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**Mothers and Monsters: Black Female Subjectivity in Black Speculative  
Fiction**

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**Mothers and Monsters: Black Female Subjectivity in Black Speculative  
Fiction**

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**Report**

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## Dedication

and look mother

I am

A dark temple where your true spirit rises

Beautiful

And touch as chestnut

-Audre Lorde

*for Lori Ann O'Neill (1955-2008) and every other mother she's sent along the way*

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## Abstract

# **Mothers and Monsters: Black Female Subjectivity in Black Speculative Fiction**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

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For if, as literary theorist Barbara Christian argues “people of color have always theorized--but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic” and “often in narrative forms,” then it only makes sense that we should turn to Black speculative fiction, a genre that has always been just as rooted in diasporic pasts as it has been invested in creating diasporic future(s) as a new avenue for exploring the trope of (mother)loss in diaspora. I first argue that Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is a black speculative proto-text from which we can begin to consider the usefulness and necessity of the imagination in radical formation of black female subjectivity. I then engage black science fiction writer Nalo Hopkinson’s 2013 novel, *Sister Mine*, which addresses intersections of race gender and sexuality in exciting ways. The ways that Jacobs and Hopkinson intentionally delve into mystery and imagination signify a unique opportunity for Black female writers to theorize themselves, to name themselves, and most importantly to claim what Hortense Spillers calls “the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to 'name')” and the potential to name *herself*. I choose to bring particular

attention to the Black speculative literature of Nalo Hopkinson not solely because she theorizes black female subjectivity but because of the ways that Hopkinson literally embraces the "monstrosity" of Black female subjectivity by writing black women as mermaids, goddesses, monsters into her work, echoes of which are also seen in Jacobs' work. The literal mermaids and monsters found in Hopkinson's 21<sup>st</sup> century (re)imagining of Toronto and Lake Ontario or Jacobs' *loophole of retreat* provide new ways of understanding what it means to be diasporic Black/woman/mother/child in both the midst and aftermath of transatlantic slavery, striking a necessary balance between acknowledging contemporary and historical struggles of black people across the world, and drawing on the power of the imaginative to look towards the future.

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## Chapter 1: "The Shape of Mystery:" *Harriet Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl as Speculative Fiction*

"Sometimes I thought God was a compassionate Father, who would forgive my sins for the sake of my sufferings. At other times, it seemed to me there was no justice or mercy in the divine government. I asked why the curse of slavery was permitted to exist, and why I had been so persecuted and wronged from youth upward. These things took the shape of mystery, which is to this day not so clear to my soul as I trust it will be hereafter."

-Harriet Jacobs, "Still in Prison"

Africa is a woman. As Anne McClintock says, "the representation of the land as female is a traumatic trope," but it is not an unfamiliar one.<sup>1</sup> After all, land-like woman-is something to be conquered, owned, and traded. And if Africa is woman she is also mother and is made so by penetrating European forces, which erect slave castles and towers on her coasts and flood them with warm bodies: her children, born brown, made Black, and exported around the world as commodity. At the

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<sup>1</sup> McClintock, Anne. *Imperial leather: Race, gender, and sexuality in the colonial contest*. Routledge, 2013. 24.

moment Africa becomes mother, she is called into being and “stands *in the flesh*” as “both mother and mother dispossessed.”<sup>2</sup> For at the exact moment she becomes mother she is made bereft of her children and is no more a mother than she is childless. And so, it would seem that if the story of Africa as mother is one of dispossession, then the story of the African Diaspora is one of a ‘sometimes’ motherless child. And that diasporic story begins where “all our stories begin” —or as Daniel J. Wideman theorizes “in the womb. In darkness, surrounded by water.”<sup>3</sup> But this story is not your usual story of loss and reunion. It is a story that has been complicated, messy, irresolute<sup>4</sup>, and marked by the sinister trappings and implications of imperialism from the onset for even “the womb” is “our first colony.”<sup>5</sup> The children of the diaspora cannot be neatly returned to the womb, cannot be neatly returned to Africa, as Orlando Patterson, Hortense Spillers, and Saidiya Hartman, have reminded us for it is the leaving, the being born that so irreversibly changes the shape of the ‘womb’ and our relation to it.<sup>6</sup> There is no going back to the motherland.

Over the years, theoretical interventions by Afro-Pessimist scholars such as Orlando Patterson, Hortense Spillers, and Saidiya Hartman have opened up avenues for thinking of (mother)loss in diaspora. I argue that these interventions are critical

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<sup>2</sup> Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 80.

<sup>3</sup> Wideman, Daniel J. "The Door of No Return? A Journey Through the Legacy of the African Slave Forts: An Excerpt." *Callaloo* 21, no. 1 (1998): 1.

<sup>4</sup> Richardson, Matt. *The Queer Limit of Black Memory: Black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution*. The Ohio State University Press, 2013. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Wideman, 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

to (re)imagining and queering presupposed fixed relations between Africa and the Diaspora as mother and child, and are only the beginning. To unfix Africa from a limited understanding of motherhood and mothering is to “rewrite... a radically different text for a female empowerment.”<sup>7</sup> This story is not the usual story and therefore requires the unusual storyteller, one that deals in the strange, the terrifying, the magnificent, and the limitless, the storyteller that traffics in the intersections of the historical and imaginary, blurs boundaries between fact and fiction—the Black female speculative or science fiction writer. Over and over, history confronts us with motherloss; and over and over, black women’s speculative fiction responds by theorizing previously uncharted depths of mother, child, and diaspora as they *could have been* and *could one day be*.

For if, as literary theorist Barbara Christian argues, “people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic” and “often in narrative forms,” then it only makes sense that we should turn to Black speculative fiction, a genre that has always been just as rooted in diasporic pasts as it has been invested in creating diasporic future(s).<sup>8</sup> In a 2006 special issue of *Socialism and Democracy* “Socialism and Social Critique in Science,” Lisa Yaszek attributes contemporary modes of speculative fiction writing to writers such as Mary Shelly, H.G. Wells, and Edgar Allen Poe that “directly engaged the changing

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<sup>7</sup> Spillers, 80.

<sup>8</sup> Christian, Barbara. “The race for theory.” *Feminist Studies* (1988): 68.

relations of science and society as a whole.”<sup>9</sup> In the context of the African diaspora, however, Yaszek draws attention to the work of 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers W.E.B. Du Bois and George S. Schulyler who were influential in their use of “speculative narrative forms to imagine how black people might participate in the creation of the future.”<sup>10</sup> But as Yaszek discusses the contemporary significance of black speculative fiction or Afro-futurism, she specifically discusses the work of Nalo Hopkinson as someone who extends the work of Du Bois and Shulyler and additionally widens the national boundaries of diaspora and brings a transnational attribute to her work that is largely influenced by her Pan-Caribbean childhood, her migration to Canada, and her most recent years spent in the United States. Hopkinson’s work goes beyond the work of Du Bois and Schulyler, Yaszek asserts, by “insisting not only that race will matter to entire nations in the future, but that it will matter to individual people in their everyday lives as well.”<sup>11</sup> I argue that Hopkinson, as do many black women writers, also brings both unusual and quotidian affects of gender and sexuality to bear on the tradition of Black Speculative fiction in exciting ways. It is for this reason that I am especially interested in speculative fiction written by Black women as an opportunity for Black female writers to theorize themselves, to name themselves, and most importantly to claim what Hortense Spillers calls “the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to

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<sup>9</sup> Yaszek, Lisa. “Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future.” *Socialism and Democracy* 20, no. 3 (November 2006): 41–60. doi:10.1080/08854300600950236.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

'name')" and the potential to name *herself*.<sup>12</sup> I choose to bring particular attention to the Black speculative literature of Nalo Hopkinson not solely because she theorizes black female subjectivity but because of the ways that Hopkinson literally embraces the "monstrosity" of Black female subjectivity by writing black women as mermaids, goddesses, monsters into her work. These literal mermaids and monsters provide new ways of understanding what it means to be diasporic Black/woman/mother in both the midst and aftermath of transatlantic slavery, striking a necessary balance between acknowledging contemporary and historical struggles of black people across the world, and drawing on the power of the imaginative to look towards the future.

Like Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley in her article "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic," in addition to considering narrative as a generative space for producing theory, I look to academic theorizing as a space to explore the narrative and pursue metaphors of water, woman, mother, and monster in African diaspora. I also look to academic theorizing as a way to further comprehend how "historical, conceptual, and embodied experience come together to transform racialized, gendered, classed, and sexualized selves," or how the experiences and histories of the Middle Passage and its material consequences mark our understanding of diaspora and Black female subjectivity in the present.<sup>13</sup> And like Tinsley, I jump off the imperial

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<sup>12</sup> Spillers, 80.

<sup>13</sup> Tinsley, O. N. "BLACK ATLANTIC, QUEER ATLANTIC: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage." *GLQ*:

*A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 2-3 (January 1, 2008): 192.  
doi:10.1215/10642684-2007-030.

landmass of Africa-as-mother and plunge into the oceans, lakes, and rivers of these texts as archives and spaces "that chur[n] with physical remnants, [the] dis(re)remembered," and awfully transformed "bodies of the Middle Passage."<sup>14</sup> It is the waters off the coasts of Africa, the Caribbean, and the Americas that are rich with metaphor and opaque possibilities not afforded to Black, queer, trans, and other fluid bodies on the imperial landmass of Africa, particularly one that is imagined in a dangerous romantic engagement of the continent as a space of perfect reunion and return. It is these bodies that come together in abject piecemeal, these strange bodies that form the (un)imaginable creatures that rise from the metaphorical space of the ocean, an "opaque space to convey the drowned, disremembered, ebbing and flowing histories of violence and healing in the African diaspora" to haunt our dreams.<sup>15</sup>

Though the space of the Black Queer Atlantic is an opaque one, we must not be afraid to gesture towards the expansive darkness and make meaning of it. As McClintock reminds us, there is a "persistent gendering of the imperial unknown"<sup>16</sup>—an imperial male urge to consume land and borders that necessitates rendering the unknown as female. This imperial gendering speaks to so much of what is unknown about Black female subjectivity. It births the haunting figures of she who sits along the margins; she who tends demonic grounds, she who stands sentinel over this 'mythical' space of abjection and dispossession that most can only imagine

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 194.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> McClintock, 24.

but that Black and brown women encounter intimately. And as we pour over imperial cartographies of the ocean<sup>17</sup> old and new, what would it mean to come to the watery borders where "cartographers filled the blank seas of their maps with mermaids and sirens"<sup>18</sup> and engage these women—other(ed), fierce, and not quite human, but *just as they are*? The mermaid, siren, or monster that western culture "imposes in blindness"<sup>19</sup> is not to a figure to shrink back from or engulf in inscrutability. Those of us who search out mermaids and monsters in the historical space of the Atlantic or the theoretical space of Black Feminist or Black Queer Studies "are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the insurgent ground as female social subject."<sup>20</sup> And this is why we might turn to speculative fiction. For within the pages of Black female speculative fiction writers we begin to find maps that chart fantastical black femaleness neither as the magic land of the delicate and pretty maiden nor as the tragic ocean of the self-sacrificing and beleaguered mother. Instead these writers queerly mirror the possibility of "actually claiming the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to "name")," which allows us to imagine new ways of encountering black femininity and female subjectivity and releasing it from restrictive hegemonic bonds.<sup>21</sup>

Surely the mother and mother dispossessed that Spillers invokes in her work have, through the technologies and mechanics of slavery and its aftereffects,

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<sup>17</sup> Tinsley, 192.

<sup>18</sup> McClintock, 24.

<sup>19</sup> Spillers, 80.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

become much removed from white heteropatriarchal tropes of (white) womanhood and motherhood. And perhaps it is that removal and distancing from white heteropatriarchal tropes and norms that renders the black woman and mother hypervisible but illegible to those very forces that have transformed her and marked her as deviant, as other, as *monster*. While it is an imperative of this study to actively engage the figure of the black woman and mother as monster and monstrosity, I am most interested in the children of these mothers. How do contemporary black diasporic subjects—especially those of us who are women—understand ourselves not only in relation to these mothers and monsters but also as the beneficiaries of their legacies? And how might making sense of black women’s transformations into mothers and monsters offer new and complex ways to understand ourselves as diasporic subjects—ways that are not limited by the fixed positioning of relationships between black mothers and their children as always already fraught and plagued by the pathology of motherloss? Instead, how might we be open to the multiple possibilities of being the inheritors of long lines of women who have made tremendous sacrifice but also have lived tremendously complicated, awe-ful lives that continuously push the boundaries of the fantastic? At the same time, however, we must resist the urge to romanticize the mother as monster as much as the urge to pathologize her. The institution of slavery imposed severe limitations on black female bodies, let alone black female subjectivity, which cannot be forgotten as they shape the conditions under which black women mothered. As McKittrick reminds us in her discussion of the black women's geography in relation

to the auction block: "Black feminine sexuality is a site of loss under slavery: birth, parentage, heredity, motherhood, fatherhood, sexual desire, and sexual consent are produced and denied through the terms of unfreedom."<sup>22</sup> After all, there is very little romance in being sold away from your infant child or having your children wrenched and sold away from you just as there is little romance in never choosing to become a mother in the first place.

And there is little romance in *becoming a monster* as the production of gender under chattel slavery is one of the processes by which the black woman and mother is made to be monster, other, and less than. Much of this meant the constant perception of being a violable body: "the enslaved black female body [as] a site of unprotected flesh,"<sup>23</sup> which in much of legal discourse rendered the black female body *ungendered*<sup>24</sup> while simultaneously and contradictorily rendering it "essential[ly] and inalterab[ly] femal[e]."<sup>25</sup> In *Scenes of Subjection*, however, Saidiya Hartman warns against the common argument that "the enslaved female existed outside the gendered universe because she was not privy to the entitlements of bourgeois women within the white patriarchal family," as it "naturalizes the discourse of protection" and "maintains the white normative to of the category "woman.""<sup>26</sup> She goes on to invoke the work of Elsa Barkley Brown and Gayatri

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<sup>22</sup> McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic grounds: Black women and the cartographies of struggle*. University of Minnesota Press, 2006. 82.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>24</sup> Spillers, 68.

<sup>25</sup> McKittrick, 81.

<sup>26</sup> Hartman, Saidiya V. 1997. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press. 99.

Spivak by asking if there is a way to acknowledge the "divergent production of the category of woman" and the multiplicity of genders that may be housed under the term 'woman' without "reproduc[ing] the very normativity that had occluded an understanding of the differential production of gender."<sup>27</sup> The tension that Hartman explores between the very material consequences of black women traditionally being denied access to the category of (white) womanhood and the dangerous, totalizing, and exclusionary tendency to only define womanhood in relation to whiteness brings her to ask how we as scholars might "understand the racialized engenderment of the black female captive in terms other than deficiency or lack in relation to normative conditions."<sup>28</sup>

Hartman's question is an important one with many possible, necessary answers that should be returned to again and again. In working with Black women's speculative fiction, however, the answer that I am most interested in exploring is that of the ancestor and foremother as monster and goddess. How might black women's speculative fiction make 'woman' a strange and unfamiliar category by disrupting its generalizing and normalizing qualities and pointing to the already fictive invention of the category? How might monster and monstrosity in this context queer the relationship between *black* and *woman*, making it something rich and strange: rich for analysis and the production of theory, strange enough to trouble tendencies to reproduce the white woman as referent? Although there is

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 100.

something to be said about the inherent strength and power conferred to monsters and the radical possibilities that could exist in a world where Black women have full control and agency over their corporeal beings, the prevailing belief of black women as untouchable, even within systems of white heteropatriarchy, is a damaging one that does much to obscure the very fact that the bodies of black women—black queer and transwomen especially—are the most susceptible and at risk. The invocation of the monster does not mean to suggest that these black women are inviolable superwomen, for even in the most literal sense these 'monsters' are susceptible to hierarchies of power and privilege. Instead, their presence could be seen to signify the rather creative ways that these women and monsters have had to navigate the violability of their bodies and those around them in order to produce fantastic and impossible<sup>29</sup> outcomes that provide instances of freedom—or "something akin to freedom"—even in spaces of constraint and contradiction.<sup>30</sup>

There are strange things that these monsters must do in order to remain women and mothers, in ways that are not easily validated or recognizable when white women are unequivocally established as referents. And there are strange things that these women must do when they feel that no other choice is available to them. Perhaps the story of Harriet Jacobs, who writes under the pseudonym Linda

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<sup>29</sup> Gopinath, Gayatri. *Impossible desires: Queer diasporas and South Asian public cultures*. Duke University Press, 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Jacobs, Harriet Ann. Edited by Lydia Maria Child. *The Deeper Wrong*. Cambridge University Press, 2011. 58–66. doi:10.1017/cbo9780511791963.009.

Brent, is one such example of the black woman as monster who, in the vein of the African American religious vernacular, *makes a way out of no way*.

I want to bring attention to Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*—believed by many to be "an antecedent black feminist narrative"—as a possible site of black women's speculative fiction.<sup>31</sup> This is perhaps a dangerous notion, as Jacobs' narrative has always been surrounded by speculation and doubt since its publication in 1861. The genre of the slave narrative has commonly come under fire, as narratives written by the formerly enslaved as well as those recorded by white abolitionists were accused of sensationalizing or even inventing the experiences recounted within their pages. The fact that narratives written by the enslaved themselves were never taken seriously or even published without a pledge of support from a white witness or editor hardly stopped questions surrounding narrative veracity. In the case of Jacobs' narrative, the text was believed by many readers to be a fictionalized account penned by the book's editor Lydia Marie Child or Harriet Beecher Stowe, because of confusion due to Jacobs' use of pseudonym. Within the realm of the academy the book was often treated as fiction for similar reasons, and was originally discredited by Historian John Blassingame who believed her unique and complex representations of enslaved people, especially women, were too different from typical slave narratives produced during that era.<sup>32</sup> It was

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<sup>31</sup> McKittrick, 37.

<sup>32</sup> Patton, Venetria K. *Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women's Fiction*, Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2000, pp. 53-55.

not until the work by the white feminist scholar Jean Fagan Yellin in the 1970s and 80s that the narrative began to be considered in the world of academia as an autobiography worthy of scholarly inquiry.<sup>33</sup> And while Yellin's efforts are significant and in many ways make possible black feminist scholars' subsequent interventions regarding Jacobs' story, it is important to point out how the need for white feminist stamps of approval persisted long after emancipation and how, indeed, the white western woman remains the implicit referent within the category of "feminist." The continuing impetus to authenticate Jacobs' narrative contributes to my interest in pursuing this text as both autobiography and speculative fiction, because of the theoretical implications that the text is able to present *regardless* of whether or not Jacobs' account is unwaveringly factual. The irresolution between the "truth" and "fiction" of her narrative underlines the way that Jacobs used narrative to theorize "in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic."<sup>34</sup> Jacobs' text, like those of black female speculative fiction writers, should not need to be vetted or approved as academic texts in order to be sites worthy of analysis; they should not need the stamp of western feminism to be recognized as capable of theorizing black female subjectivity in innovative ways.

It may be no coincidence that some of the most interesting theoretical possibilities that Jacobs offers occur in the most contested sections of her narrative,

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<sup>33</sup> Martin, Michael, and Jean Fagan Yellin. "Professor Sheds Light on Harriet Jacobs' Path to Freedom." NPR.

Last modified January 7, 2008. Accessed May 6, 2015.

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=17897134>.

<sup>34</sup> Christian 68.

those spent in the attic-like garret above her grandmother's house. These are the pages that seem the most unbelievable—perhaps even more so than Jacobs' ability to spin legal discourse into her narrative or her apt running commentary about the perverse effect of racial segregation on the United States as a developing nation. These are the pages where Jacobs asks readers to suspend their disbelief as she describes seven years confined to an oppressively small attic crawl space only three feet high at its highest point, seven feet long, nine feet wide, and so cramped that "there was no admission for either light or air."<sup>35</sup> The circumstances surrounding Jacobs' confinement might make seven years spent in such a tight and immobilizing space impossible to imagine, as she was not held in the garret against her will but committed to hiding there to escape continued abuse from her master Dr. Flint. Though Jacobs' very dangerous yet ingenious plan to hide from the Flint family in plain sight—in "the last place they thought of"—was her own decision, choice and freedom in Jacobs' narrative are not unhindered.<sup>36</sup> As Katherine McKittrick states, "this does not mean that [Jacobs] is simply a victim, but rather that her story and her actions blend black female oppression and captivity with glimpses of individual control and agency."<sup>37</sup> The oppression and captivity that restrict Jacobs' agency become physically actualized in the creation of the garret as a liminal space meant

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<sup>35</sup> Jacobs, 173–178.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> McKittrick, 39.

to shield her from the pain and threat of enslavement while inevitably causing Jacobs great physical and emotional pain.<sup>38</sup>

Jacobs' endurance of the garret, especially for such an extended period of time, is largely influenced by the presence of her two young children Ellen and Benjamin. As McKittrick notes, "Jacobs'/Brent's retreat to the garret is a geographic tactic designed to protect her body and her children's future bodies—from rape, violence, auctions, coffles, and labor that is analogous to 'a slow murder.'"<sup>39</sup> The garret is a place of protection that comes with great cost; like many spaces afforded to the enslaved, it can only provide her *something akin to freedom*. Indeed, Hartman opines that "the feat of *Incidents*...is the endeavor to actualizing something 'akin to freedom,'" a reference referring to Jacobs' circumscribed decision to 'choose' a white lawyer to father her two children who was not her master and would have the capital and influence to free her children.<sup>40</sup> The actualization of this circumscribed freedom, however, changes Jacobs' experience greatly. Her time in the garret is quite significant to her intellectual development, critically affecting her ability to produce this theoretically innovative text that queries enslaved black women's place of in the politics of liberation, the evolution of the American justice system, and the imagination of erotic autonomy. Jacobs' garret sojourn allowed her a "bird's eye view" of the terrors of slavery possible only while she was spatially and theoretically positioned simultaneously within, without, and above the plantation's

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 39-40.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>40</sup> Hartman, 105.

daily operations. As Jacobs peers from her “loophole of retreat” and sees enslaved mothers bemoaning being sold south and drowning themselves to avoid flogging, she asks herself “why the curse of slavery was permitted to exist, and why I had been so persecuted and wronged from youth upward.” She concludes with irresolution: “These things took the shape of mystery, which is to this day not so clear to my soul as I trust it will be hereafter.”<sup>41</sup> It is likely that the injustices and suicides that Jacobs witnessed while struggling to make sense of her own circumstances contributed to her transformation into an abolitionist able to connect her struggle for freedom with that of other enslaved Africans.

Important as this evolution is, I also hope to raise different questions about Jacobs’ garret stay and its effects. “The shape of mystery” that Jacob sees shrouding her circumstances—a shape that McKittrick outlines as the blending of Jacobs’ oppressive experiences of slavery and the dangerous acts she must undertake to escape it—is actualized in the garret, the physical shape that conceals the mystery of her presence and survival.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, Jacobs herself becomes a *space of mystery*: that is, her time in the garret renders her mysterious, even unrecognizable to those that might claim to have a most intimate knowledge of her including her owners, her lover, and her grandmother. Even more strikingly, she becomes unrecognizable to the beloved children who grew in her womb but now, because of her time in the garret, hardly know or remember her at all. Jacobs lives as ‘the

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<sup>41</sup> Jacobs, 173.

<sup>42</sup> Jacobs, 183–188.

shape of mystery' just as much as she lives in 'the shape of mystery.' In fact, she begins to embody the mystery of the dark and damp attic and the far reaches of enslavement. In her narrative Jacobs is careful to report that she had never known great physical exhaustion and has never been whipped nor suffered great bodily harm, though she quietly suggests that she is familiar with other types of exhaustion and sexualized violence. It is in the garret, however, that Jacobs becomes most familiar with the disabling and debilitating nature of slavery as she finds her "limbs benumbed by inaction" and a "very painful sensation of coldness in [her] head."<sup>43</sup> Over the years, Jacobs weakens and at times finds herself exceptionally ill, spending hours at a time completely unconscious with no hope for experienced medical attention. Beginning her second winter in the attic, her "face and tongue stiffened, and [she] lost the power of speech."<sup>44</sup> The body that has been plagued by darkness, inaction, and malnutrition is accompanied by a mind that, on the darkest days of winter, is wrought with dark and maudlin thoughts. The hopeful and determined Jacobs that readers may recall from earlier in the text may seem to slip away at times into the opacity of her cell, revealing a more sinister experience than Jacobs' narrative first seems to suggest.

What I am gesturing towards here is an understanding of Jacobs as not only speculative and fantastic in ways that her narrative may not usually be read, but a reading of Jacobs as part of the lineage of both monster *and* mother. Though the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

changes to Jacobs' body are very significant, I do not mean for a reading of her as monster to assert an ableist discourse. Truly, Jacobs is most monstrous for her cunning approaches to enslavement and her often deviously deviant performance of womanhood even when presented within the discursive framework of respectability politics in the Victorian era. I do not, however, want to overlook the changes to Jacobs' body and the ways these physical changes become closely tied to her (self-)generative powers. In the same way that Jacobs is able to discursively craft the garret then theorize from it, she able to craft herself through a series of deliberate actions, such as circulating her narrative. Viewed through the lens and vocabulary of speculative fiction, the space of the garret resembles a spaceship or time machine that Jacobs is able to assemble from the broken bits and pieces of a black, womanly and motherly self that slavery leaves within her reaches. She repurposes these remnants, galvanizing the fragments of her circumscribed agency into workable parts that allow her to hurl herself through space and time—that allow her to project herself into a Northern space and future time where she can secure freedom for herself and her children. In this story Jacobs returns a free woman, of course, but her eyes are darker and one side of her face droops unexpectedly. Her hands shake whenever she hears loud noises and her words circle in on themselves as though it had been years since she last spoke to anyone. And remarkably, Jacobs' hair is almost completely grey, impossibly so for a woman little older than thirty years, but her refusal to divulge all the secrets and discoveries of her time spent away does not foreclose the possibility that time collapsed and

compressed on her travels making her more than just *wiser*. In both versions of the story, Jacobs pays an incalculable price “for the redemption of [her] children,”<sup>45</sup> but becomes so changed by her journeys—metaphorical or otherwise—that she becomes an “outsider whose experience and tradition is too ‘alien’ to comprehend.”<sup>46</sup>

Given the information Jacobs provides in *Incidents*, we know that she is able to secure her children's freedom and is eventually reunited with both of them in the free states. She details tears of relief and sadness at moments of reunion, but I wonder at the things she does not detail. I wonder about her fear and anxiety and about her children's intense sorrow and regret upon seeing their long-escaped—or long-dead—mother descend from the garret and back into their lives as if she had never been missing (because in the most literal sense she *had* been there all those years, though not quite present.) What we do not find in the narrative is what it could have possibly been like for her children to discover that the eyes that watched them surreptitiously through the cracks in the attic, the terrible creaking of their nightmares, and the haint down the hall had been their flesh-and-blood mother all along. I do not expect answers from Jacobs. Her story is her own, and though it greatly impacts the life of her children, she can only speak from her own perspective. Anything less than happy reunion between mother and children would have been of no benefit to the suspenseful yet hopeful genre of this autotext; there

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Lorde, Audre. "Age, race, class, and sex." *Sister Outsider*. The Crossing Press, 1984.

are secrets still about the human cost of slavery that Jacobs cannot divulge. Some 150 years later, however, I am inclined to wonder what it means to be mothered by the monster in the attic? In some ways, Jacobs was far more fictive and much less fathomable to her children Ellen and Benny than the imaginary childhood figure Santa Claus. As she details her first Christmas spent in the garret, Jacobs tells a story about hearing Benny try on the suit she had labored to make him in her hideaway—one of many gifts that she handmade the children for Christmas. In his smart suit, Benny asks another young friend if Santa Claus had brought the other little boy something. The boy replies that Santa Claus is not real and that it is “the children’s mothers that put things into their stockings.”<sup>47</sup> Benny, however, seems troubled by this fact and insists, “Santa Claus brought Ellen and me these new clothes, and my mother has been gone this long time.”<sup>48</sup> It is interesting to note here that Benny seems less distressed by Santa Claus being fiction than he does about his mother being real. It is impossible for him to imagine having a mother familiar and close enough to anticipate and fulfill his basic needs. At many points in the narrative we experience Jacobs’ longing for her children and family, one so great that she carves three holes into the side of the attic in order to see them and better hear their voices. The holes provide little light and only very few glimpses of her growing children, but it is much more than her children were permitted to see and know of her.

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<sup>47</sup> Jacobs, 179-182.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

After all, what does it mean to be surveilled by a mother you cannot see through three small holes born in the roof of your home? Is it possible her children would have been able to spot her moving past the tiny holes? Would they have been able to hear her breathing, weeping, or softly calling their names? And how could they make sense of what it meant to be successfully haunted by your living and breathing mother, a woman made into a ghost by the social death of slavery?<sup>49</sup> Or, to put this question another way: what does it mean for Ellen and Benny to be haunted by both the living and the dead, by those whom slavery kills through social death as well as by those to whom it meted out physical death? For here it is important to drive home the point that Ellen and Benny were both real children who, though their particular story may have been unique, were like many other children who suffered the ills of slavery. And, as much as they have been real, we must also understand and acknowledge them as metaphor for those of us black womanists, feminists, theorists who have also been left to makes sense of their (fore)mother's sacrifices, absences, and reappearances, and who are left putting together the pieces of these experiences from violently fragmented and silenced archives.

There is so much that Jacobs' narrative could not say and so much that remains unsaid and surely, as Hartman notes, "the constraints on what can be said, the impossibility of representing the magnitude of slavery's violence, and the pain of

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<sup>49</sup> Patterson, Orlando. "The Constituent Elements of Slavery." *Introduction to Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, 1-14. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.

recollection account for the selective character of [her] narrative.”<sup>50</sup> When “the unspoken and the censored haunt the narrative,” precisely because the Archive<sup>51</sup> does not allow for and actively seeks to discredit and subsume the lived experiences of black women and their epistemological potential, how do we remember and—most importantly—speak to the totality of Jacobs’ experience? In the case of Jacobs and other foremothers like her, we are left having to reconstruct their journeys through, out of, and after enslavement, then make sense of our own lives through theirs. We are left to reconstruct the garret and all of the different meanings it confers on black women’s lives past and present and future. If “to read the archive is to enter a mortuary” that “permits one final viewing and allows for a last glimpse of persons about to disappear into the slave hold,” —or the garret, as it were—how do we emerge from that space of mystery to tell the stories of these women and do them justice?<sup>52</sup>

When navigating archival violence and black women in the historical Archive, a tale of two goddesses named Venus comes to mind. They are black women born of ships bearing bone, blood, and semen, curved (sometimes broken) bodies breaking through sea foam that causes them to rise up and unfold upon the decks of ships as

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<sup>50</sup> Hartman, 107.

<sup>51</sup> Here I refer to the “Archive” as we understand it in the traditional—and often impenetrable—sense that caters to desires and the demands of the project of white heteropatriarchy. I refer to the intentional construction of the Archive as an institution that marginalizes black and brown people and violently reduces them to commodities. This Archive prevents significant recognition of the various ways African and African descended people have had to develop non traditional archives and alternative epistemologies in order to see reflections of themselves in the world.

<sup>52</sup> Hartman, Saidiya V. *Lose Your Mother: a journey along the Atlantic slave route*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007. 17.

fully formed women in the eyes of some, girls in the eyes of others. They are the women from "The Dead Book," a chapter in Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Here Hartman struggles with the work of piecing their stories together from shards and fragments of their lives recorded in the archive. They are forgettable, Hartman reminds us, "an asterisk in the grand narrative of history" that she is only able to recover because the ship's captain was charged with one of the girls' murder.<sup>53</sup> It is unclear exactly how the girls died. Almost all that is known about either is that the one whose case was not tried in court was given the 'pet name' Venus, while the other girl was known only as *dead*. Hartman supposes that they both died alone and isolated on the slave ship *The Recovery* and that the abuse of the crew hastened their death. The painful terrors white heteropatriarchal capitalist societies inflict on the bodies of women like Venus and the dead girl are often reinscribed through the politics of the archive, and Hartman finds herself unwittingly participating in this dynamic. In one instance she refuses to give *the dead girl* a name, though she imagines a litany of names she could attribute to her— *Phibba or Theresa or Sally or Belinda*.<sup>54</sup> Hartman expresses a desire to save the girl from "oblivion" but sees herself capable of little beyond that, as the life of the girl is a life impossible to reconstruct.<sup>55</sup> But the lives that Hartman is unable to reconstruct are not so neatly wrapped up in the world outside of "The Dead Book." A year later, Hartman still finds herself haunted by the unraveling

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<sup>53</sup> Hartman, Saidiya V. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 2.

<sup>54</sup> Hartman, *Venus*, 1.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid* 13.

threads of their story and pens the article “Venus in Two Acts,” where she finally submits to naming the girl. In her reflections, however, she names more than just those black women on *The Recovery* but other women who also remain faint marks in the ledgers of history. The dead girl, Hartman tells us, “is found everywhere in the Atlantic world,” where familiar spaces in the geography of enslavement like “the barracoon, the hollow of the slave ship...the kitchen, the master’s bedroom—turn out to be exactly the same place and in all of them she is called Venus.”<sup>56</sup> Naming these women *Venus* invokes them as goddesses, though it is not always so clear exactly what it is they inspire in the hearts of their previous “worshippers.” It is also unclear if, like their namesake, they inspired humans to physical and divine love or to incalculable acts of violence committed in their name. But after all colonialism, Hartman reminds us, is often cloaked in the language of love.

Hartman's struggle is one based in the tensions between what is admissible as academic and what is purely “fiction,” read, fanciful and not based in reality. Her writing “is unable to exceed the limits of the sayable dictated by the archive” and all too often “falters before the archive’s silence and reproduces its omissions.”<sup>57</sup> But all the same, the story of Venus must be told just as much as it cannot be told. After all, Hartman tells us, “the loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them.”<sup>58</sup> Yet it is also fear that holds her back: fear of what she might invent, of what she would *have to* invent to tell stories that would provide a “glimpse of beauty,” or an “instant of

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 8.

possibility" in these women's memories.<sup>59</sup> Hartman continues by insisting that we approach the impossibility of these stories again and again, even though (or because) we encounter failure each time. This is not only what these Venuses deserve, but also what they demand. And as theorists we must continue writing "with and against the archive" as a best practice for theorizing of black female subjectivity.<sup>60</sup> But despite Hartman's fear of invention, when she asks how a "narrative of defeat" might "enable a place for the living or envision an alternative future" she finds her answer in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*.<sup>61</sup> Despite her avowed skepticism of fabulation, even Hartman offers black speculative fiction as a blueprint for telling the stories of the Venuses that we have encountered in the ledgers as well as those that we will never come across. This is the genre that she imagines able to "envision an alternative future": one that is not unaware of the material constraints placed on black women's lives yet also holds open possibilities for sea monsters, time travel, and goddesses to appear in black women's worlds within their pages. These pages are able to speak truth to those gaps and silences where historiography may not be able to intervene, and may offer deep waters for exploring the historical motivations and embodied experiences of centuries of black women in diaspora.

I am thinking again of Christian's "The Race for Theory" and her reminder that "black feminist literary theory ought to have some relationship to practice." Though I, like Hartman, have an interest in "writing with and against the archive," I

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Hartman, *Scenes*, 10.

<sup>61</sup> Hartman, *Venus*. 14.

also take seriously Christian's words and conceive of my project as a radical black feminist (re)imagining work that practices what it theorizes.<sup>62</sup> Christian's words and the works of Hopkinson and Jacobs encourage me to return to my own narrative roots, to the Caribbean ways of thinking and being in the world that I learned as a child who had not yet lost her mother. Above all, these writings remind me that it is significant to be a Black woman who not only produces theories about works but also produces works that theorize, ultimately contributing to a shared process of collective memory and growth.

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<sup>62</sup> Christian, 68.

## Chapter 2: “Into Something Rich and Strange:” *Marasa Consciousness in Nalo Hopkinson’s Sister Mine*

Some of us are mothered by ghosts. Far too often, brown and black women are left with the necessary work of constructing and reconstructing buried genealogies, raising figurative bodies from the dead, recovering voices from the depths, in ways that sometimes feel more literal than figurative. Some of us are mothered by women who have suffered painful and untimely deaths, women whose bodies buckled under the demands of socioeconomic pressures and the necessary—but often impossible—struggle for justice and equity. Others of us are mothered by women who are still living, but are rendered invisible by systems of oppression that demand social death and suppression in order to uphold the white heteropatriarchal establishment which was built upon and continues to lean on the backs of black women the whole world over.

Living or dead, Alice Walker’s call to preserve the work of black—and particularly female—genius feels apt, especially when considering the influences of foremothers biological, fictive, and theoretical. Walker’s quote is excerpted from a longer speech [name of speech] about her crucial and groundbreaking efforts to recover the work of novelist and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston whose great contribution to the Harlem renaissance and the field of anthropology was lost for nearly fifty years. “We are,” she writes, “a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. If they do, it is our duty as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children. If

necessary, bone by bone (in search of).”<sup>63</sup> Walker’s evocation of bone collecting references her efforts to recover not only Hurston’s body of work but also her physical body, as her gravesite remained unmarked for many years. ‘Bone collecting’ is essential to preserving the memory of black feminist contemporaries and predecessors. Though Black Feminist and Black Queer studies have begun a massive and necessary undertaking of beginning this process, there is more collecting to be done. And, recalling Walker’s mention of the collecting of genius we must do for “the sake of our children,” we must also remember that much of the work must begin with an understanding of ourselves as the children of such genius. We are the children who will first inherit the legacies of these women and we are children who find themselves in delicate and complicated positions when we are called to both collect and reassemble the bones of the black, feminist, and radical genius that came before us.

Among the legacies that have been left to us to collect, some bones are as unsettling as they are unfamiliar. Some graves sites, like that of Zora Neale Hurston, are easier to erect markers and monuments on, while others are far more difficult to comprehend. What does one do with the nameless and forgotten dead, hundred of years gone, buried on the sides of roads, in mass graves, or overboard into the ocean? The mysteries of old bones left to float or sink in the Atlantic brings to mind Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother*, where Hartman recalls an old story passed down over the centuries about the practice of African slavers during the Transatlantic slave trade. It was said that slavers would submerge the severed limbs of slaves into pools of saltwater until

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<sup>63</sup> Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Prose*. Open Road Media, 2011. 92.

they sprouted cypraeoidea, the gastropod mollusks more popularly known as cowries.<sup>64</sup> Questions about whether or not this process was truly common or ever happened at all are eventually overshadowed by the tale's endurance. What remains relevant to this work is the challenge those terrifyingly, beautifully blossoming limbs pose for those of us who harvest their unrecognizable bounty. What do we do with these severed and mutilated bodies, literal and metaphorical, that have flowered into the unrecognizable? And what do we do with those bones that have left nothing to collect but pieces of spotted shells? So different from how we long to remember them, these bones have "suffer[ed] a sea-change into something rich and strange,"<sup>65</sup> as Ariel sings in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Their stories can only be found in the profound depths/deaths of the ocean--transformed by their sojourn, recovered in abject piecemeal, hardly recognizable. In order to recover those bones made 'rich and strange,' bleached and ground to fine dust, the active work of the imagination or is required.

For you see, some of us are mothered by monsters and gods, by women and legacies necessarily transformed into figures of intimidating majesty and awe. Some of us are not unlike Louisa Matilda and Joseph Jacobs, the children of author Harriet Jacobs. Ellen and Benny, as they are known in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, were mothered for years by the nightmare in the attic, the 'thing' that went bump in the night—that is, by their mother whom they believed to have long escaped North, but who

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<sup>64</sup> Hartman, Saidiya V. *Lose Your Mother: a journey along the Atlantic slave route*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007. 205-210.

<sup>65</sup> Shakespeare, William. *Shakespeare's Comedy of the Tempest*. William J. Rolfe, Ed. New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1892.

lived clandestinely in a tiny attic right above their beds. And those of us who are like Louisa and Joseph remain haunted by that small crawl space where their mother lived in hiding for over seven years. Though we may never be able to articulate the simultaneous feelings of grief and reverence at having been the children of a mother whose only respite from sickness, confinement, and depression was watching the shadowy figures of her children through the tiny holes she gouged into the walls of her garret with a gimlet, as black women and feminists, we are nonetheless affected by it. There are some who find the tale implausible. Perhaps her tale seems unimaginable precisely because the discipline Jacobs would have had to enact to remain carefully and quietly crouched in the garret above her grandmother's home for over seven years would have required a feat of her imagination. One must invoke the uses of the imagination much in the same way she would have had to invoke hers to remain grounded in the garret, and invisible to those she both feared and loved the most.

Though Jacobs' own manumission and safety was of importance to her, the safety and freedom of her children are paramount. The living and breathing results from Jacobs' attempts to grasp hold of "something akin to freedom," however fleeting, structure much of her motivation to move forward in plotting her journey from object to subject. Practically, Jacobs' journey to freedom is complicated by the presence of her children, for she finds it is her duty to first secure their freedom before securing her own. It is her drive to secure Ellen and Benny's freedom that motivates Jacobs' harrowing yet ingenious stay in the garret. While there, Jacobs' distance from and proximity to her laughing, playing children is at once vexing, comforting and inspiring. Their very

circumspect but contrasting freedom of movement and play, which is unavailable to Jacobs within the garret and without, is a continuous reminder of why escaping the peculiar institution of slavery is necessary for Jacobs and her family. For readers, Ellen and Benny represent the promise of a post-emancipation world (though they do so in a way that is quite complex).

Louisa and Joseph's lives extend beyond the confines of the forty-one chapters of their mother's narrative much as the lives of African diaspora children extend beyond the (im)perfect confines of freedom, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These at once imaginary and very real children of Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent are reminiscent of the figure of the *Marasa*—the sacred twins of Haitian Vodun. Perpetual children, the *Marasa* are said to be the first ancestral spirits. They accept offerings associated with children— toys, candy, sweets—and often display jealousy towards each other, especially when offerings made to them are unequal.<sup>66</sup> Sallie Ann Glassman describes the *Marasa* as guardians of “the magical energy of transformation” and “transformative mystery.”<sup>67</sup> In the context of *Incidents*, Ellen and Benny are an outpouring of this transformative and magical energy that not only physically, emotionally, and spiritually altered Harriet Jacobs during her stay in the garret, but also aided in the transmutation of the Jacobs family from enslaved to free peoples.

The usefulness of reading Ellen and Benny as *Marasa*-like figures becomes especially clear when invoking VéVé Clark's foundational essay, “Developing Diaspora Literacy and *Marasa* Consciousness.” Here Clark extends the transformative twinned

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<sup>66</sup> Glassman, Sallie Ann. *Vodou Visions: An Encounter with Divine Mystery*. Villard, 2000. 61.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

properties of the *Marasa* to propose a form of African diaspora literary criticism, a creative principal and state of consciousness that “invites us to imagine beyond the binary.”<sup>68</sup> As Clark points out, the *Marasa* are revered as a triad rather than a dyad: they are honored in conjunction with the child born sequentially after them (the Dosa or Dosu), thought to integrate qualities of both twins and so become the most powerful of children. Thus *Marasa* Consciousness provides a critical intervention by recalling the tension of opposites but opting for a third, creative alternative born of the tension between members of a binary pair. This third space, reached by way of the *Marasa* and *Marasa* Consciousness, recalls McKittrick’s discussion of the garret as a paradoxical space that resists the neat categorizations of freedom and incarceration, choice and coercion, and safety and danger.<sup>69</sup> Jacobs’ love for her children produces the otherwise unimaginable alternative option of escaping bondage while hiding in the thick of it. The garret is “the last place they thought of” not because Jacobs’ hiding place among close family is unusual, but because white authorities’ lack of diaspora literacy and *Marasa* consciousness made it impossible for them to imagine Jacobs anywhere but in the Free North if she was, in fact, looking to escape enslavement.<sup>70</sup> The complexities and mystical properties of the *Marasa* are only available to those who have a working grasp of their properties or have been initiated to their secrets.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Clark, Vèvè A.. “Developing Diaspora Literacy and *Marasa* Consciousness.” *Comparative American identities: race, sex, and nationality in the modern text*. Vol. 1. Routledge, 1991. 43.

<sup>69</sup> McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic grounds: Black women and the cartographies of struggle*. University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

<sup>70</sup> Jacobs, Harriet Ann. Edited by Lydia Maria Child. *The Deeper Wrong*. Cambridge University Press, 2011. doi:10.1017/cbo9780511791963.009. 173–178.

<sup>71</sup> Clark, 43.

One such secret is the connection between the Marasa and Lasirèn. Lasirèn, like the Marasa, is a lwa (spirit or deity) in Haitian Vodou. Half-fish, half-woman, her name is Kreyol for mermaid. Although she is known for running sailors and ships aground, her powers and divine purpose are much more profound than those of European sirens. She is a protector of women, keeper of luck and riches, and mother of the Marasa.<sup>72</sup> In *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas*, Henry John Drewal shares two *dropo* (ritual flags) that depict Lasirèn with the Marasa. The flags are painstakingly detailed pieces that are intricately quilted, sequenced, and beaded by artists Evelyn Alcide and her student Roudy Azor. On Alcide's *dropo Lasirèn matennelle* (maternal Lasirèn), Lasirèn nurses the younger Marasa while an older twin swims in the background beside Lasirèn's ritual objects, a mirror and comb. In Azor's flag Lasirèn shares a tail with her twin daughters. When asked by Drewal why Azor chose to depict all three lwa with a single tail he replied, "just as twin children come one after another, so it is when you see mermaids in your dreams...First you see one then more keep swimming toward you...Mermaids never travel alone."<sup>73</sup> Here Azor establishes Lasirèn's tripartite nature, demonstrated by her inseparable relationship with the Marasa.

Lasirèn's relationship with twinning facilitates connections with other water deities across Africa and the Diaspora. As Drewal writes, "In her duality, watery nature, fierceness, and modernity, Lasirèn closely resembles Mami Wata, belief in whom spread from Africa to the Caribbean." And if Lasirèn, as the mother of the Marasa, has similar

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<sup>72</sup> Glassman, 195.

<sup>73</sup> Drewal, Henry John, Marilyn Houlberg, Bogumil Jewsiewicki, John W. Nunley, and Jill Salmons. *Mami Wata: Arts for water spirits in Africa and its diasporas*. University of Washington Press, 2008. 146.

creative powers and a tripartite nature, then her ability to surface in the different waters of the Diaspora should not be surprising. As Clark reminds us, the figure of the Marasa “denotes movement and change and may serve as a metaphor representing the profound differences in environment, social organization, and language encountered by slaves in the Americas.”<sup>74</sup> Clark’s intervention suggests that the Marasa’s shared power signifies a shared African origin from which the figures—thought of more broadly as representing enslaved Africans in the Americas—derive their spiritual force. Their subtle distinctions, however, invoke the variances between and among enslaved communities in South America, the Caribbean, and North America. These variances include the multiple African diaspora spiritual traditions that incorporate the figures of the mermaid and the divine twins: Fon-based Haitian and New Orleans Vodou as well as Yoruba-based spiritual traditions Santería, Lucumí, Candomblé, and Ifá

In Yoruba cosmologies Lasirèn changes form. She is still a beautiful woman who brings riches and sweetness to the world but dwells both in fresh waters and on land, where she walks on two legs. Oshun, as she is known here, wields the divine power of “love, sensuality, and beauty,” and is said—like the river to — “[overflow] with power and magnificence.”<sup>75</sup> The sacred twins are known as the *Ibeji*, literally meaning *twins* in the Yoruba language, but are similarly eternally childlike and of a simultaneously singular and dual nature. In Yorubaland, they take on separate names: Taiwo, the first-born but more adventurous and younger in nature; and Kehinde, the second-born, who

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<sup>74</sup> Clark, 44.

<sup>75</sup> Flores-Peña, Ysamur. "Overflowing with Beauty: The Oshun Alter in Lucumi Aesthetic Tradition." *Osun Across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas* (2001): 113.

awaited word from Taiwo that the world was safe enough to enter and appears more stately in nature. In this context, Oshun and the Ibeji are known as multiple facets of a monotheistic tradition that present as a “pantheon of gods and goddesses called [Orisha].”<sup>76</sup> Though Oshun birthed the Ibeji, it is uncommon for the Ibeji to be imagined as cradled and mothered by Oshun the way that the Marasa are depicted with Lasirèn on the dropos. Oshun is commonly understood to have been separated from these children. Why, however, requires a little explaining.

As the story goes, Oshún was a very beautiful woman, most often loved for her “adorable, coquettish, and graceful,”<sup>77</sup> manner and her “manifestation of beauty both physical and otherworldly.”<sup>78</sup> Oshún and Shangó, the orisha of lightning and the drum, were once lovers. Once while Shangó was away at war, Oshún gave birth to twins Kahinde and Taiwo. But when the villagers heard that she had given birth to multiple children at once, they were outraged. The villagers had only heard of animals giving birth to multiples, so they accused this human mother of twins of evil and witchcraft. In some versions the villagers demanded the twins’ death, while in others they demanded her immediate exile from the village. Alone and without her partner, Oshun gave her children away—sometimes to Yemayá, the mother of all things, and sometimes to the fierce warrior Oya who gave birth to nine stillborn babies before she finally became the adoptive mother of twins. Often it is said that

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<sup>76</sup> Correal, Tobe Melora. *Finding Soul on the Path of Oriša: A West African Spiritual Tradition*. Random House LLC, 2003.1.

<sup>77</sup> Castellanos 1992:49 as cited in Flores-Peña, 113.

<sup>78</sup> Flores-Peña, 113.

Oshún later realized her mistake and wandered the land, inconsolable. Without her children, Oshun lost her joy and abundance, and all that was beautiful on the Earth began to wither and lose its shine until Olodumare, the supreme creator, sent her a third child to ease her sorrow. This child she named Idowu and she loved and cherished him above anything else. His birth brought beauty and bounty back to the land and Idowu later became known as “a bearer of wealth.”<sup>79</sup>

Like any story, the tale varies by the teller. Some say this is a story about a mother who has lost her children. Some say this story is about children who have lost a natural mother but have found love and care in the arms of another. And others say that the true story is one of a mother who so mourned the loss of her children that she could not recover until she had a third child whom she was blessed enough to keep, and shower with all of her love and attention. Yet, at their core, the story is always one immediately familiar to those of the African Diaspora—which is in itself a story of disruption and loss of family, complicated relationships between black women and their children, and the importance of fictive kin networks that allow for alternative families but may never be able to provide reunions with biological families.

The particular story (re)produced above is one that is borrowed in bits and pieces from various oral and scribal sources. In Yoruba tradition, these stories are known as *patakí* or “sacred narratives,” tales that provide insight into histories of Yoruba-descended people. In the context of West Africa, these sacred narratives are

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<sup>79</sup> Flores-Peña, Ysamur. “Son Dos los Jimagüas” (“The Twins Are Two”): Worship of the Sacred Twins in Lucumí Religious Culture. Peek, Philip M., ed. *Twins in African and diaspora cultures: double trouble, twice blessed*. Indiana University Press, 2011. 103.

part of a long tradition that records history and culture orally. In the New World, however, the pataki's orality takes on additional significance in the context of slavery's physical and epistemic violence as it "tends to acquire a second underground existence" in order to endure.<sup>80</sup> Rachel Elizabeth Harding asserts that practitioners in the New World are "finding novel and creative ways to give expression to the conjunction of Orisha tradition and African American identity in their lives." These creative expressions give new life to old stories and do more than simply express "relegated outmoded traditions," but rather serve as "maps, internal compasses, ancestral echoes reversed, reverberating back, so that old paths are signaled new."<sup>81</sup> The stories are firmly rooted in a historical and cultural past, but as Clark suggests of the Marasa, "denote change and movement" and a sense of adaptability across time and space.<sup>82</sup>

In "Sustaining the Oneness in their Twoness: poetics of Twin Figures (Ère Ìbejì) among the Yoruba," Babatunde Lawal briefly establishes that the mythical and historical background of twin births among the Yoruba, thus historically contextualizing the pataki about Oshun and the Ibeji. Lawal describes the shift of Yoruba culture from a practice of killing twins—as they were believed by many to be unnatural or cursed—to a practice of adoring and revering twins. It is unclear when the practice of killing twins ended in Yorubaland. However, the practice must

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<sup>80</sup> Flores-Peña. *Osun*. 122-123.

<sup>81</sup> Harding, Rachel Elizabeth. "What Part of the River You're In." *Ọṣun across the waters: a Yoruba goddess in Africa and the Americas* (2001): 186.

<sup>82</sup> Clark, 44.

have been common by the 18<sup>th</sup> century in order for twin worship to have reached the Americas by way of the Transatlantic slave trade.<sup>83</sup> In the same edited volume, *Twins in African and Diaspora Cultures: Double Trouble, Twice Blessed*, Ysamur Flores-Peña strengthens the link between the significance of twins in the diaspora by examining the worship of the sacred twins in Afro-Cuban Lucumí culture. Flores-Peña tells a Lucumí version of the story of Oshún and the Ibeji, situating Oshun's "abandonment" of the twins within the context as slavery. He asserts that abandonment as a motif in African diaspora narratives represents the "epistemological vacuum" caused by the "fragmentation of families and lineages" following by the transatlantic slave trade.<sup>84</sup> But what would it mean to fashion a new understanding of the abandonment trope as seen in the story of Oshún and the Ibeji? It was not uncommon for black enslaved women to "[control] their fertility through abstinence and contraception" or even abortion and infanticide in order "to prevent or avert the subjugation of their children through slavery."<sup>85</sup> And, as we know from Harriet Jacobs' story, black mothers have endured extreme conditions and placed themselves in incredible danger in order to protect their children from the evils of slavery. It might be important, then, to consider figures like Jacobs and Oshún not as having abandoned their children but rather as having made difficult, measured decision as mothers that they hoped would ultimately benefit their

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<sup>83</sup> Lawal, Babatunde. "Sustaining the Oneness in Their Twoness: Poetics of Twin Figures (Ère Ìbejì) among the Yoruba." Peek, Philip M., ed. *Twins in African and diaspora cultures: double trouble, twice blessed*. Indiana University Press, 2011. 90.

<sup>84</sup> Flores-Peña, *Twins*. 103-104.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

children. Equally important might be shifting our perspective on this story from that of the mother to that of her possibly abandoned, possibly freed children. There is a clear lack in the written or accessible information about Kehinde and Taiwo, the children of Oshún, and even less about Jacobs' children. The stories of Jacobs and Oshún are always told from the point of view of the supernatural sacrificing mother, but what of their children and the trials they endured as a result? If it were possible to hear the voices of these children speak, what might they say? And might their voices also provide another way of challenging the trope of abandonment in narratives of the African Diaspora, post-Transatlantic slave trade?

In her 2013 novel *Sister Mine*, Caribbean writer Nalo Hopkinson—heralded as “one of the grand dames in black speculative fiction”—provides a necessary opportunity to explore the voices of children of absent mothers, particularly those of a supernatural or monstrous nature.<sup>86</sup> Hopkinson's novel reads as an intentional, creatively updated and translated version of the pataki(s) about Oshun and the Ibeji that is reminiscent of Harding's mention of the “novel” ways practitioners join Orisha worship with their daily lives. Hopkinson's tale is an *actual* novel told through the perspective of her funny and fiery protagonist, Makeda. The story follows the lives of twentysomethings Makeda and Abby, born as conjoined twins to father Boysie (short for Grand Boise, Iwa of the woods and wilderness) and mother Cora, a(n initially) human Afro-Trinidadian-Canadian woman. The twins' story

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<sup>86</sup> Due, Tananarive. “Nalo Hopkinson's YA Magic Carpet Ride.” *SX Salon*. Last modified February 5, 2015. Accessed May 6, 2015. <http://smallaxe.net/wordpress3/reviews/>

becomes increasingly complicated by the drama of their birth and its consequences, revealed over the course of the book. A few things, however, are initially clear. When separated by doctors one of the girls (Makeda) is left spiritually disabled and lacking “mojo,” the sparkle that makes celestial beings *celestial*; while her sister Abby is spiritually gifted but permanently physically disabled by the separation, suffering constant leg pain and walking with the assistance of a cane. Shortly after surgery, one of the infants begins to die as a result of the separation and Makeda’s parents and uncle Jack—the Iwa that walks between life and death—find themselves at an important crossroads as they must decide whether to let the child die (in keeping with divine order) or to intervene. Beautiful Cora begs Jack to bend the rules and spare the child’s life, offering him sex and devotion, but he is not impressed until she offers that which he has never truly known before—love. Finally persuaded, Jack joins forces with his brother to save the child’s waning life. Unfortunately their deed was a clear violation of divine directive and cannot go unpunished. Boysie is temporarily cursed with mortality and required to finish the course of his human host’s life. Cora is ripped away from her newborn children and condemned to live out her days as a sea monster at the bottom of Lake Ontario. Jack Cross must live forever with the knowledge of the wrongs he has committed and their bitter consequences. And the girls are left to deal with the trials of living without a mother, caring for an aging God with dementia, reckoning with what it means to be not quite celestial but not quite human either, and—in Makeda’s case—being completely without the mojo that characterizes other supernatural beings.

Though the sisters are not quite the Ibeji, the circumstances of their birth is reminiscent of the pataki. Instead of literally sharing a soul Makeda and Abby were born sharing a body, conjoined as mirror images of each other. The Ibeji themselves appear in the novel as Makeda and Abby's cousins. They are the girls' first sexual partners (aside from one another) and ultimately emerge as a driving force behind much of the novel's action. The twins' experience of having lost their mother shortly after birth is also reminiscent of the pataki. Though Cora is neither Iwa nor Orisha, her captivating beauty and ability to love bear a striking resemblance to Lasirèn and Oshun. Like Oshun's separation from the Ibeji, her separation from her twins was less her own doing than a community intervention. And the mothers chose to pay the costs of being physically separated from their children over being responsible for the death of one or both of the twins. Cora's existence as a sea monster at the bottom of Lake Ontario could easily be considered an avatar or path of Oshún, whose domain is not simply limited to the beauty, sweetness, and charm but also great lakes like Lake Ontario.

In addition to these intentional similarities, there are also intentional differences between the pataki and Hopkinson's refashioning. Hopkinson exchanges both of the earlier backdrops—pre-1800s Yorubaland and the pre-abolition 'New World'—for 21<sup>st</sup> century Toronto. The translation of the story into the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a compelling change that speaks to Flores-Peña's reading of the pataki's common association with the lingering effects of trans-Atlantic slavery—effects that continue into the new millennium. In her discussion of *Marasa*

consciousness, Clark remarks on the overwhelming number of Caribbean texts that address issues surrounding displacement, exile, immigration, and the demands of double consciousness, all of which she links to *Marasa* consciousness.<sup>87</sup> “*Marasa* consciousness is a sign of the textual times in the Caribbean,” she writes, and I posit that it is a sign of the textual times in the larger African diaspora.<sup>88</sup> Part of what makes Hopkinson’s *Sister Mine* so compelling is how she engages the pataki and marasa consciousness to bring the reader’s attention to newer, more present issues of diaspora. By locating the story in 21<sup>st</sup> century Toronto she is able to bring to bear her own experience as a Caribbean immigrant who lived in Canada for many years, while signifying on the multiple diasporas present in the city that could also find resonance with the story. Yet Hopkinson’s key intervention is shifting the tale’s protagonists so that readers experience the story from the point of view of abandoned twins Abby and Makeda instead of their mother. This shift at once centers the children’s experiences and opens space for young readers to identify with the divine, motherless twins.

Hopkinson’s youth-inflected, global northern retelling of the pataki builds on our familiarity with the trope of black maternal abandonment while radically challenging this trope. This becomes especially clear when Hopkinson narrates an unexpected reunion between the twins and their lake monster mother, who they do not remember. The encounter between Makeda, Abby, and their mother provides a

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<sup>87</sup> Clark, 45.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

striking counterpart to the histories of enslaved or previously enslaved children who were never reunited with their mothers outside of the space of the imagination. The reunion that Hopkinson provides in *Sister Mine* is far from perfect, and, Makeda admits, nothing like what she had imagined--but this is precisely why it is so significant. By deviating from a romanticized reunion between Cora and her daughters, Hopkinson reminds us that the salve for healing between black women lies not in an idyllic past that can never exist, but in an imagined future that can.

Late one evening, the girls continue a desperate search for the soul of their father that has finally been released from his mortal body. While on his computer, an appointment reminder flashes on the screen reading "Cora, two a.m." Intrigued, the girls further investigate the entry and find that it is repeated monthly, with an additional reminder the day before to purchase thirty-one oranges, none of which the girls or their father will eat. On a whim, Makeda and Abby make the necessary purchases before ambling onto the Leslie spit—the concrete walkway and beach along the shore of Lake Ontario—carrying the bag of thirty-one oranges, Cora (and Oshun's) very favorite fruit. The girls await their mother's appearance but are soon disappointed when she does not show. Disappointment gives way to anger as the twins argue as to whether or not they should remain on the beach or give up entirely. The girls' disagreement then quickly devolves into a food fight, the twins pelting one another oranges and even smashing pieces of orange on each others' faces. During their tussle a few oranges roll haphazardly into the lake, calling forth a

huge “midnight blue” creature “the size of pleasure yachts.”<sup>89</sup> It is important to note that the creature is not drawn out of the water merely by the oranges, but also by the interaction between the twin sisters. What began as a terribly immature fight eventually transitions into a fight that is child-like rather than childish, and a point of joyful connection between the girls instead of division. At the moment when the girls truly begin to embody the power of youthful creativity and imagination that characterizes the Ibeji and the Marasa, the unsuspecting women finally come face to face with their mother.

The mother that surprises them is a towering, sleek, black figure with eyes “the size of dinner plates.”<sup>90</sup> While Abby is amazed by the appearance of their long-lost mother, Makeda struggles to overcome her initial terror and displeasure with her mother’s appearance. “In my childhood imagination” she says, “my mother looked something like a cross between a dolphin and a mermaid, with a bit of dragon thrown in for good measure.”<sup>91</sup> But the creature she encounters on the spit is nothing like what she had imagined. “Big. It was too big... That rubbery, slimy thing that smelled of wet algae wasn’t the mother I dreamed of. That thing couldn’t be anyone’s mother.”<sup>92</sup> And to make matters worse, standing on the shore with her sister and her mother, Makeda realizes that while her father has returned to this same site once a month to meet with Cora for nearly twenty years, this is the first

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<sup>89</sup> Hopkinson, Nalo. *Sister Mine*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2013. 224.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 208.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 225.

time the twins have encountered her. “You don’t even look like the picture we have of you! That beautiful Mom-lady with the puffball hair and the cute little red dress...’ [Makeda] was blubbering. ‘Look at what Granny Ocean did to you! Look at what she turned you into.’”<sup>93</sup>

In order to understand just how evocative Hopkinson’s reunion between Cora, Makeda, and Abby is, the reader must not only be literate in figures like Lasirèn and Oshun. S/he must also have a working knowledge of how water women change over time and space, transforming in different oceans, lakes, and rivers. Cora’s presence in Lake Ontario is a contemporary reference to the Canadian figure of the Kingstie, a sea monster or great serpent that lives in Lake Ontario. The earliest believers in such a figure were the Seneca, the largest of six nations that constituted the Iroquois Confederacy in the Northeastern United States and Southeast Canada.<sup>94</sup> Seneca mythology points to the existence of Gaasyendietha, a large fire breathing serpent-dragon who lived deep within Lake Ontario. While mapping the St. Lawrence River’s connection to Lake Ontario and the Atlantic Ocean, French explorer Jacques Cartier reported sighting “a giant finned snake” that his crew unsuccessfully attempted to capture.<sup>95</sup> When Cartier shared his findings with the Seneca people, they spoke with him about the existence of Gaasyendietha. Since then there have been myriad sightings of a creature in Lake Ontario, though it

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 228.

<sup>94</sup> “Culture.” Seneca Nation of Indians. 2015. Accessed May 6, 2015. <https://sni.org/culture/>

<sup>95</sup> Cope, Tabitca. "Gaasyendietha, a dragon in lake Ontario." Cryptozoo-oscity. Last modified April 20, 2010. Accessed May 6, 2015. <http://cryptozoo-oscity.blogspot.com/2010/04/gaasyendietha-dragon-in-lake-ontario.html>

seems as though the indigenous iteration of the serpent Gaasyendietha was soon submerged by another named the Kingstie, said to have migrated some 262 kilometers from Kingston, Ontario to Toronto.<sup>96</sup>

The advent of the Kingstie not only erases the indigenous history of the monster but also serves as a haunting reminder of the diminished numbers of Seneca and colonial attempts to erase them from the landscape. The imperial and indigenous tensions between the origins of the monster in Lake Ontario are similar to what Drewal encounters in his transnational study of Mami Wata. In their forward to *Mami Wata*, Mary Nooter Roberts and Marla C. Berns provide an excellent articulation of Drewal's findings that also speak to the history of Gaasyendietha/Kingstie:

"Mami Wata is the result of both transaction and localization. She came in on a wave, yet she emerged from the depths of the waters. She is both foreign and indigenous, and somewhat paradoxically, she is a singular being of multiple incarnations and manifestations."<sup>97</sup>

Like Mami Wata, the Kingstie "came in on a wave" while Gaasyendietha had been there all along before emerging "from the depths of the waters." This makes Cora's presence in Lake Ontario and her integration into local folklore one that deepens the

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<sup>96</sup> Metzger, Patrick. Toronto Urban Legends: The Great Serpent of Lake Ontario. Torontoist. Last modified January 16, 2013. Accessed May 6, 2015. <http://torontoist.com/2013/01/toronto-urban-legends-the-great-serpent-of-lake-ontario/>

<sup>97</sup> Drewal, 10.

discourse surrounding Kingstie/Gaasyendietha and draws attention back to the creature's indigenous roots, instead of further subverting them.

Cora's internment in Lake Ontario brings to mind colonists' dread of Gaasyendietha and connects it with an imperial fear of black women's bodies, especially those exhibiting self-awareness and sexual agency. Ann McClintock discusses this trope as the "persistent gendering of the imperial unknown"<sup>98</sup>: a feminizing of colonial territories that European explorers viewed as unwieldy and in need of discipline, much like women's bodies. "Cartographers filled the blank seas of their maps with mermaids and sirens" and drew metaphorical connections between discoveries of "virgin" seas with the forceful discoveries of the bodies of mermaids, sirens, and black and brown women<sup>99</sup> --women at once terrible and seductive, impenetrably ugly and irresistibly sexual. Cora the Kingstie becomes another such mythic figure, relegated to monstrosity by virtue of being black, female, and sexual. In fact, Granny Ocean punished Cora not for being involved in the violation of the divine directive but for impossibly seducing the deity's celestial sons. Though Granny Ocean is conceivably black (if ancestors and spirits can be 'raced') her sentiments replicate colonial discourses about the dangerous irresistibility of black women's bodies and sexual natures. Thus, Granny Ocean's condemns Cora to a shape more consistent with a narrative of abject sexuality and excess she was accused of exhibiting by changing her into something "big...too

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<sup>98</sup> McClintock, 24.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

big.”<sup>100</sup> It is almost as though Granny Ocean intends to turn Cora into what she imagines to be her true form, the monstrous mien beneath the alluring face. This dual nature is reflected in Hopkinson’s naming of Cora. While in one etymology Cora comes from Greek Kore meaning “maiden,” another etymology links it to Scottish meaning “seething core.”<sup>101</sup> The Scottish etymology is reminiscent of Cora’s newest form and of the monster Loch Ness, a Scottish frontrunner of the Kingstie.

Cora’s existences as woman and lake monster should be read on a continuum; both are facets of the same being. A critical engagement with *Marasa* consciousness helps readers to meet Cora as she is, but this is difficult for Makeda. She is not yet able to parse out the various histories inscribed on her mother’s body, and as a result, on her own. Makeda’s disbelief and hurt are not unreasonable. Forcefully separated from her mother at birth, she has never known her through anything but family stories, a single photo of the woman with ‘the cute little red dress,’ and the one time she heard her mother’s voice echo ominously through a sea shell “Makeda eat your peas!”<sup>102</sup> And, to make matters more complicated, Makeda’s lack of diaspora literacy impedes her forgiveness of Cora and makes it impossible to understand what her mother is saying. It is Abby who exists as translator between the women, which Makeda finds especially irksome since it was Makeda who dedicated a great deal of her life to trying construct a (re)memory of Cora. It was Makeda who visited the spit early afternoons

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<sup>100</sup> Hopkinson, 225.

<sup>101</sup> “Cora.” Baby Names. 2015. Accessed May 6, 2015. <http://www.babynames.com/name/Cora>.  
“Cora.” SheKnows. 2015. Accessed May 6, 2015.

[http://babynames.allparenting.com/list/Scottish\\_Baby\\_Names/Cora/details/](http://babynames.allparenting.com/list/Scottish_Baby_Names/Cora/details/)

<sup>102</sup> Hopkinson, 229.

with her father looking for traces of Gaasyendietha while Abby opted to stay at home. It was also Makeda who was banned from working on school projects about Lake Ontario after producing an obsessive number of reports on the Great Lake, while Abby pursued other interests. It was Makeda who played the role of the perfect pining daughter, but it is Abby who gets the precious gift of communicating directly with their mother.

While there is value in the old stories, the old photo, and the old sea shell containing a grainy echo of her childhood, Makeda's longing for a lost past is so profound that it prevents her from experiencing the complexity that is her living mother, even if she does smell like wet algae. Abby's ability to speak to Cora comes not only from her celestial mojo but also from her lack of predetermined expectations of her mother and what a relationship with the lake monster should be. Makeda's use of the imagination is one rooted not in possibility and future but in missed opportunity and stagnation. Abby has no such qualms and is free to generate possibilities for future engagements. In many ways this passage seems less about twenty-four year old black women meeting their mother for the first time than about those of us in diaspora hungry for a reunion with a romanticized past and a culture that is even less ours than it is that of people who stayed behind. And Granny Ocean is no longer a grandmother or a celestial being, but rather a metaphor for the Atlantic Ocean and the Transatlantic Slave Trade at large, which forcefully served cultural and familial ties of enslaved Africans from those on the continent. Makeda's dismay echoes the impatience of African descendants trying to force

unrealistic expectations of the continent and its inhabitants instead of providing room for realistic discourses about the effects of colonialism and imperialism experienced, and still felt, on either side of the Atlantic.

The time and perspective that Cora has gained during her stay in Lake Ontario allow her a much different reaction to seeing her daughters for the first time since their birth. Cora candidly acknowledges the ways that she has been irrevocably changed by her encounter with Granny Ocean and the imposed separation from her daughters. “*With all the tears I cried from missing you, I’m surprised the lake level hasn’t risen,*” she tells them.<sup>103</sup> But ultimately, she does not express guilt for her decisions or desire to return to her old form. As Makeda remarks, “Mom was never one for regrets.”<sup>104</sup> Instead, Cora declares proudly to Makeda and Abby: “I am beautiful...” and “the original kingstie is mad jealous of my fat, round tummy.”<sup>105</sup> Cora’s insistence that she accepts her changed form and sees it as an extension of her previous beauty rejects assumptions that there is no possible future for a black woman turned monster. Cora has made a new life for herself and is focused on moving forward rather than recovering a past version of herself. When asked by her daughters if she misses being human she simply replies, “Why should I? Especially now that I have my girls in my life.” And with that, Cora takes a few oranges with her as she descends back into the depths of Lake Ontario, avoiding the fishing boats making their way into the water.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 228.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 228.

<sup>106</sup> Hopkinson, 233.

The form disappearing into the silky black water is not the beautiful half-fish woman that Makeda had imagined and hoped for, nor is she the siren whom Granny Ocean accused of bewitching two of her sons at once. Rather, she is something more akin to the mermaids that Christopher Columbus and his crew had imagined they saw off the coast of Haiti during their travels “who were not as beautiful as [mermaids] are represented for somehow in the face they look like men.”<sup>107</sup> What if the mermaid’s un beauty is less about masculinity than about imperialist constructions of beauty that deny black femininity? What would it mean if the long -lost mother, the one we had imagined as a beautiful woman with cowries and seashells tied in her hair and gleaming pearly white teeth looks more like a giant whale with a huge underbelly, or a monstrous fire breathing dragon like Gaasyendietha or something akin to early incarnations of Mami Wata that look like serpent-women? What if the birth mother that the Ibeji encounter years later is not the gorgeous and rich Oshun, or the breathtaking Lasirèn sitting upon the rocks and regarding her unparalleled beauty through a hand mirror, but a black creature that is rubbery and slimy and smells of wet algae? And, then again, what if the mother of the Ibeji-- or Makeda and Abby, or Ellen and Benny—*is* Oshun but not how we always imagine her, not beautiful and prosperous in all of the right/white ways? Makeda initially perceives Cora’s form as black woman, black mother, and black lake monster as abject, masculine, and ugly, nothing like what we traditionally associate with womanhood or ‘womanness’ —and yet that is the point. It is not Cora who needs to shape shift in order for us to understand her but rather, as Hortense Spillers reminds us,

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<sup>107</sup> Weiss, Kenneth M., and Anne V. Buchanan. *The mermaid's tale: four billion years of cooperation in the making of living things*. Harvard University Press, 2009. 6.

“our task to make a place for this different social subject.” For by doing so “we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the insurgent ground as female social subject.”<sup>108</sup>

Makeda easily accepts her dual yet singular nature as an Ibeji- or Marasa-like figure with her twin sister, and it must also become easy for her to accept Cora’s dual existence as a beautiful and sensual black woman and the massive, dark, monster in the lake (who is *still* known to have two lovers). This is the final hurdle to being fully initiated to the Marasa’s secrets: realizing that the mother of the Marasa is herself a twin. Lasirèn finds a husband in Agwe, guardian of sailors and vessels of the sea, but she finds a true companion in Labalèn, the whale.<sup>109</sup> Glassman imagines Labalèn as the “great, protective womb of the sea,” and Sparks and Conner find similarities between Labalèn and Lasirèn’s connections to fertility and maternity.<sup>110</sup> Their similarities, their profoundly intimate understanding of one another, effortlessly overflow into physical and sexual intimacy: while Agwe is Lasirèn’s husband, Labalèn is her wife. Makeda and Abby similarly decide to be intimate sexual partners when they are unable to find any other being like them to share a first sexual experience. It is Abby who remarks with a grin “we are like us!”<sup>111</sup> The deeply intimate physical relationship between Lasirèn and Labalèn results in a queer recombining of the two figures into a single Iwa. Their unified

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<sup>108</sup> Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17, no. 2

(Summer 1987): 80.

<sup>109</sup> Conner, Randy P. Lundschieen, and David Sparks. *Queering Creole spiritual traditions: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender participation in African-inspired traditions in the Americas*. Routledge, 2014. 59.

<sup>110</sup> Glassman, 121.

<sup>111</sup> Hopkinson, 125.

twinning mirrors those of the Marasa who share one soul, Makeda and Abby who once shared a single body, and Cora who is one woman but in two alternate forms.<sup>112</sup>

Undoubtedly, Labalèn resembles Cora's lake monster manifestation: like Labalèn Cora is "cumbersome" but "flows between body and imagination, speech and silence...is poetry in motion. Grace."<sup>113</sup> This parallel is best demonstrated by Hopkinson's description of Makeda watching her physically disabled sister communicate with their mother through dance. As Abby and Cora begin to move together, Makeda is instantly taken back to the first time she had ever seen Abby truly dance:

And my crippled sister threw down her crutches and began to dance. She ceased being a little girl constrained by braces and crutches. Her body moved in its own language. Suddenly, the shorter leg wasn't disabling her. It was the crook of a comma, the illustrative pause in a devastatingly meaningful statement spoken in movement. It was the length and shape it needed to be.<sup>114</sup>

As Makeda observes, the dance between Abby and Cora is a messy one that necessitates a great amount of "stumbling" and "wheezing" in order to be successful, yet Makeda describes it as a "miracle."<sup>115</sup>

The miracle is the exchange between Cora—who, as Labalèn, represents a repository of imagination, creativity, and possibility even in the face of adversity—and her daughters—who, as Ibeji or Marasa, represent an incredible new "norm of

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<sup>112</sup> Connor, 59.

<sup>113</sup> Glassman, 121.

<sup>114</sup> Hopkinson, 226.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

creativity.”<sup>116</sup> Together they confront binary constructs like siren/sea monster, lady/whore, able bodied/disabled imagine a third option. This “dosu” option creates something new by way of deconstructing or repurposing that which is already available, just as the presence of the twins offer a new reading of their mother’s story and their own by deconstructing and subverting our expectations. The twins help us “to defamiliarize our tidy, binary constructs,” which, Clark reminds us, “*is in marasa practice to divine.*”<sup>117</sup> Defamiliarizing ourselves with the binary and its comforts means learning to trust our intuitions and ourselves as black women whose lived experiences are valid sites of knowledge. It also means trusting that such intuition is often a “supernatural or magical insight.”<sup>118</sup> But lastly, defamiliarizing ourselves with the binary means divining in perhaps what is perhaps the most obscure connotation of the word, but also the most pertinent—to discover by dowsing “a technique for searching for underground water, minerals, or anything invisible, by observing the motion of a pointer... or the changes in direction of a pendulum, supposedly in response to unseen influences.”<sup>119</sup> To divine in the *Marasa* practice is to search for connections with Labalèn, as Makeda and Abby sought to connect to their mother; it is to commune with the generative depths of the sea “where imagination is dark and fertile” and where much is possible.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Clark, 44.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 57. [Emphasis my own]

<sup>118</sup> “divine, n.” Oxford Dictionaries. March 2015. Oxford University Press.  
<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/divine>

<sup>119</sup> “dowsing, v.” Oxford Dictionaries. March 2015. Oxford University Press.  
<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/dowsing>

<sup>120</sup> Glassman, 121.

Accepting Cora's self-proclaimed beauty is a means for refusing to bind black women to the cult of true womanhood, a system constructed to continually deny black women access to femininity. To love Cora the Kingstie—the mother who is real, the mother who wishes to build a life and a future with her girls—is far more liberatory than the unproductive longing for the ghost of the “beautiful Mom-lady with the puffball hair and the cute little red dress.” Cora offers us a new way of imagining the Sankofa bird as a large lake creature craning her neck back towards the past to remember the people and the places she came from, but always moving forward. Though we may not be ready to follow Cora into the depths of Lake Ontario, it is possible to meet her at the rocky shore and descend into a future where we are able to see our monsters as beautiful, a future that we are building together in much the same way that Abby and Makeda will build a relationship with their mother. This is a future where we are unafraid of “claiming the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to “name”)" herself, whether she call herself Lasirèn, Labalèn, Linda, Harriet, Cora, or Gaasyendietha.<sup>121</sup>

Lake Ontario is “a mere 19,000 square kilometers, or 7,300 square miles...it's about 244 meters at its deepest point,” and has “726 miles of shoreline.”<sup>122</sup> The attic of Molly Horniblow—“the last place they thought of” to look for Harriet Jacobs—is a “9'x7'x3' cell” some seven years deep, with over a 150 years of ramifications. These are the spaces that made our mothers monsters when there was no other way we knew how to name them. These are the spaces that have somehow shaped us into who we are, in spite

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<sup>121</sup> Spillers, 80.

<sup>122</sup> Hopkinson 207.

of their trauma and constriction and the complicated choices and distinctions that have landed us there. Sometimes, these are the only spaces by which we have come to understand the women who birthed and raised us, whether or not those women are one and the same. But these are spaces of possibility too, and the women who dwell in them—those old bones we are still searching for—are not gone so much as transformed, as “chang[ed] into something rich and strange.” These are the women whose legacies we remember, whose names and presence we call on when we feel trapped and feel that there are no livable futures for black women on this planet or the next. These are the women who ask, “Are we brave enough to imagine beyond the boundaries of “the real” and do the hard work of sculpting reality from our dreams?”<sup>123</sup>

When I learned that the Saint Lawrence Seaway connects Lake Ontario to the Atlantic, I wondered whether maybe Mom had found her way through it to the ocean. I looked up the dimensions of the Atlantic Ocean. The number crushed me. I couldn't fathom it, figuratively or literally. I couldn't look for my mom there, I just couldn't. I pestered Dad and Uncle Jack with questions about whether mom might accidentally find herself in the ocean and not be able to get back. About whether lake monsters could breathe in salt water. In desperation, Dad started taking me and Abs to walk along the Spit, where we could at least be close to the lake that had

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<sup>123</sup> Imarisha, Walidah, and Adrienne M. Brown. *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*. Oakland: AK, 2015. 5.

swallowed our mother. But after the first few times, Abby didn't want to go anymore. So it would be just me and Dad and the water, and a little pea-green boat bobbing in my imagination's eye. Those walks along the Spit relieved a little the helpless lostness I felt whenever I thought about my mother.

—Nalo Hopkinson, *Sister Mine*

## Coda

### *Why Jacobs? Why now?: a coda*

Jacobs' story has faced a fair share of criticism. There are those who have ceased to believe in monsters in the attic and spooks that sit by the door. I have encountered these people in the flesh, one of whom was a peer of mine—a black woman—who laughed raucously at the suggestion that Jacobs ever lived in such a small attic at all, let alone for seven years. She approached Jacobs' personal account as one would a fairy tale, fiction unconcerned by fact, and an account hardly worth theorizing about. But what is fact and fiction in the stories and lives of black women? How do we determine what is true and untrue when speaking of black women whose voices have been excised from centuries upon centuries of archives by systematic violence just as easily as their physical and metaphysical bodies have become archives for the very same?

The work of Historian Jean Fagan Yellin in the 1970s and 80s did the incredible and important work of validating much of Jacobs' account and bringing her writing into the academy to be considered seriously.<sup>124</sup> In this way, Jacobs' work is real because Fagan Yellin, as a very respected, vetted, and white scholar, says so. But Jacobs story is also real, because Jacobs herself says so, and we as readers and theorists will it to be. After all, as Toni Morrison tells us in "The Site of Memory,"

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<sup>124</sup> Martin, Michael, and Jean Fagan Yellin. "Professor Sheds Light on Harriet Jacobs' Path to Freedom." NPR. Last modified January 7, 2008. Accessed May 6, 2015. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=17897134>.

“the crucial distinction...is not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction between fact and truth.”<sup>125</sup> Truth is what feels real and accessible in Jacobs’ narrative, not fact. “Facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot.”<sup>126</sup> Yet, for everything Jacobs does tell us, there is much that she does not reveal. Surely the constraints of her time and genre—an adaptation of the Victorian sentimental novel—mean that there is much that Jacob leaves unsaid. After all, “Woman can whisper—her cruel wrongs into the ear of a very dear friend—much easier than she can record them for the world to read.”<sup>127</sup> Though much remains unspoken as Jacobs “drop[s] a veil over...proceedings too terrible to relate,”<sup>128</sup> Morrison interprets the job of the writer to be that of ripping the veil, especially as black woman “for historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic.”<sup>129</sup>

It is the power of the imagination that allows Morrison to rip the veil, if not shred it. Her writing, her work with the imagination, is what allows Morrison to do her own bone collecting, her own labor of collecting genius and recovering a black (feminist) past that otherwise, without the power of the imagination, is unavailable to us. The process that Morrison models in essays like “The Site of Memory” and her creative work reminds us that, as scholars, it is important to take a critical and in-

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<sup>125</sup> Morrison, Toni. “The Site of Memory.” *Inventing the truth: The art and craft of memoir* (1987): 93.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post. June 21, 1857. Autograph letter, signed; Isaac and Amy Post Family Papers, University of Rochester Library. <http://www.yale.edu/glc/harriet/07.htm>

<sup>128</sup> Morrison, 90-91.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

depth look at the work of black and women writers. For, as Barbara Christian says, “people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic.”<sup>130</sup> Nearly 30 years after the publication of Christian’s essay, Black and queer women have had increasing access to the academy and have managed to form enclaves in the academy where their theory is produced, read, and taught in traditional departments as well as departments like Black Studies, disciplines initially proposed as alternatives to older, western, disciplines. But as Grace Hong reminds us in ““The Future of Our Worlds:” Black Feminism and the Politics of Knowledge in the University under Globalization,” having black female bodies in the academy is only part of the work, but not the lion’s share of it.<sup>131</sup> Perhaps the most important project, Hong purposes, is “address[ing] how we might re-imagine and reconstitute this university formation so that it is no longer so violent toward black feminists.”<sup>132</sup> After all, many black feminists of Alice Walker and Barbara Christian’s generation, many black feminists of our mothers’ generation, are dead and have “suffered early deaths because the battles around race, gender, and sexuality were being waged so directly through and on their bodies.”<sup>133</sup>

While Barbara Christian, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, VèVè Clark and others may not have experienced the physical and emotional threat of slavery, or may not

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<sup>130</sup> Christian, Barbara. "The race for theory." *Feminist Studies* (1988): 68.

<sup>131</sup> Hong, Grace Kyungwon. "" The Future of Our Worlds": Black Feminism and the Politics of Knowledge in the University under Globalization." *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 8, no. 2 (2008): 98.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

have hidden themselves away in antebellum attics, epistemological oppression seems to affect the body in ways similar to Jacobs' time in the crawl space where hair thins and turns grey, hands shake and legs grow heavy and drag behind us, and speech begins to rasp and slur. And, similar to Jacobs' time in the space above her grandmother's home, scholarship and the production of knowledge within The University as it stands, will not be enough to save us. Perhaps in many of these discussions, it is the work of the imagination that is missing. Perhaps in some ways, it is only the work of the imagination that can save us. Hong suggests that the work of the imagination, of re-imagining presents, futures, and pasts, is the work of the black feminist. This imagining is a form of theorizing, the form of theorizing that Christian was referring to earlier, and it "is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs," not always in the academy.<sup>134</sup> This work is an old work, an emotional and intellectual work that requires physical discipline and rigor and it is older than even Jacobs and her time in the *shape of mystery*, and it is at least as old as the first time an African woman had to travel across the Atlantic in the belly of a slave ship. And yet, if the work of the Afro-Imaginative, a work that imagines usable pasts and livable futures for black women, for black queer and trans people, is indeed rooted in a long history present in the black (queer) Atlantic, as Omise'eke Tinsley argues, why is it so often "situated as a dazzlingly new "discovery" in academia—a hybrid, mermaidlike imagination that has yet to find its

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<sup>134</sup> Christian, 68.

land legs?”<sup>135</sup> Why is it so difficult to imagine that the Afro-Imaginative has a place in theorization and scholarship? Perhaps it’s time re-raise the question posed by Christian and reiterated by Hong, “Can we think about how narrowly defined our own definition of scholarship might be?”<sup>136</sup>

My work begins with the slave narrative of Harriet Jacobs as a site of black feminist knowledge because there are remarkable parallels between the unanswered questions and the veiled gaps in Jacobs’ work, and the fictional work that Nalo Hopkinson’s *Sister Mine* undertakes to speak back to those gaps. But my work also begins with Jacobs because, while work by scholars like Jean Fagan Yellin and Katherine McKittrick has situated Jacobs as perhaps one of the first recorded black feminist theorists, her work was not always considered serious or theoretical. I propose using Jacobs as a bridge between the scholastically theoretical works of Black Feminism in The Academy and the Black Feminist work happening outside of the academy, especially theorizing ‘in narrative forms,’ which allows black feminists to speak back to hegemony and articulate that which has been otherwise covered by the veil. And, in the case of Jacobs, parable and narrative theorizing not only have the potential to rent the veil that Jacobs purposely/intentionally enacts to obscure details about her life while she was enslaved, but they also have the potential to articulate “the shape of mystery,” which McKittrick asserts is as much about the

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<sup>135</sup> Tinsley, O. N. “BLACK ATLANTIC, QUEER ATLANTIC: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 2–3 (January 1, 2008): 193  
doi:10.1215/10642684-2007-030.193.

<sup>136</sup> Hong, 103.

“space of pain [Jacobs] avoids and experiences in the garret,” as it is about the complicated and compound psychic challenges that occur when Jacobs encounters the “blending of oppression, captivity, control, and agency” within the small confines of her cell.<sup>137</sup> The way McKittrick is able to bring necessary clarity to what the shape of mystery could have meant given the social political geography of the garret, is necessary, and requires us to consider more than just the “physically disabling perimeters of the 9’x7’x3 cell” that Jacobs occupied over the course of seven years, but also the ways that otherwise unseen forces of oppression layered themselves on top of the already tiny cell and cause the space that Jacobs occupied to be even more wrought and cramped than it already was.<sup>138</sup> And yet, there are things about the space of mystery that McKittrick cannot explain, because Jacobs herself could not begin to fathom them and therefore trusts them to the realm of the spiritual, maintaining that one day, she may be better able to understand them in the ‘hearafter’.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic grounds: Black women and the cartographies of struggle*. University of Minnesota Press, 2006.39.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, 40.

<sup>139</sup> Jacobs, Harriet. incidents in the life. Space of mystery page number.

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## **Vita**

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