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CONFESSIONAL NARRATIVE:
THE RHETORIC OF GUILT IN AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in
the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By
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* * * * *

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1996

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ABSTRACT

The autobiographical literature of America's heroes, following in the tradition of Benjamin Franklin, establishes a pattern of self-gratulation that tends to eliminate "errata" from recorded lives. The resulting legacy of success narratives fails, however, to explain a remarkable, though frequently overlooked, pattern of self-censure latent in American life-writing. So pervasive is this antithetical mode of autobiography, in fact, that it critiques the canon that excludes it and contests received notions of "American" identity.

By examining selected non-canonical texts that admit to openly deviant behavior, "Confessional Narrative" seeks to create a critical space for confession in American autobiography. Proposing a rhetoric of guilt, I define confessional narrative as any first-person account, shared with an audience, of events for which the narrator expresses both self-accusation, in the religio-judicial tradition of confession, and self-justification, in the autobiographical manner of apology. Embedded in this definition is a curious heterogeneity of intent apparent in the discourse, a simultaneous desire to express and deflect guilt which, I believe, reflects ambivalence on the part of the confession's audience as much as that of its narrator. Additionally, I argue that power inheres in the interpellation of confession, where the struggle for narrative control shapes the identity of audience as well as author, both redefined by their complicity in the transgressive confessional act.
To map this dynamic of guilt onto American expressions of identity, I focus on three textual sites that derive from formative points in a national history: testimony from the 1692 Salem trials; survivor accounts from the 1846-47 Donner Party; and Harriet Jacobs' 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Together, these selections bring into sharp relief issues obscured by major autobiographies and argue for the power of marginalized, multi-ethnic voices to help define a primary mode of American life-writing. By attending to issues of identity, guilt, and power, then, "Confessional Narrative" realizes two kinds of interpretive results: first, in extending the scope of autobiographical theory and, second, in challenging common assumptions behind heroic memoirs of the American canon.
Benjamin Franklin recognizes in the opening paragraph of his famous *Autobiography* that gratitude for whatever "Vanity" a printed work entails is due to God; like him, "I desire with all Humility to acknowledge" here that I owe first gratitude to "Providence, which led me to the Means I us’d and gave them Success."

As to the human means of my success, I am grateful to The Ohio State University, whose two years of fellowship support greatly advanced my study, and to the Graduate School and the Rhetoric and Composition Program of the Department of English, whose awards made my archival research possible. My appreciation extends to the staffs at the Peabody Essex Institute, the Connecticut State Library, the Huntington Library, and the Bancroft Library, who made my visits to those sites both profitable and enjoyable.

In completing this work I have also learned from Franklin that "not a tenth Part of the Wisdom was my own." For the other nine-tenths and more, I have relied on the wise guidance of Andrea A. Lunsford, Thomas Cooley, Steven Fink, and, particularly, James Phelan, whose example sustained me in the process. I remain in their debt.

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Years ago, my father marked the beginning of my graduate study with the gift of a dictionary, which he inscribed, in Franklinesque fashion, "To Chris: With love--a book of words! The second path to wisdom after fear of the Lord." I finish this book of words in his memory.
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CHAPTER 1

MEA CULPA, METACULPA:
THE CONFESSIONAL TRADITION IN AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The human in Western society, Michel Foucault proclaims, has become "a confessing animal" (History 59). Foucault's pronouncement imparts a curious teleology to a culture whose Judeo-Christian scripture already records among the earliest human words the slant admission, "The woman you placed at my side gave me fruit from the tree and I ate" (Genesis 3:12). An apple for Adam, the same for Eve, a pear for Augustine, a ribbon for Rousseau: the fruits of sin, apparently, are confessions. And the fruits are as plentiful as the deeds, a virtual Babel of self-condemnation from the individual and collective urgings of guilt. The mighty and the obscure, the saint and the sinner, the guilty and often even the innocent join their voices in a regular litany of confession as diverse as it is comprehensive. Foucault insists, "[O]ne confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles," publicly, privately, spontaneously, reluctantly, repeatedly (History 59). Confession, apparently, is ubiquitous and unavoidable.

Ubiquitous, unavoidable--and un-American. Or so it would seem from a canon that apotheosizes Benjamin Franklin and Henry Adams and their trenchant aversion to disclosure. What Foucault invokes, this pair obscures, Franklin by his determined refusal
to divulge any private transgression and Adams by his Jamesian conviction that if he is a
man to whom nothing has happened, he likewise has nothing to confess. The texts of
these dissemblers, who clothe their guarded disclosures in the guise of confession, have
bred a skewed image of American autobiography, one that privileges heroic memoir
rather than candid confession. Over against these canonical texts and their larger-than-life
success stories, however, rises a very human record of self-censure straight from the
confessional tradition. Replete with weakness, transgression, and failure, a communal
history of troubled conscience emerges from the tortured diaries of colonial Puritans, the
guilty secrets of a parade of rogues and "fallen women," and, assuredly, the pool of
voluminous guests appearing on today's television talk shows. This counter-paradigm exerts
an influence pervasive enough to critique the canon itself and, at an even more
fundamental level, refute received notions of "American" identity. Persistent, ultimately
undeniable, confession presents an antithetical form of American expression, explained by
neither the Franklinesque legacy of self-aggrandizement on the one hand nor the current
project of autobiographical theory on the other.

In fact, confession suffers from a self-perpetuating cycle of neglect in
contemporary autobiographical studies. Critics fail to examine its expression in part
because they have not yet articulated a theoretical base from which to interpret it, and,
with little attention to the practice, they have no incentive for developing an adequate
theory. The loss to American autobiography is twofold. First, the omission continues to
ignore a confessional mode latent even in Franklin and his heirs, thereby endorsing an
image of their autobiographical practice that is incomplete at best. Second,
proportionate attention to the heroic further mutes the confessional voices of the
marginalized; it justifies literary neglect of those whose race, gender, or economic status precludes their participation in the myth of the "self-made man." Thus, both canonical and extra-canonical texts issue a mute appeal for the recuperation of confession; this dissertation responds by proposing a model of confessional theory and its application to American autobiography.

Multiple in its manifestations, confession is ever a forum for the individual. In confession, the self speaks. The various disciplines recognize a mutuality of filiation between confession and selfhood, a mutuality made evident in the historical co-development of Western confessional practice with the notion of the unitary self. Theology conceives a system of penance whose primary subject, by the sixteenth century, has become the "conscience of the individual" stirred by "internal feelings of guilt," suggests Thomas N. Tentler in his *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (345). Sociohistorical studies, such as the essays of Mike Hepworth and Bryan S. Turner in *Confession: Studies in Deviance and Religion*, in fact relate the emergence of personal conscience, individualism, and exchange economy to the Tridentine reformulation of religious confession (12). Jeremy Tambling's *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject* presses the point even further, arguing that in the Eurocentric view, "confessional practices help to create the private individual, measured by deep interiority and feelings, and by a personal history" (2). Likewise, in founding psychoanalysis, cure by confession, Sigmund Freud issues the dictum that verbal self-confession is necessary in order to create consciousness (Reik 205). Extrapolating from the psychological to the literary, Terrence Doody in *Confession and Community in the Novel* declares every confession "an act of individuation," a "deliberate and self-conscious act of self-
definition" through which a person attempts to explain the continuity and integrity of his or her life (21, 22). At the cultural and individual levels, then, confession may be constitutive of the self, an exercise of self-knowledge and an appropriation of power, the power to name one’s self, one’s experiences, and one’s world.

If theology, sociology, psychology, and traditional literary theory find in confession ample evidence for the autonomous, self-named "I," post-structuralist theorists find equal cause to interrogate its putative claims as originary site for the stable subject. From Foucault's treatment of confession in *The History of Sexuality* comes the articulation that confessed "truth" and the independent "subject" who enunciates it are no more than ironic illusions (62), that confession itself is a constraint imposed by the "polymorphous techniques of power" (11). Tambling, who projects a Foucauldian interpretation of confessional discourse, posits that if confession is "constitutive of the self" it is so only in the sense that "[t]hose addressed by a confessional discourse are 'interpellated,'" created in the confession, and thereby "made to think of themselves as autonomous subjects, responsible for their acts" (2). Denial of a coherent presence within the subject by no means diminishes the discursive impact of confession, of course. Indeed, Dennis A. Foster postulates for *Confession and Complicity in Narrative*, his Lacanian examination of guilt, a confessing narrator characterized not as an autonomous being but as a speaker who attempts to "objectify the self--to present it as a knowable object" through language (10). Hence the amorphous subject must confess not only for the sake of self-knowledge, as a traditional perspective would argue, but for the sake of self-creation. Persons are compelled to confess, to formulate and disclose an intimate assessment of their identity, in order to find themselves in the response of the Other (Dennis Foster 9).
Confession thus reveals itself as a singular application of the autobiographical act, the utterance of a subject of vexed autonomy who interrogates itself and attempts to name itself in relation to a recognized audience. Because the confessional act effects self-fashioning through a process of judgment, different confessional modes evoke different forms of self-definition. Historically, in the West, two pertinent lines of development for this self-defining process co-exist, one which specifically associates confession with the admission of guilt, either religious or legal, and one which associates it more generally with autobiography. The project of confessional exegesis which I propose for American autobiography explores the rhetorical territory shared by these two confessional traditions. Additionally, it argues from evidence produced under both rubrics that confession is an identity-defining act not just for those who confess but for those to whom they confess. Confession is indeed interpellative. It binds speaker to hearer in a co-dependency of roles that distinguishes confessant from confessor at the same time that it unites them. Sharing the act, narrator and audience share its effects: whatever selfhood--and whatever guilt or innocence--the confessional disclosure reveals. The results impinge not only on autobiographers themselves but on the audiences who first elicit and then interpret their life histories.

At its foundation, then, the attempt to posit a theory of confession requires an appreciation of the bifurcated genealogy from which it springs. Roots of the West's far-flung confessional diaspora lay in the Greco-Roman legal code under which confession led to a definition of the self as criminal. From the start of the Common Era, however, this secular code was greatly complicated by the imbrication of a religious imperative. Indeed, the religious identification of oneself as Christian, one's profession of faith, was,
for the first three centuries, simultaneously confession of illegal activity. Christianity initiated, in Julia Kristeva's perceptive characterization, a religion that transformed identity into discourse, the discourse of "persecution and victimization," language that at once authenticated the speaker and delivered him or her over to death (129). Greek versions of the acta of Christian martyrs, for instance, commonly employed the verb marturein, a legal term meaning "to bear witness," which the Latin translated martyrrium dicere (Allison Elliott 22-24), often in conjunction with confiteor, the standard formula for admitting legal guilt. The etymological equation between "bearing witness" and being "martyred," like the synonymous substitution of "confession" for "profession," bears out Kristeva's observation that the avowal of faith simultaneously authenticated and condemned the criminal-convert (129).

Once Christianity was decriminalized early in the fourth century, the hegemony established by the European Church further complicated confessional practices by confounding the secular with the religious. In fact, the entangled systems of secular and canonical law that characterized pre-industrial Europe made the identity of criminal virtually indistinguishable from that of sinner. The aura of divinity that cloaked Greek and Latin heads of state, as well as the subsequent association of clerical with juridical power in the Christian era evinced a Burkian continuity in the sacralization of the secular and the secularization of the sacred (7). Religion and law presented mutually reinforcing systems of theory and praxis. Theologians argued specifically, for instance, that a priest sat in judgment over the individual and his or her offenses on the model of a Roman tribunal (Bossy 23). And in practice, priestly confessors regularly exhorted their
penitents to admit their crimes to legal authorities, while secular punishment imposed as a result of criminal confession was seldom meted out without first offering the guilty party an opportunity for sacramental confession.

The various inducements for confession, too, were not infrequently applied by one authority system in conjunction with the other. Although practices varied from country to country and the English system differed considerably from that of continental Europe, from the sixth to the twelfth centuries both secular and religious authorities relied on trial by ordeal to provide evidence of guilt or innocence by "reproducing the crime on the visible body of the criminal" (Foucault, Discipline 55). With its promise of divinely sanctioned revelation, the flesh-made-word of ordeal neatly inverted the incarnational paradigm at the same time that it conflated judgment with punishment. Initially conceived as a concrete reconstruction of the charge under investigation (a sort of "let the torment fit the crime"), ordeal gradually evolved into a narrative reconstruction of the deed under oath, a "repetition of the crime through the word" (Reik 109). As sworn testimony supplanted more dramatic evidentiary procedures, the ordeal’s element of physical agony was readily transposed to torture in the Continental economy of justice, where it became the means of producing confession rather than tangible evidence (Reik 112). The progression from one methodology to the other, in both secular and ecclesiastical courts, was institutionalized in the thirteenth century, when the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 at one stroke proscribed the use of trial by ordeal, a legal prohibition, and prescribed annual private confession, a religious obligation, and when Innocent IV in 1252 gave license for torture in the prosecution of heresy as sin and crime.
The interposition of the Inquisition in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries notwithstanding, the means of confessional coercion gradually moved from external to internal as the Middle Ages drew to a close. At the same time, theology evidenced a corresponding movement from external and social notions of sin to internal and private, although John Bossy contends in "The Social History of Confession in the Age of the Reformation" that the Roman Church never denied the social dimension of sin or the public, ritual nature of reconciliation (24). Certainly by the 1551 Council of Trent and the subsequent widespread adoption of Charles Borromeo's confessional box, confession had been significantly psychologized and privatized, with a focus on conscience as internal forum and sin as malicious intent discovered through introspection (Hepworth and Turner 149). A culture of shame and expiation was evolving into a culture of guilt and remorse (Tentler 52).

As emphasis on interiority increased against the backdrop of an expanding social universe, the Renaissance produced a self-regulating subject conscious of its own guilt and capable of externalizing its unique identity via confession. At the hands of a rising, increasingly literate middle class, public confessional rites gave way to private practice. Likewise, with the deregulation of religion, sacred and secular applications became increasingly divergent. Substantial distinctions in purpose and audience, never entirely erased even in medieval usage, were reaffirmed. Sacramental confession, conceived as a rite of reconciliation uniting the offender to God and neighbor, effected an instantaneous transformation, theologians reminded the faithful; by declaring oneself a sinner, one was immediately, \textit{ex opere operato}, forgiven and sanctified. Juridical confession, by contrast, was designed as a means of establishing guilt and confirmed the speaker in his or her
identity as criminal. In terms of narrator-audience relationship, too, the traditions diverged. Religious practice had long since moved from the public forum of exomologesis to private auricular confession, and the audience was now limited to a single confessor strictly bound to silence (Tentler 95). Legal confession, on the other hand, required a public audience who then ratified (and, in some cases, imposed) the penalty incurred (Tambling 39).

By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, religious confession in Protestant denominations was fully interiorized and subsumed under the fundamental identification of the self as justified sinner, while criminal confession had become more than ever a requirement for legal prosecution. Jurisprudence encouraged confession, whose articulation cleanly eliminated ambiguity from legal proceedings and absolved authorities from responsibility for criminal prosecution (Hepworth and Turner 92, 125). The nineteenth-century elimination of public execution in the British system effectively transposed the focus from gallows to docks, just as the Reformation's impulse toward secularization had shifted the focus from confessional to interrogation room. Under the new regime, Hepworth and Turner note, "public pain is replaced by private discipline which seeks to cure the criminal of his [or her] disposition toward deviant behaviour" (90). As Foucault observes, with customary irony, the move was now complete: where religion—the spiritual, acorporeal—had once sought by penance to punish the body for sin, here law—the secular, sensible—sought to re-order the mind and soul defiled by crime (Discipline 16).

What remains constant, of course, even when the religious classification of sin is distilled out of the legal classification of crime, is the common element of self-censure;
either modality elicits self-defining statements of guilt. Parallel to the historical co-
development of the religious and judicial modes, however, runs an antithetical strand of
confession, one which invites a greatly ameliorated self-definition: autobiography. If
religion and law evoke statements of self-condemnation, autobiography counters with self-
glorification; its narrator is less sinner or criminal than hero. Founded like the other
traditions of confession on what Georges Gusdorf in "Confessions and Limits of
Autobiography" terms an "involution of consciousness," autobiography enjoys a much
more benign history than its ecclesiastical or judicial counterparts and accords its
narrators the liberty to seek their own audience among the reading public, without
recourse to moral or legal authority (32). Nevertheless, theorists note the shared lineage
of autobiography and confessional disclosure, often tracing the former to the Confessions
of Augustine. Not only does Robert F. Sayre name conversion narrative the ancestor of
modern autobiography (14), for instance, but specialists of American life-writing,
beginning with William C. Spengemann and L. R. Lundquist in 1965, recognize that
giving a personal history implies "subjecting some part of [one's] private self to public
evaluation" (502). In the three decades of criticism since then, James M. Cox (1971) has
joined "autobiography and confessional writing" in the opening phrase of his influential
"Autobiography and America" (252); Susanna Egan (1984) has argued from a structuralist
perspective that the confessional experience approximates "the very act of autobiography"
(9); and John D. Barbour (1992) has asserted that all autobiographies involve the
evaluating and exposing of past offenses (10).

That Augustine's paradigmatic life story should manifest by turns characteristics of
religious and legal confession and somehow initiate Western autobiography suggests a
complementarity between confession and autobiography far richer than the usual
classification of the former as subgenre of the latter would indicate. The conventional
delineation of confession as but a single, discrete mode of autobiography typifies what
Elizabeth W. Bruss decries as a "Linnean lust to define and categorize" on the part of
past autobiographical theorists (1), and it is with good reason that the traditional
distinctions among apology, memoir, and confession within the "genre" of autobiography
fall before the contemporary insistence on generic indeterminability (Abbott 14). Coming
of age in a post-structuralist era, today's autobiographical critics preside, in William L.
Howarth's apt phrase, over "an unfederated domain" (84), yet one whose "deepest
intentions," according to Gusdorf, remain "directed toward a kind of apologetics . . . of
the individual" (39). Because of its attempt to assess the self, all autobiography is at root
confessional, and this fundamental characteristic resorbs whatever elements of "apology"
and "memoir" it may in addition contain. Although "autobiography," despite its recent
coinage, becomes the terminological phenotype for any narrative in which the authorial
"I" is both speaker and main character, it safely preserves the fundamental characteristics
of the embedded confessional genotype.

Moreover, suggests Tambling, in the modern era autobiography becomes "the
confessing method the subject is invited to use" (8). As a secular--both extra-religious
and extra-legal--means of claiming an identity, autobiography defines its own accusatory
and excusatory uses for confession. Where religious and legal articulations serve
primarily as modes of self-accusation, autobiography reserves to the narrator a greater
degree of control over evaluation of the actions represented and, as a result, often serves
as a mode of self-gratulation. Furthermore, unlike religio-judicial confession that
traditionally enjoins its practitioners to "tell the truth," autobiographical confession encourages artful self-dramatization as "a normal and legitimate form of self-presentation" (Berggren 137). Today the dismissal of autobiography from the realm of history and the open admission of what Patricia Meyer Spacks calls its "necessary fictions" validate the author's right to a confessional re-interpretation of his or her life, with the privilege of a hero's role in it (55). The "aesthetic rewriting of crime" pushes the limits of confession into poetry, fiction, and criticism (Foucault, *Discipline* 68) and allows the narrating "I" to name itself as it pleases even while it deconstructs past selves in the telling (Tambling 53-54).

Confession, then, emerges as the progeny of mixed lineage, a socio-literary hybrid of religious, judicial, and autobiographical grafting. Just as its historical evolution and its individual expression support Clifford Geertz's insightful association of "blurred genres" with areas of self-reflexivity (166), so they also demonstrate the need for close attention to the rhetorical construction of confessional discourse. Certainly Guskoff's insistence on an "anthropological imperative" in autobiographical study applies with special force (38), for confession is as much the product of a culture as it is of an individual. Thus, to an understanding of confession as self-defining process must be added as overlay the parallel process of communal definition. Hepworth and Turner rightly configure confession as an interactive practice, a performance utterance "socially constructed by actors in a context" (14). Tambling goes even further, arguing that proprietorship of the narrative itself is ambiguous, shared as it is between confessing narrator and receiving audience (3). If, as he asserts, the "history of confession is that of power at the centre inducing people at the
margins to internalise what is said about them" (6), then no form of confession is ever autonomous, and its articulation must be interrogated as a site of shared identity and shared guilt.

To turn, then, from historical to rhetorical analysis, it is necessary to examine more specifically the interpellative nature of confession and the occasion it presents for the deployment of power. First, to address the obvious: confession is unavoidably interlocutionary. After all, says a pragmatic Stephen Spender in "Confessions and Autobiography," "confession must always be to a confessor" (121). No confession is made in a vacuum, not even an admission made to an internal audience or one addressed in secrecy to "God," either as independent being or embodiment of communal values. It remains uncertain whether confession establishes truth or selfhood, but certain it is that confession establishes relationship, that it exists only in the hailing of an audience.

Doody defines the act itself in terms of this relationship: "A confession is the deliberate, self-conscious attempt of an individual to explain his nature to the audience who represents the kind of community he needs to exist in and to confirm him" (4). Much like a Boothian author calling forth an implied reader (10), Doody continues, the narrator of a confession "must make his confessor as he makes his confession, because in no case before us is the community simply a donnée" (14). By bringing forth interior judgment for exterior confirmation, confession establishes a narrator-audience relationship that is critical to its meaning.

Precisely because of this relationship, issues of power lie at the heart of confession. Confessional articulation never establishes a parity between narrator and auditor, nor does it necessarily reinforce the usual "imperialism of discourse" that accords
power to the narrator as repository of knowledge (Dennis Foster 13). While it is arguable that the confessing agent originally controls the material he or she is to impart to an audience, the exteriorization of this knowledge through confession effects a radical displacement of power in the act of revealing discrediting material to the Other. Inherent in confessional dialogue is an inequity whereby the confessing speaker tacitly appeals to and submits to the ear who passes judgment on the tale. Foucault’s epistemological archaeology delivers its cautionary tale here. To acknowledge such an imbalance in the narrator-audience relationship is to admit that the production of so-called "truth" by means of confession is "thoroughly imbued with relations of power" (Foucault, History 59). Confession, in Foucault’s terms:

> unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply an interlocuter but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile. . . . (61-62)

"[T]he agency of domination," he continues, "does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing; not in the one who knows and answers, but in the one who questions and is not supposed to know" (62).

The very vocabulary of confession marks the way the act confounds the usual expectation of instrumentality, Tambling suggests, for the term "confessor" grants agency not to the one who confesses but to the one who hears and passes judgment (67). Thus the evocation of confession is a highly politicized exercise in which the more powerful induce the less powerful to internalize and verbalize social articulations not just of sin or crime but of themselves (Tambling 13). The so-called "compulsion to confess" which theologians ascribe to the work of grace, jurists to the operation of self-interest, and
traditional autobiographers to the assertion of individuality reveals the extent to which cultural voices may be interiorized; admissions of guilt derive less from introspection than from introjection.

Indeed, in Western practice, confession has functioned since its inception as a mechanism of social control. Admissions of guilt work to reinforce the community's authority to define morality, legality, normality; confession presupposes the prior articulation of social standards whose violation the confessant admits. Hepworth and Turner, following Emil Durkheim, recall that any means of identifying offenders performs the "latent function of demarcating and strengthening the conscience collective or common culture of the group" (19). Likewise, sociologist Howard S. Becker applies the principles of labelling theory, whereby the group creates deviance by defining rules and then branding rule-breakers as outsiders (9); society first produces deviance and then coerces the deviant to confess. Ironically, both harsh and lenient responses to confession can reaffirm social standards. Confessions that result in punishment attest to the power of the dominant group and serve, at least in principle, as deterrents to further violations, while confessions that win pardon attest to the clemency of social authorities and welcome the confessant back into the community, with the subsequent resumption of its standards (Hepworth and Turner 23). "[W]hen the author of a confession speaks against himself," conclude Hepworth and Turner, "he speaks for the law" (93).

Arrogation of power in confession, however, is always in danger of folding over on itself. It is no accident that Mardi Gras inaugurates Lenten shrift (Tambling 162) or that rioting and insurrection have not infrequently accompanied gallows confessions (Foucault, Discipline 61). The marginalized and oppressed wield dangerous power in a
carnivalesque economy, precisely because, as Barbara A. Babcock observes, "[w]hat is socially peripheral is often symbolically central" (32). Lying as they do "at the sensitive intersection" between the interior freedom of the individual and the exterior operation of public order (Hepworth and Turner 15), confessions are always transgressive, not only in the deviance their content reveals but in their potential for disorder. Marginal themselves, they expose the fissures in the dominant ideology, evidence of Foucauldian tectonics making such eruptions unavoidable (Tambling 7). Confession is intrinsically plural in its functioning, subversive and polysemic in the Bakhtinian sense; as Mary Douglas warns of any ritual, it issues no promise of homogeneity in its message (*Purity* 166).

Given the complexity of the act, then, the relationship between narrator and audience can hardly be characterized unilaterally for all confessional circumstances. Rather, the co-evolution of religio-judicial and autobiographical traditions preserves significant differences with regard to the deployment of power. Admissions made to ecclesiastical or legal agents cede considerable power to confessors, who enact various authoritative roles. Primarily oral practices with direct narrator-audience confrontation, these confessions operate a "penal liturgy" that celebrates the fabrication of supposedly voluntary expressions of guilt before a community capable of assigning blame and forgiveness (Foucault, *Discipline* 47). By contrast, autobiographical confessions, generally products of a literacy that both creates and distances its audience, sacrifice the certainty of punishment or absolution for the semblance of authorial freedom. A confessing narrator here may assume the guise of power, particularly as the divulgence of privileged if incriminating material can itself be an act of domination. Dennis Foster
even speaks of the forceful "allure" of confession, which seduces its readers into collaborating in the interpretive act (11). But this power too can collapse onto itself, subject to Foucault's warning that the "dissemination of the procedures [of confession] represents a multiple localization of their constraints, a widening of their domain" as the impulse to confess—and condemn—is internalized (History 63). Ultimately, says Freud, "'self-betrayal oozes out from all pores'" (qtd. in Reik x), and the narrating self becomes both accuser and target in a narrative of projected guilt (Kazin 43).

Clearly, then, confession is a sociologically and culturally anomalous act, a vastly overdetermined phenomenon invoked for the contrary purposes of affirming and oppressing the person of its narrator, reinforcing and subverting the authority of its audience. Its complexity calls for a multivalent analysis of the various rhetorical strategies for making, receiving, and interpreting a public narrative of guilt. This communal self-interrogation must itself submit to a cross-examination that probes the dynamic of power in the linkage between individual and social identity, individual and social apportionment of blame. Schematically, investigation of this characteristic triad—identity, guilt, and power—presupposes the reciprocal relationship established above between autobiography and confession: all autobiography is to some extent confessional, and all confession is to some extent autobiographical. The self speaking reflectively and retrospectively about its life founds the two forms of expression; they are products of the same kind of interior examen. Even if no overt admission of guilt results, autobiography remains what Tambling calls, after Barthes, "the confession that need not speak its name" (106).
Given the richness of such complementarity, I propose an examination of autobiographical confession under the rubric of "confessional narrative." While such an expression immediately risks becoming as overdetermined as either parent-term, a descriptive definition clarifies its distinctive meaning: confessional narrative manifests itself as a first-person account, shared with an audience, for which the narrator expresses both self-accusation (in the religio-legal tradition of confession) and self-justification (in the autobiographical tradition of apology). Embedded in the definition is a curious heterogeneity of intent on the part of the author, a desire to express and at the same time to deflect guilt. The articulators of confessional narrative confess to actions of some magnitude but typically reject the religio-judicial labels of "sinner" or "criminal." Likewise, they refuse to relinquish the power of judgment that belongs, under the ethic of religio-judicial confession, to the confessor-audience and instead invoke the ethic of autobiography, which accords that power to the autobiographer.

Because confessional narratives are co-produced as self- and community-defining statements, their analysis requires equal attention to confessant and confessor. Questions of why people confess are here subsumed into questions of who confesses and to whom they confess, that is, who they claim themselves to be in relationship to what audience. With Tambling, who argues that a search for the reasons why actual individuals confess sets up false assumptions rooted in ahistoricity (2), and with Hepworth and Turner, who call for an end to such "pointless speculation" (38), the analysis of confessional narrative turns the attention, first of all, from indeterminable personal motives to social consequences. Secondly, since the "truth-value" of confession is a product of cultural context rather than objective content, this mode of interpretation addresses neither
referentiality nor comprehensiveness as issues in and of themselves. The "truth" of a confessional narrative derives less from what is said--how accurately or how completely testimony reflects historical events--than from the gestalt which defines it. A cultural etiology of guilt is founded not on individual agency exhibited in past actions but on collective agency demarcated in the act of confession itself.

As such an interpretive focus makes clear, the bilateral, autobiographer-audience construction of meaning postulated by narrative theory has far-reaching ramifications for the confessional text. James Olney's observation in "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment," that "[t]he reader of autobiography must participate in the process of discovering or creating a self in autobiography," validates the most interactive of confessional constructs (24). A confession draws readers into "a discursive exchange," says Dennis Foster, rendering them "complicit with the motivations of the writer," for a "confessor listening cannot maintain a position outside of a confessor speaking" (13-14). The model dates to Augustine, who invites his divine confessor to contribute to his self-fashioning, but it is critically re-written by Rousseau, who confesses to all heaven and earth with the egalitarian assumption, in Spender's reading, that the confessor is "as good or as bad as himself" until "[e]ven God is implicated" (121). Like the gatherers at an execution, who, Foucault insists, "must to a certain extent take part in it" (Discipline 58), those who elicit and receive confession are caught up in it. Guilt ensnares narrator and audience alike. If innocent and yet coerced into confession, narrators are cast as victims, Girardian pharmakoi atoning for the guilt of the community (78); if guilty, narrators "can unsettle the listeners," who "traffic in the sins of others" (Dennis Foster 3). Since both audience and author participate in the self-creation that is autobiography, since both
confessor and confessant participate in the self-evaluation that is confession, then the by-product of confessional narrative is nothing less than collusion in the verdict. Because experiential knowledge of the transgression remains, of course, property of the perpetrator, audience members contribute only to the verbal re-creation of the deed, not its original commission; nevertheless, by sharing the act of confession, both parties share in whatever guilt—or innocence—it evokes.

The inherent democracy of a theory which distributes guilt and innocence among confessants and confessors suggests that the logic of confessional narrative has important application to American autobiographical texts. Confession before the masses would seem especially compatible with a critical heritage whose patriotic rhetoric has dubbed autobiography "the most democratic province in the republic of letters" (Howells 798) and proclaimed it part of "our daily vernacular" (Sayre, "Autobiography" 147). To date, however, confession itself has been universally underrepresented in studies of American life-writing, and despite the unprecedented attention autobiography has received in the past three decades, no historical or rhetorical analysis of its practice yet exists.

Unquestionably, the profusion of studies sparked by Roy Pascal's 1960 publication of Design and Truth in Artobiography lays all the necessary groundwork for such an analysis. Theoretical texts by now have multiplied to the point where they can themselves be cross-classified. Some scholars, reading the critical corpus chronologically, delineate an early generation of criticism (from the 1960s and 1970s) that defines broad characteristics of the field and a later generation (generally from the 1980s and 1990s) that identifies specialized variations. In some cases, these variations determine subgenres defined by the author's membership in a particular group and lead to discussions of forms
as divergent as spiritual journals of New England Puritans (Shea, whose 1968 publication predates comparable analyses by two decades), slave narratives (Andrews, 1968; Sekora, 1987; Frances Foster, 1979), Native American oral histories (O'Brien, 1989), and women's autobiographies (Heilbrun, 1988; Jelinek, 1986; Valerie Smith, 1989; Lanser, 1992). In other cases, critics delineate thematic variations that might focus, for instance, on the prophetic (Couser, 1979), the millennial (Fichtelberg, 1989), or the transformative (Dorsey 1993) as motif in American autobiography. Still others, such as Ruth Ann Banes, offer complex matrices that map theory and historical development onto form and content (5). Even with such meta-analyses available, however, these same critics admit that expanded study has had the perverse effect of increasing rather than decreasing their dissatisfaction with the still-limited scope of their investigations, with the gaps that persist in textual choice and analysis.

Confession has clearly fallen into these gaps. It receives little more than passing mention: Spengemann and Lundquist devote five pages to autobiographies of the "Disenchanted" who admit to actions "outside the limits of culturally approved behavior" (515, 511); Estelle C. Jelinek discusses a form she terms the "female confessional" that developed out of seventeenth-century captivity narratives (70); Sayre names as examples of autobiographical variety "the deceitful apologies of scoundrels" and "the utterly artificial 'True Confessions' in magazines of romance and pornography" (147). In fact, if critics explore confession at all, it is usually only to relegate it to the status of a minor subgenre, after the fashion of Lawrence Buell, who groups criminals' confessions with military and frontier exploits under the general category of adventure stories (48).
Certainly no one has explored this material in depth or argued for confessional narrative as a rhetorical practice invoked by a wide range of autobiographers, a distinctive mode that cuts across collapsing generic taxonomies.

That theorists have overlooked confessional material in their analysis of American life-writing is all the more surprising in light of critical insistence on the breadth of autobiography. It is a field of "permeable boundaries," affirms Albert E. Stone, one that bleeds into diary, journal, memoir, poetry, virtually any form of literary self-reflection (*Autobiographical Occasions* 4). Olney explicitly argues for the inclusiveness of the adjective "autobiographical" precisely so that no part of a practice "almost as varied as its practitioners" be excluded by boundaries too narrowly drawn ("Versions" 250, 236). In reality, however, the force of canonical autobiographies that downplay confessional material focuses critical notice on texts foregrounding readily acceptable value decisions rather than admissions of guilt or questionable application of standards. Disregarding what Alfred Kazin characterizes as a demand for confession on the part of readers (41), literary critics routinely pass over confessional narratives in their enthusiasm for other candidates in the American canon.

The canonical consensus in fact nominates Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (its title a universally accepted literary anachronism) as the paradigmatic American life story. So apparently does Franklin. Writing near the end of a life he considers rich and well-lived, he turns his optimistic practical wisdom to the lessons of bootstraps pedagogy and offers his life as exemplum, intimating in his prefatory letter that members of "Posterity" might like to compare his story to "their own Situations" and thus find it "fit to be imitated" (1). On the surface, his record seems to offer an eminently suitable model, fair
and faithful to life; he includes admission of failure as well as success in the attainment of virtues, especially that problematic Humility, and he discloses his involvement in numerous financial and political schemes during his rise to international fame. Nonetheless, his self-portrait remains very much a memoir of a public figure rather than confession of a private one. His preemptive application of authorial privilege in the selection of incidents for inclusion is telling. Sayre notes, for instance, that "the young Franklin’s way with his girls and the adult Franklin’s way with girls, women, and other men is scarcely mentioned" ("Autobiography" 158). In fact, he not only edits out substantial portions of his life but revels in triumphs scored by concealing truth or withholding information from opponents, enough for Larzer Ziff to declare secrecy verging on duplicity a dominant motif in the Autobiography (Writing 86-87). When the Franklinesque pattern is duplicated in subsequent generations, spawning what Spengemann and Lundquist call "autobiographies of fulfillment" (510), what gets told, in U. S. Grant, Frederick Douglass, Margaret Fuller, Booker T. Washington, Black Elk, Malcolm X, Maya Angelou, is much more a story of successes won than offenses owned.

To the degree that Franklin and his literary heirs are canonized, devotion to them as representative texts eclipses an equally strong counter-tendency in American life-writing, the compulsion to "tell all" that confessions manifest to a pronounced degree. Recovery of the confessional tradition introduces a vital complement to the history of discretion traced by most canonical autobiographers. In doing so, it not only recuperates confessional material latent in their texts but also helps correct what Paul John Eakin observes as an errant tendency "to generalize prescriptively on the basis of a limited canon of literary masterpieces," here limited precisely by its definition of a proper
autobiography (xxiii). Furthermore, since autobiographers serve as a primary resource for cultural as well as literary analysis (Spengemann and Lundquist 501), confessional narrative helps revise fundamental notions of American identity. Confessional theory suggests that by eliciting and receiving confessions, by passing judgment on confessants, the American public partakes in the creation of a shared confessional identity. If, as Banes argues, autobiography records a history of "self-conceptions which are formed in accordance with culturally acceptable images of self" (2), then confessions are as reflective of national identity as are the proud success stories of the autobiographical canon. Confessional narrative in fact traces a cultural chronicle of author-audience complicity that implicates American society in each narrator’s verdict.

A social institution with a personal voice, confession becomes that cultural chronicle one narrative at a time. Similarly, a theory of confession is made tangible and concrete only in the experience of those who invoke it to tell their stories. The potential of confessional narrative as a rhetorical mode reveals itself best in the context of particular histories, lives of individuals who feel the need to confess. Thus, to concretize confessional theory and evaluate its material application to American identity, this project selects for examination three specific sites of autobiographical record: legal and paralegal testimony from the New England witchcraft trials; contemporary and retrospective accounts of the Donner Party expedition; and Harriet Jacobs’ pseudonymous autobiography, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. It is no accident that only the last of these has won, and only very recently, canonical recognition, or that as a group they are atypical life-texts, articulated by marginalized individuals. As such, they represent prime candidates for confession, for voicing what the community finds radically offensive.
radically Other, in them. Each in its own way verbalizes what Sidonie Smith calls the "destabilizing strategies of the 'others'" whom the hegemony has attempted to exclude and so demonstrates its aptness as a model of confessional narrative (Subj ectivity 20).

As sociologists have discovered, most of the women and, less typically, men brought to trial as witches in seventeenth-century New England are objects of misprision and maltreatment long before they are charged with diabolic wrongdoing. The chronology and extent of their persecution are well documented, as are its economic and social roots, but to date the phenomenon and its records have remained almost exclusively the domain of historians and anthropologists. Despite the insistence of Jane Kamensky, who submits that the one claiming witch status becomes, by her confession, "in the fullest seventeenth-century sense, an author, an inventor and teller of her own story," the Salem documents have inspired little interest among rhetoricians or literary theorists (298).

Three centuries after the event, there has yet been no narrative analysis of its testimony, nor any integrated attempt to read its records through an autobiographical lens. Benign literary neglect here is all the more surprising because two related Puritan autobiographical traditions, religious confessions and the legal confessions embedded in execution literature, have received, and richly repaid, close attention. What is more, research in the social sciences confirms witchcraft as a language-driven phenomenon. Although popularly associated with deed (the witch's maleficium), it is in fact identified theologically by word, a compact with Satan. It thrives on verbal threats and accusations (Demos 246), its surest proof is self-confession (Karlsen 13), and its prosecution involves repeated exhortations to confess, which hound the accused from earliest indictment to final execution sermon.
Strangely compelling, even three centuries after the fact, the Salem documents invite contemporary critics to become, like Cotton Mather, "Ear-witnesses" to witchcraft in colonial New England ("Brand," Burr 267). Examined under the rubric of confessional narrative, the rhetoric of witchcraft reveals a compound of religious and legal confession found nowhere else in American jurisprudence—or American autobiography. Admittedly, these women and men confess in interrogations and declarations that yield relatively brief life histories with a necessarily limited focus; nevertheless they manifest all the elements of autobiographical statement and offer a paradigm for confession with the overt assumption of guilt. Embedded in testimony from this singular site are defining traits of confessional narrative, and the close relationship evident between accused witch and accusing community offers an ideal test case for the degree of narrator-audience identification that confession evokes.

Like the witchcraft trials of Puritan New England, the Donner Party expedition of 1846-47 presents a rich but neglected resource within American autobiographical history. Despite the fascination it holds for the public, it too has been left largely to historians, whose statistics preserve only its skeletal outline: by the time the last party member was rescued, forty-two of the eighty-one had perished, thirty-five of them as a direct result of their four-month encampment in the Sierra Nevada, where the living resorted to cannibalizing the dead in order to survive. Stripping the story of human detail, social scientists effectively eviscerate its autobiographical interest; one reads it as "a case study of demographically mediated natural selection in action" (Grayson 223), while another chronicles the meteorological extremes of the winter, "the most severe season which ha[d] been experienced since the present American occupation" (Waggoner 351). In contrast to
such stark analyses, remarkable first-person records provide a rich field for the critic of confession. On a practical level, they permit me to examine much more extended narratives than those of the witchcraft trials and to perform a diachronic comparison of immediate and retrospective accounts. On a theoretical level, they provide an increasingly secularized mode of confession, one removed from overtly religious structures and generated as popular literature rather than legal testimony.

The plurality of Donner accounts considerably broadens the focus for a study of confession and its polyvocal expression. Widely read, the Donner histories offers evidence of a tacit confessional relationship between cannibal-survivors and nineteenth-century American readers, a dialectic that pardons the transgressive behavior of an isolated community and iconizes it in a growing body of legends of the American West. Where the witch-victims of New England are threatened with execution, the Donner survivors are anointed spokespersons for expansionism, their rhetorical triumph evidence of a potential realignment of power in the cultural production of confessional narrative. Moreover, as the stories are told and retold for over sixty years, they present an opportunity to examine the ways in which "second-hand autobiographers," vicarious participants in the cannibal act, share in the dissemination of confession.

The mid-nineteenth-century America that sanctions the Donner accounts authorizes a radically different kind of confession in the slave narratives sponsored by its abolitionist leaders. Each one an open admission of criminal activity and, especially after passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, invitation to immediate prosecution, these narratives comprise a distinctly American mode of life-writing and provide some of the strongest examples of confession-driven autobiography. Within this tradition, Harriet Jacobs'
Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself (1861) merits special attention as the only full-length antebellum slave narrative to be written by a woman. Unfortunately, however, this very distinction has tended to circumscribe critical analysis, which, especially in the initial stages, frequently limited itself to issues of gender. Even today, her account is often read in one of two ways: against the largely male tradition of the slave narrative (Andrews, 1986; Braxton, 1986) or against the female tradition of sentimental romance (Moody, 1990; Nudelman, 1992; Winter, 1992). Interrogating Incidents under the rubric of confessional narrative offers the opportunity to expand the critical approach to Jacobs with a reading that crosses both gender and genre lines.

Embedded in Incidents are multiple tensions that refract its author's private agonies over a broad spectrum. As mother, Jacobs appeals for close identification with her audience, but as fallen woman she reveals the irreducible distance between "pure" (white) woman and "fallen" (non-white) slave. As ex-slave, she demonstrates heroic strength of body and will, but as author she remains politically bound under patronizing white sponsorship. As autobiographer she claims exoneration for her past, but as confessant she submits it to an almost exclusively white readership for judgment. A combination of direct and indirect confessions, made by narrator to characters within the story and by author to abolitionist audiences, provides the means for a richly layered description of confessional dynamics. Additionally, Jacobs' text complements the Salem and Donner documents in format and expression. It provides a self-reflexive retrospective from the pen of a single autobiographer where the others offer the perspectives of multiple authors, and its tone differs considerably from that of the repentant Salem witches or the unapologetic Donner narrators. At the same time, Jacobs'
revelations confirm the need for communal as well as personal catharsis and by the introduction of a minority voice present important evidence for the ubiquity of confessional narrative in American autobiography.

This idiosyncratic confessional assemblage offers the opportunity to discover in the literature of America's marginalized a template for confession that can be applied even to the canonized. By design, the texts represent formative moments in American history, sites frequently invoked in the articulation of a national identity, the Puritan era of seventeenth-century New England and the nineteenth-century re-creation of the nation in terms of free citizenry and free territory. Additionally, all three selections derive from episodes to which some residue of guilt adheres, some recognition that the religious persecution and racial oppression they involve, explicitly or implicitly, call into question a professed tradition of freedom and equality as American ideals. Chosen with calculated effect, the somewhat sensational nature of texts dealing, in turn, with witchcraft, cannibalism, and miscegenation brings into sharp relief issues of guilt and accountability obscured by the major autobiographies; the selections then become both necessary and sufficient for purposes of defining confessional narrative. Without imposing a teleology (much less the entelechy that Myra Jehlen perceives in the relationship of America's culture to its continent [25]), I present them not to argue for a chronology of confessional narrative but rather for its persistence throughout the history of American letters.

A thorough examination of these related but independent rhetorical sites promises results in several areas. First, the investigation will help resurrect specific individuals whose marginalized status effectively buries most of them in anonymity, both in life and in history. Second, such analysis can work to recreate the cultural context that reduces
these individuals to witch, cannibal, and slave: the proleptic Puritan panopticon that
guarded colonial New England, the "hecatomb" of genocide on which America's
expansion was founded (Todorov 133), the three hundred years "on the cross" to which
slavery bound its captives (Fogel and Engerman 3). Third, it will pose, if not answer,
theoretical questions that reflect major preoccupations of contemporary criticism:
questions about genre, in a form cohabited by "history" and "literature"; questions about
referentiality, in a tradition where "truth" forms the basis for a "good" confession;
questions about subjectivity, in a study of the symbiotic relationship between confessant
and confessor, author and audience.

But broad questions of critical theory are here addressed in the concrete, so I turn
to the first of my textual sites, the documentary legacy of Massachusetts Bay. Not only
does the legal testimony of that community's witches win them historical primacy among
the confessants of my project, but it also provides a paradigm for my subsequent
investigations. I look to the outcasts of Salem to begin my rhetorical examination of
identity, guilt, and power, the triad at the heart of every confessional narrative.
CHAPTER 2

VISIBLE SAINTS, VISIBLE SINNERS:
THE CONFESSIONAL COMMUNITY OF SALEM

When, in Cotton Mather’s apocalyptic characterization, "the Prodigious War made by the Spirits of the Invisible World upon the People of New England" hit Salem in 1692, the Barker family of neighboring Andover was ill prepared to withstand attack from either within or without (Wonders 36). Their instinctive response, almost their only recourse, was confession.

First to succumb was Mary, who, "after Several Questions Propounded & Negative ans’rs Returned" during an examination on 29 August, "at last acknowledged" herself to be a witch, having bartered her "Soul & body" to win the devil’s pardon for her sins. Since their deal, he had appeared to her in the guise of a fly, bidding her afflict various "poor Creatures," the women who stood before her as accusers. Now repentant and certain that "She was left of god & all good people," in the presence of the Essex County Justice of Peace she signed her confession with her mark, much as she had signed the devil’s own book.

Three days later, on 1 September, Mary’s 14-year-old cousin, William, Jr., likewise interrogated, also admitted "Exercising acts of Witchcraft." Although he "Could Not Rememb’r" tormenting the three who accused him, he did furnish such specifics as
the size, shape, and costume of the "black man" who invited him to dip his finger into the proffered inkhorn of "Red Stuf" and set his mark to paper in return for a "Suite of Cloaths [clothes]." Confessing evoked fearful emotion in William, who found it necessary to interrupt his testimony momentarily, experiencing "Such a load Upon his Stomach that he Could Not Speak" when he attempted to describe the illicit baptism that gave him over to the devil "for Ever & Ever." The record likewise shows some strain on the part of its transcriber, who first reported that William had not "been in the Snare of the Divel above Six Years" before correcting the notation to read "Six days." At last, after revealing the names of several co-conspirators, William too set his mark to the deposition and entered it into official county record (SWP 73-74).

Compelling as the two cousins' statements may have been, they were far outdone in expansiveness and detail by the testimony of William Barker, Sr., whose oral and written confessions supplied conclusive proof of hellish intrigue. Three years previously, he admitted in court on 16 September, when the devil had first appeared and demanded his allegiance, Barker had responded out of need. He had a "greate family" and although he "was willing to pay Every Man his owne," the "world went hard w'th him"; yet here was a dark creature with "Cloven foot" offering to "pay all his Debts" and promising "he Should live Comfortably." In this Barker's confession, not only is there confirmation of a satanic covenant signed in blood in the devil's book, but also of a radically democratic plot, hatched by "about a hundred" witches at a great meeting near the minister's house, a site purposefully selected "by reason of the peoples being devided & their differeing w'th there Ministers." Soon after the bread and wine of this sacramental conclave, Satan announced his plan to "abolish all the churches of the land" and "pull dwone ye Kingdom
of Christ." Under his rule, Satan promised, "al his people should live Bravely" and "al persons Should be Equal," there being "no day of resurection or Judgment And Nither Punishment nor Shame for Sin." Laying claim to the countryside from Connecticut to Massachusetts at the sound of a trumpet, these witches--Barker put their number at 307--were "much disturbed" at the turn of events that threatened to expose them in Salem. He himself, however, professed admiration for the efforts of the afflicted to rout the devil's minions and averred that he had "not knowne or heard of one Inocent person taken up And putt in prison." Now "hartyly Sorry for W't he ha[d] done," Barker promised "to Renounce the Divel & al his works" with the help and prayers of those before him (SWP 65-66).

As if his ample courtroom testimony were not explicit enough, Barker, Sr., elaborated on his "sin and Apostasy" in a written confession recorded by the Reverend John Hale in A Modest Inquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft. Here Barker recalled his gainful labor in a field of hay and English corn while, under the terms of his compact, devils assumed his spectral shape to afflict his neighbors. Not content with tormenting individuals, though, hell's grander design sought to gain a foothold in the minister's own home and from there to wreak havoc in the village and beyond, to "Destroy the Church of God, and to set up Satans Kingdom, and then all w[ould] be well." But instead, begging pardon of heaven, the magistrates, and "all Gods people," Barker turned his "heart and hand" to the destruction of "such evil worship," hoping yet by the prayers of the faithful to earn "the sure mercies of David, and the blessing of Abraham" promised to the contrite of heart (419).
By September of 1692, when their community had already endured eight months of witch-hunting frenzy, Essex county audiences found little to startle them in the Barkers' dramatic disclosures. Typical, rather, in their content and expression, the family's revelations serve as pericopes of the confessional experience at Salem, where more than fifty accused witches from six to over seventy years of age left permanent record of their purported consort with the representatives of hell. Even while these self-proclaimed sinners offered little of personal history and even less of verifiable referentiality, their testimony is readily identified within the confessional tradition. Shaped by the bilateral, author-audience construction of meaning that lies at the heart of confessional narrative, their accounts display, on the part of confessants, a characteristic ambivalence that both accepts and denies responsibility for their actions and, on the part of confessors--magistrates, ministers, families, neighbors, and friends--the operation of a community at work in creating and confirming not only its own identity but that of its members. Product of a culture thoroughly infused with theology, the Salem testimony externalizes the conscience of an Eden faced with its fall and offers a serendipitous opportunity to examine confessional rhetoric at the intersection of the ecclesiastical and the judicial. Thus the Salem witchcraft trials provide a unique point of departure for a discussion of confessional narrative within the tradition of American autobiography.

In order to appreciate the confessional utterances that emerge from the distress of besieged Essex County, it is important to examine both their context and content. Procedurally, this study addresses the former by first establishing a socio-historical framework for the witchcraft confessions enunciated and officially preserved in the county seat at Salem. Next the work moves from group norms and cultural codes to personal
expression and specific texts, in whose structure and subject matter a paradigm for confessional narrative can be traced. Here I present evidence for the assignation of contextual identities, the tension between individual desire to claim innocence and corporate need to assign blame, and the lines of force radiating from the confessional act. Finally, to complete the circle of analysis, I apply insights derived from the witchcraft confessions to the development of confessional theory, where the Salem testimony soundly confirms the socially-constructed nature of autobiographical truth.

The Archeology of Confession at Salem

The case for 1692 Salem as an archetypal confessional territory rests on a welter of self-denunciation generated by a community in crisis. Fiercely personal, New England's war against Satan and the satanic self proved capable of transforming the autobiographical impulses of believing Puritans into tortured confessions of demonic covenants, subversive sabbaths, and malefic torment of the godly. To attempt now, three centuries after the last witch was slain, to understand this diabolical syzygy of religious, legal, and personal purgation requires attention not only to the particular history of Salem Village but also to two broader cultural phenomena. First, it is necessary to recognize seventeenth-century New England as a confessional economy whose discourse practices in meetinghouse and courtroom mapped a guilt-based program of personal and corporate identity-formation. Second, it is important to contextualize the witchcraft crisis that erupted within this Puritan enclave, in terms of both a demon-rich belief system and a colonial mission radically re-defined during the last quarter of the seventeenth century.
The Salem of this cultural moment weaves a confessional topology high in density and rich in documentary artifact, an ideal testing ground for the theory and practice of confessional narrative.

Salem's legacy to autobiography resides in a protracted sequence of accusation, examination, trial, and restitution long recognized as a singular site in the chronicles of American past. What Chadwick Hansen in 1989 called "that most grotesque episode in our colonial history" ("Andover" 138), John M. Taylor in 1908 had already denounced as "the last outbreak of epidemic demonopathy among the civilized peoples" (254) and Charles W. Upham in his classic 1867 *Salem Witchcraft* had termed "the fullest, most memorable" and "pre-eminent instance and demonstration" of the "supposed iniquity" of witchcraft on American soil (1: 327). Reference to the episode has been hyperbolic from the start. Sermonizing in midst of the outbreak, Deodat Lawson named Salem "the first seat of Satan's tyranny" (54), while Cotton Mather denounced his congregation for the "Defiling Abominations" that had delivered them to "the very belly of Hell" (Wonders 87, 86). Since then, any attempt to characterize the trials or their results has invariably conceded the near impossibility of explaining a phenomenon acknowledged to be, in the words of Ziff, "a cultural aberration" that eludes description (*Puritanism* 249).

Without question, the Salem episode was unique in scope and intensity. Although colonial records attest to a history of official witch prosecution dating from the 1647 Connecticut case of Alse [Alice] Young, in a single ten-month period the Salem courts more than doubled the number of trials and executions recorded during the five previous decades. Only at Salem was a 100% conviction rate achieved; only at Salem were jails filled to overflowing; only at Salem did accusations extend from base to tip of the social
pyramid. Conduction by a court of questionable legitimacy and without legislative authorization, the trials deviated radically from standard legal practice; they ignored customary evidentiary procedure, blinked at unlawful seizure of property, and countenanced at least modified use of torture. Among the ironies of the affair was its controversy of expectation with regard to confession—no one who confessed was executed, while no one who refused to confess was spared—and with regard to future practice—even as the trials were ending, the Privy Council was erasing the crime of witchcraft from the legal code of the colonies, giving Salem the dubious distinction of having conducted the last witchcraft executions ever to take place in North America. Nor did the notoriety of the incident subside with the conclusion of the trials. In their wake came acts of official reparation to the victims and their descendants as well as ritual statements of regret from judges, jury members, and accusers, the only known public apologies ever offered for the prosecution of witchcraft.

The legendary fury of Salem’s witch-hunt generated a profusion of documentation unsurpassed in colonial America’s judicial history, material that richly supports the rhetorical study of confession. Estimates of the caseload vary, but historians agree that the courts interrogated an inordinate number of accused practitioners and among them achieved an unusually high rate of confession, enough for Richard Godbeer to calculate that Salem yielded ten times the number of confessions generated by all previous New England witchcraft cases combined (205). Although actual trial testimony is not extant, extensive pre- and post-trial records permit thorough investigation into the web of interrogations, indictments, verdicts, and death warrants surrounding the confessions. Complementing these official records are accounts of the trials embedded in sermon
literature of the day and in Cotton Mather's *Wonders of the Invisible World*, which originated in homiletic material from late summer of 1692, as well as the secular interpretations advanced by Thomas Brattle's open letter of September or October and Robert Calef's *More Wonders of the Invisible World*, composed in 1698 although not printed until 1702. Additionally, Hale's *A Modest Inquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft*, published posthumously in 1702, comprises what Hansen believes to be "the most reliable contemporary account" ("Andover" 150). While John Putnam Demos laments that the records are "riddled with gaps and defects," the sheer volume of material guarantees a high degree of accuracy in the textual reconstruction achieved by cross-mapping available documents (*Entertaining* 57).

Fascinated by the event, scholars have in fact subjected the documents to nearly endless rounds of analysis until, according to Demos in 1970, every detail has been "widely canvassed" and the story become "well and widely known" ("Underlying Themes" 35). While historical study has yielded cogent insights, however, it has bred its own "gaps and defects," particularly on the personal level. Demos himself acknowledges that traces of human personality have been lost to statistical analyses (*Entertaining* 57), an admission that Richard P. Gildrie echoes as he appeals for attention to actual testimony in his tricentenary essay on the trials (276). Disciplined to read events for their broad social significance, historians of Salem have focused on the belief system that produced the accusations and the legal system that spawned the trials, an approach that largely overlooks the victims who responded to the combined weight of religious and judicial expectations with confessions of guilt.8

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Because it reveals a gathered people as well as an individual soul, the confessional self-definition that issues from this Salem community must be appreciated as the product of its own cultural synergy. Bred to a self-awareness influenced less by the Renaissance principle of humanism than by the Reformation doctrine of predestination, seventeenth-century New England found in the polar absolutes of depravity and redemption cause for hyper-sensitivity to inner experience (Haller 83). Trusting the interpersonal word to confirm evidence of the soul's election or damnation, community members voiced the fruits of their habituated introspection to each other; they recognized the self as saint or sinner by discovering that self to the congregation. A colony unto themselves, a community closeknit and homogeneous by divine decree, Puritans inhabited a world wherein personal and communal identity could develop only in relation to each other. Not only was every action cast in moral terms, but the action of every individual was weighed for its impact on the group; so interdependent were personal virtue and corporate mission that all were encouraged to reprove each other for the common good (Konig 130). The tightly articulated latticework of covenants that bound each citizen, says Perry Miller, "first with God, then with each other in the church and again in the state" imposed on New Englanders the twin obligations of personal disclosure and public censure in a confessional economy that fused eternal salvation for the individual to earthly success for the group (Errand 148).

In a territory thus theologized, the antithetical drives that Edmund S. Morgan identifies with New England's dual insistence on unity and purity take their place among multiple paradoxes of its cultural ecology (Puritan Dilemma 4). The Puritan errand in fact encoded a variety of unresolved "dilemmas," to borrow Morgan's term, that
supported the tensions inherent in confessional narrative. Precept valorized the individual, especially the individual conscience, yet stressed the social, demanded conformity in behavior and belief, and predicated self-definition on community identity. Ministers preached equality before God but relegated women, slaves, and Native Americans (and, certainly, children) to inferior status under church and civil law. Canonical teaching decreed that sin could be traced directly to Satan as fountainhead of all evil but at the same time held everyone responsible for his or her own wrongdoing. Theology insisted that no one could presume to know the election or damnation God had eternally predestined for the individual soul but nonetheless awarded congregations voting rights that allowed them to admit candidates to membership among the saints. Such paradoxes existed just below the surface of the Puritan state, and it is not surprising that where the tensions of their theology broke through, this People of the Word became a people of confession, seeking through self-articulation to define themselves individually and corporately.

Attuned to discourse both divine and human, in a society where the personal was always already the religious and the political, Puritans regularly invoked confessional rhetoric to claim their selfhood. In ecclesiastical terms, they predicated church membership, and thus full participation in the body politic, on the public confessions that became a hallmark of seventeenth-century New England congregationalism. These texts, long associated with the birth of American life-writing, originated in intense, prolonged introspection, often recorded in diary or journal, the fruits of which were submitted to the church in ritual declarations that required their narrators to insert themselves into the Puritan tradition through a well-defined morphology of conversion. The clergy
interrogated each candidate for further evidence of election, and then the congregation voted to decide one's status as member of the Visible Saints. While a favorable response was not guaranteed—scholars in fact disagree as to the likelihood of acceptance, and Morgan argues that the fear of unworthiness and rejection kept many from even attempting candidacy ("New England" 421)—the churches were enjoined to exercise their voting prerogative with charitable discretion. Indeed, the practice of judicio charitatis worked deftly, as Baird Tipson demonstrates, not only to win acceptance for most candidates but also to reassure the elect that communal human judgment was effectual sign of divine election (469).

Under this confessional rubric, a prescription Kathleen M. Swaim rightly associates with "Puritan assumptions of every [person] as storyteller and every [person] as contributing reader and interpreter of others' stories," the community could validate its own authority by entering actively into the life histories of every one of its members (36). Practically as well as theologically, the group took a proactive stance toward the generation of confession, with clergy editing printed manuals and candidates supplying recurrent oral models; negative examples existed, too, as evidenced most dramatically by the prosecution of Anne Hutchinson for heretical confession. Expression tended toward the formulaic, of course, as it would in the witchcraft trials; always there was the danger, says Daniel B. Shea, Jr., of reducing an autobiographical act "to testifying that one's experience ha[d] conformed, within allowable variations, to a certain pattern of feeling and behavior" (91). Close analysis demonstrates that the personal persisted, however, often in the admission of specific transgression (Caldwell 64). In fact, notes Lawrence W. Towner in "True Confessions and Dying Warnings in Colonial New
England," "[w]here a person's particular sin was known, he or she was expected to confess openly before being admitted, or readmitted, to membership," so the narratives commonly conflated profession of faith with confession of sin (527). Repudiating their transgressions in the very act of owning them, the candidates affirmed not only God's power to save but also, less eschatologically, the church's power to establish ethical norms and religious orthodoxy, to define the ideal Puritan self.

In matters of law, as in matters of faith, this community validated its authority by actively encouraging self-disclosure. The Puritan state codified its sin-crime continuum in a legal system founded, not unexpectedly, on a synthesis of English common law and Biblical imperative, product of a New England John M. Murrin calls uniquely suited to "mobiliz[ing] guilt and shame for socially approved purposes" (154). Enacted in 1641, the Massachusetts Body of Liberties created a judiciary with a widely diffuse basis of authority that, David Thomas Konig argues in Law and Society in Puritan Massachusetts: Essex County, 1629-1692, helped strengthen the bonds of mutual affection strained by the demands of daily life (xii). Courts operated with lay jurists, the "magistrates" or "assistants," chosen by popular vote, lawmakers doing double duty as judges for court sessions; verdicts were decided by these men or, particularly in capital cases, by juries of twelve males, solicited countywide, in open courtrooms before crowded audiences. Thomas H. Breen and Stephen Foster explicitly identify the participatory nature of Puritan justice with a high sense of communal responsibility under which the ideals of love and order demarcated strict limits of acceptable behavior (12, 20).

When individuals transgressed these boundaries, the legal system afforded an effective means of adjudicating difference and punishing offenders. Although based, like
English practice, on the presumption of innocence, trials also relied on the presumption of conscience; if guilty, defendants were expected to admit their crime, for, as Murrin recalls, the proper Puritan response to wrongdoing was "confession and repentance, not denial of guilt" (188). Where necessary, especially in capital cases, judges regularly employed the sternest of means to extract confessions from suspects; magistrates fired leading questions without benefit of counsel, and while "inhumane, Barbarous or cruel" treatment could not be used to coerce self-incrimination, laws permitted its seasoned application in order to expose the names of accomplices once guilt had been established, a provision that would prove more than useful in the Salem trials (Body of Liberties 539).

The number of those who complied with group expectations of confession was evidently high, and self-accusation was typically introduced either at the trial itself with the entering of a guilty plea or subsequently, as part of the sentence or at the time of appeal (Towner 528-29). Moreover, confession might be integrated with punishment, sometimes even constituting the whole of a court-ordered penalty (Powers 202). Indeed, while fines and corporal punishment were not infrequent, as New England's infamous stocks and whipping posts attest, public confession was perhaps the most common form of punishment. Courts often directed felons to stand before the meetinghouse and recite pleas for forgiveness, or, alternatively, papers detailing the offense might be attached to the body of offenders so that the community could "judge their fitness to participate anew in the moral economy of the town" (St. George 303). When the crime was severe enough to warrant death, executions were accompanied by sermons and "last dying warnings" in the Tyburn tradition of gallows confessions, which invariably admitted criminal intent and professed gratitude to the community that rightly judged and justly punished (Towner 43)
The public nature of such execution ceremonies and the reception their testimonies won in published texts confirm for Ronald A. Bosco their role as "a primary vehicle for social comment" under a theology that read collective transgression in every individual sin (162). Through these shared confessional experiences the community welcomed lawbreakers back into the fold before executing them and simultaneously reasserted its norms by defining itself against the criminal who had violated them.

"[F]or reasons of state as well as soul," concludes Towner, the Puritans had a need to exact confession" (536). In religion and law, the same confessional rhetoric that proclaimed self-identity validated the authority and thus the identity of the body that elicited the confession. Because sin lay at the root of the Puritan creed, every claim to selfhood had sin as its basis. The Visible Saints, turning their gaze inward, discovered sin in themselves; turning the gaze outward, they discovered it in others. In a society whose members were all acknowledged sinners to one degree or another, confession of the private made public necessarily became, in David D. Hall's emphasis, "the New England ritual" (Worlds of Wonder 184). While ostensibly providing a common vocabulary for self-construction, then, the practice actually served to authenticate the group and create personal identity by corporate fiat, for it was the group who defined the saint, the sinner, the model citizen, the criminal, and by a jury of peers conferred those labels on particular individuals. To speak the self was to speak an identity imposed from without and recognized from within.

Applied to the Salem trials, the Puritan machinery of communal self-definition explains the centrality of confessions in a world poised to defend itself against witchcraft, a complex criminal act defined on three overlapping matrices. Popularly, it was
recognized by deed, the witch's maleficium; theologically, it was identified by word, a heretical pact with the devil; and politically, it was defined by treasonous intent, plotting with Satan the overthrow of the state. Responsibility for policing such insidious evil rested with the whole community, which defined and supported conspicuous mechanisms of prosecution (Kittredge 372). In Massachusetts, following the Mosaic injunction "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (Exodus 22:18), the 1640 Body of Liberties classified witchcraft as a hanging offense, the second of twelve "Capitall Laws": "If any man or woeman be a witch, (that is hath or consulteth with a familiar spirit,) They shall be put to death" (544). Even when revocation of the Bay charter in 1684 nullified this statute, behind it stood nearly a century of witchcraft legislation in England, where from 1604 it had been a felony to "'consult, covenant with, entertain, employ, feed, or reward any evil & wicked spirit'" (qtd. in Thomas 443). Salem did not face its diabolical enemies alone, then, nor was it undefended by tradition when it stood to do battle with hell.

Ever conscientious in their inscription of public and personal history, Salem's Puritans left a clear record of this battle when it erupted as demonological crisis in 1692. The year-long affair originated in the dark of winter, in the home of Samuel Parris, minister to Salem Village (now Danvers), after his nine-year-old daughter Betty and his eleven-year-old niece Abigail Williams, along with friends Ann Putnam and Elizabeth Hubbard, began experimenting with magic and fell prey to symptoms no natural remedy could cure. Pressed, then, for the names of their supernatural afflicters, the girls identified Tituba, a West Indian slave who served the Parris household, and two women from the village, Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne. After formal charges of witchcraft had been filed against these three on 29 February, accusations spread widely and wildly.
ignited by the hysterics of the afflicted girls and fueled by a host of confessions. Meanwhile, its charter revoked, the colony could do no more than arrest the accused until the newly appointed royal governor, Sir William Phips, arrived in mid-May and convened a special Court of Oyer and Terminer to "hear and determine" the cases of over a hundred suspected witches. Trials commenced on 2 June; executions, a week later. With strong although not univocal support from the clergy, court reconvened at the end of the month, and prosecution continued throughout the summer until, by 22 September, scores awaited trial, nineteen had been hanged, and one, Giles Corey, had been pressed to death under the old practice of peine fort et dure for refusing to "put himself on the country" and allow the court to decide the charges against him (David Brown 218).

Meanwhile, however, opposition to the trials had been building as the unprecedented numbers of accused strained the jails and courts, challenges to the reliability of evidence proliferated, and recantations cast doubt on the veracity of confessants. Finally, in response to mounting concern, voiced most emphatically by Increase Mather in *Cases of Conscience Concerning Evil Spirits Impersonating Men* and Brattle in his open letter to Boston, Phips in October ordered arrests halted and the court suspended. He reappointed four of its judges to the newly-constituted Superior Court of Judicature to dispense with outstanding cases, which it heard in January 1693. Forty-nine defendants were there acquitted, and the three who confessed won Phips' immediate reprieve. In April he released all remaining prisoners and issued a general pardon. Communal dis-ease was slow to dissipate, however, and "so powerful was the sentiment that a public wrong had been committed," observes Marion L. Starkey, that public fasts were proclaimed in atonement and procedures for formal exoneration of the accused were
initiated (267). Among those admitting personal complicity were Samuel Parris, divisive minister of the Salem community; Samuel Sewall, member of the Court of Oyer and Terminer; and, eventually, Ann Putnam, ringleader of the afflicted girls. Survivors and relatives of the executed continued to press for restitution and reinstatement of reputation, until the General Court in 1711 reversed the attainder on most of those convicted and awarded £500 to various families involved. Two decades after the outbreak, the process of purgation had come full circle; Salem had discovered the last of its witches, and Satan without was recognized in the shame within.

Interpretation of these raw data within a confessional schema relies on a variety of contexts. The historical framework reveals a New England beset, in its fifth decade of colonization, by a plethora of foes both natural and supernatural. On the theological front, the colony battled heterodoxy and dissent, checked only imperfectly by proscription, imposed on heretics like Hutchinson or Roger Williams, and prescription, best exemplified by the doctrinal hair-splitting of the 1662 Half-Way Covenant. Projected onto the social, Puritan obsession with homogeneity inflated ethnic differences among settlers and manifested itself as outright xenophobia with regard to French traders, black slaves, and Native Americans. Especially after the bloody outbreak of Metacomet's War in 1675, recurrent border raids not only heightened fears of attack to the degree that James E. Kences posits a pervasive "invasion neurosis" but also strained the colony's financial resources with the need for military stores (174).

Economically, the colony had been smitten too by periodic droughts and floods, fires and epidemics, including a particularly deadly outbreak of smallpox in 1690 (Carden 205). Paradoxically, in the eyes of many, even what material success could be
wrought from such circumstances loomed as a scourge to be withstood. The clergy, especially, viewed with dismay the lure of mammon and the fruits of worldly prosperity: emergence of a mercantile class and increasing social striation; inter- and intra-generational conflict over land distribution and community leadership; and dispersal of members from tight-knit towns into the ever-beckoning wilderness. The complexities of commodity exchange threatened to breed spiritual contagion and declension among a people told more and more stridently that they had lost their common purpose and, with it, their divine protection.

Its moral and physical defenses breached, Massachusetts suffered politically and socially, suggests Dennis E. Owen, the same sense of invasion that it feared theologically (286). Certainly the apparatus of state ideology found itself increasingly under attack once Charles II had ascended the throne and in 1684 quashed fifty years of transatlantic self-rule by revoking the Bay’s charter. James II, Charles’ successor, further circumscribed Puritan autonomy by subordinating all northern colonies to Sir Edmund Andros, royal governor of the newly-configured Dominion of New England. Its legal system over-ridden, its land grants annulled, its purity compromised—the Act of Toleration having mandated recognition of all Protestant sects—the City on a Hill faced the loss of its very identity (Stout 111). Even New England’s homebred version of the Glorious Revolution, the 1689 ouster of Andros, failed to re-establish equilibrium and introduced instead, in Christine Leigh Heyrman’s summation, "three years of chaos under a temporary government unable to deal with the disarray in the colony’s judicial system and military defenses, a serious trade recession, and the continuing threat of French and Indians on the frontier" (57). Precisely in the midst of these unsettled times--political
instability a necessary precondition for witch frenzy (Kittredge 370)—panic erupted in Salem. That the village was torn by internal dissension and bent on winning its own independence from the parent town only compounded the turmoil, which not even Increase Mather’s messianic return from England, new charter in hand and new governor in tow, could forestall.

The collective wisdom of witchcraft scholarship, both historical and anthropological, recognizes in this New England of 1692 the etiology of witch hysteria. Typically, virulent witchcraft accusations erupt, Peter Brown posits, when two conflicting sources of power—one articulate and recognized, the other repressed but none the less potent—clash within a single social ecosystem (21). Christina Lamer specifies Brown’s broad parameters by observing that classic Western witchcraft panic thrives among pre-industrial communities that have achieved a measure of lay literacy, developed a functional legal system, and associated Christianity with a political ideology whose defense is essential to their identity as a nation-state (88). Close historical analyses, in the tradition of Keith Thomas’s foundational *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1929) or George Lyman Kittredge’s *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (1971), track the institutionalized prosecution of witches from the 1484 bull of Innocent VIII and the 1486 *Malleus Maleficarum* of the early Inquisitors through the Reformation in Europe and onto North American shores. They supply, in addition, a genealogy of the typical accusation and profiles of the most likely accuser and accused. The historical corpus demonstrates the evolution of witchcraft from a pre-Christian, folk-based belief system in which magic protects otherwise impotent individuals into a mechanism of social control wielded by an institution, spread not by its practitioners but by its prosecutors, become what Marvin
Harris calls "the magic bullet of society's privileged and powerful classes" deployed in defense of their own status (Cows 239). At the individual level, as Thomas discovers, accusations "easy to make and hard to disprove" enable society, in the name of church and state, to "force the role of witch upon its victims" (576, 525). His observation is aptly applied to Salem's witch frenzy, for New England does not invent its demons but inherits a centuries-old legacy of English and European beliefs, to which it merely contributes the unique socio-political venue, the precise compound of personal and corporate guilt that allows "the Great Wrath with which the Devil Rages" to incite a full-scale confessional mania (Cotton Mather, Wonders 101).

The anthropological study of witch beliefs, a field whose attention to social constructs offers strong support for confessional theory, likewise contributes to an understanding of the specific direction witch prosecution took in Salem. Mary Douglas, who links sorcery with "anthropomorphic ideas of power," asserts that at the heart of witchcraft lie boundary-marking mores; by naming the witch, groups demarcate limits of acceptable behaviour and so clarify the conditions of community membership, community identity (Introduction xxx). However, as Erving Goffman recalls in his study of stigmatization, because identity norms breed deviance as well as conformance (129), witchcraft beliefs threaten the very social order their promotion seeks to reinforce. Here Kai T. Erikson's The Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance is particularly helpful in demonstrating that by "patrolling the outer edges" deviants render a necessary community service, especially in societies unsure of their own identity (196).
His analysis of Salem as just such a society, its mission in jeopardy and its integrity in doubt, reveals a group facing the "reflected images" of its own compromised values and, terrified, branding them witches (23).

As penetrating as such studies may be, however, historians and anthropologists alike acknowledge that in approaching witchcraft they focus on the accusatory structure, for whom both denouncers and courts serve as mouthpieces. Thus, they divert attention from the importance of confession as meet response to accusation and forfeit the potential insights of confessional theory. Despite an embarrassment of published riches on the topic, to a great extent this problem persists even among students of the Salem outbreak, who marshal a tantalizing array of propositions to "explain" the phenomenon. Where early analysts favored religious attributions—Calef blamed the clergy, the clergy blamed Satan, and before long Upham, Salem’s mayor and rehabilitator, was indicting the whole Calvinist ethic—twentieth-century scholars now offer a wide spectrum of discipline-specific readings. Historical analyses range from Hansen’s premise that New Englanders willingly engaged in the practice of actual sorcery (*Witchcraft* x), to Konig’s assertion that accusations served as a vehicle of extralegal power (158-89), to David Hall’s analysis of Puritan religious authority (*Worlds of Wonder* 192-96), and Richard Slotkin’s association of spectral fascination with the trauma of captivity and racial hostility (*Regeneration* 128-45). Among sociological explanations, the seminal work of Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum in *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (1974), with its investigation of local factionalism and emerging mercantilism, remains the best known and most respected, but the scholarship of Demos, himself a descendant of the Putnam clan of accusers (iv), with its cogent blend of statistical and psychological analysis, and
that of Richard Weisman, with its application of deviance theory, enrich the field considerably.\textsuperscript{16} The scholarship is as original as it is diverse: Starkey makes good on her 1949 promise to apply Freudian theory to the accounts of the possessed; Linda R. Caporeal attributes the outbreak to food poisoning from a fungal infestation of rye flour; Ann Kibbey uncovers striking interconnections between divine wrath, demonic afflictions, and the perceived failure of Puritan patriarchs.\textsuperscript{17}

Conspicuous among the insights these analysts provide is the realization that witchcraft prosecution, whether in Europe, England, or New England, exhibits unmistakable biases with regard to gender. Although some temper its effects--Larner, for example, concedes that "the crime of witchcraft, while sex-related, was not sex-specific" (84)--tallies of the known accused reveal a ratio of four females to every male, and David Hall candidly concludes, "Witches were women. Gender is the most reliable of all predictors of who would be singled out and labeled 'witch'" ("Limits" 130). Carol F. Karlsen has earned well-deserved recognition for her exploration of witchcraft as a female phenomenon in \textit{The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England}, where she addresses some of the most interesting issues that underlie Salem's bald statistics: of the 185 accused citizens identifiable by name, 78\% were women; of the 19 convicted and executed, 74\% were women (40-41). She demonstrates that in a full century of New England witchcraft prosecution not only were a disproportionate number of women accused, but that once accused, women were far more likely than men to be tried (48), and that women who "stood in the way of the orderly transmission of property from one generation of males to another" found themselves particularly vulnerable (116). The culture also proclaimed women more verbal than men and, as daughters of Eve,
more prone to sin even in the New Eden, so it is no surprise that confessing too conforms to a predictable gender ratio; of the forty parties whose confessions appear in Boyer and Nissenbaum’s compendium, thirty-two, a neat 80%, are women.

These aberrant yet very human women and men emerge, precisely in 1692, the daughters and sons of a quintessential confessional community. Where scholarship already recognizes their Salem as a site ripe for witchcraft, then, confessional theory recognizes it as a society ripe for confession. Not only do political, economic, and ideological conditions expose them to attack from without, but social, theological, and psychological conditions lay them open to demons from within. The ingrained habits of introspection, personal disclosure, and community judgment that regulate their Puritan life are close at hand when the specter of witchcraft looms. Sinners are then as willing to accuse themselves as their neighbors; saints are prepared to construct elaborate witch-identities in a rhetoric of confession that sacrifices personal truth to other goods. Their errand "into the terrible wilderness of their own inner selves" configures an enmeshed community of confessors and confessants founded on a spirituality of Puritan selfhood easily diverted to dismantling self-identity (Emory Elliott 8).

Confession: Salem’s Autobiographical Idiom

"Yes, I am a witch," admitted Elizabeth Johnson, Sr., to the Salem magistrates. "I gave myself Soul & body to the devil" (SWP 501).

I "sett my hand to his book," declared a distraught Johanna Tyler. "[H]e s’d I should be his for Ever & Ever" (SWP 775).
"We have forsaken Jesus Christ, and the devil hath got hold of us," despaired Mary Lacey, Sr., exposed with her mother and daughter as a multi-generational demonic dynasty. "How shall we get clear of this evil one?" (SWP 514).

By words such as these the victims of Satan's attack on Salem were, one after the next, transformed from ordinary citizens into moral deviants, debased criminals venting their aggressions on hapless victims who found themselves, in the court's standard indictments, "Tortured Afflicted Pined Consumed Wasted and Tormented" by the agency of the damned (SWP 62). While most of the accused maintained their Gospel "Innocencye" even to the death, a surprising number abjured it, forsaking a lifelong hope of heaven for the final certainty of hell (SWP 303). The legacy of these desperate confessants particularizes not only the socio-historical context of 1692 New England but also the theory and practice of confessional narrative. Their testimony confirms the role confession plays in establishing individual and communal identity, the opportunity it affords for the creative deflection of guilt, and the function it serves as a rhetorical site for the exchange of power between confessor and confessant. In the discourse of its demons, Salem ratifies the principles of confessional theory.

The autobiographies of Salem's self-condemned witches emerge, in bits and fragments, from exchanges whose patterned structure and content conform to a readily identifiable schema. A titrate of personal anxiety and corporate guilt, confession during the colony's satanic crisis in fact defines a special variant of what Miller calls New England's "literature of self-condemnation" (Errand 15). Like its parent type, the jeremiad, witchcraft confession purges the communal soul through "ritualistic incantation" easily invoked and immediately recognized (Errand 8). The confessants of 1692 adapt
the homiletic lament over group failure into an "autojeremiad" of culturally-assigned, personally-assumed guilt that completes the circle of blame in Puritanism's spirituality of sin and establishes its own rhetorical idiom. The "confession of American shortcomings" that characterizes the jeremiad becomes, in the mouth of the American witch, personal culpability for communal damnation (Miller, *New England Mind* 26).

A typical confession might begin almost *in medias res* with the straightforward admission of guilt; Mary Osgood's examination, for instance, opens bluntly with "She confesses" (*SWP* 615). In other cases, recalcitrant individuals might initially disavow their complicity, like Sarah Bridges who first "denied" and then "disowned" the charge, but as the questioning continues they too capitulate and, like Sarah, "own" the crime (*SWP* 139). This concession launches the real narrative, a panoramic vision of apocalyptic malefaction. The first portion of this guilt-epic invariably comprises two discrete declarations of wrong-doing, confession of the satanic pact and then of its consequence, the exercise of malefic powers. The beauty of these dual revelations lies in their neat accommodation of the theological to the practical; confessants admit to both demonic covenant and *maleficium*, thereby conceding witchcraft by either definition. The covenant by which Sarah Hawkes turns from God to Satan is easily representative of the first of these. It involves both a written component—the devil offered her a paper, which she signed "by Making a black Scrawle or Mark w'th a Stick as Confermation of the Covenant"—and a rite of initiation—at "five Mile pond" (a favorite liturgical haunt in the confessions), she "Renounced her former baptisme" while "the Divel dipt her face in the Watt'r" (*SWP* 388). Once bound to hell, the witch becomes capable of deadly harm, so confession must next extend to the injuries wrought upon neighbors and kin. Thus Ann
Foster admits having the "gift" of "striking the afflicted downe w'th her eye" (SWP 342), while Rebecca Eames confesses to afflicting Mary Warren ",& an other fayre face" by "sticking of pins" (SWP 280). Often a mere look, covert gesture, or muttered curse suffices to cause injury, but the material weapons of choice also include spears, poles, spindles, hot irons, needles, and crochet hooks, applied either to "poppets" or directly to victims both human and animal.

Anxious to extend the ritual of purgation, interrogators at each examination next demand to know who introduced the confessant to witchcraft and who accompanied her or him to the satanic sabbath, that subversive gathering of Satan and his witch community that Kittredge likens to a "combined business meeting and religious service" followed by "a debauch of feasting, dancing, and wild lust" (243). As each confessant implicates others by claiming to have seen them in attendance at these revels, and as each succeeding band names still more, blame expands exponentially into an ever-widening cabal, and estimates of the number of witches set loose upon the county run to several hundred. Exposing not just one's own sins but those of one's neighbor, confession ensnares the entire community until, their damage done, many statements end as abruptly as they began, interrogations simply lapsing after a final response. Some, though, close with dire predictions about the devil's capacity for revenge, while others come to more peaceful resolution, if not absolution, by appending explicit statements of remorse. The examination Sarah Bridges and several accomplices undergo, for example, concludes, "I am sorry for it pray forgive me & forgivenes they asked w'th plenty of tears whereas they could not Shed on[e] tear before" (SWP 140). Some even evince reconciliation with
community representatives, like Susannah Post, who, at the end of her lengthy confession "was now wiling to renoncce the Devil & all his works: & she went: when bid & begged forgivnes of the afflicted" (SWP 647).

Reiterated and ritualized in testimony after testimony, this narrative of Salem in consort with Satan bred an inherent irony: maximal deviancy, conspiring with hell itself, demanded maximal conformity in expression. Confessants had clear guides for their revelations in the catechesis of heresy and harms that predetermined the means by which they could convict themselves of witchcraft and in the leading questions from interrogators who checked any danger of damaging or contradictory testimony (Upham 2: 401). Originality was limited to what Boyer and Nissenbaum treat as "colorful bits of corroboratory detail" constructed whole-cloth from communal beliefs (Salem Possessed 214). Occasional imaginative features erupted through the formulaic surface with comic, almost Twainian, particulars--about the woman whose pole broke as she flew to her first sabbath and left her clinging to her escort, barely skimming the treetops (SWP 343), or the boy who stripped at the edge of a pond, eager for a swim on a hot summer eve, only to discover Satan ready to pounce and baptize him instead (SWP 509)--but, by and large, narrative standards precluded uniqueness of content, and confessants, often with apparent relief, simply acceded to evident audience expectations.

As purported windows to the witch’s soul, then, the confessions at Salem failed utterly; as reflections of the encircling ethos, they succeeded to perfection. Accommodating the most personal autobiographical impulse to the culture’s ideological imperative, these tortured admissions transformed blameless believers with real life histories into arch-sinners from a mythic drama. And in return for their compliance with
its confessional ethic, a grateful community offered contrite witches the supreme reward: defying all precedent, it refused to condemn any confessant. Although the magistrates never explained this radical departure from prosecutory norm, the practice was implicit in the first hanging of distinctly unrepentant Bridget Bishop on 10 June and became increasingly obvious over successive months that saw fourteen women and six men executed but left all of the confessants alive.19 The conspicuous pattern of condemnation for those who professed innocence and clemency for those who claimed guilt betrayed a community committed less to honest self-revelation than to the endless replication of confession. In Karlsen's terms, expediency had rewritten the autobiographical code: "To accept the community's truth was to deny the self. To assert the self was to suffer the response of a threatened community" (251). For Salem, self-erasure had become the price of personal and communal survival.

Although only a fraction of the accused paid this price, every confession, by re-writing a life-story, dramatically demonstrated the power of the group to define the individual. So forceful, in fact, were community norms that many of the accused apparently believed their own guilt; there is near-universal agreement among scholars that some came to trial convinced they had indeed given themselves over to demons. Depression, low self-esteem, and internalized aggression, pervasive byproducts of Puritan election anxiety (Carden 47; Emory Elliott 165), undoubtedly contributed to adult susceptibility, but child-confessants especially, claims Powers, fell prey to this brand of imposed delusion (488). Others made futile attempts to plead innocent before capitulating to pressures from a community in which, says Miller, "meretricious confession went free and sincere denial automatically became guilt" (New England Mind 197). Still others, to
save their lives, wilfully chose to lie under oath, to incur by perjury the guilt to which their confessions only pretended. In every case, the matter declared in confession had no basis in the real life of the confessant; what self-accusation revealed, individually and collectively, was the mentality of the community, not the actual past of the confessant.

By their failure to reflect real deeds, the Salem trials presented, in a rarefied environment that insisted on "rhetoric as the servant of truth," the ultimate test for the reliability of the word (Murdock 43). The entire Puritan confessional system, which depended for its validity on a presumed symmetry between the life lived and the life articulated, was here skewed to radical asymmetry. Despite cultural injunctions--and other-worldly sanctions--against falsehood, confession divorced narrative from history, words from deeds. In Salem, says Miller, the jeremiad miscarried; the call to confession merely enlarged the circle of sin (New England Mind 1978). In 1692, confession was far easier to produce than truth, and the trials yielded, in the case of confessants, nothing but anti-autobiographies that "unspoke" the confessing self.  

The very falsehood of the Salem testimonies in fact makes them highly significant for confessional theory. They demonstrate that confession can be a completely unreliable index of personal history and yet supply a highly accurate reflection of the ambient culture. The case was made at Salem when a community fought threats to its corporate identity by exercising the power to define its individual members; the exercise of this power became more important than the pursuit of truth. What the group needed was not "truth," but rather a readily identifiable, easily punishable externalization of its sin, a scapegoat for its failure to maintain its character as the pure and unassailable chosen of God. On two levels, then, self-preservation drove Salem’s confessions. Individuals who
wrongfully admitted to witchcraft bought life at the cost of their souls, while the community compromised its integrity by extorting the confessions needed for its collective purgation.

The elaborate machinery by which New England provoked its witches to confess in fact reveals a community obsessed with self-denunciation. Although extant records certainly under-represent the original docket, they bespeak a frenzy that spread from family to village to town, until, as Bernard Rosenthal documents in *Salem Story: Reading the Witch Trials of 1692*, the pandemic visitation of God's wrath engulfed the entire colony (185). Prodigal legal activity testified to the eager engagement of civil authority, just as the accompanying exhortations to fast and prayer revealed the anxious collaboration offered by church leadership. Where response to suspected witchcraft might well have been left to private admonition or the practice of informal, popular (and properly proscribed) counter-spells, here prosecution proceeded with full hierarchical approval, the preliminary interrogations authorized by interim governor Simon Bradstreet and the trials by Phips himself.21

The community responded in full to the exigencies of its crisis: local magistrates conducted preliminary examinations; neighbors came forward as clerks; judges, jury members, and attorneys for the Crown accepted appointments to the Court of Oyer and Termer; and prosecution throughout could proceed only with the cooperation of community members willing for whatever reason to denounce kith and kin.22 Starkey notes that when hearings commenced on 1 March, Salem Village greeted the Essex magistrates with pennants, drums, and "martial solemnity" (54), and the crowded court sessions, packed with spectators from Salem, Andover, Beverly, and Boston, punctuated a
hyper-forensic process of accusation, subpoena, indictment, and deposition codified and inscribed in the colony's most solemn legalese. Witchcraft came to serve metonymically for all transgression, its prosecution supplanting every recognized legal action; Konig demonstrates that because no other court was functioning, "witchcraft accusations became a blanket formula (and temporarily the only available method) for protecting society from all forms of threat" (170). Nothing less than mass purgation, the year-long prosecution of Salem's witches touched quite literally everyone in the province, all radically re-defined by the confessional experience they shared. Both confessors and confessants were well rehearsed for their roles in these primal religio-judicial rites. Long familiarity with the interactive rhetoric of meetinghouse and courtroom had rendered them fluent in confessional vocabulary and receptive to participative judgment.\(^{23}\) The irony was that, having perfected a sense of self-identity won by community validation, these confession-bred Puritans failed to recognize the implications of their co-dependency. Desperate to draw clear lines of demarcation between saint and sinner, the elect of God and the elect of Satan remained oblivious to the transparent fluidity of their roles. With every accomplice named at trial accused turned into accuser, while the unsuspecting onlooker of today was liable to become the defendant of tomorrow, a lesson one Elizabeth Cary learned to her sorrow. When she and her husband arrived from Boston one morning, none of the afflicted girls even knew her--they had to ask her name during breaks between sessions--yet that did not prevent them from "crying out" upon her later the same day (SWP 207-208). The insight of confessional theory, of course, is that confessors and confessants existed as necessary complements to each other in what Goffman terms "a pervasive two-role social process" marked by the
elusive exchange of stigmatizer and stigmatized (137). All the more feared for going unrecognized, the interrogator-interrogated dualism itself embodied the danger-fraught lack of distinction, the collapse of difference that posed the gravest threat to a New England menaced on every border, torn by internal strife, dislodged from its past, and uncertain of its future. Witchcraft, with unerring accuracy, had demonized precisely what the group dreaded most (Oplinger 284).

When fears finally began to wane in the aftermath of the crisis, reapplication of the confessional dynamic further blurred the line between confessor and confessant. While a chastened Salem confronted its depravity, self-recriminations heightened the reversibility of roles in "unparalleled" apologies that began as soon as the Court of Oyer and Terminer was dismissed (Kittredge 375). Everyone, wrote Hale, had "ground to fear that there had been a great deal of innocent blood shed," and the citizenry clung to public confession in the hope of atonement (425). On behalf of a contrite colony, the new Superior Court moved quickly to resolve remaining cases, while congregations examined their collective consciences and individuals searched for ways to assuage their private guilt. Early in 1693 the contentious Samuel Parris offered part of his salary as restitution for any suffering he had caused (Rosenthal 201), and in November 1694 he preached his "Meditations for Peace," begging God and his congregation to forgive "all [his] mistakes and trespasses in so weighty a matter" (Boyer and Nissenbaum, Salem Possessed 299). In January of 1697, when the colony had proclaimed an official Day of Humiliation for the sins of 1692, Judge Sewall stood at his place in the meetinghouse while the Reverend Samuel Willard read for him:

Samuel Sewall, sensible of the reiterated strokes by God upon himself and family; and being sensible, that as to the Guilt contracted, upon the
opening of the late Commission of Oyer and Terminer at Salem (to which the order for this Day relates) he is, upon many accounts, more concerned than any that he knows of, Desires to take the Blame and Shame of it, Asking pardon of Men, And especially desiring prayers that God, who has an Unlimited Authority, would pardon that Sin and all other his Sins. . . .

(367)

Not only did twelve jury members make a similar declaration but, more than a decade later, Ann Putnam, then twenty-six, rose before the Salem Village congregation in ritual petition for church membership and declared her own confession for "that sad and humbling providence" that "befell" her in 1692:

I justly fear I have been instrumental, with others though ignorantly and unwittingly, to bring upon myself and this land the guilt of innocent blood . . . for which cause I desire to lie in the dust, and earnestly beg forgiveness of God, and from all those unto whom I have given just cause for sorrow and offense, whose relations were taken away or accused.

(Upham 2: 510)

Apparently heartfelt, these were confessions of real guilt and represented, as the confessions of the accused witches assuredly did not, remorse that sprang from actual deeds. In the aftermath of the crisis, previously assumed connections between real and scripted lives could be safely reasserted, even if that restoration entailed, in Miller's words, anguished recognition that "the covenanted community [had] committed an irreparable evil" (New England Mind 208).

Reparations personal and corporate continued into the new century, when the courts took on the legal burden of annulling indictments, reversing attainders, and awarding nominal compensation to survivors and descendants.24 The attempts to atone by "un-convicting" the accused (to un-execute, unfortunately, was beyond human power) completed a radical redistribution of guilt within the confessional community, a transformation of blame into innocence, witch into victim, confessor into confessant. The
rhetorical force of New England’s war against the demon within derived ultimately not
from secrets revealed but from identities re-defined, and by the time confession had come
circle, it had produced not just the guilty witch but the guilty community.

The history of the colony’s corporate sin thus confirmed the first of confession’s
transgressive functions, the mutual reconfiguration of private and public character across
a matrix of shame. Yet, as radical as such identity-transformation proved to be, its
straightforward permutations hardly tested the limits of articulated guilt. New England’s
communal ordeal-by-trial involved, after all, more than just this fairly orderly progression
that safeguarded the distinction between "saint" and "sinner" while transposing individuals
from one category to another. Throughout, working in concert with that linear,
sequential permutation of identity was a second adulteration, one founded on ambiguity
and simultaneity, made manifest in confessants’ concurrent impulses to admit and deny
responsibility for the activities in question. Within the narrative act, precisely where the
strictures of New England’s religio-judicial code would impose on its petitioners a
rhetoric of shame, the autobiographical nature of confession authorized a rhetoric of
legitimation; the conjunction of antithetical forces generated a sinner-saint amalgam at the
moment of self-definition. The compound was as dangerous as it was unstable, for
although community members could compel confession, they could not constrain its
autobiographical impulse. Confession, not Satan, posed the real threat to Salem, because
it granted the witch heroic voice.

In the interrogations-turned-confessions of 1692, the harsh voice of the magistrate-
confessor, border guard of Puritan New England, rang as loudly as that of the confessant,
of course, and with good reason. At the point of confession, the fragile membrane
separating elect from damned was rendered most permeable by the Puritan doctrine which held that society's worst reprobates, its witches, were de facto saved from their heresy by admitting their sin. Given the demarcating imperative, then, it was hardly surprising that Salem's defendants were charged with full responsibility for their crime. Any would-be witch had to answer for inviting and succumbing to temptation, and typical examinations were launched with a preemptive strike: "[H]ow long have you bin in this Snare?" (SWP 134) or "Why do you hurt these children?" and "What evil spirit have you familiarity with?" (SWP 610). The community tolerated only one response where it discerned satanic behavior, abject self-recrimination. In the enclave of the soul, witches had embraced total corruption, and nothing short of total confession could save them; in the enclave of the community, nothing less could restore the boundary their abominations threatened to erase.

Under the Puritan economy of salvation, however, the same theology that defended its borders by condemning its witches offered confessants a means to mitigate their responsibility. By casting Satan as the arch-enemy of the saints, the wielder of all but irresistible wiles, the church itself endorsed an attribution of guilt that flowed from the personal to the communal via the demonic. Thus in the midst of Salem's crisis, Lawson's 24 March sermon located the source of corruption not in the witch but in the devil, denounced as the font of all evil, "the Instigator of all Contrariety, Malignity, and Enmity" (Christ's Fidelity 11).25 Capable of every artifice, he appeared in frighteningly familiar shapes—a black man, a speckled bird, a grey cat, a horse, a squirrel, a pig—to catch his prey off guard. He balanced his most frequent threat, to tear the victim "in peices and Cary her away" (SWP 342), with an array of alluring promises: "fine things"
for Abigail Hobbs (SWP 406); "a pair of French fall Shouses [shoes]" for Stephen Johnson (SWP 509); "New Cloaths" and a horse for Mary Lacey, Jr. (SWP 528). Always, too, he offered his protection in this life and the next, immunity from prosecution now and "glory w'th him" in the world to come (SWP 522). Granted license by God's permissive will to tempt and test the community of saints, Satan would inevitably prove victorious in the battle for some of their souls.

If their foe's formidably superior powers enabled the accused to deflect a measure of blame from tempted back to tempter, his schemes also enlarged the circle of human guilt, for rare was the witch that had not been brought to the devil without the mediation of some readily-named friend or neighbor. Nor was the onus of responsibility limited to the individuals who, the confessants claimed, had directly encouraged their apostasy; no, shame redounded to the wider community as well. "[E]ven the best of us," charged Lawson, "have by sin a hand and share, in provoking God thus to let Satan loose" (Christ's Fidelity 48). Amid a fallen community, shared blame thus lessened the load of individual guilt. What confessional theory would find in the participatory rhetoric of confession, Puritan theology would identify with the universal consequences of Adam's fall, a human nature complicit in every sin.

This "original sin" of Salem was nowhere more evident than in the ruthlessness with which it pursued confession. Less anxious to protect the innocent than to convict the guilty, the colony's nascent jurisprudence forbade torture as a means to elicit confession but permitted it, once guilt had been established, in the effort to discover accomplices. While, even so, confessors at Salem seem not to have resorted to extreme measures, still prisoners faced a variety of tactics designed to wear down their resistance through
starvation, sleep deprivation, and physical abuse. John Proctor, before his own execution on 19 August, reported perhaps the worst of these practices in an inflamed letter to five Boston ministers about the treatment his accused son received in prison:

   My son William Procter, when he was examin'd, because he would not confess that he was Guilty, when he was Innocent, they tyed him Neck and Heels till the Blood gushed out at his Nose, and would have kept him so 24 Hours, if one more Merciful than the rest, had not taken pity on him, and caused him to be unbound. (SWP 690)

As William discovered, a community that feared the autobiographical voice of innocence would take desperate measures to muffle everything but the criminal voice of guilt.

   On the other hand, the Puritan machinery of persuasion, with psychological insight rivaling Satan's own, tempered its threats with rewards, and open recognition, as prosecution continued, that confession won immunity from execution led many defendants to forswear themselves in exchange for their lives. Martha Tyler, for one, was hard pressed to maintain her innocence after her pragmatic but impassioned brother spent the ride to Salem pleading with her to save herself from hanging, "and continued so long and so violently to urge and press her to confess" anything that they propounded to her (SWP 777-78). For her, repentance before the court rendered moot the distinction between blame and innocence; her crime was not the witchcraft she claimed but the perjury her confession enacted.

   Tyler's words conspicuously revealed the dichotomy between internal and external conscience as it operated throughout Salem's confessional narratives. Confronted with pressures stronger than their will-to-resist, many of the accused could assert their innocence only retroactively in recantations that multiplied as confession proliferated. A repentant Margaret Jacobs, for example, not only submitted a formal retraction to the
court—"what I said, was altogether false, . . . which I did to save my life and to have my liberty; but the Lord, charging it to my conscience, made me in so much horror, that I could not contain myself before I had denied my confession"—but also begged her family's forgiveness for having testified against her grandfather—"Oh! the terrors of a wounded Conscience who can bear," her letter to them from prison exclaimed shortly before his execution (SWP 490-91). Increase Mather found further evidence of the misalignment of guilt and innocence when, responding to growing concern over self-accusation, he visited the cells of several erstwhile confessants from Andover. His report of the encounters included the disclosure of Goodwife Wilson that "she was truly in the dark as to the matter of her being a witch" and the admission of Mary Bridges, Sr., that "she had confessed against herself things which were all utterly false," as well as his recognition of the anguish the women felt from belying themselves and endangering others by false accusation (Upham 2: 406-7).  

A second confession nullifying the first, recantation marked a tentative victory for what might be called "personal truth" over cultural imperatives and further obscured already-blurred boundaries at Salem. In a maze of culpability and denial, confession and recantation, the inevitable intrusion of autobiographical hero into the realm of confessional criminal exposed a system incapable of protecting its adherents from spiritual and political contagion. As every claimant to dishonor proved, neither guilt nor innocence could be safely fixed under a moral code that simultaneously accused and excused the sinner or a legal code that rewarded perjury and punished integrity. Here the contest between confessor and confessant over the assignation of blame was never to be resolved, yet the heat of confrontation betrayed the very human basis for an apocalyptic
war between Prince of Darkness and Son of Light. At the heart of Salem’s crisis, behind its obsession with resolving identity and fixing blame, lay that fundamental Foucauldian dyad, knowledge and power; official rhetoric notwithstanding, the global objective was not control of the supernatural but control of the narrative.

The 1692 trials thus became, in terms Cotton Mather himself hardly comprehended, a deadly game of "Blind Mans Buffet," the Puritan coalition uncertain of where to locate its enemies but determined to mount a defense strong enough to destroy them (Wonders 66). If Satan and his consorts commanded supernatural might, then the spectacle of the courtroom and the shadow of the gallows would proclaim commensurate power in the hands of Salem’s legal forces. In every external particular, juridical authority neared the absolute; the Court of Oyer and Terminer quite literally held power of life and death over the accused. Under its sway, confession became the index of successful examination, and each "Guilty" plea recorded another narrative forced into the dominant discourse. Operative rules of speech reflected distinctly Puritan patterns of policing, with confessants bound to God by the oath of testimony, to the community by multiple public repetitions of interrogation, to their conscience by the spoken word and the signature or mark that imprinted their assent to transcribed testimony. The Puritan machinery of law, brought to bear in the "ritual of producing penal truth," prevailed over foes diabolic and human by compelling confessants’ own complicity with the judgments leveled against them (Foucault, Discipline 38).

Supporting and reinforcing Salem’s massive external legal superstructure was the bedrock of Puritanism’s internalized authority system, that compound of shared assumptions capable of regulating private life by upholding confession as path to freedom.
Every admission of guilt reinforced not only the culture's ideology in and of itself but also the group's authority to apply its evaluative standards to personal experience. Public repudiation of witchcraft thus reaffirmed the "socially legitimate cosmos" of the Puritan deity aligned with the Puritan state (Owen 294). Likewise, it reinserted the confessant into this dually-legitimized order, reconciling the radically Other of the supernaturally malevolent with the minimally Other of the reformed sinner in a comparatively less errant flock. Then was Gospel order reasserted and social order reclaimed as the group welcomed the witch back to the fold.27

Certainly at its most obvious, confession ratified the powers of state, whose legal body authorized the repentant to speak, but only, as Erikson allows, to profess "that the moral standards of the community [were] right and that the sentence of the court [was] just" (195). The urgency with which various sectors of the community prodded trial victims to this compulsory self-condemnation betrayed multiple vested interests. Ministers applauded confession because it hastened the triumph of saints over Satan; magistrates, because it furthered their prosecutory project; family members and friends, because it reprieved suspects from otherwise-certain death. Profession of guilt not only exonerated authorities for their role in punishment but enshrined them as an indispensable line of defense against the terrors of hell--and simultaneously provided a locus of prosecution that deflected suspicion from other potentially more destructive enemies among humankind.

The axis of power in New England lay along the human plane after all, where confession as mark of an individual's triumph over Satan signified less than conscription of personal history to the service of hegemony. Yet falsehood was as much a two-edged
sword as truth, and defendants given leave to speak had won direct access to authority. From within the very discourse that constrained them, confessants exerted a counter-force to the ideology of domination. Beneath their veneer of piety and conformity, Salem’s witches were capable of far more destruction than the devil who, no matter how heinous his designs, never stood in open court a living testament to anarchy and sedition.

Apprenticed to the master of deception, Salem’s witches knew how to assume the mantle of sound doctrine and the mien of contrition as they cloaked their subversive self-assertion in a show of submissiveness. Their seeming compliance with the court’s promptings masked a thinly disguised victory, for confessing remained a self-selected act and, especially when it bartered life beyond the grave for life beyond the gallows, a decisive assertion of independence. Prosecutors soon learned to be wary. Not only were the accused capable at any moment of recanting their testimony, but they could also choose how strictly to conform to precedent and expectation. The less compliant among them created fissures in the monolith of confessional discourse by interspersing formulaic expostulations about the dangers of temptation or the rewards of obedience with windows to often unhappy individual lives. Especially revealing were the episodes they recalled from the pre-history of their days before they knew any contact with the underworld, any need to defend themselves in court. Mercy Wardwell admitted, for instance, that she had all but despaired when people told her no beau would have her (SWP 781); Mary Toothaker described nightmares dating from the attack that had killed her parents during Metacomet’s War (SWP 767); Mary Marston suffered from "melancholly" following the death of her mother (SWP 546), and Mary Osgood from postpartum depression after the birth of her last child (SWP 617). Without doubt, Shea’s observation about Puritan
spiritual autobiographies—that it proves difficult to find any "wholly barren of individuality" (101)—applies equally well to the courtroom autobiographies of 1692, where confession gave expression to an undercurrent of keen disappointment with the providential hand of God and the inevitable failure of life, even regenerate life, to fulfill its promise of happiness.

The potential for damage in Salem’s courtroom extended well beyond expressions of unfocused dissatisfaction, to the espousal of a complete inversion of the Puritan world. As Stuart Clark has noted, it was a commonplace of Christian theology that witches did everything backwards (99), but Calvinism, whose cosmology reveled in the dualism of Good and Evil, Christ and Antichrist, found itself especially vulnerable to attack by negative correspondences. "The Witches do say, that they form themselves much after the manner of Congregational Churches;" warned Cotton Mather, "and that they have a Baptism and a Supper, and Officers among them, abominably Resembling those of our Lord" (Wonders 160-61). Indeed, the satanic sabbath that formed a descriptive staple of confession parodied the exact sacraments Puritanism had retained; under cover of darkness, deep within the pagan forest, witches bound themselves to hell by perverted baptismal rites and mimicked Christian worship with cannibal-eucharists of "Red Drink" and "Red Bread like Man’s Flesh" (Lawson, "True Narrative" 210). Devil worship constituted the worst form of idolatry because of its contoversity of covenant theology, even while on a personal level it at least brought relief from the perennial uncertainty of election. Mary Toothaker, for one, already depressed and discouraged, allowed that "she was rather the worse for her [Christian] baptisme" and willing enough to forsake it for Satan’s (SWP 767). Allegations embedded within confessions enabled the apostates to
project their personal insurrection onto the wider community as well, often by accusing church members most respected for their virtue and integrity. Through their confessions, Satan's converts extended the "archetypal rebellion" of heaven's fallen angels into the failed paradise of Puritan New England (Clark 118).

The power to project anarchy and rebellion onto the godly people of Salem grew, in the confessional dynamic, from cords of sympathy that bound auditor to narrator. The witch performed a vital function in claiming to surrender "to passions with which everyone was familiar and on whose repression society depended" (Thomas 522). Because every confession "summoned deeply responsive echoes in a host of 'bystanders,'" prosecution aimed at demarcating difference collapsed under the pressure of resemblance (Demos, Entertaining 209). Courtroom disclosures gave voice to what the silent longed for but denied; confessions enabled the righteous to indulge hidden fantasies, to experience vicariously the forbidden thrills of satanic intercourse, heresy, and revolt. Desire and complicity united confessor to confessant; the witch became not just antihero, as prosecution demanded, but hero. New England protected its witches, Boyer and Nissenbaum argue, because they afforded a dual illusion of control: over deviant desires patrolled by law and over murderous impulses tempered by merciful judgment (Salem Possessed 215). To the many explanations scholarship has already advanced for Salem's non-execution of its witches, confessional theory thus adduces another: they evoked a degree of confessor-confessant identification that rendered authorities powerless to kill them.

In Puritan New England, then, Foucault's docile bodies had become docile souls, "subjected, used, transformed and improved," but they had not relinquished control of the
discursive act (*Discipline* 136). By its supposed compliance with the court's promptings, rather, Salem's witch population demonstrated a remarkable learned behavior, the ability to exploit a confused system of reward and punishment for its own ends. Read centuries later, the testimonies of 1692 become paradigmatic in their demonstration of the confessional malleability of identity, guilt, and power: the attempt to identify witch serves to identify prosecutor; the attempt to assign blame serves to destabilize it; the attempt of confessor to control discourse collapses onto control by confessant. And, in every case, the first casualty of demonic warfare is truth. I carry those lessons with me now across the New World continent to another site of proto-American confession, the narratives generated by the Donner Party on their emigrants' errand into the western wilderness.
NOTES

1. In this testimony and throughout, original spelling and punctuation have been preserved as much as possible. Where irregularities would seem to make content or meaning unclear, modernizations are provided in brackets.

2. *The Salem Witchcraft Papers: Verbatim Transcripts of the Legal Documents of the Salem Outbreak of 1692*, 59-61. Subsequent references are noted parenthetically in the text as SWP.

3. Youngest on record for having confessed is six- or seven-year-old Martha Carrier, who allowed that her mother had introduced her to witchcraft in August of 1692; among the oldest is seventy-one-year-old Rebecca Nurse, although lack of specificity about the age of defendants makes exact identification difficult.

4. Extant documents from colonial Connecticut witchcraft trials are preserved in the [Samuel] Wyllys Papers, acquired by the Connecticut State Library (Hartford) in 1908, and in the Supplement to these papers at the Ammary Brown Memorial Library in Providence, Rhode Island. The Wyllys Papers are notable for several recorded attempts to outline a protocol for witchcraft prosecution, particularly in the *Grounds for Examination of a Witch* (No. 1) and remarks on the validity of various kinds of evidence, supplied by a circle of ministers and included among the records of cases against Mercy Disborough (Nos. 30-36) and Katherine Harrison (Nos. 46-53). For a discussion of witchcraft prosecution in Connecticut, both before and after 1692, see John M. Taylor.

5. For representative statistics regarding accusations and convictions, see Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft*; John Putnam Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England*; David D. Hall, Introduction; and Karlsen. In comparing sources, it is necessary to recall that incomplete records preclude exactness about any of the prosecutions and, consequently, authorities vary in their statistical analyses.

6. A temperate Upham concludes, "A shade of illegality rests upon the very existence of this special court" (2: 251). Discussions of the irregular nature of the Salem judiciary processes may be found in Jon Oplinger 108-09 and Edwin Powers 475-77.

7. Official conservation of extant materials was undertaken in 1982, when Essex County gave the originals over to the Peabody Essex Institute. The documents are available there on microfilm, and at the Essex County Courthouse in a three-volume typescript prepared by the Works Progress Administration in 1938 under the direction of Archie N. Frost, Clerk of Courts. *The Salem Witchcraft Papers: Verbatim Transcripts of the Legal Documents of the Salem Witchcraft Outbreak of 1692*, my principal primary source, was edited by Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum from the WPA volumes in 1977. In July 1996, two additional volumes of summaries of legal proceedings from 1673 to 1695 were discovered; although they contain records from the regular colonial
courts rather than the special Court of Oyer and Terminer that dealt with the 1692 crisis, they contain many similar cases, even some involving the same parties ("Recovered Texts").

8. Most socio-historical scholarship has used a victimological focus, addressing either the accusers as the victims of witchcraft frenzy or the executed as victims of the trials; little attention has been accorded the statements of those who survived by confessing. One exception is Persis W. McMillen's *Currents of Malice: Mary Towne Esty and Her Family in Salem Witchcraft*, a biography constructed for Mary El[a]sty and her sisters on the basis of legal records, including confessional testimony.

9. The conclusion that acceptance was generally granted prevails, as Patricia Caldwell suggests in her examination of contemporary opinions on the subject (46-47).


11. Of the twelve statutes dealing with capital crimes, only this one specifies "woeman"; the rest subsume female offenders under "any man," although #8 concerns acts in which "any man lyeth with mankinde as he lyeth with a woeman" and #9 forbids adultery "with any married or espoused wife" (Body of Liberties 545). For a discussion of the gendered nature of witchcraft prosecution, see below.

12. A key to this movement was the debate over spectral evidence. In the belief that the devil awarded his consorts the preternatural ability to appear simultaneously in different places and different shapes, the courts initially accepted testimony regarding what a witch’s "specter" might have done while the actual person was engaged in legitimate activity. The practice made any accusation virtually irrefutable, for, as Upham’s expansive explanation has it, "[n]o matter how clear and certain the evidence adduced that an accused individual, at the time alleged, was absent from the specified place; no matter how far distant, whether twenty or a thousand miles, it availed him nothing; for it was charged that he was present, and acted through his agent or imp" (2: 407). When clergy solicited by the Court concluded, in the Return of Several Ministers, that spectral evidence should be disallowed, opposition to the trials accelerated.

13. For a discussion of prejudices rooted in point-of-origin differences among New England settlers, see Konig 69-74. Several helpful explorations of racial tension between white colonists and people of color exist, among them analyses of relationships with Native Americans by Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence* (128-45) and James E. Kences. For brief discussions of the colonists’ relationships with black slaves see Allen Cardin 138-41 and Ziff, *Puritanism* 241-42. Towner makes the interesting point that while in the seventeenth century the typical condemned prisoner was a member of the colony, in the eighteenth he or she was more likely to be an outsider, of a different race or national origin, as "[i]nternal deviants to be prayed with, and for, were replaced by external enemies to be rid of" (537).
14. Demos attempts to correlate the chronology of "harms" and "signs" with the various colonial witchcraft outbreaks, including that of Salem; for his conclusions, see *Entertaining* 384-86.

15. Mary Douglas admits, for example, "Anthropologists have usually approached witchcraft from the point of view of the accuser," which "has made it hard for us to interpret witchcraft confessions" (xxxiv). Demos, concurring, laments that sociologists have been able to "visualize [the accused] quite fully as suspects, but only here and there in other aspects of their lives" (*Entertaining* 57).

16. While Demos's main work, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England*, is devoted to prosecutions other than at Salem, he addresses the Salem outbreak directly in the complementary "Underlying Themes in the Witchcraft of Seventeenth-Century New England," and his conclusions throughout plainly extend to Salem as part of the inclusive New England culture.

17. Hall provides an inclusive bibliographic essay in "Witchcraft and the Limits of Interpretation." For an eminently readable, well-documented basic history of the episode, see Larry Gragg.

18. Mary Lacey, Sr., recalls that at one gathering of witches "[t]here were so many that there was not bread Enough for them all" (SWP 532-24), and Susannah Post claims that "about five Hundred" roamed the Essex countryside (SWP 648).

19. On the basis of circumstantial contemporary evidence, scholarly speculation suggests two plausible explanations for the court's refusal to execute confessants: the desire to deal leniently with repentant witches as a sign of divine beneficence or the more likely intention of dealing less mercifully with them after their confessions had borne the greatest possible yield in terms of accusation and incrimination.

20. The community's complicity with the untruths of its confessants reveals itself in a corporate refusal to acknowledge the inconsistencies of its own logic. The system accorded credibility to anyone who admitted to witchcraft, despite the fact that, as Karlsen points out, "all witches were presumed to lie, their allegiance to the 'Prince of Liars' providing sufficient evidence of the fact" (147). Oaths and assertions of sincerity to the contrary, if confessors were indeed in league with the devil, he was making fools of all believers, Robert Pike argued to Justice Corwin (Upham 2: 544).

21. Upham is careful to note that Bradstreet, 87 at the time, was not overly involved and may have been less than eager to proceed but that deputy governor Thomas Danforth pressed for action (2: 100).

22. Among the participants: Samuel Parris and Thomas Putnam were apparently the most active clerks for writs, subpoenas, and examinations; lieutenant governor William Stoughton, Bartholomew Gedney, John Richards, William Sargent, Samuel Sewall, Nathaniel Saltonstall, and Wait Winthrop comprised the Court of Oyer and Terminer, although Saltonstall resigned in protest after the June session and was replaced
by Jonathan Corwin, who with John Hathorne conducted a large proportion of the preliminary hearings; Thomas Newton originally served as the crown's attorney, until being relieved on 26 July by Andrew Checkley. As was standard for capital cases, the defendants had no counsel of their own.

23. Given congregational practices, universal exposure to spiritual confessions can be assumed, and familiarity with legal processes must have been widespread as well in a fairly litigious society where all court sessions were public and all freemen eligible for jury duty. In addition, as evidence of previous experience with courtroom procedures, Demos details extensive collateral information on the high proportion of witchcraft trial participants who had been involved in previous litigation, either as plaintiffs or defendants (Entertaining 76-79).

24. Because no blanket pardon was ever issued, the names of some victims have never been officially cleared, and, with jurisdiction confused by a tangled succession of governing bodies, the legacy of Salem's witchcraft prosecution still surfaces periodically in petitions addressed to the Massachusetts State Legislature, the United States Congress, and the British Parliament. Rosenthal makes the point that public acknowledgement of wrongdoing has, by design, never specified responsibility for prosecution or censured those involved in it (210).

25. Weisman notes that the devil was named as codefendant in nearly all seventeenth-century criminal indictments in Massachusetts, not just those for witchcraft, so great was his perceived role in all sin (25).

26. Increase Mather's analysis is far less inflammatory than that of Calef, whose ringing conclusion to More Wonders of the Invisible World insists: "As long as the Accused shall have their Lives and Liberties confirmed and restored to them, upon Confessing themselves Guilty; . . . So long God will be Daily dishonoured, And so long his Judgments must be expected to be continued" (Burr 393).

27. Surprisingly, the aftermath of 1692 produced no formal rituals of reclamation for defendants at the trials. Those who, without confession, were executed went to their deaths either maintaining silence or protesting their innocence; those who confessed were not welcomed back into communion with their congregations until much later.
In the spring of 1846, Virginia Reed was a girl of twelve when her family joined a group of emigrants seeking fortune far from their Springfield, Illinois home; ten months and 2500 miles later, she was a thirteen-year-old whose experiences as member of the Donner Party had marked her for life.

Newly recovered, in May 1847, from her mountain ordeal, Virginia prepared a letter to Mary Keyes, a cousin back in Illinois, and sent it on its way with the year’s first trading party to head east from Sutter’s Fort. "[W]e are all Well at present," she began, but, "My Dear Cousin I am going to write to you about our troubles in getting to California" (355). Although minor difficulties arose with the loss of oxen en route, she explained, their real problems began once the group reached Fort Bridger and were persuaded to take the barely-mapped Hastings Cut-off, on the promise that it would reduce their journey by three hundred miles. The new route took them first across the desert south of Great Salt Lake, on an eighty-mile "long drive" of five tortured, waterless days and nights (355). Nearing the end, when their maddened cattle stampeded, they lost
most of their stock and had to abandon a wagonful of supplies. Still four hundred miles from their destination, their stores were now so depleted, wrote Virginia, that "pa had to go on to California for provisions" (356).

Yet far worse awaited the company. By the time they sighted the Sierra Nevadas, Virginia's account continued, October was half gone, and "it was rain[ing]g in the Valleys and snowing on the mountains" (357). Pressing on, they were caught just short of the highest peak one dusk, so they made plans to cross the next day, then bedded down for the night. But by morning, as Virginia recounted, "the snow was so deep we could not go over & we had to go back," forced to dig in by the side of Truckee Lake and "stay thar all winter without Pa" (357). The situation was critical almost from the start, for, she lamented, "we had not the first thing to eat" (357). From here she went on to describe the meals of boiled bones and chewed hides, the failed attempts at relief, and the cruel necessity of leaving younger children behind when, finally, she was able to escape from the mountains with a determined party of snowshoers. Meanwhile, she recounted, her father, James Frazier Reed, was pushing eastward from Sutter's Fort, forty miles to the west, with a company of recruits on a rescue mission; by the time they reached the snowbound camp, they found a situation so desperate that "some of the compana was eating them that Died" (360). Still, Virginia assured her cousin, the Reed children "had not ate any," and subsequent rescue parties, never without danger, succeeded in carrying out the remaining survivors (360).

"O Mary," exclaimed her cousin, "I have not rote you half of the truble we have had but I have rote you anuf to let you now that you dont now what truble is but thank god we have all got throw and the onely family that did not eat human flesh" (360-61).
Still, she hastened to add, "Dont let this letter dishearten anybody," for emigrants need only observe two cautions: "never take no cutoffs and hurry along as fast as you can" (361). "We are all very well pleased with Callifornia," she concluded, "it aut to be a beautiful Country to pay us for our travail getting there" (361).

One of only forty-one who survived winter in the Sierras, Virginia was among the first to inscribe the secrets of their slopes and, by recounting her own story, to lend confessional voice to an emigrant group that quickly captured the imagination of a nation. In a decade when nearly fifty thousand would cross the plains even before the Mexican War claimed California for the United States and the discovery of gold drew thousands more across the mountains, the Reeds and their companions were not the only party to suffer hardship, not the only group to require rescue. But it was the only one to self-report survival by cannibalism, and it was the one whose identity as "the Donner Party" cohered long after its survivors had dispersed themselves among the burgeoning communities of the California territory.

Members of the group, in fact, found themselves defined for a national audience by the suffering they faced that winter and the means by which they survived it. Nearly half a century after the fact their legendary adventures still commanded such an audience that in 1891 The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine prevailed upon Virginia, by then 57-year-old Virginia Reed Murphy, to tell her story at length. Appearing in July, "Across the Plains with the Donner Party" cast a nostalgic look at the events of 1846-47. Its author devoted almost half of its twenty-two pages to memories of her carefree summer journey across the wide Mississippi valley, where youths danced before campfires (1: 22), buffalo chases lent meat and excitement to the trail (1: 22), and the
open plains spelled freedom for a girl astride a beloved pony (1: 20). The heroes of this tale were wise and noble parents capable of preserving their family from every harm. Here her father became the real leader of an expedition that bore the Donner name (1: 19), the champion banished after delivering a fatal blow to a man about to strike her mother (2: 25), yet selfless enough to return and save the group that had expelled him (2: 33); her mother, the invalid strengthened by adversity, the bounty-giver who hoarded scraps of food so that she could announce at a Christmas dinner of beans and gruel, "'Children, eat slowly, for this one day you can have all you wish!'" (2: 28).

If Virginia's forty years' reflection had transmuted her story's exquisite pain into triumph and blessing, it had also bred a peculiar rhetoric of slant confession. A bold disclaimer opened the second half of her account: "I now come to that part of my narrative which delicacy of feeling for both the dead and the living would induce me to pass over in silence, but which a correct and lucid chronicle of subsequent events of historical importance will not suffer to be omitted" (2: 25). Despite this claim to truth-telling, however, the recollections that followed, of "horrors no pen can describe nor imagination conceive" (2: 28), betrayed little. A single line protesting that the Reed family remained the only one "which was not forced to eat of human flesh to keep body and soul together" dealt with the one fact whose horror had so seized the young Virginia that she had felt compelled both to own it for the group and deny it for herself (2: 25). Thus deftly the seasoned survivor projected and universalized the cannibal deed at the same time that she rendered the party's defining feature, its cannibal nature, all but subliminal in her text.
Regardless of her circumspection, Virginia's audience had long been privy to the secrets she related by indirection, for by 1891 a host of voices had whispered the confessions of the Sierras. Across the decades during which her story matured from the ingenuous immediacy of 1847 to the mellow nostalgia of 1891, various members of the Donner aggregate—victims, survivors, rescuers—had openly competed to establish the veracity of crucial details of the winter's encampment. Confessional theory offers a matrix by which to plot the often contradictory voices that resulted, by affirming that if the admission no less than the practice of cannibalism defined individuals in the Donner Party, it defined their audience as well; that if confession lay its practitioners open to the assumption of guilt, it also provided occasion to deflect it; that if confessional disclosure revealed anything, it was the existence of a complex interdependency that rendered the literal cannibals who confessed and the vicarious cannibals who elicited their confession somehow complicit in the act.

Precisely because the stories that emerged from winter on the slopes are confessional narrative, their analysis requires, first, an incursion into the culture of nineteenth-century America and its westering inclinations and, second, a close reading of the account of that winter by its survivors and their rescuers, its victims and their devourers. Thus I explore in the first section of this chapter the extreme conditions that disposed individuals to survival cannibalism and the climate of a nation whose apparent fascination with the cannibal taboo shared a curious homology with its political evolution from colonized to colonizer. In the second section, I extend the confessional topology to the production and reception of two pivotal accounts of 1846-47, the diary of party member Patrick Breen from the camp by Truckee Lake and the efforts of Charles F.
McGlashan, thirty years later, to publish in serial form a "correct" account of the Donner Party, one that would "do justice to all parties connected with the history" (HOU 52, 53). Grounded in the dialectic between culture and text, my methodology also serves to excavate the dialectic between individual confession and theoretical concerns. Indeed, the polyphonic Donner chorus broadens the scope of confessional theory well beyond the formulaic and site-specific revelations of Salem, into a sixty-year narrative schema that conscripts autobiography into the service of national history. A combined cultural-rhetorical critique of the Donner corpus works then to illumine issues of authority and ownership that underlie the production of any text, but especially the life-text of autobiography.

**Manifestations of a Cannibal Destiny**

While the witches of Salem outrage confessors by their claims to superhuman powers, the survivors of the Sierra horrify audiences by their decline into subhuman bestiality, violating a taboo that seems to titillate observers as much as it repulses them. Certainly the tale of this country's most famous cannibals has fascinated generations of Americans, who evince a kind of perverse pride in endless creative mutations of the Donner story, into song, poetry, drama, fiction, even children's picturebook literature.\(^3\) Yet beneath an almost benign exterior, such abiding fascination with this one band of emigrants hints at a sympathy of a darker nature, an allegiance animated by a peculiar ethos of incorporation. Indeed, the status the cannibals of 1846-47 attained in the popular imagination can be understood only in relation to the culture whose expansionist projects, both geographic and economic, sponsored the doomed expedition. If the Donner
encampment holds the terror of a primal scene for America, it is partly because the cannibalism of the mountainside enacts on a literal plane the politics of what the country called its "manifest destiny." Ultimately, the Donners fascinate—and implicate—America because their confessions adumbrate its national epic.

National myths aside, the facts outlining the Donner Party's communal history are quickly told. In the summer of 1846, an irregular band of eighty-some hopefuls, all bound for the Promised Lands of California, collected in Wyoming territory and elected from among their number one George Donner as nominal leader. Just past the Continental Divide they committed themselves, as Virginia Reed had told, to a new overland route, the so-called Hastings Cutoff, and on 20 July struck out southwest of Great Salt Lake, across the desert beyond, and into the mountains. Bad advice, bad trails, and bad luck cost them precious time, so it was late fall before they reached the high ground of the Sierra Nevada. A blinding snowstorm at nightfall on 3 November caught them exhausted, just below the highest pass. With the summit an unreachable three miles away, they had to establish what camp they could on the eastern slope, sixty of them at Truckee Lake, and twenty-one at Alder Creek five miles below. There they faced the winter. By April, when the last occupants of the camp were finally led to Sutter's Fort, forty-two had perished, and it was clear that the living had been sustained by meat from the bodies of their dead companions.

The tale that emerged from the mountains in 1847 was polysemic from the start, its autobiographical nature compounding the "segmented" discontinuity Foucault posits for any discourse (History 100). The winter's enforced isolation had split an already splintered party into separate camps, whose further dissolution into irregular escape teams
bred widely dissimilar perspectives. Only fragmentary firsthand experiences were recorded on site, and specifics were difficult to recover from the few textual artifacts that survived the snows: Breen's diary, a partial journal of James Reed, and, if 1847 newspaper accounts can be believed, the dying verses of John Denton. Oral histories, by contrast, abounded, and their solicitation as part of recovery efforts further destabilized the narrative. Nor was the Donner story long left to its original protagonists. Supplementing, soon supplanting, the voices of the emigrants were reports, official and unofficial, of the various communities that rehabilitated the survivors. Military involvement required inscription into assorted records and chronologies that itemized everything from the rosters of rescue teams to the reimbursement of John Sutter for, among other things, seven mules, fifty pounds of dried beef, and eight hundred pounds of flour (Carroll Hall 84-85). Less impartial accounts came from the rescuers themselves, who expressed their horror at finding "bones and half consumed body parts," "tufts of human hair," and Jacob Donner's still recognizable corpse, with "the arms and legs . . . removed, the trunk cut open, and the heart and liver taken out" (Stewart, Ordeal 214-15). By 1848 when a military party burned the remains of the previous winter and filed a last report, it was obvious that the intimate affairs of a closed community had spread far beyond the confines of Truckee--soon to be Donner--Pass.

Indeed, reports from those directly involved were soon augmented by second- and third-hand accounts from interpreters eager to enhance a tale McGlashan would call "more thrilling than romance, more terrible than fiction" (History 6). Each author advanced a distinctive claim to textual authority. Edwin Bryant, personal friend of James Reed, capitalized on his tour with the 1848 army salvage party in What I Saw in
California (1848), while Jesse Quinn Thornton, whose Oregon and California in 1848 (1849) included eleven chapters on the Donners, began with prefatory remarks that detailed his travel with the party during earlier parts of their journey. Upon meeting a remnant of the group in San Francisco, he continued, several had pressed him to "embody the facts, and publish them to the world in connection with [his] own journal," and he willingly obliged (95). Eliza Farnham in California In Doors and Out (1850) was equally explicit about having direct contact with survivors, who furnished enough material for her to devote a hundred pages to a "Narrative of the Donner Party to California in 1846." And three decades later, McGlashan, owner of the Truckee Republican, conceived for himself a similar but grander editorial mission; his 1878 decision to publish a serial history of the party launched a correspondence that eventually included twenty-four of the twenty-six members alive at the inception of his project. Inevitably, the admixture of voices and the passage of time heightened the polyvalence of memories from the winter, even for the survivors themselves. Long-lived party members in fact continued to revise their own stories and overwrite their companions' well into the twentieth century.5

Scholarly interpretation adds yet another set of overlays to the Donner palimpsest, particularly because reception varies considerably among the disciplines. Records from the expedition have been left largely to historians and sociologists, whose statistics preserve only its skeletal outline. W. W. Waggoner's "The Donner Party and Relief Hill" and Donald K. Grayson's "Donner Party Deaths: A Demographic Assessment," although composed sixty years apart, are equally representative of the genre. The former debates the effects of weather and topography on rescue efforts, while the latter evaluates
the contributions of metabolic rate and social support to survival, with results not unlike those of Stephen A. McCurdy, whose "Epidemiology of Disaster: The Donner Party (1846-1847)" finds "elevated death rates for persons at the extremes of the age distribution" (over age thirty-five or under age six) and a "twofold increased risk" of mortality among males and those traveling outside a family group (341). Surprisingly, the party has thus far nearly escaped the notice of America's literary theorists, despite the attention now being paid to autobiographies in general and frontier diaries in particular. Although Annette Kolodny at least nods to the group during her discussion of overland emigration in The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860, only Richard C. Poulsen in "The Donner Party: History, Mythology, and the Existential Voice" attempts to offer a theoretical critique, and, even so, his analysis addresses the construction of historical rather than personal narrative.

What such studies overlook are extraordinary first-person accounts that facilitate the rhetorical mediation of a nearly unspeakable ordeal and inscribe it into the literature of the elusive American frontier. To analyze the confessions these stories embed is to trace their role in a national myth-making process that integrates their cannibalism into a broad cultural matrix. Understanding the resulting symbolic synthesis proceeds by a three-step process that first confirms the cultural import of the consumption of human flesh, then verifies cannibalism among the Donner emigrants, and finally stakes out the lines of force that tie the literal cannibalism of the mountains to the politico-economic appetites of mid-nineteenth-century America.

Cannibalism itself became the subject of sociological study during the late age of imperialism in the nineteenth century, when the emerging discipline of anthropology
struggled to mediate between the conventional mores of Western society and the unfamiliar practices of foreign cultures brought under the flag of empire. While early theorists posited for the practice a sort of evolutionary function, whereby cannibalism served as developmental stage in a progression from savagery to civilization, later scholars have read it under various symbolic schematics. The structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss, for example, integrates it with marriage and kinship into an economy of exchange (1), and the cultural materialism of Harris subsumes it into an ecology of production (*Cannibals* 4). Cutting across centuries and disciplines, cannibalism as focus for inquiry unites the paleontology of Pat Shipman in the study of Neolithic artifacts to the historical fiction of Michael Harner and Alfred Meyer in their reconstructions of Aztec society and the field research of any number of modern ethnographers, especially in their examination of myth and ritual. Subject to an elaborate taxonomy, the practice is cross-typed according to the status of the consumed and the motive for consumption. Thus, in terms of meat source, endocannibals consume members of their own group; exocannibals, the bodies of outsiders; autocannibals, their own flesh. In terms of purpose, dietary (or gastronomic) cannibalism denotes the practice of eating human flesh for its taste or nutritive value; ritual (or religious) cannibalism, for liturgical purposes, either in the worship of a deity or, in the case of mortuary cannibalism, as a means of transmitting power from the dead to the living; and survival cannibalism, for the preservation of life under crisis conditions such as those the Donners faced in the mountains of 1847.

Although only this latter function has been extensively documented, sociologists had generally assumed at least the existence of all forms until the publication of William

Taking issue with cannibalism as one of the "unchallenged 'facts' of anthropology," Arens undertook an extensive review of the historical literature and charged that it failed to produce a single reliable firsthand account of the consumption of human meat (8). Yet, he noted, xenophobic references to "the cannibal" abounded, leading him to conclude, "The idea of 'others' as cannibals, rather than the act, is the universal phenomenon. The significant question is not why people eat human flesh, but why one group invariably assumes that others do" (139). For Arens, then, cannibalism exists primarily as an ideological phenomenon, and although actual instances of survival cannibalism remain undisputed—he maintains, in fact, that cannibalism under conditions of extreme famine "is not denied for any culture" (9)—the real matter for study is the cognitive and affective constructs behind "the 'cannibal complex'" rather than the authentication of past or present practice (161).

While Arens's iconoclastic argument has met with lively debate, still it reinscribes, as Peggy Reeves Sanday notes in Divine Hunger: Cannibalism as Social System, the field's long-standing assertion that "[c]annibalism is never just about eating" (3). Whether real or imagined, cannibalism operates as an important "medium for nongustatory messages," primarily by helping to mark boundaries that define the social order (Sanday 3). Linked with parricide and incest, the practice serves as Freud's culture-founding taboo, the eating of one's own kind a mark of the sub-human and bestial (Totem 176). Isomorphically, the development of Freudian selfhood requires development past the cannibalism of the oral stage to individuation founded on an awareness of the
bounded and separate self ("Negation" 214-25). Cannibalism, in other words, can perform a critical gate-keeping function in the maintenance of social and psychological borders that distinguish "us" from "them," "me" from "you."

At a fundamental level, the status of cannibalism as a specialized form of eating associates it with what is already a heavily overdetermined phenomenon, its symbolic valence founded on physiological necessity. "Eating precedes and frames consciousness," Mervyn Nicholson reminds readers in "Eat—or Be Eaten: The Social Significance of Cannibalism" (191); its sustaining rhythm commences with conception and ceases only with death itself. So basic is food to human life, so central is its production to human exchange, Nicholson continues, that "the scene of eating" becomes "one of the key paradigms by which society perceives/organizes reality" (202). Interpreters of culture ranging from Augustine to Foucault have recognized the power of the trope and noted the ease with which food modulates into neighboring "appetites" that maintain the species. Physically, eating morphs onto sexual intercourse as a site of desire and bodily union, onto aggression as a "locus of brutality" and domination (Nicholson 197). Intellectually, it resonates with language, another oral activity whose goals are control over and communion with the outside world. As each of these projections suggest, eating constitutes a curious compound of dominance and dependence, the supposed aggressor relying on its victim to meet essential needs. The act is hardly unproblematic, then, when invoked to assert the power of the predator on the one hand or the autonomy of subject on the other.

The very act of incorporation in fact subversively undercuts the whole field of subject/object, inside/outside, self/other binarism. With ingestion, argues Maggie Kilgour
in *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation*, eater and eaten are rendered "infinitely reversible," and what began in an experience of radical alterity collapses onto absolute identification (14). Revulsion against human flesh as the definitive "antifood"—the term is Lévi-Strauss’s in *The Raw and the Cooked* (206)—derives, in Kilgour’s poststructuralist critique, from a desperate need to deny the permeability of the membrane between self and other. If humankind selects cannibalism to demarcate particularly freighted boundaries, its special horror seems to lie here, in its capacity for the ultimate boundary erasure. Common bonds repudiated, the cannibal can regard another human being as potential provision, but, once ingested, the body of the other becomes the body of the self. The dangerously unstable hybrid that results generates a locus of defilement to be proscribed with the strongest of taboos. By compromising the identity of both eater and eaten, then, cannibalism not only blurs the distinction between human and beast but helps dismantle the whole notion of human as unitary subject.

For the families caught in the mountains, of course, cannibalism was hardly a matter of epistemology. Individually and collectively, the emigrants faced one choice: eat the dead or die themselves. Their recourse to survival cannibalism involved, by definition, an adoption of that "normally prohibited behavior" despite full awareness of the stigma attached to the act (Arens 18). Even if a pragmatic Harris would pronounce human flesh the highest quality protein of any food source (*Good to Eat* 33), only a desperation born of imminent starvation could have impelled them past entrenched cultural sanctions against its consumption. In fact, the eighty-one people, including five nursing infants, forced to winter at Truckee Lake and Alder Creek were at the point of
exhaustion and near-starvation even as the first blizzard hit. Their stores were already depleted, and the animals that might have sustained them were soon scattered and lost, prey to raids by natives of the hills or lost under twenty- and thirty-foot drifts. By the time of rescue, the trapped families had subsisted for so long on strips torn from hides that covered their shelters and what few fieldmice they could catch that rescuers were aghast at the nearly lifeless beings who greeted their arrival. For the fifteen who comprised the escape party known as "Forlorn Hope," the danger of starvation was even more immediate. Carrying just six days' skeletal rations, they lost the trail in trackless passes and wandered for four and a half weeks on crude homemade snowshoes. As early as 25 December, only their tenth day out, the weaker among them were dying, begging the stronger to consume their bodies so that some, at least, might live. Their wisdom prevailed, and seven-two men and all five women survived.

The last resort of these determined survivors brought the reality of cannibalism terrifyingly close to audiences who heard their stories. And while knowledge of extreme conditions in the mountains undoubtedly prompted pity, the ethnographic research of Donald Tuzin suggests it may have done little to mitigate disgust. Studying the Arapesh of New Guinea, where soldiers in the Japanese army of occupation resorted to cannibalism near the end of World War II, Tuzin demonstrates that the image of "survival" cannibalism heightens rather than reduces revulsion in the observer. The notion of cannibalism as a phenomenon of the Other begets, after all, a protective aloofness that consigns the act to another time, another place, another culture. To admit that the universal experience of hunger can drive a person to cannibalism in the here and now is to render it "doubly repellent" by reducing the difference between cannibal and
noncannibal to a matter of degree and circumstance (Tuzin 65). As Shirley Lindenbaum
suggests in her own study, aversion to cannibalism can be inversely proportional to
emotional distance, discomfort growing more acute as observers are forced to entertain
"the not-to-be-admitted notion" that under certain conditions the "deculturated beings"
who cannibalize might well be themselves (98). The Donner stories, then, became more,
not less, awful for the necessity that drove their principals to strip and consume human
flesh. The additional fact that the Donners enacted domestic cannibalism, both in that
their group comprised largely American citizens and in that they engaged in the act
around the campsite hearth, made it all the more repugnant.

Where "personal and cultural horror intersected" (Tuzin 69) in the Donner
confessions, then, empathy and antipathy intermingled. Certainly any emigrant party
across the Plains confronted the same forces of nature that overcame the Donners, and
that knowledge bred an anxious, sympathetic solidarity with the unhappy emigration of
1846. The overland route, by all accounts, tested the emotional, physical, and financial
resources of everyone who undertook it. Constrained by the pressures of time versus
distance, emigrants were unable to move their wagons before May, when the spring rains
had ended and sufficient grass had sprouted to sustain their stock, and they had to cross
the Sierras, highest of the ranges, before snowfall in late autumn. Parties knew that not
even careful preparation, dogged perseverance, and hard work could guarantee safe
passage, and news of the Donner story crystallized the very realistic fears of subsequent
emigrations.12 No matter what trail they took—and certainly few others ever ventured
across Hastings Cutoff—overlanders after 1847 "were never free of the shadow of that
disaster," declares George R. Stewart, twentieth-century Donner historian; from then on, "[t]he memory of death and cannibalism brooded over the yearly migration as the ultimate horror and the never-relaxed threat" (*California Trail* 183).

Indeed, the sensational end of the Donner Party in no way compromised its representative nature, either in composition or in aims. Rather, Stewart suggests in *Ordeal by Hunger: The Story of the Donner Party*, the infamous party served as "microcosm" of humanity in nineteenth-century America (13). At the kernel of the group were three families from Springfield: George and Tamsen Donner with their five young daughters; Jacob and Elizabeth Donner (the husbands were brothers), also with five children; James Reed, his wife Margaret, and their four. Each with three wagons, teamsters, oxen, cattle, and ample stores, these families represented the upper limit of financial resources on the agrarian frontier, a reminder that while the goal of resettlement was economic improvement, cross-country relocation required, by most calculations, at least $500-1000 in start-up cash (Faragher 21). Joined by Iowans Patrick and Peggy Breen and their family of seven, in combination with several smaller, less prosperous families and over a dozen unmarried males, they formed a loose aggregate of adults and dependents that ranged in age from sixty-five to infancy; at least half of them were children. Products of a highly mobile nation, most adults had already migrated at least once, in a pattern of removes from eastern seaboard to the Alleghenies to the prairies. The presence among them of two German families, a Belgian, an Englishman, and the Breens, with citizenship papers barely one year old, reflected the influx of European immigrants that flooded the country in the 1830s and '40s, immigrants joined by the Spanish Antoine and Juan Baptiste, subsequently enrolled into their ranks from the
Southwest. In terms of education, the composite ranged from pre-literate children and illiterate adults to the well-read Lewis Keseberg, fluent in four languages, and the Massachusetts-bred schoolteacher, Tamsen Donner, who planned to open a young ladies’ seminary in California. Overall, members of the party conformed closely to the standard profile of mid-century overlanders, characterized by Lillian Schlissel as literate, fairly sophisticated, independent, progressive, bent on self-improvement, and possessed of sufficient means to undertake a fairly capital-rich venture (156).

The demographics of mid-nineteenth-century America, then, recommended the Donner group as typical. They became representative not by their individual attributes, certainly not by the nature of their fate, but by their collective participation in what the national ideology viewed as American epic, the divinely-ordained march of civilization across a waiting continent. The Donner Party’s very emigration from America cast them in an archetypical American role. Making their way through unmapped wilds, eager for a fresh start in a distant paradise--on land that was neither theirs to take nor their government’s to give--they renewed the assault that seventeenth-century Puritans had preached as mission and subsequent Americans canonized as mythology. When the westward advance, temporarily halted after 1820 by a lack of capital and the inhospitality of the "Great American Desert," was resumed in the 1840s, the brutal reality of wilderness dangers only reinforced the symbolic resonance of the project. Uncharted and unsettled, the distant West all the more readily served, in Stephen Fender’s terms, as "natural backdrop on which the still unfulfilled hopes of American society would be projected" (4). By 1845, when John L. O’Sullivan, editor of the United States Magazine and Democratic Review, called the stretch to the Pacific America’s "'manifest destiny,'"
two centuries of growth—in population and national spirit—had empowered its citizens to overrun "'the continent allotted [them] by Providence'" (qtd. in Zinn 149). The country had found in overland emigration, as taxis and trope, a movement peculiarly suited to the personal and cultural ends of the American Dream.

Fueled by a residue of financial fallout from the Panic of 1837 and the disturbing reality of a growing urban underclass, thousands of overlanders did in fact turn to the West, the site where, Slotkin would observe, "personal good and national greed coincide[d]" (Fatal Environment 45). Historians estimate that between a quarter and a half million emigrants—Americans and immigrants—crossed the Plains from the 1840s through the 1870s (Faragher 11). The primary stimulus for this massive relocation was the land itself, with its implicit promise of wealth and status in healthy climes warmed by a beneficent sun. Federal policy, fed by a land hunger no less specific than that of the emigrants, encouraged settlement as a means of claiming national title to territory beyond America's borders. The government's willingness to lend practical as well as political support betrayed its own self-interest. Not only did military outposts sustain emigrants along the trail, but the War Department established the Topographical Corps of Engineers for the express purpose of surveying and opening land to emigration. Among the corps's earliest efforts were the explorations of the flamboyant Captain John Charles Frémont in 1842 and 1843-44. When Frémont submitted his 1845 report on these expeditions to his commanding officers, Congress, in what Henry Nash Smith terms a "conspicuous and carefully publicized" phase of mid-century expansionism, ordered it widely published, just in time to stoke the fever of the 1846 emigrants (29).
Time in fact proved the undeniable effectiveness of invasion by "pioneer army" (Henry Nash Smith 47): first in Texas, where American settlers so outnumbered the Mexicans that invaders created the renegade Texas Republic, then contrived its annexation to the United States; next in Oregon, where migration and settlement effectively Americanized the territory years before treaty with Great Britain ended joint occupation; finally in California, where American resident-aliens fueled the fires of antagonism that led to the Mexican War. The officially declared hostilities, which blazed fitfully from 1846 until 1848, achieved only minimal support across America. Unconvinced by rhetoric that proclaimed the liberation of subject Mexican peoples from a decaying European despotism, many citizens—witness Thoreau's visit to the Concord jail—viewed "Mr. Polk's War" as an act of unprovoked aggression, even conquest. Widespread disapproval did not, however, prevent the war from proving useful in reviving sagging patriotism and a flagging economy. Moreover, it yielded, with the cessions of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, felicitous territorial results: almost 1.2 million square miles, including not only the originally contested Texan borderlands but also New Mexico and California, the real if covert objects of its quest.

The enthusiastic rate at which settlers poured into these territories, both before and after annexation, then, hid the darker side of "manifest destiny." Its public face masked the aggression that accompanied expansion, by emigrant or military maneuver. At the same time, the zealots of progress frequently failed to acknowledge the relationship between extranational and intranational expansion, between emigration and urbanization, between the westward impulse and its inevitable result, erasure of the frontier. In the complex interanimation of politics, economics, and cultural expression, the factors which
precipitated that end bound every region of the country to its western shore. A major influence was the geometric progression of population. From the 1830s on, steadily increasing birthrates and liberal immigration policies led to dramatic growth, felt first in the Eastern metropolitan-industrial centers. While the city soon became a new locus for pursuit of the American Dream, its overcrowded tenements and sweatshops also proved a nexus for troubling new problems, for increased crime, social stratification, and class conflict. By mid-century, the disparity between the nation's traditional agrarian ideals and its evolving economic organization had become pronounced; it was apparent that the move from farm to factory would necessitate a philosophical as well as a functional shift in America's established paradigm.

In response, defenders of the age-old image of the New World state as haven for the dispossessed and door to unlimited opportunity fell back on the country's most ancient resource, its land. A favorite device in their rhetoric of regeneration was the Franklin-inspired notion of frontier as "safety valve," a reservoir of free land that would draw surplus labor from cities and thus save both urban and rural America: they looked to the West to save the East. Immensely appealing as theory, the notion was doomed to failure in practice. Nature would not solve the problems of the Industrial Revolution, nor would a finite continent satisfy the national appetite for territorial expansion. Ineluctably, emigration consumed the wilderness. As the line of settlement leapt from the Mississippi to the Pacific, then crossed back on itself to fill in the prairies and mountains, it eliminated the frontier on which America's salvation—and its self-proclaimed uniqueness—presumably rested. The standards the Donner Party supposedly championed in 1846 were already on their way to extinction.
Anticipatory nostalgia for America's free-hold idealism culminated, in 1890, in the announcement by the U.S. Census Bureau of the "closing" of the frontier since it could find no further pockets of territory with a population density of less than two persons per square mile. The results were interpreted for the nation by Frederick Jackson Turner in his 12 July 1893 address to the American Historical Society, gathered at Chicago for that year-long tribute to progress, the Columbian Exposition. His reflection was important not only for, in David Mogen's words, the "elegiac and ironic theme" it lent to subsequent discussions of the frontier (28), but also for its insistence on the intimate bonds between wilderness and city, on the "economic and social consolidation of the country" effected by the frontier (Turner 69). The loss of the frontier, then, affected all of America, whose uniqueness was for Turner rooted organically, almost literally, in "democracy born of free land" (83). With the eradication of its wilderness the nation forfeited the very source of its identity as well as the storehold of its natural wealth (88). At risk in 1846, then, were not just the Donner emigrants and their four thousand companions on the Oregon Trail, but also the dream that would lure not a few of them to their death.

Scripting and Conscripting the Unspeakable

As multifaceted as the personal and cultural horror of Donner cannibalism appears, it is perhaps best understood in the particular. Here Lewis Keseberg, last member of the party to be rescued, serves as apt--if, by all contemporary accounts, most notorious--example. Prevented by injury from moving out with the third relief team, Keseberg was left at camp several weeks after everyone else had departed or perished. When a fourth relief mission finally returned on 19 April, the team found him, as rescuer
John Fallon reported, "lying down amidst the human bones and beside him a large pan full of liver and lights," with "two kettles of human blood" nearby ("Extracts"). According to Fallon's journal, in enforced solitude the man had become particular, even fastidious, about his unfortunate diet. He spurned frozen livestock near his cabin and dismissed unidentified meat lying on a chair with the disclaimer, "'Oh! its too dry eating!' the liver and lights were a great deal better, and the brains made good soup!" Of Tamsen Donner, his last living companion, he exclaimed that "he [had] eat[en] her body and found her flesh the best he had ever tasted!"

However immoderate the behavior Fallon attributed to this "Cannibal of the Sierras" (and that is the reputation he acquired) a vastly different image emerged when McGlashan convinced an aging, reclusive Keseberg to relate his story for publication in 1879. "'I cannot describe the unutterable repugnance with which I tasted the first mouthful of flesh,'" he then declared to McGlashan; "'[i]t makes my blood curdle to think of it!'" (210). With evident emotion he continued:

"'To see that loathsome food ever before my eyes was almost too much for human endurance. I am conversant with four different languages . . . yet in all four I do not find words enough to express the horror I experienced during those two months, or what I still feel when memory reverts to the scene.'" (211)

The striking disparity of tone between the two accounts of this survivor's cannibalism—both purportedly in his own voice—finds several ready explanations, from ambivalence about his past actions and the inevitable modification of memories over time to the difference in perceptive filters the two recorders brought to their respective conversations. More to the point, however, is the image Keseberg projects as icon of the Donner Party experience: the survivor of the mountains become victim in the process of
rescue and restoration. By reproducing his words, the rescuer-rehabilitators of Keseberg shape and reshape his history; despite the putative presence of a first-person voice, marked in both accounts by the sign of quotation, biography here overwrites autobiography. Especially if the composition of a life story is the construction of a life, this process accomplishes an inscription-conscription that diminishes Keseberg in the very act of saving him.

While the multivalency of their narratives makes it impossible for a single Donner emigrant to speak for the whole, Keseberg's fate at the hands of those who tell his story typifies their collective experience of confession. What happened to the group, moreover, helps to explicate confessional theory, and on several levels. First, their experience confirms the dynamic offices of confession. Here, just as when confession erupts in Salem, there is a redefinition of both narrator and audience; here confession again both absorbs and reflects guilt; here confessant and confessor again share out the power inherent in their narrative exchange. Second, the solicitation and codification of these stories by a "nation of emigrants" dramatize the foundational premise of confessional theory, the metastatic relationship that confession establishes among author, audience, and text. Finally, the particular way in which the stories get inscribed, their appropriation as textual property, exposes the economic forces behind life-writing in American print culture, wherein to create autobiography is to consume-by-commodifying the life one purports to represent.

So interdependent are these diverse facets of the Donner histories that my study almost immediately escapes the neat (although necessarily artificial) frame I could construct for confession in Massachusetts Bay. While I begin, then, with the same
criteria that I used to interrogate Salem's demonological outpourings, my analysis soon expands to an examination of ways in which the conquest of extra-national territory and the consumption of autobiographical artifact profit by the confession of cannibalism in the Sierras. In fact, the winter provides what James A. Henretta in his gloss of historical critique calls a "focused paradigmatic episode," a single event that serves as correlative of the "critical and cognitive consciousness of [its] audience," manifest here in its obsession with a signal taboo (1321). By their metonymic conflation of individual and cultural guilt, then, the disclosures of the starving emigrants' help enflesh confessional theory.

Like witchcraft in that other proto-American territory, Massachusetts Bay, cannibalism on the Western frontier entailed radically transgressive behavior, and confessional expression was a source of considerable anxiety for emigrants who found their fare nearly impossible to stomach, its effect on them nearly impossible to describe. While they could, and obviously did, relate the stark facts of their survival, at a more elemental level they doubted the validity of language to "reify and codify, and therefore make palatable, an otherwise inaccessible experience" (Poulsen 106). Elaine Scarry's perceptive interpretation of physicality in The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World suggests here that the torments of the winter--the ordeal of cannibalism, certainly, but also the extremes of cold, isolation, anxiety, and unsanitary living conditions--would render the emigrants' experience essentially unsusceptible to language. Their subsequent attempts at narration were blocked, then, not only by the force of taboo but also by what Scarry calls the "unsharability" of pain, its persistent "resistance to language" (4).
In possession of a story whose central action defied language, some survivors invoked hyperbole to convey by superlative what they could ill express at all; others simply conceded the fundamental inadequacy of language to transmit their experience. Virginia Reed Murphy, for one, would forever equate that winter with "untold suffering," with pain that "words cannot tell" ("Girl with the Donner Party" 2: 34), with "horrors" that "no pen can describe nor imagination conceive" ("Girl with the Donner Party" 2: 28), and Keseberg would exclaim, "’[T]o go into details—to relate the minutiae—is too agonizing! I can not do it! Imagination can supply these’" (McGlashan, History 211). The telling of the untellable underwrote every inscription of the Donner story, embedding the paradoxical assertion of its ineffability into the very text.

Narrators' insistence on the inexpressibility of their experience served as textual marker for the magnitude of the identity displacement that their transformation from ordinary emigrants into aberrant cannibals entailed. And although this conversion involved, in every case, the same oral activity, its narrative byproducts issued from dozens of individuals relating a highly personal tale over the course of several decades. The common threat of starvation had forced a single choice upon its sufferers, but the resulting deed was enacted in at least four different sites (two at the original camps, two on the escape routes), and the decision to feed on the dead seems to have been made independently in each situation, without knowledge of other groups' choices. As a result, while the matter for confession among the emigrants was uniform, its expression was not. Because of the diversity of experience and narrative, then, it is important to deal with accounts individually, beginning with those recorded on-site as the most immediate reflection of the cannibal experience. The first of these—and the one the
critical consensus regards as most reliable—is the journal in which Patrick Breen registered his experiences at the Alder Creek camp, in almost daily installments.\textsuperscript{19}

Breen's diary opened on Friday, 20 November 1846, with its longest entry, a summary of events from the party's arrival at the pass three weeks earlier. After 102 less expansive passages recorded over the next three and a half months, it closed abruptly with the 1 March entry that noted, "[T]here has 10 men arrived this morning from Bear Valley with provisions  we are to start in two or three days" (16). The text contains, as Poulsen observes, mainly "enumerations of wood, wind, snow, clouds, sun" (113). Here, in the context of imminent starvation, the potential for cannibalism took its place almost matter-of-factly among the other necessary conditions for survival. While the diary served also as the camp's necrology—Breen recorded on 8 February, for example, "Spitzer died last night about 3 o'clock to[day] we will bury him in the snow" (13)—its "telegraphese style" reduced the affect of every entry (Jones 1). Thus the 26 February statement, which contained the first direct reference to cannibalism, began with "Froze hard last night today clear & warm" and, with no apparent misgiving, moved on to:

Mrs Murphy said here yesterday that thought she would commence on Milt. [Milton Elliott, who had died two weeks before] & eat him  I dont [know] that she has done so yet, it is distressing  The Donos told the California folks that they commence to eat the dead people 4 days ago, if they did not succeed that day or next in finding their cattle then under ten or twelve feet of snow & did not know the spot or near it, I suppose they have done so ere this time." (15)

In his extremity, Breen's concern was with physical necessities, not social prohibitions, and he let circumstances offer their own justification for the narrative he inscribed.\textsuperscript{20} His observation is important, moreover, because it, unwittingly, initiated what later becomes evident as a pattern in the Donner corpus: he described others'
supposed cannibalism rather than his own (for despite the likelihood he reports, no actual

cannibalism had yet occurred). The campsite diary ended just days before Breen, his

wife, and five of their children embarked on the perilous descent from Truckee Lake, in a

rescue attempt that would deliver fourteen of seventeen to the safety of Sutter’s Fort. En

route, the company would succumb to famine and cold, and Breen himself would

consume human flesh. His diary, then, would require a sequel, to be supplied by his

wife Margaret, when she told the tale to Farnham for California In Doors and Out, which

in turn provided corroboratory material for McGlashan’s history. And William Eddy,

engaged in the rescue effort, would report Breen’s cannibalism in the account he gave

out, first to other rescuers, then to Thornton in San Francisco, ultimately to McGlashan

as well. Significantly, none of the narrators of these transgressions delivered an actual

confession: Patrick Breen because he closed his diary before necessity drove him to

cannibalism; Margaret Breen and Eddy because, at least by their accounts, they abstained

from all traffic in the “loathsome” meat (McGlashan 211). Instead, all three narrators

preserved for themselves a distinct, non-cannibal identity, even while they invoked close

association with flesh-eating companions to substantiate their textual authenticity.

The volunteers who risked their lives to save the starving likewise advanced a

claim to an authentic tale from the mountains, where they reported incontrovertible

evidence of transgressive activity. Relief teams confronted the obvious paraphernalia of

cannibalism when they reached the Truckee campsites, the ravaged bodies of the dead

mutterly serving to indict the living. Thornton, for example, described the scene that

greeted rescuers Charles Cady and Nicholas Stone when they reached the late Jacob

Donner’s tent: one of the party making off with Donner’s leg; children feeding on the
heart and liver; and, around the fireside, "bits of human hair, many bones, and half-
consumed fragments of limbs" (215-16). As for those who fled the mountains, in the
absence of material evidence, their very survival testified to cannibal activity. "Forlorn
Hope," in particular, was known to have left camp with little over a pound of meat per
person; the remnants that reached the settlements thirty days later had, quite obviously,
subsisted on something other than sheer determination.21 In the Sierras, then, there was
no need to establish the fact of cannibalism, but there was, quite evidently, a need on the
part of the audience to produce this fact as text. Thus, rather than render confession
superfluous, the ubiquity of evidence became a force for its evocation, skeletal remains
proclaiming that sufferers need supply only the particulars for a tale already conspicuous
in outline. Those who lived were convicted by the material circumstances of their rescue
and made, by confession, to participate in their own judgment. The resultant disclosures
cast rescuers in the simultaneous role of confessors and put them in possession of a
macabre tale as much theirs as the emigrants'.

By direct and indirect admission, then, the winter's tale effected a complex
process of identity-displacement along the confessional axis. Cannibals become
confessants, but often through the mediation of texts constructed for them by observers,
who brought to the cannibal act not just the passive ear of a confessor but the active hand
of a biographer. As anxious to share the story as they were to distance themselves from
the deed, rescuer-audiences blasted any hope the survivors may have held for post-
traumatic anonymity. The result was a confused pastiche of confession and reportage,
autobiography and biography, first-person memory and third-person history that both
preserved and transformed the confessional remains of 1847.22
As the story spread from Sutter’s Fort to the West Coast, then ricocheted eastward, biography cannibalized autobiography but did not silence confession. Indeed, the promulgation of their history, on both sides of the mountains, apparently evoked within survivors something of a confessional urgency. Once rescue was complete, accounts multiplied, and in them the impulse to divulge the grisliest details seemed scarcely stronger than the narrators’ professed reluctance to speak. And although the content of their narratives varied with each author’s perspective, all evinced a single overriding intention, exculpation. Without exception, the narrators maintained that their behavior on the trail was an appropriate response to the catastrophic conditions they faced. If reports of the winter’s mighty trial by ordeal had forced the truth out of them, they faced their audiences as they might a jury of peers, determined to win full acquittal.

Yet guilt inheres in confessional narrative, and it seeps from even the Donner Party annals. Denied primacy of place in the accounts of their cannibalism, it found abundant expression elsewhere along the trail. The group’s long overland journey left festering pockets of remorse over actions that violated the tacit code of the West: 68-year-old Hardkoop left to die on the way when no one would lend a horse to carry him; an angry Breen refusing water to Eddy’s children, near dead of thirst in the desert; Mrs. Wolfinger widowed when the two who stayed behind to help her husband cache his well-laden wagons returned with the suspicious story--forever unproven--that natives had killed him and chased them away.23 Lasting guilt attended the abandonment of loved ones at the mountain camps by those able to attempt escape, despite recognition that their escape afforded the only hope for rescue of the young, the old, the weak. Forty years after the event, an aged Juan Baptiste confessed in shame to Eliza Houghton (orphaned daughter of
George and Tamsen Donner) that "what looked so bad in us was[:] We came away and left your mother there alone with your father. Yes, strong able men marched away when they might have saved them both" (HOU 1378). Two incidents along the trail even incurred sufficient blame to lead to court action in California. At Sutter's, James Reed was tried in the death of John Snyder, the act that had led to his banishment on 12 October when the party was still far east of the Sierras. Reed was acquitted on the grounds of self-defense, but the incident remained a source of remorse for the emigrants, who had expelled him without food and, in territory beyond reach of American law, without trial. Moreover, Keseberg, who could not escape the suspicion of having murdered Tamsen Donner, whether for her flesh or for the considerable fortune she and her husband were said to have carried, brought suit against Edward Coffeymeyer of the relief teams for defamation of character; in a decision that conveyed little sympathy for the plaintiff, he was awarded $1 in damages and charged court costs.

If the non-apologetic confessants of the Donner Party had cause to parry guilt, there was plenty to spare for their confessors. Much of it here too was unacknowledged, swept aside in their immediate rush of concern for the emigrants and their plight. Not only did Sutter lend his legendary aid, offering with Alcalde John Sinclair to guarantee rescuers wages of $3 a day, but San Franciscans held a public meeting that drew "nearly every male citizen" of the town and raised $700 in one night for the relief (Thornton 42). Americans in California, it would seem, reacted with the energy and enthusiasm that characterized a nation of "perennial rebirth" on a frontier won by successive emigration (Turner 60). The response to rescue, moreover, was as swift and confident as the response to need. By the time relief teams brought out the last survivor, the West
was already reading the episode less as disaster than as catalyst for growth, despite the pyrrhic nature of a victory that claimed forty out of eighty-one as casualties; the 22 May 1847 California Star averred that the "thrilling event" would "create much sensation throughout the States" and teach "the authorities of the Union" the "necessity of another and a better road to this country" ("California Emigrants"). And, back east, the Illinois Journal concluded a front-page article on its hometown emigrants with the sanguine observation that "now after three month's starvation, among the snow-capped mountains, the survivors of this unfortunate company, are tilling the soil, beneath the perpetual summers of the valleys of California" (Reed, "California Correspondence").

Yet neither triumph nor innocence emerged unadulterated from the winter of 1847, where in the figure of domestic anthropophagus individual and cultural guilt collided. Actualized in emigrant confession, cannibalism as metacultural myth of origin was readily mapped onto the still-evolving myth of American origin. What Turner five decades later would enunciate as historical hypothesis, that the frontier defined the nation, mid-nineteenth-century America intuited, and the identification of all parts of an increasingly diverse population with its westernmost inhabitants hinted at a most discomforting recognition. Not only had the wilderness ravaged the resources of its citizens, but it had thwarted their best efforts to subdue it, had, in a sense, defeated even the survivors: it had driven the standard-bearers of American civilization to barbaric behavior. If, as Turner was to proclaim, the frontier presented "the meeting point between savagery and civilization," here the former had won (60). While the Donners
did not, as the Puritans had feared, meet the devil in the wilderness, they at least met their own most desperate selves, and in them the nation confronted anew its abiding ambivalence about the frontier it both embraced and abhorred.

The determination with which the American populace worked to beat back the wilderness betrayed as much aggression as awe, and in its pogromic westward sweep the nation to whom the Donners confessed earned complicity in whatever identity the group in its desperation acquired. Citizens of a state whose "crucial founding fiction," says Jehlen, was the "prior vacancy of the continent" (7), Americans as a group espoused a mission and a "destiny" attainable only by appetitive aggression. The nation advanced to the Pacific by means of a cannibalizing imperialism that confronted the exotic, the extra-national, the radically Other, and consumed it. By giving confessional form to a very concrete transgression, the Donner emigrants helped write the wider culture's narrative of colonization in a form that could be told and retold, dispensed and dispersed, until the victors over physical starvation and the victors over political containment won vindication for, and from, each other.

The degree to which systemic racism accompanied and supported the aims of American imperialism was made chillingly apparent in an incident often glossed over by survivors of "Forlorn Hope." When Eddy, chief chronicler of that snowshoe party, attempted to construct a history for them, he conceived a hero-studded epic replete with almost eucharistic self-sacrifice: a weakened Charles Stanton slipping off to die alone rather than hold the group back; a dying Franklin Graves urging his daughters to use whatever means possible--and his intention was clear--to sustain life; the strongest offering to "cast lots to see who should die to preserve the remainder" (Thornton 253).
Despite Eddy's efforts, however, the group's basest secret escaped with them. Among them marched two native vaqueros who had been sent by Sutter, early in winter, to carry food to the emigrant party. When the snowshoers first resorted to cannibalism, these two had separated from the group, revolted by the food their companions devoured. Days later, when the Mexicans fell, dying from exposure and starvation, the party came upon them again and conspired to kill them outright in the only confirmed instance of homicidal cannibalism among the entire party.

This act of murderous desperation was predicated on a neat displacement discernible in the indirection with which Farnham recounted it: "The starving emigrants, who could not slay each other, thought with less scruple of the fate of these" (417). Identification of the (American) self as cannibal had heightened the alien status of the non-American, non-cannibal Mexicans until, racially and now ethically distinct, the vaqueros became consummate Others, removed from the category of companion and reclassified as prey. Moreover, Eddy, the man who committed and reported the act, would have died himself were it not for the help of a native tribe that discovered him crawling in the snow, fed him on pinenuts, and carried him to the American settlements. In its failure to evoke criticism, its neat assimilation into the guilt-without-apology and absolution-without-censure pattern that the Donner Party's non-homicidal cannibalism elicited, this episode and its resolution indicted the latent racism of its national and, pointedly, extra-national audiences.

The eighty-one members of the Donner Party trapped in the mountains, then, were caught not just by the worst winter of the century but by the moral and political forces that shaped their culture. Certainly the nation did not share the Donners' meat, but it had
bred the ideology that sent them through a thousand miles of foreign territory with the conviction, in Sacvan Berkovitch's terms, that a "border" was not a boundary to be observed but a threshold to be crossed (23). Applauding the Donners' courage and determination, even, in extremity, their Yankee resourcefulness, American culture found good cause to forgive the confessing cannibals. Not only did necessity render their actions blameless, but their sacrifices had rendered an important national service: these emigrants had helped tame the West. Their tales proclaimed that emigrants could face the worst and survive; in fact, the weakest, women and children, could survive (a feat Grayson attributes to lower metabolic rate but which the popular mind ascribed to less tangible qualities of character [233]). Read as testament to American spirit, their stories belonged to the chronicles of patriotism, their confessions not to tragedy but to what Arnold Krupat sees as the comedy of the American West, where every autobiography "progresses firmly toward a 'happy ending,' the triumph of 'civilization' over 'savagery'" (314). Supplied with this new cast of heroes for its favorite fable, that of fearless emigrants bringing enlightenment to a savage land, America could continue to ignore the darker consequences of its advance across the continent, the displacement and destruction of the land's original inhabitants, the despoilment of its wilderness. In the particulars of 1846, the nation would pay in human life the cost that the Mexican War exacted, would support in U.S. currency the relief efforts that rescued the Sierran camps, would pledge in lavish promises better roads to carry new emigrants over the mountains, and would fail to recognize any kinship between the desperate figure feeding on the carrion of dead companions and a nation driven to incorporate millions of square miles of foreign territory and, at the same time, consume its own resources in the name of progress.28
Amid the victorious rhetoric of empire, the Donner survivors surely won the right to claim pride of place in their chapter of national history. A certain boastfulness, the obverse of shame, erupted in the Donner confessions, where the naive assumption of innocence gave way to protestations of pride. An aside of Virginia Reed Murphy's, for example, acclaimed her brother "the youngest child that walked over the Sierra Nevada" ("Girl with the Donner Party" 2: 33), while her father asserted unequivocally, "Had I remained with the company, I would have had the whole of them over the mountains before the snow would have caught them; and those who have got through have admitted this to be true" ("California Correspondence"). The winter became a quintessential rite of passage; Virginia would recall that her father's departure, which left her to face the coming trials with an ailing mother and three young siblings, "suddenly ma[de] a woman of me" (2: 26). The ordeal thrust many from that season into the role of heroes, and lesser stars spoke with close to awe about John Stark, the rescue-team member who carried other families' children forty miles through the snow, or with bemused affection about Patty Reed, the eight-year-old who hid her tiny doll in the pocket of her dress and carried her treasure to safety. The winter may have made the emigrants victims of its horrors, but their survival made them victors of the mountains, and a pronounced strand of accomplishment marked the tale their memories told.

Those who "lived to tell the tale" were, like Melville's Ishmael-inspired narrator a few years later, survivors and more. Their participation in an action guarded by the strongest of taboos won them elite status as initiates of esoteric mysteries; they had tasted forbidden fruits. What was true in general of Western emigrants, that their geophysical movement put them in possession of exotic knowledge, was true in special measure of the
Donners, who had trespassed, literally and figuratively, beyond the borders of civilization. Here were men and women who might break the silence guarding a sacred proscription, and their stories could not fail to titillate audiences across the country. And while it would prove impossible for party members fully to satisfy the sometimes prurient curiosity of their audiences, since some part of the experience would remain forever incommunicable, telling the stories would also become a ritual means of moderating the horror of their winter; the confession of stain served to remove pollution and reconcile the cannibal with the human community (Sanday 34). Narrativizing the experience afforded emigrant-confessants a degree of distance and authorial control; to verbalize the memory was, in some measure, to neutralize its trauma.

Confession, however, never accords full control to the individual whose disclosure defines the act, a rhetorical object lesson the dissemination of stories on both sides of the Sierras would soon teach Donner survivors. While some, understandably, sought to erase all memory of the ordeal or shared their experiences only with a small circle of family and friends, others evinced a near-obsession with "fixing" for public record the story of 1846-47, with telling "what really happened" in the mountains. Party members, each in possession of communal yet intensely personal recollections, initiated a curious competition for narrative ascendancy that frequently conscripted others' texts into a history they claimed for their own. The fate of the journal that Eddy composed during or shortly after his escape with "Forlorn Hope" offers a ready example of such narrative appropriation. Before entrusting his story to Thornton (first to include an account of the Donner Party in a published volume, as two chapters of What I Saw in California), Eddy evidently circulated his journal widely enough for it to be conveyed back to his native
state, where it surfaced in the Springfield *Illinois Journal* of 9 December 1847. There his account was published in the semblance still of a first-person report, but overlaid with such extensive editorial apparatus that its author receded into shadow.

The title of the article in which the tale of "Forlorn Hope" appeared identified the authorship not of Eddy but of James Reed: "Narrative of the Sufferings Of a Company of Emigrants in the Mountains of California, in the winter of '46 and '7 by J. F. Reed, late of Sagamon County, Illinois." An annotation in brackets immediately below this title indicated, however, that it had already undergone editorial revision: "The following narrative was prepared for the press by Mr. J. H. Merryman, from notes written by Mr. J. F. Reed. We copy it from the [Illinois] State Registe[r] . . . ." The opening paragraph of the article explained, "Through the kindness of Mr. James W. Keys, Esq. [an in-law of Reed's], we are enabled to lay before our readers an abstract of the journal of Mr. James F. Reed, who emigrated from this place, some two years since, to California." What followed next reduced Eddy's authorial contribution to a journal-within-a-journal; mention of "Forlorn Hope" emerged only when Reed, narrator-hero of the "frame" journal, described the rescue effort he was about to launch just as the seven surviving snowshoers reached safety. Here, Reed proposed, "A synopsis of the journal of Wm. H. Eddy, of Belleville, will give the reader a better idea of the hardships endured by them." Buried until now in this Reed narrative, Eddy's chronicle of the escape finally appeared, in two brief paragraphs, before Reed's narration resumed.

Certainly the kind of narrative conscription to which Eddy's text fell prey became increasingly likely as the popularity of the Donner tales grew. Soon the winter's principals, both party members and rescuers, who had first competed with each other for
the primacy of their recollections, found themselves displaced by zealous interpreters in a
process of mediation founded on the story's polysemic nature, its origin in oral narrative,
and, of course, its sensational appeal. The development of a national market for print
media and a national appetite for Western lore encouraged a kind of textual voyeurism,
and in response to the demands of a fast-growing audience, second- and third-hand
narrators obligingly turned glimpses of that winter into material for the editor of the
weekly press and the publisher of frontier fiction. Before long, Donner Party members
risked losing their history to those who would write it for them.

The potential for confessional conscription only intensified in the succeeding
decades when attitudes toward the West turned from anticipation to nostalgia, when, says
Fender, "[r]omance took over from realism" (165). Sympathetic appropriators openly
mythologized the Donner Party, elevating members to heroic status according to the
standards of the day. By 1871, when Frances H. McDougal composed "The Donner
Tragedy" for the Pacific Rural Press of 21 January (where it appeared on "The Home
Circle" page just ahead of a column entitled "How to Have a Loving Wife"), the drama
shone with sentimental appeal. In Margaret Breen, who had sheltered four other
emigrants with her family, McDougal identified a paragon of womanhood, a mother who
deserved "the crown of virtue," one whose name "should be inscribed in golden lettering
on the page of history." Her saga had in Captain Sutter the embodiment of frontier
generosity; in the rescuers, hearty outdoorsmen who, "each with a heavy load on his
back, boldly set foot on the trackless mountain"; and in Keseberg, of course, the classic
outlaw.
Behind such demonizing and eulogizing impulses, the successive transformation of the Donner story revealed the nature of confession as not only communal textual product but also communal textual possession; what confessions the Donners shared soon ceased to be their own. Especially here, where narration involved dozens of individuals scripting and rescripting a collective history over half a century and more, the winter's survivors could hardly avoid becoming victims of textual consumption. The commodification of the frontier over the same period of time, its reification in everything from postcards and dime novels to "Buffalo Bill" Cody's Wild West Show and Frederic Remington's nostalgic realism, simply provided a commercial forum for the confessional contest between narrator and audience over the power to define identity, assign guilt, and control narrative.

One material result of this competition emerged in 1879, apparently with the most benign of intentions, when McGlashan, as editor of the *Truckee Republican*, decided to compile a full history of the Donner Party. Initiated by an amateur historian in a bid to boost circulation for his newly-acquired newspaper, McGlashan's project would ultimately produce a work scholars recognize as a foundational Donner text. What ensued more immediately was a lengthy excursion into "investigative reporting" that involved thousands of letters, interviews with survivors, a legal battle over rights to the Donner story, even an archaeological dig at the cabin sites. It involved, in addition, an oddly cannibal-like process of incorporation that transformed the confessions of the emigrants into McGlashan's textual property.

Among McGlashan's most willing participants was Eliza Poor Donner Houghton, youngest of the Donner daughters orphaned at Alder Creek. Her correspondence with the
editor-historian began on 8 February 1879, when he submitted a request for information regarding her memories of the winter’s encampment (HOU 52, 53). She replied four days later, cautious, hesitating to contribute until certain that he shared her concern for "having the truth told" and correcting "false impressions" (HOU 50). She explained:

My reason for this is, several histories have been published from time to time, purporting to be true histories of the party; which were not only erroneous [sic], but in many instances grossly exaggerated. I am satisfied no one individual can give anything like a history of the party after [its encampment] near Donner lake. (HOU 50)

Won over by McGlashan’s evident sincerity, Houghton became an enthusiastic contributor to the cumulative history being published in weekly columns of the Republican with invitations to all living survivors to submit any necessary emendations. The repeated appeals elicited ever more expansive response from correspondents anxious to clarify as if for all time their roles in what his advertisements called “the most thrilling chapter of pioneer California history” (Truckee Republican). The relationship between these survivor-informants and their editor-confessor evolved with the serialized history, to the point that each came to rely on the other for the symbiotic actualization of needs, they supplying the material, he mouthpiece for that elusive, definitive, "true" history of their ordeal at Donner Lake.

McGlashan’s mediation of confessional voice effected a curiously aborted process of collaborative authorship. On 17 June, just days before the first bound copies of the text would appear, McGlashan wrote to Houghton, “Please suggest, freely, any changes you would make if you were writing the history all alone instead of having me to assist you” (HOU 84). Two days later, when the volumes neared completion, a generous McGlashan wrote again to her:
I have just been reading your—my—our proofs. Suppose I get a reputation as an author—a historian, how much of the honor will belong to me? Here is a chapter appropriated bodily from your pen! In other places there are sweet little phrases, cute sentences, apt expressions which I stole without even saying—"by your leave"... I know you will approve the theft however, because of [your concern for] the subject (HOU 87).

And on 4 July, he wrote jubilantly, "I send you today the beginning and ending of our book" (HOU 89). But by 12 July, when he announced, "A very tired mortal is writing you," it was because "My book came out this afternoon and I have since delivered a hundred copies of them" (HOU 90). And five days later, when he reported, "The book is selling very rapidly. Indeed, my most sanguine dreams are more than realized, in a financial point of view," no mention was made of profit-sharing (HOU 91).

Luckily, Eliza Donner Houghton, who had long ago made her peace with the Sierras, had by now forged a friendship with the editor from Truckee. Two months before, when her sister (Elithia C. Donner Wilder) and brother-in-law angrily opposed McGlashan’s conscription of their history, even seeking a legal injunction against him, she had begged them to reconsider. McGlashan, she wrote, had "spared neither time, trouble, or expense in his endeavor" to "place the acts and memories of [our] loved ones before the public in a true light"; not only was it their duty to assist him, but it was futile to oppose his efforts, for "[t]he entire vote of the survivors could not stop the publication of the History even if we should desire it" (HOU 49).

So committed was Houghton to collective confession, and so confident was she in the trustworthiness of her chosen confessor, that when, in 1902, she decided to compile her own reminiscences of 1846-47, the mentor she turned to was the same McGlashan who twenty-three years before had first sought her assistance (HOU 142). He willingly persevered with her through a lengthy apprenticeship in writing and publishing until he
could mark the 1911 publication of *The Expedition of the Donner Party and Its Tragic Fate* with his warmest congratulations. Houghton’s book, the last full-length account by a Donner survivor, approached no nearer to the “truth” of 1846-47 than McGlashan’s had, but his reflection to her on the process of its composition hinted at the real source of confessional truth: “[Y]our letters to me did educate you as well” (HOU 1738).

Thirty years later, McGlashan’s own editors, George H. Hinkle and Bliss McGlashan Hinkle, would turn hagiographers and canonize his efforts in explicitly confessional terms. "McGlashan was much more than the mere historian of the Donner party," they would declare; "he was their confessor" (xxx). If in eliciting their stories he also became possessor of their secrets, his power was never unmediated by the reciprocity that co-defined participants in the exchange of guilt and returned to confessants their own rightful authority. The ability to manipulate such power, and to great advantage, becomes, next, the focus for discussion in the history of Harriet Jacobs, who emerges from the abjection of slavery to claim a liberatory narrative of confessional self-definition.
NOTES

1. Virginia's letter was printed, with editorial corrections, as "Deeply Interesting Letter" in the Springfield Illinois Journal, 16 December 1847, making it one of the earliest published accounts of the Donner Party's winter. Although the original eight-page manuscript has been lost, George R. Stewart has reconstructed the text from five extant versions and published it in Ordeal by Hunger (355-62). He provides as well a full history of the letter and its various emendations (348-54).

2. Virginia Reed Murphy's account was reprinted by American History Illustrated as "A Girl with the Donner Party" in its September and October 1986 issues; all citations refer to that version.

3. Among the more unusual recent adaptations: George Keithley's 254-page epic poem, The Donner Party; Rachel K. Laurgaard's illustrated Patty Reed's Doll (newly reprinted), which retells the story for children; the Disney made-for-TV movie, One More Mountain, with Meredith Baxter; and the theater art of Julie Ince Thompson, who bases her choreographed performances on Ruth Whitman's poetic re-creation of a lost journal, Tamsen Donner: A Woman's Journey. The group has left a distinct mark on California as well. Not only have Truckee Lake and Truckee Gap lost their names to the party, but the two campsites, with memorabilia on permanent display, have been preserved at Donner Lake State Park and the aptly if ironically named Donner Family Picnic Grounds in the Truckee arm of Tahoe National Forest.

4. Breen's diary remains in the collections of the Bancroft Library and Reed's in the Sutter's Fort Historical Museum in Sacramento. The only record of the poetry Denton is said to have composed just prior to his death is that published in the California Star and reprinted by J. Quinn Thornton in What I Saw in California; no original is extant. Tamsen Donner is known to have kept an extensive journal, but nothing of it survived the winter. Published accounts based on journals of William Eddy and rescuer John Fallon exist, but it is not clear that the authors composed their reflections while actually engaged in either escape or rescue. Other partial diaries exist, but none for the period during which party members were snowbound.

5. By 1936, when Stewart was completing his first edition of Ordeal by Hunger, he noted that Isabella Breen MacMahon, the last surviving member of the party, had died on 25 March 1935, although as a one-year-old infant in 1847, she would have had no firsthand memories of the winter encampment.

6. Interestingly enough for my study, Arens makes a specific connection between cannibalism and witchcraft (178-80). Drawing on the work of H. R. Trevor-Roper in The European Witch-Craze of the 16th and 17th Centuries, he notes that, historically, the two practices are often coupled in accusations and that, at a systemic level, these accusations serve a similar function in the efforts of dominant groups to control a marginalized minority and thus solidify their own positions of power.
7. Two years before Arens, Harris posed an analogous question from the materialist perspective of nutritional efficiency: "What has to be explained is why cultures that have no scruples about killing enemies should ever refrain from eating them" (Cannibals 105).

8. Note that Sanday soundly refutes Arens's conclusions on the basis of her own study of 156 societies who figure in reports of cannibalism. By her count, the data on the 109 for whom sufficient evidence is available to form an opinion show that 34% yielded information indicating cannibalistic practices.

9. The etymology of the cannibal epithet bears a heavy political weight. A bastardized form of "Carib," Columbus's designation for the lands and people he encountered on his western voyages, it tacitly equates the xenic with the savage at the same time that it divides the alien from the familiar.

10. For a description (more clinical than graphic) of the circumstances of the party's famine and the symptoms it produced, see Grayson or McCurdy.

11. I have been unable to determine when or by whom the epithet "Forlorn Hope" was first applied to the snowshoe party, but apparently it was in evidence from the start. Etymologically, the name is entirely apt; it is ascribed a folk derivation from the Dutch verloren hoop, literally, "lost band."

12. Nor was the fate of the Donner group unique in the annals of mountain extremity; accounts of disaster and cannibalism peppered the history of the West. Among the more egregious contemporary examples were the 1845 expedition of "Lost Immigrants," whose entrapment in the Cascade Mountains cost nearly twice as many lives as the Donner encampment, and Charles Frémont's 1848 attempt to map the ranges of southwest Colorado, a failed effort which reproduced the pattern of starvation, cannibalism, and desperate rescue (DeVoto 375, 480). Moreover, the passage of time did little to mitigate the danger; Horace Greeley, crossing the country in the comparative luxury available by 1859, was to pronounce along the California Trail the Donners had followed, "Here on the Humboldt, famine sits enthroned, and waves his scepter over a dominion expressly made for him" (272).

13. John Mack Faragher correlates these successive moves with the family life cycle, noting that emigration usually occurred either in conjunction with marriage, or in second-stage families with young children, or in mature families whose parents hoped to relocate with their married children (19).

14. The 1845 publication of Lansford Hastings's Emigrants' Guide, which Stewart was to pronounce "neither detailed nor reliable" (Trail 146) would be the decisive factor in the Donner route. Hastings's ill-founded enthusiasm was tempered by the more practical and realistic Route Across the Rocky Mountains of Overton Johnson (which appeared in 1846 but probably too late to have been a major influence on that year's
emigration) and the *Route and Distances to Oregon and California* of J. M. Shively, both of which contained invaluable descriptions of terrain and tables of altitudes, temperatures, and distances between key landmarks.

15. By Bernard DeVoto's careful estimates in *The Year of Decision: 1846*, there were 6000-7000 Americans in Oregon before joint occupation with the British ended in 1846 and about 1000 in California before its cession to the United States in 1848 (51).

16. Slotkin argues persuasively in *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* that class conflict is itself of the essence of American identity. Rather than emerging only in mid-nineteenth century, he insists, social stratification was coterminous with settlement. Displaced first onto racial antagonism in the conflict between Puritans and natives, secondly onto nature in the conflict between pioneers and the land, this elemental conflict has provided "the building blocks of our dominant historiographical tradition and political ideology"; at the root of the so-called Myth of the Frontier are the "same 'laws' of capitalist competition, of supply and demand, of Social Darwinian 'survival of the fittest'" that foment class conflict (15).

17. Frances Helen McDougal, writing for the *Pacific Rural Press* in 1871, insists that Keseberg operated an eatery "well known as Cannibal Tent" at Sutter's.

18. True, cannibal survivors of the group known as "Forlorn Hope" reached safety just as the first relief team was departing, but rescuers agreed to conceal the fate of the snowshoers from the other emigrants so as not to discourage them. Thus, although certain relief team members had knowledge of its practice, there was no apparent overlap in cannibal activity.

19. The original, as William R. Jones describes in his preface, was written in ink on 8 sheets of paper, each folded in half to comprise a 32-page booklet. Breen carried it with him out of the mountains, then presented it to Sheriff George McKinstry at Sutter's Fort to aid in the official report of the rescue efforts to Captain J. B. Hull, U.S. Navy, who served in what Americans took to be official administrative authority over the Pacific coast territory.

20. In observing the relatively late date at which the group entertained cannibalism as a viable option, McCurdy notes that entrenched inhibitions require an extended lapse of time, coupled with a high degree of desperation, to break down (230).

21. McGlashan records the quantity of meat in terms the escapees themselves used: enough "to allow each person, three times a day, a piece the size of one's two fingers" (History 71).

22. It is interesting to note that while the displacement from first to third person is precisely what Arens argues invalidates historical reports of cannibalism, neither the mediated nor the unmediated Donner accounts seem to have aroused much suspicion of fabrication.
23. Although Mrs. Wolfinger survived the winter, neither her given name nor that of her husband appears on the roster, and they remain known to Donner biographers only as Mr. and Mrs. Wolfinger.

24. Reed's banishment was a peculiarly mixed blessing for the party. In retrospect, most agreed with Reed's assessment that if he had remained with the group he would have gotten them over the mountains before they were trapped by the snows, yet it was only by his efforts from California to spearhead rescue that many of them were saved.

25. Sinclair's wife acted even before her husband, promptly sending a supply of undergarments for the women of "Forlorn Hope," who had arrived at Johnson's ranch, the closest American settlement, destitute of clothing as well as food.

26. Here Kolodny's discovery of a particular fear on the part of both men and women that the frontier masculinized its women (174) collides forcefully with Grayson's studies confirming the high survival rates among women of the Donner Party, the inference being clear that they did not disdain cannibal meat in order to survive.

27. Tellingly, official inscription seems to have erased this history's racial subtext. When Alcalde John Sinclair prepared his summary of the incident, he reported that when the snowshoers found the two natives, one was already dead, the other dying: "They raised him up, and offered him some food; he tried to eat, but could not; and only lived about an hour." Only then, in his account, did the Americans consume the Mexicans (Bryant 254).

28. One of the seldom-noted ironies of the Donner disaster is that relief efforts were delayed crucial weeks because any able-bodied male citizens of the western settlements who might have volunteered to undertake rescue were engaged in the war to claim the Pacific coast for America.

29. Betraying the disgust that "always bears the imprint of desire," even the usually restrained McGlashan would occasionally prod survivors for gory details (Stallybrass and White 191; his interview with Keseberg, for instance, at one point pressed the aged man with a blunt "Did you boil the flesh?" (211).

30. Many of McGlashan's letters to Houghton are preserved among the hundreds of items in the Houghton files of the Huntington Library. Unlike Houghton, however, McGlashan, to protect confidentiality, shortly before his death systematically destroyed all of the Donner Party materials that remained in his possession (Hinkle and Hinkle xxx). Prior to that time, Houghton had requested that he return to her whatever of their correspondence he had retained until then (HOU 141), so some of her letters survive.
While all American slaves who told the story of their escape reported undeniably illegal activity, their narratives evinced little remorse; the pursuit of freedom might be criminal, but it induced neither apology nor regret. When Harriet Jacobs joined their ranks, then, she surprised audiences by revealing not only the special outrage of a woman's slavery but also the depth of guilt that life in bondage to a master's lust could beget.

In the persona of Linda Brent, the pseudonymous first-person narrator of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, Jacobs related a "criminal" history that began years before her escape to the Free States. Her brief childhood past, her parents and their kind mistress dead, Brent reached adolescence in the household of Dr. Flint and his wife, whom she served as property of their five-year-old daughter. There she suffered the common fate of a slave woman whose beauty would become her "greatest curse": she grew "prematurely knowing in evil things"; she learned "to tremble when she hear[d] her master's footfall"; she realized from hard experience that "she [was] no longer a child."\(^*\) Painfully aware of Flint's intentions, Brent longed to confide in the grandmother who had raised her, but the girl felt "shamefaced about telling her such
impure things" and knew she risked death if she exposed her master (29). Defenseless, she endured his ever more forward advances while he pressed his advantage with threats and promises—shouted, whispered, wordless, written—mocking her appeal to virtue and claiming a master's right "to do as [he] like[d] with [her]" (39).

With no hope of physical escape, Brent found comfort in a childhood friend, a freeborn black carpenter for whom affection grew into "all the ardor of a girl's first love" (37). When Flint refused her permission to marry, Brent sent her beloved away and, now desperate, resorted to "a plunge into the abyss," the recollection of which still "fill[ed] [her] with sorrow and shame" forty years later (53). Flattered by the attentions of Mr. Sands, an "educated and eloquent" white neighbor, she reasoned that if she were to bear him a child it would incite Flint to such rage that he would sell her and so deliver her from his tyranny (54); she convinced herself, moreover, that it would prove far "less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion" (55). Once the consequences of her decision became apparent, however, she found she had sacrificed self-respect as well as virtue. Forced to confess, she gained no relief from Flint and only condemnation from her grandmother, who declared her "'a disgrace to [her] dead mother'" and pronounced, "'I had rather see you dead than to see you as you now are'" (56).

Reconciled to her grandmother after a tearful appeal, Brent gave birth to Benny and, two years later, to Ellen, daughter of the same Sands. Her persecutions continued at the hands of Flint, who refused to sell her, until at last she resolved to escape. Unwilling to leave her children, she determined to lie in wait for a chance to win their freedom as well as her own. The deceptions she employed in this endeavor elicted nothing of the shame she continued to derive from her illicit union with Sands, however. She eluded
capture by cunning recourse to a series of strategic hiding places—a closet in the home of a white neighbor, a cellar beneath the kitchen floor, a reptile- and mosquito-infested thicket in Snaky Swamp, and, finally, the garret over her grandmother’s storeroom. There she endured seven years in a nine-by-seven-foot space barely three feet high. When, finally, she won the chance of a passage north, with the expectation that she could there work to free her son and daughter, she quit the scene of her bondage—involuntary servitude and voluntary incarceration—with the blessing of her grandmother and “the light of hope” rising in her heart (155).

In the relative security of New York, Brent found employment, support, and joyful reunion with her son and daughter and brother. She was still a fugitive in need of protection, however, and when the Flint family’s efforts at pursuit threatened, she turned for help to her employer’s wife. When she reluctantly entrusted her history to this “kind and gentle lady,” Brent discovered a confessor who “listen[ed] with all womanly sympathy” (180). Yet the ex-slave’s remorse extended only to what her festering conscience perceived as the “great sin” of her life (188). She declared the statutes that made her escape criminal “the regulations of robbers, who had no rights that I was bound to respect” (187), and she reserved her final indignation for the insult of being purchased, through the generosity of friends, whereby she at last gained her freedom. By the end of her narrative, only a single ambition remained; she yearned for that cherished emblem of moral righteousness, the Christian home. “I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble. I wish it for my children’s sake far more than for my own,” she admitted, the mother who sacrificed her virtue yet hoping to bestow on the bastard children of slavery a legitimacy not even freedom could confer (201).
Despite this last, unrealized dream, the history Jacobs composed transported her far beyond the limits of a slave’s unjustly circumscribed life. Heir and contributor to a rich slave narrative tradition, she shared in a uniquely American and unusually communal form of life-writing that has been recognized in the later twentieth century as a vital force in national literary history. Surprisingly, however, even sustained critique has largely overlooked the confessional characteristics of slave texts and ignored the extent to which, particularly in their antebellum form, they reflected the conscience of a nation increasingly defined by its slave-keeping practices. As confessional literature, Jacobs’ exposition of guilt afforded American audiences the opportunity to mediate the shame of slavery, even as it exposed their share in the stigma once reserved for their slaves.

Unwitting heir to the legacy of Salem and the Sierras, this slave mother bares her shame in confession, like the witches and emigrants before her, and, as a consequence, confessional theory has much to contribute to an appreciation of her life-story. Reciprocally, a focused examination of this woman’s text, particularly because of its recognized autobiographical qualities, can, once again, enrich confessional theory. In support of this dual proposition, I offer, as before, a titrate of cultural critique and textual analysis. The first section of this chapter, then, presents an examination of antebellum America’s literary and extra-literary responses to the "peculiar institution" entrenched in its Southern states; I turn, in the second section, to the confessional tracery that gives form and structure to Jacobs’ autobiography, to the particular inflections of guilt adopted by a slave-victim whose crime was a belief in her right to self-determination of her life, her affection, and her family.
Like the colonists condemned at Salem and the emigrants encamped in the Sierras, Jacobs was converted by what she confessed. Her profession of guilt transformed her, from private individual to spokesperson for the community; giving voice to the scruples of a slave, she gave voice to the conscience of a nation. Yet the way Jacobs configured her guilt-narrative distinguished it from that of either witch or cannibal, in structure as well as content. Her invocation of a coherent narrative form, her attempt to shape an extended retrospective, her care in evaluating past actions, all set her text apart from the abbreviated histories of 1692 or the collected reminiscences of 1847. Theorists in fact acknowledge Incidents and slave texts like it as important examples of American autobiographical expression, and their critical response allows me, for the first time in this project of confessional analysis, to examine a work from the perspective of literary criticism as well as cultural critique. The distinctly confessional characteristics of the slave narrative emerge from this confluence of text, context, and critical response: a life-story conceived in relation to a putative crime, a form that telegraphs its confessional intention, and an audience whose identity demands complicity in a war of only marginally passive oppression. I begin, as Jacobs does, with the historically specific, the course of her actual life.

Born about 1813 to slaves Delilah and Elijah, both of mixed heritage, Harriet Ann Jacobs was orphaned in childhood and raised by her grandmother Molly Horniblow in Edenton, North Carolina. She was taught to read by her first mistress, who died when Jacobs was eleven and willed her to a three-year-old niece, Mary Matilda, the daughter of Dr. James and Mary Norcom. Soon in her adolescence, Jacobs fought to withstand
Norcom's sexual advances until, in self-defense, she became pregnant by Samuel Tredwell Sawyer (later Congressman for the district) and bore him two children, Joseph and Louisa Matilda. Infuriated, Norcom shipped Jacobs to his plantation to serve as a fieldhand; when she learned that he intended to do the same with her two young children, she resolved to escape in hopes that the act would move him to sell Joseph and Louisa, whose father had already agreed to purchase them.

Unwilling to leave until she could see her children safe, Jacobs hid for seven years in her grandmother's garret, where she read, sewed, and, through holes bored in the wall, watched over her son and daughter, now the property of their father. When Sawyer married and took Louisa to Brooklyn to serve as nurse to her freeborn half-sister, Jacobs escaped North as well. There, in 1842, she found work in the home of Nathaniel Parker Willis (brother of Sara Willis) and his wife. Pursued by Norcom, she confided the story of her escape—but not her sexual history—to Mrs. Willis (Mary Stace), who helped her elude capture by a remove to Boston, where her son joined her. Following this woman's death in 1845, Jacobs took up residence in Rochester with her brother John, on the abolitionist lecture circuit, and in 1849 began work in the antislavery reading room above Frederick Douglass's *North Star* office. She lived for a while with Quakers Isaac and Amy Post, who, once they had heard Jacobs' tale, urged her to commit it to print. She was deterred, however, by the resumption of employment under Willis, newly remarried, and her pursuit by Mary Matilda Norcom, also married and with her husband determined to reclaim their lost property under the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. Jacobs was forced into hiding again until her newfound friend, the second Mrs. Willis (Cornelia Grinnell), arranged to negotiate her sale, early in 1852, for the sum of $300.
Free at last, Jacobs was able, when her household duties permitted, to concentrate on composing her life’s story. Disappointed in an initial bid to produce a dictated narrative with Harriet Beecher Stowe, she decided to create one herself. She began with several apprentice pieces, the first of which appeared in the *New York Tribune* in 1851, and worked secretly on the narrative until its completion in 1858. When she could find a printer willing to publish the manuscript only on condition that she secure an introduction by Lydia Maria Child, the noted abolitionist agreed to edit the manuscript as well as supply its forward. Once the text was stereotype-cast, however, Jacobs’ Boston publishers went bankrupt, so she purchased the plates herself and negotiated elsewhere to have it printed “for the author” in 1861. After the book realized an encouraging number of sales and won her some limited celebrity, she used a portion of her profits for the relief of slaves behind Union lines. She continued work in the defeated South and remained active in the cause of equality during Reconstruction, until her death in Washington, D.C., on 7 March 1897.

Widely read in the nineteenth century, Jacobs’ book was generally neglected in the twentieth, when uncertainty about the identity of its author led critics to dismiss it either as the creation of its editor rather than an actual slave or as a work of sentimental fiction contrived in the autobiographical mode. Even the scrutiny slave narratives elicited over the last three decades was for years insufficient to dislodge this prejudice; as late as 1979, John W. Blassingame still argued that the piece was patently “too orderly” and “too melodramatic” to be genuine (*Community* 373). Not until Jean Fagan Yellin’s 1981 discovery of a cache of thirty letters in the Post archives at the University of Rochester was it possible to verify the authorship of "Linda Brent’s" manuscript and confirm
Incidents as authentic; since then Yellin, in addition, has clarified Child's role in the
text's publication and identified many of the people and places it names. Yellin's
scrupulous study has since defused scholars' initial skepticism, and Jacobs' work is now
recognized as one of the seminal pieces in the African-American corpus.

The body of literature into which Yellin's research integrated Jacobs' text is both
broad and deep. Bibliographers have located over a hundred separate slave narratives
published between 1760 (when the 14-page A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and
Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man, the earliest known example,
was printed in Boston) and 1863, when Emancipation effectively ended the era of the
fugitive slave. John Sekora testifies to the field's sweep by citing more than four hundred
accounts printed in abolitionist periodicals and compilations, fifty narratives collected by
the Freedman's Inquiry Commission of 1863, and an additional eighty book-length
histories published between Emancipation and the turn of the century ("Slave Narrative"
101). Added to this number are the hundreds of autobiographical sketches preserved in
letters and manuscripts and the 2,194 interviews transcribed by the Works Progress
Administration in 1936-38, enough for Henry Louis Gates, Jr., to estimate that over
6,000 histories of ex-slaves have been recorded, written, or published (Introduction ix).
Moreover, its elastic boundaries enable the slave narrative to escape formal and temporal
constraints. Toni Morrison salutes the kind of "literary archeology" that recovers the
slave text in multiple reincarnations, and theorists regularly cite its pervasive influence in
contemporary African-American literature, where its themes surface in poetry, jazz lyrics,
fiction, and every form of life-writing (112-13).
Despite the legacy that they represent, however, for two centuries slave narratives occupied only the margins of American literature. They did not win critical recognition until the 1960s, when Charles H. Nichols published his 1948 dissertation research in *Many Thousands Gone: The Ex-Slaves' Account of Their Bondage and Freedom* (1963). Nichols' successors in the early 1970s, particularly Blassingame (*The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, 1972); *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, 1972), Stephen Butterfield (*Black Autobiography in America*, 1974), and Sidonie Smith (*Where I'm Bound: Patterns of Slavery and Freedom in Black American Autobiography*, 1974), turned their attention to the works themselves in a process that, of necessity, supplemented analysis with excavation—the recovery and reissuing of numerous out-of-print texts. Since then, theorists have interpreted slave narratives from every critical perspective: William L. Andrews has served as literary historian; Gates has provided structuralist commentary; and Joanne Braxton, Frances Smith Foster, and Kari J. Winter, among others, have offered feminist revisions of earlier critique. It is, of course, not by accident that the resurgence of interest in these texts coincides with critical re-examination of the notions of subjectivity by a culture that had long limited agency to the pale, the male, and the privileged. With other marginalized and colonized "minorities," slaves regularly experienced a fragile, socially-contingent selfhood, and the efforts of Sidonie Smith, Frances Smith Foster, and Andrews suggest slave narratives as classic examples of the literature of colonization. With good reason, then, theorists have approached their study with respect for the racialized subject position (the dual meanings of "subject" becoming
acutely ironic here) of every slave narrator and awareness that the texts' announced aims, to decry slavery and agitate for its abolition, often obscured their effectiveness in limiting and essentializing the identity of the (ex-)slave.

An early consequence of this thirty-year project of sustained analysis has been to recognize the formulaic nature of the typical slave narrative, the result, Gates attests, of a deliberate "process of imitation and repetition" that marks each one as "a community utterance, a collective tale rather than merely an individual's autobiography (Introduction x). Although all critics of the texts join Gates in discerning a high degree of patterning, they describe it with varying emphases. Braxton, focusing on rhetorical purpose, notes the narrative's didactic aim and its thematic content: deprivation; desire for education; brutality and exploitation; destruction of families, both white (by corruption) and black (by forcible division) ("Jacobs's Incidents" 380). Robert B. Stepto in his early From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative (1979), reviews the historical linkage of freedom with literacy, slaves claiming their rightful humanity by demonstrating, in and through the text, their ability to read and write (ix). Frances Smith Foster casts the resulting autobiographies as alternative American success stories and observes that their heroes attain freedom through a series of literal and metaphorical transpositions, from South to North, plantation to city, ignorance to wisdom (Witnessing 55, 81; "Adding Color" 32). Noting, significantly, that conventions can be formal as well as thematic, James Olney elaborates on a dozen elements that shape the narrative's "master outline," including five structural components that it invariably accommodates: a signed portrait of the author, a title page asserting that the text was "Written by Himself,"
various testimonials of authenticity, a poetic epigraph, and assorted documents appended after the narrative itself, such as copies of the slave’s bill of sale, admonitions from abolitionist newspapers, or sermons denouncing slavery ("Born" 152-53).^7

Because the voices in these narratives were overwhelmingly male, the embedded patterns fossilized many gender-specific characteristics.8 The form both predated and accommodated the Franklinesque tradition, with a fiercely independent male hero who provided proofs of his manhood in feats of strength and, where necessary, aggression. While he never lost his sense of collective, representative voice, the escapee-narrator valorized the strength of a single individual, stripped of family ties, single-mindedly pursuing a very public goal. His tale, as Valerie Smith indicates, "mythologiz[ed] rugged individuality, physical strength, and geographical mobility," descriptors so closely matched to the cultural profile for masculinity that the journey from slavery to literacy and freedom collapsed onto a rite of male passage (34). And as for the female slave this hero left behind, she was reduced to a passive victim of brutality and sexual abuse (Carby 35; Frances Smith Foster, Written 95). There, in bonds, she remained, in Minrose C. Gwin’s litany, "the rape victim, bereft mother, grieving wife," able neither to resist nor escape (56). Studies, then, in patterned masculinity, the narratives celebrated a literal-rags-to-limited-riches story that marked the triumph of freedom over slavery rather than equality over patriarchy.9

Patent gender codes in the slave narratives serve as reminder, again, that autobiography licenses what Sidonie Smith’s "The Autobiographical Manifesto" calls "culturally legitimated and authorized performances of identity" (190); the results demonstrate how readily the slave narrators who appropriated a Western generic device
became co-opted by a patriarchal culture. That culture's autobiographical creed is itself inimical to women, feminist theorists argue, for women tend to define their lives, in action and in text, with reference to counter-paradigmatic modes of identity: relationship rather than independence; discontinuity and fragmentation rather than linear chronology; a focus on the private and domestic rather than the public and professional.  

Particularized in antebellum America, these strategies pointedly reinterpreted the image of the female slave and her quest. Unlike her male counterpart, the typical female slave narrator inhabited a tightly woven community; she was a mother who refused to desert her children and who delivered them to freedom not independently but with the aid—the collusion—of family and friends. If required to offer some account of the sexuality implicit in her motherhood, she resisted the passive role that conventional male slave narrators assigned her here too; although she had been victim in the past, she was now "master" of her own narrative. She became, in the archetype Braxton creates for her, the "outraged mother" who used wit, words, and wiles—rather than the fists or feet that a male slave applied—to win freedom for herself and her children ("Jacobs's Incidents" 382-87; Black Women 18-38).

If, in her revision of the male autobiographical paradigm, the female slave narrator won a degree of literary freedom, she did so over against another central narrative mode of the nineteenth century, the sentimental novel. The most overtly feminized of all antebellum genres, the novel of sentiment served equally as amusement, education, and propaganda for what historians christened the "Cult of True Womanhood." A defining ideology for every aspect of female conduct in Victorian America, this "cult" had its roots, as Gillian Brown most recently demonstrates in Domestic Individualism:
Imaging Self in Nineteenth-Century America, in economics (1); True Womanhood was a product of industrial capitalism. The image of the True Woman enlisted women, defined on the basis of their sexuality, in the service of production at the same time that it attempted to control their very real power by separating them from the locus of production. In her home, the True Woman served the market. Here measures of her compliance with the ideal were distilled into various virtues (especially, in Barbara Welter's often-invoked formula, piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity [21]) and sentiments (notably, in Herbert Ross Brown's time-tested registry, swoons, trances, visions, ecstasies, and, above all, tears [78]). With her behavior and attitudes thus quantified, the embodiment of True Womanhood was pleated into the literary protocol of the sentimental novel, where heroines tested their conduct against their conscience in plots contrived around the genre's tested alliterative triad: sensibility, seduction, and suicide (Herbert Ross Brown 159).

That American women of the white majority conspired in their own repression is suggested by the enthusiasm with which they participated in the circulation of literary models of True Womanhood. Not only were women the chief consumers of sentimental fiction, but they were, increasingly, its producers as well. In addition, as research by Welter, Sidonie Smith, and Gillian Brown indicates, they assimilated its ideals into autobiographical reflections as readily as fiction, into their letters, diaries, memoirs. Not unexpectedly, then, the same complex of attitudes and assumptions influenced the composition of narratives by exslave women, who unapologetically borrowed their techniques of character and plot definition from contemporary fiction, especially the novel of seduction. In addition, the female slave text based its rhetorical appeal on sentimental...
grounds; the slave narrator evoked sympathy, "sentiment," and by it won a measure of
communion with her female, non-slave audience. She could not, however, advance a
claim for full membership in the community of True Women, which her audience claimed
as birthright. In fact, the more the slave revealed, the less of a True Woman she became.
Her story inevitably involved sexual abuse (conveyed by discreet euphemism), and in this
degradation the slave committed her most egregious offense: she survived. Where the
heroine of the sentimental novel renounced life itself for the sake of her purity, the hero
of the female slave narrative risked everything, even her virtue, for the chance to escape.
For her, intones Hazel V. Carby, "[f]reedom replaced and transcended purity," and the
substitution put all women at risk (60).

A major contribution of the scholarship devoted to slave narratives over the past
three decades, then, has been the recognition of their ability to critique and revise two
major narrative conventions of the nineteenth century, Franklinesque autobiography and
sentimental fiction. And the scrutiny has borne fruit: not only has it led to increased
critical appreciation for the texts, but it has also opened up intriguing new courses of
inquiry—Bakhtinian critique for Gates, or Foucauldian theory for Michelle Burnham, or
Marxist analysis for Hortense J. Spillers. At the same time, however, two limitations
have become apparent as the field has grown. First, while useful, the appeal to
Franklinesque hero or sentimental heroine can quickly become reductive; it can expand
only in relation to one of two forms. Second, comparisons to either genre risk
essentializing male and female authorship; the results may serve less to elucidate the text
than to recapitulate cultural constructions of gender. It is at this juncture that confessional
theory offers an alternative interpretive mode which proves itself less constrained by
genre—it accommodates voices as divergent as those of 1692 and 1847, for instance—and less polarized by gender—Salem's female-skewed witch population is balanced, after all, by the more regular distribution of the Californian cannibals. Even more importantly, confessional theory can directly address the defining element of slave narratives, the narrator's escape; it recognizes confession as the core around which the slave text is constructed. Without discounting previous scholarship, then, confessional theory has the potential to offer new insight into crucial issues of identity, responsibility, and empowerment, which underlie not just confession but the whole field of African-American autobiographical criticism.

The introduction of confession to the critical repertoire of slave narratologists immediately enacts an important recovery of intention in the corpus: in every case its subject matter was, if not guilt, certainly illegality. And while literary scholars might choose to gloss this aspect of the works in favor of their thematic and stylistic features, narrators and their original audiences assuredly could not. Moreover, even as the number of escapes rose with the growth in slave population, two developments of the 1850s made it considerably more dangerous for slaves to advertise their histories, either on stage or in print. The 1850 Fugitive Slave Law and the 1857 Dred Scott decision, legislation backed by judicial decree, made life for the escaped slave more precarious than ever in the decade before war. The combined impact of these enactments was to deny citizenship and its legal rights to all slaves and to make escape criminal not only for them but for all who abetted them; the literary response was to reinscribe a formula previously established in slave narratives, the aura of secrecy surrounding the details of escape. Their own
lives already at risk, slave narrators relied on this convention less to heighten suspense for a story whose ending was hardly in doubt than, quite simply, to confess their "crimes" without jeopardizing those to whom they owed their freedom.

Diachronic study confirms the confessional design apparent in the histories of these slaves-at-risk by tracing the parentage of slave narratives to two markedly confessional modes, the Puritan autobiography and the captivity narrative (Cafarelli 43-53; "Slave Narrative" Sekora 106). In the first slave texts, as in these parent forms, confession bore distinctly religious overtones. When the early narrators, native Africans captured in their homeland, elected to write their life stories, they adopted, as Frances Smith Foster points out, the narratology of Western religion, the myth of paradisal origin, exile, and hoped-for return (Witnessing 84). Especially in cases where they won their freedom legally, they confessed not crime but the supposed goodness of God, invoking, notes Andrews, a traditionally Protestant and remarkably pacifistic world view ("1850s" 40). After 1808, however, when the U.S. slave trade was suppressed, the typical narrator became an American-born slave whose perspective was characterized less by a Christian cycle of birth-death-rebirth than by the growing strength of the abolitionist movement. By the time the last three decades before Emancipation ushered in the "golden age" of slave narratives—the period that Andrews calls "the first African-American Literary Renaissance" ("1850s" 38)—the ex-slave’s history had became a propaganda weapon for abolition and its focus had effectively shifted from profession of faith to confession of criminal activity.

Amid abolitionist fervor, the triumph of successful escape was likely to obscure the criminality of the central deed in this confession, however, especially for male slaves.
Although the hero willingly and unapologetically admitted whatever actions had been necessary to win his freedom, the model he borrowed from Franklin allowed him to reveal little else; his very success, suggests Frances Smith Foster, checked him from "indulg[ing] in any inclination to confess struggles against sin or temptation" ("Adding Color" 31). If male patterns of autobiography veiled confession, however, female patterns foregrounded it, and here too the impulses that prompted them were partly religious, related to the connection Ann Douglas observes between the disestablishment of the American church and the rise of sentimental fiction. When natural goodness replaced innate depravity in the American soul, it not only "redefined the traditional conversion experience," as Douglas notes, but also de-privatized confession (159). What was once confided to a spiritual journal or admitted to a closeknit congregation was now broadcast in popular literature. There, in the self-flagellating voice of the sentimental heroine, confession announced not the discovery of grace in the soul but the commission of sin in the world. The form of the novel supported this confessional intention with an internal system of justice, the inevitable death sentence punishing a life of crime and drawing a plot to neat completion. With its frequent expostulations to the audience, moreover, the genre relied explicitly on a readership that constituted a confessional community, eager to pass judgment on narrator and narrative alike. The sentimental novel prepared both author and audience for their roles in the confessional drama of Jacobs' escape.

As the evolution of slave narratives suggests, then, the various literary institutions that insinuated themselves into the slave's life, whether in the success story of male autobiography or the sentimental novel of female fiction, were, necessarily, reflections of the primary strategies by which the larger culture identified the self: race and gender. In
this dyad, the demarcation and subjugation of the non-white and non-male was rendered facile by the application to biology, to what Spillers calls a "politics of melanin" (71) and what Sidonie Smith calls the gender-driven "economics of reproduction" (191-92).

This process of essentializing difference had particular consequences for the fixing of deviance and, by extension, confession under slavery. Not only was slavery a "theft of the body" (Spillers 67), it was also a construction of the deeds of the slave-body as crime. Actions perceived as honorable so long as they remained the property of the hegemony--claims to liberty and literacy, defense of life, honor, family--were forbidden the slave, who was rendered criminal by attempting them. Laws condoned the crime that white, Western males perpetrated on the bodies of African natives by capture, on the bodies of African-American slaves by torture and exploitation, and, most pointedly, on the bodies of female African-American slaves by rape and violation, while defining whole categories of the deeds of those bodies as transgressive. There it became Spillers' "primary narrative," the point of origin for the only story the slave had to tell (67).

The most transgressive body, and thus the one most obligated to confess, was the one rendered Other by both race and gender: the black body of the female slave. Even before she began her story, her audience read her crime on her body; she narrated that which they already saw, despite her efforts to hide it. As Burnham says of Jacobs, "By configuring the history of her concealed body, she construct[ed] that body as a text" (54); it was not her deeds that she must confess but her black and female self. If, in Gillian Brown's avowal, the "purest autobiography undoes its author" because it "is inscribed
upon the author’s body, slated to appear only in the decomposition of that body," then slave texts hastened this process of erasure by writing the body of the female slave as site for physical, sexual, and narrative brutality (151).

Transparent attempts to contain the black body, especially the black female body, by narrative or legislative control, failed to mask the non-differentiation that sutured the white male to its dark Other. In fact, dynamic and explicit connections—economic, political, and moral as well as epistemological—yoked these bodies together in the antebellum nation, where, as historians of slavery are quick to point out, reliance on the slave body was hardly confined to the South. While its advantages there in terms of labor, capital, and sexual diversion were obvious, the financial interests of Northern bankers, manufacturers, and traders were equally dependent on the usages of slavery. Politically, too, the country relied for the preservation of its fragile unity on the exploitation of the slave body. Except for the increasingly militant abolitionists, most citizens were willing to accept a negotiated truce with the distant figure of the Southern slaveholder. Paralyzed by conflicting loyalties to sectional interests and the larger Union, to social tranquility and the demands of justice, to obedience to law and recognition of a greater good, non-dissenting citizens everywhere became complicit in the slave’s continued subjugation (Dillon 188-89). The cowardice of individuals and nation is readily traced in the federal effluvia of arbitration and concession: the Three-Fifth Compromise of the Constitutional Convention (1787), the Missouri Compromise (1820), the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854).

In these tesselated interests of North and South, economics and politics, ethics and self-interest, it is not difficult to read the nation’s desire for the captive body. At the
same time, it is possible to identify, from the logic and locus of Otherness inscribed there, the necessary pre-conditions for confession. What issued from the hand and mouth of the slave, then, issued from the mind and heart of the nation. What appeared to be if not the initiative of a single slave at least the initiative of a small body of zealous abolitionists was instead very much a work of communal construction. The secrets put into narrative circulation by slaves did more than reshape the embryonic confessions their authors inherited from autobiographical or sentimental tradition; by their reconfiguration of a protean rhetoric of guilt they helped initiate the torturous process of cultural contrition that expiation for America's "Great Long National Shame" would require (Spillers 68).

The Loophole of Confession

"I was born a slave," announced Linda Brent in the formulaic preamble that opened Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (5).

By the second chapter, her "happy childhood" was past and she had come to realize what the condition of her birth implied (5). From here, she moved quickly through memories of an innocent youth to adolescence, that "Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl's Life" which comprised Chapter X (53). Plainly troubled now, she recalled, "I wanted to keep myself pure; and under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect" (54). Yet slavery had left her few options and so, she recounted with model indirection, "I made a headlong plunge" (55).

When a tiny son, weighing barely four pounds, was born, the "little vine" at once took root in her heart, where love grew twined with pain. "I could never forget that he
was a slave," the new mother recalled. "Sometimes," she admitted, "I wished that he might die" because she knew death to be "better than slavery" for them both (62).

These three "incidents" in the life of Harriet Jacobs would seem, in the minds of her nineteenth-century readers, forever to fix her identity. Daughter of a culture that classified women in terms of "manners, morals and motherhood," Jacobs became, by her own testimony, slave, fallen woman, and mother (Frances Smith Foster, "In Respect" 66). Her secrets made public by confession, she won what appeared to be nothing more than a minor, sexually-coded role in a well-rehearsed rite of antebellum expostulation and expiation. Yet precisely because she exercised, far more consciously than witches or cannibals before her, the confessional rights of an autobiographer, Jacobs' narrative retained confession's uncanny potential for confounding all expectation, subverting every stereotype. Product of its author's deliberate self-reflection, Incidents in fact presented a tightly woven, highly personal demonstration of confession's ability to refashion identity, recast guilt, and reconfigure power at every level.

My analysis attends to the conscious art of Jacobs' narrative by integrating all aspects of this normative confessional triad into a unified whole. My starting point, as with the confessions of 1692 and 1847, is the pivotal issue of identity, inscribed here in the transformation of Jacobs-the-slave into Jacobs-the-free. Crucial matters for confession locate themselves within this primary identity shift, revealed both in Jacobs' censure of a culture that consigns its slaves to amorality and in the reversal of roles by which she metes out judgment to those who would judge her. Thus, formulating my argument around Jacobs' evolving self-definition, I address the confessional redistribution of guilt and power as a function of her conversion from fallen (slave) woman to noble (free)
mother. Transformed, in the same process, from confessant to confessor, Jacobs realizes to an unusual degree the subversive potential latent in every confession. The narrative she produces preaches "a jubilation and a jeremiad" that elicits an audience predisposed to mercy because its need for absolution is at least as great as hers (Frances Smith Foster, *Written* 96). In Jacobs' text, confessional theory recognizes a slave freed, a woman restored, and a sinner become the conscience of a nation.

Prepared to bare her soul, Jacobs presented a most self-conscious confessant, an autobiographer compelled, simultaneously, to tell her story and conceal her identity. Jacobs' strategy was to foreground not her name but her condition; her pseudonym masked the real person behind the gendered, enslaved entity signified by the "Slave Girl" of her title. Thus essentialized, her identity was further obscured by the transformation wrought in escape, for by the time she created Linda Brent, Jacobs was no longer a slave. This transformation, which formed the core of her confession, liberated her from the "nameless, faceless, timeless" state she had endured amid nearly four million all but anonymous sisters and brothers who could claim neither individuality nor personal history (Sekora, "Slave Narrative" 110). Especially those of Brent's generation found themselves, in Gordon O. Taylor's vocabulary, "dispossessed of the African past" and disavowed by the American present (342). Addressed as chattel, objects in the most literal sense, they "awaken[ed]," only after escape, to the countless "possibilities of self-definition" offered by their freedom (Frances Smith Foster, *Written* 95). Typical narrators hinted at the magnitude of this change by proclaiming their "rebirth" and, often, adopting a new name. Thus, when Brent stood on deck the ship that had carried her to Philadelphia and watched the "sun rise, for the first time . . . on free soil," she was born
anew. At this dawn of freedom, each wave sparkled and "every thing caught the beautiful glow" (158); after twenty-seven years in bondage, she would recalibrate her life from this moment.  

So literal did this rebirth appear to most escaped slaves that it seemed to inaugurate a conscious self where before there had been only unconscious lack. For those who recorded the personal impact of the change, it precipitated a crisis of autobiographical identity, an excess of disjunction between the subject who wrote as free person and the object described as slave. Obvious biological continuity belied an ontological change so radical that, suggests Andrews, most slaves could find no words to describe the gulf separating their former experience from their new life (To Tell). Annette Niemtzow fruitfully explores the consequent discontinuity in "The Problematic of Self in Autobiography: The Example of the Slave Narrative," where she recognizes in the dilemma of "describing the slave-self even as it ceases to be that slave-self" an extreme variant of the task of any autobiographer, who must negotiate between past and present incarnations to construct a textual site for selfhood (96-97). Thus, Jacobs' revelation of an emergent identity, still protectively half-concealed, not only enacted in dramatic fashion the "altered ego" experience at the core of every slave narrative but also exposed the ambiguities implicit in a much broader enterprise, the autobiographical project of representing in writing the self's coming into being. 

This primary "incident" of Jacobs' text, her transformation from slave to ex-slave, demanded confession. But it was confession as moral truth rather than criminal guilt. Judging her freedom a personal and ethical triumph, she adopted a lexicon of righteousness in which slavery, not flight, constituted a "damnable" sin (23), a "curse"
(52, 123), a "demon" (158). She conceived of escape, for herself and her children, in explicitly religious imagery. She "meditated" on it, held herself ready for "every sacrifice" in its cause (89). The most striking portrait of her moral certitude in this regard occurred in a Gothic scene that Jacobs constructed shortly before recounting her escape into hiding. In it, Brent took herself one Sabbath to the solitary stillness of twilit burial grounds, to invoke her mother's "dying blessing" and swear a vow to freedom (90). Close by, from out of the slaves' meetinghouse, she heard her dead father's voice "bidding [her] not to tarry till [she] reached freedom or the grave" (91). Strengthened and reassured by "that prayer among the graves" (91), Jacobs was ready to join the fight for freedom and count herself "guiltless of crime" once she had prevailed (198).

To the moral imperative of freedom and every stratagem required to accomplish it Jacobs confessed freely, even defiantly. Yet the boldness with which she trumpeted that confession contrasted sharply with the hesitancy she evinced as she integrated a second confession into her history, the confession of her illicit sexual choices. In this matter she was averse to confession, her attitude unmistakably conveyed by the emotions she expressed through her protagonist and the reservations she voiced as author. By her parallactic doubling of internal and external perspective, Jacobs demonstrated a resistance that served less to deflect attention from her transgression than to focus it on the way characters and readers responded to its reluctant but reiterated disclosure.

Within the narrative world of Incidents, Linda Brent, as Jacobs' mouthpiece, everywhere recoiled from the role of confessant. Faced with the consequences of her unwedded union with Sands, she delayed as long as possible any discussion of her condition. Then, in a rebellious exchange with Flint, she spit at him a bold "In a few
months I shall be a mother" when her advanced pregnancy rendered explanation almost
moot (56). While she realized a fleeting "satisfaction and triumph" in thus defying her
master, she knew only shame when her beloved grandmother heard of her misdeed (56).
Confronted by her guardian, she recalled, "My lips moved to make confession, but the
words stuck in my throat" (56). Days later, however, when the girl senses the old
woman’s implicit pardon, she revealed all:

I knelt before her, and told her the things that had poisoned my life; how
long I had been persecuted, that I saw no way of escape; and in an hour of
extremity I had become desperate. She listened in silence. I told her I
would bear any thing and do any thing, if in time I had hopes of obtaining
her forgiveness. I begged her to pity me, for my dead mother’s sake.
And she did pity me. She did not say, "I forgive you;" but she looked at
me lovingly, with her eyes full of tears. She laid her old hand gently on
my head, and murmured, "Poor child! Poor child!" (57)

Brent made no further confession until after her escape nine years later when she
replied with little prompting to questions posed by the minister who sheltered her in
Philadelphia. She gained sound advice from this encounter: "Your straight-forward
answers do you credit," Rev. Jeremiah Durham counseled, "but don’t answer every body
so openly. It might give some heartless people a pretext for treating you with contempt"
(160). Glad of his counsel, she told her history to no one else until, in danger of
recapture, she appealed to the first Mrs. Bruce and by confession won the protection of
that "true and sympathizing friend" (168). Finally, almost as if she had been rehearsing,
Brent turned from these preliminary rites to the painful task of confessing to the daughter
born of her shame. Her resolution to speak the truth to Ellen formed the basis for a
highly-charged scene in the book’s shortest and most focused chapter, entitled, starkly,
"The Confession" (188). Here, however, she was spared the pain of full disclosure. As
soon as Brent broached the subject, Ellen, taking over the confessant’s role, admitted that
she has long known her mother's secret and, she assured her, loved her all the more (189). After sixteen years, Brent's confessional debt was paid. A succession of confessors had lifted the burden of further disclosure and won her, at last, a surfeit of forgiveness.

In Linda Brent, then, what emerged with regard to her sexual choices was an exceedingly reluctant confessant who, despite protesting that she "like[d] a straightforward course," concealed from all but a few a significant part of her past (165). A similar kind of shame-driven aphasia became recurrent motif in Jacobs' narrative at the level of authorial comment. In her preface she insisted, "I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself; on the contrary, it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history" (1). Likewise, when her retrospective approached the point at which she must recount the cause of her shame, she intruded on her storyline to appeal directly to her audience: "And now, reader, I come to a period in my unhappy life, which I would gladly forget if I could. It pains me to tell you of it; but I have promised to tell you the truth, and I will do it honestly, let it cost me what it may" (53).18

Outside the pages of her narrative, too, Jacobs agonized over the history she was committing to print, weighing its potential for good against the pain it was certain to cause. Early in the project, in 1852, she wrote of her apprehensions to Amy Post, out of concern that hers was hardly "the life of a Heroine with no degradation associated with it" (233). Nor did the five-year project of confessional inscription quiet her fears. When
she had completed her manuscript, she wrote, again to Post, "I have My dear friend -
Striven faithfully to give a true and just account of my own life in Slavery" (242).

Nevertheless she added:

> there are some things that I might have made plainer I know - Woman can whisper - her cruel wrongs into the ear of a very dear friend - much easier than she can record them for the world to read - I have left nothing out but what I thought - the world might believe that a Slave Woman was too willing to pour out - that she might gain their sympathies. (242)

Were it not for the hope that her words might aid the "two million of women in the
South, still in bondage, suffering what [she] suffered, and most of them far worse" (1),
Jacobs would doubtless not have "pour[ed] out" her story at all.

The slave once forced to choose between rape and fornication was now forced to
choose between the possibility of saving others and the need to protect herself. Given
that choice, she consented to a confessional *kenosis*, for, she confided to Post in 1852, "if
it could help save another from my fate it would be selfish and unchristian in me to keep
it back" (232). Still, by the exercise of strong authorial control, she was able to mediate
the pain this sacrifice entailed. She enjoyed the protection of anonymity as "Linda
Brent," so that while her protagonist's disclosures, for all their discretion, broadcast her
sins to the reading world, Jacobs herself could remain safely concealed. At the same
time, by a kind of textual triangulation, the scenes of Brent's confessions served an
important function in the relationship of author to audience. Each of Brent's emotional
outpourings helped Jacobs enlist her readers' sympathy by engaging them as privileged
intimates of a narrator who committed her deepest secrets into their care. Brent's
carefully selected confidants served, as Andrews usefully suggests, to model the kind of
implied reader Jacobs needed to receive her confession; grandmother, pastor, patron, and
daughter embodied the empathetic reader-confessors she sought among her actual audiences (*To Tell* 247). The possibility of their response counteracted the shame she suffered and enabled her, though never completely willingly, to undertake her autobiographical sacrifice.

Scholars, of course, have not failed to remark Jacobs' competing desires for secrecy and disclosure, drives common to all autobiographies but here foregrounded with peculiar intensity. Franny Nudelman, in "Harriet Jacobs and the Sentimental Politics of Female Suffering," explores the tension in terms of stylistic purpose and detects parallels between Brent's escape-by-concealment—what Jacobs calls her "loophole of retreat" (114)—and the narrative "loopholes" behind which Jacobs continues to hide (959). Burnham, concurring, discovers in the text a profusion of verbs that suggest forms of camouflage—"screen," "veil," "hide," and the like—and concludes, "For all its confessional rhetoric, this narrative seems finally more concerned with that which is hidden, disguised, or kept secret" than that which is revealed (55). Much of this effect derives from the conditions under which Jacobs lives and writes, Burnham argues, because slavery, like sentimental fiction, "demands" and "enforces" secrecy (55). Furthermore, she warns, no narrative ever accomplishes complete disclosure, because every confessional attempt "remains incomplete" and leaves "a residue," an "inevitable degree of waste that is never recuperated" (Burnham 61).

It was precisely this residue of the unconfessed within confession that afforded Jacobs the narrative loophole she sought for negotiating her dual transformation from slave to ex-slave and innocent girl to redeemed woman. Her strategy was her candor: she would readily volunteer the manner of her escape and the extent of her hatred for the
"hoary-headed miscreant" from whom she fled, even as she shuddered to bare the sexual history that accompanied those revelations (34). Yet, unquestionably, that which she wished to hide was precisely what her audiences wished to hear, and it was only by exposing her sexual secrets that she assumed, in most eyes, the role of confessant. For them, the proper object, indeed, in Foucault’s appraisal, the "privileged theme," of confession was not criminality--few of her readers would have considered her escape criminal, in any case--but sexuality (*History* 61). It was this which Jacobs must confess, the truth she must bring forth "through the obligatory and exhaustive expression of an individual secret" (*History* 61). If she was to confess at all, she must concede her sexual sin, for where a woman’s virtue was equated with a single encapsulation, purity, her confession was equated with a single event, that in which she lost all virtue by losing that one. For all Jacobs’ reticence, then, her audiences, both internal and external, knew precisely what her crime was--and, by extension, precisely who she was.21

Jacobs’ history in fact invoked a sentimental politics of abolition that derived its power from the revelation of the slave woman’s sexual degradation (Nudelman 940). Oblique descriptions of her experiences at the hands of Flint and Sands served to titillate her readers while failing to shield her from discursive reenactment of past violation. In equally appetitive drives, the white man’s desire for her captive body was displaced onto the white woman’s desire for her narrativized body, a desire that afforded her readers a taste of vicarious freedom for “a sexual self long repressed under the nineteenth-century mantle of purity” (Gwin 79). Moreover, the matter of such interest to her audiences was ultimately of great import to Jacobs herself. By means of confession she would be able to claim another kind of freedom, exemption from the standards of conventional white
morality, and another kind of redemption, transfiguration from fallen woman to noble mother. Through her confessional narrative she would effect a double identity-displacement that redefined her and redistributed the guilt around which she formulated her confession.

Thus by essence and by action, Jacobs assumed her necessary identity as fallen woman; she could not be other than confessant because she could not be other than fallen. Nevertheless, Jacobs refused to accept an identity founded only on shame. She conceived of her fall not as the end of her story but as her "passage" to motherhood. Just as she rejected the typical roles for a female slave in the usual abolitionist drama—the tragic mulatta driven to suicide by her ruin or the bereft Rachel mourning the loss of her children—she also rejected the role of fallen woman, not by denying it but by transcending it. While she never fully absolved herself of prostitution, commentators have found in her realization of motherhood something akin to a felix culpa (Sherman 169). The "new tie to life" that Jacobs discovered with the birth of her son and daughter became a means of redemption, first in her own eyes and then, she evidently hoped, in the mind of her audience (58). "Through her descent into 'sin,'" writes Braxton, "she discover[ed] motherhood as an avenue to identity" and a much ameliorated status (Black Women 38); what nineteenth-century America defined as woman's ultimate transgression opened the door to what that same culture defined as her ultimate sanctification. Jacobs' defection from virtue, in other words, bore the seed of her new life. The consequences of her shame, fervently embraced, ennobled her.

The text supplies abundant evidence of Brent's new role, the mother sanctified by suffering: she brought forth her children in pain, at the risk of her own life (60-61); sent
to Flint's plantation, she walked miles on foot, foregoing sleep, to visit them by night (89); she refused to abandon them even to obtain her own freedom (89); secreted in her garret, she fashioned clothes and toys for them and ever watched over them (118, 115); once in the Free States, she spent herself in efforts to secure for them an education and a home (166, 187). So expansive, finally, did her maternal sense become that she reached out to thousands of foster daughters; martyr-like, she consented to tell her story for the sake of all slave women whom her disclosure might help save from a similar fate.23

This slave who was fallen, then, displaced the shame of her misconduct onto the nobility of her motherhood and in maternal sacrifice redeemed herself. She proved her repentance for past sin by virtuous action in an exemplary new life worthy of any True Woman. Cloaked in the conservative Victorian language of sentimentality, however, this slave-mother's text delivered a highly subversive message, for in seeking to surmount the judgment due her, she not only demonstrated virtuous action but also interrogated the precepts that proclaimed her sin. She redefined morality itself, in a move that deflected the guilt incurred onto the confessors who would impose it.24 Jacobs' story was authentic confessional narrative, and at its core lay the question "Who owns this woman's guilt?"

Guilt abounded in Jacobs' narrative, and at a much more conscious level than in the narratives of witches or cannibals. As narrator, Brent explicitly owned her shame: "I knew what I did," she wrote of her relationship with Sands, "and I did it with all deliberate calculation" (54). But just as readily she advanced a revised code that exempted her from traditional ethical standards and, without mitigating her guilt, surmounted it: "There may be sophistry in all this; but the conditions of a slave confuses
all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible" (55).

Then, in an oft-cited passage, she advanced the rationale for a new moral ground:

Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares, and eluding the power of a hated tyrant; you never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice. I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others. (55-56)

Jacobs revealed two not entirely antithetical impulses by her invocation. First, she remained deeply ambivalent about the extent of her culpability and about her need for exoneration by her audience. To the extent that she was guilty, proposes Braxton, she offered her narrative as partial expiation (Black Women 25). Thus, Jocelyn K. Moody suggests, the autobiographical act became an exorcism performed to restore lost honor, a means to "rid her narrating self of the sense of impurity and inferiority resulting from the abuse that her historic self suffered" (635). Secondly, at the same time, she intended her narrative as anthem for a new ethics. Over against the code of the True Woman, the standard by which her white audiences would judge her, she proposed a counter-code that recognized the slave woman’s distinctive position. Her logic, furthermore, argued for an actual displacement of guilt. Jacobs’ goal was not just to clear her own name but to indict the nation. What she advertised, and in the language of contrition, was a complete Babcockian inversion of code: at the personal level, she transmuted guilt into, if not innocence, at least principled action; at the cultural level, she exposed compliance as complicity.
The confessional maneuver that Jacobs thus enacted positioned her in a highly problematic relationship to her nineteenth-century audience. Internal and external evidence indicates that Jacobs anticipated this audience quite specifically, for she clearly envisioned her work as part of the abolition movement’s print attack on slavery, to be circulated among its members and sold by its agents. Within this project, she addressed *Incidents* to a middle-class readership, overwhelmingly white, largely but not exclusively female: readers, suggests Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, who could wield political influence, offer financial support, and authenticate the ex-slave-writer (166). Knowing the profile of her audience hardly minimized the complexity of Jacobs’ rhetorical task, however. She combatted, among her majority readers, the insidious racism that invaded even the ranks of abolitionists and predisposed them to question the ability and deny the equality of their slave narrators; among her rare minority readers, the jealous fear that her confession would jeopardize the precarious status they had managed to achieve (Frances Smith Foster, "Adding" 33). She faced, too, her own well-founded prejudices, conditioned, as she had been, by hard usage to mistrust the race that abused her. She inhabited, in other words, the liminal position of an ex-slave who must find a ground from which to appeal to the very people who had marginalized and disenfranchised her.

To such an audience she preached her slave’s jeremiad, and it was clear from the start, in her preface’s opening address, that this was hardly the ideal readership for her confession (1). Jacobs had no guarantee of winning the sympathetic reception that Brent had found within the text, the understanding that she herself had known first in Post and then Child. In utter confidence she had written to the former, who had agreed to prepare a testimonial for the finished manuscript, "I ask nothing - I have placed myself before you
to be judged as a woman, whether I deserve your pity or contempt" (242). This "whole Souled woman" had become, over the extended composition process, her primary confessor, and to this audience of one would she willingly submit herself and her moral code for judgment (247).

Jacobs could hardly address her full readership on the same ground of trust that she had established with Post or Child, however. Of necessity, she both engaged and distanced herself from the faceless narratees that comprised her implied audience, Robyn A. Warhol suggests (68); she claimed solidarity with them in terms of gender but asserted her difference from them in terms of race. She employed a "rhetoric of contrast" to profess that what she knew by her exclusive experience, and what they knew by theirs, stood as irreducible distance between them (Nudelman 957). Her multiple direct appeals—"you happy free women" (16), "ye free men and women of the north" (29-30), "O virtuous reader" (55), and all the rest—did more to establish difference than erase it. The subtext of every apostrophe was a crucial interrogatory: "What would you be, if you had been brought up a slave . . . ?" (44).

With whatever ambivalence Jacobs approached this readership of racialized Others, she left no doubt as to the standards by which she judged them: she excoriated them for their systemic participation in the institution that enslaved her and for the hypocrisy that enabled them to sympathize with individual slaves while ignoring their own complicity in systemic oppression. Northerners were "apt scholars" of the South, she proclaimed; they were "proud to give their daughters in marriage to slaveholders" and become "proverbially, the hardest masters" if they themselves move South (44). They masked their duplicity with specious religious argument and persisted in racist bigotry,
bigotry Jacobs experienced firsthand on board their trains and ships, in their dining rooms, tea rooms, and hotels (162-63, 175-77). Their collusion in the Fugitive Slave Law had initiated "a reign of terror" enforced by "cruel human bloodhounds" that rendered all states Slave States (191, 44). And while their most grievous fault lay in their failure still, in 1861, to proclaim freedom to all, they were accountable as well for enforcing in slavery an institution not just "peculiar" (44, 173) but "patriarchal" (66), for the particular cruelty that slave women suffered and, by implication, for the denial of equality to all women.26 "In view of these things," she cried with the syntax of biblical rebuke, "why are ye silent, ye free men and women of the north? Why do your tongues falter in maintenance of the right?" (30).

Inherent in Jacobs' turn from the code of True Womanhood to the code of slavewomanhood, then, was a critical confessional maneuver that few confessants are able to execute, one that allowed her not only to hail her readers but also to accuse them. Having constructed an implied audience of confessors, she could not fail to remark their complicity in the system that enslaved and condemned her. This move effected a startling transposition of confessional roles, although one that was implicit from the start of her project. Indeed, what began in a relationship of writer/confessant to reader/confessor was almost immediately subverted by Jacobs' covert purposes: her disclosures would expose not just her guilt but that of the nation. She who had announced a new standard of morality became confessor to her readers. No matter if they refused to recognize or admit their culpability; as confessor she knew their sins as surely as they knew hers. Indeed, such was their obduracy that, for all the wrongs they perpetrated, the ex-slave envisioned but a single internal confessant, the second Mrs. Bruce. When a relative
remonstrated with this character for aiding Brent and asked if she knew the penalty she risked, the woman returned, "I am very well aware of it. It is imprisonment and one thousand dollars fine. Shame on my country that it is so!" (194). This one "noble heart" represented an honest citizenry that owned responsibility for its sins and who, Jacobs imagined, might deserve a confessor's full absolution (194).

While the confession that was Jacobs' slave narrative marked a three-fold reconfiguration of her identity—enslaved, she won freedom; defiled, she claimed purification; confessant, she became confessor—it was this last, her masterful assumption of the right to judge, that confirmed her command of the confessional arena. Of course, the success of her bid for confessional self-definition was tied to her control over a narrative circumscribed by far more material considerations than those usually addressed in the abstract deliberations of autobiographical ethicists. Issues of authority were central to the production of every slave narrative, whose very form acknowledged a concession to Western notions of selfhood and inscription. Each was conceived, moreover, for an audience with limited and limiting expectations that demanded subordination of the author's integrity to the requirements of rigid specifications. Scholars have recognized in the guides imposed by abolitionist sponsors a very real set of editorial constraints that subjugated the "free" ex-slave to the white _imprimatur_ who was to supply indispensable supporting documentation for the text they co-produced.

The degree of power that slave authors retained in this problematic textual arena has been the subject of ongoing debate. Sekora disputes the relative importance accorded a "black message" in a "white envelope" ("Black" 482), while Raymond Hedin argues that the textual field itself—with framing documents that visibly enclose the narrative—
construes the slave's words as a black "'means'" to "its white audience's 'ends'" (25). Frances Smith Foster opens Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892 with the reminder that slaves composed their histories in English because they were denied use of their native tongue (1), while Sidonie Smith recalls the "fractional humanity" slaves were accorded and denounces white sponsorship of slave narratives as "editorial colonization" (Subjectivity 35, 44). Others, however, cede considerable power to slave authors. "[B]y their mere existence," Winters reminds readers, the narratives "demonstrated that slaveholders' power was not absolute" (33). Among Winters' colleagues, Frances Smith Foster and Braxton join Gates in arguing that by revising the conventions of white autobiography slave narrators achieve a fair measure of control, although few go as far as Lucinda MacKethan, who proposes that they are so capable of shaping their material that the results should be called "'mastery narratives'" rather than slave narratives (56). Even Sekora concludes that the narratives represent a "powerful collective memory," a force that the nation dare not deny, and "the only moral history of American slavery" ever recorded ("Slave Narrative" 110).27

"Superadded," in Jacobs's word, to whatever limitations—or opportunities—a culture of oppression visited on the typical male slave narrator were the particular mechanisms for disempowerment that impeded her exercise of agency as a woman (77). Young, black, female, enslaved, impoverished, immobilized under the dual hegemony of racism and patriarchy, she would appear the personification of powerlessness in nineteenth-century America. The very accomplishment of her lifetime, the attainment of freedom, was tainted by the knowledge that only because she was purchased as "an article of property" ("So I was sold at last!" she would exclaim) that she, "a human being,"
became free (199, 200). From out of radical disempowerment, however, Jacobs' voice rose in protest. Already at age fourteen, when the terms of her bondage under Flint were first made clear, Brent had declared "the war of [her] life" begun: "Though one of God's most powerless creatures, I resolved never to be conquered" (19). In an assertion of will at once feminine and individual, she vowed to counter the physical and psychological threats slavery leveled against her with "a woman's pride, and a mother's love for [her] children" (85). "My master had power and law on his side," she reflected; "I had a determined will. There is might in each" (85).

Her commentators readily agree. Carby extols her untethering of the slave-victim; Braxton, Frances Smith Foster, Nudelman and Winter cheer her assault on the True Woman; Yellin delights in her determined achievements; Elizabeth C. Becker celebrates her manipulation of domestic spaces; and, in a deliciously original analysis, Anne Bradford Warner reads her tropes of food and consumption as subversive revision of the rites of Southern hospitality. Almost unilaterally, these champions of the former slave proclaim a linguistic basis for her empowerment. Taught early to read and write, Brent was the literate slave who defiantly taught "uncle Fred" to read (7); who disdained to respond to her master's lewd notes (88); who, while hidden only blocks from his home, contrived letters posted from New York to confound his efforts at capture (133). In her story, which Andrews proclaims "the most 'dialogized' of antebellum black autobiographies," she was the trickster who ruptured the surface of hegemonic speech with calculated ironies, nimble parries, and rapid-fire exchanges ("Dialogue" 93), the weak character who cunningly exploited the flaws of the strong (Byerman 76). For her commanding use of language as "weapon of self-defense" and "tool of liberation,"
Braxton nominates her as archetypal "outraged mother" (Black Women 31); whenever Flint launched a verbal attack, she countered by "return[ing] a portion of the poison the master has offered her" (31). Brent, Braxton pronounces, knew how to sass back.28

The confession that Jacobs' autobiography embodied, then, emerged from a skilled rhetorician. As creator of the Brent persona and re-creator of her dialogic encounters, Jacobs proved her technical proficiency; as participant in the autobiographical tradition, she claimed the right to master her experience by narrativizing it. Incidents, Gwin proposes, became "the artifact created by Jacobs's impulse to control and dominate, through language, those who controlled and dominated her" (65). The woman who had fought for control of her physical body and physical space was well equipped to fight for control of her text.

Even when submitted to white editing and endorsement, the confession of this life attested to Jacobs' mastery. To see her narrative into print, the ex-slave persevered through rebuffs by the nation's best-known abolitionist author, the discipline of apprentice pieces, her publishers' bankruptcy, and the necessary mediations with Child, whose reassurances to Jacobs described a minimally-invasive editorial role:

I have very little occasion to alter the language, which is wonderfully good, for one whose opportunities for education have been so limited. The events are interesting, and well told; the remarks are also good, and to the purpose. But I am copying a great deal of it, so as to bring the story into continuous order, and the remarks into appropriate places. I think that you will see that this renders the story much more clear and entertaining. (Yellin, Incidents 244).29

In fact, Yellin's study of the relationship between author and editor, and the ancillary scholarship of Bruce Mills in examining the scope of Child's influence, confirms Jacobs' authorial agency not only in narrative choice but in extra-textual decisions ranging from
choice of sponsors to arrangements for copyright protection and allocation of her 10% royalty, which she hoped to use, according to an anonymous British reviewer, "to raise a small fund for the benefit of her two children" (*The Anti-Slavery Advocate* 33). As confessant-in-print, Jacobs proved as skillful at negotiating the prejudices of her audiences, the limitations of received literary forms, and the arcana of publishing contracts as Brent had been at manipulating her master.

To all of this critical analysis, confessional theory can offer one additional insight by invoking the now-familiar principle of self-definition by reference to an alien Other. While theorists of this phenomenon generally have emphasized the use to which a dominant class puts members of a secondary group—a move typified by Nancy Armstrong’s cogent argument that Victorian middle-class women "came to understand themselves in relation to their deviant counterparts" (15)—confessional texts suggest that subordinate groups are equally invested in the project of self-fashioning by back-formation. *Incidents* in fact demonstrates that the very ones who have been displaced to a territory of essentialized Otherness can counter with the same claims to identity-by-difference.

Where the process by which Jacobs’ audiences defined themselves over against the slave whose text they elicited and exhibited has already been the focus of perceptive investigation, confessional theory probes Jacobs’ counter-move to identify herself in reaction to what she perceived of her northern, white, middle-class readers. The insights, especially by feminist critics, into the ground of Jacobs’ appeal to her readership are here read from the opposite direction. If her slavery and its consequence, fallen womanhood, established a disjunction that enabled readers to recognize their privileged status, these
conditions simultaneously underscored for Jacobs the culture’s ability to impose limitations on her self-definition. Yet from her delimited site of marginalized difference she projected Otherness on them, on the ones who, in her cutting refrain, "never knew" what her life was like, the ones whose very identity as privileged white women made it impossible for them ever to know (55).

Applied to Jacobs’ text, the principles of confessional self-definition extend to a second conclusion quick with even more subversive potential. If identity formation rests on the notion of alterity, it is critical to investigate the position Jacobs staked out in relationship not only to the white women who constituted her Others across the dividing line of race, but also to the men who constituted her doubles across the divide of gender. On a grid scored for race and gender, she remained both radically like and radically unlike the hyper-differentiated group of white males whose essentialized identity guaranteed that they would be least required, ever, to confess. If Jacobs mediated her own identity, her own vexed purity and contested power, in confession to this doubly-Other cohort, the confessional dynamic insists that, their identities irrevocably joined to hers, there was cause for confession in their behavior as well. The one they identified as victim, the object of their sexual and aggressive appetites, called out their sin, and the presumed confessant pressed them for confession.

To such as these, Jacobs confessed. Little wonder that she faced them with reluctance or that in doing so she came to redefine not just herself but them and the moral code that bound their actions together. In submitting her sins for judgment, she summoned the power to judge all those who named her as Other.
NOTES

1. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, 28. All subsequent citations, including those to Jacobs' letters, are given parenthetically within the text. I have borrowed from Hazel V. Carby the convention of referring to the character within the narrative as Linda Brent and to the author of the document as Harriet Jacobs; this usage helps distinguish between references internal to *Incidents* and those that are external to it. In addition it precludes the necessity of providing alternative names for the many historical characters and locations to which Jacobs assigned fictionalized names.

2. The book was also published the following year in England, under the title *The Deeper Wrong; Or, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.


4. William L. Andrews offers a very helpful summary of criticism up to 1991 in his bibliographical essay "African-American Autobiography Criticism: Retrospect and Prospect." Because of the date of its publication, however, Andrews' work precludes most criticism of female slave narratives, which received little attention before the 1990s.

5. Margaret Homans aligns herself with this position when she suggests, in her discussion of Zora Neale Hurston, that "continuous narrative and coherent selfhood [were] precisely what African Americans were long denied, when the white U.S. could take them for granted" (8).

6. Foster notes that the convention of North-to-South geographical movement is not always accurate, since a small number of slaves instead joined one of the rogue slave communities of the Southern swamps or migrated to Mexico or the Indian territories of the West (*Witnessing* 55).

7. Although Andrews sees in the formulaic an opportunity for the free play of intra-generic creativity, especially in the final antebellum decade ("1850s" 42), and Gates celebrates their deployment of subversive, Bakhtinian polyvocality (*Signifying* 50-52), most theorists agree that the narratives' patterned nature constituted a constraint, a restriction, a means of subjugating the "free" ex-slave to the expectations of audiences and the demands of editor-sponsors. For a treatment of the issues underlying this problematic use of power, see below.

8. Only a small fraction of the slave narratives were dictated or written by women: 15% of the list Charles T. Davis and Gates include in *The Slave's Narrative* (319-27); 12% of extant narratives by Mary Helen Washington’s count in *Invented Lives* (7).
9. Until the late 1980s, notes Braxton, even the criticism of slave narratives was "dominated by male bias, by linear logic, and by either/or thinking"; prior to the application of feminist perspectives to slave narrative theory, analysts were, in her judgment, "paralyzed by issues of primacy and authorship and by criteria of unity, coherence, completion, and length" ("Jacobs's *Incidents*" 380).

10. This characterization of feminist autobiographical drives derives from Shirley Neuman's *Introduction to Autobiography and Questions of Gender* (1-11). For complementary interpretations, see Mary G. Mason, who was one of the first to speculate in print about gender-specificity in autobiographical writing; Domna C. Stanton, who responded to Mason with the coinage "autogynography"; Jelinek, who supplied a diachronic perspective; and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, who added the issue of race as overlay to gender in self-writing.

11. Because data are, necessarily, lacking, it is impossible to supply hard statistics on escapes. Research by Gerda Lerner suggests that while escape attempts were numerous, failed escapes far outnumbered successful ones. Lerner contends that most runaways were hunted and captured (often because there were few places to hide, and, even if slaves had knowledge of local geography, huge distances separated some of the slave states from free territory) or returned "voluntarily," usually driven back by hunger (53).

12. Thus Frederick Douglass, in his 1845 narrative, would announce merely, "I left my chains," before expounding, "How I did so,—what means I adopted,—what direction I traveled, and by what mode of conveyance—I must leave unexplained" (319-20).

13. In attempting to define the distinguishing characteristics of African-American life-writing, Arnold Rampersad argues that the "best" African-American autobiography departs from the white autobiographical tradition inherited from Franklin precisely by preserving an explicitly confessional intention (12).

14. Nudelman argues that the mulatta's "abused body reveals collective sin" in its dual embodiment of the sins of her forefathers against her foremothers and locus of desire for white male lust (947).

15. The original title page presented a study in conscious self-effacement. Although it proclaimed the text "Written by Herself" and "Published for the Author," it gave no indication of that author's identity and omitted even the titular "Linda." It named L. Maria Child as editor and offered two epigrams, both with citation, one from the bible and one by "A Woman of North Carolina"; Frances Smith Foster argues persuasively if inconclusively that the source of the latter may be Jacobs herself (*Written* 110). The author's actual identity, meanwhile, was further hidden, two pages later, behind the fictive signature of Linda Brent beneath the "Preface by the Author."
16. Burnham notes in this connection that because mothers were forbidden to reveal the names of their children's fathers, slaves were denied even their genealogies (55). Spillers suggests the same pattern of fear-driven concealment when she writes of the Law of the Mother as replacement, under slavery, for the Lacanian Law of the Father (80).

17. Undeniably, this transformation, for all its radical nature, remained incomplete. Even while Brent rejoiced in her freedom, she grieved for her loved ones still bound and now far distant from her (158). She would soon experience, moreover, the racism that spilled over as toxic residue into the North, where the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law would make any escape much less permanent than a slave's first onrush of freedom would indicate.

18. Nudelman observes in this connection that the requirement to revisit bitter memories makes pain an integral part of any slave narration but that Jacobs underwent the additional pain of reliving her particular sin (950).

19. For a perceptive interpretation of the denotative and connotative richness of the term "loophole," see Burnham 56-60.

20. Especially in the matter of slaves' paternity, wrote Jacobs, "[t]he secrets of slavery are concealed like those of the Inquisition" (35). For a discussion of concealment as a means of control exercised by and upon slaveholders, see Burnham 54-56; for a treatment of deceit as motif in slave texts, see Keith Byerman.

21. Spillers explores an intriguing Freudian-Foucauldian scene of mute accusation in the sleepless nights spent by a jealous Mrs. Flint hovering over Brent's bed, waiting to hear in the whispers of dreams what she was certain Brent needed to confess—a husband's adultery enacted on the body of the slave. Brent, in other words, was, while still virginal, the quintessential sexualized confessant (76).

22. In commenting on Jacobs' description of her infant as a "new tie to life," Yellin notes that the ex-slave implicitly critiques the cultural association of impurity and illegitimacy with sin, suicide, and death (Women and Sisters 88).

23. In connection with the autobiography of Annie Besant, T. L. Broughton argues that Victorian women's sacrificial self-giving suggests a link between "the cult of martyrdom and the cultural construction of middle-class female sexuality as passive, indeed as masochistic" (83). While he builds a strong case in general, Jacobs' action here seems less the result of passive submission than active choice.

24. Fruitfully explored by virtually all of Jacobs' critics, the new morality that Jacobs proposed is concisely represented by Byerman: "[T]hough there is a universal morality, extreme social conditions limit its applicability, and, in addition, the desire for life, freedom, and integrity supersedes any narrow judgment of behavior" (78). For lucid explications of Jacobsian ethics, see Andrews, "The Changing Moral Discourse of
25. Tellingly, analysts have been as ambivalent about Jacobs' relationship to her audiences as she herself was. Braxton assumes perhaps the most benevolent of relationships, while, at the other extreme, Fox-Genovese posits that Jacobs "harbored deep bitterness toward northern society in general and northern white women in particular," feelings that unquestionably influenced her text (166).

26. Without projecting onto Incidents anachronistic espousals of feminist agendas, Jacobs' critics note that by challenging the sexual (mis)treatment of slave women her text at least entertained the hope of revising patriarchal structures (Yellin, Women and Sisters 94). Certainly Jacobs presented a striking contrast to the image of the female slave described by bell hooks in Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism: "By completely accepting the female role as defined by patriarchy, enslaved black women embraced and upheld an oppressive social order and became (along with their white sisters) both accomplices in the crimes perpetuated against them and the victims of those crimes" (48).

27. In a collateral reading, Edwin Gittleman provides an empowering image of slave texts by construing the Declaration of Independence as slave narrative in which an American people escape from bondage and achieve their rightful freedom (239-56).

28. Braxton elaborates on the etymology of "sass" and its relationship to Exu, the trickster figure of African lore, in an unusual examination of verbal control of master by slave (Black Women 30-31).

29. Child described her role in similar terms when she wrote to a friend, Lucy Searle, that she had felt the need to "put the 'savage cruelties' into one chapter" yet had kept other editorial intrusions to a minimum: "I abridged, and struck out superfluous words sometimes; but I don't think I altered fifty words in the whole volume" (qtd. in Yellin, Introduction xxii). For a discussion of Child's structural and thematic influence, particularly in the decision to omit a later chapter on John Brown, see Bruce Mills.

30. On the matter of sponsorship, see Yellin, Introduction xxiii; on that of copyright arrangements, see the letter from Child to Jacobs in Yellin's edition of Incidents, 250.
CHAPTER 5

THE CULTURE OF CONFESSION

In "A Reporter at Large: Explaining Hitler," Ron Rosenbaum of the New Yorker offers a journalist's perspective on a man who confessed to nothing. Significantly, Rosenbaum's investigations lead him to reflect not just on one personification of pathology but also on the extent to which that figure has been able to fascinate first his enemies and allies and now two generations of scholars. "What one discovers," in studying Hitler, he finds, is:

that Hitler explanations often tell us as much about the explainers as they do about Hitler. That, in a sense, when we talk about Hitler we are talking about who we are--and who we are not. We project upon the inky Rorschach of the evidence an image of our anti-self. Hitler theories are cultural self-portraits in the negative--ways of distancing ourselves from him. And ways of protecting ourselves. (50)

The aura of sinister allure that emanates from the historical Hitler defines the man only imperfectly, but enough for the rest of humankind to recognize in him what they hope never to discover in themselves.

In confession, would-be explainers of human nature obtain what Hitler never provided, open admission of personal transgression. Those who confess reveal, in explicit and often intimate terms, a reservoir of potential or actualized perversion that, their audiences trust, safely distinguishes perpetrator from victim, wrongdoer from right-
doer, confessant from confessor. Confessional narrative provides the textual Rorschach by which a culture can attempt to define itself by denouncing what it wishes not to be.

I have taken as premise for this dissertation the belief that confession is always this kind of social text. While confessing is first an autobiographical act that reveals something about the self, it is also a cultural act, revelatory of the shared values, assumptions, and practices that elicit it. Despite what its participants may believe, confession is ultimately far more significant as cultural document than personal testimony, more interesting for what it tells about social agency than individual actions. At the same time, since confession is always made in the personal and particular, it is best understood in the actual voices of those who offer it. Recognizing the particularity of confessional expression, I have taken as secondary premise the notion that American confessions constitute uniquely American expressions of identity. In focusing on three widely disparate sites of confession made by and to Americans, I have argued that confessional texts contribute to the articulation and, more importantly, the construction of American identity. But because the autobiographies historically privileged as "typically American" more often foreground proud, public displays of courage and rectitude (generally enacted by males) than shameful, buried deeds of weakness and failure, I have needed to argue, further, that attention to confession as a latent but ubiquitous feature of the nation's life-writing suggests, with some urgency, a reason to redefine the so-called representative American autobiographer.

Thus my purpose has been twofold: to propose a confessional theory that helps explain the contours of autobiography in general; and to suggest that attending to confession reconfigures, in important ways, the contours of American autobiography in
particular. The over-arching goal has been to create space in the critical conversation for what already occupies substantial space in American life-writing. My efforts depend for their effect on a site-specific approach and the insights derived from the confessions of three atypical American figures, the witch, the cannibal, and the slave. In selecting and explicating texts, my chief criterion has been the range of confessional concerns that they might demonstrate rather than a desire to compile an inclusive history of confessional narrative. While other texts could have been chosen—and I argue that the pervasiveness of confession in American autobiography multiplies the possibilities for selection—the diversity these three offer, in terms of authorship, audience, formulation, and cultural context, has provided an ample foundation from which to theorize the tradition they represent.

Although it has been important here to reconstruct the historical circumstances of confessions separated by almost two hundred years, my approach has not been to trace a historical progression. Rather, I have emphasized the peculiar confessor-confessant relationship in each of three striking cultural contexts. This is not to suggest, however, that the gap between 1692 and 1847 or 1861 is not highly significant. Indeed, it is difficult to overstate the differences between Massachusetts Bay Colony and the thirty-state nation into which it had been assimilated by mid-nineteenth century. In 1690 Boston had a population of less than 7,000; in 1850 the U.S. census reported 23.2 million inhabitants spread across 3.5 million square miles. Over those decades, the Puritans' nascent sense of "Americanness" had been annealed, through revolution and independence, into national consciousness founded on a Declaration Couser names "a form of communal autobiography" (Altered Egos 29). By the time Emerson issued his
call for American authorship, the republic was poised to respond, not only with the creativity of its artists but also with the ingenuity of its inventors, whose enterprise enabled the print materials produced with ever more speed and economy to reach increasingly broader and more literate audiences. In the same lapse of time, the disestablishment of religion and the Foucauldian dissemination of the means of confession had bred a populace willing to claim their individuality in terms of transgression as well as achievement. In the dialectic of individual and society that generates life-writing, such sweeping differences are critical precisely because they engender qualitatively different autobiographical expression.

Thus, the approach I have taken, in its historical specificity, has very much focused my interpretive vision. While the nature of the project has enabled me to regard every text as a potential repository for confession—and the non-canonical and marginally canonical have richly repaid my interest—the necessity for a unitary focus has also precluded any number of ancillary considerations, especially the role that gender plays in autobiographical construction. Unquestionably, gender sculpts the confessional topography of the three textual sites here. The disproportionate number of women accused of and confessing to witchcraft has long been the subject of study, as has the variance between male and female mortality rates among famine victims, a discrepancy that clearly amazed early commentators on the Donner disaster. And with regard to slavery, the question of a gender "bias" has been raised not only by scholars and interpreters but in the voices of slaves themselves. "Slavery is terrible for men," Jacobs reflects in an oft-quoted passage that follows the birth of her daughter, "but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burdens common to all, they have wrongs, and
sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own" (77). While my purpose has not been to differentiate among confessions on the basis of the biological sex of confessants, my sample does raise compelling questions about the interrelatedness of shame, guilt, confession, and gender that warrant future study.

The design of my project, in its textual specificity, has also prevented me from treating any of a wide spectrum of potential applications of confessional theory, among them, from a pedagogical perspective, the ethics of confession in the composition classroom. Certainly an increased focus on the educational uses of personal writing and the possibility for confessional disclosure it promotes raise important ethical concerns. With good reason David Bleich issues his call for a "pedagogy of disclosure"—an interstitial variant of self-expression located somewhere between private confession and public revelation (43, 47)—and Lester Faigley appeals for an examination of the dynamics at play among the "technologies of confession" in composition classes (129). As the ethnographical studies of these theorists suggest, the construction of students' "former selves" as legitimate objects of analysis poses particular problems for the reception and evaluation of writing in academic settings. If, as Faigley claims, the representation of personal composition in contemporary rhetorical textbooks "bears many of the characteristics of institutional confession," then needed pedagogical insights—and cautions—could well be supplied by confessional theory (130).

While my field remains broad, then, my framework has narrowed my study and generated a certain tension between scope and possibility. Further evidence of this tension appears in the need to evaluate texts against a chosen interpretive screen without forcing every voice into a pre-established pattern. As with any attempt to argue a
defining principle, mine presents the temptation to impose a formula that forecloses the free play of meaning in a text and blinds me to nuances suggestive of other equally illuminating interpretations. Furthermore, by stacking the interpretive deck with pre-selected examples, I risk collapsing the substantial differences among texts. Guarding against these temptations has been crucial throughout my analysis, for by their very presence textual differences help validate my argument for confession as a habitual form of expression among diverse populations and my claim to its ubiquity in American autobiography. Additionally, these differences have proven provocative in and of themselves in a project that has addressed univocal and multivocal confessions; legal testimony, religious expression, and popular literature; accounts as brief as the interrogatory dialogues of Salem, as expansive as Jacobs’ 200-page narrative; testimony concentrated into dramatically immediate "sound-bite" segments as well as recollections gathered over the course of decades. The wide arc these diverse points describe has helped expand my model to assure the accommodation of multiple and unique forms of self-expression.

Because this project has sought to discover in confession a particular characterization of American self-expression, my work has implicitly acknowledged a pair of assumptions that persist among theorists of American life-writing. The first is a sense that autobiography represents, in Sayre’s well-known formulation, a "preeminent kind of American expression," that the nation and the form are "peculiarly linked" by a correspondence in origin and impulse ("Autobiography" 147). Added to this foundational premise is the recognition that practitioners of autobiography inevitably draw upon a fund of shared metaphors, what Spengemann and Lundquist thematize as shared experiences of
the American myth (503). By its focus on the autobiographical and cultural uses of guilt, that necessary pre-text of confession, this study joins the critical conversation both to challenge and to extend these assumptions. In order to evaluate its contribution to that dialogue, it is useful first to note two broad observations that emerge from the conjunction of textual sites.

First, the content of confession at Salem, in the Sierras, or under slavery suggests in every case an attempt to interpret one's actions in terms of the encircling ethos. The resulting examens present a full range of confessional response. Salem's confessants voice an explicit assumption of guilt, while the pragmatic cannibals of the West declare that circumstances absolve them of any fault, and Jacobs projects much of the responsibility for her "sins" onto the culture that makes those actions necessary. As dissimilar as they appear, however, these confessions share a common motivation; all proceed from an impulse for self-preservation within a group on the verge of self-destruction. The People of the Word at Salem compromise their commitment to truth in their battle with Satan and his human minions; there confessants learn that the only way to save one's life is to sacrifice principle to the expedient lie. The starving emigrants in the mountain camps recognize that their survival depends on defying unwritten law; forced to choose, they put self-preservation above one of the foundational tenets of human society. Jacobs, for her part, inhabits a community so debased that its standards are rendered wholly invalid; to survive at all, she must write her own law. All of these confessants have weighed their "will to live" against recognized ethical precepts and then
chosen a course of deliberate deviance. Their guilt derives, in a sense, from opposing their desire for life to the community's need to control action and identify right-acting members.

Second, the confessions that issue forth from these transgressors suggest that all of them, not just the ambivalent Jacobs, wrestle with the opposition of individual to communal will. They experience in the personal terms the antithetical drives for self- and community-definition that inhere in American individualism, in the paradox at the heart of an Adamic figure alone in the wilderness yet driven to define that isolated self for the group. Confession may rely for its origin on introspection, interiority, and the willed belief in a unitary individual, but the "self" is produced exteriorly in expression to a community and becomes somehow community property. If autobiography is peculiarly American, it is perhaps partly because its conversion of the private self into a public, published text manifests the paradoxes embedded in one of the nation's favorite self-images. If, as Couser believes, Americans show a predilection for "writing one's life in such a way as to illuminate the community's history," that practice heightens rather than resolves the tension between individual and group at the heart of American autobiography, a tension nowhere more evident than in its confessional recreation of personal guilt as cultural artifact (*Altered Egos* vii).

The confessional corpus, then, challenges the Adamic archetype on two grounds. First, it insists on the recognition of guilt as a force in shaping not only individual conscience but national consciousness. It provides specific evidence that inherent in any myth of Eden is a necessary, and not necessarily happy, fall. The eruption of confession in autobiographical discourse destroys the illusion of guilt as but a minor aberration
among the inhabitants of a paradisal nation resplendent with spiritual and material promise. Confessional narrative from the desk of William Bradford reminds America that there was dissension on the *Mayflower* and murder (if not mayhem) in Massachusetts Bay: the colony's first execution, of John Billington the elder for "wilful murder," was "a matter of great sadness" in 1630, wrote Bradford (234), and the General Court ordered construction of Boston's first prison two years later (Powers 217). Where popularizers of national mythologies would imagine for the American Adam (and perhaps, after Kolodny, the American Eve) a long tenure of innocence, delaying what Thomas Cooley conceives as their "education" into a lower state (x), confession argues that the fallen and the heroic have always co-existed, that the Visible Sinner sat at meeting next to the Visible Saint. Confession chastens the nation with the reminder that America exists only in a postlapsarian state.

Confessional narrative further critiques America's vision of that solitary innocent in Eden by reminding a nation of two hundred million souls that they, and their life-stories, exist in relationship to each other. Guilt may be named by the individual, but it is very much a social concern whose expression derives from the dialectic of individual and community. At the level of personal expression, the resulting tension precipitates a crisis of representation in the delivery of confession, since the instability of power at the moment of articulation always threatens to silence the confessant by subsuming his or her unique life-story into the dominant discourse. At the level of cultural expression, the same tension fuels debate over whose histories of guilt or innocence deserve recognition, a text's literary value to some degree cognate with its ability to reproduce a privileged cultural narrative. At either level the tension serves as reminder that what is at stake in
autobiography and the autobiographical canon is the right to name the self and, by
implication, to claim American selfhood. The confessional theory of autobiography
proposed here rightly models inclusiveness by reaching beyond the canon at the same time
that it provides an important rationale for doing so, by demonstrating that the voices of
marginalized "witches," starving emigrants, and a persecuted slave help define an
American people as well as an important mode of American life-writing.

Confessional theory, then, engages traditional American autobiographical criticism
in a dialogue of revision. Attention to confession defamiliarizes the field of American
life-writing enough to expose the discursive tactics necessary for mediating between the
twin poles of guilt and innocence, individual and community that sustain one of America's
favorite self-images and much of its national literature. On this same-but-different plane,
confession can erupt from below the surface at any point, much as Leigh Gilmore's
subversive "autobiographies" of women's self-representation can "interrupt" and "rupture"
hegemonic discourse (49). Confession asserts itself here in the manner of a Foucauldian
"counter-myth," critiquing the illusion of a monolithic culture and calling for a focused
(re)reading of all American autobiographical texts (Language 160).

If confession signifies in American autobiographical contexts, its logic should
suggest new meanings for autobiography in general. While the scope of my sample and
the inductive design of my project restrict me to limited conclusions, the site-specific
learnings from this investigation are yet transferrable across a wide range of study. The
results lead me to pose, if not answer, several variants of a key question: What does
autobiography become when it is viewed through a confessional lens? How, for instance,
does confession as a mode of self-expression intersect with the broader field of
autobiography? At the start of this project, I posited that all confession is autobiographical and all autobiography is to some extent confessional; by the end, I recognize that interembeddedness tags a larger question, the vexing problem of generic determinability. Autobiography continues to elude definition, and certainly the term becomes, if possible, even less stable with the interposition of yet another nuanced form. A theory of confessional narrative confirms the impulse of autobiographical scholars to identify their field descriptively rather than prescriptively. It may prove impossible, then, to differentiate confessional narratives from "other" autobiographical narratives, but the potential for doing so serves an important purpose in sensitizing readers to the confessions that can fissure the surface of any identity-defining text.

Because all autobiographical texts argue a case for self-definition on the basis of a life history, the interanimation of autobiography and confession readily opens into a question of textual representation: What place does referentiality hold in confession, particularly in light of the narrativizing-fictionalizing process that creates the object-self of autobiography? While I warned at the outset that this study was not designed for the analysis of referentiality, still the question of truth is not easily dismissed. It haunts confessional narrative, a form of expression historically assessed, by church and court, in terms of truthfulness layered onto inclusiveness. Certainly the witch trials set a precedent for autobiographies of uncertain authenticity, just as competition for rights to the "real" Donner story highlighted the amorphous character of historical truth, whether personal or communal. As textual construct, confession contends with the postmodern suspicion that truth is undeliverable in language precisely because it is linguistically contingent. As product of personal memory, confession must answer as well before the board of
neurological science, which demonstrates the susceptibility of the human brain to "false" memories that embed themselves with "real" memories until it becomes impossible to distinguish between them (Kotre 35-38). Can there be truth in the autobiographical text? Confession, that interlocution designed to provide answers, is here able to confirm only that whatever truth its discourse produces is, like the guilt or innocence it likewise seeks to elicit, always a social construct.

By the questions it raises and the observations it confirms, then, confessional narrative has something to contribute to discussions of autobiographical theory in general and American autobiography in particular. At the same time, on a less macrocosmic scale, it has something to offer to the individual who reads autobiography as confessional narrative. How does one read a confession? More autobiographically, how do I read the confessions of the victims of Salem, the families in the mountains, the slave in hiding? The answer is rooted in my basic premise, that confession exists only in the relationship of confessant to confessor. The immediacy of the Salem trials, the face-to-face interaction between accuser and accused, sets up perhaps the ultimate model for confessional relationship. Intimacy of contact diminishes with the other confessants in my study, with the Donners, whose oral histories soon passed into print, and with Harriet Jacobs, the closet confessant who composed in secret and concealed herself behind protective anonymity. Much of what I have posited here is based on the proximity of confessant to confessor in their narrative exchange: the reconfiguration of identity, the assignation of guilt, the active contest of power. What happens, then, when I become confessor to individuals from across an expanse of time?
I am, quite obviously, not the audience originally hailed by witch, emigrant, or slave. Much less hangs in the balance when I read their confessions from centuries ago, from a point in history when the outcome in Salem, for instance, meant literal life or death. A certain level of significance is erased by the passage of time, especially with the death of the confessant. Yet words intended as confession still call out to be read as confession. They elicit an engagement that sets up, across centuries, the relationship of confessor to confessant. There is a confessional design that calls forth a certain response, the "arousing and fulfillment of desires" that Kenneth Burke envisions for literary form as a means of leading the reader to anticipate, and be gratified by, the text ("Lexicon" 124). The difficulty is that expectations are confounded rather than resolved by confession across the divide of time. Confessant-confessor reciprocity does not have the same hold. Other things obtrude, the potential for commodification of a life-in-text, the titillation of mean curiosity, the temptation to textual voyeurism. Much of what happened between the Donners and their readers interposes itself between my narrators and me.

Only infrequent, startling episodes does the distance between us close and the something of the original confessional relationship reassert itself. In tracing the lives of these real individuals from the past, for instance, I am struck by the conscience-wrenching decisions that they faced—damnation by perjury, survival by cannibalism, abandonment of principle almost by force—and the image establishes a link. In a few instances, something even stronger takes root. I cannot not read impartially Thomas Bradbury’s 1692 plea for the release of his "beloved wife Mary Bradbury": "wee have been married fifty five yeare: and shee hath bin a loveing & faithful wife to mee, unto this day shee hath been wonderfull laborious dilligent & Industryous" (SWP 117).
cannot forget the early letter of Tamsen Poor, long before she met George Donner and went with him to die at Truckee Pass, writing to her sister in June of 1831 and describing her first love: "I do not intend to boast of my husband but I find him one of the best of men - affectionate, industrious, and possessed of an upright heart." Especially when I discover, on the back of the same letter paper, an addition dated seven months later:

I have lost that little boy I loved so well. He died the 28 Sept. I have lost my husband who made so large a share of my happiness. He died on the 24 December. I prematurely had a daughter which died on the 18th of Nov. I have broken up housekeeping and intend to commence school in February. O, my sister weep with me if you have tears to shar.

Your sister (HOU 8)

In neither of these cases is the narrator confessant in any obvious sense; guilt is neither assumed nor implied. Yet in a broader sense, these are individuals confessing who they are, and their confession beckons me to respond.

The consequences of this kind of reading and the differences between it and the reception of confession in the immediacy with which it is given suggest the preliminary nature of this project conceived to initiate a conversation about the rhetoric of confession. They suggest already a need for revision: rather than a rhetoric of confession, what is needed is rhetorics of confession, a range of responses that would allow for the many ways in which confessional narrative may be declared, received, and interpreted. The confessional analecta would certainly warrant that kind of extended, expansive study and reward it.
ABBREVIATIONS


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Letter to Eliza P. Donner Houghton. 15 June 1903. Ms. HOU 143. The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.


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