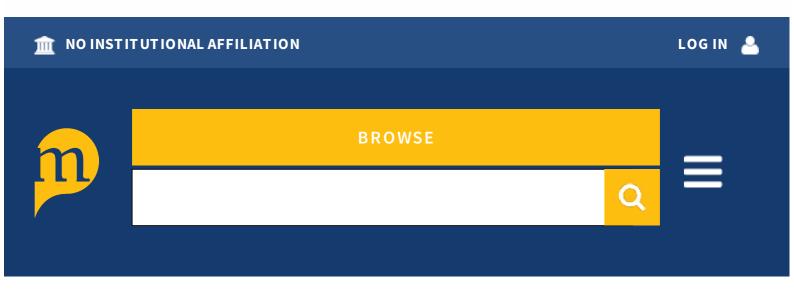
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Loopholes of Resistance: Harriet Jacobs' Slave Narrative and the Critique of Agency in

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# Coopholes of Resistance: Harriet Jacobs' Slave Narrative and the Critique of Agency in Foucault

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# In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

MICHELLE BURNHAM Loopholes of Resistance: Harriet Jacobs' Slave Narrative and the Critique of Agency in Foucault Located in the exact center of Harriet Jacobs' i86r slave narrative, Incidents in the Life of a Shve Girl, is a chapter entitled "The Loophole of Retreat." The chapter's title refers to the tiny crawlspace above her grand mother's shed, where Jacobs hides for seven years in an effort to escape her master's persecution and the "peculiar institution" of slavery which authorizes that persecution. This chapter's central location, whether the result of accident or design, would seem to suggest its structural significance

within Jacobs' narrative. Yet its central location is by no means obvious, for "The Loophole of Retreat" goes
just as easily unnoticed in the middle of forty-one unnumbered chapters as it becomes—after careful
enumeration—potentially quite prominent, as the hinge which balances twenty chapters on either side. It is
almost as though this chapter is hidden in plain sight, much like the body of Harriet Jacobs herself, who
finally discovers the safest hiding place to be the most obvious one imaginable: in her own grandmother's
house and in the center of her master Dr. Flint's domain. What Jacobs calls her "loophole of retreat" thus
provides a strategic site for concealment even as it masks its own location. This spatial loophole becomes
for Jacobs a means for escape from slaveiy, and her manipulation of textual loopholes in dominant
discourse allows her narrative to escape, as well, from the constraints which her culture necessarily
imposes on it. It is this tactical operation of the loophole which I intend to explore not only in Jacobs'
narrative but, through her Arizona Quarter!} Volume 49 Number 2, Summer 1993 Copyright © 1993 by Arizona
Board of Regents ISSN 0004-16154Michelie Burnham text, in the work of Foucault. This loophole operation
opens up possibilities for locating and imagining resistance in any discursive structure , including ones
which—as Foucault would sometimes have it—effectively exile autonomous agency by producing and then
recuperating their own opposition. Critiques of Foucault, including those inspired by Lacanian and
pragmatist the ory, have all solved this dilemma only by ignoring its very basis: Foucault's important critique
of the individual subject as s/he is produced by institutional structures. The figure of the loophole permits a
reconfiguration of agency that, unlike the psychoanalytic rescue of agency, accommodates Foucault's
critique of the subject and also integrates, rather than elides, the problematic and overlooked category of
the structure. I. CONFESSION AND CONCEALMENT Lydia Maria Child introduces Harriet Jacobs' slave narrative
with a gesture ofunveiling that promises a subsequent revealing. In hereditor's introduction, Child
confronts the difficulty of offering to the public Jacobs' account of sexual oppression, by claiming that "this
peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with
its monstrous features, and I willingly take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil withdrawn."'
Child's the atrical, almost voyeuristic, gesture suggests that what will be revealed is not only the body of the
desirable female slave, but the truth about that body, and about the Southern institution of slavery that has
inscribed it. A similar language of unveiling proliferates throughout Jacobs' own text, in her recurrent
promises "to tellthe truth" (53) and to "not try to screen [her]self" from "the painful task ofconfessing"
(54). Jacobs' larger project is to lift the veil of deception that hangs between the North and the South, and it
is therefore for her Northern listeners—even those whose "ears are too delicate to listen to" (4) the details
of her story—that Jacobs constructs the personal history which was denied her in the South. By confessing
$the\ history\ of\ her concealed\ body, she\ constructs\ that\ body\ as\ a\ text\ for\ "the\ wome\ n\ of\ the\ North"\ (1)\ who, in$
this sense, function as confessors for Jacobs. Thus her narrative appropriately ends with a statement that
suggests on the one hand freedom, and on the other self-display: "when I rode home in the cars I was
Loophoíes of Resistance55 no longer afraid to unveil my face and look at people as

#### MICHELLE BURNHAM

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