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## In search of the self: An analysis of Incidents in the life of a slave girl by Harriet Ann Jacobs

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IN SEARCH OF THE SELF: AN ANALYSIS OF INCIDENTS IN  
THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL BY HARRIET ANN JACOBS

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A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
English Composition

---

by  
Rhonda Kay Roddy  
September 2001

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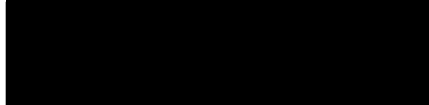
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A Thesis  
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by  
Rhonda Kay Roddy  
September 2001

Approved by:

  
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## ABSTRACT

In her autobiography, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Harriet Ann Jacobs appropriates the autobiographical "I" in order to tell her own story of slavery and talk back to the dominant culture that enslaves her. Through analysis and explication of the text, this thesis examines Jacobs' rhetorical and psychological evolution from slave to self as she struggles against patriarchal power that would rob her of her identity as well as her freedom. Included in the discussion is an analysis of the concept of self in Western philosophy, an overview of American autobiography prior to the publication of Jacobs' narrative, a discussion of the history of the slave narrative as a genre, and a discussion of the history of Jacobs' narrative. A Bakhtinian re-reading of the text provides a critical base from which to analyze Jacobs "novelization" of her text, particularly her use of dialogue. Feminist criticism is also employed to analyze Jacobs' gendered transformation into selfhood, with works by Sidonie Smith, Nellie McKay, Elaine Showalter, Jean Fagan Yellin, and others cited throughout the thesis. The conclusion of the thesis re-presents Jacobs' text to modern readers through analysis of Mary Louise Pratt's "Arts of the Contact

Zone," a discussion of autoethnographic texts produced by writers previously marginalized by cultural definitions of literacy, literature, and culture itself. This discussion centers around the indeterminate ending of Jacobs' narrative and suggests that Pratt's "contact zone" is the philosophical equivalent of Jacobs' "communitas"--an idealized community in which each person sees herself represented in the human story.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my sincere thanks to the members of my committee: Phil Page, Bruce Golden, and Maureen Newlin. Your guidance, your encouragement, and your patience are sincerely appreciated.

To Phil Page I offer my special thanks for serving as primary reader and one-man support system. I am forever grateful for your confidence in my ability to complete this project, your endless patience, and your faith that I would "do the work."

I also wish to extend a very special thank you to Robert Montee for providing me with the place and the space to complete this project. You have my eternal gratitude.

To all of my teachers, I wish to express my deepest gratitude for doing what you do.

DEDICATION

To

Lorraine, Annie, and Emma Lorraine

with love

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

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

Isaiah 32:9

It is with this verse from the Book of Isaiah that Harriet Ann Jacobs introduces her autobiography, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, one of two antebellum slave narratives that address the particular problems faced by women slaves. The verse from Isaiah is a clear signal to Jacobs' readers that Incidents is not another "as-told-to" slave narrative, co-written by white editors in order to confirm the abolitionist version of slavery. The passage from the Book of Isaiah is a direct challenge to Jacobs' intended audience: white women whom Jacobs sees as both co-conspirators and victims of the patriarchy that enslaves her.

Throughout her powerful narrative, Jacobs talks back to the dominant culture through the autobiographical "I," creating a rhetorically and psychologically evolving self. Rejecting the abolitionist version of slavery that focused on the collective experience of slaves, Jacobs' narrative focuses on her personal experience of slavery. Her bold

presentation simultaneously mystified and offended nineteenth-century American readers, who largely doubted the humanity of the African, making the concept of slave-as-self almost impossible to accept.

Jacobs' narrative directly confronts the issue of the sexual abuse of female slaves, a topic whispered about in nineteenth-century America but deemed unsuitable for public discussion. Writing as a slave woman, Jacobs uses the autobiographical "I" to expose the underbelly of a patriarchal culture that enshrines women of one color, rendering them dependent and helpless, while enslaving and abusing women of another color, rendering them invisible and hopeless.

By reconstructing specific "incidents" from her life, Jacobs creates a rhetorical self who evolves from a cultural non-entity into a woman who learns to tilt patriarchal power in her favor through negotiated meanings within the language of slavery. By insisting upon telling her story in her own voice, in her own way, she transforms from slave to self and challenges patriarchal authority.

Accustomed to heavily edited slave narratives that were mass-produced by the abolitionist movement, nineteenth-century readers shunned Jacobs' narrative because of its content as well as its form. Jacobs' use of

dialogue in the text was particularly offensive to the nineteenth-century reader, who believed that dialogue fictionalized autobiography. Literary scholars also rejected the text, dismissing it as a highly fictionalized account of the slave woman's life, one that was modeled on popular romantic fictions of the time. After being ignored by scholars for decades, the text was re-discovered by Professor Jean Fagan Yellin, who published her study of the narrative in 1981. Since that time, scholars such as William Andrews, Sidonie Smith, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and others have written extensively about the Jacobs' autobiography. A scholarly re-reading of the text has shed considerable light on the history of the narrative, its authenticity, and its unusual form. For example, Professor Yellin's research provided documentation that Jacobs is, in fact, the author of the narrative, disputing the long-held opinion that the work was a collaboration between Jacobs and social activist Lydia Marie Childs. Modern scholars also reject the earlier assumption that dialogue fictionalizes autobiography. Jacobs' use of dialogue is considered to be a brilliant, if misunderstood, attempt to re-create the context in which the incidents of her life take place. The renewed interest in the Jacobs text has resulted in a more liberal

definition of autobiography, which now includes numerous texts by writers previously not entitled to the autobiographical "I" of the dominant culture.

Subsequently, the definition of the universal human subject has been expanded to include those who were previously marginalized as "other". (Smith 9).

Chapter Two, "The Self as Universal Human Subject," examines the cultural concept of self as it is manifested in autobiography and the evolution of the self as a masculine construct in Western philosophical tradition. Women and all those deemed "other" by the culture are excluded from claiming the autobiographical "I" as their own. Chapter Three, "Ben Franklin and the Quintessential American Self," closely examines American autobiography, with its emphasis on masculine discourse that creates privileged cultural themes. Chapter Four, "In Search of the Self," examines the problems slave writers encountered when they attempted to tell their stories to white audiences, and it explores the relationship between the slave writer and the abolitionist press. Chapter Five, "The Other of the Other," is an explication of the text that focuses on Jacobs' use of dialogue. This chapter argues that dialogue allows Jacobs to transform herself from object to subject, a critical shift in her evolution

from slave to self and in her relationship with the dominant culture. Chapter Six, "Secrets," explores the ways in which Jacobs communicates with her audience, understands the language of the community of women, and offers up the secrets of slavery--secrets that women have whispered to one another--in the language of women. It also examines how secrets of the patriarchy fragmented women's community, and it explores Jacobs' continuing evolution into selfhood as she challenges patriarchal authority over women's identities, cultural roles, and behavior. Chapter Seven, "From the Margins to the Contact Zone," explores the indeterminate ending of Jacobs' story in relationship to the cultural context in which it was written and argues that the fragmentation of women's community prevented Jacobs from achieving the ultimate evolution into selfhood that she envisioned.

Harriet Ann Jacobs was searching for the "contact zone" at a time in American history when few conceived that such a space could be created. She sought recognition from a culture that rendered her invisible. She appropriated the autobiographical "I" and ignored literary conventions that prevented her from telling her story in her own way. The subtitle of her autobiography is, therefore, most appropriate: "Written by Herself."

CHAPTER TWO  
THE SELF AS UNIVERSAL  
HUMAN SUBJECT

According to Terry Eagleton, "certain meanings are elevated by social ideologies to a privileged position, or made centers around which other meanings are forced to turn" (131). One concept that has been privileged in Western philosophical tradition is that of the self as *isolato*, a unified, stable essence with its own "sharp configuration that is different from all others" (Smith 5).

This traditional concept of self has been challenged, however, by modern linguists, social psychologists, and literary critics who argue that the Western concept of self is neither singular, unified, nor stable. Freud himself may have indirectly assaulted the traditional notion of self when he wrote that psychoanalysis is the "third blow" to human narcissism:

After the Copernican wound, affirming that we humans occupied not the center of the universe but just another planet revolving around the sun, and after the Darwinian wound, demonstrating that we humans are not descended

from the angels of heaven but ascended from the apes of the jungle, the psychoanalytic wound came to say that we are not even masters in our own house; if we were indeed sole possessors of reason, we were not exclusively ruled by it.

(qtd. in Krupat 5-6)

The traditional concept of self has also been challenged by social constructionists, who argue that the self is a socially created construct, a contextually variable cultural artifact (Couser 16). Feminist critics such as Sidonie Smith agree with the contention that the traditional version of self is a political, philosophical, and cultural construct. However, they stress that this self is also a masculine construct whose masculine bias has resulted in the exclusion of all those deemed "other, exotic, unruly, irrational, and uncivilized" (Smith 9)--women specifically and the culturally marginalized in general.

In her work Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body in which autobiography is the model through which she seeks to explain why women's voices have often been silenced in Western culture, Sidonie Smith explores the issue of the self by tracing its evolution from the Renaissance through the nineteenth century, an evolution that produced what

Smith calls the "universal human subject" (2). She asserts that the concept of self as a "fixed, extralinguistic entity, consciously pursuing its unique destiny" (5) can be traced through specific historical events as well as specific philosophical, economic, political, theological, scientific, and literary influences--the "universal human subject who is marked individually" (5). The Renaissance, eighteenth-century enlightenment, the creation of the middle class, capitalism, and Victorian optimism (Smith 5) all served to further refine the concept of selfhood and to "help secure its privilege" (Smith 5) in Western culture.

The debate about the self and its relationship to autobiography is not a debate about the literal existence of a particular person as a living, breathing, biological reality. It is, however, a debate about the troublesome question of culturally assigned values and how such assignments privilege specific ideas (and texts) while marginalizing or excluding others within certain cultural contexts.

For Smith and other feminist critics, the evolution of the universal human subject, with its inherent masculinity, directly impacts traditional Western autobiography in a very dramatic fashion. Citing Cartesian



philosophy, with its emphasis on the rational and its rejection of the sensual, Smith asserts that mind (logic) was privileged over body (the senses), resulting in a value assignment that eventually produced a universal human subject who was disembodied--separated from the chaos of the senses (6). If the body, with its capricious and unreliable urges, could not be ignored, it could be controlled, "drained of its chaotic and grotesque potential" (Smith 6). As the concept of universal human subject evolved, those identified with embodiment--those who could not escape the drag of the body--were marginalized (Smith 17), banned to the cultural borderlands. Woman, for example, could not escape the encumbrance of her biology, long regarded as her destiny. By the nineteenth century even woman's ability to reason was sexualized:

In various philosophical and religious discourse, the sexualization of woman's mind influences her intellectual capacity. In thrall to her body and to the affections and behavior associated with her encumbrances, woman remains "naturally" less rational than man. Rather than working logically her mind works through another

kind of logic, which becomes a marginalized logic. (Smith 13)

Her "encumbrances" (body, culturally imposed roles and relationships, other-mindedness) disqualify her from participation as universal human subject, a subject that "presumes individual participation in an eternal human nature and an identification with a common ontology--rational thinking" (Smith 8).

Embodied, irrational, and marginalized, women were deemed culturally as other, unlikely candidates as universal human subjects and therefore not entitled to lay claim to the metaphorical "I" that symbolized "ontologically identical, rational beings" (Smith 8).

The exclusionary practices of the evolving universal human subject were not limited to middle and upper class white women. Also excluded were people of color and members of the lower class, regardless of gender or ethnicity. The exotic African slave, hopelessly embodied, certainly could not claim a selfhood that was "neutral, middling, democratic [or] rational" (Smith 9), all requirements of the universal human subject, nor could the unruly, colorful members of the lower class claim interest in a self to whom they bore little resemblance.

Almost by default, then, the universal human subject became equated with a certain class of white male who was empowered politically, economically, and philosophically to claim as his own the "I" of traditional Western autobiography. Most certainly his story had individual markings; more importantly, however, its themes were necessarily universal. As Smith points out,

the individual self could endure as a concept of human beingness only if, despite the specificities of individual experience, despite the multiplication of differences among people, the legend continued to bear universal marks. This self had to move freely toward its cultural positioning as the universal subject to retain a threshold of particulars. (9)

The self-as-universal-subject who emerges from Western autobiography was influenced by such sociopolitical phenomena as the French Revolution, the philosophies of Locke and Rousseau, Romanticism (with its focus on the subjective experience), the shift from aristocratic to bourgeoisie power, Darwinism, and Protestant theology (Smith 8-9). The result was an autobiographical subject who represents the culturally and politically privileged concepts of individualism and

self-determinism--a man who is in charge of his destiny. He is the self-made man, culturally empowered to "autograph history [and] mark the times" (Smith 9).

In American autobiography, the issue of self and the problem of self-representation intersect dramatically. The Americanized version of the universal human subject, evolving along with the ideology of democracy, had to be both typical and unique, the autobiographical "I" symbolic of both an individual and a representative self--America's "every man." But as William Andrews observes in his introduction to Classic American Autobiographies,

when the American who attempted autobiography was someone other than the white male, in whose interests the ideology of democracy had been designed, the problems of self-representation only intensified as questions arose about the legitimacy of one's claim to selfhood and the willingness of the social order to claim one as a member. (10)

CHAPTER THREE  
BEN FRANKLIN AND THE  
QUINTESENTIAL  
AMERICAN SELF

Michel Foucault writes that it is "one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, come to be identified and constituted as individuals" (qtd. in Krupat 80). Foucault's comments underscore William Boelhower's observation that the self projected by such notable Americans as Benjamin Franklin was scripted to

mythologize the nation's early historical patterns and protagonists, promote a political philosophy of liberalism, and take for its system of values a virulent form of individualism. (127)

Boelhower further states that this privileged American self was "perennially dressed out in typological rhetoric, in part because its base was stringently monocultural and monolingualistic, in part because it was sheathed in a theory of American exceptionalism" (127).

Franklin's autobiography, described by Daniel B Shea as a "touchstone for estimates of the national character"

(39), seems to confirm Foucault's observations. Franklin's young apprentice bears all the markings of a universal human subject rhetorically created to reflect culturally privileged ideals. Franklin's ideal self, individualized through charming anecdotes, could well be considered the prototype for future culturally sanctioned American selves: white, male, autonomous, industrious, ambitious, and self-sufficient. He is concerned with morality, but in a secular sense, as in public versus religious service, and he concludes that moral imperfections are "errata" that can be revised through a somewhat mechanical formula of self-discipline. Simply stated, he can endlessly reinvent himself.

Franklin's memoir is an essentially masculine discourse that helped to create privileged cultural themes and set the precedent for future American autobiographies.

As a memoir, the Franklin autobiography belongs to a sub-genre of autobiography that focuses principally on the external events of a public life. The story of Franklin's young printer is the American story of the "perpetual reinvention of one's role and image in the social order" (Andrews, Classic 10), and it contains all the elements of the quintessential American success story: a nobody who

becomes a somebody, an outsider who becomes an insider, and the poor boy who makes good (Andrews, Classic 10).

With Franklin's young apprentice as the model for the idealized American version of the universal human subject, the autobiographical "I" became the domain of the white male as he told and retold the American story. The story can be traced throughout later years in the canonized writings of Adams, Thoreau, Twain, and Whitman. While the writers may bend Franklin's model in varying degrees, the selves that emerge from their stories are remarkably similar, even in the aftermath of that most profound national event, the Civil War. For example, by the nineteenth century American autobiography had evolved into a hybridization of memoir, such as Franklin's narrative, and confession, "an inner-directed, soul-searching model of self-examination" (Andrews, Classic 8), resulting in autobiography that consisted of both "self-celebration and self-revelation" (Andrews, Classic 8). In the autobiography of this period, the "I" seeks to rhetorically balance its public and private selves in a way that did not concern Franklin, with his focus on his public persona. Instead, for the nineteenth-century autobiographer the issue is "how far to think and write about the "I" as a figure distinct from an established

public or narrative role" (Buell 55). Describing the influence on the era of transcendentalist thinkers like Emerson and Thoreau, who insisted that "living discourse" was the source of "true eloquence," Andrews writes of this period:

The convergence of spiritual self-examination, romantic self-consciousness, and democratic individualism in transcendental writings made the self, its nature and potential, an inescapable topic of the time. (To Tell 102)

Lawrence Buell describes the balancing act between the universal and the particular as the "single motif that fundamentally distinguishes this period of American autobiographical writing" (55):

While the writers of this period's American autobiography grappled with the problem of presenting versions of self--"one with its psyche stripped bare and one in full dress" (Andrews, Classic 10)--he more interesting fact remains that as universal human subjects, with the existence of selfhood culturally secured, they are free to grapple at will. For example, Thoreau is free to brood endlessly at Walden Pond about self-sufficiency; a young riverboat pilot is free to transform himself from Samuel Clemens into Mark Twain; Whitman may freely fuss



and cluck over the ultimate meaning of "me/myself," while Adams is free to explore in third person the meaning of his American selfhood.

For over two centuries, Franklin's ideal American self has continued to charm. However, American culture is not now nor has it ever been as tidy as presumed by Franklin's idealized American self. Even as Franklin's young printer made his way and his fortune in the New World, other voices were echoing in the background. The man who came to colonize the New World brought with him a cultural context confirming that he was the vast new continent's only worthy inhabitant and that his story was the only story worth telling. The new American self continued the autobiographical tendencies of the Old World, with its "endless rewriting of Genesis in the first person" (Shea 27).

In this context, the universal human subject did not need to consider the fact that prior to his arrival the New World was populated with Others who had their own literatures of songs and stories, and systems of language that defined the self in different terms than his own. Neither did he consider women's voices, already deemed powerless by the same Old World rhetoric that empowered him. Marginalized in the Old World, women continued to be

marginalized in the new one, as were all voices of others deemed unsuitable for the role of universal human subject.

With no legitimate claim to the autobiographical "I," Americans who also happened to be other sought ways in which to present themselves as individuals and as representatives of a culture in which they were largely invisible and silenced. Some chose to cloak themselves in the discourse of the empowered and to disguise themselves as universal human subjects; others defiantly talked back in discourse that evolved in the margins.

In nineteenth century America, no person was more marginalized--more excluded--from the autobiographical "I" than the American slave woman. Her journey from the hopeless embodiment of slavery to empowered selfhood through the autobiographical "I" is an inspiring American story.

CHAPTER FOUR  
IN SEARCH OF THE SELF

"The autobiographer," writes George Gusdorf, "decides to tell his [sic] own story in order to restore an incomplete or deformed truth" (36). For the marginalized writer of the slave narrative, restoring deformed truth meant finding a way to talk back to the dominant culture in order to lay forever to rest the myth of race and prove that blacks were the intellectual, spiritual, and moral equals of whites. Through the autobiographical "I" slaves sought to extricate themselves from the margins by recreating and representing literate, believable selves who portrayed the black character far more accurately than it had been portrayed by whites. The selves they presented, however, were not generally welcomed into the cultural mainstream by their contemporary white readers. As William Andrews notes, "as a class, no American autobiographer has been received with more skepticism and resistance than the slave" ("First Century" 5). Both slave and slavery were embedded in a cultural context that certainly "deformed" the truth for all concerned.

A most deadly deformed truth faced by the slave autobiographer was the cultural tendency to believe in the

"minutely calibrated" evolutionary ladder (Smith 34), a belief that placed the African squarely on the bottom rung of human evolution. Western, i.e. white, culture was regarded as the pinnacle of human achievement, while the African was regarded as atavistic, hopelessly embodied, and associated with "primitive impulses" (Smith 35). The dominant culture's doubt that the slave was fully human created an environment that tested the African's determination to produce an autobiography "worthy" of a generally skeptical white audience. One misconception born from the culturally skewed view of the African was the belief that the slave's lack of written language was proof of his or her lack of intellect. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. points out, "blacks were reasonable and hence men if--and only if--they demonstrated mastery of the written language" (54). Slaves, therefore, found themselves in a cultural catch 22: they lived in an era that viewed writing as the "evidentiary scene of reason" (Smith 35), but were enslaved in a system that forbade them to read and write. The act of writing itself became an "oppositional gesture" (Smith 35) for the slave--a defiant act undertaken to "establish and redefine his [sic] status within the human community" (Gates 53).

Another obstacle for the slave autobiographer was what Andrews calls the era's "vision of perfect truth" ("First Century" 6), a vision that induced Thoreau, for example, to call for a "simple and sincere account" of another person's life, an account that presented the "facts" in plain and simple language (Andrews, "Dialogue" 89-90). For the slave writer, presenting the "truth" proved problematic for several reasons. White readers, for example, generally accepted the cultural myth that the African was an exotic, rather terrifying blend of manipulative child and cunning savage who was either inherently unable to tell the truth or who willfully refused to do so. So entrenched was this belief that even prominent leaders in the American Anti-Slavery Society publicly labeled slaves as liars (Andrews, "Dialogue" 90). With their humanity in question, their intellect in doubt, and their ability to state the truth almost universally rejected by the dominant culture, slave autobiographers recognized that, to the white audience, sounding truthful was as important as being truthful. Unable to rely upon what Andrews calls the "assumption of trustworthiness" ("First Century" 5) between reader and writer that assumes a peer relationship, and sensitive to the skepticism of

whites who labeled as exaggeration any slave story that contradicted their own perception of slavery,

black autobiographers promised to understate the facts of their experience in the hope that this gesture of insincerity, this tacit admission of self-censorship, would inspire white confidence in their sincerity. (Andrews, "Dialogue" 90)

White readers also viewed with hostility any imaginative, i.e. fictional, elements in autobiography, particularly dialogue (Andrews, "Dialogue" 91). Andrews states that "nothing that might prompt the reader to suspect that he or she was reading fiction could be allowed in the text" ("Dialogue" 90). Slave writers and their white editors/amanuenses went to great lengths to assure white readers that a narrative had been cleansed of all elements of the imagination (i.e. fiction). Abolitionist editors routinely prefaced slave narratives with long-winded, didactic introductions in which the editor vouched for the slave's honesty and the reliability of the narrative's attention to facts. Andrews notes that the Douglass narrative of 1845 is prefaced by such a device, written by none other than William Lloyd Garrison:

Indeed, one of the best guarantees that William Lloyd Garrison could give Frederick Douglass'

narrative (1845) was that nothing in it had been 'drawn from the imagination.' Rather than exaggerate, Douglass had deliberately 'come short of the reality' of slavery as he knew it. ("Dialogue" 90)

It is in this context of mistrust, misinformation, and erroneous beliefs that "the era's most interesting literary experiments were conducted in how to tell the truth about experience" (Andrews, "Dialogue" 89).

Between 1831 and the Emancipation, the role played by the abolitionist movement in producing these "experiments" reshaped the genre, according to John Sekora (108). However noble their cause, producing authentic slave autobiographies was not the abolitionists' main purpose. In their drive to create an "alternative text" to the American story (Sekora 108), the abolitionists "sought to explain slavery to an ignorant audience, not chart an individual life" (Sekora 109). The abolitionists had little interest in slavery as individual experience, viewing it instead as collective experience (Sekora 109). Certain narratives were "touted as documents of empirical fact" (Andrews, To Tell 65) in an effort to give the genre "a certain positivistic, quasi-scientific status" (Andrews, To Tell 65). Forced through the seive of

abolitionist politics, slave autobiographies "concentrated on race, gender, and caste, institutionalized in chattel slavery, as ends in themselves" (Andrews, To Tell 65). Abolitionists were generally not concerned with the life stories of selves who existed "beneath the accidents of race, gender, and caste" (Andrews, To Tell 65).

While some slave writers might have hoped that the autobiographical "I" would be what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls the "instrument of transformation" (qtd. in Smith 36) that would underwrite their status as human beings and end their cultural exile, the slave's struggle to re-create and re-present a "potentialized self" (Andrews, To Tell 64) was routinely thwarted by abolitionist editors empowered to deliver the "truth" of slave life as it served to "restore"--in abolitionist terms--the incomplete or deformed truth about slavery, not about the individual slave. The slave writer who hoped to create an authentic black voice--"a voice of deliverance from the deafening discursive silence" (Gates in Smith 35)--instead became the narrative's "eye witness" rather than its "I witness" (Andrews, To Tell 65). In that sense, slave writers were forced to vacate their own texts for the sake of the abolitionist agenda. Sidonie Smith remarks that the slave "entered the scene of writing that, like the scene of



slavery, required the erasure of individual history and of self" (36).

Abolitionist meddling subsequently resulted in decades of scholarly confusion and bias with regard to slave narratives and their literary value as autobiography. Some narratives (like their authors) were marginalized by scholars who privileged abolitionist editing over slave authorship. Scholarly probing into issues such as relevance, literary authority, and the absence of Gates' "voice of deliverance" has resulted in what John Sekora describes as the "expulsion of the narrative from the center of our literary history to its furthest margins" (110). He adds that

to search for the slave presence in the institutional clutter of sources, composition, sponsorship, or ideology is actually to look in specifically those places where, by definition, it cannot reside. (109)

The slave presence, however, did reside in the margins where it continued to evolve as slave writers continued to experiment with the autobiographical "I" and to challenge the culturally sanctioned version of the American self. For example, Andrews describes the evolution of the slave narrative and classifies its

writers into three distinct groups: outsiders manque, interstitial, and liminal (To Tell 177-178). In the first group, the slave writer attempts to "establish an outside vantage point from which to critique and analyze" privileged cultural assumptions (Andrews, To Tell 177). In the second group, the slave writer "conjoins and confuses that which culture and society demand remain separate, distinct, and valorized according to rank" (Andrews, To Tell 178). For the third group of slave writers, the "writing of autobiography may enact its own [w]rite of transition, allowing the liminal narrator to pass over various thresholds into a new relationship with the reader" (Andrews, To Tell 179). These groups reflect different perspectives of the slave experience and the slave's shifting relationship to the dominant culture. As a model of the liminal group of slave writers, Harriet Jacobs realized that

there would be no final breakthrough, no ultimate arrival, no essential transformation of self or transcendence of roles unless [she] found some form of "communitas" that [she], as a liminal figure, could claim as [her] own special kind of home. (Andrews, To Tell 204)

In her narrative, Jacobs encourages her intended audience to cross over new thresholds with her as she challenges not only cultural beliefs about slaves, but as she challenges cultural beliefs about women and about patriarchal authority. Her experiment with the genre is in part the result of her desire to establish a new relationship with her readers--a bond between women, regardless of color or class.

Until recently, only a few slave narratives, most often authored by males, received the bulk of scholarly attention. American school children now regularly read excerpts from the autobiography of Frederick Douglass as an example of both American literature and American history. Modern American students may be more familiar with the Douglass autobiography than with the Franklin autobiography, the irony of which would surely be appreciated by both authors. Through the diligent effort of feminist scholars such as Sidonie Smith, Nellie McKay, Joanne Braxton, and others, the narratives written by female slaves--the "Other of the Other" (Smith 37)--have been rescued from the cultural borderlands, re-read, and re-positioned within the genre. Often dismissed in the past as largely unreliable and chaotic in nature (perhaps reflecting the cultural opinion of the authors),

narratives authored by women slaves offer not only a different view of slavery, but also a unique way of creating a self through the autobiographical "I" that was never intended for her appropriation. The autobiography of Harriet Ann Jacobs, as told through her narrator Linda Brent, is one such text.

CHAPTER FIVE  
THE OTHER OF THE OTHER

If the vision of American selfhood as rendered by the autobiographical "I" excluded white women and black males, then the black woman was culturally marginalized to the point of near invisibility. Doubly embodied by race and gender, her quest for selfhood was arduous. A critical part of her passage into full-fledged selfhood includes her perception of and relationship to the dominant culture while she was enslaved by it. While she was forced to play a central role in America's most degrading historical moment, only in recent decades has her story been recognized as equally important to American literature as the narratives written by male slaves.

The dominant culture that privileged the white male as the rightful possessor of the autobiographical "I" also privileged the black male as the author of the slave narrative, America's "alternate text." In recent decades, feminist scholars, clamoring for a gynocritical approach to previously rejected texts, have greatly influenced how such texts are read--or reread. For example, Joanne Braxton asserts that, by ignoring or rejecting narratives written by slave women, scholars have been "paralyzed by

issues of primacy, authenticity, and authorship" and that "by focusing on male slave narratives scholars have missed half the picture" (18).

One such narrative is Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, written by Harriet Ann Jacobs and published in 1861. Writing under the pseudonym "Linda Brent," Jacobs declines to relate the story of her life as a series of similar details about the experience of slavery. Instead, she creates a self that evolves rhetorically and psychologically by talking back to the dominant culture that enslaves her. She flaunts literary conventions through a dialogized narrative that demonstrates how power is verbally negotiated in master-slave relationships; she confronts the incendiary issue of sexual misconduct between master and slave, the first slave narrative to do so, and she demonstrates how women, through the telling or keeping of secrets seek to influence and sometimes subvert the male-dominated cultural discourse.

In the past, questions concerning authorship and authenticity led scholars to dismiss the Jacobs narrative as an example of romantic fiction rather than autobiography. Particularly problematic for scholars was the role played by Jacobs' editor, Lydia Marie Childs. Finally, in 1981 Professor Jean Fagan Yellin offered

research that ended the authenticity debate. Yellin's research indicates that correspondence between Jacobs, Childs, and others verifies Jacobs' authorship of the text. Braxton notes that "questions of authenticity camouflaged the narrative's importance, though they were relatively easy to answer" (23). Braxton's remarks support what Yellin's research implies--that those raising the question of authenticity did little, if any, research in order to resolve the matter.

With the benefit of the backward glance, together with an invigoratingly diverse critical base from which to draw, feminist scholars generally have high regard for Jacobs' autobiography; they consider it to be an excellent example of both slave narrative and woman's text, and cite its differences from male-authored texts as one of its greatest strengths. For example, Nellie McKay points out that Jacobs' narrative "reveals some of the differences in black male and female psychological development towards agency" (98). McKay notes that for male writers (such as Douglass), agency was "the power of self in the public image of manhood; for women, it was self-recognition of their ability to manipulate the power in the self even when they were in otherwise powerless situations" (98).

The black woman tells a different story of slavery than her male counterpart, but it is nonetheless powerful. From her "complex angle of vision" (McKay 98), the female slave is at once

along side and apart from white women and black men, joined to the struggles of each but separated from both in a system that still privileges whiteness and maleness. (McKay 97)

From this unique position, Jacobs confronts the institution of slavery, the cult of true womanhood, and the hypocrisy of the abolitionist movement through a rhetorically created "potencialized self" (Andrews, To Tell 64) who views the margin as a point of departure rather than a destination.

Sidonie Smith observes that the marginalized write autobiography because they are alienated from the image of self that has been culturally assigned to them: "With their entry there is mess and clutter all around" (20).

Part of the "mess and clutter" that Jacobs creates is produced by her extensive use of dialogue--reconstructed conversations through which she is sometimes engaged in a furious struggle for selfhood. As Andrews points out, Jacobs' narrative contains more dialogue than any other slave narrative of the antebellum period (To Tell 277).



She infuses her narrative with a diversity of speech types--what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "heteroglossia (Vice 20)--creating a "dialogized" rendition of her past that "extends beyond the basic rhetorical relationship between narrator and reader" (Andrews, To Tell 272). A Bakhtinian re-reading of Jacobs' narrative suggests that the multiple voices and diversity of speech types contained within "multiply the channels through which the narrative communicates" its messages (Andrews, To Tell 272). Andrews joins other present-day scholars who reject the idea that dialogue supplements reality by insisting that

without incorporating the fullest possible diversity of social speech into autobiography, one could not dramatize the fundamental sociolinguistic reality within and against which all black speech action had to contend for authority. Dialogue evokes reality by dramatizing the sociolinguistic context in which all discourse takes on form and meaning.

(To Tell 272-73)

In The Dialogic Imagination, Bakhtin writes that "language for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in

language is half someone else's" (293). Writing or speaking is "to become an active participant in social dialogue--to engage in a power struggle" (Bakhtin 293-94). Bakhtin stresses that "language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions" (276-77). Meaning is negotiated between the speaker and other, a meaning that is constantly in flux. For example, Andrews suggests that, through dialogic instances, the slave "creates a crack in the wall" surrounding words, "making room for potencialized meanings" (To Tell 275). To enslave people, "there must be a [constriction] of the free play of meaning that normally informs words like 'master,' 'home,' 'lady,' or 'freedom'" (Andrews, To Tell 274). The slave asserts herself through language by "flexing [her] mental muscle in a power struggle, the significance of which is crucial to our understanding of slavery as Jacobs wanted it understood" (Andrews, To Tell 275). An example of this power struggle is found in Chapter Two of the autobiography in a telling scene that signals a "crack in the wall" of the language of slavery.

Brent's brother William is summoned simultaneously by their father (also a slave) and by their mistress. The boy hesitates between the two, then responds to the mistress.

Their father reprimands the boy by telling him: "'You are my child and when I call you, you should come immediately, if you have to pass through fire and water'" (Jacobs 9). This brief exchange between father and son shows a slave father who feels entitled to exercise his parental authority, even if that authority is at odds with the authority of the master. This scene illustrates the same familial line of authority practiced in the dominant culture, i.e. the man is the head of the family and is in charge of its members. The father claims his son's allegiance, as is his right, to the exclusion of any other claim on the boy, and he will not accept interference with his authority. The father's admonition to his son indirectly challenges the paternalistic authority of the master and plays on the meaning of "master," which is subject to negotiation. The father uses the possessive "my child" to declare his right to the relationship, much as the slave owner uses the possessive to claim the right to "his" or "her" slaves. Although this domestic scene seems benign on the surface, it foreshadows the means by which Brent deliberately and ceaselessly chisels away at the wall that surrounds and constricts meaning within the confines of slavery.

Dialogue in the narrative is most effective when Jacobs reconstructs conversations between Brent and her master, the odious Dr. Flint. These conversations "tell us more about male-female power relationships under slavery than we are likely to find in any other antebellum source" (Andrews, "Dialogue" 93). Brent describes the "war of my life" (Jacobs 19) as a bitter battle of words and wills that begins when Brent is fifteen and ends only when Flint dies many years later. Initially, theirs is a literal war over the right to Brent's body; the ensuing "war" becomes a metaphor for Brent's evolution into selfhood. Jacobs' narrative plots out this evolution chronologically and rhetorically as Brent grows from child to woman and from slave to self.

Jacobs' dialogue reconstructs scenes in which Brent is forced to defend herself against Flint's unwanted sexual advances. Their arguments turn on Brent's right to use certain words "in certain contexts, to define herself through language that her master denies is applicable to her" (Andrews, "Dialogue" 94). For example, in Chapter Seven (entitled "The Lover"), Brent confesses her love for a certain young carpenter (a free man) whom she wishes to marry. When she seeks Flint's permission to marry, Flint immediately exercises his authority by rejecting Brent's

carpenter and offering a substitute: "'If you must have a husband, you may take up with one of my slaves'" (Jacobs 39).

Brent not only rejects his suggestion, she counters with a response that plays on the word "marriage:"

'Don't you suppose, sir, that a slave can have some preference about marrying? Do you suppose all men are alike to her?' (Jacobs 39)

Flint has used the phrase "take up" while Brent uses the word "marry"--two different interpretations of the relationship that Brent seeks. Brent desires a culturally sanctioned union with the man of her choice; Flint's words reflect the practice of mating slaves like livestock. This war of words continues on a more personal level when Brent suggests that a slave woman can discern differences in men that make one man preferable over another. Having repeatedly rejected Flint's advances, Brent's reply is another form of rejection.

Annoyed, Flint snaps back at Brent:

'Do you love this nigger?' said he [Flint] abruptly.

'Yes, sir.'

'How dare you tell me so!' he exclaimed, in great wrath. (Jacobs 39)

The word "love" is a constant source of tension between Brent and Dr. Flint. From his point of view, Brent is not entitled to the word "love" or to the relationship that it symbolizes--a relationship very different from the relationship that he has in mind. Andrews observes that "to name the feeling is to know the difference between what Flint and the young carpenter desire of the slave woman" ("Dialogue" 94). By putting these words into Flint's mouth, Jacobs demonstrates that it is the "telling as much as the feeling that angers the master" (Andrews, To Tell 277). Flint cannot tolerate Brent speaking of love because "this is a word that signifies a feeling to which he would deny her access" (Andrews, "Dialogue" 94).

As the scene continues, Flint tries to regain control of the argument by telling Brent: "'I supposed you thought more of yourself; that you felt above the insults of such puppies'" (Jacobs 39). Unwilling to accept Flint's definition of "love as insult" (Andrews, "Dialogue" 94), Brent replies: "'The man you call a puppy never insulted me, sir; and he would not love me if he did not believe me to be a virtuous woman'" (Jacobs 39). At this point, Flint resorts to physical aggression in order to regain command of the situation. He gives Brent a "stunning blow" (Jacobs 39), a clear signal that he has lost the verbal battle.

Brent answers the physical blow with a verbal blow of her own: "'How I despise you!'" (Jacobs 39). As Andrews notes, she "caps the argument over whom she loves by identifying unmistakably whom she hates" ("Dialogue" 94). Flint finally orders Brent to be silent and to never again mention the carpenter. In doing so, he

tries to repress the dialogic imperative that underlies the competition between master and slave for the right to define the word "love." However, he cannot simply take the word out of commission. (Andrews, "Dialogue" 94)

The word resurfaces several chapters later in a similar confrontation between the two, following the birth of Brent's first child, who is fathered by a man whom she refuses to identify. Dr. Flint demands to know whether the father of Brent's child is white or black: "'I command you,' said he, 'to tell me whether the father of your child is white or black. Answer me this instant!' he exclaimed" (Jacobs 59). When Brent replies that the man is white, the following scene erupts, with the word "love" coming into play once again:

He sprang upon me like a wolf, and grabbed my arm as if he would have broken it. 'Do you love him?' said he, in a hissing tone. 'I am thankful

that I do not despise him,' I replied.

(Jacobs 59)

Remarking that Brent's reply is the "perfect squelch," Andrews goes on to say that Brent evades the question of how she feels about the unnamed white man while echoing the conclusion of her previous interview with Flint. It is an act of verbal obfuscation that leaves Flint tormentingly ambivalent about the manner and degree of his response to [Brent].

("Dialogue" 95)

Through the use of dialogue, Jacobs illustrates "the discursive nature of male-female power relationships" under slavery (Andrews, "Dialogue" 95). Brent's engagement in this war of words with Flint challenges certain beliefs about slavery and discloses a rhetorically evolving self. For example, by reconstructing confrontations between master and slave, Brent disputes the belief that this relationship is a monologic one in which the master's word is law--final and non-negotiable. By talking back to Flint, Brent creates a dialogue in which the master's word proves to be sometimes negotiable, a possibility that is subsumed in the abolitionist depiction of the slave-master relationship. When Brent rejects Flint's sexual advances,



she demonstrates that the "vagaries of patriarchalism" (Andrews, To Tell 278) require Flint to convince her to submit. Their heated exchanges reveal that "the source of power of the master over his concubine is not sanctioned in the law; it is relative only to the informal ties that bind the two parties together" (Andrews, To Tell 278). By giving Brent a verbal escape route, however narrow, from patriarchal control, Jacobs shows that power is not absolutely fixed on the side of the master, but is

negotiated through speech acts, through dialogue in which the woman constantly matches wits with the man in order to define a margin of options for herself. (Andrews, "Dialogue" 95)

Through the use of dialogue, Jacobs insists that slavery is experienced individually rather than collectively as portrayed in the abolitionist press. Through dialogue, Jacobs "liberates [her] narrative from the fetters of monolithic facts and monologic voice" found in the abolitionist version of slavery (Andrews, "Dialogue" 97).

Similarly, Jacobs' use of dialogue serves as a kind of growth chart through which she traces Brent's psychological development. For example, Brent's increasing boldness in her disputes with Flint reveals a self

gradually empowered by her ability to master the language of slavery. Each time that Brent manages to verbally deflect Flint's sexual assaults, she reveals a self who readily seizes every opportunity to subvert patriarchal authority. For instance, a dramatic confrontation between the two adversaries turns on the word "silence." Angered and frustrated by the altercation over the young carpenter, Flint ends the argument by shouting "'Silence!'" (Jacobs 39). Flint assumes that he has regained control of the situation and makes plans to isolate Brent in the country where he can do with her as he pleases. Brent, however, makes the word "silence" her own, using Flint's command to dramatically alter her reality. While Flint prepares a small cottage for her on the outskirts of town, she remains silent, a silence that Flint reads as resignation to the inevitable. When moving day arrives, Brent refuses to go. Flint then threatens to forcibly move her, a threat for which Brent has carefully prepared. She tells Flint: "'I will never go there. In a few months I shall be a mother'" (Jacobs 56). This revelation so shocks Flint that, in a twist of irony, it is he who is forced into silence. Brent savors the moment: "He stood and looked at me in dumb amazement, and left the house without a word" (Jacobs 56).

By deliberately misinterpreting Flint's earlier admonition to be silent, Brent reworks the word into a defiant act of revenge and a hoped-for means of escape. The silence that Flint has imposed upon her serves as a space for Brent to form and execute her own plan: she enters into a sexual liaison with a prominent white man from the community and soon becomes pregnant. While Flint interprets Brent's silence as a lack of power, Brent perceives it to be a manifestation of power--the power of self to boldly seize some measure of control over her destiny.

This scene reveals an empowered Brent who has subverted patriarchal authority by acting as her own agent. Through the use of dialogue, Jacobs transforms Brent from object to subject, a self whose position has shifted from defense to offense as she manipulates the master's words and bends them to her own purpose. Elaine Showalter comments that "Jacobs inscribes a subversive plot of empowerment beneath the more orthodox, public plot of vulnerability" ("Review Essay" 435). If she is forced by circumstances to become another shameful secret of the patriarchy, then she will choose the man and the moment. The use of dialogue also allows Jacobs to reveal a self that defies the abolitionist-inspired image of the slave

woman as helpless victim. Instead, she master's slavery's language and uses that language to talk back to the culture that would render her mute and invisible. Dialogue reveals a self evolving toward agency--a self that insists upon having a voice in her own life, enslaved though she may be.

Jacobs also creates other scenes in her narrative in which dialogue allows her to talk back to the patriarchy. While she is not free to openly ridicule whites without alienating her readers, she reconstructs scenes in which blacks are clearly the intellectual and social superiors to certain whites in the community. One such scene takes place when, frightened by the Nat Turner rebellion, the local militia unleashes on the black population what Brent calls "country bullies" and "poor whites" (Jacobs 63). Whether slave or free, blacks must allow their quarters to be searched, forcing Brent's free grandmother (the beloved Aunt Martha) to allow these men into her home. When the men discover a trunk full of beautiful linens, one of them exclaims, "'Where'd the damned niggers git all dis sheet an table clarf?'" (Jacobs 65). As they continue pilfering, one man accuses Aunt Martha of having a superior attitude because of her high-quality possessions. During the search, a letter to Brent is discovered, touching off an

exchange between Brent and the group's captain. The captain is infuriated by the knowledge that Brent can read and write. He tears the letter into pieces, asking "'Who writes to you?--half free niggers?'"--to which Jacobs replies "'O no; most of my letters are from white people. Some request me to burn them after they are read, and some I destroy without reading'" (Jacobs 66).

While this scene might be read as another example of racist attitudes within the dominant culture, Jacobs uses it as a way to talk back to the white power structure. With "freedom approaching that of a caricaturist" (Andrews, "Dialogue" 96), Jacobs uses dialogue to create a scene in which low-class whites are not only ignorant but are also as culturally invisible as slaves or free blacks. Jacobs reflects their lowly status through their lack of manners and through their language. Andrews notes that "for once, Southern whites, not slaves, speak in a dialect removed from dignified English" ("Dialogue" 96). In contrast, Brent's behavior and her command of English suggest a refined character and--most importantly--a degree of literacy. The fact that Brent corresponds with others not only confirms that she is literate but also subverts the stereotypical image of slaves as the text indirectly declares that slaves write, slaves read, and

that blacks and whites exchange thoughts and ideas via the written word. This realization so enrages the white captain that he destroys her letter, the symbol of her literacy.

A Bakhtinian reading of this scene suggests that by reconstructing the dialect of lower class whites, Jacobs inserts another example of heteroglossia into her narrative. Bakhtinian scholar Sue Vice states that

heteroglossia takes two general forms: first, social languages within a single national language; and second, different national languages within the same culture. (19)

These forms may be manifested as dialogue or inner speech, as the language of a particular social class, or as various dialects (Vice 19). An author may express his or her intentions through these languages in a "refracted way" (Vice 19), resulting in what Bakhtin calls

double-voiced discourse, as it serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking and the refracted intention of the author. (Vice 19)

In the scene with the militia, Jacobs juxtaposes social languages in such a way that an ironic situation develops in which uncouth, illiterate whites express superiority over literate, refined blacks, a superiority that is based on nothing other than skin color. Their dialect, together with the fact that they are unable to read, identifies them as members of the white lower class who, like other marginalized groups, derive power temporarily from the patriarchy that otherwise excludes them. On the other hand, Brent's language identifies her as a literate, refined woman who, except for the myth of race and the bonds of slavery, would be considered the culturally superior to these men.

Another example of heteroglossia is Brent's inclusion of an Episcopal sermon delivered to a slave congregation shortly after the Turner incident. The text is Ephesians 6:5: "Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ." The minister delivers a blistering attack upon the congregation, enumerating specific offenses that are considered acts of disobedience: trading corn for rum, pitching pennies, and a superstitious ritual that involves burying roots. The clergyman also accuses the slaves of habitually lying and

shirking their duties. He finally closes by admonishing the slaves with a warning: "If you disobey you earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master" (Jacobs 69). Jacobs juxtaposes the sermon on obedience and yet another verbal exchange between Brent and Flint, one that also focuses on the word "obey." A newly confirmed Flint suggests that Brent should also formally join the Episcopal congregation, to which she replies: "'There are sinners enough in it already...if I could be allowed to live like a Christian, I should be glad'" (Jacobs 75). Flint retorts, "'You can do what I require; and if you are faithful to me, you will be as virtuous as my wife'" (Jacobs 75). When Brent volleys back with "the Bible [doesn't] say so" (Jacobs 75), Flint flies into a rage: 'How dare you preach to me about your infernal Bible! What right have you, who are my negro, to talk to me about what you would like and what you wouldn't like? I am your master, and you shall obey me.' (Jacobs 75)

Jacobs' play on the word "obey" reveals how the meaning shifts from the scripture, to the sermon, and to Flint's command that she become his mistress. Jacobs uses this scene to talk back by exposing the hypocrisy of the dominant culture's sacred institutions. While the church



chastises slaves for pitching pennies and burying roots, it abandons its moral authority and turns a blind eye to the human degradation and suffering that exists in its own parish. When the church admits Flint as a member in good standing, the irony is not lost on Brent, nor on her readers.

Aware that she has once again successfully deflected Flint's advances, Brent closes this scene by wryly commenting: "No wonder the slaves sing--'Ole Satan's church is here below; Up to God's free church I hope to go'" (Jacobs 75). This scene demonstrates Brent's considerable skill at manipulating the master's language and subverting patriarchal authority.

Students of Bakhtin recognize Jacobs' use of various speech types as part of the process of novelization. In this process, the writer includes dialogue, dialect, and speech genres such as the sermon. Andrews notes that Jacobs' narrative "shows us a genre [the slave narrative] in transition, becoming something novel, indeed, something that reads and appeals to us like a novel" (To Tell 272).

In her effort to relate her experience of slavery, Jacobs reconstructs the reality (the context) of her world through a variety of speech acts. Her evolution into selfhood is directly related to her ability to accurately

reflect the perspectives of both realities, slave and free. One of her strengths is the ability to draw from various sources of experience and re-create for the reader her individual experience of slavery.

## CHAPTER SIX

### SECRETS

As Jacobs seeks to demonstrate throughout her narrative, male and female slaves experience slavery in ways that differ sharply. As a result of these differences, their narratives describe the evolution of the self in gendered terms. For example, male-authored slave narratives often focus on a dramatic moment of transformation in which "the slave and the self confront each other, and the self overcomes the slave" (McKay 97). Importantly, these instances of transformation take place in public as the male slave confronts the white power structure. Frederick Douglass, for example, recounts his public confrontation with Edward Covey as the defining moment of selfhood (Narrative of the Life 290). Through their narratives, male slaves recapture lost manhood as they "celebrate their liberated selves in public stories of individual masculine heroism" (McKay 99).

Because the woman slave experiences slavery differently than her male counterpart, her rhetorical evolution into selfhood reflects those differences. For example, Jacobs--like Douglass--must confront and overcome white authority in her transformation from slave to self,

but her transformation does not take place by way of the solitary heroic act, executed in one defining public moment. Jacobs lives her life in the private world of women, a world overshadowed by patriarchalism, and her transformation from slave to self evolves within that world, over a lifetime. Unable to claim selfhood through the autobiographical "I" that describes masculine feats of heroism or tests of physical strength, Jacobs demonstrates that the power she possesses manifests itself through her ability to manipulate her circumstances. Subsequently, Linda Brent narrates a gendered experience of slavery that results in a gendered transformation into selfhood.

An important aspect of her story is secrecy, a motif woven throughout her narrative. Much of her life is shaped--or warped--by secrets that act as a coded language within women's community, a "sub rosa zone of knowledge and communication [where] all sorts of muted truths traffic about" (Andrews, To Tell 255). Some of these muted truths serve women's community, while others have the potential to destroy it. The life that slave women are forced to live under patriarchalism is one such secret.

The word "secret" is somewhat troublesome for modern readers, who no longer relate to nineteenth-century conventions of polite behavior. Women especially were

shielded from topics thought to be too vulgar, too shocking, for their delicate and highly excitable emotions. While modern readers have become somewhat desensitized to the often lurid descriptions of life in a highly complex culture, nineteenth-century readers lived in a different cultural context.

The modern reader, therefore, may not immediately grasp the fact that Jacobs' entire narrative exposes secret after secret about the lives of those who endure the evils of slavery, whether they are black or white. Many of her "secrets" are overshadowed by the issue of concubinage, a subject that does not surprise or shock the modern reader but deeply offended the reader of the nineteenth century.

For example, Jacobs' narrative is one of only two slave narratives that dares divulge how black women were sexually abused under slavery. Prior to the publication of these two narratives, the problem of sexual mistreatment of slave women was hinted at in various male-authored narratives but was considered too shocking to expose (Andrews, To Tell 243). In 1861, the same year in which Jacobs published her narrative, Rev. Hiram Mattison published an interview with a former slave woman named Louisa Picquet. In this as-told-to narrative, Mattison's

questions are voyeuristic and provocative, focusing on such details as the sheerness of the dress Picquet wears while the master whips her (Andrews, To Tell 254).

In contrast, Jacobs' narrative contains no sensual details about sheer dresses that expose the freshly-whipped thighs of slave women. While her narrative is rightfully acknowledged for its bold revelations about sexual misconduct between master and slave, Jacobs contextualizes forbidden sexual activity within what she sees as a larger cultural problem: the male-created vision of "True Womanhood" that results in the marginalization of all women and in the fragmentation of women's community. Jacobs sees "True Womanhood" for what it clearly is--a cultural construct designed to promote and preserve patriarchal power.

Jacobs confides her secrets to a "potentialized" community of women, one not fragmented by patriarchal authority, in the hope that women will "assert the power and potential of women's community and denounce the state of commonage [sic] under which all resided under the patriarchy of slavery" (Andrews, To Tell 254). In her continued quest for selfhood, she rejects the "as-told-to" presentation favored by the abolitionists and allows Linda Brent, the narrator, to speak directly to the reader, a

style of presentation that creates an atmosphere of "sororal complicity" (Sommers 199) and allows her to convey confidential information. She understands that women often use secrets to convey their innermost thoughts, fears, and feelings, an understanding that she expresses in a letter to Amy Post: "Woman can whisper her cruel wrongs into the ear of a very dear friend much easier than she can record them for the world to read" (Jacobs 242).

Jacobs keeps certain secrets to limit access to certain parts of her life and to "cordon off curious and controlling readers from the vulnerable objects of their attention" (Sommers 200). For example, Jacobs keeps her own identity a secret from her readers, creating the fictional Brent to narrate the story. While this secret serves as an act of self-protection from public scorn should she be identified, it also provides her with the privacy she needs to write. Simply stated, Jacobs needs secrecy in order to write about her secrets. Hazel Carby notes that "the construction of the history of Linda Brent was the terrain through which Jacobs had to journey in order to reconstruct the meaning of her own life" (67). Keeping some secrets in order to reveal others allows Jacobs to confront and subvert the white power structure

on her own terms. Linda Brent's "as-lived" presentation addresses the secrets of slavery that most concern and most undermine Jacobs' vision of women's community.

Secrets are embedded within the incidents described in the narrative. For example, as Brent beckons the readers into her world, she describes how she learned that she was a slave: "'When I was six my mother died; and then I learned from the talk around me that I was a slave'" (Jacobs 6). Jacobs' audience recognizes the source of the "talk around" her--women much like themselves, whispering to each other their concern about the fate of a little girl too young to know that she has been born into slavery. Brent goes on to confide that her introduction to slavery was softened by a kind, loving mistress who "'taught me to read and spell, and for this privilege, which so rarely falls to the lot of a slave, I bless her memory'" (Jacobs 8).

Introduced to the readers as an innocent, motherless child, Brent is non-threatening and vulnerable. From childhood, she has resided within a community of women who, whether black or white, speak in the code of women's community. One of those women, however, teaches her skills forbidden to slaves--a secret revealed.



By innocently disclosing how she learned to read and write, Brent suggests that the forbidden is sometimes permitted--or committed--in the master-slave relationship and that women sometimes commit clandestine acts of rebellion that subvert patriarchal authority. This secret, confided in the childish innocence of a six year old, foreshadows the revelations yet to come.

In order to challenge the myth of "True Womanhood," Jacobs uses secrets to dislodge the Southern mistress from the cultural pedestal upon which she is enshrined. Her purpose is to expose the behavior and attitudes of white women who rationalize the horrors of slavery, simultaneously acting as accomplice and victim of the patriarchy. For example, at twelve years of age, Brent is bequeathed to the Flints, relatives of her first mistress, now dead. As Brent details domestic life in the Flint household, a most chilling revelation about her new mistress is embedded within her description:

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. (Jacobs 12)

Young Brent's disclosure undermines the cultural image of the delicate, pious plantation mistress who is lovingly sheltered from all of life's harsh realities, especially the degradation of slavery. Brent's description of Mrs. Flint transforms the "treasured attributes of the southern lady [into] a corrupt and superficial veneer that covers an underlying strength and power in cruelty and brutality" (Carby 70). By exposing this unacknowledged aspect of southern womanhood, Jacobs asks women to consider that they are not by nature any less susceptible to the corrupting influences of slavery than are men, regardless of cultural stereotypes that insist the opposite is true.

In another revelation, Brent describes how Southern women act out of a mistaken sense of loyalty by discreetly ignoring their husbands' illicit relationships with slave women, as if feigning ignorance of such relationships were a virtue:

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. (Jacobs 36)

Brent goes on to disclose that Flint, considered to be an upstanding member of the community, has fathered at least eleven slave children by various mothers.

Another secret of slavery is directly related to the problem of concubinage and the moral quagmire it creates for women, black and white. Unhappy with her husband's infidelity, a jealous wife often assigns blame for his misconduct to the slave woman instead of confronting her husband. For example, Brent is devastated when she realizes that Mrs. Flint's jealousy fuels irrational hatred, directed towards her:

I was an object of her jealousy, and consequently of her hatred; and I knew I could not expect kindness or confidence from her under the circumstances in which I was placed. I could not blame her. Slaveholders' wives feel as other women would under similar circumstances.

(Jacobs 34)

Although Brent expresses some sympathy for Mrs. Flint, who is "completely foiled" by her husband (Jacobs 34), she declares that women err when they keep their husbands' secrets at the expense of their own integrity:

Mrs. Flint 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 innocent among her slaves; but for them she had no sympathy. They were the objects of her constant suspicion and malevolence.

(Jacobs 31)

In revealing such details about the private life of her mistress, Jacobs suggests that "women prostitute themselves for men because of their misplaced allegiance to the supposedly feminine virtue of discretion" (Andrews, To Tell 256). By keeping her husband's secrets, a woman may be regarded as "honorably discreet" in the male world, but she is "pathetically discrete" from women's community (Andrews, To Tell 256). Through her disclosures about slavery, Jacobs asks women to inspect their carefully created cultural identities, to examine their own hypocritical attitudes about race, and to realize that their misguided loyalty to patriarchalism erodes women's community.

In order to demonstrate what can happen when women's community is divided against itself, Brent opens her own life and discloses her most carefully guarded secret--the affair that ultimately alters her destiny. When Mrs. Flint

fails to protect her from the master, Brent feels isolated and alone. Although she longs to confide in her grandmother, she knows that Aunt Martha is powerless to help her. Dr. Flint denies her permission to marry the young carpenter and prepares to move her to the country, away from all restraining influences. With no support from a hopelessly fragmented community of women, Brent leaps into agency by taking control of her own fate. Exercising the small degree of power left to her, she enters into an affair with another prominent white man whom she identifies as "Mr. Sands." As she reveals the nature of her relationship with Sands, she bravely accepts responsibility for her action--a clear indication of her continuing evolution towards selfhood: "'I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation'" (Jacobs 54).

Brent's defiant act against patriarchal authority does not instantly transform her from slave to self, but it plots her course. For example, her insistence that her body is not property subverts a basic premise of patriarchal authority--the right of one human being to own another, whether through slavery or through marriage--and demands a renegotiation of terms. Furthermore, by disclosing such an act of boldness, Brent also challenges

another myth of "True Womanhood"--that death is preferable to the loss of virtue. Her act of self-assertion defies and subverts the patriarchy by erasing this myth and replacing it with "death is preferable to slavery" (Carby 75). Although she is aware that her relationship with Sands may shock her readers, Brent remains quite candid about her motives:

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. (Jacobs 55)

Brent rejects the patriarchal view that a woman's "self-esteem is a simple function of her adherence to conventional sexual behavior" (Yellin, Incidents xxx). Brent stresses that, in spite of her valiant effort to preserve her virginity, she is forced to choose self-respect over purity (Yellin, Incidents xxx). By revealing the truth about Mr. Sands and by contextualizing Brent's actions within the larger evil of slavery, Jacobs asks women to consider

whether they should be judged like men--on complex moral grounds--rather than on the single issue of their conformity to the sexual behavior

mandated by the white patriarchy. (Yellin,  
Incidents xxx)

This idea is most definitely subversive. Jacobs indirectly suggests that women usurp patriarchal authority by redefining themselves and their relationships with men. By doing so, they can throw off culturally imposed roles and reject the designation of "other," a designation that keeps all women marginalized. Only then can a unified community of women be established in which all women are acknowledged as members, regardless of race or class.

Unwilling to relinquish her vision of such a community, Jacobs believes that the patriarchy's most foul secret is not revealed in the description of lurid sexual transgressions. She believes the real obscenity of slavery to be the origin of all obscenity--the "objectification of another for one's personal gratification" (Andrews, To Tell 252). Consequently, Brent strips her relationship with Sands of all "pornographic potential" (Andrews, To Tell 252), whereby the relationship quickly loses any resemblance to a traditional romance. Similarly, she "concentrates on the psychological source, not the physical manifestation, of the obscenity of slavery" when she discloses Flint's misconduct (Andrews, To Tell 251). Jacobs demonstrates that she understands the sexual abuse

of slaves to be a symptom of a culturally sanctioned imbalance--and subsequent abuse--of power.

While secrets may be the source of great sorrow and conflict in the lives of women, Jacobs demonstrates how women form lasting bonds through the secrets they share. For example, after Brent escapes to the North, she must reveal to her white employer that she is a fugitive slave about to be captured and returned to her legal owners. Mrs. Bruce not only keeps Brent's secret, but she eventually secures Brent's freedom from the Flints. The price of Brent's freedom: three-hundred dollars. Brent's relationship with Mrs. Bruce represents more than just a loving friendship between women who trust each other with their deepest secrets. The relationship reflects Jacobs' purpose for writing her story: "I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two million women at [sic] the South, still in bondage" (1). Yellin observes that a "central pattern in Incidents shows white women betraying allegiances of race and class to assert their stronger allegiance to the sisterhood of all women" (Incidents xxxiii). While the friendship between the two women is undoubtedly genuine, it is also symbolic of an idealized women's community in which women transcend race and class, joining forces to



defy and subvert patriarchal authority. It is to this community that Jacobs wishes to be admitted so that her evolution from slave to self can be complete. It is to this end that she politicizes her sexual history and reveals slavery's most guarded secrets.

Whether or not Jacobs is successful in her quest for inclusion in this community is left open-ended. At the conclusion of the narrative, Brent has not achieved her goal of having a home of her own. She remains with Mrs. Bruce:

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 more than for my own. (Jacobs 201)

Legally free, she insists that "love, duty, and gratitude" prevent her from leaving Mrs. Bruce (201). However, Andrews comments that "all of her protestations about 'love, duty, and gratitude' do not conceal her lingering sense of constraint, of being bound in obligation to a white woman" (To Tell 262). Brent must make a choice that challenges her final transforming moment into selfhood: will she stay with Mrs. Bruce and serve out of gratitude, or will she "reject the obligation

in the name of freedom inherently deserved?" (Andrews, To Tell 262).

The answer to this question may be Jacobs' most closely guarded, private secret, one that is never revealed in the narrative. Rather than disclose what action she will take, Brent simply presents the dilemma, placing the problem "back into the hands of the reader for resolution" (Andrews, To Tell 262).

Rather than label as self-defeating and contradictory Jacobs' refusal to divulge her most intriguing secret, Andrews declares the narrative's ending to be delightfully Bakhtinian in its indeterminacy, suggesting that the narrative is a "living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the open-ended present)" (To Tell 272). Ever resisting the expectations of the dominant culture, Jacobs resists the conventional ending to what is a most unconventional story. Her refusal to disclose her ultimate decision allows Jacobs to talk back once more to the patriarchy, "leaving her readers with only hard questions about the subtler forms of bondage encountered by free blacks in the North" (Andrews, To Tell 263). Perhaps Jacobs learned what other liminal slave writers learned--that indeterminacy "signifies a

host of possibilities, not simply a loss of center"

(Andrews, To Tell 202). Andrews observes that

only the liminal autobiographer has the insight and the power to declare that self and role are but two sides of the same (authentically American) coin, payable on the acceptance of face value. Recognizing this, the wisest of the marginal writers did not delude themselves into thinking that life outside slavery would deliver them wholly from role-playing or leave them free and complete in One-Self. (Andrews, To Tell 203)

Harriet Ann Jacobs has told her story and has shared her secrets. In doing so, she has evolved from a position of powerlessness and invisibility on the margin's outer edge into a self that is one manifestation of many potential selves--empowered in the knowledge that she is forever entitled to claim the autobiographical "I" as her own.

CHAPTER SEVEN  
FROM THE MARGINS TO THE  
CONTACT ZONE

In her essay "Arts of the Contact Zone," Mary Louise Pratt describes a letter written in 1613 by an Andean named Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, addressed to King Philip III of Spain. Twelve-hundred pages in length, the letter suggested a collaboration between the Incas of the New World and the Spanish invaders. Poma writes that "the Indies should be administered through a collaboration of Inca and Spanish elites" (Pratt 584). Writing in both his native Quechua and in Spanish, Poma appropriates an official Spanish genre (the "Nueva coronica") and constructs "a new picture of the world, with Andean rather than European peoples at the center of it" (Pratt 585). Pratt writes that

in a couple of hundred pages, Guaman Poma constructs a veritable encyclopedia of Inca and pre-Inca history, customs, laws, social forms, public offices, and dynastic leaders, [reproducing] the meticulous detail with which knowledge was stored on "quipus" and in the oral memories of elders. (585)

Unfortunately, Poma's letter never reached its intended destination. In 1908, it was discovered in the Danish Royal Archives in Copenhagen by a Peruvianist named Richard Pietschmann. Because Quechua was not then thought of as a written language nor Andean culture as a literate culture, no one had tried to read Poma's letter (Pratt 584). In 1912, Pietschmann presented a paper on his discovery, but "reception by an international congress of Americanists was apparently confused" (Pratt 584). Pratt notes that

it took twenty-five years for a facsimile edition of the work to appear in Paris. It was not till the late 1970's, as positivist reading habits gave way to interpretive studies and colonial elitisms to post-colonial pluralisms, that Western scholars found ways of reading Guaman Poma's "New Chronicle and Good Government" as the extraordinary intercultural tour de force that it was. The letter got there, only 350 years too late, a miracle and a terrible tragedy. (584)

While the similarities between Poma's letter and Harriet Jacobs' slave narrative may not seem immediately apparent, they share a similar fate: neither Poma's letter

nor Jacobs' autobiography was "received" by the intended recipients. Jacobs' narrative, never embraced by the public, was eventually forgotten by all but a few scholars, whose response to her text, very much like the scholarly response to Poma's letter, was confused. Also like Poma's letter, Jacobs' narrative was archived and ignored for a number of decades.

Pratt writes that Poma's letter is an example of what she calls an "autoethnographic" text (585), a text in which "people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them" (585). Pratt notes that the creation of autoethnographic texts requires "selective collaboration" with the dominant culture (or conqueror or patriarchy) and "appropriation of [its] idioms" (585). Because these texts address both the dominant culture and the marginalized, their "reception is highly indeterminate" (586).

Just as Poma tried to engage with the Spanish representation of Andean culture, Jacobs sought to engage with the American culture's representation of slavery, particularly as it was experienced by a slave woman. Jacobs collaborated with carefully selected members of the dominant culture to create a text that "merged" with culturally defined "modes of understanding" (Pratt 585).

In her narrative, Jacobs addressed both the members of the dominant culture and the marginalized community of women. And, as Pratt predicts, the reception of Jacobs' narrative was--until recently--highly indeterminate.

Pratt believes that Poma's letter was indecipherable because we thought of "literacy," "literature," and "culture" as "discrete, coherently structure, monolingual edifices" (589). Under that definition, a text such as Poma's letter could not be "received." However, Pratt suggests that Poma's letter is a product of what she calls the "contact zones" (584), which she describes as

social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths. (584)

As Pratt points out, the contact zone may be a challenging, perhaps threatening space where old assumptions and definitions are re-examined:

Autoethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, vernacular expressions--these are some of the literate arts of the contact zone. Miscomprehension, incomprehension, dead letters, unread

masterpieces, absolute heterogeneity of meaning--these are some of the perils of writing in the contact zone. (590)

Because Poma's letter was never received, Pratt suggests that in a sense it was never really written (588). The same fate might have befallen Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl had Professor Jean Fagan Yellin not ventured into the contact zone in search of Harriet Jacobs.

Yellin writes that after first reading Jacobs' text, she accepted "received opinion" and "dismissed it as a false slave narrative (Incidents vii). Her subsequent research, influenced by feminist criticism, convinced Yellin that Jacobs' text was an authentic slave narrative, a fact now generally accepted by scholars. The contact-zone inspired "collaboration" of Jacobs and Yellin provided Jacobs' narrative with the reception it had been denied in earlier decades by the abolitionist press, the public, and scholars confused by a text that is multi-voiced, contradictory, and composed in contrasting literary styles.

No longer excluded as "unreadable," Incidents is now celebrated for the characteristics that once made it seem indecipherable. The road to "decipherability" (like the



road to selfhood) has been a long one for Harriet Jacobs. William Andrews notes that

the journey of black autobiography toward free telling first had to pass through the intervening consciousness of amanuenses and editors, then had to challenge generic conventions and discursive properties of writing itself before undertaking the greatest task of all, the appropriation of language for purposes of signification outside that which was privileged by the dominant culture. (To Tell 290)

Mary Louise Pratt might say that black autobiography had to be both conceived and received in the contact zone, the "communitas" that Harriet Jacobs was seeking all along.

At the narrative's conclusion, Jacobs leaves Linda Brent in limbo between slavery and freedom, her transformation to self still a work-in-progress, the story's ending "indeterminate." Perhaps Jacobs sensed that no community yet existed in which she could be received, making impossible any other ending except one that is unresolved. However, such a community now exists where there are others like Jacobs who "demand to [see] the

world described with [themselves] in it" (Pratt 594). No longer marginalized, that community flourishes within the contact zone.

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