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Jacobs's *Incident in the
Life of a Slave Girl***

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Negotiation of Sentimental and Abolitionist Traditions in Harriet Jacobs's *Incident in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Harriet Jacobs's autobiographical narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* offers invaluable insight into the specific position of female slaves in antebellum United States. However, the importance of the text does not rest solely on its historical value. It is first and foremost a narrative, and not only the story itself, but the way the story is told, is what differentiates Jacobs's text firstly from those focused on male slaves, and secondly from those written by white abolitionists. Thus, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* becomes a means of negotiation between various facets of the narrator's identity and what the society expects of her, according to the dominant social views on femininity and chastity. Moreover, Jacobs's text, through (and in spite of) both sentimental and abolitionist writing, tries to maneuver the narrator's position as regards her white, free, northern, female audience. By focusing on her experiences of womanhood and motherhood, Jacobs seemingly relies on the white female readers' sympathy, but ultimately rejects the kind of identification which would be based on the shared idea of "true womanhood". By doing so, Jacobs points to the necessity of a deeper, intersectional understanding of slave women's sufferings, and not one based solely on the sentimental notions of moral sympathy and sympathetic identification.

KEYWORDS

slave narrative, women's writing, "true womanhood", identity, sympathetic identification

Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* offers invaluable insight into the specific position of female slaves in *antebellum* United States. However, the importance of the text does not rest solely on its historical value. Not only the story itself, but *the way the story is told*, is what differentiates Jacobs's text firstly from those focused on male slaves, and secondly from those written by white female abolitionists. Thus, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* becomes a means of negotiation between various facets of the narrator's identity and what the society expects of her, according to the dominant social views on femininity. Moreover, Jacobs's text, through (and in spite of) both sentimental and abolitionist writing, tries to maneuver the narrator's position as regards her white, free, northern, female audience.

When approaching Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, one ought to keep in mind the existing literary tradition that inevitably informed the creation of her narrative. As Sherman explains, "[g]ender directly shapes Jacobs's experience both as a slave and as a free woman; moreover, gender shapes the conventions available for her interpretations of these experiences" (168). The two literary traditions proposed by Nudelman are abolitionist writings and sentimental novels, since she interprets Jacobs's narrative as a negotiation and re-invention of both of these two literary modes:

The text's cultural significance lies neither in Jacobs's acquiescence to social and literary standards nor in her defiant rejection of them but in her restless movement between styles of address. Caught between a domestic ideology that relies on female sexual purity and an abolitionist discourse that insistently publicizes the sexual victimization of slave women, Jacobs is peculiarly able to elaborate on their interrelatedness, the ways they concur and conflict, and their particular limitations for the narration of black female experience. (942)

This "interrelatedness" Nudelman refers to brings to mind the modern-day notion of intersectional feminism. According to Ross Sheriff and Samuels, "intersectionality enables us to stretch our thinking about gender and feminism to include the impact of context and to pay attention to interlocking oppressions and privileges across various contexts" (5). Thus, a link is formed between a nineteenth century author and a late twentieth century analytical framework – from Ross Sheriff's and Samuels's description, it could be posited that Jacobs's text ought to be approached as a precursor of today's intersectional feminist thought. The very title of the book points to the fact that, however appalling any slave's experience must be, the incidents which could occur in the life of a female slave are, in certain aspects, irrefutably different from those of male slaves. It is also

interesting to note that in the title of her narrative, Jacobs fashions herself as a "slave girl", not as a "slave woman". This decision can be attributed to an editorial intervention, or merely to the social norms of address of the time. But it is precisely her identity as a young black woman in slavery that ultimately guides the narrative. Even with particular chapter titles, such as "The Trials of Girlhood" or "A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl's Life", Jacobs points to the fact that her youth is another important aspect of her identity. "But now I enter on my fifteenth year – a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl", writes Jacobs, and brings the readers' attention to the fact that for women in slavery, adolescence is a far more dangerous rite of passage than it is for white women (27).

The different facets of her identity (gender, race, age, motherhood) that leave Linda Brent (Jacobs's pseudonym in the narrative) vulnerable to the system of slavery are explicitly stated in the narrative multiple times, sometimes through pleas for understanding and sympathy, at other times through righteous indignation. But even as she uses both, the sentimental and the abolitionist literary tradition, Jacobs "refigures the sympathetic model in a way that shows how *contextual* identities are" (Nelson 142). The mere fact that she has shared her suffering does not give the (white, northern, female) readers the right to claim they understand what it is like to have lived through those experiences. As Nelson points out, self-serving and uncritical sympathy "assumes *sameness* in a way that can prevent an understanding of the very real, material *differences* that structure human experience in a society based upon unequal distribution of power" (142).

One could claim that power (and the lack thereof) is the key motif of the text, one that helps Linda negotiate genteel notions of femininity and her own slave status. Linda's position is precarious in that she has none of the protection offered to free white women in exchange for their chastity but is still held to (and holds herself to) these notions in a social structure which renders them obsolete. She is supposed to be an example of what Barbara Welter calls "True Womanhood", a mode of being characterized by "four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (152). It is interesting to note that all of these attributes are in some way part of her grandmother Martha's personality and worldviews. As Sherman explains, "Martha in many ways is a model of womanly strength and integrity. A capable, devout Christian, she has earned the respect of her community, black and white" (171). But, as the narrative regularly reminds us, Linda's grandmother Martha is a free woman. She is able to enjoy domesticity and hold on to her purity and piety in a way that is, as Jacobs suggests, untenable for women in slavery:

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 about to relate; but all my prospects had been blighted by slavery. *I wanted to keep myself pure*; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to persevere my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me. I felt as if I was *forsaken by God* and man; as if all my efforts must be frustrated; and I became reckless in my despair. (54, emphasis mine)

Linda ultimately has to accept the fact that the notions of chastity promoted under the Cult of True Womanhood are simply not viable in her position.

It is interesting to observe how Linda as the protagonist (and Jacobs as the writer) negotiates this moral qualm. On the one hand, Linda feels "wretched" (Jacobs 56) about having to confess that she had "degraded herself" (Jacobs 56), and cries "bitter tears, such as the eyes never shed but once" (Jacobs 57). This corresponds to the tenets of True Womanhood, wherein "to contemplate the loss of purity brought tears; to be guilty of such a crime, in the women's magazines at least, brought madness or death" (Welter 154). On the other hand, she refuses to be shamed by Dr Flint and maintains that by entering a sexual relationship with another man she has done her utmost to thwart the sexual harassment of her master (Jacobs 55). "I have sinned against God and myself ... but not against you," replies Linda to Dr Flint's accusations that she has wronged him by choosing Mr Sands as her sexual partner (Jacobs 58). Linda feels pride over the fact that she "*triumphed* over her tyrant even in that small way" (Jacobs 55, emphasis mine) – even while exhibiting greater sexual agency, she is still bound by the social mores of True Womanhood, for as Welter claims, "[i]f, however, a woman managed to withstand man's assaults on her virtue, she demonstrated her superiority and her power over him." (156). Power is only attainable for Linda through defiance of genteel mores of female behavior, and the creation of new ones.

For Linda to achieve the kind of agency she seeks, a new sort of sexual moral standard must be created, one that functions as a reaction to and in opposition to the sexual harassment she is subjected to by her master. According to Sherman, in doing so, Jacobs (although possibly not intentionally) points to real moral values: "[w]hat Brent seems reluctant to say, perhaps for fear of alienating her audience, is that if slavery renders

the practice of morality impossible, far from confusing all principles of morality, it may actually clarify them. Under pressure, the genuinely ethical stands out from the merely conventional." (172). Although Sherman's assertion may seem somewhat bold (for how does one unequivocally prove that terrible suffering leads to ethical clarity?), within the context of this particular narrative, it could be posited that some "genuinely ethical" sentiments *are* brought to light. Moreover, what perseveres as an emotional and moral constant – her unwavering devotion to her children – is brought about precisely because of Linda's breach of all norms of propriety. In fact, Li points out that it is motherhood that effectively gives Linda the strength to fight for freedom:

By fashioning a literary persona who is defined almost exclusively by her maternal identity, Jacobs rejects the materialist logic of human ownership. Maternal love is shown to offer a model of relations that opposes the economy of exchange and possession characterizing the *antebellum* system of human bondage. Converting her body and reproductive abilities from sites of exploitation to vehicles of resistance, Linda undermines the authority of the slave master and works to liberate her children. (15)

Furthermore, Li claims that motherhood is the key sympathetic device through which Jacobs is able to reach and move her white, northern, middle-class readership (17).

However, their shared sentiments of motherly affection do not automatically erase the differences between mothers in bondage and free white women. As Nelson points out, there is an underlying danger in the notion of the shared "essence" of womanhood and motherhood which seeks to annul the radically different circumstances and conditions in which these women live (141). Jacobs's narrative, in Nelson's words, "challenges essential constructions of womanhood" (141). While retelling the suffering of a mother being torn from her children on New Year's Day auction because they had been sold to a different master, Jacobs directly addressed free white mothers. "O, you happy free women, contrast your New Year's Day with that of the poor bond-woman," she writes, simultaneously pointing to their shared identity as mothers and the impossibility of equating their experiences of motherhood (Jacobs 16). Here again we see the intertwining of abolitionist style (in which northern readers are urged to contemplate on the horrors of slavery) and sentimental writing (which aims to excite sympathy in readers through motifs such as loss of virtue and motherhood). As Nudelman writes, "descriptions of the defiled slave girl and the bereft slave mother" (941) were crucial for abolitionist writers:

Because their own authority was founded on the proposed preservation of sexual purity and the dissemination of domestic values, white female abolitionists often took the sexual and maternal suffering of the female slave as their object. By showing that slavery entailed the sexual abuse of black women and the fragmentation of the black family, they could at once condemn slavery and extend the sexual and domestic values they were entrusted to protect. (Nudelman 941)

Although Jacobs's narrative is perhaps most readily compared to works written by white female abolitionists (such as Lydia Maria Child, the editor of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, or Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of the abolitionist novel contemporary readers are best acquainted with, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), one ought also to place it alongside male slave narratives. Gomaa cites from Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom and Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* in order to point to the fact that "the slave body was used in abolitionist discourse as the site/sight of pain" (371). "Sentimentalizing pain", as Gomaa phrases it, was therefore not a practice exclusively linked to the representation of female slaves – the terribly scarred body of the male slave corresponded to the irrevocably tarnished chastity of the sexually molested female slave (371). However, the (re)presentational tactics inevitably differed – while similarly circumspect and apologetic in narrating such experiences, the scars on Douglass's back were freely presented to white northern audiences, while no such spectacle could be made to physically and publicly point to a woman's loss of virtue (Gomaa 371). "Spectacle" therefore becomes both the key term denoting the lived experience of an escaped male slave, as well something to be carefully managed and maneuvered in a writing a female slave's narrative. As Gomaa points out,

Antislavery discourse treated pain as a phenomenon that required interpretation and intervention – but it did not ascribe the role of the interpreter to the sufferer. Pain had a cultural meaning determined by the limits (i.e. who gets to do the interpretative work) and excesses (the fascination with spectacle) of its representation. On one hand, the abolitionists' attitude towards pain as preventable made significant impact on the progress of human rights discourse in the United States... On the other hand, the spectacle of pain also implied objectifying the sufferer by assigning the interpretative work to the viewers of the spectacle. (380)

Jacobs, however, negotiates this fascination with the spectacle of pain and asserts her interpretation of her own experiences: "[u]nlike the middle-class white authors' engaging narrators, Jacobs's narrator draws a line which the narratee may not cross in identifying with the narrator/protagonist." (Warhol 64). The narrator in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave*

Girl seeks the readers' sympathy, but there is a caveat – the readers are warned to be “careful about the motives and critical of the results of that sympathetic identification” (Nelson 142). This distinct mode of narration which eludes and rejects white northern identification becomes even more visible upon Linda's escape from the slaveholding south. Regardless of the fact that she has physically removed herself from the vicinity of her master, Linda is still chained up in the institution of slavery; and when she escapes to the north, she is faced with the fact that she is only “as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the north” (Jacobs 201). Moreover, it is important to take note of the “bittersweet” ending, in which Linda finally gains her freedom, but only because she was bought without her knowledge or consent by her employer, the second Mrs Bruce (Sherman 183). Linda is free, but the ideal of peaceful domesticity is still unattainable to her, for she has exchanged slavery and sexual harassment in the south for servitude and benevolent patronage in the north:

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 the 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. (Jacobs 201)

Here, in the penultimate paragraph of Jacobs's narrative, it becomes clear that however fortunate she herself may have been, so long as “her oppressed people” have to rely on the “pity” of white benefactors and readers and hope for them to “bestow the inestimable boon of freedom” on them, the sympathetic reader does not have the right to “assume sameness between Afro and Anglo Americans” (Nelson 145).

Harriet Jacobs's narrative is indubitably informed not only by two contending but nevertheless interwoven literary traditions, but also by her own position towards her middle-class white female audience and their ability to sympathize with her plights. By openly writing about sexual transgressions deemed deeply improper by the Cult of True Womanhood, Jacobs tries to create a space which would allow for a contextualization of social and sexual mores and acknowledge the inherent unfairness of subjecting free and bound women to the same standards. Another point of contention is the notion of motherhood, which serves to awaken a sense of humanity and tender feelings which is assumed to be shared by all women, but which must also be considered in the context of the situation a certain mother is placed in by society. A slave woman's narrative is

also placed in comparison to that of a male slave, as they are united by the abolitionist sentimental approach which makes a spectacle of their pain so as to incite sympathy. By taking up the interpretative work of her own narrative, Harriet Jacobs does not necessarily reject the abolitionist discourse, nor does she negate the cultural significance of the sentimental writing. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* negotiates and shifts the social underpinnings and narrative norms behind these literary modes, but, it could be posited, not in a radical fashion. What does make narratives like Jacobs's radical, however, is the fact that they enable escaped slave women to take control in shaping the story. Rather than being an object to be bought and sold in the south, or a spectacle to be gawked at in the north, through the pseudonym *Linda Brent* Jacobs becomes an interpreter of her own experiences. She asserts herself as the storyteller of her own distinct pains and losses. This is visible most clearly in the way she instructs her readers to extend their sympathy, but not their complete identification – for that would shift the position of the interpreter back into free, white, northern hands, and that is something Jacobs refuses to do. Even in her final passages, she distinctly separates herself, a free but ultimately relatively powerless former “slave girl”, from her benefactor, a woman with enough social, legal and economic protection to grant freedom to Jacobs and her children. In pointing out this difference in their positions, she reclaims some of her power, even if Mrs Bruce is the one who freed her – for it is ultimately Harriet Jacobs who wields the power to tell her own story.

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