Introduction: When Literature and Identity "Get Real"

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LOCATING THE “NEAR”

Just outside the Biology building at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, there is a small freestanding marker with a plaque that reads as follows:

BURIED NEAR THIS PLACE ARE JACK RUDOLPH AND WILLIAM “BOYSEY” BROWN, TWO SLAVES OWNED BY UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA FACULTY, AND WILLIAM J. CRAWFORD, A UNIVERSITY STUDENT WHO DIED IN 1844. RUDOLPH WAS BORN IN AFRICA ABOUT 1791 AND DIED MAY 5, 1846, FROM “BILIOUS PNEUMONIA.” BROWN WAS BORN APRIL 10, 1838, AND DIED NOVEMBER 22, 1844, FROM “WHOOPING COUGH.”

Both Jack and Boysey were owned by Basil Manly Sr., the second president of the university and namesake of Manly Hall (where the departments of Religious Studies and Gender and Race Studies are now housed, and where my own office resides). The plaque commemorating their unmarked graves is right in front of a small group of headstones, where members of a white family—the Pratts—are buried, their graves enclosed by an iron fence.

The image that appears is striking in its representation of various attempts at “recognition.” Initially, there are the marked graves for the white family. It was not until 2004 that the UA administration officially recognized its role in the buying and selling of human bodies and its reliance on slave labor to build many of its own walls. So, now there is a twenty-first-century counternarrative to the “original story” (at least, the first one given any visual signifier) of the family who is buried there. Interestingly, many passersby confuse the marker about Jack and Boysey with the dingy headstones, thinking those are the slave graves that had just gone unnoticed. The line between the counternarrative and the narrative against which it is situated (literally, right in front of, in this case) becomes blurred and confused. These two graves (whether marked or unmarked) provide a striking visual for those who are interested in histories and narratives about race and labor in the South. Worth mentioning, of course, is that the bodies were never buried at all. There were certainly (and many) more than two slaves on campus, after all. How many bodies were simply left, how many bones were scattered and separated by animals and weather, is not known.

What becomes clear in the attempt to “get right” the story of who’s where and how they came to be there is that there is no “real” history, no true story that we can access with careful scholarly work. The attempt to play academic excavator and go digging to uncover “what really happened” is potentially well-intentioned but ultimately ineffective. Whatever history we might reveal is a highly manipulated thing, understood and edited differently by a variety of agents. In the cases of Jack Rudolph and Boysey Brown, the administration that subsidized the monument has a decidedly different role to play from the faculty who critiqued the timing of its commemoration, for example. On the level of scholarship, there are still other and varying interests represented in relation to the issues of historical narratives and forgotten people. Depending on what kinds of concerns are at the table, scholars will perhaps emphasize personal narratives or civic records, journals and letters or contracts and bills of
FIGURE 1. Marker commemorating the role of slave labor at the University of Alabama, specifically noting the lives and deaths of Jack Rudolph and William “Boysey” Brown. University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa. Photo by author.
sale. These different approaches, however, tend to share an emphasis on the idea of historical accuracy and on the personal stories of the peoples themselves. Herein lies the rub. Scholars attempt to offer a history of this or that, pretending that they can stand removed and apart from the particular curiosities and expectations they bring to a text or community. Further, there is implicitly present the idea that these texts or communities are “things in themselves,” as if they exist nondiscursively or as \textit{a priori} subjects. The phenomenological descriptive efforts, however, are their own brick monuments, metaphorically speaking. Many might approach the stories they tell as objective histories that tell a contemporary audience about this or that part of the transatlantic slave trade. But just like the marker that commemorates the lives and representative experiences of Jack Rudolph and Boysey Brown, these histories have inevitable erasures and inclusions of very particular sorts. In this way, they corroborate Hayden White’s understanding of histories—that they are only ever and inevitably fictions\textsuperscript{2} and that, as such, they rely on and indeed come into existence through the discourses that name them.

Rather than the object of study (in this case, slave histories) being the starting point for critical inquiry, then, I locate the starting point in the interests and theoretical approaches taken in identifying what stories get told and how. The scholarly approach that has become pervasive within postcolonial and feminist readings of African diasporic histories is one that would bring light to counternarratives and alternative histories (at UA alone, there is an annual and successful symposium called “Recovering Black Women’s Voices and Lives,” as well as a popular “African American Heritage tour” of the campus). This approach aims to chip away at the seeming monolith of colonial discourse, telling the stories of those who are left out of the narrative. As such, those of us working in these fields of identity studies try to follow in the narrative vein that has manifested brilliant works from \textit{Clotel} to \textit{The Wind Done Gone}. However, while these novels have the convenience of genre to keep the constructed nature of history at the fore, scholars doing so-called recuperative work in strands of race and gender theory too often forget that our ethnographic, historical, and literary studies are projections of present interests. Our recovery or recuperation efforts presume to identify (through a Nietzschean “myth of immaculate perception”) the intentions and investments of a particular subject, forgetting that critical analyses of texts say less about the object of study (the various themes, characters, contexts—\textit{i.e.}, the text “itself”) than they do about the scholars discussing it.
Changing the Subject looks at just a few of the ways in which slave narratives and first-person novels about women of color resist critical appeals to “authentic” histories. The textual entree is The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself (1831). This story of a Caribbean slave who moves from place to place with her owners, joins the Moravian church, and finally “relates” her story in England under the patronage and guidance of the Anti-Slavery Society has received more critical attention in recent years after Henry Louis Gates Jr. “legitimized” it by including it in his volume The Classic Slave Narratives (1987, reprinted in 2000). This book seeks to put the 1831 narrative in conversation with novels in which slavery remains a pivot point for negotiations of women’s migrations, of diasporic identities that are in literal, geographical flux. Specifically, I offer readings of how the constructions of “gender” and “labor” come into relief—for both the protagonists and those in the communities they encounter—in such contexts of migration. These constructions and migrations suggest that the notion of “authenticity,” often used in feminist and postcolonial readings of women’s narratives, is too narrow a classification to be as productive in literary scholarship as has been commonly assumed.

APPROXIMATING THE AUTHENTIC

In scholarly and historical recuperation efforts, there is often the implicit suggestion that “They told it wrong. Here’s the real story.” As appealing as this logic is, the closest we can get to something “authentic” is to say that the stories and bodies we are trying to recuperate—in the case of the marker commemorating the unmarked slave graves—are “buried near this place.” We can only approximate. Thus, there is no “coherent past” as such, no “stable memory” that points to an authentic story of what “really” happened. Tara McPherson makes a similar claim in Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South regarding tourist sites:

[There is] . . . an overarching concern with the “authenticity” of history: each structures its historic account as a series of tangible locations, displays, or artifacts that truthfully and accurately represent History (albeit in air-conditioned comfort). History’s “realness” here depends on spectacular display and immersive experience, on structuring an encounter with “excellent relics” and “exceptional details.” There is an overwhelm-
ing emphasis on authenticity and accuracy as the keys to some “real”
History rather than an understanding that our only contemporary access
to history (as the actual past) is through the stories we tell about it. (101)

Indeed, the reconstruction of a subject is a new construction. Too many
times, a stable and linear history is confused for legitimacy. In making a
claim for a real story granted by experiential authority, scholars project
their own interests backwards, attempting to recreate marginalized identi-
ties in their own image and, by extension, granting “authentic” narratives
to stories that have not been told.

While academic conversations about identities and personal narra-
tives have made a habit of critiquing appeals to individual and collec-
tive essences, scholarly discussions of race and experience often remain
strangely invested in the notion of “authenticity.” Accessing the supposed
“truth” of a tale is an obsession of not only the reality-TV-drenched pop
culture but also the essentialism-wary communities within academia. As
J. Martin Favor notes in Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro
Renaissance, “the definition of blackness is constantly being invented,
policed, transgressed, and contested. When hip-hop artists remind them-

themselves and their audiences to ‘stay black’ or ‘keep it real,’ they are implic-
itly suggesting that there is a recognizable, repeatable, and agreed upon
thing that we might call black authenticity” (2). In postcolonial theory,
this emphasis on the authentic has taken shape in the ways in which cul-
tures are situated as cohesive wholes around which scholars and activists
might rally for progressive ends. Even when promoting a focus on creole
or hybrid identities and cultures, as Stuart Hall does in “Créolité and the
Process of Creolization,” there remains an identifiable geographical and
imaginative region called “the Caribbean” and, what’s more, a Caribbean
possessing of a distinctive character: “I would argue that the process of
creolization in this sense is what defines the distinctiveness of Caribbean
cultures: their ‘mixed’ character, their creative vibrancy, their complex,
troubled, unfinished relation to history, the prevalence in their narratives
of the themes of voyaging, exile and the unrequited trauma of violent
expropriation and separation” (29). Leaving alone the irony of suggest-
ing a “distinctive” mixed-ness or complexity, I find reason to pause at the
notion of the Caribbean as a cohesive and self-evident region possessing
a distinctive character in its own right. The Caribbean, as such, might be
instead viewed as a manufactured product of those discourses that iden-
tify “it” as a specific place or thing.
All of the texts that I discuss in this book have two thematic elements in common. First, each is a first-person account—a woman telling her own story about moving from one place to another. This framing structure is often what invites critical responses that emphasize the “authenticity” of the voice telling the story. Second, they all sustain a focus on migration as the reason for and motivation behind much of the events that drive the plot. Ultimately, these texts are about migration, as the changes in context force the characters to rethink signs like gender in particular ways. This second element complicates the first—or, at least, the simplistic readings that emphasize first-person vocality as a subversive end in itself. My own contribution to literary and migration theory, then, comes in an alternative to analyses that, in the name of legitimizing diasporic women’s voices, lend experiential authority to their narratives. Reading diaspora narratives through simultaneity discourse—that is, through an analysis of the mutually constitutive but ever-changing constructions of gender, race, and work—destabilizes authenticity as the ideal to which the women in these narratives aspire. My approach changes the subject of literary criticism about diasporic identities—or, more aptly, identifications—as it provides close readings of how these subjects in the narratives change.

Within the academy, attempts to “recuperate” or unearth a previously ignored past often take shape as descriptive data-driven analysis operating within a framework of standpoint theory. We will talk about this or that group of women, this or that diaspora, and so on, as a piece of sui generis data that is interesting or compelling in its own right. This not only (and inevitably) ignores particular communities—we cannot discuss everyone, after all—but also avoids more substantive analytical critique. More directly, such an approach reduces ideas like “race,” “blackness,” “diaspora,” “women,” and so forth to a single subject position. While “the personal is political,” identity theorists would do well not to engage autobiography solely on its face. The personal is only ever political. Thus, the subject or “person” of the personal comes into being as such only through the contextual (political) lenses used to discuss that subject. A more useful project involves asking questions about contexts and classifications—what kinds of stories are told by whom in what venues and why? Specifically, I problematize classifications of race and gender within culturally specific contexts that broaden the scope of inquiry regarding autobiography. As Frances Smith Foster notes, “Not only is autobiography the most democratic genre in American literature, it is also one of the oldest and offers
the best opportunity for examining a variety of particular confrontations of culture by particular people in particular settings” (26).

By traveling from one social and societal sphere to another where “race,” “gender,” “sexuality,” and “class” freight with them different meanings for the bodies to which they are ascribed, bodies in motion allow for an interrogation of the very categories that would label and essentialize them. Indeed, to talk about bodies as if they can somehow be removed or held in isolation from notions like “race,” “gender,” or “nation” is problematic. At issue here is how bodies in motion help to underscore the instability of these signs by presenting characters for whom categories simply do not work. They productively shift critical focus, making the “subject” not the women “themselves” but rather the discourses about them. What is more, they are examples of bodies becoming, and they signify not only spatial but also classificatory flux, always coming in and out of contact with other bodies and societal expectations or definitions of their own. As such, they represent the corporeal interpretation that Judith Butler articulates in *Undoing Gender*:

“[the] body is not . . . a static and accomplished fact, but as an aging process, a mode of becoming that, in becoming otherwise, exceeds the norm, reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone” (29, emphasis mine).

Elizabeth Grosz gives a similar reading in *Volatile Bodies*, suggesting, “Presence and absence are coupled in and to the same framework. In place of plenitude, being, fullness or self-identity is not lack, absence, rupture, but rather becoming” (165, emphasis mine).

An argument may be made that would see the academic quest for authenticity like any other search for “truth”—a mainstay that, while perhaps misguided, is not ultimately a cause for serious critical concern. As marginalized identities and diasporas become the focus of more scholarly discourses, however, the kind of attention we give them is itself a piece of data worth study. In other words, there is no black female body without discourse on black female bodies. Likewise, there is no African diaspora or narratives coming out of it so much as there are discourses on the African diaspora and its literary tradition. This book is an example of how we might look at the conversations of gendered and working bodies in migration as our object of study more than the ostensible bodies themselves. In examining the terms of engagement in identity theory, we might start to let go of the pressure of trying to get at and recuperate identities themselves (the authentic story of this or that woman of color)
and more productively discuss what is accessible in the realm of academic analysis: discourses on identity and on narratives by women of color.

DEFINING THE CATEGORIES

I am using terms in this study that are familiar in academic conversations about identities and diaspora: terms like “migration,” “gender,” and “labor.” It is worth spending time to explain how I define and deploy these terms in relation to the specific contexts of the narratives I discuss in the following pages. Among the various unifying threads of the narratives in my study, the most important are migration and a so-called diasporic community. The women in all of the narratives I analyze are travelers. They are moved variously by coercion, force, or choice. An easy and appealing scholarly move in the face of such foregrounded travel in diaspora narratives is to trace a sort of heroine’s journey as an epic quest for self-discovery and self-governance. Such critical tracking is not an uncompelling enterprise. Indeed, a central argument in the following chapters is that so much of what we often understand as “identity” does change—sometimes radically—with shifts in geographical (and it would follow: social, national, and economic) contexts. What require more careful attention than they have received, then, are the often-inexact mappings of geosocial diasporas and the critical assumption that clear and identifiable starting points mark them.

This book rejects such triumphalism and attempts more productively to approach texts about women, migration, labor, and identity in the office of a more thoroughgoing Diaspora Studies. The analyses in the following chapters attempt to resist both an easy synonymity and a reductive critical impulse to confine works categorized as “women’s narrative” to a closed trajectory. I am in complete agreement with Anne McClintock when she writes in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* as follows: “gender is not synonymous with women . . . feminism is as much about class, race, work and money as it is about sex. Indeed, one of the most valuable and enabling moves of recent feminist theory has been its insistence on the separation of sexuality and gender and the recognition that gender is as much an issue of masculinity as it is of femininity” (7). I would add to this claim, however, that masculinity and femininity are just two classifications within a spectrum of gendered categories. In the same way that class, race, work, and money (and
surely nation-state and migration) are constitutive elements of feminism, sexuality and gender are not so easily teased apart.

The ways that gender identity becomes performed and understood in the texts I analyze are not uncomplicated products of a steady-state exploitation leading indubitably to gifted empowerment. In fact the narratives are visible in a relational field of multiple practices. Masculinities and migrations are the matrices, and both of these are themselves contextualized by structures of race, work, and sexuality. Diaspora is a gender-complicated business. How womanhood is presented and manipulated in changing geographies is affected by the kinds of work women do—from place to different place, in physical contexts of labor that are ever-varying, comprising a diachronic panorama that yields prospects of cross-temporal theorization and more exacting accounts of diaspora.

In discussing “labor” I am talking about systems of exchange. Specifically, in the narratives I discuss I am interested not only in physical “work” but also in economies of classification. For example, along with the material ways that Mary Prince’s body is bought and sold in her narrative, “womanhood” serves as its own currency in negotiations between the respective legal endgames of Prince’s slave owner and proponents and members of the Anti-Slavery Society. “Womanhood” is thus complexly traded and given varying degrees of value governed by competing orders of trade. Gender and labor, one might say, are presented in the narratives I analyze as transient properties. They scramble across literally shifting sands, transmogrifying with social contexts that regulate both “womanhood” and “work.”

IDENTIFYING THE SUBJECT

The classifications of various identity signifiers become particularly beleaguered in the realm of autobiographical literature, where individuals are quickly and easily cast as archetypes. Frances Smith Foster makes this point in specific reference to slave narratives: “Though ostensibly individual life stories, these narratives create a protagonist who was not an individual but a type” (31). Discourse, then, constructs types—and, indeed, subjects—that then are read as naturally occurring states of being. Françoise Lionnet takes these questions about discourse and subjectivity into productive arenas by casting them in relation to cultural convergence in Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture. She cites Edouard Glissant from his Le Discours Antillais, wherein he suggests that
“This practice of cultural creolization [pratique de métissage] is not part of some vague humanism, which makes it permissible for us to become one with the other. It establishes a cross-cultural relationship, in an egalitarian and unprecedented way, among histories which we know today in the Caribbean are interrelated” (qtd. in Lionnet 4). For Glissant, as well as for Lionnet and many contemporary scholars of identity and diaspora, the domain of creolization (métissage for Lionnet) has “led to the recovery of occulted histories” (4). *Autobiographical Voices* is worth quoting at some length here:

In the effort to recover their unrecorded past, contemporary writers and critics have come to the realization that opacity and obscurity are necessarily the precious ingredients of all authentic communication . . . Since history and memory have to be reclaimed either in the absence of hard copy or in full acknowledgment of the ideological distortions that have colored whatever written documents and archival materials do exist, contemporary women writers especially have been interested in reappropriating the past so as to transform our understanding of ourselves. Their voices echo the submerged or repressed values of our cultures. (4–5)

For Lionnet, then, these writers are tapping into values that were suppressed by colonial rule. The cultural pasts and ancestries seemingly lie in wait for contemporary women writers to discover and use for their own purposes. This “reappropriating the past,” as Lionnet sees it, is the recuperative project of a communal paradigm.

Within literary studies, scholars offering critical readings of slave narratives often state their purpose using the familiar rhetoric of “recuperating” a “lost” story, unearthing the heretofore unknown, and so forth. Foster discusses the resulting connection that many readers make between black autobiography and slave narratives:

Scholars of ethnic studies and of women’s studies have been especially quick to exploit the treasures that the personal narratives’ combination of history and discourse provides. In black studies the research has focused upon the testimonies of slaves and ex-slaves concerning their lives in slavery and their determination to be free. However, the enormous popularity of the slave narrative, both in the nineteenth century and at the present time, has contributed to a perception of the Afro-American experience prior to the Civil War as a monolithic oppression, differing in detail, perhaps, for the house and the field slave, but generally contoured by daily
struggle for survival. The slave narrative becomes for most people the voice of our Afro-American ancestors. The slave narrative becomes synonymous with early Afro-American autobiography; and the prototypical autobiographer, then, is the slave. (26)

This phenomenon offers an inroad into scholarly dialogues about gender, race, and diaspora. The route that Changing the Subject takes is, thus, an analysis of first-person narratives and autobiography alongside one another. “Voice” and the issue of experiential authority (such that one might have a real story to recuperate after the fact) are laden with the politics of external and intersubjective discourse. As Houston Baker points out in The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism, “Egotism, self-consciousness, and a deep and abiding concern with the individual are at the forefront of American intellectual traditions,” and as such, the limits of autobiography as a narrative methodology and genre were not particularly concerning to white authors (27). “The question of autobiography’s adequacy,” Baker suggests, “entails questions directed not only toward the black voice in the South, but also toward the larger context of the American experiment as a whole” (27–28).

Complicating the “master narrative” by adding more voices and stories has been and continues to be an important pursuit. Also important, however, is not seeing the addition alone as an “add-narrative-and-stir” end in itself. What results in such projects is ideological imperialism in the name of progressive politics. The notion of a “self” that might speak, as Baker points out, is endlessly imbricated with issues of societal classifications of and expectations made on individual agency. Speaking specifically of the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Baker notes, “One can realize one’s humanity through ‘speech and concept,’ but one cannot distinguish the uniqueness of the self if the ‘avenue towards areas of the self’ excludes rigorously individualizing definitions of a human, black identity” (38). Thus, as conceptions of the subject change as she travels from place to place, so too might the subject of scholarly discussions that would describe “her” identity as a stable or self-evident end in itself.

There are certainly important exceptions to the critical trend that purports to recuperate a lost but stable subject. One of the most notable is the work of Hortense Spillers. With essays like her classic “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” accompanied by collections such as Black, White, and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture; Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition; and Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex and Nationality in the
Modern Text, Spillers’s writing is an example for those of us in fields of literary theory and cultural studies who want to engage seriously the blurry lines between history and text. The category of “black women” (or, broadly speaking, “gender” itself for that matter) is not at all an irreducible given for Spillers. She has offered vital critiques of the way that categories of black womanhood have come into relief through systems of slavery and plantation economics, and many scholars duly note the importance of her work to analyses of race, gender, and class. Nonetheless, too much work on race and identity has nodded at the heterogeneity of subjectivity without keeping close the lessons that thinkers like Spillers articulate. Namely, while emphases on notions like creolization and hybridity have become more and more the order of the day in academic circles, they nonetheless imply a self, a subject, to which the creolized hybridities refer. In this manner, creolization comes too often at the price of contingency, such that dominant spaces of power and white supremacy are not also understood as creolized, fluid, and subject to reinvention. We thus keep stable the very systems we seek to deconstruct by our unwillingness to frame all identities as contingent and not at all self-evident.

**MAPPING THE TEXT**

In relation to Prince’s History, subsequent chapters focus on Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*; and Maryse Condé’s *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*. These texts demonstrate that gender and labor mutually constitute, even as they struggle against, each other. Further, the narratives expose authenticity as a trope nostalgically appealing to the presumed origins of the women to whom the trope is attached and operating based on the social interests of those making the judgments of what counts as authentic and the social worlds those judgments help to create. The migrations and displacements in the texts that follow keep categories of gender and work within diasporic contexts in constant flux and degrees of interaction. To put it another way, the question this book answers is: “How might scholars of literary and identity studies change the subject of our analysis in relation to women of the African diaspora?” We would like to presume that identities exist apart from that secondary discourse, when in fact “they” are contingent upon it. What is at stake in recognizing this relationship? Self-reflexive scholarship that takes seriously our own roles in constructing the subject of analysis involves a reworking of the notion of “authenticity” not in
terms of its value or potential but in terms of its stasis. That is, a critical call for “authenticity” is not invalid as such, but it is quite limiting when taken as an end in itself.

Whether the context of their migrations is a traveling slave owner’s motion in the world, or a more self-actualizing and affective hope for a new beginning, the narratives I analyze literally navigate shifting senses of *place* as their female protagonists confront shifting structures of economic subjugation and racial and sexual disparity. True, these texts present visions of imagined refuge and return. Mary Prince dreams of a return to the Caribbean; Janie Crawford strolls confidently through the center of a Southern town oblivious to the porch talkers’ envious disdain at her return. Cocoa makes a point of returning to Willow Springs. In each case, however, the “home” or place of supposed *return* is not cast as something enduringly stable, or even uniquely identifiable. “Home” is endlessly contextualized as a site of multiple players and unceasingly shifting histories. Critiques suggesting that the narratives I analyze are products of some cosmogony of personal struggle and liberation—one marked by singularly knowable origins and signal heroic self-actualization—are, I think, misguided. They are undone by their commitment to a myth of discernible origins, usually conceived as *national*.

Ironically, these texts (and many others whose generic company they share) are held in great esteem by virtue of their inclusion in a canon of black women writers precisely as a result of the valorization of origins. And this valorization, rather than enlivening the interpretive and theoretical fields, tends toward intellectual rigor mortis. The texts are categorically “conserved” within the specific parameters of national, racial, and gender narratives with prescribed origins and ends. Their diasporic complexity is subsumed by a low-voltage critical impulse to conform them to a closed trajectory: oppression’s *origin*, and its triumphal conquest by a radiant community of self-empowered women warriors. More productive is a reading that emphasizes the ways in which subjectivities change as women move from place to place. Critically foregrounding how these subjects change, I find quickly apparent a need to change the subject of our discourse in relation to women and African diasporas.

An easy point of access for such a project may be thought to lie in texts that deal with the Great Migration. Certainly the mass exodus out of the South is a key moment for those who wish to analyze migration within the African diaspora. Farah Jasmine Griffin’s “Who Set You Flowin’?*: The African-American Migration Narrative* is a compelling example of the fine work being done in this genre. For this specific project, however, I
am interested in travel that is not focused in one specific direction. Tha-
dious Davis addresses slavery in relation to constructions of “the South”
as a region and “Southern identity” in her essay “Reclaiming the South.”
She suggests that, as signifiers, “slavery” and “slave-economy” allowed
for “cultural outsiders to define the region and for cultural insiders to jus-
tify both self-perception and social order” (58). In Davis’s view, differ-
ence rather than diversity became the issue in describing the South. “The
result,” she notes, “has been curious: whites in the South became simply
‘southerners’ without a racial designation, but blacks in the South became
simply ‘blacks’ without a regional designation” (58). Rather than escap-
ing from an oppressive South and heading to an opportunistic North,
the women in the texts I discuss find themselves within complex webs of
coercion, retreat, escape, and return.  I am suggesting, then, a focus on
the moves that the narrative subjects make not only geographically but
also socially and politically. In such moves that change the classificatory
rubrics of gender, race, and work, the North and South do not represent
isolated spaces of freedom and oppression.

STARTING THE JOURNEY

In chapter 1, “Sites of Authentication: Migration and Subjectivity in The
History of Mary Prince,” I read Mary Prince’s History as a work that sub-
verts a singular quest for authenticity. Specifically, I focus on Prince as a
less stable figure whose text is inevitably freighted with nineteenth-century
British cultural ideologies and persuasions. Her story, while certainly only
one of many slave narratives that arose out of European colonial expa-
sion in the Caribbean, is distinctive not because of an isolated series of
events unfamiliar to other slaves (though certainly her specific set of cir-
cumstances should not be too quickly universalized) or because of some
special, essential quality to what many read as Prince’s own “voice”
(though her own specific ethos should not be undermined by a reading
of Prince as a would-be representative for the whole of nineteenth-cen-
tury enslaved subjects). Rather, her narrative deserves more attention
because of how it manages to subvert the charges made for and against
her “authenticity” as a woman of a certain kind of character—both by
her editor and former owner, and by many modern scholars who continue
to make similar appeals to her “authentic” and universalizing voice.

Prince’s History as an analytical framework is compelling specifically
because the narrative encourages critical attention to be not on “her”
text, implicated in and produced by a series of contextual particularities as she is, but rather on the interests with which we as readers and critics might approach her text. The History calls attention to our roles as readers. In her role as “speaker,” that is, as author of her own experiences, Prince remains nonetheless ambiguous; she is out of her master’s house but working in her patron’s, she is free in England but still enslaved in Antigua, she is an exotic outsider as well as a respectable British subject. The triangulation of gendered respectability, work, and migration that is present in her narrative offers a productive lens through which to approach twentieth-century novels that present the same triangulation in different genres. In making the History relatable to more recent texts, I hope to suggest an approach that ceases to view the slave narrative as exceptional. If we dislodge it from a “special” space, we can find it useful in more expansive dialogues on narrative, genre, identity, and migration. Explaining her own project which examines texts from Augustine and Nietzsche alongside twentieth-century women writers, Lionnet encourages readings of “the interconnectedness of . . . various traditions,” as such a practice “would teach us far more about the status and function of our own subject positions in the world” (Autobiographical 7). The result of this approach, as she sees it, is liberating: “the renewed connections to the past can emancipate us, provided they are used to elaborate empowering myths for living in the present and for affirming our belief in the future” (7). Thus, her focus is on what kind of journey various authors are on and what kind of pasts they unearth. In reference to the autobiographies of Hurston and Condé, Lionnet suggests that, for these writers, “writing is an unrelenting search for a different past, to be exhumed from the rubble of patriarchal and racist obfuscations” (21). My own contribution to readings of first-person narratives is one that disavows a return to a clear or identifiable past as a possible endgame in the first place.

Chapter 2, “‘Different with Every Shore’: Women, Workers, and the Transatlantic South in Their Eyes Were Watching God,” examines the gender and labor expectations projected by both the communities in and critical responses to Hurston’s novel. Slave histories and diasporic Caribbean workers make significant appearances in Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), a novel that finds a strong textual parallel in Mary Prince’s narrative. Once again, a woman of the African diaspora must navigate social impositions and ideologies of gender and work that change as she moves from place to place. What initially seems to be solely the personal quest for liberation and autonomy is in
fact a much more layered narrative that rejects a single understanding of an “authentic” experiential tale.

Hurston’s framing of Janie’s story with its transference to Pheoby, even as she aims to protect that same story, is a key part of what makes an understanding of Janie as an “authentic” feminist hero a faulty identification. I see the impossibility of such a label, far from being a failure of Hurston’s vision, as exactly what allows Janie’s story to be so instructive and useful for Pheoby and for scholars of literary criticism. Even though the tale is coming from Janie’s own mouth, it necessarily moves through various filters in its relation to Pheoby. As Janie externalizes her memory, she, of course, makes choices about what details to include and exclude, how long to linger on this or that description of her experience. It is, necessarily, an edited thing that serves her interests. The degrees of separation that exist between the narrator and her journey are revealed through the act of narration. Pheoby, meanwhile, serves as a framing filter—the receptive audience to Barthes’s dead author. In this way, “Janie,” then, is just as much a text as anything else, and just as much a construction.

Significantly, Janie ends her tale with the difficult knowledge that comes with migration: “you got tuh go there tuh know there” (192). Her story arises out of her own displacement, and it ends likewise in flux. Like with Mary Prince, a reading of the migrations within Their Eyes reveals slippages in the constructions of gender and labor that leave both unstable instead of fixed or categorical. All of the novels that I discuss in this project can be described in the way that Gordon E. Thompson characterizes Their Eyes when he suggests that the text “can be thought of as a ‘fictionalized autobiography’” (741). In this way, they offer constructive readings to accompany a discussion of Mary Prince’s slave narrative, an “autobiography” nonetheless intercepted in many instances by editorial revisions. Indeed, Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes is a key—perhaps unavoidable—text to consider when looking at the implications of migration for the signs of gender and labor or at the convergences of the Caribbean and a transatlantic American South. It is also an important text in its presentation of African American travel patterns that are not as well known or as well documented as the Great Migration.

Chapter 3, “Familiar Ground: The Rhetoric of ‘Realness’ in Mama Day,” likewise reads the South as an extension to and from the wider Atlantic, with an analysis of the migrations and displacements in Gloria Naylor’s Mama Day. Set on the island Willow Springs off the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina, Mama Day tells a story of a place, which,
in turn, offers the story of a community. Like in Prince’s *History* and Hurston’s *Their Eyes*, women are telling their own stories, though not attempting to prove an “authentic” voice.

Early on, Naylor makes very clear that her agenda has little to do with establishing an accurate historical account: “It ain’t about right or wrong, truth or lies; it’s about a slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both them words, soon as you cross over here from beyond the bridge” (3). Through textual manipulations of history and memory, Naylor engages the story of a nineteenth-century slave woman. While *The History of Mary Prince* receives editorial and legal arguments for and against its textual veracity, the history of Sapphira Wade (whose name remains unknown to protagonist Miranda and the rest of Willow Springs for much of the book) is shaped by the island community that transmits her story orally. The summary of *Mama Day* on the back cover describes it as “Timeless yet indelibly authentic”; however, Naylor sustains a critique of the very rhetoric of “realness” that she includes. This rhetoric takes different shapes in accordance with geographical context—we hear interpretations of “realness” from George and Cocoa in New York, for example, which begin to change once they arrive in Willow Springs. Naylor’s articulation and simultaneous critique of the “real” is key to the subversion of “authenticity” that runs throughout the novel. Such subversion shapes the way we read the figure of Sapphira and the forces at work in Willow Springs, to name just two important examples. Like *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Mama Day* presents the South as a space where ideologies and identities are both constructed and destabilized. While this concurrent construction and destabilization can be said to be true of all places, such ambivalence is particularly key to a study of the transnational South, where multiple and diverse histories of power and oppression converge.

Chapter 4, “‘Recuperating’ the Subject in *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*,” brings the textual framework back to the Caribbean and back to a genre of slave narrative with a revision of the story surrounding Tituba, the slave who was the third person to be accused of witchcraft during the 1692–93 Salem witch trials. Tituba presents a particularly noteworthy figure to study alongside Mary Prince’s *History*. Like Mary Prince’s narrative, which was subjected to ideological and editorial revision depending on who was characterizing Prince, the details of Tituba’s story are fodder for historical and anthropological debate. She thus quite literally represents the sort of rejection of sociohistorical and literary “authenticity” that I trace throughout this book. Even her race remains in ques-
tion. Condé sets her squarely within Barbados, even as the self-identifying title allows Salem to lay at least a contextual claim to her. Meanwhile, scholars like Elaine Breslaw specifically suggest she was an Arawak Indian, and other historical accounts refer to her as a “Spanish Indian” (which then would have set her place of origin in the very contexts of Their Eyes and Mama Day: Florida, Georgia, and the Carolinas). With details about her life that are less than specific, I, Tituba is an attempt to resituate and recuperate a narrative that was never able to be written. Accordingly, the many critical appeals to the “authentic voice” that Tituba exercises within the text are at best misplaced. Combining fiction and first-person slave account, Condé offers Tituba’s story as something of a mock slave narrative. As such, it resonates with the major strands of slavery, migration, labor, and oppression found in Mary Prince’s account. It also presents Tituba’s story through an authorial lens that plays a role not so entirely dissimilar to that of Mary Prince’s amanuensis, Susanna Strickland. Once again, we are able to see authorial agendas and emphases subtly manipulating the narrative that aims to recuperate a woman’s experience. While Mary Prince’s narrative is a traditional example of the slave narrative genre, written as a contemporary text of Afro-Caribbean slave experiences, Condé’s is a “fictionalized” exercise in telling a similar story. The migrations and displacements in each narrative shape the constructions of gender and labor identity. In the case of Tituba, migration frames her thoughts on womanhood, desire, and her “work” as an alleged witch.

The conclusion, “Writing Women across the African Diaspora,” offers analysis on how “writing women” is often a practice of “righting women.” As narratives purport to bring their stories into the analytical light of day, an emphasis comes with getting the story right and doing right by “the woman herself.” Insistence on “the real story” of “the real woman” implicitly suggests a “Mary Prince” or a “Zora Neale Hurston” existing outside the criticism and analysis about her—a claim I find well-intentioned but ultimately naïve. It evades the responsibility that scholars have in creating our own narratives and speaking “the truth” about this or that author or text into existence. By this, I do not mean to suggest an exceptional creative omnipotence for academicians. I only mean to draw our attention to the simple fact that discourse—endlessly mediated and politicized and contingent—is all we have when approaching the ostensible real story about someone or something. There is, additionally, another mode of “rightness” working here. Even as the narratives I discuss subvert efforts at identifying authenticity, they nonetheless conserve
a certain notion of gender and the self and its relations to others, making these texts ironically more conservative than they might appear. While I will not go as far as to call them narratives from the political right (not because I do not think that that case cannot be made but simply because it is outside of my primary interest in this project), I emphatically reject the notion that these texts herald categorical feminist and racial progressivism. The hybrid or creolized constitution of the identities narrativized is not a reformist or progressive end in itself and does not necessarily do the work that critics might want it to on its own. Suggesting otherwise amounts merely to rhetorical radicalism that nonetheless conserves a reliance on a stable subject. I look briefly to an example in the conclusion that illuminates this vein of inquiry in relation to women and diaspora—from two scholars writing on recently uncovered work by Zora Neale Hurston.

*Changing the Subject* suggests that the shifting geographical and social locations of the women in these texts are not geographical and social transitions alone. They uncover fluctuating dynamics of gender performance and class identifications that expose the notion of an authentic narrative as an impossible endgame. Even when scholarly efforts employ rhetoric of creolization and hybridity, there are too often thought to be bodies and subjects behind the descriptive classifications we apply to them. What I hope to show in this book, however, is that there is no subject sans those classifications, and that we would be well served to talk about the scholarly moves that create the conditions/interests for such labels. Katharyne Mitchell’s “Different Diasporas and the Hype of Hybridity” is likewise skeptical of scholarly projects that tout hybridity as its own progressive strategy. Interestingly, Mitchell is a professor of geography, and the important moves she makes are not ones that have necessarily become part of identity theory, where there is something more at stake in retaining a stable subject even in the focus on hybridity. However, while her case studies in the essay are located in Hong Kong and Vancouver and are presented through a specific methodology vis-à-vis geographical analysis (the essay was originally published in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*), her critique of hybridity discourse is instructive for identity theories. She discusses her project as follows: “Without denying the potential for resistance, I critique the notion that the diasporic, the liminal and the hybrid can always be equated with a politically progressive agenda” inasmuch as “liminal and partial sites can be used for the purposes of capital accumulation.
quite as effectively as for the purposes of intervention in hegemonic narratives of race and nation” (258). “The overuse of abstract metaphors,” Mitchell suggests, “often leads to thorny problems of fetishization”: “As concepts such as hybridity become disarticulated from the historically shaped political and economic relations in which identities and narratives of nation unfold, they take on a life and trajectory of their own making” (258).

Thus, this book is meant to open several discussions or considerations. It asks, for example, about what role slave narratives might be able to play in and what they might offer to literary criticism surrounding more recent—specifically twentieth-century—novels. Too often, slave narratives are housed in an isolated realm of literary and historical analysis, as if they speak solely to the authentically experiential, without any editorial intervention or subterfuge. One aim of this book is to bring slave narratives into a more active exchange and conversation with other literary genres that do not make the same appeals to “truth” but that continue to frame and rework some of the very issues that a text like Prince’s navigates. The chapters are bookended with texts that arise out of the Caribbean—Prince’s History and Condé’s so-called neo-slave narrative I, Tituba, both of which present women telling their stories within the context of enslavement. Couched between them are examinations of Hurston’s Their Eyes and Naylor’s Mama Day, where slavery remains central in the manufacturing of race, womanhood, and work. The chapters on Their Eyes Were Watching God and Mama Day look at the particular case study of the cultural convergences between the Caribbean and the South. Expanding the South beyond American borders creates opportunities for complicating notions like a woman’s work, as Their Eyes reveals, and southern womanhood, in the case of Mama Day. Violence, time, and trauma interrupt the attempt to get the story right, as scholars seek to uncover, only to bury again differently, the tortured pasts of their subjects.

Uncomplicated and ascribed cosmogenies that tend to accompany discourses on diaspora often appeal to authenticity: a woman’s voice that is both home origin and fecund place of communal redemption. But surely “diaspora” as it is inferable from the texts I analyze in the following pages is not bound by such honorifics. Like all else in Diaspora Studies, “authenticity” is a shifty classification that must be subjected to critique and inquiry for its various significations. I hope to productively respond to the irony often present in scholarship that discusses diasporas
in relation to origins, hybridity, and, of course, authenticity. My goal is to rigorously follow the migratory and laboring course of the narratives and narrators I analyze and arrive at critical and theoretical protocols that provide a more capacious understanding of the registers of identification surrounding African diasporas. In so doing, I offer a change of “subject” in studies of narrative and diasporic subjectivity.