

# Liberated Arts: a journal for undergraduate research

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Volume 5

Issue 1 *Writing Rights, Righting Wrongs: Transatlantic  
Narratives of Race*

Article 4

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2018

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### Recommended Citation

Rowe-Crowder, Agatha (2018) "Authority and Identity in Sylvia Dubois: A Biography of the Slav who Whipt Her Mistres and Gand Her Fredom by C.W. Larison," *Liberated Arts: a journal for undergraduate research*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.  
Available at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/lajur/vol5/iss1/4>

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# **Authority and Identity in *Sylvia Dubois: A Biography of the Slav who Whipt Her Mistres and Gand Her Freedom* by C.W. Larison**

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Abstract: This essay looks at the reception of the story of former slave Sylvia Dubois, first by her biographer C.W. Larison and second by contemporary literary critics. It examines the power dynamics in the text and in its interpretation, in order to reclaim Sylvia's authority and integrity in relation to the history she puts forward. The essay addresses some of the problematic ways the text has been previously explored, while also emphasizing the powerful oral and direct nature of the writing.

Keywords: Sylvia Dubois; slavery; freedom; C.W. Larison; oral history; identity; 1800s; dialect; New Jersey; phonetics

This essay will examine *Sylvia Dubois: A Biography of the Slav who Whipt Her Mistres and Gand Her Freedom* (1883) and the dichotomous identities it presents. Throughout the text the subject Sylvia is always fighting for her voice to be heard, and her phonetic approach, dialect and slang remove the class and authority markers traditionally found in nineteenth-century writing. This leads to the text having two authors, undermining Larison's authorial intentions, and preserving the oral history of late 19<sup>th</sup> Century America.

Sylvia Dubois was the daughter of Dorcas Compton and Cuffy Bard, born into slavery on Richard Compton's plantation on Sourland Mountain (NJ). Separated from her parents at 5 years old, she moved to Dominicus Dubois' estate in Flagtown (NJ), whose second wife, Elizabeth Dubois, beat her regularly. In her late teens, after the household had moved to the Great Bend (PA), she retaliated against Elizabeth's abuse and fled to Chenang Point (NY), but was called back by Dominicus to take her daughter, Judith, and her freedom. She then went in search of her mother, searching first at Flagtown, but then finding her in New Brunswick (NJ). Towards the end of her life, she moved back to Sourland Mountain to care for her Grandfather, who then left her Put's Tavern in his will. It was destroyed by fire, leaving Sylvia destitute, so she moved in with her second youngest daughter, which is where the interviews with C.W. Larison took place in 1883.

Larison's approach to compiling the interviews was unconventional. He did not conform to standard spelling and used this text to promote the larger phonetic alphabet proposed by the Committee on the Reform of English Spelling. Larison takes the English alphabet and adds accent markers. He writes;

To improv the ălfăbăt, then we műst ěnlărg  
it. This we do by usĩng eeh ov thě vouel  
cărăctěrs in thě old ălfăbăt, without diăcrĩtiě  
mărks to rěpresěnt thě souund, or fon, hěrd  
in űttěriěg it; that is, we use ĩs nam sound. <sup>1</sup>

Although the irregular spelling does make the text very difficult to read, with the most efficient way to be read out loud, it does honour the interview style of the text. Using a phonetic alphabet allows Sylvia's voice to be clearly heard and her slang and dialect to come through. Larison's voice is also preserved, as he uses the same alphabet throughout the work. This puts both Larison and Sylvia on an equal footing in the text; the general markers of class or authority are lost with the phonetic spelling and oral design, as they portray local dialects with contemporary slang successfully.

This, in essence, gives the text two authors. As the text is essentially a compilation of interviews with Sylvia, with excerpts of Larison's descriptions or side notes, both voices are received directly. Sylvia's voice is uninterrupted, giving her equal power in their conversation, which is then preserved in the text. Here, Larison asks Sylvia a leading question, attempting to avoid the discussion of abuse, but Sylvia refuses his direction and takes the opportunity to confirm and describe the abuse:

Wěl; yur műstrěs wăs ăluwăs kĩnd to yu,  
wăgn't she?

Kĩnd to me; hwŷ, she wăs thě věřě děvĩ  
hĩmsělf. Hwŷ, she'd lěvěl me wĩth ěněthĩng  
she cud gět hold ov—clűb, stĩk ov wod, tongs,  
fir-shűvěl, nif, ăx, hătehĕt; ěněthĩng that wăs  
hănděst; ănd then she wăs so dămd qwik  
about it, to. I těl yu, ĩf I ĩntěnděd to săç hěr,  
I mad shur to be of ăwăs. 2

<sup>1</sup> Larison, C.W., Sylvia Dubois, *A Biography of The Slav Who Whipt Her Mistres And Gand Her Freedom* ed. Lobdell, Jared C. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) Page 11. Images of the text courtesy of the Hathi Trust Digital Library. <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/004385557>.

<sup>2</sup> Larison, C.W., Sylvia Dubois, *A Biography of The Slav Who Whipt Her Mistres And Gand Her Freedom* 59

Larison's inability to control Sylvia's speech in these face to face interactions is then counterbalanced by long-winded descriptive passages, solely narrated by himself. Although it creates an illusion of ownership over the text, with the majority being written by Larison, Sylvia makes her presence known. Her parts of the text are significantly more engaging, and rich in oral history that would otherwise have been lost.

To understand Larison's approach, Michael Berthold focuses on his early life, as is documented in his text *Reminiscences of School Life* (1896). Berthold compares Larison's account of his childhood and working as a teacher to the account of Sylvia and their encounter to decode who Larison was, and identify his effect on the text. Overall, he does not paint Larison or his writings in a particularly favourable light. He looks closely at the racial motivation for Larison's treatment of a black female student specifically and compares that to the respect Larison claims to have for Sylvia's rebellious nature. He also looks at Larison's childhood, comparing Sylvia to the descriptions of Larison's strong disciplinarian mother. Larison's education is also examined as the source of his interest in spelling reform. Larison explains his preference of the reformed language down to his childhood difficulty to grasp the basics of grammar and spelling, and the beatings that ensued. He then used his earnings from teaching to fund himself during his medicine degree, as his father did not think it appropriate to support him. Berthold looks closely at this medical training, and Larison's career as a doctor, suggesting that "Although some remembered him as a kind and considerate physician, particularly in obstetrical cases, other patients thought he was inclined to "experiment" with his patients as subjects."<sup>3</sup> This analysis can be extended to Larison's manipulation of language, experimenting with it as opposed to using standard spelling.

Larison aspired to gain social authority from his profession, working hard to earn his title, and identifying himself quickly as a Doctor in the text. Drawing on other accounts of Larison's studies, Berthold identifies that "As a medical student (as if replicating Victor Frankenstein's "workshop of filthy creation") Larison "purchased human bodies from whatever source he could" and "dissected everything that came his way"<sup>4</sup>. This grotesque practice fits well with Sylvia's own description of doctors:

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<sup>3</sup>Berthold, Michael C. "'The Peals of Her Terrific Language': The Control of Representation in *Silvia Dubois, a Biography of the Slav Who Whipt Her Mistres and Gand Her Freedom.*" *MELUS* 20, no. 2(1995):[Pages 3-14]Page 7

<sup>4</sup> Berthold, Michael C. "The Peals of Her Terrific Language" Page 8

**Thēs doctōrs, tha’v gōt no mērcy ōn yu, ’spēsh-  
 alý ĭf yur blāk. Ah ! I’v sen ’ēm, mēny ā tim,  
 būt, thay nēvēr cūm āftēr me, I nēvēr gav ’ēm  
 ā ehānc,—nōt the fūst tim.**

5

Her scepticism is met with laughter from Larison, but she immediately undermines the authority he seeks to establish through his profession and reminds the audience and Larison of the abuse black minorities face from establishments, including medicine. Sylvia’s confidence in the text allows the reader to see the contradictions in Larison’s portrayed character. Berthold writes “Larison brings to the interview a characteristic melange of curiosity and arrogance, of benevolence and narcissism, and the resultant text reminds that his professionalisms, shifting, contradictory, always under construction, are the roles that he is playing.”<sup>6</sup> Sylvia’s reaction seems to see right through Larison’s pretences to the contradictory and possibly threatening character underneath, that can be seen in some of his other works.

In the SUNY edition of the text, the introduction by DoVeanna S. Fulton Minor and Reginald H. Pitts makes a poignant comparison between the biography by Larison and those of other writers at the time collecting recipes and lifestyles of different cultures. They suggest that likewise Larison is collecting exotic stories, arguing that that “This narrative construction reveals interviewers were unconcerned with the ex-slave’s person, her or his personal feelings, perceptions, and reactions to her or his experiences.” The text is heavily peppered with accounts of foods and other descriptions of things somewhat trivial to Sylvia’s life story, such as this overview of Sylvia’s diet as a slave:

**Tha gāv us Indiān dūmplīngs, sǎmp, pōrag,  
 corn-brēd, potatos, pōrk, bef, mūsh ānd mīlk,  
 ānd nīgēr būtēr ; ānd we dīd’nt gēt ā bēly-sul  
 ōv thes, sūmtims—I’v ōfēn gōn tō bēd hūngrý,  
 būt, ’twas no us tō cōmplān ;—yu hād yur  
 maşur ānd yu gōt no mor. Thāt’s the wa tha  
 fēd yūng nīgērs, ĭn old tims, būt tha mad ’ēm  
 gro.**

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<sup>5</sup> Larison, C.W., Sylvia Dubois, *A Biography of The Slav Who Whipt Her Mistres And Gand Her Freedom* Page 36

<sup>6</sup> Berthold, Michael C. "The Peals of Her Terrific Language" Page 8

<sup>7</sup> Larison, C.W., Sylvia Dubois, *A Biography of The Slav Who Whipt Her Mistres And Gand Her Freedom* Page 87

However, as Minor and Pitts argue, “Dubois undermines Larison’s intentions and expresses her own concerns.”<sup>8</sup> Despite the presumption that this would become a catalogue of parts of life, Sylvia refuses to be limited by this, repeatedly reminding Larison of the abuse she suffered. Here she talks about the foods, as she’s been asked, but she reminds him that she often went hungry, and her food sources were drastically limited. Taking control of the platform Larison has given her, she charges the text with stories of injustice and hardship, breaking the clean façade Larison had intended.

Her manipulation of these intentions seeps through the entire text, asserting her as the dominant speaker in these interviews. This is most present when she talks about her mistress. As seen earlier in the essay, Larison attempted to curb Sylvia’s wrath towards Elizabeth Dubois, but to no avail. As the text turns from Larison’s attempts to minimize the discussion of the violence of slavery on the text, to Sylvia’s forceful acknowledgement of the hardships, so does the power shift between them. Whereas before Larison had been interested in preserving the Dubois name, and assuming the Mistress was benevolent to Sylvia, by the end of the interviews the text has become the tale of Sylvia, with even the title of the book changing to reflect the conflict between Sylvia and Elizabeth:

It, and I saçt hër ; she strūk me wĭth hër hānd.  
Thĭnk’s I, ĭt’s a gōd tĭm nou tō drēs yu out,  
ānd dāmd ĭf I wōn’t dō ĭt ; I sēt doun mĭ tōls,  
ānd sqwārd for a fit. The fĭrst hwāk, I strūk  
hër a hēl oŷ a blo wĭth mĭ fĭst. I dĭdn’t nōk  
hër ěntĭrlĭ thru the pānēls oŷ the dōr ; bŭt hër  
lāndĭng āgānst the dor mad a tĕrĭbl smāsh, ānd  
I hŭrt hër so hādly thāt aĭ wĕr frĭtēnd out ov  
thar wĭts, ānd I dĭdn’t no mĭsēlf bŭt thāt I’d  
kĭld the old dĕvĭl. 9

The title of the book celebrates this moment of victory, when Sylvia physically fights for her freedom against her Mistress and wins. Reading Sylvia’s story more closely, the events were slightly different. She fights her Mistress and runs away to New York, where she is called back by her Master, who gives her freedom and reunites her with her daughter. The image of Sylvia fighting for her freedom, however, is more

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<sup>8</sup> Fulton Minor, DoVeanna S., and Pitts, Reginald H., *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010) Page 27

<sup>9</sup> Larison, C.W., *Sylvia Dubois, A Biography of The Slav Who Whipt Her Mistres And Gand Her Fredom* Page 63

in keeping with the image she presents of herself, as she proves she is a woman who fights over and over again for justice. The text builds this up as a moment of bravery and victory, standing against a tyrant decidedly set against her.

This scene is closely examined by Fulton Minor and Pitts, who sought to discover the motivation between the violent relationship between Elizabeth and Sylvia. They draw on other criticism of the text, citing “Historian Marc Mappen suggests Dominicus Dubois was the father of the child, which would easily explain Elizabeth Dubois’s animosity toward Sylvia. Sylvia’s testimony supports this suspicion. She states, “I tried to please him, and he tried to please me; and we got along together pretty well.”<sup>10</sup> They even go so far as to say “Her actions intimate that not only did she refuse to accept Elizabeth’s abuse, she may have also rejected the secondary position Dominicus had assigned her.”<sup>11</sup> This perspective is highly problematic. Although it is possible that Judith, Sylvia’s first born, was the child of Dominicus Dubois, and they may have been having a sexual relationship, she was still enslaved.

Jared C. Lobdell worked on a timeline to establish Sylvia’s true age, as Larison claims she was 116 when the text was published. Lobdell dismisses this claim and works from the fact she was 14 when Dominicus moved to the Great Bend, and she describes walking the journey from Flagtown:

**out pásing á hous, or meting á pĕrsŭn. The  
wods was ful ōv bars, pánthĕrs, wild-cáts ánd  
the lik. About thes I hăd hĕrd á grat mĕny  
wild storĭs. So I mad shur tŕ kep mĕ coug  
prĕty clos tŕ the wăgŭns.** 12

Lobdell writes that if Sylvia “trekked to Great Bend when she was fourteen, then she was born in 1788/89.”<sup>13</sup> (a twenty-year disparity to Larison’s claim). Working from these dates, I calculate that Sylvia would be 32 years Dominicus’ junior, and roughly 15 when she would have fallen pregnant with Judith. The claims about her age undermine Sylvia’s integrity by disproving her statements and invalidating her experiences by suggesting she had autonomy during this period, even so far as to suggest she accepted Elizabeth’s repeated abuse to maintain her relationship with

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<sup>10</sup> Fulton Minor, DoVeanna S., and Pitts, Reginald H., *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, Page 24

<sup>11</sup> Fulton Minor, DoVeanna S., and Pitts, Reginald H., *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, Page 25

<sup>12</sup> Larison, C.W., *Sylvia Dubois, A Biography of The Slav Who Whipt Her Mistres And Gand Her Freedom*, Page 49

<sup>13</sup> Larison, C.W., *Sylvia Dubois, A Biography of The Slav Who Whipt Her Mistres And Gand Her Freedom*, Page 8

Minna. When discussing the relationship between Dominicus and Sylvia, I do not believe consent can be considered, and for Sylvia it would have likely been a situation of survival, not fondness. Pitts and Fulton Minor's suggestion that Sylvia fought Elizabeth for Dominicus' affection seems to be trivialising Sylvia's her vulnerability in a household she had been a part of since she was five, as she is selected by the Master and beaten by the Mistress. This is romanticising of a relationship she would have had little to no control over, ending with her being given her daughter and freedom and being told to leave.

Lobdell works closely with the text, trying to authenticate it as a historical document, as Larison had initially intended. He points at her age, and the story of Richard Compton as reasons why Sylvia is an unreliable narrator, he suggests more so than her advanced age would cause. To confirm her age, Larison tells a small story of how Sylvia and Richard Compton were both nursed by Sylvia's mother, Dorcas:

ladŷ, ĩnforms me, thāt sēvērāl old foks used tō  
tēl hēr hwēn ā gĭrl, thāt hēr Uncl Rĭehārd ānd  
Sĭlvĭā Dubois, wēr ābout ōv thē sam āg ; thāt  
thā hād sen both Rĭehārd ānd Sĭlvĭā nŭrs thē  
sam mŭthēr āt thē sam tim ; ānd thāt her<sup>14</sup>

Lobdell dismisses this story and highlights it as a point of the tale's inaccuracy, identifying that "Indeed, it would appear that the very tradition itself is suspicious: the birth of a black baby and a white baby at about (or exactly) the same time, both of them nursed by the black mother, is a common motif in folklore and literature"<sup>15</sup>. Although the nature of segregation makes this highly believable, there is something to be questioned here. Emily West looks at the use of slave wet nurses by masters when it comes to white and slave children: "Because the extent of wet-nursing under slavery is hard to quantify, historians have tended to define its use in the South as fairly unusual and to maintain that its significance is hard to evaluate. [...] McMillen concludes that about one-fifth of white women relied on female domestic slaves for wet-nursing"<sup>16</sup>. She goes on to outline McMillen's view that the sharing of breastfeeding bridged a gap in segregation, unifying women in child rearing, but West disagrees with this. She qualifies this as a new form of abuse, with some

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<sup>14</sup> Larison, C.W., *Sylvia Dubois, A Biography of The Slav Who Whipt Her Mistres And Gand Her Freedom* Page 84

<sup>15</sup> Larison, C.W., *Sylvia Dubois, A Biography of The Slav Who Whipt Her Mistres And Gand Her Freedom*, Page 8

<sup>16</sup> West, E, & Knight, RJ, 'Mothers' Milk: Slavery, Wet-Nursing, and Black and White Women in the Antebellum South', *Journal of Southern History*, vol. 83, no. 1, 2017. [pp. 37-68.] Page 42



mothers separated from their new-borns to feed the white family's child, leaving their child malnourished or starving if the mother could not feed two babies. In a way, Sylvia's abuse has been used as a point to discredit her interviews and her biography.

In conclusion although Larison attempts to control the text using the alternative phonetic alphabet, and curbing Sylvia's sections with long winded descriptions about the area or the authenticity, Sylvia maintains her presence, her authority and her integrity in the text. Though earlier criticism may question her reliability, such as Lobdell, or shift responsibilities and movies, such as Fulton Minor and Pitts, Sylvia's story, her character and her language remain. Sylvia's power in these interviews is enough to make this text her own, even being surrounded by a separate narrative.

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