with Dessa are a battle between "oppressive literacy and an emancipatory orality" (Rushdy 366). Dessa participates in this battle during the interviews as she both cannot and does not answer all Nehemiah's questions. As Nehemiah speculates that one of the slaves in the slave coffle used a file and asks Dessa about it, Dessa does not answer him since the slaves had not used a file to break free. She comes to realize that "the white man did not expect her to answer", as he moves quickly from question to question while Dessa is still trying to figure out what the previous question meant (Williams 56). Instead of telling Nehemiah the details of the attack on her owner and the rebellion of the slave coffle directly, Dessa tells him about the slaves on the plantation and the things that matter to her. Nehemiah gradually realizes that Dessa's stories about Kaine are "not wholly tangential to the events of the coffle" and that "mention of the buck was the key to getting the darky to talk" (40).

The struggle to "[gain] narrative control over one's story" continues throughout the novel (Rushdy 367). The division of the novel into three parts – "The Darky," "The Wench" and "The Negress" – slowly gives Dessa more room for her version of events and her thoughts. Nehemiah generally refers to Dessa as "Odessa" or "the darky" and there is little room in this first part of the novel for Dessa's flashbacks and contemplations in between Nehemiah's diary entries and perspective. By renaming Dessa "Odessa," Nehemiah "[imposes]" his "definitions" on her and asserts his superiority (McKible 232). Dessa shares

the spotlight in the second part of the novel with Ruth, who mostly refers to Dessa as “the wench” and later as “Odessa.” Dessa has complete control over the final part of the novel, “The Negress,” however, as indicated by the fact that the events are presented from her first-person perspective and are narrated by Dessa. When, at the end of the novel, Dessa tells Ruth that “my name Dessa, Dessa Rose. Ain’t no O to it” (Williams 232), she takes complete control over her identity and story and “rewrites her narrative” (McKible 233). Dessa’s version of her story stays alive as she passes it on to her children and they to theirs, creating an oral tradition. Decades later, she says in the epilogue that she has “told that West part so often, these childrens about know it by heart” and “Mony tell it to his babies like the memories was his, stead of things he heard when he was coming up” (Williams, 236).

This struggle for narrative control also occurs in the representation of the past in general. According to Adam McKible, “historiography ... is a place of struggle” and history books often only present one version of events that “a dominant culture tells about itself,” while other versions and smaller cultures are pushed aside (McKible 224). McKible further argues that characters in slavery novels often find themselves on the sideline of society and by calling attention to this state, novels raise “a consciousness that defies the purported truthfulness of History, a perspective that envisions Truth as a fictionalized assemblage and erasure of events rather than as a factual representation of actual social or historical relations” (224).

Besides the struggle for control over the text, there are but a few instances in which Dessa shows overt forms of rebellion or physical agency while she is a working slave up until she attacks her owner on the plantation. However, this does not mean that the slaves on the plantation have no agency; their acts of rebellion may be small and are restricted by slavery, but they are reflections of their agency. These acts of agency are connected to love and family relationships and are shown in Dessa’s stories and flashbacks to her life on the plantation. These flashbacks are centered around the slaves she lives and works with and consist mostly of conversations she overheard or had with her family or Kaine. In Nehemiah’s first diary entry, he writes that Dessa told him that “[Kaine] chosed [her]. Masa ain’t had nothing to do wid it” (19). Dessa tells that her owner usually decided which slaves should form a couple and he wanted them to produce as many slaves as possible for his own profit, either to sell or to work. However, the slaves still try to choose for themselves; an example of this is the story Dessa tells of Monroe, who had fallen in love with a slave woman from another plantation and kept trying to meet her, though his owner forbid it since “Master didn’t like the men planting his seeds in the neighbors’ gardens” (33). The slaves also try to practice

anticonception and cause miscarriages in order to keep their children from becoming slaves and being sold away (46).

Dessa Rose is similar to Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in its focus on the slave community. Whereas Douglass's slave narrative in general focuses on himself as a self-reliant individual, Jacobs's and Dessa's stories focus on family and community. Dessa's story goes even one step further than Jacobs, as she is rarely on her own. She is either in conversation in the present or has flashbacks to conversations in the past. Even in her prison cell, she is accompanied by others, since "[a]lways, whether her eyes were open or closed, Kaine walked with her, or mammy." She feels the presence of her family who "sat with her in the cellar. She grieved in this presence as she had not done since their loss" (53-54).

Another similarity between *Dessa Rose* and *Incidents* lies in the description of the sexual exploitation of female slaves. As argued previously, Jacobs's narrative was one of the first narratives to describe the sexual victimization of female slaves in some detail, though still in veiled terms. This veil is cast aside in *Dessa Rose*. In his first diary entry Nehemiah relates the story Dessa told him about changing tasks at the plantation. When Kaine tries to move Dessa from working in the fields to working in the house to be closer to him, Aunt Lefonia points out that the owners would not allow this move as Dessa is "too light for Mist's and not light enough for Masa" (18). According to Aunt Lefonia, the mistress fears the master will sleep with the light-coloured slaves as he did before his marriage and the mistress therefore only allows dark-coloured or older female slaves in the house. The mistress refuses Kaine's request to move Dessa to the house after she has seen Dessa, which leads to the conclusion that the mistress fears Dessa's appearance would attract the master's interest. Although Dessa is a field slave and therefore has less contact with her master than house slaves, this story suggests that the master was likely to take advantage of female house slaves.

Also, after Dessa's master has killed Kaine, the mistress assumes that her husband had done so because he is the father of Dessa's child. She vindictively tells Dessa that at least her husband "live knowing his slut and his bastid south in worsen slavery than they ever thought of" (41). Dessa's mistress is similar to Harriet Jacobs's mistress who also suspects that Harriet is her husband's slave concubine. As the mistress's jealousy and watchfulness increase, Jacobs "began to be fearful for [her own] life" (Jacobs 166). Jacobs rebels against her owners by taking a white lover and thus shows her agency. Though Dessa is in a similar situation as Jacobs, she acts differently. After her mistress insults her, Dessa tries to attack her, and thus

reacts in a more violent manner than Jacobs. Dessa tries to fight, and therefore shows a form of agency that is more similar to that of male slaves like Douglass and Northup.

Although Dessa and Jacobs handle similar situations differently, what remains the same is that both are owned by white men who therefore have power over them. The power white owners have over their female slaves is shown in *Dessa Rose* through Ruth's memory of a conversation with her black servant Mammy. Ruth at first does not believe that white men would take advantage of female slaves when her servant Ada tells her she tried to save her daughter Annabelle from this fate. However, when Ruth tells this "lie" to Mammy, a slave who is more important to her than her own mother, Mammy surprisingly reprimands her and tells her that "men can do things a *lady* can't even guess at" (92). The novel also shows that white men are not the only ones taking advantage of their slaves, as the slave Nathan tells Ruth that his unmarried owner Miz Lorraine took advantage of her male slaves. This mistress slept with slave men because she had power over them and "she would have had no way of ensuring [white men's] silence" (156).

Jacobs would not have been able to share similar scenes described in such detail in her narratives, as the dominant Victorian morals at the time of the publication of *Incidents* would have prevented white audiences from reading her narrative. In *Dessa Rose*, Nehemiah does suggest that white females might be interested in this aspect of slavery. Nehemiah has come in contact with Miss Janet, a woman he admires for her fine taste and luxurious life style, and relates that Miss Janet "was eloquent on the subject of slave concubinage, charging that the practice was an affront to white womanhood" (42). Dessa does not think so highly of white ladies, as she ridicules the stereotypical behaviour of a white female in Nehemiah's first diary entry. Whereas her own reaction to Kaine being slain by his owner was to attack her owner, Dessa thinks that, "[w]as I white, I might woulda fainted when Emmalina told me Masa done gone upside Kaine head" (17). Kaine has told her that "that how Mist's act up at the House when Masa or jes any lil thang don't be goin to suit her" and that he laughs "to hear how one lil sickly white woman turn a House that big upside down" (21). Dessa cannot imagine her family and friends "comin, runnin and fannin and car'in on, askin, what wrong?" (21). This shows that Dessa does not consider this notion of femininity to apply to her.

Although Dessa's gender influences her perspective on slavery and her story has similarities with Jacobs's narrative, Dessa also engages in physical forms of agency that are only found in male slave narratives. Like Douglass and Northup, Dessa participates in physical fights in her narrative and the emotions she feels during these fights are described in a similar manner to those of Douglass and Northup. When Dessa is given room to tell her

story and share her thoughts while she is staying in Ruth's house, she describes an instance in which she came close to fighting. After Dessa discovers that Ruth and Ned are having an affair, Dessa is so shocked and angry that she "[shakes] with feeling" with "the flash that'd nelly-bout killed Master and almost strangled Mistress, that rode me in the fight on the coffle" (184). This type of emotion "was a bloodhound in my throat, a monster that didn't seem to know enemy nor friend, wouldn't know the difference once it got loose" (184). In comparison, when Douglass is attacked by Covey, he "[resolves] to fight" without knowing where the "spirit" to do so comes from (Douglass 77); and when Northup is attacked by Tibeats, he describes that "[his] fear changed to anger, and before he reached me I had made up my mind fully not to be whipped, let the result be life or death" (80). However, compared with Douglass and Northup, Dessa experiences this feeling more often and also acts upon it more often. Whereas Douglass and Northup only act violently towards their master when they are physically attacked, the verbal insults of Dessa's mistress and seeing Ruth and Nathan also sparks Dessa's anger and violent outbreak.

Dessa participates in more fights than Northup and Douglass do in their narratives. She attacks her owner on the plantation, participates in the slave coffle rebellion, and fights when the escaped coffle slaves are discovered. These fights took place in the past and are viewed through memories and stories that characters tell. Dessa's participation in these fights in the past, and especially the fight at the discovery of the escaped slave coffle, has given her the reputation of a "fiend" and "devil woman" (21); and according to Nehemiah, when he first approached her she was "biting, scratching, spitting, a wildcat" (23). Though Dessa is pregnant during these fights, this does not hinder her. She does not care about her own or her baby's life at this point, as she believes that "after what they had done, someone had to be free" (60) and "she had fought fiercely hoping by the strength of their resistance to provoke them into killing her (62). As Dessa is not concerned with staying alive during these first fights, she is able to be more violent than the historical figures who narrated slave narratives and were concerned with staying alive and gaining freedom.

In conclusion, Dessa's agency is a combination of both stereotypical female and male forms of agency, a combination only possible in fiction in the late twentieth century when black authors were writing back and were creating fictional versions of the past that spoke to the post-Civil Rights Era's ideology which insisted that slaves and blacks' in general were not simply victims, but people who were determined to shape their own lives. While the black woman in the historical account is hanged, Dessa significantly takes control of her life, survives, and is able to tell her own story.

Chapter 5: Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*

The recent film adaptation of Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* placed the narrative in the spotlight and reintroduced it to a large audience, but the film also presents a particular perspective on the narrative. This perspective is the twenty-first-century perspective of a British film director with slave ancestry, Steve McQueen, and his team. Though the film stays close to the narrative in many respects, changes were also made. As with many film adaptations, parts of the narrative were cut and new scenes were added in order to make the narrative suitable for film and attractive for audiences. However, McQueen made some surprising moves in his film adaptation. Whereas Gordon Parks, the director of the earlier TV film adaptation of the narrative, *Solomon Northup's Odyssey* (1984), weakened the violence in the narrative in order "to make it bearable for people to look at" (Bennetts), McQueen dwells on the violence in the narrative, which has evoked mixed responses. Also, the characters were made more complex as they express their awareness of the horrible situation they are in, are no longer simply heroes or villains, and have different degrees of agency. This chapter will explore the effect of the changes McQueen made to the characters' agency in Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* and argue that McQueen's film emphasises and exaggerates the harsh conditions of slavery described in the narrative. As audiences are shown why the agency of the characters is limited, they cannot help but feel for the characters who live in this aggressive environment and appreciate the limited agency characters are able to show. I will analyze the effect of the changes made to the narrative by comparing scenes in the narrative and the film; and among the changes made by McQueen, I will emphasise those that most directly affect the characters' agency.

The opening scenes already show changes made to the narrative. Whereas the narrative presents Northup's story in a chronological order and starts with Northup's ancestors and life as a free man, the film starts in the middle of the narrative when Northup is working on Judge Turner's sugarcane plantation and shows instances of his life as a slave. No explanation is given and the title of the film has not yet been shown; only a statement precedes the scene, claiming that "This film is based on a true story." This statement replaces David Wilson's introduction of the narrative and the paratext. Modern audiences no longer require or expect an introduction or proof to verify the account of a black man. However, the statements still work as a means of verification as it now helps distinguish fictional and non-fictional tales, and adds value to the latter. When watching a film adaptation of a non-fictional narrative, modern audiences expect both this statement and an indication or explanation

during the first scene that shows where and when the scene takes place. This information is not given and confuses viewers, but according to Miriam Thaggert this is the intended effect of the scene. Thaggert mentions an interview with McQueen in which he is asked about the beginning of the film and McQueen “[noted] a need to disarm, to startle the viewer” (Thaggert 332) and “de-familiarize the contemporary filmgoer’s ideas about slavery, muted from years of sanitized depictions of the ‘peculiar institution’” (333). The opening scenes and the film as a whole show what slavery was like, how it was part of the normal life of many people, and therefore did not need an explanation. Meanwhile, they aim to make modern audiences realize how unnatural and strange it was to live in or around slavery (333).

The first scenes of the film can be divided into three parts that seem to have no direct connection to each other. This division into three parts is made on the basis of the locations of the scenes: at a sugarcane plantation, around a slave cabin and in a comfortable-looking bed. As Northup is not yet introduced by name or as a free man abducted into slavery, it seems strange that the scenes take place in very different locations, but though these scenes seem unconnected they are important in the plot. Viewers realize the importance of the scenes as they are repeated later in the film. The opening scenes are followed by the film title, after which Northup’s life and abduction into slavery are shown in chronological order and for several scenes indications of place and time are given. When the opening scenes are repeated, viewers both recognize the scenes and are able to attribute meaning to the scenes because of the context they have been given since the opening title was shown. With the aid of this context, viewers realize that the first scene in which Northup and other slaves are instructed how to work at the sugarcane plantation is one of the many instructions and orders Northup receives which he has to follow and which are overseen by white males. A similar scene has appeared before in which the slaves receive instructions from Tibeats. Viewers also know now that Northup is not Judge Tanner’s property, but is hired out by Epps after Epps’s cotton is ruined by a caterpillar plague. The next of the introductory scenes, when Northup, while eating his dinner on a veranda of a slave cabin, discovers that the berries on his plate contain a dark fluid that can be used as ink with a self-made pen, has more meaning when viewers have seen how hard Northup has had to work to be able to steal a sheet of paper and how much depends on the letter, as he hopes it will lead to his rescue from slavery. In the last of these scenes, Northup has a sexual encounter with a woman while lying on a floor of a room filled with sleeping slaves. After seeing Northup’s life as a free man, viewers realize the next scene as Northup’s flashback to lying in bed with his wife in his own home.

Whereas the first two scenes follow the historical narrative, the third scene in which a woman initiates a sexual encounter with Northup after which she turns her back to him and cries was created for the film. In a discussion about the film with the historian Eric Foner, Steve McQueen, and others in the *New York Times*, Foner argued that “there is no place for ... a discussion [of Northup’s sexual relations in the narrative] because of the purpose of the book” to convince readers that slavery is horrible and should be abolished. McQueen explained that he incorporated this scene into the narrative in order to give the woman some “tenderness” and “control over her own body” for a short amount of time (“An Essentially”). The unnamed woman is able to reclaim some of her agency which is repressed by slavery, but this is short-lived. This scene seems intended to show more of what Toni Morrison terms the “interior life” of slaves (Morrison 91), which is left out of autobiographical slave narratives in order for the authors to appear as objective narrators (87). Stephanie Li therefore argues that this scene fits the genre of the neo-slave narrative, the contemporary genre that includes violent, tragic or emotional elements that were left out of or only hinted at in autobiographical slave narratives (Li 327). Besides showing the interior life of slaves, Li argues, the scene “affirms black female sexuality even as it emphasises Northup’s powerlessness” as he can do nothing to truly comfort this woman (327).

Following the scene of Northup and the unnamed woman is a shot of Northup and his wife lying in their bed. Though the scenes are similar, as they show a man and woman in a sleeping position at night, they show the contrast between the life of a slave and a free person. Whereas Northup and his wife are named later in the film and their marriage was legal, the unnamed slave woman does not appear in other scenes and would not have been able to have a legal relationship or marriage with a black or white male. The film contains more of these mirroring scenes showing similar events in both freedom and slavery, though not all immediately follow each other like the sleeping scenes do. For example, as a free man, Northup is seen happily tuning his violin and playing at a dance, and he smiles while receiving applause. As a slave, Northup directly starts tuning the violin given to him as a reward by master Ford, and when he is Epps’s property plays at a dance in Louisiana. However, there is no applause for Northup or reason to smile, and he clearly looks unhappy. McQueen’s use of repetition and mirroring scenes show the clashes between life in slavery and freedom and clearly aim at an emotional effect on viewers.

The unnamed woman and Northup are not the only characters whose interior lives are shown. Both slaves and slave owners are given more room to express their thoughts and emotions than in the historical narrative, and, as McQueen alters parts of the narrative, the

characters become much more complex. For example, the benevolence of Master Ford, who is the most humane master Northup has in the narrative, is called into question. The film first develops the notion that Ford has a benevolent nature, as he tries to buy both Eliza and her children at Eliza's request, holds peaceful sermons for his slaves in a flower-filled garden, gives Northup a violin as a reward for finding a way to transport lumber over water, and frees Northup from the ropes with which Tibeats had tried to hang Northup, while Chapin, Mrs. Ford and other slaves left Northup hanging all day. Part of these scenes have their origin in the narrative, as Ford is described as a "kind, noble, candid, Christian man" (62). Though described as not being able to see the moral wrong of slavery, he was "a model master, walking uprightly, according to the light of his understanding, and fortunate was the slave who came to his possession" (62). Northup was fond of Ford and thought of telling Ford about his free-born status, but never carried out this plan. However, not all scenes that include or mention Ford have their origin in the narrative. Alterations to the narrative and new scenes show both Ford's benevolent side and his evil side, and the latter slowly change Northup's perspective of him. At first, a benevolent side of Ford that does not exist in the narrative is shown, as Ford did not give Northup his violin in the narrative; Mrs. Epps makes Epps buy Northup a violin so that Northup can play for her, "mistress being passionately fond of music" (Northup 137). More details from the narrative are attributed to Ford, as Ford watches over Northup while he is sleeping in the hallway after Tibeats attempt to hang him. In the narrative, it is not Ford but Chapin who looks out for Northup that night, as Chapin tells Northup to "sleep on the floor in the great house to-night" and that "[he believes] ... that scoundrel is skulking about the premises somewhere. If the dog barks again, and I am sleeping, wake me" (90). Ford's watching over Northup in the film and telling him that Tibeats is somewhere near confirms the benevolent image Northup has of Ford in the narrative.

The rest of the scene in which Northup is lying in the hallway of Ford's house has no origin in the narrative and continues with Ford telling Northup that "It is no longer safe for you here." Ford also tries to save Northup from himself, as "[he knows] that [Northup] will not remain passive under Tibeats' attacks" and fighting back would cost Northup his life. However, a less benevolent side of Ford is shown when Ford replies to Northup telling him about his past as a free man. As Northup tells Ford, "You must know I am not a slave," Ford replies "I cannot hear that." Northup even tells Ford that "Before I came to you I was a free man," but Ford replies: "I'm trying to save your life. I have a debt to be mindful of and that is to Edwin Epps," the man to whom he has just sold Northup. Ford attaches greater value to his financial debt to Epps than to Northup's fate. The question arises whether Ford would have

helped Northup if he had told Ford about his past earlier, if this reply is the result of Ford's financial troubles, or whether Northup would in any case have been too valuable to lose for a slave owner, even one as kind as Ford.

Whether Ford does not want or is not able to help Northup remains unclear as the scene continues and Ford tells Northup that he has sold him to Epps. Ford has sold Northup to protect him from Tibeats. However, this sale has no further benefits for Northup as his new owner Epps is known to be a "hard man who prides himself on being a nigger breaker." Ford justifies his actions by saying that he "could find no other who would take [Northup]," as Northup "made a reputation of [himself]." Though Northup's reputation is not explained in the scene, it is included in the narrative. After the fight with Tibeats, Northup is aware that this has given him the reputation of being "a devil of a nigger" (Northup 93) and when Northup is hired out to Peter Tanner, Tanner asks him, "You're the nigger that kicks, and holds carpenter Tibeats by the leg, and wallops him, are ye?" and warns Northup not to do the same to him because it will lead to severe punishment (94). Northup's ability to fight Tibeats is even more impressive in the narrative, as Tibeats is Northup's master at the time of their fight. These details are left out of the film, probably to focus on the contrast between Northup's life as Ford's slave and as Epps's slave.

Another detail from the narrative that includes Ford and is not shown in the film is Northup's second fight with Tibeats, after which he flees and travels through the swamp to Ford's house. Northup's last meeting with Ford is one in which Ford comes to Northup's aid by returning with him to Tibeats and treating him kindly. The last scene that Northup and Ford share in the film is the scene in the hallway, which ends with Ford telling Northup that "[he is] an exceptional nigger but [Ford fears] no good will come of that." Though this conversation in the film is new, it affirms what is shown in the narrative: that it is dangerous for a slave to stand up for himself and show agency. At the same time, this scene also allows Northup to show more agency than he does in the narrative, as Northup only thinks of telling Ford about his free-born status in the narrative, but never actually does so.

Northup's conversation with Ford in the hallway is not the first new scene in which Northup sees a different side of Ford. In another new scene in the film, a discussion between Eliza and Northup about the way she deals with the loss of her children results in a discussion of their lives as slaves and of their master Ford. Eliza and Northup discuss Eliza's losses in the narrative, but Eliza does not judge Ford or call out Northup for trying to please Ford. She asks Northup whether he remembers her children and she is described as already "[having] sunk beneath the weight of her excessive grief" when Northup sees her (77). Eliza has not yet

reached that point in the narrative, as Northup warns her that if she continues to cry she will be “overcome by sorrow” and “drown in them.” Eliza has much more agency in the film, as she asks Northup whether he has stopped crying for his children and why he wants her to stop crying for her children. She asks Northup: “Do I upset the master and mistress? You care less about my loss than their well-being?.” Northup defends Ford and tells Eliza that he “will keep myself ardent until freedom is opportune,” but Eliza questions Northup’s faith in Ford by saying, “You think [Ford] does not know that you are more than you suggest. But he does nothing for you, nothing. You are no better than prized livestock.” Northup becomes upset as Eliza asks him whether he has “settled into [his] role as Platt,” and he replies that “[his] back is thick with scars of protesting [his] freedom.” Eliza breaks down as she says “I’ve done dishonorable things to survive, and for all of that I ended up here, no better than if I had stood up for myself” and continues crying as she says “Solomon, let me weep for my children,” and he lets her. According to Stauffer, Northup’s conversation with Eliza shows that “[Northup] manages the horror of slavery and the loss of his family” as he says “I survive” (Stauffer 319). He does not continually show his despair and survives slavery, whereas Eliza is removed from the house to work in the fields because her constant crying upsets the mistress. The narrative indicates that Eliza dies in slavery in the Red River area with a heart “[broken] by the burden of maternal sorrow” (Northup 32).

Eliza’s mistrust of Ford proves to be justified, as Ford does not want to hear about Northup’s past and sells him to Epps. Whereas this discussion in the narrative is focused on Eliza’s loss and sorrow, the film also incorporates the idea of survival into the scene. Survival has been mentioned before both in the narrative and in the film when Northup discussed his possibilities with other slaves while on the steamboat. Northup and his interlocutor in the narrative believe that “death was far less terrible than the living prospect that was before [them]” and they therefore talk about “the possibilities of escape” (Northup 44). The film offers more strategies for survival, as one of the slaves says, “If you want to survive, do and say as little as possible” since “survival is ... about keeping your head down” and another proposes to fight the crew of the steamboat. At this point, Northup rejects the notion of keeping his head down, as he says “I don’t want to survive, I want to live.” However, when Northup and Eliza discuss Northup’s perspective of Ford while both live as slaves, it becomes clear that both have kept their head down in the hope that they will survive their current circumstances and will find themselves in better circumstances eventually. Northup “will keep [himself] ardent until freedom is opportune” and Eliza “[has] done dishonorable things to survive, and for all of that I ended up here, no better than if I had stood up for myself.”

Though Eliza has more agency in the film than in the historical narrative, she is also similar to the character in the narrative in that she is crying in most of her scenes on Ford's plantation. Her constant crying is also the reason she is sent away from Ford's house to work in the fields, as her show of sorrow displeases Mistress Ford. As the film incorporates not only Eliza's expressions of grief from the narrative but also those expressions by Northup and other characters, Deborah McDowell argues that "one of the film's most insistent and arresting sounds is that of human wailing" (McDowell 377). These sounds affect the audience, and McDowell argues that "in giving so much visual and sonic space to the mournful and melancholic—*forlorn looks, grieving eyes, audible sobs*—McQueen allows us to consider slavery's devastating hold on the emotional lives of the enslaved" (McDowell 379).

Northup's conditions as a slave become more restricted after he arrives at Epps's plantation. Like Ford, Epps considers agency to be dangerous, but whereas Ford expresses this idea directly to Northup, Epps cites from the Bible and uses violence to inculcate the idea. Epps is introduced in the film through the sermon he gives, in which he uses quotes from the Bible to justify the punishment of slaves when they do not obey their masters. Whereas Ford has proven to be less of a benign character than Northup initially thought, there is a clear contrast between Epps's sermon and the sermon that Ford gave earlier. Ford read from his Bible while standing in his garden surrounded by flowers while his slaves sat on benches, whereas Epps stands on the veranda of his house during his sermon while his slaves stand below him around the bottom of the stairs that lead to the veranda. Interestingly, not Epps but Peter Tanner delivers this sermon in the narrative. Again, the lines of one character in the narrative are ascribed to another in the film. In Epps's case, the newly ascribed details fit the generally cruel nature of the character in the historical narrative, as Northup describes Epps as "[having] the faculty of saying most provoking things, in that respect even excelling old Peter Tanner" (122) and as a mean drunk "whose chief delight was in . . . lashing [his slaves] about the yard with his longwhip, just for the pleasure of hearing them screech and scream, as the great welts were planted on their backs" (122). The audience also already knows Epps is a cruel and immoral character before they see him deliver his sermon, as Ford has warned Northup about Epps in the previous scene.

There are many more instances in the film that show the violence directed towards slaves. Most of these scenes originate in the historical narrative and John Stauffer argues that the film "interprets them in compelling ways" that "capture the psychology of slavery even better than the book" (Stauffer 320). The example Stauffer gives is the scene in which Northup is nearly hanged by Tibbeats and two companions. In the narrative, Tibbeats ties

Northup and places a noose around his neck; as Northup narrates, “they were dragging me towards the tree, Chapin ... came out of the house and walked towards us” and stops Tibeats from hanging Northup (Northup 83). As Tibeats leaves and Chapin returns to the house, Northup is left to stand in the burning sun, “the rope still dangling from [his] neck” and he “could not move an inch, so firmly had [he] been bound” (86). Northup considers lying down “but knew [he] could not rise again,” and he therefore remains standing at the place the men left him (86). He stands there from around noon to dusk, when Ford arrives to cut his cords. In the film, however, Chapin interrupts the hanging when the cord around Northup’s neck has been placed over a tree branch and the men have lifted Northup off the ground. When Chapin starts to speak with the men, Northup is dropped a little and he can reach the ground with his toes. This position is extremely uncomfortable, as Northup can barely breathe and has to tiptoe in the soft ground. According to Stauffer, “[Northup] clearly suffers, but the book obscures the image of his suffering, whereas the film clarifies it, turning it into a central metaphor of the slave experience” (Stauffer 321).

After the men leave Northup in his uncomfortable position, the slaves that had hid in their houses during the confrontation return to their duties and walk around, paying no attention to Northup. One slave comes up to quickly give Northup something to drink, and children play in the grass behind him. Chapin and Mrs. Ford watch Northup for an instant from the veranda of Ford’s house, but the scene consists mostly of long shots of Northup hanging from the tree, accompanied by the sounds of Northup gasping for air and bugs humming. According to Miriam Thaggert, “physical violence as well as lengthy, extended scenes” add to the viewer’s feeling of “unease” that is evoked throughout the film (Thaggert 335), as the film shows the “desensitization to violence in antebellum America” and how people were used to the dehumanizing treatment of slaves (334). The slaves that walk around Northup while he is hanging from the tree and pay no attention to him are in the scene to show that “this type of punishment was seen by the people of the time as recurrent and perpetual” (335).

Another violent scene that stands out in the film is Patsey’s whipping. This scene is also based on the historical narrative and the explicit way in which the whipping is shown has shocked many viewers. There is no sound in the scene except for the discourse, Patsey’s screams, and humming bugs. While Northup whips Patsey, Patsey’s expressions are shown in close-up and the back of her naked body is shown as Epps whips her and scars her back. Whereas in the narrative Epps only threatens to punish Northup if he does not continue flogging Patsey, Epps pulls a gun on Northup in the film and threatens “to kill every nigger in

[his] sight” if Northup does not continue whipping. When Northup accuses Northup of being a “devil” and committing a sin, Epps replies that “There is no sin. A man does how he pleases with his property.” Patsey’s treatment after the whipping is described in the narrative and is visualized by McQueen in a silent, but powerful way. The scene consists of a shot of Patsey’s bloody back, close-ups of Patsey’s face as her wounds are being treated and shots of Northup looking at Patsey’s back while other slaves in the room are looking at the ground. The only sound heard is Patsey’s crying. As Patsey looks up to Northup, a single tear drops from his eye. Stephanie Li argues that “McQueen’s execution of the scene reminds us of the unspeakable emotions that coexist with such unrelenting violence as well as Northup’s inability to alleviate Patsey’s suffering” (Li 329).

In the scene that follows Patsey’s whipping, one of the strings of Northup’s violin snaps when he tries to tune it. He is so upset that he smashes the violin to pieces. This last scene does not take place in the narrative, nor does the scene in which Northup carves the names of his wife and children into the violin. Northup would probably not have smashed so valuable an object that allowed him to earn some money and that is described as a “companion” in the narrative (Northup 166), but the scene does show Northup’s interior life and translates his emotions without using words. Northup releases his anger and helplessness at Patsey’s suffering by violently smashing his violin to the ground.

Patsey’s punishment is a result of the relationship Epps has with her, as he becomes jealous when she visits another plantation. Mistress Epps’s jealousy of Patsey also results in violence; as “the jealousy and hatred of Mistress Epps made the daily life of the young and agile slave completely miserable” (194-195). Patsey is therefore described in the narrative as “the enslaved victim of lust and hate” (143). In the film, McQueen focuses on the complex relationship between Epps, Patsey and Mrs. Epps. Whereas the narrative left the nature of Epps’s relationship with Patsey ambiguous, the film includes a scene in which Epps leads Patsey away from the slave quarters in the middle of the night and rapes her.

Both Mrs. Epps and Patsey play prominent parts in the film, which shows many instances of Mistress Epps’s jealousy and cruelty and Patsey’s suffering that are described in the narrative. For example, the narrative states that Patsey had to be careful when she walked around the plantation because “a billet of wood, or a broken bottle perhaps, hurled from her mistress’ hand, would smite her unexpectedly in the face” (143). This is shown in the film, as Mistress Epps throws a bottle at Patsey during one of the midnight dances the slaves are forced to perform under the order of Epps, who is clearly drunk. In the narrative, Mrs. Epps “often upbraided him” but “nevertheless, there were times she could not restrain a burst of

laughter on witnessing his uproarious pranks” during the dances (137). However, in the film, Mrs. Epps also forces the slaves to dance and argues with Epps about selling Patsey in front of the slaves. When Mr. Epps dismisses Mrs. Epps’s claim that Patsey gave her a foul look, Mrs. Epps asks her husband that “If you won’t stand up to me I pray at least you’ll be a credit to your own kind and beat every foul thought from them.” The slaves stand around silently while this discussion takes place and they cannot defend Patsey or react to Mistress Epps’s insults, as this would lead to punishment.

Mrs. Epps is described in the narrative as “a woman with much in her character to admire” and though “she was possessed with the devil, jealousy,” “she was kind to all of us but Patsey” (151). However, in the film, only instances of her cruelty towards slaves are shown. Mrs. Epps is made to appear even more cruel as one of Epps’s sayings in the narrative is attributed to her, when she tells Northup “that [Epps] bought ‘niggers’ to work and not to educate” (175), thus making both husband and wife figures who restrict Northup’s agency at the Epps plantation.

While Mrs. Epps is shown to be more cruel in the film, Patsey is given more agency. In the narrative Mrs. Epps “tempted [Northup] with bribes to put [Patsey] secretly to death, and bury her body in some lonely place in the margin of the swamp” (143), but in the film Patsey herself asks Northup to kill her. Northup does not understand how Patsey has become so desperate, but Patsey replies, “How can you not. I have no comfort in this life.” Stauffer argues that this change has been made “in order to dramatize the psychology of slavery” and that “suicide is also a form of rebellion” (320). However, Patsey is not able to rebel without help, as she asks Northup to kill her and to “Do what I ain’t got the strength to do myself.” Patsey will not gain the strength to commit suicide, as this scene is followed by the scene in which she is brutally whipped and her spirit is crushed.

Interestingly, in the film, Northup has the most agency of the male slaves, as the film does not include the narrative’s stories of other slaves’ failed attempts to escape or the extreme punishment they received after refusing orders. The scenes in which Northup shows agency are taken from the narrative and include Northup’s discussion and fight with Tibbeats, creating a pen and ink, and writing a letter at night. Not all instances in which Northup shows agency in the narrative are included, as some of his attempts to escape are left out of the film. For example, the scene in which a sailor agrees to post a letter that Northup has written on the steamer is not included, nor is the scene in which Northup asks a captain of a boat to hide him and bring him North. A literal adaptation of the novel to film would result in hours of film and empty cinemas, as audiences would not have the time or patience to watch such a film.

According to Stauffer, McQueen has “altered details from the book” and “has compressed the plot [of the narrative] in order to heighten the emotional and psychological drama” (Stauffer 321).

Throughout the film, McQueen focuses on Northup’s agency and emphasises the restrictions of his agency by slavery. New scenes are added to the film that show the restricted conditions Northup is living in and his helplessness, as he can do nothing to change them. Some of these scenes are based on details mentioned in the narrative, for example the scene that takes place on the steamboat that transports the slaves south. One of the slaves on the steamboat, who previously advocated fighting the crew of the boat in order to escape, is stabbed by a white man on the steamboat when he tries to prevent the man from taking Eliza away to rape her. According to Li, there is little chance that this could have truly happened, as slaves were valuable and the sailor would suffer the consequences of such an act (Li 328). However, this scene does show that rebellion is dangerous and can end badly and that simply surviving in slavery is not a sign of passivity as it is sometimes made out to be.

The difficulty of rebellion in slavery is also shown in the scene in which Northup tries to escape into the woods while he is on an errand for Mrs. Epps. After leaving the road, he comes upon a clearing in which some white men are about to hang two black men. After checking Northup’s pass the white men let Northup walk away, but as he is walking away, the two black men can be seen over Northup’s shoulder while they choke to death. This scene does not originate in the historical narrative, though it includes elements mentioned in the narrative. Patrollers are mentioned in the narrative as “[having] a right, either by law, or by general consent, to inflict discretionary chastisement upon a black man caught beyond the boundaries of his master’s estate without a pass, and even to shoot him, if he attempts to escape” and an explanation is given about the way they work (Northup 181). Besides the patrollers, “any white man” can “[seize] and [whip]” a slave he finds on the road without a pass. Mostly “unmistakable [loafers]” check slave passes since “catching runaways is sometimes a money-making business” (118). Like the previously mentioned scene of the stabbing on the steamboat, there is but a small chance that this scene in the film could have really happened, as the patrollers or “any white man” would not be allowed to kill slaves without their owners’ consent. As it is mentioned in the narrative that the slave owners paid the patrollers for their work, killing a slave would be equal to stealing property. However, this scene does show Northup’s helplessness as helping these men would certainly lead to his own death, and how difficult and dangerous it was to escape, as there are patrollers in the area who can treat slaves violently.

McQueen's film adaptation thus emphasises the restricted conditions slaves encounter. Not all of Northup's attempts to escape are shown, but because of the film's portrayal of extreme violence in slavery, the attempts that are shown look more brave as viewers are shown how dangerous it is to rebel. In the narrative, Northup's education and intelligence sometimes give him an advantage compared to other slaves, of which one example is the fish trap he invents. Northup is not able to show much of these small expressions of independence in the film or show his masculinity in another way, and when he does show them, they end in punishment. Surviving slavery is shown as being difficult enough as it is and, according to McDowell, "*12 Years a Slave* challenges the standard tropes of films about slavery, especially the most recognizable trope of scenes and acts of 'resistance', the expressions of 'agency'" (McDowell 380). However, Stauffer argues that "the film subtly complicates this ethos of survivalism" that is present in the film, as slaves dismiss survival and rebel when they "perceive living in slavery as worse than death" (Stauffer 319). In these moments "the spirit of freedom trumped the bodily quest to survive" (319). Though McDowell makes a valid point about the "survivalism" in the film, Stauffer's argument is even more valid, since the film does show Northup's rebellion against his masters and one of his attempts at resistance leads to his rescue.

Conclusion

All autobiographical slave narratives have at least one thing in common: they are the stories of slaves striving for freedom and being successful in their attempt. The protagonists of the autobiographical slave narratives discussed in this paper - Northup, Douglass and Jacobs - were enslaved in different parts of the U.S. and explored different routes to freedom. The routes available to them were limited, and at times, freedom seemed impossible to reach. When an attempt to escape failed, slaves often had to wait a long time for another opportunity. Moreover, slaves' agency was limited and influenced by their specific circumstances, which created different forms of agency. Northup was a free-born, educated man kidnapped into slavery, and therefore had an advantage compared with the slaves he met that were born in slavery since he could explore opportunities to escape that required literacy. However, Northup experienced slavery on plantations in the bayou in Louisiana, far away from the free states or from Northerners who could help him escape. Northup had to spend many years in slavery before one of his attempts to be rescued succeeded. Only when a white Canadian carpenter came to work on the plantation and risked sending a letter to Northup's friends in the North, did someone come to Louisiana to rescue him.

Like many of the slaves who managed to attain freedom, Northup published a narrative in which he narrated the story of his life from birth to freedom. These autobiographical slave narratives show a slave's agency and its limitations, but are also presented in a way to fit a certain aim and make it suitable for the intended audience and the time in which the narrative was published. Most narratives were published with the financial and/or editorial support of abolitionists and aimed to convince readers that slavery was immoral and should be abolished. In order to help convince readers of this need, the narrators of the narratives had to appear objective and deserving of freedom. Slave narratives therefore included a paratext to validate the narrative and narrators refrained from showing too much emotion. Furthermore, Douglass constructed his narrative in a way to promote an image of himself as an independent, self-reliant individual, adopting the notion of masculinity in society at that time. Though Northup was clearly influenced by the ideals of individualism, he had less to prove to his audience as he was a free man unjustly captured into slavery, and his narrative is therefore less constructed to cater to white readers' expectations and dwells on the extreme conditions slaves endured in the deep South. Harriet Jacobs's narrative differs from Douglass's and Northup's narratives as she narrates the experiences of a female in slavery and writes in more detail about the sexual victimization of slaves. Her agency consists of resisting

her master's approaches and rebelling by choosing the father of her children herself. Jacobs's narrative is heavily influenced by her socio-political environment as she presents the victimization of female slaves in veiled terms and tries to present herself in a way that is acceptable for her audience and to convince them that slave women were unable to meet the moral standards set by white society for women.

The genre of the autobiographical slave narrative helped give rise to African American literature and was followed by autobiographies of former slaves freed through the emancipation of all slaves in 1865. Like autobiographical slave narratives, these autobiographies are also influenced by the time and circumstances in which they are published, and therefore present a different kind of agency than that of escaped slaves. The autobiographies also have a different aim and audience, as they focus on improving their own circumstances and those of other people in society. Booker T. Washington's autobiography uses the Protestant work ethic to present himself and his agency in a way that is non-threatening and easily acceptable to many white people in the U.S. This allows him to establish a name for himself, gain support for his school, and create opportunities to slowly change the circumstances of African Americans in the South.

Autobiographical slave narratives were also a source of inspiration for writers of neo-slave novels in the 1970s. However, the authors of these novels also responded to the socio-political circumstances of their own time and the agency of the slave protagonists in these novels therefore is much more powerful than in the historical slave narratives. Dessa, the slave protagonist in Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*, shows much more of the interior life of slaves, which is usually left out of slave narratives in order to make the narrator appear objective. Dessa's agency is almost unlimited after her lover is killed and combines both stereotypical male and female forms of agency shown in slave narratives. Furthermore, Dessa is also able to win the fight over narrative control with the "editor" of her narrative, and is able to present her narrative in her own terms. Williams thus writes back to slavery literature that diminishes the voice of slaves and creates a fictional version of the past in which a female, pregnant slave can fight, survive, and attain freedom.

There has been a renewed interest in Northup's slave narrative in recent years following Steve McQueen's film adaptation of that narrative. This adaptation emphasises the violence slaves encounter and the restricted conditions they live in that limit their agency. Survival is no longer seen as passive behaviour, as almost all the instances of agency or rebellion that are shown end in punishment. Northup's ability to survive twelve years in slavery and regain freedom is almost considered heroic after everything he has been through.

As Northup and his rescuer drive away from Epps's plantation in the film, Northup looks back and sees slaves standing on the road and going back to work in the fields. Though the slave narratives discussed here show different forms of agency and present their narrative in different ways, they all left slavery while others remained slaves. No narratives were written about those left behind, for whom there was but a very small chance that they escaped slavery so deep in the South, but they should not be forgotten. Steve McQueen acknowledged this in his acceptance speech for the Academy Award for Best Picture for *12 Years a Slave*, as he said that "Everyone deserves not just to survive, but to live. This is the most important legacy of Solomon Northup. I dedicate this award to all the people who have endured slavery and the twenty-one million people who still suffer slavery today" (Oscars). The only small consolation is that McQueen's film has succeeded in bringing Northup's narrative to the masses and has helped remind people of the forgotten stories of slavery.

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