Most readers of slave narratives quickly recognize the central role that violence played in maintaining the institution of American slavery and fostering the concomitant growth of American economic, political, and military power. These folk narratives provide graphic accounts of African and African American kidnappings, horrendous journeys across the Middle Passage to slave markets, grueling riverboat trips and forced marches to plantations, and myriad other physical and emotional abuses sadistically inflicted for centuries on African descendants by American nation builders. Curiously enough, however, literary critics have yet to scrutinize a striking paradox in the portrayal of slave-narrative violence—namely, its frequent association with Christianity.\(^1\) Writing about a slave who attempted escape, the author of *The Narrative of the Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa* recalls that “This *christian* [my emphasis] master immediately pinned the wretch to the ground, at each wrist and ankle, and then took some sticks of sealing wax, lighted them, and dropped it all over his back.”\(^2\) More than a half-century later in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself*, its renowned protagonist asserts that “of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others.”\(^3\) Later still, at the beginning of the Civil War, Harriet Jacobs makes a similar observation in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*: “When I was told that [slaveowner] Dr. Flint had joined the Episcopal church, I was much surprised. I supposed that religion had a purifying effect on the character of men; but the worst persecutions
I endured from him were after he was a communicant.”  Equiano, Douglass, and Jacobs are especially adept at demonstrating how devout Christians used the theological concepts of original sin, blood sacrifice, and spiritual atonement to rationalize the moral contradictions and brutality that attended the practice of Christian slavery. Their exposure of this religious fanaticism certainly lends moral authority to the voices of their narrators, voices speaking primarily to a hostile white reading public eager to expiate Original Sin, the central dogma of Christian theology.

Rather than emphasize the material results of slavery, as most scholars tend to do, the slave writers focus on its human causes in an attempt to understand why white people chose to victimize them. Their representations of religious violence identify deep and complex psychological forces that drive the slaveowner to try imposing upon colored people an absolute power and control rivaling that of the Maker Itself. By depicting the slavery regime as a brutal theological patriarchy, the slave authors illustrate how it affords white American men the unprecedented opportunity to appear divine by reconstructing, genetically and mentally, the dark-skinned people fashioned by the universal Creator. All members of the human family are born physically unchained in a world of diverse sexes, cultures, and skin colors. But the white slavemasters sought to steal from dark-complexioned people the physical liberty with which the original Maker endows all humans and to rearrange the universe into hierarchically ordered groups whose destiny is determined by slaveowners and their progeny. Thus, this slaveholding elite demonized and whipped those of African descent long enough to immobilize their free will and make their enslavers seem godlike. Since ascendancy achieved by physical torture is necessarily temporary, the slavemasters then tried to sustain their supposedly exalted position through psychological manipulation of both themselves and their victims.

Christianity, a religion having connections to the imperialistic slaveholding European culture from which the American slaveowners descended, serves the goal of psychological control especially well. As several scholars have noted, two contradictory interpretations of events central to the beliefs of organized Christianity—the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ—allow Christians to establish a religious duality that liberates humanity from an enslavement to the Creator caused by Original Sin. During the slavocracy, white slavemasters
copied this Christian dualism to eradicate the "original sin" of people born black. In the first interpretation, while Christ dies for the wrongs of humankind, he brings about only a partial liberation whose greatest rewards are to be enjoyed in an afterlife. If converts remain eternally submissive to the Creator, Christ's death eventually atones for their sinful origins. In the second interpretation, however, Christ's death cancels any permanent enslavement to the Maker because each time a believer does wrong Christ's sacrifice empowers the sinner to return to prelapsarian innocence. This exchange of divine innocence for mortal guilt essentially emancipates the world from any spiritual or physical slavery to the Creator, and is brought about when the execution of Jesus Christ in lieu of Adam and Eve repays their debt for disobeying the Edenic God.⁸

The slave narratives reflect these conflicting interpretations of the crucifixion and resurrection. On the one hand, the authors stress the slave's spiritual liberation by and willing obedience to a divinity they call Providence or Creator. Indeed, the bondspeople remain eternally grateful for this Maker's continuing guardianship over their lives. On the other, the narrators portray the slaveholders as new Adams and Eves who use the forgiveness resulting from the blood sacrifice and resurrection of Christ both to violate the Maker's original laws of human sanctity and to return themselves repeatedly and instantaneously to the moment of moral purity. Because, in this view, divine pardons can be obtained up to the moment before death, slaveholders do not repent until on their deathbeds, where they confess sins and arrange the release of lifelong prisoners. Olaudah Equiano outlines this process when describing his own attempt to achieve personal redemption with the help of Christian guides:

I once heard . . . Mr. G——, speak of a man who had departed this life in full assurance of his going to glory. I was much astonished at this assertion; and did very deliberately inquire how he could get at this knowledge. I was answered fully, agreeably to what I read in the oracles of truth . . . that if I did not experience the new birth, and the pardon of my sins, through the blood of Christ, before I died, I could not enter the kingdom of heaven. I knew not what to think of this report, as I thought I kept eight commandments out of ten: then my worthy interpreter told me I did not do it, nor could I; and he added, that no man ever did or could keep the commandments. . . .
I then asked my friend Mr. L—d, who was a clerk in a chapel, *why the commandments of God were given, if we could not be saved by them*. To which he replied, “The law is a school-master to bring us to Christ,” who alone could, and did keep the commandments . . . and the sins of those chosen vessels *were already* atoned for, and forgiven them whilst living. (139-40)

When Christianity sacrifices innocents in order to permit unlimited wrong with unlimited forgiveness to sinners, evildoers—whether slaveowners or the Ku Klux Klan—pay only lip service to this God. In fact, they can easily elevate themselves to the position of deity, as long as they can find a Christlike victim to become the instrument of their moral transformation. As theologians Joanne Carlson and Rebecca Parker explain, “Christianity has been a primary . . . force in shaping our acceptance of abuse. The central image of Christ on the cross . . . communicates the message that suffering is redemptive. . . . The message is complicated further by the theology that says Christ suffered in obedience to his Father’s will. Divine child abuse is paraded as salvific and the child who suffers . . . is lauded as the hope of the world.”

In other words, Christian dogma predisposes some believers, whether despotic slavemasters or glory-bound parish priests, to seek Jesus-like sufferers onto whom they can project their own vices and through whom they can exorcize their own demons, thereby becoming gods themselves. By mentally investing themselves with the redemptive omnipotence of a dualistic Christian Father, such Christians become like the oxymoronic Good Master, who sires a morally perfect son in order to crucify him as a sign of divine love. A similar moral perversion enables the slaveowner to claim that his violence saves those he abuses, thereby making his captives the scapegoats for his sins. A brutalized slave is virtually defenseless against such psychological acrobatics, and the slaveholder easily forms a vampirish relationship with the bondsperson that leaves the latter a grotesque transfiguration of the enslaver. Unlike the mortal/immortal Jesus, who after great human pain conquers death and ascends into heaven, the enslaved person assumes the slavemaster’s moral filth and carries this evil load until a stake through the parasite’s heart finally ends the torment.

Frederick Douglass witnesses such a dynamic in the relationship between the slavemaster Thomas Auld and his already horribly crippled and disfigured slave, Henny, who has little value to Auld except to
“bear heavy burdens” (69) and enable the perverted slaveowner to replace the Creator with a culture-bound Christian God who is, ultimately, Auld himself. When he cannot give her away, Auld makes Henny earn her keep by becoming a human sacrifice befitting the most primitive societies. He would tie her up “and whip her with a heavy cowskin upon her naked shoulders, causing the warm red blood to drip; and, in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of Scripture—‘He that knoweth his master’s will, and doeth not, shall be beaten with many stripes’” (Douglass, 68). It is significant that the beating continues until blood flows freely and the Christlike Henny shows other signs of suffering, since only then does Auld have physical evidence that she has assumed the burden of his sins. Only then does he self-righteously cite the Bible and conveniently identify his own will with regard to the African American slave woman as that of the Christian God. Now “cleansed” of his immorality and beholden to no deity for his own redemption, he becomes a god without much more effort than the physical exertion required by his act of violence. After literally beating his way to salvation, he tries to rationalize the disorder that he himself has caused and pretends that his viciousness saves his victim rather than himself. The slave’s only escape from a theology that blesses this perversity is the physical and psychological strength to reject the role of the suffering servant. Unfortunately, as Douglass makes clear, Henny was almost helpless to do so.

The ability of slaves such as Equiano, Douglass, and Jacobs to reject their torturers exposes the basic weakness in religious violence. Free will allows for choice and reflects the human inner soul, which a number of good and evil gods tend to covet. As the three slave narrators show, their kidnappers sought to control black minds and souls as well as black bodies, because slave and master alike conceded that the former were Creator-endowed qualities the traffickers in human flesh could not readily steal. Indeed, the belief that the soul symbolizes the original Maker’s dominion over people and that it permanently bars all would-be usurpers of this universal supremacy emboldened many slaves to resist and eventually defeat their captors. John Blassingame notes in *The Slave Community* that “[a]fter administering a few floggings, most masters gave up and allowed the slave to go to church when he pleased. Clearly, religion was more powerful than the master, engendering more love and fear in the slave than he could” (75). Such resolve from slaves, however, frustrated and enraged slaveowners,
making them unwittingly expose the futility and impotence of their vio-
ience before the Creator. Simultaneously, slave resistance reveals the
degree to which the captives reject human deities. Because men have
a greater stake in any patriarchy, it is not surprising that their vari-
ous autobiographical narratives show male slaves as more susceptible
than their female counterparts to psychological compromise with the
slave theocracy. In the final analysis, however, slave authors of both
sexes bear witness to the god complex of early Euro-Americans who
confront and do battle with the original Creator for the souls of black
folk. As the spoils in a fight between divinity-seeking Christians and
the Maker, these writers look on with both repulsion and awe.

Thus, slave narratives are filled with images of predatory slave-
holders obsessed with gaining in America absolute sovereignty over
captured Africans. Slave narrators specifically recount the horror of
being trapped in a culture where whites brand black skin evil, abnor-
mal, and in need of obliteration. Using metaphors that echo the Book of
Genesis, slave author Olaudah Equiano evokes in his *Interesting Nar-
rative* the Edenic quest of slaveowners to forge a new world order that
would redefine the very nature of creation, the created, and the creator.
He says that the white invaders see African minds as “barren soil” (81)
and the slaves as having come “from a climate, where nature, though
prodigal of her bounties in a degree unknown to yourselves [slave-
masters], has left [the black] man alone scant and unfinished, and
incapable of enjoying the treasures she has poured out for him” (81).
According to Equiano, slaveowners presume an incompetent Creator
committed the Original Sin of making Africans colored; they there-
fore immediately set about correcting the Maker’s free, dark-skinned
“mistakes.” This behavior emerges as culturally specific when one
compares Equiano’s African perception of white skin color as a natural
flaw with his view of it as a symbol of European social power. Re-
calling the period before his capture, he observes that white-skinned
blacks were regarded as “deformed” (17), an allusion to the genetic
disorder called albinism. After being exposed to British racism, the
young Equiano starts to view his own skin color as a social deformity,
becoming “mortified at the difference” (44) between his healthy dark
complexion and that of a white playmate. Riggins R. Earl Jr. further
explains that “[i]t was the unchangeable blackness of the slave’s body,
which signified the demonic, that left the ideal Christian master type
unwilling to assert theologically that the slave was made in the image
of God.”
Later slave writers like Douglass and Jacobs portray even more explicitly than Equiano American Adams and Eves who, not satisfied with merely demonizing dark skin, defiantly sought and found a way to make it lighter. These slaveholders undertook the godlike task of reengineering black folks by using their own bodies to dilute the African’s naturally large amount of melanin, the natural pigment of humans. According to Ashley H. Robins, “[o]ne of the most problematic features of melanin . . . is its insolubility in almost all solvents,” a fact which makes it difficult to purify and analyze. Robins adds that scientists “in the eighteenth century were amazed at their failure to extract pigment from black skin.”

But finding no better way to alter a Providential symbol branded evil by their cultural traditions, the slaveholders paradoxically developed a relentless and shameless sexual lust for the black bodies they claimed to despise. This irrational behavior prevailed despite all manner of laws against interracial sex. That great patriot Benjamin Franklin was forced to acknowledge that “purely white People” were in the minority on earth and plaintively asked, “why increase the Sons of Africa, by Planting them in America, where we have so fair an Opportunity, by excluding all Blacks and Tawneys, of increasing the lovely White?” Thomas Jefferson, himself accused of fathering several children by his teenaged slave sister-in-law, Sally Hemings, echoed Franklin’s sentiment by remarking that “their [whites’] amalgamation with the other colour produces a degradation to which no lover of this country, no lover of excellence in the human character can innocently consent.”

With such incessant worship and glorification of “the lovely White,” miscegenation should not have—but nevertheless did—run rampant. Financial profit alone could not have motivated slaveholders to copulate with their bondspeople, since intraracial slave breeding could have achieved the same economic end. Indeed, even as the whites demonized the blacks, they made the colored people more desirable, reaffirming universal principles of human biology set by the Creator and mocking the mortal nature of divinity seekers. Over fifty years after Equiano’s narrative appeared and during the height of American abolitionism, Frederick Douglass notes the proliferation of mulattoes like himself, who are direct results of the slaveholder’s efforts at human reengineering: “Every year brings with it multitudes of this class of slaves. . . . [A] very different looking class of people are springing up at the south . . . from those originally brought to this country from Africa” (23–24). In Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Harriet Jacobs points
out the highly visible and crucial role the slave woman plays in this new genesis: "I was compelled to live under the same roof with him [her captor, Dr. Flint]—where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. He told me . . . that I must be subject to his will in all things" (27). Flint was absolutely vicious in his pursuit of Jacobs, sexually harassing her as she visited her mother’s grave and refusing to stop even after she hid from him nearly seven years in her grandmother’s attic and fled North. His lust for Jacobs became so intense that this United States Congressman scorned his own wife and family, pathologically trying to make a teenaged girl a sexual vessel through which he might father the new, whiter-skinned African in America. In so doing, Flint displays the lack of personal restraint that Thomas Jefferson feared would compromise the ability of the founding fathers to govern the fledgling American republic. As critic Ronald Takaki more pointedly asks, “If the philosopher of republicanism could not restrain what he called ‘the strongest of all the human passions’ and if the author of jeremiads against miscegenation were guilty of ‘staining’ the blood of white America, how could white men in the republic ever hope to be self-governing?”

Nevertheless, overwhelming numbers of slave testimonies and documents from breeding farms confirm the autobiographical accounts of slavery as a means of enabling Euro-Americans literally to re-create the black-skinned African in their own image. In fact, these mostly male re-creators were so successful that one would be hard pressed to find among the heirs of millions of American slaves one family tree left untouched by white blood. Through an amalgamation privileged by the slave theocracy, these Americans became “gods” who stubbornly rejected the Creator’s world by genetically altering the black African “evil” of the Christian Eden.

Many personal diaries, journals, letters, and other documents of white plantation owners underscore the slave author’s portrayal of Christian violence as essential to controlling these “new people” psychologically. Drew Gilpin Faust notes that the extraordinarily detailed papers of South Carolinian James Henry Hammond, who married at age twenty-four and became slavemaster to some 147 people, illustrate the “highly structured efforts” Hammond took to establish and maintain dominion over every element of his slaves’ lives, especially their religion. Hammond’s goal was an “absolute control” that depended upon his “undermining slave society and culture . . . [through] a care-
fully designed plan of physical and psychological domination.” Within a week of his arrival at the Silver Bluff Plantation, Hammond felt so omnipotent that he sought “control over the very souls of the slaves.” 19 He tried to eliminate all aspects of slave life reminiscent of Africa and replace them with Western cultural elements.

On 15 and 16 December 1831, Hammond wrote in his plantation diary: “Intend to break up negro preaching & negro churches. . . . Refused to allow Ben Shubrick to join the Negro Church . . . but promised to have him taken in the church . . . I attended. . . . Ordered night meetings on the plantation to be discontinued” (Faust, 57). In addition, Hammond followed a practice common among slaveowners and hired itinerant white ministers for Sunday slave services. By 1845 he had constructed a Methodist church on the plantation and named the structure “St. Catherine” after his wife, elevating her to the level of Christian goddess. In the 1860s Virginia Clay-Clopton, a house guest at Silver Bluff, called the services at St. Catherine “solemn and impressive” and remarked that blacks only yesterday “in savagery” were “now peaceful, contented, respectful and comprehending the worship of God . . . [by] reason of Senator Hammond’s wise discipline” (Faust, 57–58).

Using language both dripping with Christian piety and divorced from divine precepts, Clay-Clopton presumes the sinfulness of the captives, not the captors, and with her euphemistic “wise discipline” cloaks the savagery employed by Hammond to rid the slaves of their “savagery.” While Hammond wears the benign mask of the Christian Master, his slaves display the corrosive effects of his actual violence and greed. Enslavers may temporarily ease their conscience by persuading their victims to participate in their own oppression, but they generally remain trapped by their strategy of Christian violence. Having once succumbed to the seduction of such cruelty, they resemble vampires forever compelled to seek and abuse prey to fuel cycles of grotesque redemption. To stop is to risk baring their immoral mortal souls to divine judgment.

Central to the slaveholder’s transformation into a “god” is the subjugation of the will of the African slaves. With brute force, the enslavers compel their prey to distort ideas of the original Creator, or Providence, into the image of oppressors wearing the mask of the Christian God. After repeated episodes of physical and mental torture, the slaves begin to confuse these two images to the point that they momentarily see nothing more omnipotent than their white tormentor, over whom
even Providence seems to have no control. Olaudah Equiano, for example, having been promised freedom, is suddenly and forcibly sold to another slavemaster. Dejected, Equiano says, "I must have done something to displease the Lord, that he thus punished me so severely. . . . I felt that the Lord was able to disappoint me in all things, and immediately considered my present situation as a judgment of Heaven, on account of my presumption in swearing. I therefore . . . acknowledged my transgression to God, and poured out my soul before Him with unfeigned repentance, and with earnest supplications I besought Him not to abandon me in my distress, nor cast me from his mercy forever" (66). Throughout this passage, Equiano mistakenly attributes the suffering inflicted by his slavemaster to a displeased Christian God who has become indistinguishable from the slaveholder himself. The "Lord," "God," and "Him" whom he angers and to whom he pleads and prays are all the transfigured "good" man who continues to hold Equiano in chains. Temporarily overwhelmed by pain, Equiano blurs the line between white slaveowner and Christian God and dutifully complies with his slavemaster's demand for redemptive sacrifice by prostrating his defenseless body and spirit. Although at other times his shifting point of view makes it difficult to pinpoint exactly which god of which religion he confuses with the slaveholder, his readiness to accept abuse as due punishment reveals the degree to which Equiano has internalized the Christian values that require suffering to atone even for unknown wrongs. With his lamentations, Equiano unwittingly feeds the white man's god complex.

Similarly, after the Christian overseer Edward Covey repeatedly bruises and bloodies his body, Frederick Douglass concedes that "Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit" (75, my emphasis). Before long, he starts to portray Covey as divine: "There was no deceiving him. . . . [H]e had the faculty of making us feel that he was ever present with us. . . . He appeared to us as being ever at hand" (73). In addition, Douglass notes that Covey "seemed to think himself equal to deceiving the Almighty" (74), and further declares, "I do verily believe that he [Covey] sometimes deceived himself into the solemn belief, that he was a sincere worshipper of the most high God" (74). Douglass's scorn for Covey's self-deception reveals classically tragic dimensions in the slavedriver's violent behavior, exposing the overseer as an Oedipus trying to circumvent the wishes of a divine foe. At the same time, this mixed por-
trait of an omnipotent, omnipresent, but pitiful self-deceiver creates a tonal shift that suggests Douglass himself is amazed and, perhaps, impressed that Covey keeps trying. Indeed, even while Douglass's skepticism makes Covey's claims of white supremacy dissipate into impotent whinings, his human empathy concurrently casts the overseer as a universal dreamer steadfastly tilting at personal windmills. In other words, this quixotic tableau reveals the wish of both master and slave to challenge the gods, although only Covey dares to act on this desire. By measuring the complex aspirations and desires of humans against the omniscience of the Creator, Douglass shows greater insight than Equiano into the nature of human and divine tormentors. This understanding lets Douglass know that only Covey needs to atone for defying the Maker, and it fortifies the author's resistance to human deities.

Before their indoctrination by violence, Equiano, Douglass, and Jacobs follow the African custom of distinguishing between the Creator and High God—often associated with the sky and remote from the mundane world—and the lesser gods and ancestral spirits actively and constantly concerned with human existence. Accordingly, after initiation into the brutalities of slave life, these writers depict hierarchical relationships between the universal Providence and a localized Christian God who simultaneously advocates spiritual emancipation and human degradation. Making this theological distinction helps protect them from the emotional damage that could be caused by a religion compromised by two contradictory moral strains—one that largely comports with the values of the Maker and accepts the inalienable freedom of all peoples and another that allows evil white men to redeem themselves through human sacrifice. As a result, the slave authors usually do not confuse their all-encompassing Providence with the schizophrenic Christian God.

With few exceptions Christian slave authors embrace only those religious precepts consistent with their innate ideas about Providence, a concept that reinforces their humanity in an alien and violent environment and gives them the freedom either to choose or reject gods. This strongly held belief system also shields them from the power of Christianity to convince the emotionally vulnerable of their total depravity, especially those forced to live within the dysfunctional confines of American slave society. Consequently, Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and many other slave narrators stress the
hypocrisy of slaveholders who strip Puritanism, Quakerism, Catholicism, and Anglicanism of tenets condemning slavery. These authors either view ambivalently or, more often, reject outright ministers such as the Episcopal Reverend Thomas Bacon of Maryland, who glorifies the image of the suffering servant in his sermon to bondspeople: “Almighty God hath been pleased to make you slaves here, and to give you nothing but Labour and Poverty in this world. . . . If you desire ‘Freedom,’ serve the Lord here, and you shall be his ‘Freeman’ in Heaven hereafter.”23 When not intimidated by violence, slaves know that the “Almighty God” and “Lord” the reverend urges them to worship is the slaveowner himself. Harriet Jacobs writes in Incidents that after “Pious Mr. Pike” preached in this way one evening, “We went home highly amused” (69). More significantly, by deliberately hiding from themselves an evil nature quite obvious to potential adversaries, slaveholders ensure a moral obtuseness that leads to self-destruction.

When not threatened by violence, slave writers embrace a naturalistic, universal Providence unlimited by the boundaries of Western culture. In his dedication to The Interesting Narrative, Equiano contrasts “the mysterious ways of Providence” that lead to his kidnapping from Africa with his later “knowledge of the Christian religion” (3); in his mind, the latter is clearly separate from the former. Even after Equiano “converts” to Christianity, Providence remains the dominant theological force in his life, while Christianity survives as an aspect of his fateful encounter with the Western slave patriarchy. Indeed, Equiano substitutes the paganistic “fortune” for “Providence” so often that his editor feels compelled to explain that the author’s language is in “conformity to the expressions of a vain world not to be expected from Gustavus, who generally manifests a becoming sense of the benefits which he received, and a knowledge of the Blessed Fountain from whence they issued. After censoring it as a slip of his pen, let none venture to attribute it to atheistical motives. . . . He had heard the term thus misapplied by others, and from an imitative habit, he thoughtlessly gave it the same appellation” (31). Despite the veiled threats to shut off the “Blessed Fountain” and various other attempts to edit his text, Equiano continues to view Providence as the High God of the universe even for whites, whose mysterious encounters with that deity he repeatedly mentions (63, 151, 152, passim). The editor’s threats do not, after all, include Equiano’s greatest fear—treatment as a “common slave” and the concomitant beatings his fellow bondspeople must endure.
Frederick Douglass also acknowledges the role of a universal Providence over his life and credits good fortune to that Providence rather than to a culture-based Christian God. When he is sent away from an especially barbaric plantation, he sees his selection as "the first plain manifestation of that kind providence which has ever since attended me. . . . I may be deemed superstitious, and even egotistical, in regarding this event as a special interposition of divine Providence in my favor. But I should be false to the earliest sentiments of my soul, if I suppressed the opinion" (47). When she escapes having to sleep with the slavemaster, Harriet Jacobs gives credit to "A kind Providence [that] interposed in my favor" (33). Like Equiano and Jacobs, Douglass views Providence as beyond the realm of human tampering. In the appendix to his Narrative, Douglass distinguishes further between "the slaveholding religion" and "Christianity proper" (120), or a Christian Providence. He says that "between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other" (120). Because the slaveowner's religious and other subversive ploys fail to force him to surrender his soul, Douglass is targeted for horrendous beatings that continue until he "resolved to fight; and . . . seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose" (81).

If the slaveholder wins over the spirit of Equiano or Douglass to any extent whatever, he does so mainly because each is a male subtly seduced by and acculturated into the slave patriarchy. Both male writers identify with the materialistic values that signify manhood to their captors, whereas the female slaves embrace more spiritual values. Equiano, for instance, preaches with righteous indignation against the violence that perverts "that first natural right of mankind, equality, and independency; and gives one man a dominion over his fellows which God could never intend" (80). Yet, like many other slave narrators writing before the slavocracy was completely institutionalized, he does not categorically reject the idea of human enslavement. Equiano criticizes only the grotesque brutality of individual slaveholders, not the institution of slavery itself.24 In fact, he naively argues that the captives themselves would choose slavery if the slavemasters were not so cruel, and claims "[t]hey [the slaves] would be faithful, honest, intelli-
gent and vigorous; and peace, prosperity, and happiness, would attend you [slavemasters]" (81). He becomes so comfortable with the slave regime that he does not even consider escape until he loses special privileges and fears being "used" as "a common slave" (92). Having grown to adolescence in a less violent, African slave culture and coveting the slaveowner's technological power and knowledge, Equiano consistently accommodates himself to his slave condition even when doing so requires him to ignore the suffering of fellow captives. As he matures into manhood, he becomes an entrepreneur who proudly serves on slave ships with fewer and fewer pangs of guilt; indeed, he even predicts nineteenth-century colonialism by suggesting that "A commercial intercourse with Africa opens an inexhaustible source of wealth to the manufacturing interests of Great Britain" (176). When he considers going home as a missionary at the end of the narrative, one wonders if the return of this African son, now steeped in the capitalistic values of his former owners, will be a blessing or a curse.

Similarly, Frederick Douglass waxes eloquent when he deplors the way slaveholders used the Christmas recess both to encourage the slaves to drink until they became disgusted with themselves and freedom, and to prevent the "wildest desperation" (84) brought on by the brutal slave experience. Indeed, wild desperation might have generated enough hopelessness to cause a full-scale rebellion by those having nothing else to lose. Yet Douglass's depiction of the contemptible Thomas Auld as a conflicted Hamlet mirrors his own ambivalence about the traditional values of the slave patriarchy and exposes a latent envy of Auld's power. He claims that Auld lacks the nobility and consistency Douglass finds admirable in other slavemasters: "He [Auld] was cruel, but cowardly. He commanded without firmness. In the enforcement of his rules, he was at times rigid, and at times lax. At times, he spoke to his slaves with the firmness of Napoleon and the fury of a demon; at other times, he might well be mistaken for an inquirer who had lost his way. . . . Our want of reverence for him must have perplexed him greatly. He wished to have us to call him master, but lacked the firmness necessary to command us to do so" (66-67). Douglass's rhetoric presumes that there are honorable principles of slaveholding that Auld needs to learn and that Douglass could teach. If given the chance, Douglass could probably demonstrate his skills to Auld and any hapless captives nearby. Perhaps William S. McFeely does not overstate the case when he says, "Frederick loved Thomas, and
that love was returned,” because Douglass more than once shows a willingness to accept the extremely circumscribed definition of manhood accorded him by the slave system. He stands in sharp contrast to Harriet Jacobs, whose narrative, according to Hazel Carby, “is the most sophisticated, sustained . . . dissection” by an African American female author of a womanhood defined by the male slaveholder. In the last chapter of Incidents, Jacobs implies that marriage in the patriarchy is just another form of slavery (201). But in describing his fight with Covey, Douglass explicitly downplays the element of self-defense and—like his captor—links the contest to a masculinity achieved through physical domination when he asserts that this violent incident “revived within me a sense of my own manhood” (82). In subscribing to the law of machismo, Douglass allows the slavocracy to distort his humanity and thus participates in his own victimization. Although he is not as easily warped as Equiano, who considers it noble to buy himself from people who had no right to own him, Douglass shows that a fragile manhood unites both master and slave.

Although their sex leaves slave women especially vulnerable to rape, they usually remain spiritually invulnerable to slaveholders. Because only females can bear children, white oppressors seeking to reinvent Africans and get rich in the process must gain dominion over their bodies. In a letter of 30 June 1820 to John W. Eppes, slaveholder Thomas Jefferson declared in the Farm Book, “I consider a woman who brings a child every two years as more profitable than the best man of the farm. [W]hat she produces is an addition to the capital, while his labors disappear in mere consumption” (46). Hazel Carby further explains, “As a slave, the black woman was in an entirely different relation [from the slave man] to the plantation patriarch. Her reproductive system . . . gave birth to property . . . and all slaves inherited their status from their mothers” (24–25). More significantly, slaveowners also equated sexual dominance with a godlike control of spirit and so tried to reduce these women to the level of wombs and vaginas, making black slave women the only group of American females ever to be specifically targeted for rape. This strategy of sexual violence was also noteworthy for the efficiency with which the slaveholders recycled its human by-products. With the dual power to re-create and degrade, this quintessential violence inflicted by men against women has the potential to break even the strong will of a Harriet Jacobs. In Incidents, she declares that slave women are “not
allowed to have any pride of character. It is deemed a crime in her to wish to be virtuous” (31). Describing a series of evasive maneuvers taken by her persona Linda Brent to avoid sexual assault, Jacobs displays sharp insight into the potency of rape as a way for slaveholders to fulfill their grand ambitions for genetic and spiritual re-creation for both the slaves and themselves. More specifically, she outlines a fierce battle with a lustful slaveholder for control over both her reproductive system and, by extension, her soul. Success hinges on whether he can exert enough physical and emotional force to compel her to “choose” a concubinage that symbolizes her acceptance of his deity.

When Linda (Harriet) is fifteen, her fifty-five-year-old slaveowner, the prominent Christian Congressman Dr. Flint (Dr. James Norcom) of Edenton, North Carolina, begins making overt sexual advances couched in language that makes clear his aggressive need to be Linda’s god and not just her slavemaster. She remarks, “I stood a moment gazing at the hateful man who claimed a right to rule me, body and soul” (38–39, my emphasis). Moreover, when Linda tells Flint of her desire “to live like a Christian,” he defines her Christian womanhood as concubinage to a god who is himself, saying, “You can do what I require; and if you are faithful to me, you will be as virtuous as my wife” (75, my emphases). He does not rape her outright (as he apparently has other slave women by whom it is rumored he has fathered eleven children) but instead conducts a series of violent “courtings.” In so doing, he exposes a salient weakness of the Christian God—namely, a human ego consumed by the need to be chosen over other suitors. Linda says of Flint, “No jealous lover ever watched a rival more closely than he watched me and the unknown slaveholder, with whom he accused me of wishing to get up an intrigue” (81). That same need, ironically enough, also gives his prisoner a fleeting chance to exercise her own free will. Well aware that his jealousy is her strongest weapon against Flint, Linda scores a qualified victory when she “chooses” to be impregnated by a less repugnant slaveowner, Mr. Sands (Samuel Tredwell Sawyer), rather than by the free black man she loves and whom Flint could harm. Her rationale for this ironic choice—that “It seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion” (55)—echoes the supposed nobility of falling on one’s sword, a literary device common to the sentimental fiction that her narrative mimics. But her choice also signals Brent’s physical and spiritual conquest of Flint. By depriving him of the opportunity to violate her sexually, she
stops him from using her body for genetic re-creation and simultaneously prevents him from refuring her image of Providence and making her complicitous in both her own suffering and his redemption. Throughout her narrative, Jacobs never veers far from her initial reaction to her captor’s violence: “My soul revolted against the mean tyranny” (27, my emphasis).\(^2\)

Slave women like Jacobs remain spiritually strong because the slave patriarchy so degrades them that they have little else left except the souls that link them to their Creator, the source of their humanity. Without the physical prowess of an Equiano or Douglass, they cannot overpower their tormentors and are forced therefore to discover less violent means to liberation. Jacobs herself stresses the self-empowerment that derives from the original Maker’s gift of a free soul, asserting: “My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each” (85).\(^3\) Because Linda Brent protects her soul, Flint’s physical and spiritual impact on her is minimal, even though the slaveholder repeatedly slaps her and exploits her greatest psychological weakness, the “bastard” children who initially save her from rape by him but who later mock her failure to live up to her grandmother’s moral directives. Similarly, Frederick Douglass recalls that grotesque beatings could not permanently repress his Aunt Hester’s spirit and prevent her from sneaking dates with fellow bondsman Ned Roberts, though on many occasions Anthony, a jealous and inhumane slaveholder, “tie[d] [her] up to a joist, and whip[ped] upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. . . . The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the bloodclotted cowskin” (24–25). Echoing the futile wailing of the rejected sadist, his whip becomes the mocking symbol of a penis that could not arouse in Hester either the passionate desire or godlike worship Anthony craves. As he tries to beat this sacrificial lamb into accepting his obsessive lust, Anthony precipitates a fortunate fall that, ironically, liberates a spirit Hester chooses to reinforce in Ned’s arms.

Although each slave narrative recounts its own unique story, those of Equiano, Douglass, and Jacobs especially make clear that cultures devise self-justifying value systems and that the slaveowners drew from their European heritage a religion that presumed imperfect human
beings could become deities through the sacrifice of innocent people. For all its redemptive pretensions, the version of Christianity practiced during the slavocracy is an exercise in self-contradiction that blesses devils at the expense of angels. While the narratives do mention the material benefits reaped from captured laborers, their authors usually focus on how a religious loophole was Americanized by slaveholders intent on playing god by remaking Africans and themselves. As seen by the slave authors, the economic benefits of slavery are more its by-product than its cause, serving primarily to finance the new, white-controlled world order and to camouflage the slaveholders’ more sinister experiments in genetics and psychology. The mind-numbing brutality of the slave system often elicited a subservience in the Africans that Christian rituals sanctioned and reinforced. Such religious violence undermined dark-skinned allegiance to the original Maker, thereby affording slaveowners a brief opportunity to impose their own bodies and their racist heritage on vulnerable dark-skinned humanity. Because these tactics were so materially profitable and morally deceptive, they tended to entice even their victims, particularly male slaves seduced by the slave patriarchy’s ideas of manhood. To the extent that the male slaves lost control over their souls, they came to mirror not only the physical appearance but also the material and spiritual values of their captors, whom they worshipped to varying degrees as gods. Indeed, Christian violence was so effective at purifying guilty whites and defiling innocent slaves that, thirty years after Emancipation ended over three hundred years of slavery, black postbellum author Booker T. Washington still regarded morally bankrupt ex-slaveholders as paragons of virtue, while denigrating ex-slaves and their heirs as unfit for first-class citizenship without “severe and constant struggle.”

In contrast, African American women such as Harriet Jacobs and Douglass’s Aunt Hester experienced firsthand the unrelenting desperation in the slaveowner’s pursuit of their rejecting black bodies and minds and were less fooled and tempted by either him or his material goods. Seeing nothing godly or even manly about men who unashamedly begged “detestable and inferior” slave women for sex and devotion by stringing them up and lashing them, their voices cut through the racist mythology to reveal miscegenation as both the inevitable result of the slaveholder’s futile quest for divinity and the Creator’s mocking reaffirmation of his mortality. After Dr. Flint tells Linda Brent
that he is building a house for her to occupy as his concubine, she "vowed before my Maker [who is definitely not Flint] that I would never enter it" (53). In so doing, Jacobs distinguishes between human monsters and their godlike disguises, an insight that enables her to define a self that is never alone or isolated from others or from that mysterious, higher order in a universe Flint seeks but cannot begin to fathom.

The effects of the Christian paradox continue to undermine the ability of the slaveowner's progeny to come to terms with either personal evil or good. Just as postbellum African Americans have inherited and must cope with the slave's legacy of subjugation, the slave-master's beneficiaries must do the same with his legacy of using skin color to justify living off, rather than with, the majority of humanity. In the meantime, the narratives of victimized ex-slave authors strongly suggest that the key to surviving human predators of any sort is to doubt their ability to become divine, no matter what religion claims.

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Notes

1 Although several literary scholars have devoted full-length volumes to the study of slave narratives, none has focused directly on this specific paradox. Literary studies of slave narratives include William Andrews, To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865 (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1988); Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr., The Slave's Narrative (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985); Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad, Slavery and the Literary Imagination (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1989); Darwin Turner and John Sekora, eds., The Art of Slave Narrative (Macomb: Western Illinois Univ. Press, 1982); Charles Nichols, Many Thousand Gone: The Ex-Slaves' Account of Their Bondage and Freedom (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1963); Robert Stepto, From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative, 2d ed. (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1991); and Frances Smith Foster, Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Antebellum Slave Narratives (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979). But historian John W. Blassingame implies a conflict between white slave-owners and the Creator when he writes that "Religious faith often conquered the slave's fear of his [human] master. The more pious slaves persisted in attending religious services contrary to the order of their masters and in spite of floggings. In this test of wills the slave asserted that his master could inflict pain on his body, but he could not harm his
Soul” *(The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South, 2d ed. [New York, Oxford Univ. Press, 1972], 75).


3 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845; reprint, New York: New American Library, 1968), 87. All further references to Douglass’s *Narrative* are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.


6 Virginia Clayton affirms the complicity of white women in sustaining the slave regime by which they were also victimized. She outlines the hierarchal structure of this system as follows: “We regarded slavery in a patriarchal sense. We were all one family, and, as master and mistress, heads of this family, we were responsible to the God we worshipped” *(White and Black Under the Old Regime* [Milwaukee and New York: The Young Churchman Co., 1899], 58). For all practical purposes, they themselves became this god.

7 While tracing the roots of Christianity to an Egyptian slave culture, J. G. Davies links its major metaphors of spiritual atonement—redemption, justification, and reconciliation—to the specifically Roman slave experience. In that context, redemption meant literal release from physical and spiritual enslavement, and Christ’s suffering emancipated humankind. Justification meant that the believer had been judged and found not guilty in much the same manner as the slave who had received the most perfect of manumissions, the restoration of his birthright. Reconciliation, or atonement, meant bringing together through rebirth into the community those who had been separated; see Davies, “Christianity: The Early Church” in *The Concise Encyclopedia of Living Faiths*, ed. Robert C. Zaehner (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1959), 56. See also Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), 66–70.

8 See Patterson’s summary of scholarship about this Christian contradiction, especially its roots in the writings of St. Paul (Slavery and Social Death, 70–72).

Patterson captures the vampirish and parasitic nature of the master/slave relationship by linking the slaveowner's honor to the slave's dishonor. He points out that "The counterpart of the master's sense of honor is the slave's experience of its loss. The so-called servile personality is merely the outward expression of this loss of honor" (Slavery and Social Death, 11–12).

Psychologist Erich Fromm acknowledges the debate within his profession regarding the roots of the frustration/aggression relationship but concludes, nevertheless, that this relationship stems from "the interaction of various social conditions, with man's existential needs." He notes that "[m]alignant aggression . . . is specifically human and not derived from animal instinct. It does not serve the physiological survival of man, yet it is an important part of his mental functioning. It is one of the passions that are dominant and powerful in some cultures, although not in others" (The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness [New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973], 218). Fromm further explains that "The character of the person [or group] determines in the first place what frustrates him, and in the second place the intensity of his reaction to frustration" (68). Viewed from this perspective, slave narratives consistently portray insecure white slave owners obsessed not only with having their black captives work for them but also with having those captives regard white skin color as supreme. The slaveowners' Eurocentric psyche leaves them unable to cope with personal rejection, especially from the black females. See also Leonard Berkowitz, "The Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis Revisited," in Roots of Aggression: A Re-Examination of the Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis (New York: Atherton Press, 1969).


Full-length critical studies about miscegenation include David Goodman Croly, Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the American White Man and the Negro (New York: H. Dexter, Hamilton &

Surveys and discussions of various theories and facts about the roots of Western racism include Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, vol. 1 (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1987), 201–04; St. Clair Drake, *Black Folk Here and There: An Essay in History and Anthropology*, vols. 1 and 2 (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, 1990); Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (New York: Schocken, 1965); David Theo Goldberg, *Anatomy of Race* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1990); Dana D. Nelson, *The Word in Black and White: Reading “Race” in American Literature* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), 3–37; and Alexander Thomas and Samuel Sillen, *Racism and Psychiatry* (1972; reprint, New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1991), 112–21. A study that best reflects the slave writer’s characterization of enslavers as more concerned with skin color than economics comes from psychiatrist Frances Cress Welsing, *The Isis (Yssis) Papers: The Keys to the Colors* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1991). Like Benjamin Franklin, Welsing notes that the world has fewer whites than colored people, but she then relates white racism to a neurotic drive to overcompensate for a “deep pervading sense of inadequacy and inferiority” caused by this minority status. Welsing theorizes that “the quality of whiteness is indeed a genetic inadequacy or a relative genetic deficiency state, based upon the genetic inability to produce the skin pigments of melanin (which is responsible for all skin color). The vast majority of the world’s people are not so afflicted, which suggests that color is normal for human beings and color absence is abnormal. Additionally, this state of color absence acts always as a genetic recessive to the dominant genetic factor of color-production. Color always ‘annihilates’ (phynotypically- and genetically-speaking) the non-color, white. Black people possess the greatest color potential, with brown, red and yellow peoples possessing qualities, respectively” (4).


In “Tryin’ to Get Over: Narrative Posture in Equiano’s Autobiography,” Chinosole examines several points of view that Equiano assumes as he goes through what amounts to “mental colonization” after his capture (*Art of Slave Narrative*, 45–46). These various narrative stances reveal his own personal ambivalence and contradictions.

Chinosole adds that Equiano’s privileged socio-economic position, which enables him to become an autobiographer, also forces him to write within
a paradox—that is, with a loss of critical judgment with respect to the ideology of the dominant culture that feeds him. The price he pays for his cultural privileges is internalization of their attendant values, including the oppressive ones ("Tryin’ to Get Over," 50).


24 For a discussion of differences between early slave narratives like Equiano’s and later ones written by fugitive slaves like Douglass and Jacobs, see Foster, *Witnessing Slavery*, 44–61.


27 In her analysis of the acculturation of Frederick Douglass into the “white idolet” in “The Problematic Self in Autobiography: The Example of the Slave Narrative” (in *The Art of Slave Narrative*, 101–03), Annette Niemtzow insightfully discusses how the slavery regime grants him the benefits of legitimacy and literacy. But the most compelling evidence of Douglass’s acculturation is the degree to which he embraces the evils of the slavocracy.


29 The speaker of “The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave, (Related by Herself)” (1828) also undercuts the myth of the dashing, romantic, and irresistibly sexy slaveholder. According to her, mere flogging is a luxury in comparison to contact with this man. She says: “He[r] enslaver] had an ugly fashion of stripping himself quite naked, and ordering me then to wash him in a tub of water. This was worse to me than all the licks” (*The Classic Slave Narratives*, 202).

30 While Dana D. Nelson correctly claims that Flint’s sense of mastery was confirmed in other areas of his life (*The Word in Black and White*, 167), she does not account for his god complex, which demanded absolute worship and drove him to stalk a slave girl who had the temerity to reject him. Also, while Thomas Doherty in “Harriet Jacobs’ Narrative Strategies: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” *Southern Literary Journal* 19 [fall 1986]: 84, 88) stresses the irony in Flint’s view of Linda Brent as an object of psychological conquest for which mere rape was an unsatisfactory outcome, he nonetheless ignores Jacobs’s descriptions of Flint’s
godlike need to have a black woman kneel to him. Additionally, Jacobs's habit of either rejecting outright or merely settling for the white male comports with motifs prominent in the African American female literary tradition, which rarely, if ever, depicts mutual romantic love between a white male and an African American female, although this canon details sexual encounters between the two.


When Annette Niemtzow compares Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs on the issue of acculturation, she rightly points out that Jacobs has a stronger voice than Douglass. But that is so precisely because Jacobs compromises with the slave society to a lesser degree than Douglass does (for example, in her refusal to pay and reluctance to have her employer, Mrs. Bruce, pay for her freedom). Furthermore, it is highly doubtful that, as Niemtzow suggests, Jacobs felt a loss of self because the domestic novel genre prevented her from recounting the gory details of her sexual liaison with Sands. To assert that her relationship with Sands amounts to "sexual experiences of her own" "with a man she cares for" ("The Problematic Self in Autobiography," 107) rather than a glorified rape is to ascribe to Jacobs a level of control over her body and choice of her sexual mate that she denies having everywhere else in the narrative. Indeed, her choice was to enjoy a love relationship with "a young colored carpenter; a free born man" (Incidents, 37). Niemtzow's assertion wrongly imputes to Jacobs a sacrificial nature more deserving of heaven than the mortal world in which she herself is always seeking to live and die peacefully. Unlike the slaveowners, obsessed with teaching their captives to regard them as gods and goddesses, Jacobs never aspires to sainthood.

Karla F. C. Holloway links this emphasis on will to West African female traditions: "I believe that far from being a coincidental selection of metaphor, the ancestral presence in contemporary African-American women's writing reconstructs an imaginative, cultural (re)membrane of a dimension of West African spirituality, and that the spiritual place of this subjective figuration is fixed into the structures of the text's language" (Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature [New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1992], 2).