

5-3-2017

The Slaves' Devil: The Parallel between Experiences of Slavery and Christian Conversion

Brandon Render

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/rs_theses

Recommended Citation

Render, Brandon, "The Slaves' Devil: The Parallel between Experiences of Slavery and Christian Conversion." Thesis, Georgia State University, 2017.

https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/rs_theses/54

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Religious Studies at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religious Studies Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gsu.edu.

THE SLAVES' DEVIL: THE PARALLEL BETWEEN EXPERIENCES OF SLAVERY AND
CHRISTIAN CONVERSION

by

BRANDON RENDER

Under the Direction of Brett Esaki Slominski, PhD

ABSTRACT

An evil spiritual being, often called the devil, is an antagonist in several religious traditions. The religious ideology among enslaved Africans in America allowed for the devil to play an important, and sometimes ambiguous, role in their lives. Through the examination of conversion narratives, this research intends to argue that their conversion experiences are heavily impacted by and mirrored the reality of slavery. Therefore, the enslaved people's accounts of the devil are influenced by the power and honor attributed to the institution of slavery. The data from gathered from the narratives will be interpreted through a poststructuralist lens of power and honor. Poststructuralist theories of power and honor will reveal the significance of the devil in conversion narratives and unearth an African American understanding of the devil that is created and sustained by the systems of power and honor in American Slavery.

INDEX WORDS: Slave narratives, Devil, Power, Honor, Slavery, Poststructuralism

THE SLAVES' DEVIL: THE PARALLEL BETWEEN EXPERIENCES OF SLAVERY AND
CHRISTIAN CONVERSION

by

BRANDON RENDER

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2017

Copyright by
Brandon Morris Render
2017

THE SLAVES' DEVIL: THE PARALLEL BETWEEN EXPERIENCES OF SLAVERY AND
CHRISTIAN CONVERSION

by

BRANDON RENDER

Committee Chair: Brett Esaki Slominski

Committee: Monique Moultrie

Makungu Akinyela

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

May 2017

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1	Theoretical Introduction	2
2	HISTORICAL CONTEXT	4
2.1	The Devil.....	4
2.2	Conversion.....	7
2.3	Honor	9
2.4	Slave Narratives	11
3	THE DEVIL IN CONVERSION NARRATIVES	14
3.1	Friday Jones	14
3.2	Noah Davis.....	16
3.3	Thomas L. Johnson.....	18
3.4	Mary F. McCray	20
3.5	Jarena Lee.....	22
3.6	God Struck Me Dead Narratives.....	25
4	ANALYSIS	27
5	CONCLUSION	34
	REFERENCES.....	37
5.1	Primary Sources.....	38

1 INTRODUCTION

Slavery's ability to touch every facet of slave life made its influence strong and impactful. Specifically, religion in the slave community was directly shaped by the experience of the institution of slavery. For slaves that converted to Christianity, the Christian message of salvation afforded them the very thing deprived of them, freedom. While this freedom was only found in their religious world, the desire for freedom is derived from their physical status as slaves. Christian slaves, through the use of double meaning, blurred the lines between biblical characters and concepts and actual people and institutions present in the slave's life. Interpreting the use of the biblical figure, the devil, in the slave narrative *The Slave Who Joined The Yanks*, Yolanda Pierce posits, "it is clear here that the 'devil' is not just a reference to the spiritual bondage of Satan, but to the physical bondage he experiences under a human devil."¹ Undergirding Pierce's evaluation is the notion of slavery acting as a source for the creation of the slave's religious world. In essence, slaves used their experiences of slavery to create a religious world that mirrored their present reality.

In taking a closer look at how enslaved Africans viewed the devil, there was not complete agreement that the devil functioned as a maleficent spiritual being whose role is to prevent humanity from receiving Christian salvation. Rather, enslaved Africans held a variety of interpretations of the devil. In some instances, the devil was not looked upon as purely evil, rather the image of the devil was syncretized with images of trickster deities in African Traditional Religions. However, one of the more common interpretations harkens back to Pierce's understanding of the devil. Seeing the devil through a dual lens allowed many enslaved Africans to conclude that the devil, though a real and often frightening spiritual being, is

¹ Yolanda Pierce, *Hell Without Fires: Slavery, Christianity, and the Antebellum Spiritual Narrative* (Miami: University Press of Florida), 4.

symbolic for the institution of slavery. This duality is most present in documented conversion experiences of slaves and former slaves. With the aid of the slave narratives of Jarena Lee, Friday Jones, Mary McCray, Thomas L. Johnson, Noah Davis, and three slave narratives from the *God Struck Me Dead* collection, this research, in a broad sense, contends that conversion experiences of enslaved people were heavily impacted by and mirrored their reality as slaves. More specifically, this research will use a poststructuralist lens of power and honor to display an African American understanding of the devil that is created and sustained by the systems of power and honor in American Slavery.

1.1 Theoretical Introduction

The concept of power and honor is inescapable when examining narratives of slaves and former slaves. Specifically, the issue of power is brought to the surface by the presence of social stratification in eighteenth and nineteenth century American societies. With the establishment of a social hierarchy that refuses to place value on black bodies, slaves of African descent began to express the necessity for the acquisition of power. One of the ways in which they gained power is through religion. In understanding their despondent position as the property of America's white community, religion provided the community of enslaved Africans with fundamental needs, such as dignity and power, that the institution of slavery refused to them. Whether Christianity, Islam, African Traditional Religion, or a syncretization of religious practices, religion gave the slave community power to dictate, create, and sustain their religious worlds. While religion provided them with this power to create, slavery still stood as a major influence on the creation of their religious worlds. One approach to understand these religious world, in *Masculine Domination*, Pierre Bourdieu theorizes that society is a symbolic system, thus every facet of society is a replication of the symbols present in society. Bourdieu writes, "the social

order functions as an immense symbolic machine tending to ratify the masculine domination on which it is founded.”² In applying Pierre Bourdieu’s theory, the social dominance of the white body over the black body influences the way a slave of African descent perceives the world. As a result, their perception of the physical world influences the creation of a religious world. Therefore, the reality of slavery became a catalyst behind the presence of a power struggle between the slave and the devil in slave narratives written by slaves and former slaves.

Similar to images of power, slavery is responsible for the symbol of honor in conversion narratives. The notion of honor is important, because honor is a symbol of prestige and nobility. The Antebellum South held this ideal in the highest esteem. Honor in southern society signified respect and dignity. In *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson uses timocracy in connection with honor to show that the owning of slaves attributed to the creation of a highly regarded reputation for slave owners. Therefore, in understanding honor in the context of ownership, honor in conversion narratives is depicted as being desired by both the Christian god and the devil. Both characters are fighting for a symbolic representation of honor that is derived from the slave experience.

Honor, as a theoretical lens, provides insights into how slaves understand their slave condition and how that condition impacts the formation of their community. If the slave experience in America, especially the Antebellum South, taught them that honor is an important character trait and that honor is gained by ownership, then it is not a coincidence that Christian slaves understood their conversion in terms of ownership and property. A major theme present in many conversion narratives is the idea of “belonging” to god or the devil. The conversion narratives often reflect the “Pauline notion of slavery...that one is either a slave to sin or a slave

² Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 9.

to righteousness, but every person has a spiritual ‘master’ above him.”³ While acknowledging that the slave has the power of choice, which is significant, in Christianity, the slave’s choice of being a servant of god or of the devil demonstrates that notion of ownership present in narratives. Therefore, honor, which is fused to ownership in slavery, is given to the spiritual owner of the slave. This idea leads to the understanding that when the slave fails to convert, then the slave, by default, is in service of the devil. The devil, in the mind of the Christian enslaved person, gains honor when conversion to Christianity is impeded.

2 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

2.1 The Devil

Before applying the theoretical lens to the narratives, it is necessary to understand the social and religious environment of the Antebellum South in which the narratives were written. The devil, often portrayed as an evil spiritual being, is an antagonist in several religious traditions. The concept of the devil is popularized by its usage in the Abrahamic faiths. Additionally, the function of the devil can be different depending on the religious practice. In the American context, the devil is commonly understood through a Protestant Christian lens. The Protestant devil is particularly important for this project due to the influence of Protestantism among enslaved Africans. In looking at a wider history, the devil is an extremely popular figure. Past and contemporary pop culture is littered with references to the devil. Scholars and Christian theologians give significant attention to the devil when trying to explain and create rationales for evil. For Christian slaves, what makes the devil significant is not its popularity, rather it is the perception that the devil plays the role of the villain in the Christian religious world. With God

³ Yolanda Pierce, *Hell Without Fires*, 20.

being the hero figure, the devil was fashioned as the antagonist to the Christian god and this god's creation.

Functioning as a nemesis, the devil in Protestant Christianity finds its purpose in the desire to prevent God and humanity from being reconciled. Protestant theology contends that the devil was a former angel and that "evil originated in heaven before it did on earth. Evil was born in the breast of an archangel in the presence of God. This is a tremendous mystery, but it is, nonetheless, the essence of Christian teaching on the source of evil."⁴ Seeing the devil as the progenitor of evil gives the devil incredible power in the mind of Protestant Christians. Therefore, the devil becomes the reason behind the occurrence of tragedies and misfortunes. For the Protestant Christian, the devil is an entity that should be feared and avoided when possible.

However, taking deeper examination of the role the devil plays in Protestant Christianity, Philip C. Almond contends that "the Christian story cannot be told without the devil. . . .He plays, next to God himself, the most important part . . . yet this is a story that is deeply paradoxical. The Devil is God's most implacable enemy and beyond God's control...yet he is also God's faithful servant, acting only at God's command, or at least with his endorsement. The Devil literally and metaphorically personifies the paradox at the heart of Christian theism."⁵ Therefore, the devil's existence in Protestant Christianity challenges either God's omnipotence or omnibenevolence. Looking at their relationship with an objective eye, God is hindered and possibly flawed by the presence of the devil. While this complex observation may not be adopted fully Antebellum Protestant Christians, the understanding of the devil, the creator of sin and evil, as an enemy to God and the Christian is important when attempting to understand the religious environment that engulfs the slave community.

⁴ Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology: In One Volume*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2011), 743.

⁵ Philip C. Almond, *The Devil: A New Biography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), xv.

In addition to common Protestant interpretations, within the community of enslaved Africans existed similar and divergent interpretations of the devil. The remnants of African Traditional Religions influence on the devil is articulated among select members of the community of enslaved Africans. For those slaves who had access to and did not reject African religious beliefs, the devil took on a different existential form. In many African Traditional Religions, a good and evil binary did not exist. In Christianity, there is a clear delineation between who and what is good and who and what is bad. However, in Africa, good and evil do not work in opposition but work together to bring balance. For African gods that survived the voyage to the “New World,” they often syncretized Christian characters, such as the apostles and saints.

Most of the syncretization occurred with slaves who adopted Catholicism, however, in theory, Protestant Christianity was flexible enough for slaves to intermix African deities with the most prominent Christian characters, such as God and the devil. In the Yoruba tradition, the deity Eshu is the most common deity linked to the devil. Robert Farris Thompson’s examination of African and African American Art further reveals a connection between Eshu and the devil. Describing artwork that depicts the symbol Eshu, Thompson states, “Even Satan was identified with a Yoruba deity, Eshu . . . thus the ‘signatures’ of Eshu, associated with the crossroads, sudden changes of fortune, and ‘devilish,’ . . . are circular blazons in which Satan’s pitchfork, a pinwheel sign of sudden change and motion, a crossroads like sign, and additional mystic points are recombined.”⁶ Thompson goes to explain that turning the symbol in a different direction is the indicator of whether Eshu will bring the slave a favorable outcome or an unfavorable

⁶Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983), 114.

outcome.⁷ Unlike the wholly evil Protestant devil, Eshu was described as bringing both good and bad fortunes. Thus, enslaved Africans who combined the African god Eshu with the devil saw the devil as spiritual that has the possibility of doing good. Ultimately, it is African Traditional Religions and Protestant Christianity that directly influence how the community of enslaved Africans perceived the devil.

2.2 Conversion

To have a more complete understanding of how the devil functions in the conversion stories, a wider of understanding of conversion practices in the slave community is necessary. During the early portion of African enslavement in the lands of present-day America, both the slave community and the institution of slavery were not receptive to slaves converting to Christianity. For these enslaved Africans, conversion threatened “the core of traditional [African] cosmology, including the belief in a supreme being and a multiplicity of lesser spirits and an after-world inhabited by revered ancestors.”⁸ For the institution of slavery, slave owners were officially in opposition “to the religious instruction of their slaves.”⁹ Therefore, it is not until the First Great Awakening that enslaved persons of African descent began to convert in significant numbers. As a result of the Second Great Awakening, conversion among the enslaved African community further increased. Alongside conversion, the Second Great Awakening allowed for the rise of black itinerant preachers, including black female preachers. Two of the female narrators discussed in this project functioned as preachers during and after the Second Great Awakening. The religious fervor that was brought forth from these periods of revival changed the way in which several enslaved persons viewed both Christianity and their African past.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Sylvia R. Fry, “Shaking the Dry Bones: The Dialectic of Conversion” in *Black White Cultural Interaction in the Antebellum South* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 24.

⁹ Ibid.

Love Henry Welchel Jr. makes the observation that despite the spiritual freedom found in Christianity, conversion contributed to the elimination of the slave's African heritage. He claims, "rarely recognized is the fact that white denominations offering instruction in Christianity contributed to the process of eradicating traditional African beliefs and practices."¹⁰ In losing beliefs such as the worship of African deities and ancestors, it is possible that the image of the devil, among converting slaves, becomes less like Eshu and more similar to the white Protestant image of the devil.

The acceptance of slaves converting on the part of white slave owners is due in large part to the dissemination of pro-slavery religious instruction on slave plantations. In the Antebellum era, conversion was thought to help aid in the process of creating a model slave. The belief surfaced among slave owners that "Jesus could transform the life of a 'pure African' was proof that Christianity could make a 'bad nigger' good" became incentive for slave owners to encourage slaves to convert to Christianity.¹¹ For the enslaved persons who adopted the model slave mentality, theologian Riggins Earl Jr. suggests that "slaves were expected to understand themselves as God's innocent sufferers of history, to be as sheep to the slaughter, enduring the cross and despising the shame. . . . The primary objective of such a prescriptive ethic was to bind the slave to the will of the master in the name of Jesus Christ."¹²

However, conversion in the eyes of most slaves was not interpreted as divine approval for their physical bondage. Rather, conversion provided the enslaved person with power and equality. While not being able to break the chains of their physical enslavement, conversion

¹⁰ Love Henry Welchel Jr., *Hell Without Fire: Conversion in Slave Religion* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 35.

¹¹ Riggins R. Earl Jr., *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self and Community in the Slave Mind* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee, 2003), 36.

¹² *Ibid*, 38.

equipped the slaves with the power to break the chains of their spiritual enslavement. The slave had the choice to dictate where he or she would spend eternity serving God in heaven or serving the devil in hell. For enslaved persons, the partial agency to determine one's future was extremely attractive. Additionally, conversion equalized, on the spiritual level, the relationship between black and white people. Pierce makes note that conversion forces the concept of "absolute human lordship [to] dissolve."¹³ The idea of human lordship dissolves, because the slave is no longer the subject of the slave owner. Rather, the slave and slaver owner are subjects to the same god. Spiritually, conversion eradicates the racial hierarchy, and it attributes humanity to both the black and white body. Eventually the Christian faith of African slaves encouraged the slave community not to be satisfied with power and equality in spiritual matters, and it instilled religious arguments for protesting against the Institution of Slavery.

2.3 Honor

Similar to conversion, notions of honor were added to the community of enslaved Africans via their experiences of slavery. In the conversion stories examined in this paper, honor is an underlining theme. Honor is a concept that is present in numerous human societies. It is often defined as respect, dignity, or a positive reputation within a social community. In the context of the Antebellum South, honor was different from acting honorable. Honor was not chiefly about action, rather it centered on a special social status bestowed upon an individual by his or her community that demonstrates the individual's validation in the community. In the Antebellum South, honor was vital to the complex relationship shared between white men and the Institution of Slavery. Honor can only be had by those who possessed humanity. Orlando Patterson brings to light that "there have been slaves who have been honored or whose acts have

¹³ Yolanda Pierce, *Hell Without Fires*, 20.

been considered honorable, yet who remained despised as persons without honor.”¹⁴ By denying the black body humanity, white slave owners were able to deny African slaves the ability to have honor. Additionally, Patterson makes the observation that, in the Antebellum South, honor is inseparable from its timocracy.

The requirement to own property barred the slave from being acknowledged with honor. However, for white males, honor could be granted by the owning of the black body. Having lordship over a human, allowed the white community to heap upon the slave owner southern ideals of masculinity, respect, and pride. The slave owner was seen as the perfect model for what the southern man aspires to be. Being at the top of the social hierarchy in the Antebellum South, the slave owner dictated not only how the black body was used, but the slave owner was also able, as a result of his nobility, to influence the social-political climate of the Antebellum South.

In contrast to the slave owner, the slave acts as the means by which the slave owner gained honor. The honor attributed to the slave owner is not simply had by merely owning the slave or the economic advances he may gain through slave labor. The slave owner receives his honor by being able to remind slaves that they are dishonorable. Otherwise stated, honor came from adopting a position of inferiority and acknowledging that only white skin can have honor. Patterson furthers this notion by arguing, “what was the real sense of honor held by the master, its denial to the slave, its enhancement through the degradation of the slave, and possibly the slave’s own feeling of being dishonored and degraded.”¹⁵ Thus, human degradation and honor shaming became the source of the slave master’s honor.

¹⁴ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 80.

¹⁵Ibid, 96.

The context through which the enslaved person learned of American honor was through the experience of enslavement. As a result of enslaved Africans being told they lacked honor, negative self-images crept into the slave community. The most notable of these self-images was the argument that the black body was created by the devil. Earl Jr. contends, “there is evidence that African Americans struggled with the question of whether the blackness of their bodies was the creation of the devil . . . they believed that God was the Creator of the white race . . . the black body was the handiwork of Satan. It was their belief that this making of a human being . . . was the sin for which the devil . . . was flung from heaven.”¹⁶ The belief that the black body was made from the devil demonstrates that the black body, in the Antebellum South, was seen as abhorrent. Thus, the black body’s connection with the devil prevented it from being a vessel that could receive honor. Additionally, this negative self-image deepens the understanding of the devil in the Antebellum South, and it adds to a layer of complexity to the relationship between the slave community and the devil. However, other members of the community of enslaved Africans contested these negative self-image. They believed the black body was not inherently evil, and they posited that Christianity gave enslaved Africans the opportunity to refute any negative perspectives of the black body.

2.4 Slave Narratives

To fully grasp the understanding of the devil in conversion stories it is necessary to understand the importance and construction of slave narratives. The conversion stories that this project explores are a part of larger collection of slave literature most commonly known as slave narratives. It is important to note that most narratives were not written for a black audience. With the rise of abolitionism in the nineteenth century came the desire to use slave narratives as a way

¹⁶ Riggins R. Earl Jr., *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs*, 51.

to justify, to promote, and to support the abolition movement. While these narratives do attempt to depict the life of slaves, there were advantages and disadvantages of using slave narratives to paint an accurate historical picture. A common critique of many slave narratives, such as Work Projects Administration's (WPA) *The American Slave* collection, is the reliability of the information provided in the narrative. For several narratives, the date in which they were written becomes an issue for reliability. For the WPA's *The American Slave*, narratives were written based on interviews collected during the 1930s, seventy years after slavery ended. The information gathered in the interviews may be corrupted by memory loss or influenced by modern perspectives. This critique can be applied to three of the narratives explored in this research. "I Want to Jump," "Hooked in the Heart," and "I Am Blessed, but You are Damned" are a part of a larger slave narrative collection called *God Struck Me Dead*. Much like *The American Slave*, the narratives in *God Struck Me Dead* were collected and transcribed in the late 1920s. Hence, these narratives may not be as dependable as narratives written in the nineteenth century.

Another drawback of slave narratives is the issue of literacy. For illiterate slaves and former slaves, it became necessary to rely on a literate person, typically white, to pen their narratives. This becomes problematic because the slave's story has the potential to be altered or underemphasized. Scholar of African American Studies, John W. Blassingame states, "since the Antebellum narratives were frequently dictated to and written by whites, any study of such sources must begin with an assessment of the editors. An editor's education, religious beliefs, and literacy skill, attitudes towards slavery, and occupation all affected how he recorded the account of the slave's life."¹⁷ Furthermore, many of the white editors who wrote slave narratives

¹⁷ John W. Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slave: Approaches and Problems" in *The Slave's Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis & Henry L. Gates, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 79.

were mostly concerned with abolition. As a result, many of the narratives focus more on the need to end slavery than accurately recording the life events and perspectives of the enslaved person.

However, the benefits of slave narratives are that they keep alive the story of a traditionally oppressed people. Though sometimes distorted, the narratives do provide a sketch of slave life. With this sketch, it allows historians to place the story of the African American slave in the larger American story. Ultimately, the narratives represent the enslaved person's ability to be heard by future generations and in this case by religious audiences. Therefore, the narratives stand as symbols of resiliency in spite of the oppression of American slavery.

Aside from three narratives, the majority of the narratives examined in this project were published before the twentieth century. These narratives are typically considered to be better at accurately portraying slave life compared to twentieth-century narratives. The analyses of the narratives presented in this paper requires the reader to pay attention to factors such as age, years and area of enslavement, and gender. This list is not exhaustive, but these factors aid in helping the reader derive a historical interpretation of the narratives. Of the eight narratives used, two of the narrators are women, five narrators are men, and the remaining two, from the *God Struck Me Dead* collection are unidentified. These narratives are unique in that they give significant focus on the religious life of the narrators. With some of these narratives falling under the sub-category of spiritual or conversion narratives, most of the narrators intend for their narratives to be used to evangelize and to encourage people to accept Christianity.

Though every conversion experience is different, many narratives share similar depictions of religious themes and characters. A typical conversion story "begins with a sense of sin and nonrealization and terminated with one of cleanliness, certainty, and reintegration, the

three things every Negro was denied.”¹⁸ Visions commonly accompany conversion experiences in slave narratives. In these visions the convert usually travels to either heaven or hell, and what is seen at either place emotionally generates the need for the convert to accept Christianity. Additionally, physical descriptions of characters such as demons, the devil, and God are often different from biblical accounts. The Christian god is often described a “little man” who guides and helps the convert in visions.¹⁹ The devil and demons are portrayed as vicious animal like monsters that attempt to kill the convert.²⁰ While this study primarily focuses on how the narrators understand and depict the devil, the narratives offer a wealth of insight to how Christian slaves interacted with the world around, and how these slaves were able to overcome the enormous obstacles the Institution of Slavery placed in their way.

3 THE DEVIL IN CONVERSION NARRATIVES

3.1 Friday Jones

Days of Bondage: Autobiography of Friday Jones records the life of a former North Carolina male slave, named Friday Jones. Unlike many of the slave accounts presented in this project, Friday Jones was illiterate at the time of its publishing. Jones’ narrative was penned by an unnamed editor of Washington D.C. Commercial Publishing Company in 1883. The narrative reveals that Jones was born in 1810 in Raleigh, North Carolina. Jones spent the entirety of his enslavement in North Carolina. Despite him being a former slave, Jones was embraced by the state’s white community. Following his death in 1887, a local newspaper printed an obituary describing Jones’ value to the community. His narrative reflects the adversities faced by black

¹⁸ Paul Radin, “Status, Fantasy, and the Christian Dogma,” in *God Struck Me Dead*, ed., Charles Johnson (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1969), viii.

¹⁹ Charles Johnson, ed., “I Want to Jump” in *God Struck Me Dead* (Philadelphia, United Church Press, 1969), 91.

²⁰ Charles Johnson, ed., “Hooked in the Heart” in *God Struck Me Dead* (Philadelphia, United Church Press, 1969), 21.

individuals as a result of the horrors of American slavery. Consistent with many other slave narratives written in the nineteenth century, Jones utilized religion as a mechanism for overcoming his slave experience. He recalled that his mother, who was separated from him at an early age, was dedicated to Christian religious practices. However, Jones' father, also separated from him during childhood, neglected the Christian religion. Jones describes his father as a "desperate wicked man" from whom Jones was physically and emotionally estranged.²¹ Not wanting to follow in his father's example, Jones makes converting to Christianity a priority in his life. In his attempt to convert, Jones encounters several obstacles. The starkest obstacle is Jones' brief conversation with the devil. Jones records:

I made many attempts to bow and pray to God, but failed to be in earnest. His spirit followed so long I had to give up my work and bow and pray. On one occasion I went out and tried to pray to God and raised up and felt worse than I did before. I bowed down, the Lord spoke to me and said, never can you obtain religion while you continue drinking whiskey. This was in 1851. I then ceased to drink, the devil got with me, told me it was all imagination and that I could take whiskey moderately two or three times a day and seek my salvation too. I did not know it was He at that time, but I yielded to Him. I turned to and drank again as usual.²²

Jones' depiction of the devil displays an intent, on the devil's part, to manipulate the slave from following God's instructions for conversion. Additionally, attention must be paid to Jones' acknowledgment that at the time of this particular experience he was not aware that it was the devil inciting him to continue to drink alcohol. Given Jones' Christian mother and religious climate of the American South, it is highly unlikely that Jones was not familiar with the concept of the devil. However, it is probable that Jones was aware of an existence of a devil, but failed to grasp its function. More than likely, after religious education, Jones came to believe it was the devil inspiring him to reject true conversion.

²¹ Friday Jones, *Days of Bondage. Autobiography of Friday Jones. Being a Brief Narrative of His Trials and Tribulations in Slavery* (Washington, DC: Commercial Pub. Co., 1883), 1

²² Friday Jones, *Days of Bondage*, 2.

It can be argued that Jones' experience as a slave in North Carolina provides the framework for his depiction of the devil. It is possible that Jones, unconsciously, sees his interaction with the devil as representative of his struggles to accept his status as slave. His narratives mentioned that Jones had a desire to be both converted and to receive physical freedom. However, the devil used whiskey as a way to lure Jones away from what Jones feels was God's instruction for conversion. Initially, Jones finds it easier, possibly safer, to follow the devil's suggestion, however the struggle of choosing between God's instruction and the devil's instruction is key. The institution of slavery puts Jones in a similar position. While freedom was his ultimate objective, accepting his status as a slave gave Jones a measure of security in that following the instructions of the slave master would likely reduce physical punishment. However, in accepting a slave status, Jones would have negated his goal of freedom. Likewise, Jones' goal of salvation was hindered when he succumbs to the complacency of drinking whiskey. By initially choosing the devil's instructions over God's command, Jones avoided any retaliation from the devil. Jones' conversion story demonstrated a struggle to navigate between his ultimate desires and the consequences of pursuing those desires. The devil functioned similar as slave master in that the devil contended against Jones achieving spiritual freedom.

3.2 Noah Davis

The narrative of Friday Jones shows religious parallels to that of Rev. Noah Davis. Davis, born a slave in Madison County Virginia in 1804, purchased his freedom with the aid of a Baltimore church in 1847. The narrative was written by Davis in 1859, 12 years after the end of his enslavement. It is assumed that much of his theological perspectives were influenced by the Baptist denomination, given that he pastored a Baptist church in Baltimore immediately after purchasing his freedom. Though he shares a religious outlook similar to most early to mid-

nineteenth century slaves, his 43 years of captivity were unusual compared to that of Friday Jones and other enslaved Africans who felt the full severity of America's slave system. Davis characterized his master as being far more lenient than other masters on nearby plantations. As result of his masters' tolerant nature, Davis' father taught Davis the alphabet, a skill that would later lead to his literacy.

Additionally, Davis spent much of his enslavement as a shoemaker's apprentice. During this apprenticeship, Davis converted to Christianity. Prior to conversion, he was well informed of the Christian faith. Throughout Davis' childhood, his father aided in the dissemination of religious instruction to Davis, his siblings, and other slaves. However, it is during his attempts to convert that Davis gains further knowledge about the function of the devil. Questioning his mother about conversion, Davis records:

I went to my mother, and asked her the question, how do people feel, when they get converted? She replied, do you think you are converted? Now, this was a severe trial; for, although I felt that I was really changed, yet I wanted to hear from her, before I could decide whether I was actually converted, or not. I replied, "No." Then she said, "My son, the devil makes people think themselves converted, sometimes." I arose, and left immediately, believing that the devil had made a fool of me. I returned to my shop, more determined to pray than ever before.²³

Prior to this conversation with his mother, Davis spent several days contemplating and praying for conversion. He was unsure if his efforts to convert were successful, which encouraged him to ask his mother about the conversion process. It appears that his mother perceived the devil to be very active in the conversion process. Much of the events recorded in Davis' narrative take place during the Second Great Awakening, therefore it is probable that the mother understands the devil through an evangelical Christian lens given that the narrative

²³ Noah Davis, *A Narrative of the Life of Rev. Noah Davis, A Colored Man. Written by Himself at the Age of Fifty-Four*, (Baltimore: John F. Weishampel, Jr., 1859), 23-24.

portrays Davis' mother as a Baptist Christian. Absent from her brief discourse on the devil is any surface influence of African Traditional Religions. However, it is possible that lingering African theological beliefs, such as the trickster nature of the Yoruba god Eshu, attached itself to her concept of the devil. Eshu and the devil function similarly in this passage. Both spiritual beings' mission is to be an obstacle to humanity. However, the scope of Davis' understanding of the devil is limited to his mother's Christian theological assertions. Davis is left viewing the devil in a wholly negative light. In connection to his slave experience, Davis is forced to construct a rationale for his failure to convert, and he utilizes the devil as the cornerstone for his rationale.

While Davis' slave experience was more tolerable than most slaves, the obstacle to his freedom was the institution of slavery. It is here that Davis' devil and his slave experience merge. In seeing the devil as the entity that blocked his spiritual salvation, it is possible that Davis is metaphorically expressing the slave masters' opposition to his physical freedom. Davis' devil and the slave master share a common goal of enslavement. Davis, like the other narrators, represents the devil as a spiritual master that sought to keep Davis in the bondage of sin. Similarly, the institution of slavery developed strategies, much like the trickery of Davis' devil, to ensure the continued enslavement of Davis.

3.3 Thomas L. Johnson

Juxtaposed to Noah Davis, the slave experience of Thomas L. Johnson is stark example of resentment enslaved Africans felt towards their masters and the institution of slavery. In his narrative, *Twenty-Eight Years a Slave*, Johnson reveals how slavery defined his childhood. Ripping him from his mother, Johnson grew to resent the American South for its abuse of human life. Though he wrote his narrative to gain financial support for missionary work in Africa, the early portion of his narrative exhibits a heavy anti-slavery tone. Born into slavery in Virginia in

1836, Johnson was not granted his freedom till the conclusion of the Civil War. The twenty-eight years Johnson spent in enslavement was also marked by his religious awakening. Like Friday Jones, Johnson uses religion as a way of enduring the inhumane treatment of slaves of African heritage. Before Johnson is removed from his mothers' care, his mother teaches him the Lord's prayer. It is the major Christian theological instruction Johnson receives until his conversion. Johnson's early life portrays an interest in conversion, however he rejects conversion believing that the process includes a confrontation with the devil. Writing of his initial understanding of conversion, Johnson posits:

I remember well how I used to think of seeking religion, but whenever I began to think seriously on this matter, a great obstacle confronted me. I was superstitious. Superstition is characteristic of the race in Africa. Having been brought to America, not permitted to be taught to read the Bible, and having every avenue to education closed against us, it was natural we should retain the superstitions of our fathers. My idea was that if I set out to "seek religion," I must meet with that old serpent, the devil. I often heard slaves say that when they set out to "seek religion," the devil set out with them, and this greatly perplexed me... One day, I was out gathering blackberries, and commenced to pray the Lord's Prayer; I knew not what else to say. As I prayed, a rabbit jumped up from under the bush from which I was gathering the berries. I felt sure his was the devil. I had heard that when he deceived Eve in the garden, he came like a serpent; and, furthermore, he could put himself into any shape. I was never more frightened in all my life. I was afraid to say my prayers at night, not so much because I might disturb the devil, but because he might disturb me. I wept bitterly in my loneliness and in my darkness of mind, having no father or mother to direct me.²⁴

Interestingly, Johnson incorporates his African heritage into his religious practices. It must be noted that he lists these African-based beliefs and practices as "superstition." Johnson is delineating between what he understands as authentic religion and as folk beliefs of the uneducated. For Johnson leaving behind the "superstitions" of Africa and moving towards "religion" is where the convert encountered the devil. Describing the devil as the "old serpent"

²⁴ Thomas L. Johnson, *Twenty-Eight Years a Slave or the Story of My Life on Three Continents* (London: Christian Workers' Depot, 1909), 10-11.

fits the generally held Christian belief that the serpent in the Genesis 3 is the devil. Additionally, the notion that the devil is an obstacle every Christian must overcome before converting signifies the devil's importance to Christian African slaves. The fear that Johnson displays in reference to encountering the devil also leads to the understanding that the devil was interpreted to be a sinister character that sought to only bring harm.

Johnson expounds on his fear in a later passage, stating, "the thought of meeting that old serpent, the devil, was chilling and repulsive to me I dreaded the encounter and feared to go to bed, and sat out in the porch at night, sometimes dozing a little, then awakening with fear, my thoughts being of that dreadful time through which I must go to get religion."²⁵ The idea of the devil being an extremely frightful and terrifying spiritual being, and the reluctance to approach such a being shows the level of power Johnson attributed to the devil. The terror that the devil caused Johnson can be compared to the fear the slave owner instilled in the enslaved person. The power the devil held over Johnson that made him hesitant to pursue conversion is the same that the slave owner held over the slave. The horrendous acts of violence that were common in slavery taught enslaved Africans that the institution of slavery should be feared. Johnson's depiction of the devil is a reflection of perspective that the devil, like the slave owner, had the power to perpetrate violence.

3.4 Mary F. McCray

The narrative of Mary F. McCray was written by her husband and son four years after her death in 1894. The authors were primarily concerned with shaping McCray's story as a religious narrative in hopes to promote the Christian faith. Following her conversion McCray pursued ministry. After her release from slavery, McCray was licensed to preach and founded churches in

²⁵ Ibid, 14.

Ohio and the Dakota territories. However, as result of the narrative being written by males, this account of her life may not fully express McCray's perspective as a woman. Additionally, the narrative does not fully portray the magnitude of a nineteenth-century African American female licensed preacher.

In reference to slavery, the narrative records very little about her experience as a slave. What is known is that McCray was born in Goshen, Kentucky in 1837. She spent twenty-two years in enslavement, with her captivity ending in 1859 as the result of the dying wish of her female master. The date of her conversion is unknown, but the narrative mentions that she converted on a slave plantation. Therefore, it is probable that her conversion occurred during enslavement. Similar to other slave accounts, McCray's religious journey includes several failed efforts to convert. Much like the narratives mentioned above, McCray failure to convert is blamed on the devil. Detailing her first attempt at conversion, the narrative states:

She was trying to get converted shouting, like her cousin, but the Dear Lord did not come to her in that way. She did reason with the devil for some time, who told her that if she did not shout she would not have religion. She had a terrible struggle to get over that. After that terrible struggle about getting converted shouting, her faith was greatly increased, and while she was praying one day she was wonderfully blessed. She told her cousin how she felt. Her cousin told her that she had religion. She said, oh, no, I am just getting in a good way. She did not understand the scheme of the devil, so she was defeated and had to do her work all over again.²⁶

For McCray, converted shouting is a tangible sign that accompanied conversion. Her inability to participate in this ritual leads the assumption of the devil's involvement in McCray's failure to convert. Before discussing the devil's role in her conversion, it must be pointed that the narrative, written by her son and husband, may not authentically reflect McCray's understanding of the devil at this point in her religious journey. It is

²⁶ Mary F. McCray, *Life of Mary F. McCray: Born and Raised a Slave in the State of Kentucky* (Lima, Ohio, 1898), 11.

possible that the writers imposed their own presumptions on McCray's narrative.

Similarly, the understanding of the devil may be reflective of McCray's latter theological beliefs. Therefore, caution needs to be applied when attempting to determine McCray's actual understanding of the devil at the time when this passage occurred.

The passage presents the devil as one that conversed and rationalized with McCray. The devil is responsible for the doubt McCray expresses about her conversion. While the narrative does not describe the devil as dreadful and horrifying, it sets up an image of the devil that displays the willingness to use its intelligent and cunning nature to prevent McCray from believing she is converted. The phrase "schemes of the devil" portrays the devil as having well thought-out detailed strategies that are intended to keep individuals from joining the Christian faith. Though McCray's narrative mentions little about her experience as a slave, the attribute in which the authors give the devil can also be accredited to the institution of slavery. With McCray's narrative describing the devil as smart and sly, the tactics in which the slave owner used to keep the slave in bondage are comparable to McCray's devil. For example, the consistent promotion of white supremacy propaganda that argue for the continuation slavery on the basis that the black body was inherently inferior is similar to the lie the devil told McCray to prevent her conversion.

3.5 Jarena Lee

Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee is another of example of a female slave narrative. Unlike the narrative of McCray, this narrative is written by Lee herself. Being the first African American female to be licensed to preach, Lee's narrative was highly popular during its time, and it stands as a significant primary source for scholars who engage in gender

and African American studies. It is widely accepted that Lee was born to free black parents, however due to poverty her parents were forced to send her away to work as a servant maid. Though Lee was free, it is probable that conditions of working as servant maid mirrored the conditions of an indentured servant. The entirety of her narrative is dedicated to her religious journey. Little is known of her personal life outside of the events that intersect with her religious life.

In relation to her conversion experience, Lee gives significant detail about her struggles to convert. The narrative alludes to Lee being converted at some point in late adolescence and early adulthood. Her conversion begins when Lee becomes aware of sins against god, however she is unaware of the path to conversion. Lee's inability to correct her wrongs leads to extreme anguish and depression. She states:

This description of my condition struck me to the heart, and made me to feel in some measure, the weight of my sins, and sinful nature. But not knowing how to run immediately to the Lord for help, I was driven of Satan, in the course of a few days, and tempted to destroy myself. There was a brook about a quarter of a mile from the house, in which there was a deep hole, where the water whirled about among the rocks; to this place it was suggested, I must go and drown myself. . . .It seemed as if someone was speaking to me, saying put your head under, it will not distress you. But by some means, of which I can give no account, my thoughts were taken entirely from this purpose, when I went from the place to the house again. It was the unseen arm of God which saved me from self murder.²⁷

It is here that the devil emerges in her narrative. At this point in her life she experiences a devil that is subtle but dangerous. Without doubt, Lee wants her reader to know that the devil is the Christian's spiritual and physical enemy. The devil's mission is not to simply destroy the soul, but the devil is also out to destroy the body as well. While the devil does not take a physical

²⁷ Jarena Lee, "Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee" in *Spiritual Narratives*, ed., Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 4.

form, he appears to have the power to manipulate, in this case Lee's mind, the objects in the physical world to kill or injure converts.

While there is no clear evidence in her narrative, it is presented as if this was her first encounter with the devil. If this assumption is correct then the devil likes to target Christians and potential converts. This is significant because the devil is not the enemy of all humanity, rather he is portrayed as the enemy of those who follow Christian teaching. This thought only intensifies when Lee reveals that the devil attempts to kill her on two other occasions. Lee puts forth:

From the day on which I first went to the Methodist Church, until the hour of my deliverance, I was strangely buffeted by that enemy of all righteousness—the devil . . . this persuasion was greatly strengthened during the three weeks [before my conversion], which was the last of Satan's power over me. . . here I was again tempted to destroy my life by drowning; but suddenly this mode was changed—and while in the dusk of the evening, as I was walking to and fro in the yard of the house, I was beset to hang myself with a cord suspended from the wall enclosing the secluded spot.²⁸

The devil's continual willingness to kill Lee displays the devil's desire to stop Christianity. This account of potential suicide contains a power struggle. Lee wants to be free of her sins but the devil is in stark opposition of Lee being free. Lee's story can be interpreted as an allusion to slavery. While Lee desires and works toward spiritual freedom, the devil is giving Lee an ultimatum, spiritual slavery or death. This ultimatum is similar to what the institution of slavery gave the slave community daily. The degree of violence in which the devil is willing to use to maintain its dominance compares to the daily torture enslaved Africans endured as a result of slave master's yearning for superiority.

²⁸ Ibid, 5-6.

Before continuing to Lee's final encounter with the devil, it must be noted that it is possible that at the time of her attempted suicides she may not have been aware of what or who influenced her. It is possible that after receiving religious teaching that she interpreted these suicidal thoughts as attacks from the devil. It may very well be that Lee before her conversion was ignorant of the devil's role in Christianity.

At the point of Lee's conversion, she encounters the devil through a vision. Lee recalls, "the awful gulf of hell seemed to be open beneath me . . . there appeared, sitting in one corner of the room, Satan, in the form of a monstrous dog, and in a rage, as if in pursuit, his tongue protruding from his mouth to a great length and his eyes looked like two balls of fire."²⁹ This was Lee's first physical description of the devil. As in the case of Thomas L. Johnson's narrative, the devil does not take the form of a serpent, rather Lee sees the devil as a dog. It is possible that her description was influenced by European folk beliefs of hellhounds. However, it is equally possible that the dog in Lee's account is allusion to the dogs used to hunt runaway slaves. If the latter is correct, then Lee's vision further connects the devil in conversion narratives with slavery.

3.6 God Struck Me Dead Narratives

Like Lee's narrative, the narratives in Charles Johnson's *God Struck Me Dead* collection are exclusively religious. Missing from many of the narratives is vital biographical information that would aid the reader with the context in which the narrator's conversion experience is taking place. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, these narratives were collected as oral interviews in the 1920s. Therefore, the narratives may fall victim to the erosion of memory. Of the thirty-eight narratives included in *God Struck Me Dead*, three narratives, "I Want to Jump," "Hooked

²⁹ Ibid, 6.

in the Heart,” and “I Am Blessed, but You are Damned,” will be used to continue the discussion on the influence of slavery on the portrayal of the devil.

In the narrative “Hooked in the Heart,” the narrator reveals that his name is William. “Hooked in the Heart” is the only one of the three narratives used from *God Struck Dead* that possesses biographical information. The other two narratives, “I want to Jump” and “I am Blessed, but You are Damned,” are nameless, genderless, and ageless. However, in “Hooked in the Heart,” William finds himself in an existential crisis and he sees conversion to Christianity as the solution. Like many of the other narrators, previously discussed, William credits the difficulties in his process to convert to the devil. Speaking of his experience with the devil, William puts forth:

But in spite of this it wasn't long before I was serving the devil again. I was serving him outwardly, but my soul was pleading with God. I turned back several times because the devil stayed so hot on my trail. Whenever a man tries to do right and seek God, then the devil gets busy. I used to go to my praying place, and it just looked like the devil would take me whether or no. I would see him with my spiritual eye as some great monster coming down out of the tree to tear me to pieces and devour me.³⁰

William's perspective of the devil is not unique to him. “I want to Jump” and “I am Blessed, but You are Damned” are almost identical to “Hooked in the Heart” in their emphasis on the struggle to convert and in their depiction of the devil as a monstrous creature. In “I want to Jump,” the narrator sees in the devil in a vision of hell. The narrator gives a detailed description of the devil, stating, “the devil, his face as black as it could be and his eyes as red as fire, told me to come and go with him, and that if I followed God I would lose all my friends.”³¹

³⁰ Johnson, “Hooked in the Heart,” 21.

³¹ Johnson, “I Want to Jump,” 91.

Alongside “I Want to Jump,” “I am Blessed” continues the fanciful portrayal of the devil. Similar to the other two *God Struck Me Dead* narrators, the “I am Blessed” narrator also experiences a vision of hell. In this vision, the sins of the narrator begin to weigh on the narrators’ conscience. When the narrator accepts the need for conversion, the narrative exclaims the devil stands in opposition. The narrator of “I am Blessed” contends that he or she “saw Satan with a host of his angels hop from the pit, and there they began to stick out their tongues at me and make motions as if to lay hands on me and drag me back into the pit.”³² The consistent similarities between the *God Struck Me Dead* narratives must be noted. Each narrator has a personal conversion experience, but the experience is almost indistinguishable from the other two narrators.

Looking at these three narratives as a whole, the devil functions similarly to the five other narratives in this study. Like the other narratives, the concept of honor is not explicit and lies underneath the text. However, the concept of power is visible in the devil’s relentless attempts to prevent the narrators from converting. Additionally, absent from the narratives is any direct mention of enslavement. The narrators focus solely on their journey to conversion, while leaving out the context in which the conversion takes place. Nevertheless, since these narratives function as testimonies of former slaves about their religious experience during slavery it is plausible, to a certain degree, to contend that their slave experience shaped their narratives.

4 ANALYSIS

The conversion stories above do not reflect the beliefs of the entire community of enslaved Africans, rather they are the narrators’ representations of the devil. With these conversion stories displaying the narrators’ individual depiction of the devil, the analysis of these

³² Charles Johnson, ed., “I am Blessed, but You are Damned” in *God Struck Me Dead* (Philadelphia, United Church Press, 1969), 17.

narratives is focused on understanding the devil through the narrators' view. Additionally, these narratives are evidence for the usefulness of Bourdieu's theory of homology in describing the relationship between the slaves' religious world and their physical world. In Bourdieu's homology, society's hierarchy, whether pertaining to race, gender, or class, and its accompanying symbols of the hierarchy, are reproduced at every level of society. For the narrators, the symbols of power and honor that characterized their slave experience were reproduced in their conversion experiences. Thus, the narrators' struggles for physical freedom was articulated in their struggles for spiritual freedom. Bourdieu's theory sets up the idea that every level of slave life mirrors the slave experience. It is the denial of freedom that became fundamental influence on the creation of the slaves' religious world. The reproduction of their enslavement is significant, because it demonstrates the slavery was more than just chains, whips, and cotton, rather it became the identity of the black body.

Additionally, looking at slavery as a state of being involves the idea of subjection. Judith Butler's contends that subjection is "a kind of power that not only unilaterally acts on a given individual as a form of domination, but also activates or forms the subject."³³ If one with a black body sees himself or herself as a slave in both the physical and religious worlds then the black body is inescapably connected to slavery's inferior and superior binary. As a result, every action and thought was not free from the slave identity. Rather, slavery's labeling of the black body as inferior forced the black body to see his or her state of being as a slave. Thus, in the Antebellum era, slavery and dishonor was the black body's identity. The physical world in which the slave lived and the social worlds in which the slave created were distinguished by the institution of slavery's dominance over the black body. The examination of the narrators' depictions of the

³³ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 84.

devil through Butler's and Bourdieu's poststructuralist lenses indicates that the devil was a product of the slave experience, and the symbols of power and honor represented the state of being for enslaved Africans.

Furthermore, within the slave narratives, Antebellum concepts of power and honor are specific illustrations of how the devil was influenced by slavery. Notions of power, in the form of the struggles to convert, are transparent in the narratives. By contrast, concepts of honor are less apparent, and they are only revealed when juxtaposing the characters in the conversions narratives with themes and people in the Antebellum South. Hidden within the conversion stories is a coded language, the language of honor. Kenneth S. Greenberg writes, "since the language of honor was the dominant language of the men who ruled the slave South, we will never understand masters, the nature of slavery, or the Civil War without first understanding that language."³⁴ The cultural context in which many of the narrators experience their conversions is dominated by the notion of honor. Using Bourdieu's theoretical framework, homology allows for Greenberg's language of honor to be present in the slave narratives. Thus, the respect, timocracy, and masculinity that were associated with southern honor became one of lenses through which the enslaved African understood world and his or her place in it. Remembering the honor bestowed upon the slave master, the narratives reflect a connection between the devil, the spiritual enslaver, and the concept of honor.

The starkest example of the relationship between honor and the devil is found in the narrative of Thomas L. Johnson. The narrator portrays the devil as a figure to be feared. Out of these images of fear of terror comes a respect for the devil's power. For Johnson's narrative, the devil is articulated as a legendary creature who must be defeated before conversion can be

³⁴ Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor & Slavery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), xi.

reached. Johnson states, “my idea was that if I set out to "seek religion," I must meet with that old serpent, the devil. I often heard slaves say that when they set out to seek religion, the devil set out with them.”³⁵ Johnson’s later admission of disdain for wanting to meet the devil leads to the postponement of his conversion. Johnson is not converted until he finds the inner resolve to confront and renounce the devil. What lies underneath the surface of Johnson’s image of the devil is the concept of respect. The fear that Johnson, and other narrators, feel is a validation of the devil’s reputation. Every instance of fear and dread the narrators express is an indicator of the degree of esteem that they attached to the devil. Though narrators nullify African Traditional Religious beliefs that bestow on the devil qualities of a good deity, the fear the narrators exhibit demonstrates that a wholly evil devil was given a level of importance that rivaled the benevolent Christian god. The terror that grips the enslaved African acknowledged that the devil possesses the power to interfere with the slave’s spiritual and physical life. The acknowledgement of power is a sign of respect.

The ideal of respect is a part of the system of honor in the Antebellum South. In comparing the devil to the institution of slavery, slave owners used fear to command respect from their slaves. Respect in American slavery was not tied to the moral perception of right and wrong. Though respect may be articulated in modern society as admiration, and owning slaves most certainly was seen as admirable in the Southern white community, in the relationships between the slave owner and slaves and the devil and converts, respect takes on a different connotation. For the devil and slave owner, respect is attached to the ability to efficiently execute power over a subordinate figure. As a result of the devil and slave owner’s power, the slave and

³⁵ Thomas L. Johnson, *Twenty-Eight Years a Slave*, 10-11.

convert was forced to acknowledge the power that the slave owner and the devil held over them. Therefore, slaves and converts understood respect as a recognition of superiority.

The narratives additionally reveal that honor stems from an American understanding of gender. Masculinity, especially in the American South, was a complex component of male identity. For many narrators, like the Christian god, the devil is expressed in masculine terms. The use of the pronouns he, him, or his reveal that for at least a portion of the community of enslaved Africans the devil is understood to be male. Consequently, the community of enslaved Africans' understanding of masculinity, more importantly white masculinity, is vital to understanding similarities between the devil and the institution of slavery. Culturally defined by his masculinity, the slave owner cannot be bestowed honor without portraying the Antebellum understanding of masculinity. The southern white gentleman understands that one of his roles in Antebellum society was to be protector. As a guardian of southern culture, the white male, specifically the slave owner, was tasked with using violence to keep order and stability in the Antebellum South. The refusal, and sometimes failure, to protect southern society damages a southern gentleman's reputation of honor. For example, the failure of a slave master to adequately punish his slaves would upset the order of society, and he would risk losing his standing of honor within the southern community. Hence, the slave owner derives both his honor and masculinity from the violence committed against slaves. Patterson continues the assertion that honor, masculinity, and violence are intertwined by first stating that "one part of the ideology [of honor] referred to the master's own conception of himself...[is] the attendant virtues of manliness and chivalry."³⁶ Patterson adds that the second part of the master's ideology of honor is "its denial to the slave . . . [and] the degree to which a master class is prepared to

³⁶ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 94.

defend its honor against rebelling slaves or invading outsiders.”³⁷ Consequently, the narrators’ representations of the devil fit the notion of honor that is connected to the slave master’s masculinity. The association of the devil with the male identity and the devil’s willingness to use violence displays that the narrator’s environment played a significant influence on their articulation of the devil. Therefore, the depiction of the devil in the conversion stories reflects the tumultuous relationship between enslaved persons and the institution of slavery.

Similar to honor, the lens of power draws a connection between the narrator’s devil and the institution of slavery. The honor the slave master possesses as a result of degrading enslaved Africans is not possible without power. Power, for many of the narrators, is the difference between an enslaved and a free person and a servant of the devil and a follower of the Christian God. The concepts of ruler and subject are congruent between American slavery and Christianity. Reexamining the previously mentioned statement by Judith Butler, seeing subjection as “a kind of power that . . . activates or forms the subject” illustrates that in the physical world and the spiritual world the slave understood that he or she was a subject.³⁸ The subjection or slave identity is the perspective that the narratives were written from. Continuing Bourdieu’s theory of homology, if indeed slavery shaped the identity of the slave then everything the slave created was reflective of the experience of slavery. Thus, the institution of slavery was responsible for the images of the devil present in the narratives. In determining the connection between the devil and slavery, the formation of the slavery identity as a result of subjection would influence a majority of aspects of slave life.

While slavery directly influences the conversion stories, the narratives reflect a shift of power. The devil reflects the institution of slavery, however the narrators do not give absolute

³⁷ Ibid, 96.

³⁸ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 84.

power. The devil was just as menacing and terrifying as the slave owner, but in the conversion stories display an alternative reality where oppression could be overcome. It is possible that the devil was presented in similar manner as the slave master to signal to the reader that conversion to Christianity was a method to combat slavery and create positive black identity.

Again, with slavery being the dominant influence on the religious world of the enslaved community, the narratives demonstrate that the devil has a similar power as the slave master. As the narrators point out, the devil has the ability to inflict physical harm and block potential converts from finding spiritual freedom. Overwhelmingly, the narrators agree that the devil is the source to blame for their failed attempts at conversion. Similarly, enslaved persons of African descent did not blame themselves nor, in many cases, did they blame the gods of Africa for their status as slaves. The responsibility for their enslavement resides in the white community. More specifically, the burden of responsibility rested on the shoulders of the white slave owning male, who functioned as the guardian of Antebellum society. Therefore, the devil and the slave master used their power to block attempts at freedom, and in the process, they become the villains that the slave and convert articulated were culpable for the evil that is present in the physical reality and the spiritual reality.

Additionally, the social power exerted by the slave master and the lack of social power experienced by the slave community contributed to the prolongment of slavery. However, as result of the power demonstrated by the creation of their religious world, the slave community possessed religious capital. Bourdieu articulates that forms of capital, such as social, cultural, and economic, are the forms of currency that function as the “principle underlying immanent regularities of the social world.”³⁹ Capital and power are interconnected. Thus, whoever

³⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, “Forms of Capital” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed., John Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 46.

possesses capital also has the ability to influence the social world. Likewise, whoever has social influence has the ability to gain capital. The religious capital owned by the slave community gave slaves a form of currency to bargain for social power. From this framework, the religious world, which the slave created, was a response to the slave master's totalitarian rule. That is not to conclude that persons of African descent would not have changed their religiosity if they traveled to the "New World" as free persons. However, it is to state that the religious world, specifically those who adopted Christianity, gave the slave necessary power to confront the fundamental issue of slavery, the denial of freedom.

Ultimately, the struggle for freedom is at the heart of the narratives presented in this study. What lies underneath the narrators' struggle for spiritual freedom is the struggle for power. This power struggle, as seen in the narratives, reflects the need for power in the narrators' physical reality. Similar to the manner in which the slave struggles with the slave master for the power to be free, the narrators see the devil as a slave master typology from which the convert has to strive with in order to fully convert to Christianity. In seeing the enslaved African and the convert's struggle for freedom as a desire for power, narrators show that their ultimate concern goes beyond simply ending slave labor. The ultimate concern is the fulfillment of the yearning to have the necessary power to experience freedom and equality in every area of society. The legal protections of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment did not entirely grant freedom and equality to the slave. However, in trying to find a solution to their lack of power, religion became the entity the African American community continuously grasps ahold of to equip them with the necessary strength to oppose inferior notions of the black body.

Ultimately, the devil in conversion narratives seems to be symbolic for not only the slave's dual

oppression, but the devil is also a reminder that despite insurmountable oppression, freedom and equality can be obtained.

5 CONCLUSION

As revealed in the above analysis, the religious world of slaves is a web of complex ideas. The religious themes and character that make up this web are rooted in their experiences as slaves. Paul Radin contends that “in the days of slavery, an adaptation to the external world in which slaves lived was blocked completely except on a very superficial level. Only in an inner world could the Negroes develop a scale of values and fixed points of vantage from which to judge the world around them and themselves.”⁴⁰ The inner world which Radin speaks of is the religious world of the enslaved community. The scale of values and the fixed points of vantage are not new, rather they adapted from their physical reality and then modified to meet the specific needs of the slave community. As a result of their physical reality denying the slave both honor and power, the slave narratives demonstrate a religious world where the slave has the opportunity to gain both. However, much like the slave’s physical reality in which the slave master boasted honor and power, the devil in the slave narratives possessed the honor and power desired by the convert.

The similarities between the slave master and the devil are not a coincidence. Throughout this paper, it is shown that slavery was the lens through which the slave understood the self and the surrounding world. By combining Patterson’s argument of timocracy and Butler’s understanding of subjection with Bourdieu’s theory of social homology, the devil was created to be a mirror image of the institution of slavery. As Pierce pointed out, the slave community gave the devil double meaning. While on the surface the devil was the evil spiritual being of

⁴⁰ Paul Radin, “Status, Fantasy, and the Christian Dogma,” vii.

Protestant Christianity, beneath the surface the devil became a symbol for the slave owner. As a result, images of the devil in the community of enslaved Africans add to the complexities of the slaves' religious world.

Furthermore, this project contends that enslaved Africans modified the Christian character of the devil to represent not only their obstacles to obtaining spiritual freedom, but the devil signifies the inhumane treatment the institution of slavery heaped upon early African American communities. With various musical, theological, and cultural representations of the devil, studying the devil through the eyes of the slave narrators allows for the slave community to add their depiction to a growing collage of the devil. Focusing this project on the slave community opens the door for the future scholarship to examine the variety of depictions of the devil in the African American society

REFERENCES

- Alho, Olli. *The Religion of the Slaves: A Study of the Religious Tradition and Behavior of Plantation Slaves in the United States, 1830-1865*. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1976.
- Almond, Philip C. *The Devil: A New Biography*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014.
- Blassingame, John W. "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slave: Approaches and Problems" in *The Slave's Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis & Henry L. Gates, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Masculine Domination*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- _____. "Forms of Capital" in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed., John Richardson. New York: Greenwood Press, 1986.

- Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997.
- Earl, Jr., Riggins R. *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self, and Community in the Slave Mind*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. 2nd ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.
- Fry, Sylvia R. "Shaking the Dry Bones: The Dialectic of Conversion" in *Black White Cultural Interaction in the Antebellum South*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1993.
- Genovese, Eugene D. *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York: Vintage, 1976.
- Geisler, Norman L. *Systematic Theology: In One Volume*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2011.
- Greenberg, Kenneth S. *Honor & Slavery*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Pierce, Yolanda. *Hell Without Fires: Slavery, Christianity, and the Antebellum Spiritual Narrative*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005.
- Raboteau, Albert J. *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. New York: Random House, 1983.
- Whelchel, Jr., Love Henry. *Hell Without Fire: Conversion in Slave Religion*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002.

5.1 Primary Sources

- Davis, Noah. *A Narrative of the Life of Rev. Noah Davis, A Colored Man. Written by Himself at the Age of Fifty-Four*. Baltimore, MD: John F. Weishampel, Jr., 1859.
- Johnson, Clifton H., Ed. *God Struck Me Dead: Religious Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Ex-slaves*. Boston, MA: Pilgrim Press, 1969.
- _____. "I Want to Jump;" "I Am Blessed but You are Damned;" "Hooked in the Heart."
- Johnson, Thomas L. *Twenty-Eight Years a Slave or the Story of My Life on Three Continents*.

London: Christian Workers' Depot, 1909.

Jones, Friday. *Days of Bondage. Autobiography of Friday Jones. Being a Brief Narrative of His Trials and Tribulations in Slavery.* Washington, DC: Commercial Pub. Co., 1883.

Lee Jarena. "Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee" in *Spiritual Narratives*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

McCray, Mary F. *Life of Mary F. McCray: Born and Raised a Slave in the State of Kentucky.* Lima, OH, 1898.