


[Resistances] *in*
the Life of a
Slave Girl

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CENTERING THE PRACTICE OF RESISTANCE



But her concern and struggles for physical survival, while clearly important, did not constitute her most outstanding contributions. It will be submitted that by virtue of the brutal force of circumstances, the black woman was assigned the mission of promoting the consciousness and practice of resistance. A great deal has been said about the black *man* and resistance, but very little about the unique relationship black women bore to the resistance struggles during slavery. To understand the part she played in developing and sharpening the thrust towards freedom, the broader meaning of slavery and of American slavery in particular must be explored.

P.84. Davis, Angela. "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves."
The Massachusetts Review, Vol. 13, No. 1/2 1972, pp. 81-100.

THE CULT OF TRUE WOMANHOOD

Pure

“Each [young girl] was also taught to value her virginity “as the ‘pearl of great price’ which was her greatest asset” (188)

“She prepared for marriage by keeping herself chaste for her husband and learning the skills necessary to manage a household and rear children.” (188)

Mother

“Motherhood was valued as the most fulfilling and essential of all women’s duties” (188)

“This ideal ‘prescribed a female role bound by the kitchen and nursery, overlaid with piety and purity, crowned with subservience’” (188)

Dependent

“[...]she was also portrayed as delicate and weak, prone to fainting and illness.” (189)

“Due to her emotional and physical frailty, a True Woman needed to be protected by a male family member. She also required the luxuries that his income could provide.” (189)

Pillar of morality

“A True Woman was known as the ‘Angel of the House’ whose primary purpose was to impart moral guidance to her family” (190)

“As the ‘Angel out of the house’ a True woman’s ‘activity within the church communities was [seen as] an extension of women’s role within the home” (190)

The Trials of Girlhood

DURING THE FIRST YEARS of my service in Dr. Flint's family, I was accustomed to share some indulgences with the children of my mistress. Though this seemed to me no more than right, I was grateful for it, and tried to merit the kindness by the faithful discharge of my duties. But I now entered on my fifteenth year—a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import. I tried to treat them with indifference or contempt. The master's age, my extreme youth, and the fear that his conduct would be reported to my grandmother, made him bear this treatment for many months.

(Ch. V The Trials of Girlhood)

He tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled. He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master. I was compelled to live under the same roof with him—where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection? No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men.

(Ch. V The Trials of Girlhood)

She will become prematurely knowing in evil things. Soon she will learn to tremble when she hears her master's footfall. She will be compelled to realize that she is no longer a child. If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave.

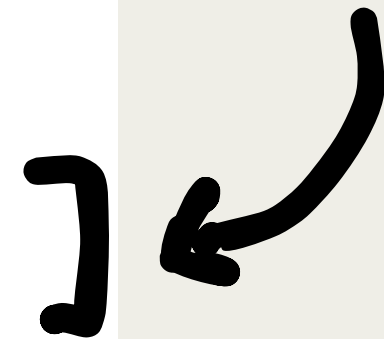
(Ch. V The Trials of Girlhood)

Again and again I revolved in my mind how all this would end. There was no hope that the doctor would consent to sell me on any terms. He had an iron will, and was determined to keep me, and to conquer me. My lover was an intelligent and religious man. Even if he could have obtained permission to marry me while I was a slave, the marriage would give him no power to protect me from my master. It would have made him miserable to witness the insults I should have been subjected to. And then, if we had children, I knew they must “follow the condition of the mother.” What a terrible blight that would be on the heart of a free, intelligent father! For his sake, I felt that I ought not to link his fate with my own unhappy destiny.

(Ch. VII The Lover)

But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate; but all my prospects had been blighted by slavery.

(Ch. X A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl's Life)



But to the slave mother New Year's day comes laden with peculiar sorrows. She sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the day dawns. She may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood; but she has a mother's instincts, and is capable of feeling a mother's agonies.

(Ch. III The Slaves' New Year's Day)

Of course I saw whither all this was tending. I knew the impassable gulf between us; but to be an object of interest to a man who is not married, and who is not her master, is agreeable to the pride and feelings of a slave, if her miserable situation has left her any pride or sentiment. It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to **freedom** in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment. A master may treat you as rudely as he pleases, and you dare not speak; moreover, the wrong does not seem so great with an unmarried man, as with one who has a wife to be made unhappy. There may be sophistry in all this; but the condition of a slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practise of them impossible.

(Ch. X A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl's Life)

Sojourner Truth
Ain't I A Woman?
I HAVE PLOWED
AND REAPED
AND HUSKED
AND CHOPPED
AND MOWED.
AND CAN ANY
MAN DO MORE
THAN THAT?

Penguin Books
Great Ideas



I WELLED THE SHADOW TO SUPPORT THE
SUBSTANCE.
SOJOURNER TRUTH.

In consequence of numerous requests of this kind, she asked permission of her mistress to bake crackers at night, after all the household work was done; and she obtained leave to do it, provided she would clothe herself and her children from the profits. Upon these terms, after working hard all day for her mistress, she began her midnight bakings, assisted by her two oldest children. The business proved profitable; and each year she laid by a little, which was saved for a fund to purchase her children.

(Ch. I Childhood)

I was indebted to *her* for all my comforts, spiritual or temporal. It was *her* labor that supplied my scanty wardrobe. I have a vivid recollection of the linsey-woolsey³ dress given me every winter by Mrs. Flint. How I hated it! It was one of the badges of slavery.

While my grandmother was thus helping to support me from her hard earnings, the three hundred dollars she had lent her mistress were never repaid. When her mistress died, her son-in-law, Dr. Flint, was appointed executor. When grandmother applied to him for payment, he said the estate was insolvent, and the law prohibited payment. It did not, however, prohibit him from retaining the silver candelabra, which had been purchased with that money. I presume they will be handed down in the family, from generation to generation.

(Ch. II The New Master and Mistress)

XXI

The Loophole of Retreat

WHAT IS A LOOPHOLE?

1.a. *Fortification.* A narrow vertical opening, usually widening inwards, cut in a wall or other defence, to allow of the passage of missiles.

2.a. A similar opening to look through, or for the admission of light and air.

3. *figurative.* An outlet or means of escape. Often applied to an ambiguity or omission in a statute, etc., which affords opportunity for evading its intention.

(“Loophole.” *Oxford English Dictionary*)

A SMALL SHED HAD been added to my grandmother's house years ago. Some boards were laid across the joists at the top, and between these boards and the roof was a very small garret, never occupied by any thing but rats and mice. It was a pent roof, covered with nothing but shingles, according to the southern custom for such buildings. The garret was only nine feet long and seven wide. The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor. There was no admission for either light or air. My uncle Phillip, who was a carpenter, had very skilfully made a concealed trap-door, which communicated with the storeroom.¹ He had been doing this while I was waiting in the swamp. The storeroom opened upon a piazza.

(Ch. XXI The Loophole of Retreat)

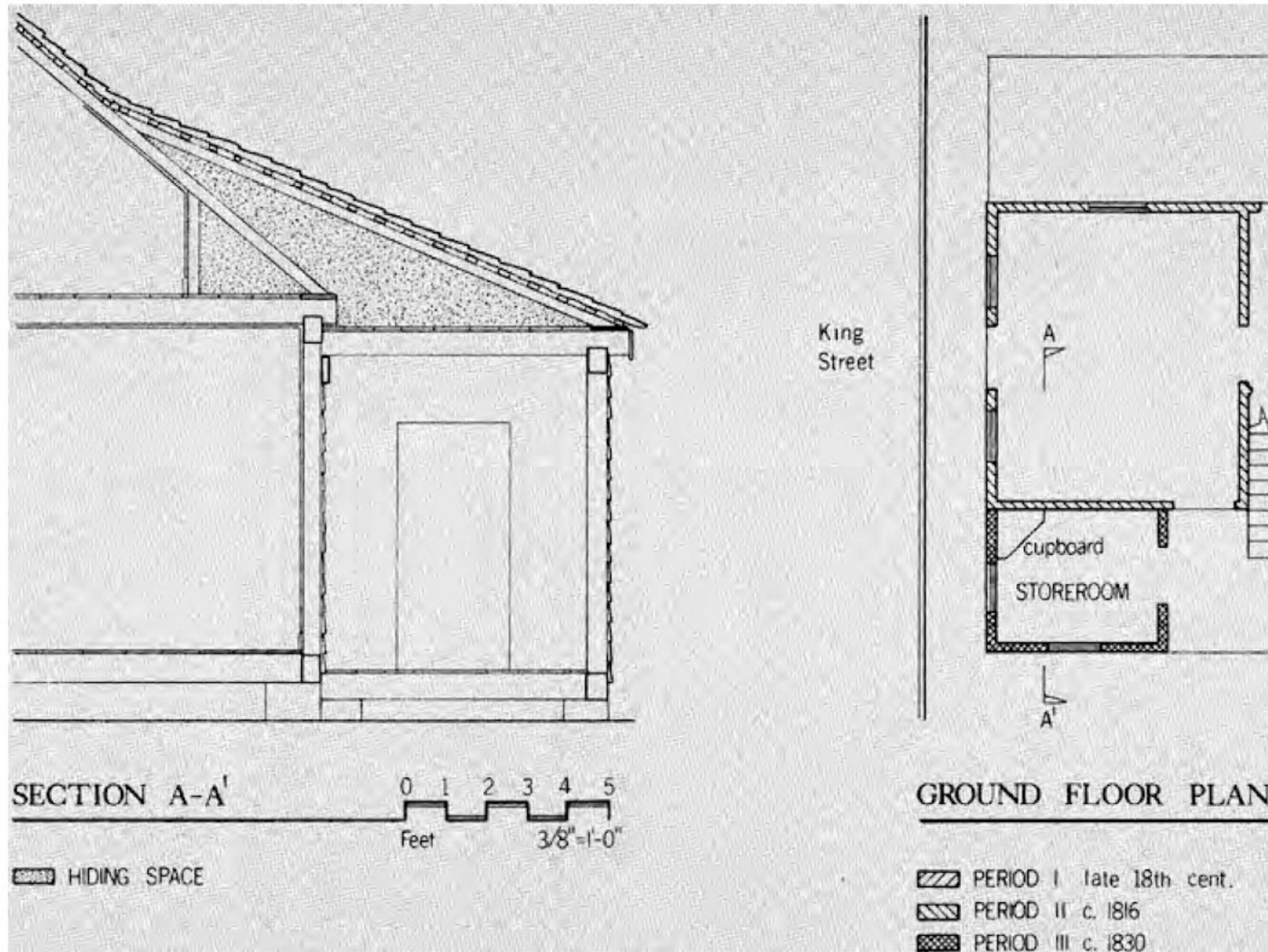
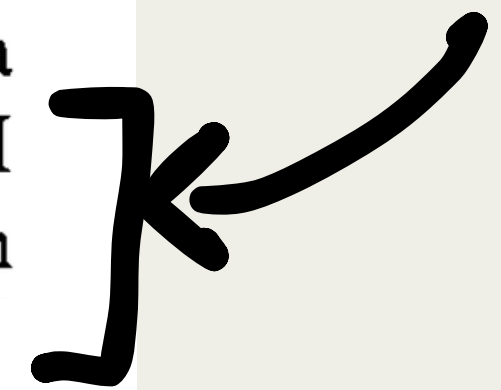


Image:
 Reconstruction to
 scale of Harriet
 Jacobs's hiding
 place. Drawing by
 Carl R. Louns, from
 Demonic Grounds.

I could sleep quite comfortably on one side; but the slope was so sudden that I could not turn on the other without hitting the roof. The rats and mice ran over my bed; but I was weary, and I slept such sleep as the wretched may, when a tempest has passed over them. Morning came. I knew it only by the noises I heard; for in my small den day and night were all the same. I suffered for air even more than for light. But I was not comfortless. I heard the voices of my children. There was joy and there was sadness in the sound. It made my tears flow. How I longed to speak to them! I was eager to look on their faces; but there was no hole, no crack, through which I could peep. This continued darkness was oppressive. It seemed horrible to sit or lie in a cramped position day after day, without one gleam of light. Yet I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave, though white people considered it an easy one;



(Ch. XXI The Loophole of Retreat)

My master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him. If I went out for a breath of fresh air, after a day of unwearied toil, his footsteps dogged me. If I knelt by my mother's grave, his dark shadow fell on me even there. The light heart which nature had given me became heavy with sad forebodings. The other slaves in my master's house noticed the change. Many of them pitied me; but none dared to ask the cause. They had no need to inquire. They knew too well the guilty practices under that roof; and they were aware that to speak of them was an offence that never went unpunished.

(Ch. V The Trials of Girlhood)

I bored three rows of holes, one above another; then I bored out the interstices between. I thus succeeded in making one hole about an inch long and an inch broad. I sat by it till late into the night, to enjoy the little whiff of air that floated in. In the morning I watched for my children. The first person I saw in the street was Dr. Flint.

(Ch. XXI The Loophole of Retreat)

Autumn came, with a pleasant abatement of heat. My eyes had become accustomed to the dim light, and by holding my book or work in a certain position near the aperture I contrived to read and sew.

(Ch. XXI The Loophole of Retreat)

XXIX

Preparations for Escape

I HARDLY EXPECT THAT the reader will credit me, when I affirm that I lived in that little dismal hole, almost deprived of light and air, and with no space to move my limbs, for nearly seven years. But it is a fact; and to me a sad one, even now; for my body still suffers from the effects of that long imprisonment, to say nothing of my soul. Members of my family, now living in New York and Boston, can testify to the truth of what I say.

(Ch. XXIX Preparations for Escape)



Simone Leigh

Sovereignty

Image: "Cover."
Sovereignty,
Brochure.



Image:
Simone Leigh
sculpting Sentinel,
2021
From: Sovereignty,
Borchure, p. 12

Simone Leigh: Sovereignty features a new body of work made for the United States Pavilion. Characterized by an interest in performativity and affect, Leigh's expansive practice parses the construction of Black femme subjectivity. Her large-scale sculptural works join forms derived from vernacular architecture and the female body, rendering them via materials and processes associated with the artistic traditions of Africa and the African diaspora. *Sovereignty* commingles disparate histories and narratives, including those related to ritual performances of the Baga peoples in Guinea, early Black American material culture from the Edgefield District in South Carolina, and the landmark 1931 Paris Colonial Exposition. With a series of new bronzes and ceramics both outside and inside the Pavilion, Leigh intervenes imaginatively to fill gaps in the historical record by proposing new hybridities. The works in *Sovereignty* collectively extend the artist's ongoing inquiry into the theme of self-

determination. The exhibition's title speaks to notions of self-governance and independence, for both the individual and the collective. To be sovereign is to not be subject to another's authority, another's desires, or another's gaze, but rather to be the author of one's own history. Many of the featured sculptures interrogate the extraction of images and objects from across the African diaspora and their circulation as souvenirs in service of colonial narratives. Though Leigh's figural works present their subjects as autonomous and self-sufficient, they do not simply celebrate the capacity of Black women to overcome oppressive circumstances, but rather indict the conditions that so often require them to affirm their own humanity. Acknowledging the capacity of Leigh's work to articulate an expansive view of Black female experience, American author and scholar Saidiya Hartman has described the artist's address of the Black feminine as "an architecture of possibility." Hartman's conception of

"critical fabulation"—a strategy that invites historians, artists, and critics to creatively fill the gaps of history—provides a resonant framework for approaching Leigh's work. "In order to tell the truth," Leigh proposes, "you need to invent what might be missing from the archive, to collapse time, to concern yourself with issues of scale, to formally move things around in a way that reveals something more true than fact."

Leigh's exhibition continues beyond the U.S. Pavilion with *Loophole of Retreat: Venice*, a convening of Black women scholars, performers, writers, and artists in October 2022, organized by Rashida Bumbray. The project reflects the collaborative ethos that is characteristic of Leigh's practice, and pays homage to a long history of Black femme collectivity, communality, and care.

life. Which is why the images that float around them — the remains, so to speak, at the archeological site — surface first, and they surface so vividly and so compellingly that I acknowledge them as my route to a reconstruction of a world, to **an exploration of an interior life that was not written and to the revelation of a kind of truth.**



P.95. Morrison, Toni. "The Site of Memory"
Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir, 2nd ed., ed. William Zinsser, 1995, pp.83-102.

Leigh, *Sentinel*, 2022
Image from: Simone Leigh's website





Simone Leigh, *Brick House*, view of the installation at 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, The Milk of Dreams. Photo by: Roberto Marossi Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia



Simone Leigh, *Façade*, 2022, Thatch, steel, and wood Dimensions variable

Simone Leigh, *Satellite*, 2022, Bronze 24 feet × 10 feet × 7 feet 7 inches (7.3 × 3 × 2.3 m)

Image from: Simone Leigh's website

EXPOSITION COLONIALE INTERNATIONALE — PARIS 1931



109 CAMEROUN TOGO — GRAND PAVILLON

Boiteau et Carrière, Archs.

Images (left to right):

Postcard of the Grand Pavilion housing the Cameroon/Togo exhibit at the Paris Colonial Exposition, 1931. Imp. Braun & Cie, Editeurs Concessionnaires, Paris

Postcard of the Transport Pavilion housing the Belgian Congo exhibit at the Paris Colonial Exposition, 1931.

Imp. Braun & Cie, Editeurs Concessionnaires, Paris

Images from: *Sovereignty*, Borchure, p.p. 4-5

EXPOSITION COLONIALE INTERNATIONALE — PARIS 1931



152 LE JARDIN DU CONGO BELGE — PAVILLON DES TRANSPORTS

H. Lacoste, Arch. S. A. D. G.



Images (left to right):

Postcard, Guinée Française Idole femelle des Bagasforés. M. E. Chevrier, ca. 1907.

Africa, Unrecorded Baga artist,
“D’mba” headdress. Guinea, ca. early 20th
century. Wood and brass tacks,
55 7/8 × 15 3/4 × 29 1/2 inches (142 × 40 × 75 cm)

Images from: *Sovereignty*, Borchure, pp. 6-7



Loophole of Retreat: Venice

October 7–9, 2022
Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice

For more information, visit
simoneleighvenice2022.org

FIG. 19.
Mary McLeod Bethune, Ida B. Wells,
Nannie Burroughs, and other women
at Baptist Women's gathering,
Chicago, 1930

As part of her exhibition at the U.S. Pavilion, Leigh will bring together scholars, artists, and activists from around the world for a major project, *Loophole of Retreat: Venice*.

Organized by Rashida Bumbray, director of Culture and Art at the Open Society Foundations, with curatorial advisors Saidiya Hartman, University Professor, Columbia University, and Tina M. Campt, Owen F. Walker Professor of Humanities and Modern Culture and Media, Brown University, the three-day symposium will comprise dialogue, performances, and presentations centered on Black women's intellectual and creative labor. Taking place in Venice in fall 2022, the gathering will feature a global roster of participants and will spotlight performances, film screenings, and conversations organized around selected key directives including maroonage, magical realism, and medicine.

"Leigh is committed to the lineage of Black women artists and intellectuals that make her practice possible. As such, in connection with her

exhibition at the U.S. Pavilion in Venice, she continues her work of making Black women's intellectual labor more visible. *Loophole* will elevate a global conversation on Black feminist thought in order to nurture the intergenerational and interdisciplinary connections between Black women thinkers and makers," said Bumbray in a statement.

Loophole of Retreat: Venice builds on an eponymous one-day convening held in 2019 at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. The conceptual frame is drawn from the 1861 autobiography of Harriet Jacobs, a formerly enslaved woman who for seven years after her escape lived in a crawl space she described as a "loophole of retreat." Jacobs claimed this site as simultaneously an enclosure and a space for enacting practices of thinking, planning, writing, and imagining new forms of freedom. It is a place that *Loophole of Retreat: Venice* will mobilize again in centering this space for the intellectual labor of Black women and femmes.

Image: "Program Schedule," *Loophole of Retreat*.



LOOPHOLE OF RETREAT: VENICE

OCT 7-9, 2022
SCHEDULE

Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! We are as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the north; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in *my* condition. The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. 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. But God so orders circumstances as to keep me with my friend Mrs. Bruce. Love, duty, gratitude, also bind me to her side. It is a privilege to serve her who pities my oppressed people, and who has bestowed the inestimable boon of freedom on me and my children.

(Ch. XLI Free at Last)

With all these thoughts revolving in my mind, and seeing no other way of escaping the doom I so much dreaded, I made a headlong plunge. 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 standard as others.

(Ch. X A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl's Life)

When they told me my new-born babe was a girl,¹ my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own.

(Ch. XIV Another Link to Life)