They gaze in all seriousness out from the past. And whether their grave expressions are softened by a partial profile, or hardened by all the fullness of an unsmiling face, the author portraits of ex-slave and fugitive authors appear on the frontispieces of slave narratives with a regularity that is surprising and remarkable. Given the limited technology and expense of illustration in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—the years when slave narratives were published—the author portraits appear so often that their significance requires an investigation that matches the gravity of their facial expressions. Whether these portraits serve to illustrate and guide the readers' understanding of the texts, or if they have a more urgent, strategic, and political function are the questions addressed in this study. For whether the portraits illustrate, persuade, or manipulate, their appearance is not an element which should be overlooked.

The frontispiece author portraits of slave narratives offer a representative likeness of a former slave in order to provide a graphic point of reference for the title characters. Moreover the author portraits become, in some cases, persuasive tools for abolitionist arguments. In this way the portraits are a guide for understanding the contradiction between slave status and the formality of author portraiture. And since the portraits appear before, or outside, the texts, as such they are "paratextual" elements, whose "threshold, or zone of transaction" functions to persuade the reader regarding the (auto)biographical objectives of slave narratives as life writings. The transaction of these portraits occurs as a semiotic exchange where the reader interprets the image within the contexts of historical, ideological, and cultural constructions of representation and identity. The portraits become meaningful when readers bring to them an ability to read the signs of race and class, privilege, and bondage. The illustrations therefore require a highly sophisticated order of literacy in their creation of what Gerard Genette calls a "privileged space [for] pragmatics and strategy," the reading of which is the focus of this study.
Frontispiece author portraits are strategic elements of publication which emerge in the early days of modern book making. The portraits introduce, identify, or signal the presence of a narrator in the text. However, such identification has always been potentially misleading and even ironic. The publishing convention of author portraiture was already well established when the first slave narratives appeared in eighteenth-century Britain. The 1726 and 1735 editions of Gulliver's Travels used the frontispiece author portrait convention to create an ironic tension between the author's image and the narrative to evidence an apparent contradiction between the fictional title character, his portrait, and the information in the novel itself. By the 1750s and -60s, the conventions of frontispiece illustration had become subject to ridicule when the author portrait was a manifestation of visual satire in the illustration of narratives written by extremely talented dogs (The History of Pompey, the Little [1751]), or allegedly literate houses (Millennium Hall [1762]) (PG 265-78).

But the playful tension that occurs in the emergent genre of the novel, or prose fiction, where the frontispiece portrait is in satirical, ironic, or contradictory relationship to the narrative, is a luxury that slave narrative frontispiece portraits cannot afford. Since the slave narratives have more urgent autobiographical and abolitionist objectives, playful irony can only be understood as a perilous and potential problem of misreading. To avoid the appearance of irony, the author portraits of slave narratives struggle to evidence multiple icons of realistic, biographical representation available to the period. Therefore the slave frontispiece portraits contain graphic cues to assist the readers' identification of the image as the likeness of a slave.

In order for slave narrative frontispiece portraits to preface and guide the readers' interpretation of the narrative, the avoidance of satire and irony is critically important. Yet a more profound irony becomes apparent when the frontispiece likeness is that of a slave author. In the likeness of a slave who writes, frontispiece portraits present the initial "threshold" through which the overarching irony of the writing slave is readable. The ironic relation of slavery's dehumanizing bondage to writing, which is evidence of the highest cultural and artistic achievement of human consciousness, means that frontispiece portraiture of the slave author resists one irony at the same time that it produces another. The portrait of the slave is therefore a frontispiece threshold, whose apparent resistance to ironic interpretation can be clearly seen in the posture and deportment of the author's countenance, whose features and gaze follow, guide, and instruct an interpretation of the slave narrative. That is, frontispiece portraits are serious evidence of the credibility and truthful authority of slave narratives as auto/biographies.
The images are used as persuasive evidence of the ex-slaves' class status, and their current membership among the literate elite of western culture at the same time that they illustrate the contradiction of the writing slave.

An early edition of "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavas Vassa, the African" (1793) features a frontispiece portrait of the author, and his regal, undeniably African likeness, as a first introduction to the author, narrator, and subject of his autobiography (fig. 1). In this portrait, the title character's two different names, and African origins, are apparently overtaken by his British costume, hair, and the open text in his hands. Although his autobiography's title asserts that his national identity is that of an "African," his bearing, clothing, posture, and styling contradict references to any similar style found among the indigenous eighteenth-century inhabitants of his native continent.

Moreover the portrait itself, from which this engraving is taken, is evidence of Equiano's fame and popularity since portraiture was a painstaking process reserved primarily for those of fame and renown. Hugh Honour's study of the black in western art finds that portraits of blacks were extremely rare in the late eighteenth century since portraits "were still valued mainly as visual records of people whose personalities or achievements were known to the public at large." Equiano's portrait therefore illustrates a later edition of his self-published narrative in order to reference an author whose earlier editions had already thrust his name into the popular and literate consciousness of Great Britain. However Equiano's formal countenance provides more than a simple illustration with which a reader could imagine the events of his "Interesting Narrative." The frontispiece author portrait of Olaudah Equiano sought to resolve the ideological contradiction of the writing slave.

In this way the earliest slave narrative's author portrait is the initial threshold through which the reader realizes the genre's ironic relation to New World Slavery. That is, the ironic contradiction of an African and/or British subject, slave and/or writer confronts the reader, who must realize that the narrative which follows concerns a character who is both African and British, a slave and a writer. The struggle between these contradictions is the instruction by which readers are able to interpret the events of a slave's life. That desperate irony, or dangerous contradiction, which made property of human beings, is the pedagogy of the frontispiece slave-author portrait.

In order to guide the readers' understanding and acceptance of a black slave who writes eloquently of the violent—yet unsuccessful—erasure of human identity, Equiano's portrait offers a clear piece of evidence: The Bible. The portrait holds within its hands the strongest
evidence of the narrative’s truth and the truth of Equiano’s humanity. In the portrait, the Bible tries to resolve and explain the apparent contradiction between Equiano’s nationalism and his costume, and the tension which emerges in the contexts of racism and its erasure of African humanity. The writing within the text he holds enables our further reading of his narrative’s authority, and the author’s literacy (fig. 1A). The citation that appears within the open text is an even further ironic juxtaposition of the narrative’s authority and representation.

Equiano’s Bible is open to Acts: chapter four, verse twelve, yet the information contained therein is barely legible scrawl within the portrait. What is barely readable in the portrait is, however, an imperative and profoundly complex layer of signification, which is knowable if the viewer locates her own Bible to discern what is missing. Equiano’s portrait directs the readers’ attention to the following quote from the Acts of the Apostles: “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The letters, which spell the word “Acts,” reference the words of the Apostle Peter in his response to queries from “rulers,
elders, and scribes" who have confronted him to force an explanation of a miracle he has performed. They demand to know “in whose name” Peter has cured “a man lame from birth,” and Peter replies that he performed the miracle “in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth” (Acts 4:9, 10). In the verse cited by Equiano’s Bible, Peter has further proclaimed that only in Jesus’ name is spiritual salvation possible.

Equiano’s portrait presents an open Bible as a graphic threshold through which readers may understand his complex and controversial rhetorical strategy. The salvation of the “lame by birth” African, the image argues, is possible through the name of Jesus. A miraculous cure for the African’s crippling, congenital bondage comes by knowledge of that “name,” which is possible through knowledge of Christianity. The controversy of Equiano’s apparent argument emerges in the historical awareness that Christian salvation for the African occurs in the context of chattel slavery. Equiano’s portrait illustrates what his narrative will later articulate as an ideologically problematic identification of Christianity—and slavery—as the means for the salvation of the African soul.

However, another reading of Equiano’s portrait offers an alternative understanding of the open Bible. The biblical verse quotes a reference to Jesus Christ, yet replaces that more precise identification with the phrase, “the name.” Without the entire biblical chapter, the person to whom “the name” refers is elusive. Moreover, in its location at the lower foreground of the portrait, “the name,” by which salvation is possible, occurs adjacent to—yet above—the name(s) of Equiano himself. The proximity of the identifying caption—Equiano’s proper names—to Jesus Christ, creates a possible confusion and potential substitution of Equiano
for Jesus Christ. Therefore the open chapter and verse assert that salvation is an effect of “the name”—Jesus/Equiano—and the slave narrative/Bible is a threshold through which readers enter for salvation.

The potential substitution of Equiano for Jesus Christ is still further evidenced in the verse, which immediately precedes the one cited in the portrait. Peter’s response, “that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth” is followed by an accusation: “whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man is standing before you well” (Acts 4:10, emphasis added). Without its narrative and biblical context, the reference to “him” is collapsed into “this man standing before you well,” and the viewer of Equiano’s portrait is offered only one illustration for both: Equiano himself. The frontispiece portrait illustrates one who was lame by birth—a former slave—who miraculously “stands before you,” whole and well by the miraculous cure received from “the name.”

In the final verse, which immediately precedes that which is cited in the portrait, Peter proclaims, “This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, but which has become the head of the corner” (Acts 4:11, emphasis added). Christ’s rejection, crucifixion, and resurrection, make possible his present location as “the head” of the corner, or cornerstone of the Church. The head and the name offered by the image, to which the Biblical citation makes apparent reference, are none other than the portrait and name of the African.

The rhetorical power of Equiano’s portrait relies upon the biblical literacy of the eighteenth-century British Empire. An intimate relationship to the Bible is the condition under which Equiano’s portrait is meaningful in its multiple layers of signification, which contain and express the portrait’s symbolic deployment and collapse of Jesus/Equiano/the miraculously cured, and Christianity’s spiritual salvation/cure for crippling oppression.

The strategic and rhetorical power of the Equiano portrait lies in its evidence that the African is indeed a loyal British subject and a piously literate man of regal bearing and higher class status, if not the savior for those crippled by slavery or African birth. Another rhetorical effect of Equiano’s portrait is its apparent resistance to eighteenth-century racial categorization of the African slave. Eighteenth-century ideologies of race had determined that the black was, at best, strange, and exotic. At worst the black African was naturally inferior along the Great Chain of man.

The portrait’s signs of class status and British citizenship contradict the assumed lower status of the African in eighteenth-century Britain. Almost 150 years before Equiano, the emergent discourse of natural science had philosophized and rationalized the bondage of Africans by locating them at the bottom of the evolutionary scale. English philosopher Frances Bacon’s influential *The New Organon* (1620) had, through
a series of specific aphorisms, inaugurated a revolutionary method of observation in order to "give formal shape to a rapidly emerging experimentally based science."56 Bacon’s treatise sought ways to understand the relationship of the natural world to European humanity through observation, experimentation, and the application of Reason.

Where the variations of mankind were observable to seventeenth-century Europe, Bacon’s theories explained differences as attributable to the relative and observable use of “the Arts:” “Let anyone reflect how great is the difference between the life of men in any of the most civilised provinces of Europe and in the most savage and barbarous region of New India; and he will judge that . . . this [difference] is due not to soil, climate, or bodily qualities but to the Arts” (NO, Aphorism CXXIX). Bacon’s observations regarding the “barbarous regions” were instrumental in later scientific inquiry about the varieties of mankind found during the early drives toward European colonization. Moreover this passage has been cited to theorize the historical and philosophical emergence of slave narratives because Bacon’s initiation of the scientific methods of observation facilitated the placement of the African in nature. The African is, therefore, a being whose lack of “the Arts” of education, or writing, means that the black is observable, knowable, and controllable according to the same scientific methods and Eurocentric ideology used to understand the natural world.

Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr. cite the same quotation from Bacon’s text in order to assert the philosophical and historical importance of slave narratives in that, “since the Renaissance in Europe, the act of writing has been considered the visible sign of Reason.”56 Ronald Judy traces the effects of “the writing Negro” as a philosophical and scientific “proof,” and the slave narrative becomes “an exemplary demonstration of the Negro’s humanity.”7 In light of western European philosophies, it becomes clear what is at stake in the rhetorical evidence of slave narratives, and their portraits: the portraits of the writing Negro orient the reader toward the apparent humanity of the African savage.

The “proof” of writing, and the further evidence of author portraiture, make the Equiano portrait meaningful as a rhetorical strategy for the relocation of African being. It is furthermore unquestionable that the most powerful inscription, which formed the fundamental and multiple ideologies of racist Europe, was the Christian Bible. Its appearance in Equiano’s hands signals the most persuasive argument of the narrative that follows. Even more persuasive than his likeness, his British costume or powdered wig is the assertive iconography of his adopted text.

In this way the frontispiece portrait of the slave narrative prepares the reader to understand the African struggle for nationalist identity, class status, piety, and his clearly evident sentience/humanity. Since the
author portrait harnessed multiple signs of elite membership in the Christian human family of British subjects, we can say that the portraits function ideologically to resolve contradictory social relations and to assert the author's understanding, acceptance, and utilization of dominant codes and institutional standards of human being. The African is human to the extent that he is also British and a pious, literate Christian.

However, Christianity loses its strategic ability to locate slaves in the human family after the violent overthrow of slavery in San Domingue, and the historical turning point of Nat Turner's violent—but failed—slave insurrection in the United States. After the abolition of slavery in Great Britain, and the ban on the importation of new African slaves to the United States, nineteenth-century American slavery institutionalized African inferiority in even more contradictory ways, as the rationalization for slavery became mired in the increasingly complex and subtle iconography of race. In the multiple flashpoints of historical events of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the literate Christian criteria for membership in the human family was lost, denied, and even forbidden. Reading the Bible was no longer a persuasive argument for a slave's humanity, and the slave's literacy became a threatening sign of institutional sedition.

In the nineteenth century, the Bible disappears from slave narrative frontispiece portraiture, and it loses the ability to clearly identify the African as a human being. Moreover American slavery's prohibition against new African slaves meant that the American slave narrative lost its cultural identification with Africa. Instead the narrative locates the humanity of slaves in a complex semiotic identification with whiteness and class privilege.

The strategic relocation of the African's humanity had a distinctly scientific urgency at the turn of the nineteenth century. The taxonomic categorization of the African, the "negro," or the "black" as inferior had joined natural science and philosophy to aesthetics and fine arts in widely read publications such as that which was written by Swiss pastor Johann Lavater. Lavater's Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beforderung (1775–78) attempted to create a science which could deduce a person's virtues and vices from her or his physical features. "According to Lavater, a prominent nose indicates exceptional intelligence, a flat one, stupidity" (IB 16).8 The urge to categorize human beings, and ascribe to physical features certain inherent character traits further produced Franz Josef Gall's theory of phrenology. Gall's phrenology was based on the notion that protuberances of the skull indicate "faculties and propensities of the brain" (IB 17).

By the nineteenth century, French scientist Julien Joseph Virey had published his immensely popular Histoire naturelle du genre humaine
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natural science and philosophy informed public understanding of physical difference as racial, or hierarchical, slave narratives labored to reverse their orientation with the evidence of a writing black. By the time of its peak in popularity in the antebellum era, the American slave narratives use frontispiece portraiture to illustrate a more complex and semiotically layered configuration of race. The invention of photographic technology, and cheaper, more sophisticated print methods, had allowed the frontispiece slave’s portrait to become more widespread, and its use as a threshold for interpretation had become more commonplace. Yet the frontispiece portrait never loses its rhetorical and pedagogical guidance for interpretation, and its resolution of the fundamental contradiction of a slave author. Moreover the abolitionist rhetoric of the antebellum era strategically assimilated the contradictions into the slave narratives’ persuasive strategy in order to illustrate the more fundamental contradiction of human property, and the irrationality of race categorization. The clearest illustration and graphic evidence of American slavery’s dreadful irony is read in the signs of frontispiece portraits.

If Equiano’s narrative used African origins to evidence culture and Bible reading to prove Christian humanity, then American slave narratives used the mulatto’s marginal and tragic whiteness to the same ends. In order to prove the slave author’s potential location in the privileges of whiteness and class—and the tragic denial of access to those privileges—the American slave narratives’ frontispiece portrait is key evidence.
Dr. James M'Cune Smith introduces Frederick Douglass's 1855 narrative titled *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Dr. Smith's laudatory comments about Douglass begin with immediate references to the frontispiece portrait: "But this full recognition of the colored man to the right, and the entire admission of the same to the full privileges . . . of manhood, requires powerful effort . . . the negro must prove himself equal" (emphasis added). Dr. Smith clearly articulates the significance of the Douglass portrait and the narrative which follows as that which will facilitate the recognition of the slave's manhood; however the image is that of no ordinary slave. To understand the extraordinary talents, of which the narrative is a prime example, Dr. Smith explains that Douglass has "Anglo-Saxon blood" (*MB* 125). Although Douglass himself will deny that his literacy and skillful prose are attributable to the white father he never knew, Smith's introduction asserts the possibility: "We are left in the dark as to who was the paternal ancestor of our author; [however,] the versatility of talent he yields . . . would seem to be the result of the grafting of the Anglo-Saxon on good, original, negro stock" (*MB* 137). Unlike the first edition of his "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass" (1845), this later edition does not mention his genealogical/racial "mixture" until the third chapter. Moreover the first edition admits that Douglass did not know his mother, yet this 1855 edition provides anecdotal evidence of his mother's periodic appearance in his childhood. More importantly, Douglass asserts that his literacy is attributable to an African, genetic link to the mother he hardly knew: "I learned, after my mother's death, that she could read. . . . How she acquired this knowledge I know not. . . . I can, therefore, fondly and proudly ascribe to her an earnest love of knowledge" (*MB* 155-56). Although "there was a whisper" that Douglass's master was his own father, he did not "give [the rumor] any credence" (*MB* 156). The credence which Douglass will not accept is, however, important information for Dr. Smith, who struggles to assert the significance of the white father for understanding Douglass and his unique talents. Dr. Smith asserts that such talent is due to mixed racial blood, or "grafting." The suggestion of "grafting" is an abolitionists' rhetorical strategy, which asserts the denied privileges of the mulatto. The slave narrative portrait is graphic illustration of the abolitionists' politics.

The frontispiece portrait is evidence that Douglass is no ordinary slave (fig. 2). In order to interpret the Douglass portrait as an illustration of an exceptional, "grafted" member of the black African race, nineteenth-century readers had been given more comprehensive and detailed instruction in the European pseudoscience of Gall's phrenology. Another scientist, Johan Gaspar Spurzheim (1776–1832) had taken Gall a step further when he mapped the human cranium as indicative of individual, national, and
racial character. By 1822, phrenology had found an institutional foothold in the United States with the first American society for the study of the "Powers and Organs of the Mind" by mapping a human skull.
In the culturally and racially blended—yet stratified—United States, such scientific generalizations were valued for the ways that they joined scientific discourse to artistic representation in order to rationalize as “natural” the superiority and inferiority of various races and national groups. The combined efforts of artists and scientists, in their orientation toward the articulation and historical use of phrenology, firmly rationalized the racism of American slavery. Colbert finds that artistic representations, especially “the prospect of portraiture could provide an objective record of the sitter’s character... and a more complete account of the cranium, [means that the portrait] would be cherished by future historians” (MP 18). Slave portraits provide such an “account of the cranium” in their exposure of a broad expanse of forehead to evidence the slave author’s higher intellectual faculties. Indeed, the slave is an author precisely due to his extraordinary cranium. Insofar as natural science and the nineteenth-century pseudoscience of phrenology had already charted the natural inferiority of the black, Douglass’s grave countenance provides a likeness whose parted hair reveals his prominent “Intellectual” and “Reflective” faculties, which phrenologists had already ascribed to whiteness.

The 1855 portrait offers a countenance that is neither softened nor tempered by partial profile. Rather his features and expression assert defiance in the way he faces the daguerreotype camera in the portrait from which this engraving was made. Like Equiano, Douglass wears the costume of nationalist identity (he is neither British nor African), and higher-class status. Also like Equiano, his American costume asserts membership among the higher classes, and contradicts his narrative’s identification of him as a slave. His dress also contradicts the narrative’s description of slave clothing as ill-fitting, scanty, ragged, and torn. The Douglass portrait presents an angry American whose clenched fists and steady gaze prepare the reader to interpret the resistant violence of his autobiography.

Like Equiano’s Bible, beneath the Douglass portrait lies written evidence of his literacy, and the truthful authority of his narrative. The conventional formality of a signature identifies the slave author as a free man whose written manifestation of identity is necessary for the representative function of his story. That is, the author’s signature attempts to signal Philippe LeJeune’s “autobiographical pact,” even as the narrative ironically reverses the contractual obligations of autobiography when the reader realizes that his mother named him "Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey." The ironic contradiction between the signature and his original, given name is symptomatic of larger ideological contradictions of slavery. The frontispiece portrait resolves the contradictions by offering the slave-author countenance.
Another slave narrative, which was also published in midcentury, features a frontispiece portrait that quite literally faces and confronts the ironies of race and human property. The 1846 *Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke, Sons of a Soldier of the Revolution*, asserts the irony in its title, and the slave portrait illustrates the ironic contradiction of the “almost white” slave (fig. 3).

The frontispiece portrait of Lewis Clarke illustrates an important issue of his “sufferings” as a slave in Kentucky. Like almost all slave narratives, his story begins with the problematic of a slave’s racial genealogy, which Clarke explains is an accident of mixed racial birth: “My father was . . . from Scotland. He came to this country in time to be in the earliest scenes of the American Revolution.”12 That his father was not African is evidenced in the illustration of the title character, which is bereft of any signs of African phenotype in his facial features.

Moreover the Clarke portrait illustrates his narrative’s distinctive scenes of slavery’s cruelty, which are singular in their repeated insistence upon the role of the slave mistress in her violent treatment of mulatto slaves. Clarke identifies his mistress as his own aunt, whose blood ties to Lewis Clarke caused no end to the violent rage with which she tortured him and his sisters because of their apparently white skin and features.

After an incident of mistaken identity, in which Clarke’s slave sister was mistaken for her own mistress by a bemused visiting suitor, the mistress vents her rage upon Clarke by saying she “would fix me, so that nobody should ever think I was white. Accordingly in a burning hot day, she made me take off every rag of clothes, go out into the garden, and pick herbs for hours in order to burn me black” (*LMC* 614).

The apparent whiteness of the Clarke brothers—Lewis, Milton, and Cyrus—and their sisters, causes multiple incidents of mistaken identity and subsequent cruelty. Even after they reach freedom in the North, the Clarke brothers’ racial misidentification becomes newsworthy when Cyrus tries to cast his ballot in a local election. Where Lewis Clarke’s narrative opens with his genealogical identification of himself as a “son of a soldier of the Revolution,” the brothers’ narratives conclude with a recent news story that documents a run-in with mistaken racial identity.

In the article, Cyrus Clarke’s right to vote is challenged by a judge who prohibits his ballot on the grounds that Clarke is a slave and a “colored man,” by asking, “Are you not a colored man? And is not your hair curly?” (*LMC* 632). Clarke observes that the judge himself has swarthy skin tone when he replies, “We are both colored men; and all we differ is that you have not the handsome wavy curl” (*LMC* 632). Clarke’s argument produces lively debate in the courtroom regarding “what constitutes a colored man by the New York state statute” (*LMC* 632). Indeed, what constitutes a “colored man” or slave is the question with
which the narratives begin. The question of what constitutes a black man is the threshold of Clarke's frontispiece portrait.

The Lewis Clarke narrative is also significant as a slave narrative that was not written by the title character. For this reason the narrative's strategic assertion of mixed racial ancestry is primarily a feature of amanuensis biography. Authorial control, that is, the control of the narrative which is asserted when the subject of the narrative is also the

Fig. 3. Lewis Clark, 1846
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author, allows the interpretation of the portrait to emerge within the terms of value asserted by the slave himself. When an amanuensis or biographer holds such authorial control, then the terms or values within which the portrait becomes meaningful are those values of an abolitionist. The criteria within which the frontispiece portraits are meaningful shifts from first to third person, from “myself” to “her” or “him.” Such a shift also means that the interpretation of the portrait is understood in terms of race. The criteria within which whiteness and blackness appear, disappear, or perceptibly blend are of high importance for amanuensis biographers. Therefore the amanuensis biographers use frontispiece portraits to work through and evidence their own fascination with the physicality of race. Such fascination becomes, within the narrative, a rhetorical tool with which they persuade readers and instruct them in the contradictory and tragic lessons of racial slavery, that is, miscegenation.

For amanuensis biographers, the irrational and contradictory arguments of race science in the contexts of slavery provide a point of reference, or orientation toward the locus of white privilege and black bondage. The frontispiece portrait is a graphic illustration of the human being who has fallen between the racial cracks of slave society. In the instance of women’s slave narratives, the amanuensis biographers articulate their own puzzlement, surprise, and prurient interest in the apparent whiteness of slave women. The contradictory “white slave” is a rhetorical tool for the abolitionist writer, whose biography of the mixed-race slave woman asks, “How can this woman be a slave in light of the way she looks?”

The 1861 dictated narrative, titled “Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon” features the likeness of the title character (fig. 4). Through the threshold of her image the reader understands precisely what an “octoroon” is. And in case we still do not understand, the biographer, Reverend Mattison, explains in the narrative’s opening paragraph: “Louisa Picquet, the subject of the following narrative . . . is a little above the medium height, easy and graceful in her manners, of fair complexion and rosy cheeks, with dark eyes, a flowing head of hair with no perceptible inclination to curl, and every appearance, at first view, of an accomplished white lady” (emphasis added). A footnote immediately follows the paragraph to explain that “the cut on the outside title-page is a tolerable representation of the features of Mrs. P., though by no means a flattering picture” (5). The woodcut portrait of Louisa Picquet illustrates the opening paragraph’s contention that, for all intents and purposes, Picquet is “white.” If the litmus test for whiteness is the color of a person’s skin, Mattison argues, then Picquet’s “fair complexion” qualifies her for membership. Another criteria for membership used by Mattison is apparent hair texture, and his introduction testifies that Picquet’s hair
has "no inclination to curl" without her (or a hairdresser's) manipulation.

The biographer further asserts that the reader should not be too misled by the likeness of Louisa Picquet, for "notwithstanding the fair complexion and lady-like bearing . . . she is of African descent on her mother's side—an octoroon, or eighth blood—and consequently, one of those who 'have no rights that white men are bound to respect'" (5, emphasis added). Where men's narratives identify a genealogy of denied privilege from their father's side, the women's narratives emphasize a genealogy of bondage on their mother's side. The terms of value, through which readers will interpret the Picquet portrait and narrative, are those determined by Reverend Mattison. What is apparently important for understanding the Picquet story of slavery is not so much who her father was—white privilege which is denied—rather interpretation of her suffering is possible if the reader is told who her mother was: Picquet's sufferings are the fruits of black bondage. Mattison explains that the
denial of white privileges, and the consequential treatment of Picquet as her black mother’s child, is a “story of wrongs and sorrows” (5).

The woodcut illustrations of Lewis Clarke and Louisa Picquet are strategic devices for amanuenses’ rhetorical objectives, which use the stories to describe the horrible irony of racialized slavery, which determines that “one drop” of African blood forever consigns a person to a life in bondage. Yet such slave portraits also attempt to illustrate the current class status of the slave narratives’ title character, whose countenance contradicts any association of slavery with degradation and dehumanization: these are the likenesses of fellow American citizens, and not a beaten, raped, humiliated, and subservient class of servile human beings. These people look like us, and are therefore amongst us.

The ideological and rhetorical importance of slave portraiture notwithstanding, their function is perhaps best understood when their evidence is manipulated or absent. The 1861 narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* included an author portrait at the time of its first appearance. Yet the portrait of the escaped slave, Harriet Jacobs, disappears from the narrative in the twentieth century. In the last century, and up to the 1970s, the publication of Jacobs’s narrative had no author portrait. The Harcourt Brace edition of 1973 illustrated the narrative with an anonymous slave woman alone in the wilderness (fig. 5). It was only in the scholarly republication of the narrative, edited by historian Jean Fagan Yellin, that the reader is offered a likeness of Harriet Jacobs herself (fig. 6). It is important to note, moreover, that the Harcourt Brace edition’s author is “Linda Brent,” not Jacobs. Since the “slave girl” by whom the incidents are narrated is named Linda Brent, the Harcourt Brace edition had yet to benefit from the detailed historical work done by Yellin and others, who authenticated the narrative as autobiographical, and further identified its author as Harriet Ann Jacobs.

It was after this historical authentication that the Jacobs narrative began to include her likeness on the cover. This daguerreotype portrait, an engraved facsimile of which illustrated the original, is purportedly that which was commissioned by her abolitionist editor, Lydia Maria Child, to illustrate the first edition of her narrative in 1861. Unlike the Picquet narrative, Jacobs’s story does not strategically assert the tragedy of mixed racial heritage or the contradictions of race slavery. That is, her apparently fair skin—and her hair’s “inclination to curl”—are not the primary issues of her life story. The ironic tragedy of the mulatto is not the strategic or rhetorical drive of the Jacobs narrative.

Yet another irony or contradiction emerges in the title’s identification of the author as a “slave girl,” which is in stark contrast to the elderly woman on the cover. Harriet Jacobs writes her own narrative, and her
Fig. 5. Harcourt Brace edition, 1973
Fig. 6. Harriet Jacobs, 1894 (from Harvard UP edition, 1987)
control over her own representation means that genealogical and racial ambiguity are less important than her narrative’s emphasis upon her struggle with the ideological contradictions of motherhood and womanhood for slave women in the antebellum South. Although her title states that the autobiographical incidents are those of a slave girl, her portrait asserts a matronly countenance, seated upon an apparently matriarchal throne, and dressed according to the conventions of the middle class. The author portrait of Harriet Ann Jacobs therefore illustrates her narrative’s critique of the abuse and denial of motherhood’s privileges for slave women. Given the narrative’s distinctive and singular politics, the matron Harriet image becomes critically important evidence of this slave woman’s life story.

With these rhetorical objectives in mind we realize what is lost when matron Harriet’s likeness is replaced by a more youthful illustration for her narrative. A mass-market paperback edition of the Jacobs narrative displays an illustration that features a decidedly younger and darker image (fig. 7). Although the text never reached the marketplace, the cover illustration is one which appears on the website of Amazon.com, the most popular online bookstore. The use of this portrait to illustrate the narrative is puzzling since anyone who has read the poetry of Phillis Wheatley will recognize the image as precisely the same portrait as the one that illustrates an early edition of her poems (fig. 8). What had been a portrait of Wheatley illustrates the narrative of Jacobs. The substitution immediately dismisses the rhetorical function of author portraits generally, and the strategic function of the Jacobs portrait specifically.

Such substitutions reveal that the author portraits of slave narratives are currently ambiguous in their relation to the title characters. The substitution of Jacobs with Wheatley has darkened her countenance and reduced her apparent age (and the matronly respect that her portrait’s advanced age demands). The Wheatley portrait’s graphic threshold becomes a confusing and generic gateway to “a writing slave girl,” and therefore makes the identification of a specific slave woman irrelevant. The edition of the Jacobs narrative that uses Wheatley’s portrait as an illustration makes a successful substitution only in the instance where a reader knows nothing of Phillis Wheatley, or if the reader has not read her poems. That is, the substitution functions primarily in the context of reader ignorance.

In order for the cover illustration to serve as a threshold for reader interpretation of the narrative, the reader should not know that the illustration is a portrait of Phillis Wheatley rather than Harriet Jacobs. Perhaps the author portrait failed in this regard, since the publishers decided not to use this specific cover illustration for their most recent edition of the narrative.14 However, the use of Wheatley to illustrate the
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Harriet Jacobs
writing as Linda Brent

Fig. 7. Signet Classics edition, 1999 (from Amazon.com)
Fig. 8. Frontispiece portrait from Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773)
Jacobs narrative demonstrates an important current function of slave narratives' author portraits in regards to their narratives' authority as autobiographies. That is, it no longer matters precisely what Jacobs looked like since the controversy over her text's authority and the strategic importance of author portraiture are no longer significant. What matters is the extent to which the slave narrative is authentically a story of slave women, and such interpretation is guided by the dark features and costume of the generic slave girl.

Yet the current absence of the slave portrait, as both a rhetorical device and an ideological point of reference, reveals how the portrait of Harriet Jacobs, and her physical and facial features, do matter. For these misleading illustrations still function to guide a reader's interpretation and understanding of the texts as autobiographical. They are twenty-first century manifestations of the original problem that author portraits sought to resolve in the first place. In order for slave narratives to be understood as "autobiographies," then any evidence of their authenticity and authority is serious business indeed. Harriet Jacobs's likeness is interchangeable with any other dark-skinned, headwrapped image precisely because the slave narratives have become generic evidence of any slave—they are finally stories of an institution, not lives. In the publication of Jacobs's narrative as mass-market paperbacks for a broad audience, the rhetorically significant author portrait loses its strategic ability to illustrate the evidence of race slavery's contradictions and ironies. The replacement of her likeness can be understood as evidence that Jacobs is no longer in control of her life story, rather her story is now in service to current concerns about marketing, illustration, and genre. The evidently more pressing concerns of institutional representation and generic location are, however, not in evidence in the most recent and comprehensive edition of the Frederick Douglass narratives. Where the Douglass narratives are concerned, the rhetorical function of his frontispiece portraits is sustained in most editions throughout the 150 years of their publication.

The cover illustration of Frederick Douglass (ca. 1847), (fig. 9), which features his earliest photograph (ca. 1847), appears on the Library of America edition that includes all three of his autobiographies—and all three of the frontispiece portraits from the first editions. In contrast to the Jacobs narrative illustrations, the Library of America used the most serious and defiant portrait available to ensure the "presence" of Frederick Douglass as a point of reference for interpretation and authority of his autobiographies. The status of the Douglass narratives as autobiographies of an individual slave is therefore ensured, as his features emerge like an apparition from the blackness of the historical past. The Jacobs narrative is representative of a generic women’s slave narrative, whereas the Douglass narratives are the life writings of an individual.
Frontispiece slave narratives' portraits strategically utilize dominant constructions of nationalist, racial, and class identities at the same time that they attempt to revise and manipulate them. As such they produce
critically important knowledge—perhaps the only knowledge, or evidence—which asserts historical arguments about race slavery, and which can also tie the narratives to their subjects in the contexts of life writing. Yet the substitutability of the slave’s likeness, as seen in the multiple editions of the Jacobs narrative, is evidence that the authority of the slave in regards to her own story is, and has always been, controlled by the concerns of the dominant culture.

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NOTES

1 The slave narratives selected for this study include the narratives of Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, Lewis Clarke, Louisa Piquet, and Harriet Jacobs, respectively.
2 Gerard Genette, Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation (Cambridge, 1997), p. 1. The important distinction between slave narratives that were written by the slaves themselves, and those dictated to amanuenses biographers will become more significant later in the argument.
3 Janine Barchas, "Prefiguring Genre: Frontispiece Portraits from Gulliver’s Travels to Millennium Hall," Studies in the Novel, 30 (Summer 1998), 272; hereafter cited in text as PG. Barchas finds that in these two separate editions of Gulliver’s Travels, “the frontispieces deconstruct the tradition of the author portrait and, by extension, the persona of the author” because Jonathan Swift “offers readers two new portraits of Gulliver [which] are so unlike those found in the first edition, and so unlike one another that they undermine the ability of the frontispiece portrait to signify identity” (“Prefiguring Genre,” 267).
8 In his multivolume study of blacks in fine arts, Hugh Honour examines the emergence of apparently “black” characters in the sculptures, paintings, and drawings of “western culture” from the pharaohs to the modern era. His lavishly illustrated texts evidence an artist’s perspective on race and representation; however his study is apparently unconcerned to reveal the reception of those images by blacks themselves. See Honour, The Image of the Black in Western Art.
9 James M'Cune Smith, “Introduction” to Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom [1855], rpt. in Autobiographies (New York, 1999), p. 125; this volume hereafter cited in text as MB.
10 Charles Colbert, A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America (Chapel Hill, 1997), pp. 10, 11. Colbert’s study of phrenology is primarily concerned with its use in the work of painters and sculptors of the eighteenth century. However the fundamental science, which informed the popular and historical understanding of the era, can be generalized to apply to frontispiece portraiture and the knowledge required to read and understand those images.


Penguin Putnam Publishers' Signet Classics editor Tracy Bernstein was at a loss to explain the Wheatley portrait on the Jacobs text, which can be seen online at the popular Website of Amazon.com: "This illustration was probably a suggested cover that we decided not to use" (interview, 11 October 2002). The current Signet Classics edition instead opted to illustrate the Jacobs narrative with an archive photo of a black woman seated in a chair. The ambiguous relation of author portraiture to slave narratives is not resolved by the photograph.