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

THE RE-DEFINITION OF THE SLAVE NARRATIVE GENRE

"Rise up, ye women that are at ease! Hear my voice, ye careless daughters! Give ear unto my speech." Isaiah, XXX, original epigram from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

"READER, be assured this narrative is no fiction." Preface by the Author, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

I BELIEVE, WITH JAMES OLNEY, that students of autobiography are themselves vicarious autobiographers, and I know that I read every text through my own experience, as well as that of my mother and my grandmothers.[1] As black American women, we are born into a mystic sisterhood, and we live our lives within a magic circle, a realm of shared language, reference, and allusion within the veil of our blackness and our femaleness.[2] We have been as invisible to the dominant culture as rain; we have been knowers, but we have not been known. This paradox is central to what I suggest we call the Afra-American experience.

It was in the world of Afra-American autobiography that I first met her on the conscious plane, but then I realized that I had known the outraged mother all my life. With her hands on her hips

[1]See James Olney, "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment" in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), p. 26.

[2]See Robert Stepto's "Teaching Afro-American Literature: Survey or Tradition," in *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction,* ed. Dexter Fisher and Robert B. Stepto (New York: Modern Language Association, 1979), pp. 8–25. Within the "continuum of [black] artistic endeavor" described by Stepto as a *temenos* or "magic circle" exists yet another realm of artistic expression and meaning, that of the black woman, the Afra-American.

and her head covered with a bandanna, she is the sassiest woman on the face of the earth, and with good reason. She is the mother of Frederick Douglass travelling twelve miles through the darkness to share a morsel of food with her mulatto son and to reassure him that he is somebody's child. She travels twelve miles back again before the dawn. She sacrifices and improvises for the survival of flesh and spirit, and as mother of the race, she is muse to black poets, male and female alike. She is known by many names, the most exalted being "Momma." Implied in all of her actions and fueling her heroic ones is outrage at the abuse of her people and her person.

She must be the core of our black and female experience, this American Amazon of African descent, dwelling in the moral and psychic wilderness of North America. Yet when I surveyed the literature of the critical wilderness proliferated from that moral and psychic one, I found her absent. I imagined our ancestor mothers lost forever in that fearsome place in search of a tradition to claim them.

The treatment of the slave narrative genre has been one of the most skewed in Afro-American literary criticism. It has been almost always the treatment of the narratives of heroic male slaves, not their wives or sisters. By focusing almost exclusively on the narratives of male slaves, critics have left out half the picture.

In general, the purpose of the slave narrative genre is to decry the cruelty and brutality of slavery and to bring about its abolition. In addition, the genre has been defined as possessing certain other characteristics, including a narrator who speaks in a coherent, first person voice, with a range and scope of knowledge like that of an unlettered slave and a narrative movement which progresses from South to North, and culminates in an escape from slavery to a freedom which is both an inner and outer liberation. The prevalent themes of the genre include the deprivation of food, clothing, and shelter, the desire for instruction (frequently for religious instruction, which is thwarted), physical brutality, the corruption of families (usually white), the separation of families (usually black), the exploitation of slave workers and, in some narratives, especially those written by women, abuse of the sexuality and reproductive powers of the slave woman.

The resistance to a gynocritical or gynocentric approach to the slave narrative genre has been dominated by male bias, by linear logic, and by either/or thinking. We have been paralyzed by issues

of primacy, and authorship, and by criteria of unity, coherence, completion, and length. Academic systems, which do not value scholarship on black women or reward it, have told us that we are not first, not central, not major, not authentic. The suggestion has been that neither the lives of black women nor the study of our narratives and autobiographies have been legitimate.

I want to supplement the either/or thinking that has limited the consideration of evidence surrounding the narratives of women, and the inclusion of such works in the slave narrative genre. Instead of asking "Is it first? Is it major? Is it central? Does it conform to established criteria?" this study asks, "How would the inclusion of works by women change the shape of the genre?"

To begin with, the inclusion of works by women would push the origin of the slave narrative genre back by two years, and root it more firmly in American soil, for the genre begins, not with *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African,* published in London in 1789, but with the narrative of a slave woman entitled "Belinda, or the Cruelty of Men Whose Faces Were Like the Moon," published in the United States in 1787, a narrative of a few pages which would be considered too short by conventional standards.[3]

Traditionally, the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself,* has been viewed as the central text in the genre, and based on this narrative, critic Robert Stepto has defined the primary Afro-American archetype as that of the articulate hero who discovers the "bonds among freedom, literacy, and struggle."[4] Once again, the narrative experience of the articulate and rationally enlightened female slave has not

[3]A woman called "Belinda" wrote "The Cruelty of Men Whose Faces Were Like the Moon: the Petition of an African Slave to the Legislature of Massachusetts." The title of the text suggests an awareness of racial and sexual oppression that is both race and sex specific. Belinda speaks to the cruelty of men, white men, whose moon-like faces symbolize strangeness, spiritual barrenness and death. See "Belinda: or the Cruelty of Men Whose Faces Were Like the Moon" in *American Museum and Repository of Ancient and Modern Fugitive Pieces, Prose and Poetical Volume I* (June, 1787).

[4]See Robert B. Stepto, "Narration, Authentication, and Authorial Control in Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* of 1845," in *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction,* pp. 178-91. See also Robert B. Stepto, *Beyond the Veil* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1979), chapters 1-3.

been part of the definition. Stepto, in his otherwise brilliant work on the *Narrative of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), makes no attempt to define a corresponding female archetype; I propose that we consider as a counterpart to the articulate hero the archetype of the outraged mother. She appears repeatedly in Afro-American history and literary tradition, and she is fully represented in Harriet "Linda Brent" Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (1861).

Although Thayer and Eldridge published *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in Boston in 1861, not until 1981 did Jean F. Yellin publish evidence establishing Jacobs' historical identity and the authorship of her narrative. Marion Starling, a black woman, had argued for the authenticity of the Jacobs narrative as early as 1947, but male critics like Sterling Brown and Arna Bontemps contested that authorship.[5] The issue was complicated by the fact that Lydia Maria Child had edited the Jacobs narrative, which was published under the pseudonym, Linda Brent.

In general, the kinds of questions asked about the text prohibited scholars from seeing *Incidents* as part of the slave narrative genre and prevented them from looking for historical evidence to establish Jacobs' authorship. Yellin found such evidence readily available in the form of letters from Jacobs to Lydia Maria Child, from Jacobs to her confidante, Rochester Quaker Amy Post, and also in letters from Lydia Maria Child to John Greenleaf Whittier and William Lloyd Garrison, as well as the apprentice pieces Jacobs published in the New York *Tribune*.[6]

Another piece of external evidence overlooked by many scholars is a May 1, 1861 review of *Incidents* which appeared in the London

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[5]See Arna Bontemps, "The Slave Narrative: An American Genre," Introduction to *Great Slave Narratives* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), vol. XV; John W. Blassingame, "Critical Essay on Sources" in *The Slave Community* (New York: Oxford UP, 1972), pp. 233-34; and Jean F. Yellin, "Written by Herself: Harriet Brent Jacobs' Slave Narrative in *American Literature* 53 (November, 1981), 480-85.

[6]Jean Yellin first disclosed the existence of Jacobs' autobiographical apprentice piece, "Letter From a Fugitive Slave," in "Written by Herself: Harriet Brent Jacobs' Slave Narrative." "Letter From a Fugitive Slave," published in the New York *Tribune*, 21 June 1853, treats the subject matter which later becomes *Incidents* in Mrs. Jacobs' distinctive style. Mrs. Jacobs' correspondence with Rochester Quaker Mrs. Amy Post verifies her claim to authorship of these letters to the *Tribune*.

Anti-Slavery Advocate written by a reviewer who had knowledge of the manuscript in both the original and published versions and who also had talked with the author. This *Anti-Slavery Advocate* review contains a wonderful description of Jacobs and her text:

> We have read this book with no ordinary interest, for we are acquainted with the writer; and have heard many of the incidents from her own lips, and have great confidence in her truthfulness and integrity. Between two and three years ago, a coloured woman, about as dark as a southern Spaniard or a Portuguese, aged about five-and-forty, with a kind and pleasing expression of countenance, called on us, bearing an introductory letter from one of the most honoured friends of the anti-slavery cause in the United States. This letter requested our friendly offices on behalf of Linda, who was desirous of publishing her narrative in England. It happened that the friends at whose house we were then staying were so much interested by this dusky stranger's conversation and demeanour, that they induced her to become their guest for some weeks. Thus we had an excellent opportunity of becoming acquainted with one of the greatest heroines we have ever met with. Her manners were marked by refinement and sensibility, and by an utter absence of pretense or affectation; and we were deeply touched by the circumstances of her early life which she then communicated, and which exactly coincide with those of the volume now before us.[7]

This kind of evidence establishes both the authenticity and primacy many critics have denied *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.* Had these scholars asked the same questions of *Incidents* they asked of male narratives, had they looked for external evidence and examined it carefully, they would have come to the conclusion that Linda Brent wrote this narrative herself.

But as I have suggested, questions about unity, length, primacy and authorship are not the most important ones we can ask of such a narrative. We can more profitably ask how reading the work modifies an understanding of the slave narrative genre. However, the fact remains that the established criteria used to define the slave narrative genre have systematically excluded women; this paper calls those criteria into question.

When viewed from a gynocritical or gynocentric perspective, *Incidents* arrives at the very heart and root of Afra-American

[7]Rev. of *Incidents, Anti-Slavery Advocate,* London, England, May 1, 1861.

autobiographical writing. Although other works appear earlier, this full-length work by an Afra-American writing about her experiences as a slave woman is indeed rare. Yet despite its rarity, *Incidents* speaks for many lives; it is in many respects a representative document.

Incidents is descended both from the autobiographical tradition of the heroic male slaves and a line of American women's writings that attacks racial oppression and sexual exploitation. It combines the narrative pattern of the slave narrative genre with the conventional literary forms and stylistic devices of the 19th century domestic novel in an attempt to transform the so-called "cult of true womanhood' and to persuade the women of the north to take a public stand against slavery, the most political issue of the day. The twin themes of abolition and feminism are interwoven in Jacobs' text.

Like Harriet Beecher Stowe's hybrid, *Uncle Tom's Cabin, Incidents* focuses on the power relationships of masters and slaves and the ways in which (slave) women learn to manage the invasive sexuality of (white) men. Unlike Stowe, who demonstrates her anxiety about the authorship of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by saying that God wrote it, the author of *Incidents* claims responsibility for every word, and yet she publishes under the pseudonym "Linda Brent."

Although I had read the critical literature on women's autobiography, it was *Incidents* that taught me that the silences and gaps in the narrative of women's lives are sometimes more significant than the filled spaces.[8] "Linda Brent" obscures the names of persons and places mentioned in the text, and although she denies any need for secrecy on her own part, she writes that she deemed it "kind and considerate toward others to pursue this course."[9] Thus she speaks as a disguised woman, whose identity remains partly obscured. A virtual "madwoman in the attic," Linda leads a veiled and unconventional life. Her dilemma is that of life under slavery as a beautiful, desirable female slave, object of desire as well as profit.

Linda adheres to a system of black and female cultural values

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[8]In "Women's Autobiographies and the Male Tradition," her introduction to *Women's Autobiography* (Bloomington: U of Indiana P. 1980), Estelle Jelinek discusses some of the differences between the autobiographies of men and women.

[9]Harriet "Linda Brent" Jacobs, "Preface by the Author," *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1861), p. 1. Subsequently referred to in the text as "Jacobs."

that motivate her actions and inform the structure of this text. First of all, the author's stated purpose is to "arouse the woman of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South" (Jacobs, p. 1). If the white women of the North know the true conditions of the slave women of the South, then they cannot fail to answer Jacobs' call to moral action.

In order to balance our understanding of the slave narrative genre, we need first to read those narratives written by women (and to read them closely), and secondly to expand the range of terms used in writing about those narratives. An analysis of the imagery, thematic content, uses of language, and patterns of narrative movement in *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl* moves us closer to a characterization of the behavior of the outraged mother and to a more balanced understanding of the slave narrative genre.

As one who is small and relatively powerless in the face of her oppression, the outraged mother makes use of wit and intelligence to overwhelm and defeat a more powerful foe. In her aspect as trickster, "Linda" employs defensive verbal postures as well as various forms of disguise and concealment to outwit and escape Dr. Flint, the archetypal patriarchal rapist slavemaster:

1. She must conceal her quest for literacy and her ability to read in order to prevent the master from slipping her foul notes in an attempt to seduce her.
2. She must conceal her love for a free black man she eventually sends away for his own good, as well as the identity of the white man who becomes the father of her children and who eventually betrays her.
3. She conceals her pregnancy from everyone.
4. She must conceal her plans to run away, working hard and attempting to appear contented during the time she formulates these plans.
5. When Linda "runs away," she is disguised as a man and taken to the Snaky Swamp, a location she finds more hospitable than landed slave culture.
6. She is then concealed in the home of a neighboring white woman (a slaveholder sympathetic to her plight), and, finally, in a crawl space in her grandmother's house for seven years.
7. While concealed in her grandmother's house, Linda deceives the master by writing letters a friend mails from New York. When Flint takes off to New York to look for the fugitive, she is practically in his own back yard.

8. Linda is taken to the North in disguise, and even after she arrives there, she must conceal her identity with a veil, which she only removes when her freedom is purchased by a group of Northern white women. Through quick-thinking, the use of sass and invective, and a series of deceptions, Linda finally realizes freedom for herself and her children.

"Sass" is a word of West African derivation associated with the female aspect of the trickster figure. The OED attributes the origin of "sass" to the "sassy tree," the powerfully poisonous Erythophloeum quineense (Cynometra Manni). A decoction of the bark of this tree was used in West Africa as an ordeal poison in the trial of accused witches, women spoken of as being wives of Exu, the trickster god. According to the 1893 *Autobiography* of Mrs. Amanda Smith,

> I don't know as any one has ever found what the composition of this sassy wood really is; but I am told it is a mixture of certain barks. There is a tree there which grows very tall, called the sassy wood tree, but there is something mixed with this which is very difficult to find out, and the natives do not tell what it is. They say that it is one of their medicines that they use to carry out their law for punishing witches; so you cannot find out what it is.

"The accused had *two gallons* to drink. If she throws it up, she has gained her case," Mrs. Smith wrote.[10] So "sass" can kill.

Webster's Third International Dictionary defines "sass" as talking impudently or disrespectfully to an elder or a superior, or as talking back. Throughout the text, Linda uses "sass" as a weapon of self-defense whenever she is under sexual attack by the master; she returns a portion of the poison he has offered her. In one instance Dr. Flint demands: "Do you know that I have a right to do as I like with you,—that I can kill you, if I please?" Negotiating for respect, Linda replies: "You have tried to kill me, and I wish you had; but you have no right to do as you like with me" (Jacobs, p. 62). "Sass" is an effective tool that allows "Linda" to preserve her self-esteem and to increase the psychological distance between herself and the master. She uses "sass" the way Frederick Douglass uses his fists and his feet, as a means of expressing her resistance.

It is a distinctive feature of the outraged mother that she sacrifi-

[10]See Amanda Smith's *Autobiography* (Chicago: Meyer and Brother, 1893), pp. 386-89.

ces opportunities to escape without her children; Linda is motivated by an overwhelming concern for them, a concern not apparent in the narratives of the questing male slaves. This concern is shown in chapter titles like "A New Tie to Life," "Another Link to Life," "The Children Sold," "New Destination for the Children," and "The Meeting of Mother and Daughter."

The outraged mother resists her situation not so much on behalf of herself as on behalf of her children. She is part of a continuum; she links the dead, the living, and the unborn. "I knew the doom that awaited my fair baby in slavery, and I determined to save her from it, or perish in the attempt. I went to make this vow at the graves of my poor parents, in the burying ground of the slaves" (Jacobs, pp. 137–38). In the case of Jacobs' narrative, the sense of the continuum of *women's* oppression is also clear.

It is the prospect of her daughter's life under slavery that finally nerves Jacobs to run away. "When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is a terrible thing for men; but it is far more terrible for women," Jacobs wrote. "Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings and mortifications peculiarly their own" (Jacobs, p. 119).

Another important difference between this narrative and those of the heroic male slaves is that Linda celebrates the cooperation and collaboration of all the people, black and white, slave and free, who make her freedom possible. She celebrates her liberation and her children's as the fruit of a collective, not individual effort.

The inclusion of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* in the slave narrative genre and the autobiographical tradition of black Americans, permits a more balanced view of that genre and that tradition, presenting fresh themes, images, and uses of language. *Incidents* occupies a position as central to that tradition as the 1845 *Narrative of Frederick Douglass*. Only in this perspective does the outraged mother emerge as the archetypal counterpart of the articulate hero.

Further study of all such texts and testimonies by women will allow us to fill out an understanding of that experience and culture which I have designated as Afra-American, and help us correct and expand existing analyses based too exclusively on male models of experience and writing. The study of black women's writing helps us to transform definitions of genre, of archetype, of narrative traditions, and of the African-American experience itself.