

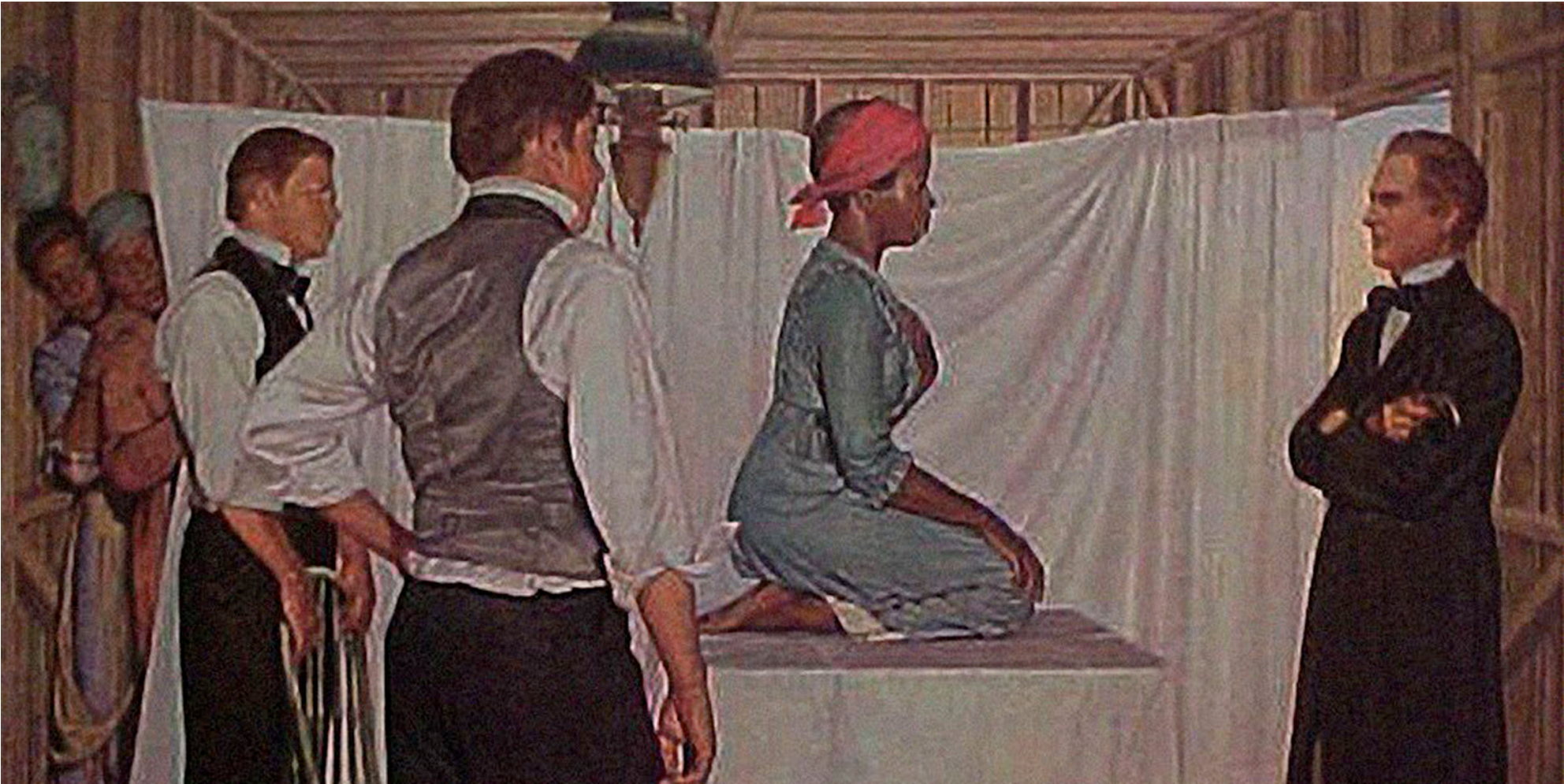
# Representing the Freedom Fighter as a Woman

Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*





Robert Thom, *J. Marion Sims: Gynecologic Surgeon*, from "The History of Medicine", 1952





# The Slave Mother in Pro-Slavery Discourse and Abolitionist Propaganda

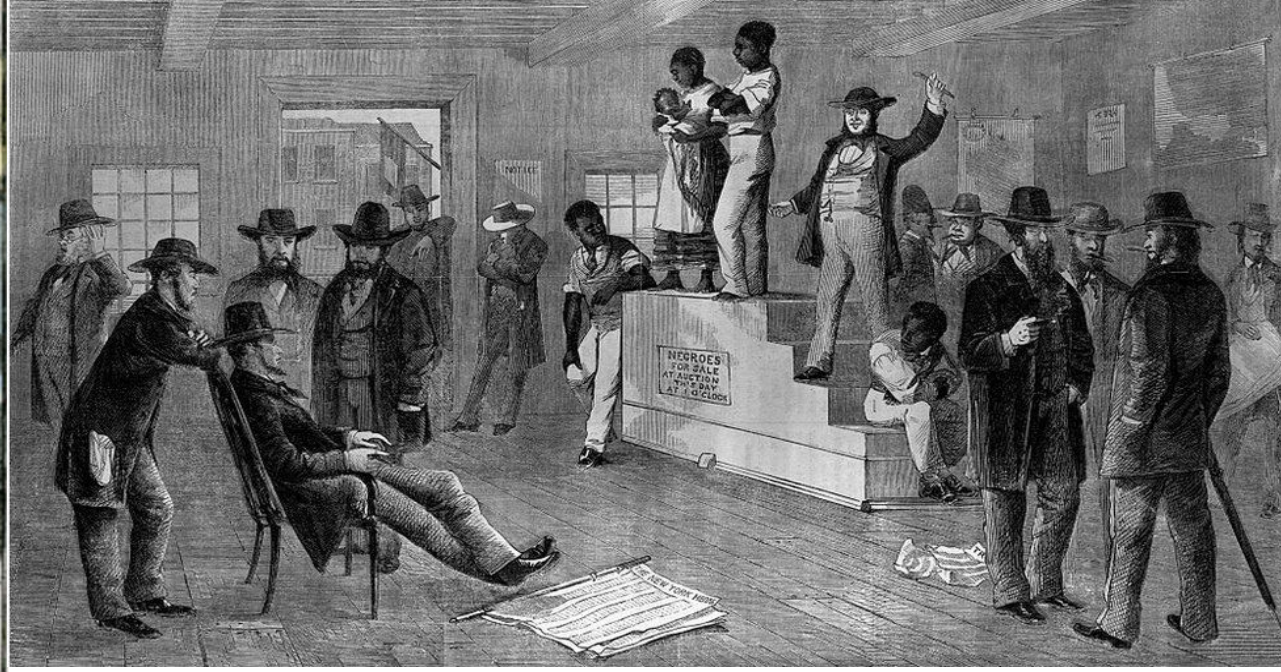
In the Southern discourse in defense of slavery black women were both hypersexualized and degenerated. Used as labor force in the fields, just like male slaves, they were portrayed as primitive beings, animalistic creatures that lacked the deep bond of affection for their offspring characterizing white motherhood, and could be separated from their children without problems. They were represented as hypersexual females and mere breeders, but also as «natural» nurturers when needed as nannies. The mammy became an icon of Southern identity signalling nostalgia for the past in the post-slavery era. «In 1923, a group of white women wanted to build what they called a “monument to the faithful colored mammies” in Washington. These women, members of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, pressed lawmakers in Congress to introduce a bill. The Senate passed it, but the bill stalled in the House after fierce opposition from black women, including Mary Church Terrell and Hallie Quinn Brown, members of the National Association of Colored Women.” Alison Parker, *New York Times*, February 2020

The representation of enslaved motherhood in abolitionist literature aimed at awakening sentimental empathy in white women and so focused on the separation of families, physical abuse and victimized bodies. They were never thought of as fighters in the struggle against slavery.





# The Slave Mother in Abolitionist Propaganda







### SELLING A MOTHER FROM HER CHILD.

“ ‘Do you *often* buy the wife without the husband?’ ‘Yes, *very often*; and *frequently*, too, they sell me the mother while they keep her children. I have often known them take away the infant from its mother’s breast, and keep it, while they sold her.’ ”—*Prof. Andrews, late of the University of N. C., in his recent work on Slavery and the Slave-Trade, p. 147, relates the foregoing conversation with a slave-trader on the Potomac.*



## REFLECTIONS ON THE BLACK WOMAN'S ROLE IN THE COMMUNITY OF SLAVES

*Angela Davis*

*The Massachusetts Review*

[Vol. 13, No. 1/2, Woman: An Issue \(Winter -  
Spring, 1972\)](#), pp. 81-100



The matriarchal black woman has been repeatedly invoked as one of the fatal by-products of slavery. When the Moynihan Report consecrated this myth with Washington's stamp of approval, its spurious content and propagandistic mission should have become apparent. Yet even outside the established ideological apparatus, and also among black people, unfortunate references to the matriarchate can still be encountered. Occasionally, there is even acknowledgement of the "tangle of pathology" it supposedly engendered. (This black matriarchate, according to Moynihan *et al.* defines the roots of our oppression as a people.) An accurate portrait of the African woman in bondage must debunk the myth of the matriarchate. Such a portrait must simultaneously attempt to illuminate the historical matrix of her oppression and must evoke her varied, often heroic, responses to the slaveholder's domination.

Lingering beneath the notion of the black matriarch is an unspoken indictment of our female forebears as having actively assented to slavery. The notorious cliché, the "emasculating female," has its roots in the fallacious inference that in playing a central part in the slave "family," the black woman related to the slaveholding class as collaborator. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the most fundamental sense, the slave system did not—and could not—engender and recognize a matriarchal family structure. Inherent in the very concept of the matriarchy is "power." It would have been exceedingly risky for the slaveholding class to openly acknowledge symbols of authority—female symbols no less than male. Such legitimized concentrations of authority might eventually unleash their "power" against the slave system itself.

Even the broadest construction of the matriarch concept would not render it applicable to the black slave woman. But it should not be inferred that she therefore played no significant role in the community of slaves. Her indispensable efforts to ensure the survival of her people can hardly be contested. Even if she had done no more, her deeds would still be laudable. 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.



But with the black slave woman, there is a strange twist of affairs: in the infinite anguish of ministering to the needs of the men and children around her (who were not necessarily members of her immediate family), she was performing the *only* labor of the slave community which could not be directly and immediately claimed by the oppressor. There was no compensation for work in the fields; it served no useful purpose for the slaves. Domestic labor was the only meaningful labor for the slave community as a whole (discounting as negligible the exceptional situations where slaves received some pay for their work).

Precisely through performing the drudgery which has long been a central expression of the socially conditioned inferiority of women, the black woman in chains could help to lay the foundation for some degree of autonomy, both for herself and her men. Even as she was suffering under her unique oppression as female, she was thrust by the force of circumstances into the center of the slave community. She was, therefore, essential to the *survival* of the community. Not all people have survived enslavement; hence her survival-oriented activities were themselves a form of resistance. Survival, moreover, was the prerequisite of all higher levels of struggle.

But much more remains to be said of the black woman during slavery. The dialectics of her oppression will become far more complex. It is true that she was a victim of the myth that only the woman, with her diminished capacity for mental and physical labor, should do degrading household work. Yet, the alleged benefits of the ideology of femininity did not accrue to her. She was not sheltered or protected; she would not remain oblivious to the desperate struggle for existence unfolding outside the "home." She was also there in the fields, alongside the man, toiling under the lash from sun-up to sun-down.

This was one of the supreme ironies of slavery: in order to approach its strategic goal—to extract the greatest possible surplus from the labor of the slaves—the black woman had to be released from the chains of the myth of femininity. In the words of W.E.B. Du Bois, ". . . our women in black had freedom contemptuously thrust upon them."<sup>8</sup> In order to function as slave, the black woman had to be annulled as woman, that is, as woman in her historical stance of wardship under the entire male hierarchy. The sheer force of things rendered her equal to her man.



Even before the *Roots* phenomenon, maybe even before the forceful presentations of writers and scholars such as Arna Bontemps, Charles Nichols, Eugene Genovese, and John Blassingame, the watermelon loving, dancing and singing, docile and dull Sambo image had been pretty well abandoned. Not only do many Americans now know of Frederick Douglass, Richard Allen, and George Washington Carver, but they embrace these outstanding achievers along with Kunte Kinte and Chicken George as examples of the heroic spirits once enslaved. Mention the slave woman, however, and noble images fade. They see her as victim—to be pitied, perhaps—but neither respected nor emulated. In the popular imagination, she stands on the auction block, nameless, stripped to the waist, her infant just sold from her arms, waiting to be claimed by yet another licentious master. Phillis Wheatley, Vyry, and Miss Jane Pittman notwithstanding, the common association of slave women is with fornication. From *Clotel* to *Kizzy*, our most frequent images of slave women are as victims of illicit sexual intercourse and as childless mothers.

"IN RESPECT TO FEMALES . . .": DIFFERENCES IN THE  
PORTRAYALS OF WOMEN BY MALE AND FEMALE NARRATORS

FRANCES FOSTER

A second reason for the tenacity of the image of the slave woman as sexual victim is the slave narratives. Widely accepted as being, if not the slave's own true story of slavery, at least the versions of slave life most sympathetic to the slaves, most slave narratives stereotyped slave women as sexually exploited beings. Most slave narratives, however, were related by men. Narratives by slave women present a significantly different perception of slave women. It is this discrepancy which has not been duly noted, and it is this neglect of slave women's versions of their lives that is a basic reason for the perpetuation of the current and inadequate image of women slaves.

There is no reason to believe that male narrators deliberately set out to demean or to misrepresent slave women. Both social attitudes toward women and literary conventions made the distortion of slave women probable in narratives that featured male protagonists.



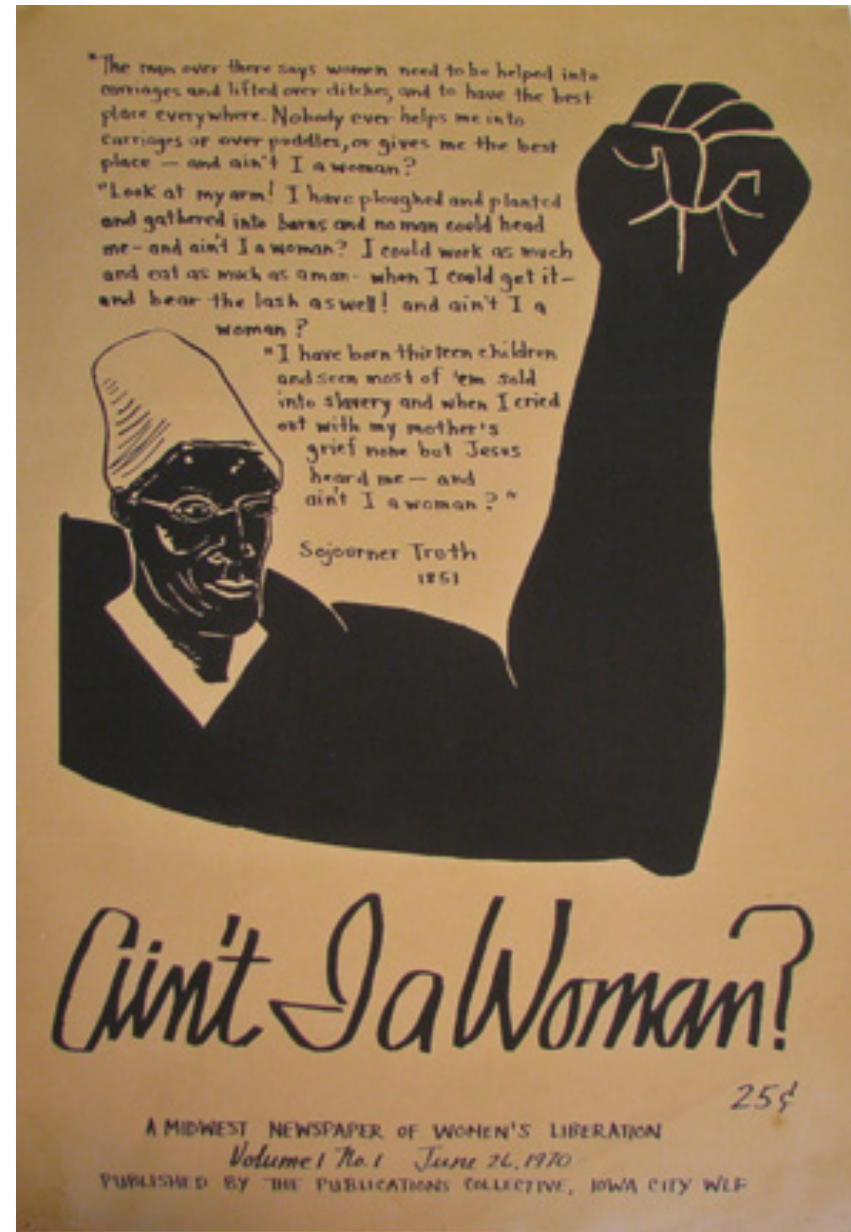
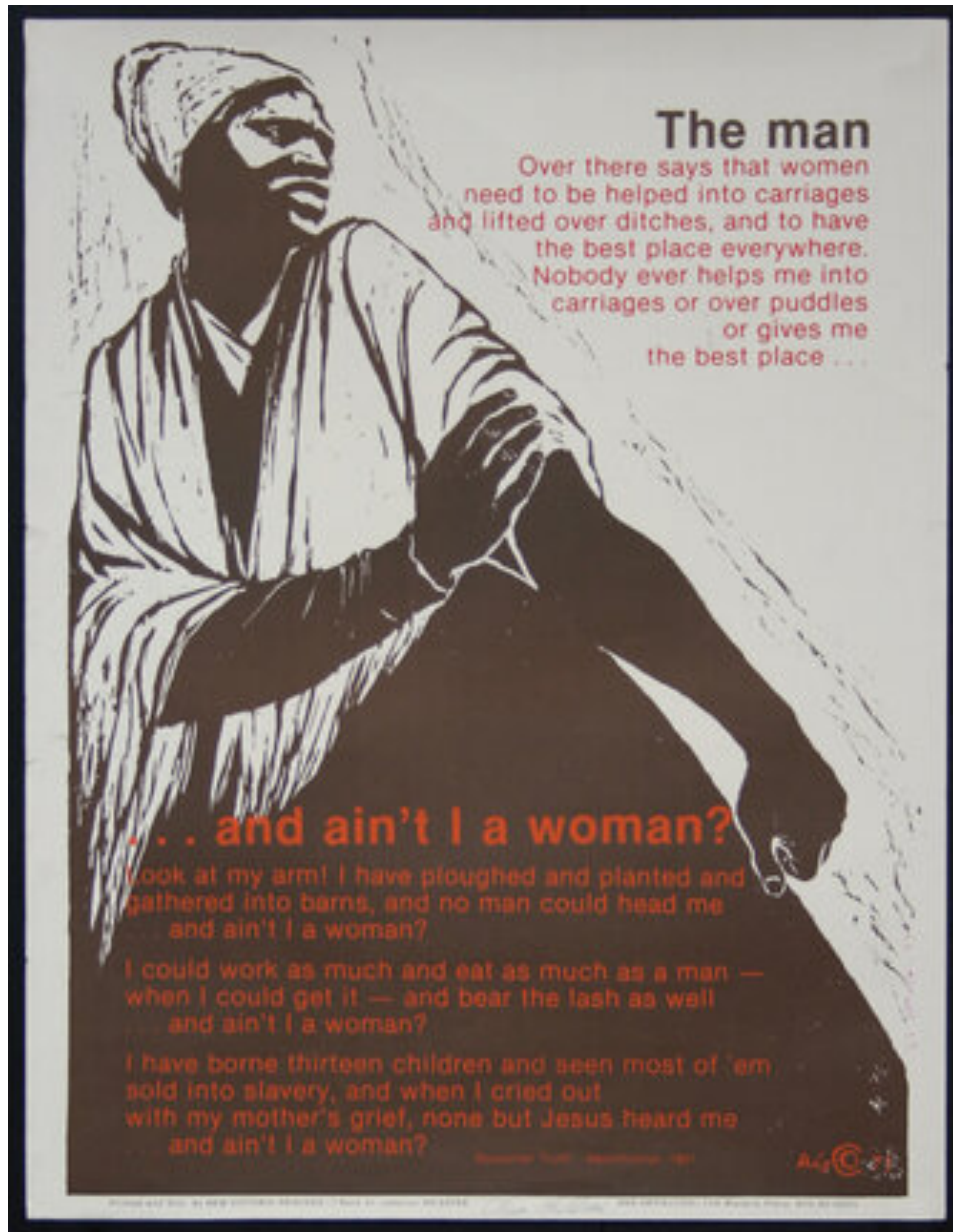
Moreover, black men shared the nineteenth century's predilection for defining women in terms of manners, morals, and motherhood and for limiting the female protagonist to the genteel writing designed for the woman reader. Few male slave narrators appear to notice that their pictures of slavery were largely masculine. One who did is revealing. Says Moses Roper, "It will be observed, that most of the cases here cited are those in respect to males. Many instances, however, in respect to females might be mentioned, but are too disgusting to appear in this narrative."<sup>1</sup> Roper, like most male narrators, refers to slave women en masse as "the females" or "the women" and presents slave women primarily as examples of the extremes of the depravity to which slaveholders descended and of the degradation to which black men, through their inability to protect and to provide, were forced.

The switch in characterization of slave women from passive victims to heroic actors is partly due to the fact that slave women are protagonists and thus expected to exhibit more complex and positive traits and to engage in a greater variety of experiences than when all women are secondary characters. However, slave women's narratives also present more positive images of secondary female characters, devote more discussion to familial relationships, and rely less upon litanies of beatings and mutilations of other slaves. This seems to indicate a subtle difference in the values of male and female slave narrators. Male narrators interpret as supplements to their own experiences that which they saw and deemed significant of other slaves' experiences as a means of enhancing their descriptions of the crippling power of slavery. Female narrators present those incidents that most affected their development, those experiences that in Keckley's words "influenced the moulding of my character" (p. 18), and by implication or direct statement, they extend their positive characteristics to other slaves. Rather than elaborating upon the weight of their oppression, the women emphasize the sources of the strength with which they met that force.





Born into slavery in 1797, Isabella Baumfree, who later changed her name to Sojourner Truth, would become one of the most powerful advocates for human rights in the nineteenth century. Her early childhood was spent on a New York estate owned by a Dutch American named Colonel Johannes Hardenbergh. In 1827, after her master failed to honor his promise to free her or to uphold the New York Anti-Slavery Law of 1827, Isabella ran away, or, as she later informed her master, "I did not run away, I walked away by daylight..." After experiencing a religious conversion, she became an itinerant preacher and in 1843 changed her name to Sojourner Truth. During this period she became involved in the growing antislavery movement, and by the 1850s she was involved in the woman's rights movement as well. At the 1851 Women's Rights Convention held in Akron, Ohio, Sojourner Truth delivered what is now recognized as one of the most famous abolitionist and women's rights speeches in American history, "Ain't I a Woman?" She continued to speak out for the rights of African Americans and women during and after the Civil War.





## \$100 REWARD

**W**ILL be given for the apprehension and delivery of my Servant Girl **HARRIET**. She is a light mulatto, 21 years of age, about 5 feet 4 inches high, of a thick and corpulent habit, having on her head a thick covering of black hair that curls naturally, but which can be easily combed straight. She speaks easily and fluently, and has an agreeable carriage and address. Being a good seamstress, she has been accustomed to dress well, has a variety of very fine clothes, made in the prevailing fashion, and will probably appear, if abroad, tricked out in gay and fashionable finery. As this girl absconded from the plantation of my son without any known cause or provocation, it is probable she designs to transport herself to the North.

The above reward, with all reasonable charges, will be given for apprehending her, or securing her in any prison or jail within the U. States.

All persons are hereby forewarned against harboring or entertaining her, or being in any way instrumental in her escape, under the most rigorous penalties of the law.

**JAMES NORCOM.**

Edenton, N. C. June 30

ST22W

**HARRIET A. JACOBS**

**VITA DI UNA RAGAZZA SCHIAVA**

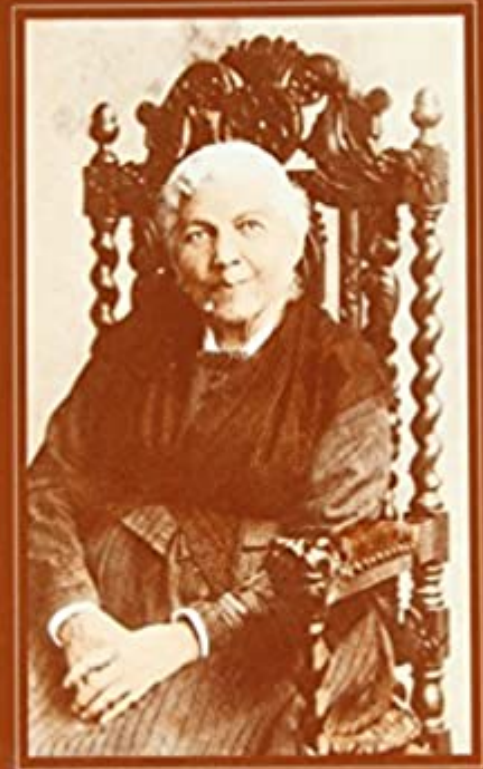
RACCONTATA DA LEI MEDESIMA



**DE** NARRATIVA DONZELLI

## INCIDENTS IN THE *Life of a Slave Girl*

*Written by Herself*



*Harriet A. Jacobs*

EDITED BY JEAN FAGAN YELLIN

## The difficult textual history of Harriet Jacobs's *Linda, or Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

1842: after nearly 7 years in hiding, H. Jacobs escaped to the North. She settled in Brooklyn, New York, where she made contact with her daughter and found work as a nursemaid with the Parker Willis family.

1844: she fled to Boston upon knowing that Dr. Norcom was traveling to New York after her.

1845: She accompanied Mr. Willis, whose wife had died, to England to take care of his daughter.

1848: she moved to Rochester to join her brother John, a lecturer for the abolitionist movement, and became an activist in the fight for the abolition of slavery. Asked to tell her story in public, however, she refused. As she later explained, "I felt that I could not be honest and tell the whole truth."

1849: she lived for 9 months in the house of Quaker feminist and abolitionist Amy Post. They became close friends and Jacobs told her story to Post, who urged her to make it public. Her writing skills kept improving and she started to feel more confident about her knowledge of grammar and syntax.

1852: Still chased by her mistress and her husband, she finally accepted Mrs Willis's offer to buy her freedom for 300 dollars. The new condition probably had an influence on her decision to see her story in print. A white editor attesting to the story's veracity was needed. She contacted Harriet Beecher Stowe who said that, if the story was true, she would use it in her forthcoming work, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but Jacobs refused.

1859: she finally found a publisher willing to print the manuscript if she could provide an introduction by Lydia Maria Child. Child agreed and also did a minimum of editing on the manuscript.

1860: The publisher went bankrupt and Jacobs bought the book's plates so as to have it published "for the author" by a printer.

1861: the book was finally published anonymously.

1981: Even though Jacobs's contemporaries were well aware that she was the author of *Linda*, most scholars doubted that it was a true slave narrative and/or believed that Child's role was much more important than stated, until Jean Fagan Yellin was able to authenticate Jacobs's authorship thanks to the Amy Post archive at the University of Rochester



NARRATIVE  
OF THE  
LIFE  
OF  
FREDERICK DOUGLASS,  
AN  
AMERICAN SLAVE.

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WRITTEN BY HIMSELF.

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BOSTON:  
PUBLISHED AT THE ANTI-SLAVERY OFFICE,  
No. 25 CORNHILL  
1845.

INCIDENTS  
IN THE  
LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL.

WRITTEN BY HERSELF.

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"Northerners know nothing at all about Slavery. They think it is perpetual  
bondage only. They have no conception of the depth of degradation involved  
by that word, Slavery; if they had, they would never cease their efforts until  
an insupportable system was overthrown." A WOMAN OF BOSTON COURAGE.

"Sitte up, ye women that are at ease! Hear my voice, ye careless daughters!  
Give ear unto my speech." JACOB EARL, S.

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EDITED BY L. MARIA CHILD.

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BOSTON:  
PUBLISHED FOR THE AUTHOR.  
1861.



“Northerners know nothing at all about Slavery. They think it is perpetual bondage only. They have no conception of the depth of *degradation* involved in that word, SLAVERY; if they had, they would never cease their efforts until so horrible a system was overthrown.”

A WOMAN OF NORTH CAROLINA.<sup>2</sup>

“Rise up, ye women that are at ease! Hear my voice, ye careless daughters! Give ear unto my speech.”

ISAIAH xxxii.9.<sup>3</sup>

## *Preface by the Author*

READER, BE ASSURED THIS narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true. I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary, my descriptions fall far short of the facts. I have concealed the names of places, and given persons fictitious names. I had no motive for secrecy on my own account, but I deemed it kind and considerate towards others to pursue this course.

I wish I were more competent to the task I have undertaken. But I trust my readers will excuse deficiencies in consideration of circumstances. I was born and reared in Slavery; and I remained in a Slave State twenty-seven years. Since I have been at the North, it has been necessary for me to work diligently for my own support, and the education of my children. This has not left me much leisure to make up for the loss of early opportunities to improve myself; and it has compelled me to write these pages at irregular intervals, whenever I could snatch an hour from household duties.



11010 00115.

When I first arrived in Philadelphia, Bishop Paine<sup>4</sup> advised me to publish a sketch of my life, but I told him I was altogether incompetent to such an undertaking. Though I have improved my mind somewhat since that time, I still remain of the same opinion; but I trust my motives will excuse what might otherwise seem presumptuous. 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. Neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings. But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is. Only by experience can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations. May the blessing of God rest on this imperfect effort in behalf of my persecuted people!

LINDA BRENT

THE AUTHOR OF THE following autobiography is personally known to me, and her conversation and manners inspire me with confidence. During the last seventeen years, she has lived the greater part of the time with a distinguished family in New York,<sup>5</sup> and has so deported herself as to be highly esteemed by them. This fact is sufficient, without further credentials of her character. I believe those who know her will not be disposed to doubt her veracity, though some incidents in her story are more romantic than fiction.

At her request, I have revised her manuscript; but such changes as I have made have been mainly for purposes of condensation and orderly arrangement. I have not added any thing to the incidents, or changed the import of her very pertinent remarks. With trifling exceptions, both the ideas and the language are her own. I pruned excrescences a little, but otherwise I had no reason for changing her lively and dramatic way of telling her own story. The names of both persons and places are known to me; but for good reasons I suppress them.

I am well aware that many will accuse me of indecorum for presenting these pages to the public; for the experiences of this intelligent and much-injured woman belong to a class which some call delicate subjects, and others indelicate. This peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features, and I willingly take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil withdrawn. I do this for the sake of my sisters in bondage, who are suffering wrongs so foul, that our ears are too delicate to listen to them. I do it with the hope of arousing conscientious and reflecting women at the North to a sense of their duty in the exertion of moral influence on the question of Slavery, on all possible occasions. I do it with the hope that every man who reads this narrative will swear solemnly before God that, so far as he has power to prevent it, no fugitive from Slavery shall ever be sent back to suffer in that loathsome den of corruption and cruelty.

L. MARIA CHILD



## Childhood

I WAS BORN A slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away. My father<sup>1</sup> was a carpenter, and considered so intelligent and skilful in his trade, that, when buildings out of the common line were to be erected, he was sent for from long distances, to be head workman. On condition of paying his mistress two hundred dollars a year, and supporting himself, he was allowed to work at his trade, and manage his own affairs. His strongest wish was to purchase his children; but, though he several times offered his hard earnings for that purpose, he never succeeded. In complexion my parents were a light shade of brownish yellow, and were termed mulattoes. They lived together in a comfortable home; and, though we were all slaves, I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise, trusted to them for safe keeping, and liable to be demanded of them at any moment. I had one brother, William,<sup>2</sup> who was two years younger than myself—a bright, affectionate child. I had also a great treasure in my maternal grandmother,<sup>3</sup> who was a remarkable woman in many respects. She was the daughter of a planter in South Carolina, who, at his death, left her mother and his three children free, with money to go to St. Augustine, where they had relatives. It was during the Revolutionary War; and they were captured on their passage, carried back, and sold to different purchasers. Such was the story my grandmother used to tell me; but I do not remember all the particulars. She was a little girl when she was captured and sold to the keeper of a large hotel. I have often heard her tell how hard she fared during childhood. But as she grew older she

evinced so much intelligence, and was so faithful, that her master and mistress could not help seeing it was for their interest to take care of such a valuable piece of property. She became an indispensable personage in the household, officiating in all capacities, from cook and wet nurse to seamstress. She was much praised for her cooking; and her nice crackers became so famous in the neighborhood that many people were desirous of obtaining them. 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. Her master died, and the property was divided among his heirs. The widow had her dower in the hotel, which she continued to keep open. My grandmother remained in her service as a slave; but her children were divided among her master's children. As she had five, Benjamin,<sup>4</sup> the youngest one, was sold, in order that each heir might have an equal portion of dollars and cents. There was so little difference in our ages that he seemed more like my brother than my uncle. He was a bright, handsome lad, nearly white; for he inherited the complexion my grandmother had derived from Anglo-Saxon ancestors. Though only ten years old, seven hundred and twenty dollars were paid for him. His sale was a terrible blow to my grandmother; but she was naturally hopeful, and she went to work with renewed energy, trusting in time to be able to purchase some of her children. She had laid up three hundred dollars, which her mistress one day begged as a loan, promising to pay her soon. The reader probably knows that no promise or writing given to a slave is legally binding; for, according to Southern laws, a slave, *being* property, can *hold* no property. When my grandmother lent her hard earnings to her mistress, she trusted solely to her honor. The honor of a slaveholder to a slave!

Such were the unusually fortunate circumstances of my early childhood. When I was six years old, my mother<sup>5</sup> died; and then, for the first time, I learned, by the talk about me, that I was a slave. My mother's mistress was the daughter of my grandmother's mistress. She was the foster sister of my mother; they were both nourished at my grandmother's breast. In fact, my mother had been weaned at three months old, that the babe of the mistress might obtain sufficient food. They played together as children; and, when they became women, my mother was a most faithful servant to her whiter foster sister. On her death-bed her mistress promised that her children should never suffer for any thing; and during her lifetime she kept her word. They all spoke kindly of my dead mother, who had been a slave merely in name, but in nature was noble and womanly. I grieved for her, and my young mind was troubled with the thought who would now take care of me and my little brother. I was told that my home was now to be with her mistress; and I found it a happy one. No toilsome or disagreeable duties were imposed upon me. My mistress was so kind to me that I was always glad to do her bidding, and proud to labor for her as much as my young years would permit. I would sit by her side for hours, sewing diligently, with a heart as free from care as that of any free-born white child. When she thought I was tired, she would send me out to run and jump; and away I bounded, to gather berries or flowers to decorate her room. Those were happy days—too happy to last. The slave child had no thought for the morrow; but there came that blight, which too surely waits on every human being born to be a chattel.

When I was nearly twelve years old, my kind mistress sickened and died. As I saw the cheek grow paler, and the eye more glassy, how earnestly I prayed in my heart that she might live! I loved her; for she had been almost like a mother to me. My prayers were not answered. She died, and they buried her in the little churchyard, where, day after day, my tears fell upon her grave.

I was sent to spend a week with my grandmother. I was now old enough to begin to think of the future; and again and again I asked myself what they would do with me. I felt sure I should never find another mistress so kind as the one who was gone. She had promised my dying mother that her children should never suffer for any thing; and when I remembered that, and recalled her many proofs of attachment to me, I could not help having some hopes that she had left me free. My friends were almost certain it would be so. They thought she would be sure to do it, on account of my mother's love and faithful service. But, alas! we all know that the memory of a faithful slave does not avail much to save her children from the auction block.

After a brief period of suspense, the will of my mistress was read, and we learned that she had bequeathed me to her sister's daughter,<sup>6</sup> a child of five years old. So vanished our hopes. My mistress had taught me the precepts of God's Word: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." "Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them." But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor. I would give much to blot out from my memory that one great wrong. As a child, I loved my mistress; and, looking back on the happy days I spent with her, I try to think with less bitterness of this act of injustice. While I was with her, she taught me to read and spell; and for this privilege, which so rarely falls to the lot of a slave, I bless her memory.

She possessed but few slaves; and at her death those were all distributed among her relatives. Five of them were my grandmother's children, and had shared the same milk that nourished her mother's children. Notwithstanding my grandmother's long and faithful service to her owners, not one of her children escaped the auction block. These God-breathing machines are no more, in the sight of their masters, than the cotton they plant, or the horses they tend.



*The New Master and Mistress*

At that time, my grandmother was just fifty years old. Laborious years had passed since then; and now my brother and I were slaves to the man who had defrauded her of her money, and tried to defraud her of her freedom. One of my mother's sisters, called Aunt Nancy,<sup>4</sup> was also a slave in his family. She was a kind, good aunt to me; and supplied the place of both house-keeper and waiting maid to her mistress. She was, in fact, at the beginning and end of every thing.

Mrs. Flint, like many southern women, was totally deficient in energy. She had not strength to superintend her household affairs; but her nerves were so strong, that she could sit in her easy chair and see a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash. She was a member of the church; but partaking of the Lord's supper did not seem to put her in a Christian frame of mind. If dinner was not served at the exact time on that particular Sunday, she would station herself in the kitchen, and wait till it was dished, and then spit in all the kettles and pans that had been used for cooking. She did this to prevent

the cook and her children from eking out their meagre fare with the remains of the gravy and other scrapings. The slaves could get nothing to eat except what she chose to give them. Provisions were weighed out by the pound and ounce, three times a day. I can assure you she gave them no chance to eat wheat bread from her flour barrel. She knew how many biscuits a quart of flour would make, and exactly what size they ought to be.

Dr. Flint was an epicure. The cook never sent a dinner to his table without fear and trembling; for if there happened to be a dish not to his liking, he would either order her to be whipped, or compel her to eat every mouthful of it in his presence. The poor, hungry creature might not have objected to eating it; but she did object to having her master cram it down her throat till she choked.

They had a pet dog, that was a nuisance in the house. The cook was ordered to make some Indian mush for him. He refused to eat, and when his head was held over it, the froth flowed from his mouth into the basin. He died a few minutes after. When Dr. Flint came in, he said the mush had not been well cooked, and that was the reason the animal would not eat it. He sent for the cook, and compelled her to eat it. He thought that the woman's stomach was stronger than the dog's; but her sufferings afterwards proved that he was mistaken. This poor woman endured many cruelties from her master and mistress; sometimes she was locked up, away from her nursing baby, for a whole day and night.

When I had been in the family a few weeks, one of the plantation slaves was brought to town, by order of his master. It was near night when he arrived, and Dr. Flint ordered him to be taken to the work house, and tied up to the joist, so that his feet would just escape the ground. In that situation he was to wait till the doctor had taken his tea. I shall never forget that night. Never before, in my life, had I heard hundreds of blows fall, in succession, on a human being. His piteous groans, and his "O, pray don't, massa," rang in my ear for months afterwards. There were many conjectures as to the cause of this terrible punishment. Some said master accused him of stealing corn; others said

the slave had quarrelled with his wife, in presence of the overseer, and had accused his master of being the father of her child. They were both black, and the child was very fair.

I went into the work house next morning, and saw the cowhide still wet with blood, and the boards all covered with gore. The poor man lived, and continued to quarrel with his wife. A few months afterwards Dr. Flint handed them both over to a slave-trader. The guilty man put their value into his pocket, and had the satisfaction of knowing that they were out of sight and hearing. When the mother was delivered into the trader's hands, she said, "You *promised* to treat me well." To which he replied, "You have let your tongue run too far; damn you!" She had forgotten that it was a crime for a slave to tell who was the father of her child.

From others than the master persecution also comes in such cases. I once saw a young slave girl dying soon after the birth of a child nearly white. In her agony she cried out, "O Lord, come and take me!" Her mistress stood by, and mocked at her like an incarnate fiend. "You suffer, do you?" she exclaimed. "I am glad of it. You deserve it all, and more too."

The girl's mother said, "The baby is dead, thank God; and I hope my poor child will soon be in heaven, too."

"Heaven!" retorted the mistress. "There is no such place for the like of her and her bastard."

The poor mother turned away, sobbing. Her dying daughter called her, feebly, and as she bent over her, I heard her say, "Don't grieve so, mother; God knows all about it; and HE will have mercy upon me."

Her sufferings, afterwards, became so intense, that her mistress felt unable to stay; but when she left the room, the scornful smile was still on her lips. Seven children called her mother. The poor black woman had but the one child, whose eyes she saw closing in death, while she thanked God for taking her away from the greater bitterness of life.



## *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. He was a crafty man, and resorted to many means to accomplish his purposes. Sometimes he had stormy, terrific ways, that made his victims tremble; sometimes he assumed a gentleness that he thought must surely subdue. Of the two, I preferred his stormy moods, although they left me trembling. 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. The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage. The

Every where the years bring to all enough of sin and sorrow; but in slavery the very dawn of life is darkened by these shadows. Even the little child, who is accustomed to wait on her mistress and her children, will learn, before she is twelve years old, why it is that her mistress hates such and such a one among the slaves. Perhaps the child's own mother is among those hated ones. She listens to violent outbreaks of jealous passion, and cannot help understanding what is the cause. 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. I know that some are too much brutalized by slavery to feel the humiliation of their position; but many slaves feel it most acutely, and shrink from the memory of it. I cannot tell how much I suffered in the presence of these wrongs, nor how I am still pained by the retrospect. 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.

VITIOUS.

Mrs. Flint<sup>1</sup> possessed the key to her husband's character before I was born. She might have used this knowledge to counsel and to screen the young and the innocent among her slaves; but for them she had no sympathy. They were the objects of her constant suspicion and malevolence. She watched her husband with unceasing vigilance; but he was well practised in means to evade it. What he could not find opportunity to say in words he manifested in signs. He invented more than were ever thought of in a deaf and dumb asylum. I let them pass, as if I did not understand what he meant; and many were the curses and threats bestowed on me for my stupidity. One day he caught me teaching myself to write. He frowned, as if he was not well pleased; but I suppose he came to the conclusion that such an accomplishment might help to advance his favorite scheme. Before long, notes were often slipped into my hand. I would return them, saying, "I can't read them, sir." "Can't you?" he replied; "then I must read them to you." He always finished the reading by asking, "Do you understand?" Sometimes he would complain of the heat of the tea room, and order his supper to be placed on a small table in the piazza. He would seat himself there with a well-satisfied

## THE JEALOUS MISTRESS

smile, and tell me to stand by and brush away the flies. He would eat very slowly, pausing between the mouthfuls. These intervals were employed in describing the happiness I was so foolishly throwing away, and in threatening me with the penalty that finally awaited my stubborn disobedience. He boasted much of the forbearance he had exercised towards me, and reminded me that there was a limit to his patience. When I succeeded in avoiding opportunities for him to talk to me at home, I was ordered to come to his office, to do some errand. When there, I was obliged to stand and listen to such language as he saw fit to address to me. Sometimes I so openly expressed my contempt for him that he would become violently enraged, and I wondered why he did not strike me. Circumstanced as he was, he probably thought it was a better policy to be forbearing. But the state of things grew worse and worse daily. In desperation I told him that I must and would apply to my grandmother for protection. He threatened me with death, and worse than death, if I made any complaint to her. Strange to say, I did not despair. I was naturally of a buoyant disposition, and always I had a hope of somehow getting out of his clutches. Like many a poor, simple slave before me, I trusted that some threads of joy would yet be woven into my dark destiny.



Reader, I draw no imaginary pictures of southern homes. I am telling you the plain truth. Yet when victims make their escape from this wild beast of Slavery, northerners consent to act the part of bloodhounds, and hunt the poor fugitive back into his den, "full of dead men's bones, and all uncleanness." Nay, more, they are not only willing, but proud, to give their daughters in marriage to slaveholders. The poor girls have romantic notions of a sunny clime, and of the flowering vines that all the year round shade a happy home. To what disappointments are they destined! The young wife soon learns that the husband in whose hands she has placed her happiness pays no regard to his marriage vows. Children of every shade of complexion play with her own fair babies, and too well she knows that they are born unto him of his own household. Jealousy and hatred enter the flowery home, and it is ravaged of its loveliness.

Southern women often marry a man knowing that he is the father of many little slaves. They do not trouble themselves about it. They regard such children as property, as marketable as the pigs on the plantation; and it is seldom that they do not make them aware of this by passing them into the slave-trader's hands

as soon as possible, and thus getting them out of their sight. I am glad to say there are some honorable exceptions.

I have myself known two southern wives who exhorted their husbands to free those slaves towards whom they stood in a "parental relation;" and their request was granted. These husbands blushed before the superior nobleness of their wives' natures. Though they had only counselled them to do that which it was their duty to do, it commanded their respect, and rendered their conduct more exemplary. Concealment was at an end, and confidence took the place of distrust.

Though this bad institution deadens the moral sense, even in white women, to a fearful extent, it is not altogether extinct. I have heard southern ladies say of Mr. Such a one, "He not only thinks it no disgrace to be the father of those little niggers, but he is not ashamed to call himself their master. I declare, such things ought not to be tolerated in any decent society!"

## SKETCHES OF NEIGHBORING SLAVEHOLDERS

The slaveholder's sons are, of course, vitiated, even while boys, by the unclean influences every where around them. Nor do the master's daughters always escape. Severe retributions sometimes come upon him for the wrongs he does to the daughters of the slaves. The white daughters early hear their parents quarrelling about some female slave. Their curiosity is excited, and they soon learn the cause. They are attended by the young slave girls whom their father has corrupted; and they hear such talk as should never meet youthful ears, or any other ears. They know that the women slaves are subject to their father's authority in all things; and in some cases they exercise the same authority over the men slaves. I have myself seen the master of such a household whose head was bowed down in shame; for it was known in the neighborhood that his daughter had selected one of the meanest slaves on his plantation to be the father of his first grandchild. She did not make her advances to her equals, nor even to her father's more intelligent servants. She selected the

most brutalized, over whom her authority could be exercised with less fear of exposure. Her father, half frantic with rage, sought to revenge himself on the offending black man; but his daughter, foreseeing the storm that would arise, had given him free papers, and sent him out of the state.

In such cases the infant is smothered, or sent where it is never seen by any who know its history. But if the white parent is the *father*, instead of the mother, the offspring are unblushingly reared for the market. If they are girls, I have indicated plainly enough what will be their inevitable destiny.

You may believe what I say; for I write only that whereof I know. I was twenty-one years in that cage of obscene birds. I can testify, from my own experience and observation, that slavery is a curse to the whites as well as to the blacks. It makes the white fathers cruel and sensual; the sons violent and licentious; it contaminates the daughters, and makes the wives wretched. And as for the colored race, it needs an abler pen than mine to describe the extremity of their sufferings, the depth of their degradation.

Yet few slaveholders seem to be aware of the widespread moral ruin occasioned by this wicked system. Their talk is of blighted cotton crops—not of the blight on their children's souls.

If you want to be fully convinced of the abominations of slavery, go on a southern plantation, and call yourself a negro trader. Then there will be no concealment; and you will see and hear things that will seem to you impossible among human beings with immortal souls.



## *A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl's Life*

AFTER MY LOVER WENT away, Dr. Flint contrived a new plan. He seemed to have an idea that my fear of my mistress was his greatest obstacle. In the blandest tones, he told me that he was going to build a small house for me, in a secluded place, four miles away from the town. I shuddered; but I was constrained to listen, while he talked of his intention to give me a home of my own, and to make a lady of me. Hitherto, I had escaped my dreaded fate, by being in the midst of people. My grandmother had already had high words with my master about me. She had told him pretty plainly what she thought of his character, and there was considerable gossip in the neighborhood about our affairs, to which the open-mouthed jealousy of Mrs. Flint contributed not a little. When my master said he was going to build a house for me, and that he could do it with little trouble and expense, I was in hopes something would happen to frustrate his scheme; but I soon heard that the house was actually begun. I vowed before my Maker that I would never enter it. I had rather toil on the plantation from dawn till dark; I had rather live and die in jail, than drag on, from day to day, through such a living death. I was determined that the master, whom I so hated and loathed, who had blighted the prospects of my youth, and made my life a desert, should not, after my long struggle with him, succeed at last in trampling his victim under his feet. I would do any thing, every thing, for the sake of defeating him. What *could* I do? I thought and thought, till I became desperate, and made a plunge into the abyss.

me what it may. I will not try to screen myself behind the plea of compulsion from a master; for it was not so. Neither can I plead ignorance or thoughtlessness. For years, my master had done his utmost to pollute my mind with foul images, and to destroy the pure principles inculcated by my grandmother, and the good mistress of my childhood. The influences of slavery had had the same effect on me that they had on other young girls; they had made me prematurely knowing, concerning the evil ways of the world. I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation.

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. I want to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve 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.

I have told you that Dr. Flint's persecutions and his wife's jealousy had given rise to some gossip in the neighborhood. Among others, it chanced that a white unmarried gentleman<sup>1</sup> had obtained some knowledge of the circumstances in which I was placed. He knew my grandmother, and often spoke to me in the street. He became interested for me, and asked questions about my master, which I answered in part. He expressed a great deal of sympathy, and a wish to aid me. He constantly sought opportunities to see me, and wrote to me frequently. I was a poor slave girl, only fifteen years old.

So much attention from a superior person was, of course, flattering; for human nature is the same in all. I also felt grateful for his sympathy, and encouraged by his kind words. It seemed to me a great thing to have such a friend. By degrees, a more tender feeling crept into my heart. He was an educated and eloquent

gentleman; too eloquent, alas, for the poor slave girl who trusted in him. 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.



possible.

When I found that my master had actually begun to build the lonely cottage, other feelings mixed with those I have described. Revenge, and calculations of interest, were added to flattered vanity and sincere gratitude for kindness. I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favored another; and it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way. I thought he would revenge himself by selling me, and I was sure my friend, Mr. Sands, would buy me. He was a man of more generosity and feeling than my master, and I thought my freedom could be easily obtained from him. The crisis of my fate now came so near that I was desperate. I shuddered to think of being the mother of children that should be owned by my old tyrant. I knew that as soon as a new fancy took him, his victims were sold far off to get rid of them; especially if they had children. I had seen several women sold, with his babies at the breast. He never allowed his offspring by slaves to remain long in sight of himself and his wife. Of a man who was not my master I could ask to have my children well supported; and in this case, I felt confident I should obtain the boon. I also felt quite sure that they would be made free. 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.

in the swamp. The storeroom opened upon a piazza. To this hole I was conveyed as soon as I entered the house. The air was stifling; the darkness total. A bed had been spread on the floor. 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; and it was so compared with the fate of others. I was never cruelly over-worked; I was

## The Loophole of Retreat

crawled about my den for exercise. One day I hit my head against something, and found it was a gimlet.<sup>2</sup> My uncle had left it sticking there when he made the trap-door. I was as rejoiced as Robinson Crusoe could have been at finding such a treasure. It put a lucky thought into my head. I said to myself, "Now I will have some light. Now I will see my children." I did not dare to begin my work during the daytime, for fear of attracting attention. But I groped round; and having found the side next the street, where I could frequently see my children, I stuck the gimlet in and waited for evening. 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.



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.

It has been painful to me, in many ways, to recall the dreary years I passed in bondage. I would gladly forget them if I could. Yet the retrospection is not altogether without solace; for with those gloomy recollections come tender memories of my good old grandmother, like light, fleecy clouds floating over a dark and troubled sea.

Incidents' ending not the ending of sentimental novels

Freedom as still uncompleted project

A home of one's own (see bell hooks, "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance")

# The Loophole of Retreat—An Invitation

Tina M. Campt

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*On April 27, 2019, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum was the site of a very special convening. It was the brainchild of Simone Leigh, and shared its title with her 2019 exhibition at the museum. Organized by Leigh, Saidiya Hartman, and myself, “The Loophole of Retreat” was an exhilarating, rejuvenating, and inspirational daylong gathering dedicated to the intellectual life of black women that brought together an international constellation of writers, artists, poets, filmmakers, and activists. This special issue of e-flux journal seeks to lift up the extraordinary voices, thoughts, and conversations that emerged at the convening and share them with a wider audience. In doing so, I and my coeditors, Leigh and Hartman, seek to extend the dialogues of the “Loophole” in the hope of including others and inspiring future gatherings which, like the Guggenheim convening, will honor and celebrate the intellectual and creative labor of black women. Like all the texts included in this special issue, the comments below are revised remarks originally shared at the event.*



*The loophole of retreat ...*

a dark hole

an attic space

she plots, she plans

she dreams of possibility from within impossible strictures of enclosure and confinement

her escape is immanent, as her imagination is boundless

her enclosure is an incubator for a practice of refusal and a roadmap to freedom.

These are the registers of a slave girl who dreamed into life practices of self-care, intellectual fortitude, and fiercely defiant forms of love and connection, of which we are proud beneficiaries. It is these multiple registers of Harriet Jacobs's loophole of retreat that we reference as a preparation ground for this gathering, as our attempt to cultivate a space for celebrating black women's intellectual and creative labor.

It is a site Jacobs claimed as simultaneously an enclosure and a space for enacting practices of freedom—practices of thinking, planning, writing, and imagining new forms of freedom. It is a place we mobilize in an effort to revalue black women's intellectual labor.

HARRIET JACOBS'S *LINDA: Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, seven years concealed in Slavery, Written by Herself* (1861), the best-known nineteenth-century African-American woman's autobiography, makes a marked contribution to American history and letters by having been written, as Jacobs stressed, "by herself."<sup>1</sup> Many other narratives by women who had been enslaved (for example, Sojourner Truth) had been dictated to amanuenses whose roles diluted the authenticity of the texts.<sup>2</sup> Jacobs not only wrote her own book, but as an abolitionist and ardent reader, she knew the literary genres of her time. Describing an African-American family whose members cleave to one another against great odds, she skillfully plays on her story's adherence to and departure from the sentimental conventions of domestic fiction. In so doing, she used its difference to a woman's advantage. Her self-consciously gendered and thoroughly feminist narrative criticizes slavery for corrupting the morals and the families of all it touched, whether rich or poor, white or black. She lays the groundwork for the analysis of black womanhood.<sup>3</sup>

Nell Irving Painter,  
"Introduction," in H. Jacobs,  
*Incidents*, Penguin 2000



*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* makes three important points convincingly: It shows, first, the myriad traumas owners and their agents inflicted upon slaves. Bloody whippings and rapes constituted ground zero of the enslaved condition, but in addition, slaves were subject to a whole series of soul-murdering psychological violations: destruction of families, abandonment of children, sexual harassment, verbal abuse, humiliation, contempt. Jacobs details the physical violence so common in her Southern world, but she especially stresses the assault on slaves' psyches. Second, she denounces the figure of the "happy darky." As a slave and later as an abolitionist, she was frequently con-

fronted with this favorite American myth, which she knew to be false. In answer to this proslavery argument, she enumerates the miseries of the enslaved; in chapter 13 she shows precisely how Northerners were gulled into believing black people liked being enslaved.<sup>4</sup> Third, and most courageously, Jacobs insists that enslaved people—here, black women—cannot be judged by the same standards as the free. Jacobs expounds the conditions of enslavement that deprived people of autonomy, denying them influence over their own and their children's destinies. While her enslaved friends and family took advantage of every possible loophole<sup>5</sup> within the fabric of an evil system, working the system allowed them only a modicum of self-determination. Because they literally belonged to other people, slaves lacked the power to protect their morals, their bodily integrity, or their children.

## INTERSECTIONALITY

“The concept of the simultaneity of oppression is still the crux of a Black feminist understanding of political reality and, I believe, one of the most significant ideological contributions of Black feminist thought.”

Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), xxxiv.

“Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. . . . But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm.”

Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, 139–67.



## **Male slave narrative**

Focus on the individual and his fight for freedom

Centrality of literacy as emancipatory

Master/slave relationship is pivotal

Enslavement and masculinity (lack of paternal authority)

Rebellion

Picaresque novel

Women as helpless victims and tools of emasculation

## **Female slave narrative**

Focus on the enslaved community and its culture

Family ties

Sexual exploitation of black women

Motherhood

Resistance

Sentimental novel

Female agency

Gender considerations account not only for many of the differences in style and genre that we see in Douglass's and Jacobs's narratives, but also for the versions of slavery that they endured and the versions of authorship that they were able to shape for themselves in freedom. **Douglass was a public speaker who could boldly self-fashion himself as hero of his own adventure. In his first narrative, he combined and equated the achievement of selfhood, manhood, freedom, and voice.** The resulting lead character of his autobiography is a boy, and then a young man, who is robbed of family and community and who gains an identity not only through his escape from Baltimore to Massachusetts but through his ability to create himself through telling his story. Harriet Jacobs, on the other hand, was enmeshed in all the trappings of community, family, and domesticity. She was literally a "domestic" in her northern employment, as well as a slave mother with children to protect, and one from whom subservience was expected, whether slave or free. As Jacobs pointedly put it, "Slavery is bad for men, but it is far more terrible for women." **The overriding concern of Jacobs's narrative was one that made her story especially problematic both for herself as author and for the women readers of her time.** Because the major crisis of her life involved her master's unrelenting, forced sexual attentions, the focus of Jacobs's narrative is the sexual exploitation that she, as well as many other slave women, had to endure. **For her, the question of how to address this "unmentionable" subject dominates the choices she delineates in her narrative—as woman slave and as woman author.**

Lucinda MacKethan, "Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs: American Slave Narrators"

<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1609-1865/essays/douglassjacobs.htm>

Like Douglass, Jacobs was determined to fight to the death for her freedom. **Yet while Douglass could show “how a slave became a man” in a physical fight with an overseer, Jacobs’s gender determined a different course.** Pregnant with the child of a white lover of her own choosing, fifteen year old Jacobs reasoned (erroneously) that her condition would spur her licentious master to sell her and her child. Once she was a mother, with “ties to life,” as she called them, her concern for her children had to take precedence over her own self-interest. Thus throughout her narrative, **Jacobs is looking not only for freedom but also for a secure home for her children.** She might also long for a husband, but her shameful early liaison, resulting in two children born “out of wedlock,” meant, as she notes with perhaps a dose of sarcasm, that her story ends “not, in the usual way, with marriage,” but “with freedom.” In this finale, she still mourns (even though her children were now grown) that she does not have “a home of my own.” Douglass’s 1845 narrative, conversely, ends with his standing as a speaker before an eager audience and feeling an exhilarating “degree of freedom.” While Douglass’s and Jacobs’s lives might seem to have moved in different directions, it is nevertheless important not to miss the common will that their narratives proclaim. They never lost their determination to gain not only freedom from enslavement but also respect for their individual humanity and that of other bondsmen and women.

Lucinda MacKethan, “Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs: American Slave Narrators”  
<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1609-1865/essays/douglassjacobs.htm>



Too writerly to be  
the true account of  
slave life by a former  
slave?

In spite of Lydia Maria Child's insistence that she had only revised the manuscript of Harriet Jacobs's [narrative] "mainly for purposes of condensation and orderly arrangement," the work is not credible. In the first place, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) is too orderly; too many of the major characters meet providentially after years of separation. Then, too, the story is too melodramatic: miscegenation and cruelty, outraged virtue, unrequited love, and planter licentiousness appear on practically every page. The virtuous Harriet sympathizes with her wretched mistress who has to look on all of the mulattoes fathered by her husband, she refuses to bow to the lascivious demands of her master, bears two children by another white man, and then runs away and hides in a garret in her grandmother's cabin for seven years until she is able to escape to New York. In the meantime, her white lover has acknowledged his paternity of her children, purchased their freedom, and been elected to Congress. In the end, all live happily ever after.<sup>3</sup>

John W. Blassingame, "Critical Essay on Sources," in *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 373.

*INTRODUCTION*  
*OVER-EXPOSED, UNDER-EXPOSED*

*HARRIET JACOBS AND INCIDENTS IN THE*  
*LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL*

RAFIA ZAFAR

When Jacobs writes “Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction,” she is well aware that she must begin, before even writing of her birth, by breaking down the walls of prejudice and disbelief between her and her white audience. Rather than embellish her own story, Jacobs says “my descriptions fall far short of the facts” (1). From the time of the first slave who dared tell the story of enslavement, African Americans have faced a hostile, disbelieving audience; but as Robert Stepto has remarked of African American narratives, “it is the reader – not the author or text and certainly not the storyteller in the text – who is unreliable.”<sup>9</sup> Jacobs, a woman with a woman’s story of sexual oppression and frustrated motherhood, had more reader resistance to overcome than her male counterparts, then and now. As Frances Smith Foster tells us, “Jacobs has more than once been accused of having omitted or distorted details of her own life in order to enhance her personal reputation or to achieve artistic effect”; she had to contend with notions as to how her “victories and values contrast with prevailing theories and opinions of slave life.” Jacobs also, at least at the time of the original publication, had to contend with shifting currents in the American political scene. Yellin notes that at the

A delicate/indelicate subject:  
Jacobs’s reluctance to speak

## Slave narrative, received opinion, and the archive

STEPHANIE A. SMITH

### Harriet Jacobs: a case history of authentication

Why did scholars and critics resist believing that the events in *Incidents* were true? One reason had to do with the way in which the slave narrative itself had been defined. In 1977 the influential, indeed groundbreaking, African American historian John Blassingame published an important and unprecedented collection of papers titled *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews and Autobiographies*.<sup>3</sup> By 1977 Professor Blassingame, the first acting chair of Yale's fledgling African American Studies Program in 1971-72, had established a reputation as a first-rate historian who had almost single-handedly established the importance of African American writing – especially the slave narrative – as historically crucial.

But, as previously noted, Blassingame (like the literary critic Robert Stepto) insisted that *Incidents* was not, nor could be, an authentic slave narrative. Given how important Professor Blassingame's work was (and still is), his judgment, especially in the 1970s, would have been difficult to question: he recovered numerous texts, laid the groundwork for African American studies, and his work was acclaimed because he did away with stereotypical, racist histories of slavery and replaced them with complex portraits of how slaves, former slaves, and freedmen formed social bonds and cultural practices.

### *Incidents'* anomaly as a slave narrative



Thus, this narrative not only presented textual problems that Yellin's archival research at last resolved – i.e. that Harriet Jacobs was indeed the same person as Linda Brent, and that even if novelist and abolitionist Lydia Maria Child had edited the work (sometimes aggressively), Jacobs was the author, and she was recounting her own life's story – it also challenged fixed racist and sexist preconceptions that scholars had about women held as slaves. However, once presented with Yellin's archival facts, critics and historians had to re-examine, and indeed redefine, the parameters of the slave narrative altogether.

So let's see how this redefinition happened, since the problems that *Incidents* faced, as I've said above and discussed elsewhere, had everything to do with what scholars considered to be credible fact, since a slave narrative had to be a true narrative: could a slave woman truly have been able to confound her master by usurping his so-called right to her body? In other words, could a slave woman choose to have children with a man she actually had feelings for?<sup>7</sup> Could a slave hide, for years, in what amounted to a crawl space, in order to fool her master into thinking she'd fled north? And as numerous critics have noted, one of the oft-cited (racist) questions was: could a slave have the cultural ability to manipulate sentimental tropes, to play upon her audience's sensibilities, as it were, with such skill?<sup>8</sup>

## “I DISGUISED MY HAND”

WRITING VERSIONS OF THE TRUTH IN HARRIET  
JACOBS'S INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL  
AND JOHN JACOBS'S "A TRUE TALE OF SLAVERY"

JACQUELINE GOLDSBY

Blassingame's pronouncement influenced subsequent evaluations of *Incidents* for a number of years because of the significance of his own work in the field-at-large. First published in 1972, *The Slave Community* (along with Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*) broke new methodological ground, as it relied almost exclusively upon slave narratives to reconstruct the experience of blacks in antebellum plantation culture. "While other sources are important in any general description of the institution of slavery," Blassingame explained, "they rarely tell us much about how blacks perceived their experiences."<sup>4</sup> Blacks' autobiographies proved their argumentative worth precisely because of their subjective point of view, but Blassingame was careful to recognize that the narratives were not transparent texts. Assuming that the slaves' stories were biased or selective accounts of the witnesses' memories, he also believed that such prejudices could be corrected by comparing the slaves' accounts with one another and using available external sources to cross-check the claims in a given account.<sup>5</sup> In Blassingame's estimation, though, *Incidents* crossed this line of evidentiary propriety. Jacobs's narrative was so subjective and so perceptive that it exceeded Blassingame's requirements for "sample" or "representative" texts; rather, the narrative was itself a representation. However, by omitting *Incidents* from his data set Blassingame endorsed the very problem Jacobs's autobiography raises: what narrative elements or modes produce "credible" texts? At what point does a writer's narrative logic become "too orderly" and, so, not true?

Is reading and evaluating slave narratives for their fact-based content problematic?

What matters, once Jacobs's authorship of *Incidents* is established, is how she shaped the facts of her life, the narrative strategies she employed to tell and validate a story that her historical milieu condemned to silence.

That Yellin locates the pleasure of reading the text (assuming pleasure would supplant “dismay”) in its correspondence to actual, verifiable details from Jacobs's life may be as troublesome an equation as was Blassingame's suggestion that the orderliness of the text belies its claims to truth. Yellin implies that historical veracity makes literary meaning not only plausible but possible. In that formulation, the power of the archive renders the text accessible and literate and thus confirms its narrative value. The canonical stature of the Harvard edition of *Incidents* rests upon Yellin's effort to set Jacobs's story before the public as being incontrovertibly “true,” to narrow (if not forge closed altogether) the gaps between fact and fiction by subjecting the text to rigorous archival verification.

Far from bridging interdisciplinary boundaries, however, this ethic allows history to subsume the narrative imperatives of literature. It presumes an economy of value that defines “credibility” and “authenticity” similarly when, in fact, literature happens and works precisely because of its contestation of those very terms. Thus, where Yellin locates and defines the textual authority of *Incidents* by its correspondence to factual history, literary critic William L. Andrews associates it with the narrative's manipulation of historical facts. Andrews's literary historiography, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865*, classifies *Incidents* as an “experimental” slave narrative, arguing that Jacobs's text was composed at the cultural moment during the nineteenth century when (ex-)slave narrators approached their life stories in a radically new way. As a “liminal autobiographer,” Jacobs sought to map out the impasse slaves faced when writing: how to make their narratives “authentic” for a white audience that could – more than ever after the 1850s – expect (if not demand) specific, racialized conventions from them. These authors struggled to balance the competing claims placed upon them between sincerity and authority or, as Andrews conceptualizes it, to reconcile the relationships between “literary priorities and freedom of expression over facts of experience.”<sup>8</sup>



Although there is no ready way to ascertain the definitive “truth” of what occurred to either John or Harriet Jacobs in terms of how each of them represents their own (and each other’s) experience, this is not to say that *Incidents* and “A True Tale” are not “reliable” historical records. Nor is it to say that the Jacobs narratives make the idea of truth a relative concept. Rather, between *Incidents* and “A True Tale,” truth becomes a function and trope of representation, each narrative promoting versions of Harriet Jacobs’s self that simultaneously present and re-present her life as a matter for textual interpretation. Indeed, to the extent that we cannot use one story as a “reality check” for the other, what we come to know about Harriet Jacobs’s life as a slave girl does not strictly depend on the literal, point-by-point correspondence between her narrative and her brother’s, but on the gaps produced by their respective perceptions of what “really” happened to them both.

In this way, *Incidents* both anticipates and historicizes the debates that have been and continue to be formative in the development of African American literature and its attendant critical paradigms. The charge that black fiction must necessarily engage history (which is itself supposed to be a transparent and nonnarrative entity) to render the literal, authentic “truth” of black existence and experience is the directive that *Incidents* challenges thoroughly. When considered in relation to John Jacobs’s “A True Tale” and the distinction made between oral and written discourse as approved modes of black testimony in abolitionist politics, *Incidents* proposes that truth can, as fact, assume symbolic forms, and requires that received ideas about what counts as “authentic” narrative be reconceived in nonracial terms. In such a reading, *Incidents* can be seen to retract its own claims to autobiography, its factual differences with “A True Tale” bracketing the “auto” and “bio,” leaving us to contend with the “graphy” or, simply, the writing itself.

to support of the antislavery cause. Not surprisingly, white abolitionists encouraged ex-slave narrators to conform to the conventions that had proved successful. Thus, as Frederick Douglass reports of his experience on the antislavery lecture circuit, even his well-meaning associates urged him “to pin [himself] down to [his] simple narrative” of the facts of his life when he spoke for the cause of freedom (Douglass, *My Bondage* 220). Not long after he started experimenting with an individual rhetorical style, his Garrisonian friends reminded him of the importance of maintaining a voice that would sound authentic to his hearers: “‘Better have a *little* of the plantation manner of speech than not; ’tis not best that you seemed too learned’ ” (220).<sup>2</sup> The more Douglass learned to stage-manage his voice and adopt personae in his speeches and writing, the more white reviewers complained about his “thinking more of his speech than of the end for which he professes to make it” (Peabody 75). Nor was Douglass alone in incurring the suspicion of whites because his speeches seemed to testify as much to conscious crafting as to the authenticity of their indictment of slavery.<sup>3</sup>

By the 1850s the most sophisticated black writers refused to conceal the dilemma inherent in their quest for authorization: to *sound* authentic to whites required them to adopt a mask, to play a role, to feign authenticity in and through a carefully cultivated voice. This feigning of an authentic voice for rhetorical purposes did not necessarily render inauthentic the narrative produced by that voice or the subjects treated in that narrative. But writers like Douglass and William Wells Brown knew that without a new and expanded awareness of black voice and the possibilities of black storytelling, the traditional medium of black narrative would continue to restrict, if not distort, its message. Moreover, the idea of authenticity and the relation of authority to authenticity would also remain simplistic and subservient to white myths rather than expressive of black perceptions of reality. Thus it was during the 1850s, when black as well as white American literature underwent a renaissance, that the voice of black narrative broke most profoundly with discursive conventions and white expectations in an attempt to find new ways of authorizing itself.

William Andrews,  
«The Novelization  
of Voice in Early  
African American  
Narratives», *PMLA*  
1990