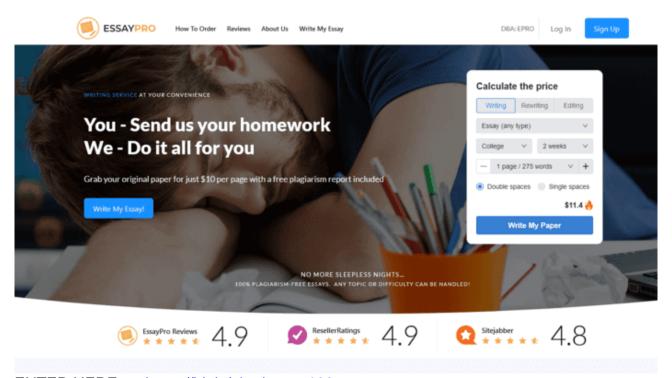
Peculiar Institutions Reconfiguring Notions of Political Participation Through the Narratives of Hannah Crafts and Harriet Jacobs



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In her narrative Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Harriet Jacobs says, "If the secret memoirs of many members of Congress should be published, curious details would be unfolded" (142). Jacobs here, and throughout her narrative, reveals herself as a political outsider in all possible senses. She does not, herself, know what stories are told in the so-called "secret memoirs" of white, male, empowered politicians. She can only surmise what frightful and disturbing events and attitudes they must describe. In sharp contrast, Hannah Crafts, author of The Bondwoman's Narrative, is and presents herself as the most intimate kind of political insider. She is for all intents and purposes – throughout her own story – writing the diary, the secret memoir, of her master, Mr. John Hill Wheeler. A focus on this point of intersection between the two women's texts takes on a new and uncanny significance when one considers that the actual diary kept by the historical Congressman John Wheeler has been a major tool used in the authentication of the Crafts narrative. This

important political figure kept a written record of virtually every day of his adult life. Records reveal, among other things, that at age twenty-one Wheeler became the youngest member ever elected to the North Carolina House of Commons. By his early forties, he would become a permanent presence on Capitol Hill, serving as close counselor and friend to Presidents Pierce, Jackson, Van Buren, Buchanan, and Johnson. He would also later serve as the American Minister to Nicaragua, then a Central American stronghold, where he would try to single-handedly claim the land and institute slavery, inadvertently ruining his political career in the process. That Hannah Crafts lives in and reproduces for the readers' eyes the most intricate details of those secret political records and relationships ultimately has an enormous impact upon the connections she perceives herself as having to other slave women, to white Northern women, and to men of either race. Crafts' recognition and narration of her unique personal position also subtly but profoundly alters the opportunities for political participation that she conceives as possible.

The Bondwoman's Narrative, written by Hannah Crafts, self-described as "a fugitive slave, recently escaped from North Carolina," was uncovered in 2001 and published in 2002 under the auspices of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

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