

## **“THEORY IN THE FLESH”: QUESTIONS OF RACE, QUESTIONS OF RESISTANCE**

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*I have also been called one thing and then another  
while no one really wished to hear what I called myself.*  
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color*, the editors Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa use the term “theory in the flesh” to describe what they call the “flesh and blood experiences” of lesbian and feminist women of color. “A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives – our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings – all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity,” they write. “We attempt to bridge the contradictions of our experience” “by naming our selves and by telling our stories in our own words.”<sup>1</sup> While ethnic, gay and women scholars have been enabled by and continue to draw on poststructuralist theory, as I tried to suggest through my comparison of Mallarmé and Du Bois as “authors” in yesterday’s lecture, what Moraga and Anzaldúa’s experiential notion of “theory in the flesh” suggests, is first, the historically situated nature of knowledge, representation, and theory itself; second, the historically different and culturally inflected meanings identity, authorship, writing, and resistance can have in different cultures; and, last, the potential contradiction between the grounds of poststructuralist theory, with its challenge to the subject, the author, experience, and representation and the work of Black Studies,

Women’s Studies, Gay Studies, Chicano Studies, Native American Studies, and Asian American Studies, with its attempt to constitute a racial and/or gendered subject, culture, experience, and representation as legitimate

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fields of study. This potential contradiction between the deconstructive and deauthorizing strategies of poststructuralist theory and the culturally constitutive and specifically political project of ethnic, gay, and women's studies in the United States – a kind of “identity crisis” that is at the center of debates about multiculturalism and what might be called the new American Cultural Studies – was particularly evident at a session of the 1989 American Studies Association Convention devoted entirely to the question of whether or not Linda Brent's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (1861) was in fact an “authentic” slave narrative written by Harriet Jacobs, a black woman and former slave, rather than a fictional narrative written by Lydia Maria Child, a white abolitionist.<sup>2</sup>

Whereas poststructuralist theorists have spent the last few decades killing off the author and the subject, several black women critics who take as their subject black women's writing, including Mary Helen Washington, Barbara Christian, Barbara Smith, Claudia Tate, Hortense Spillers, Gloria Hull, and Frances Foster have spent the last decades struggling to bring into voice, visibility, and circulation the works of obscure, anonymous, or neglected black women writers in order to change what Stuart Hall calls the “relations of representation.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, while Foucault, Barthes, and other poststructuralist theorists have done away with notions of voice, authorship, and historical subject as matters of indifference, for many African Americanists, issues of voice, authorship, and historical authenticity- of theory in the flesh - are still at the center of discussions of texts such as Linda Brent's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.<sup>4</sup>

I suppose one response to this potential contradiction between poststructuralist theory and multicultural practice in the United States might be to criticize African Americanists, and black women critics in particular, for being hopelessly enmeshed in historical, textual, and essentially bourgeois modes of analysis.<sup>5</sup> But I believe something more is at stake. In the case of Brent's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as in the case of other texts by women, gays, and other minorities that are being discovered or recovered by feminists, African Americanists, Chicanos, Native Americans, and gay critics in the United States, it **does** matter who is speaking for reasons that are embedded in the historical experiences and cultural and political practices of minority cultures in America.

If for the Puritan and founding fathers, the originary myth of America was represented as a voluntary break with family, society, past and history, for black slave narrators, the myth of black origins in American has been represented as just the opposite: the story of a violent and forced break

with family, society, past, and history brought about by kidnap, piracy, and thievery. Thus, in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African* (1789), Equiano is kidnapped from his people and his country, transformed into goods, and transported and sold as property. This forced seizure from family, people, home, and land is accompanied by an act of literal silencing by his “kidnappers”:

*One day, when all our people were gone to their works as usual, and only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both, and, **without giving us time to cry out, or make resistance, they stopped our mouths**, and ran off with us into the nearest wood . . . . The next day proved a day of greater sorrow than I had yet experienced; for my sister and I were then separated, while we lay clasped in each other's arms.<sup>6</sup> (emphasis added)*

**Without giving us time to cry out, or make resistance, they stopped our mouths.** This act of stopping the mouths of black men and women as a means of silencing their cries and foiling their resistance to being transformed into white men's goods suggests the particular importance that voice, public speech, literacy and writing have had for enslaved blacks historically. For Equiano as for Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, the unstopped black mouth, the black subject who thinks, speaks, writes, and creates back becomes integral to the process of transforming the black person's material and symbolic status as “cargo,” slave, and other within the imperialist narratives and representational practices of white Euro-American history.

“Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction,” writes “the Author,” Linda Brent, in the preface to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*.<sup>7</sup> In Linda Brent's narrative, it does matter who is speaking because against a cultural economy that equates literacy and writing with whiteness and maleness, Brent/ Jacobs demonstrates the ability of a “slave girl” to write, to create, to narrate, and in the words of Brent, to engage in a “Competition in Cunning” with the master himself. It does matter who is speaking because against the freely circulating national fictions of freedom and equality, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* bears witness to a black girl's actual experience of enslavement and brutalization at the hands of a white Southern lady and a white Christian slave master. It does matter who is speaking because by testifying to the physical violation of mothers and

children – the rape, incest, child abuse, and daily assault on the parent/child bond that are part of the everyday practice of slavery – *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* erodes the sacred national myth of a true and pure womanhood and motherhood and thus the fundamental social, sexual, and religious categories – motherhood, sexual purity, republican virtue, the home, the family, Christianity – that ordered nineteenth – century American society. Finally, it does matter who is speaking because against the master’s attempt to stop her mouth and thereby usurp her power to speak for, represent, and write herself, Brent/Jacobs seeks to give voice to her historical experience as a slave woman in order to resist and change the material – and not merely fictive or discursive – relations of power and dominance in the United States.

At the end of “What Is an Author?”, Foucault predicts that in the future “the author function will disappear.” All discourses “would then develop in the anonymity of a murmur. We would no longer hear the questions that have been rehashed for so long: Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality? And what part of his deepest self did he express in his discourse?” (119). But these questions that Foucault consigns to the “anonymity of a murmur” are the very questions that have been, and still are being posed by women, blacks, Chicanos, and others who have been consigned to silence and invisibility within traditional representations of American history and literary history.

“Why is it,” Frances Foster asked at the 1989 ASA session on the authorship of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* “that white people have such a hard time accepting the fact of a black woman writing a book?” Foster’s question (re)locates the question of authorship not in relation to the historical rise of capitalist individualism, but in relation to the historical silencing of black women. And within this narrative of black American Women’s history, Foucault’s consignment of the question “What difference does it make who is speaking?” to the “anonymity of a murmur” might be read as one more historical instance of white western male hegemony seeking to stop black women’s mouths by (re)colonizing them under the sign of invisibility, anonymity, and silence.

But it is not only women and specifically black women scholars who care about who is speaking in black women’s texts. It also matters a great deal to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Houston Baker, who have been central figures in arguing for the powerful and indeed emancipatory role that poststructuralist theory can play in the interpretation of black literature. In fact, Gates was a member of the ASA panel on *Incidents*, and argued as vociferously as Frances Foster for the black female authorship of Brent’s

narrative. "It was not until 1981 that a scholar, Jean Fagan Yellin, demonstrated conclusively that Jacobs indeed wrote the narrative of her bondage and freedom," Gates wrote in a review of Yellin's 1987 edition of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. "Few instances of scholarly inquiry have been more important to Afro-American studies than has Ms. Yellin's. The moving tale of her verification of Jacobs's authorship . . . makes this edition of 'Incidents' one of the most important documents in the black woman's literary tradition, and Ms. Yellin's quest one of the most dramatic." A few years earlier, Gates was also instrumental in uncovering Harriet Wilson as the black woman author of *Our Nig* (1859), and thus, as he says, "most probably the first Afro-American to publish a novel in the United States."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Gates is also General Editor for Oxford University Press of the Schomburg series which has as its goal the republication – the making public and putting into print – of works by black writers.

And yet here a potential contradiction emerges. For Gates has also argued just as vociferously for the discursive construction of "race" as mere fiction, metaphor, and trope. "Race, as a meaningful criterion within the biological sciences, has long been recognized to be a fiction. When we speak of 'the white race' or 'the black race,' 'the Jewish race or the Aryan race,' we speak in biological misnomers and, more generally, in metaphors," Gate argues in "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes."<sup>9</sup> More recently, Houston Baker has defended theory as practiced by a vanguard of black men against the essentially historical embeddedness and containment of much writing by black women writers and critics. Setting Black Power against Black Studies in an essentially blackmale/blackfemale, theoretical/historical dialectics, Baker argues: "While history and the body were of the essence of Afro-American women's creativity and criticism, Afro-American male critics and theorists were engaged in a furious battle of the signs." "How many historical texts, examples, out-of-print texts will suffice radically to alter the rhetorical power ratios between Afro-American women's traditions and those of a white, theoretically dominant cohort," Baker asks.<sup>10</sup>

But while both Gates and Baker embrace poststructuralist theory as an emancipatory strategy in their analyses of black writing, neither has let go of the notion of a creative, expressive, signifying and ultimately resistant and resisting black authorship. In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988), Gates argues for a tradition of black writers who signify upon each other as they seek to inscribe "an authentic black voice" in the written word; and in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984), Baker argues that African slave

narratives “reveal profoundly brilliant economic **expressive strategies designed by Africans** in the New World and the Old to negotiate the dwarfing spaces and paternally aberrant arrangements of western slavery” (emphasis added). Moreover, against Anthony Appiah’s deconstruction of race in “The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race,” Baker also argues for retaining race as a category of literary and historical analysis. “In a world dramatically conditioned both by the visible and by a perduring discursive formation of ‘old’ (and doubtless mistaken) racial enunciative statements, such gross features (of hair, bone and skin) always make a painfully significant difference – perhaps, **the only significant difference where life and limb are concerned in a perilous world.**”<sup>11</sup>

Like Hortense Spillers, who in her magisterial article “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” deploys a Foucaultian critique of “an American grammar,” “grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation,” without ever losing sight of the material conditions of black, and specifically black female slavery – in the “flesh”<sup>12</sup> – the work of Gates and Baker is, in fact, representative of the paradoxical position of blacks, gays, women, and other minorities who do “theory” and who are simultaneously engaged in the study of traditionally marginalized literatures. The work of Edward Said is similarly split between his philosophical commitment to poststructuralist theory and his political commitment to the struggles of the Islamic world and what he calls “concrete human history and experience” in *Orientalism*. In “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak also seeks to negotiate the potential contradiction between deconstructive theory and the identity politics of subaltern cultures by advocating a strategy of “affirmative deconstruction.”<sup>13</sup> These critics do their work even as they recognize the potential instability of their subject. These subjects are never merely the voices of white heterosexual male hegemony, but multiply located, multi-voiced, ironic, subversive, hybrid, and never fully contained by the system. To give up the notion of a black subject, a woman subject, a Chicana subject, a gay subject, a subaltern subject, or a postcolonial subject who is capable of speaking as more than an echo of the language of the masters, would be, ultimately, to give up the subject of ethnic, gay, and women’s studies altogether. As Stuart Hall notes, in a recent essay entitled “New Ethnicities”:

*The original critique of the predominant relations of race and representation and the politics which developed around it have not and cannot possibly disappear while the conditions which gave rise to it . . . not only persist but*

*positively flourish. There is no sense in which a new phase in black cultural politics could replace the earlier one. Nevertheless it is true that as the struggle moves forward and assumes new forms, it does to some degree displace, reorganise and reposition the different cultural strategies in relation to one another....*

*The shift is best thought of in terms of a change from a struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself.<sup>14</sup>*

As we move into a new phase of what Hall calls “New Ethnicities,” there is a need to complicate the politically and historically sedimented notions of identity, subjectivity, authorship, writing, culture, and difference that have come to constitute the fields of ethnic, gay, and women’s studies. What does it mean to speak of a white author or a Native American author, a woman subject or a man subject, a straight culture or a gay culture? What does it mean to say that an author, a text, or a tradition inscribes “an authentic black voice”(Gates) or that “the Afro-American critic ought to be committed to exploring the blackness of black texts” (Awkward)?<sup>15</sup> Or, to return to the example of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, what does it mean to “authenticate” Harriet Jacobs as the author of this text? Doesn’t the focus on “authentic authorship” in this, as in any text, tend to reinforce privatized and aestheticized notions of authorship set in place by capitalist and bourgeois individualist modes of production and thus remove *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* from the complicated network of power relationships – racial, sexual, textual, literary, and political – that are part of its publication history?

Although Linda Brent’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was “written by herself,” the copyright and the contract of the book, which was published by Thayer and Eldridge of Boston in 1861, were owned by Lydia Maria Child, whose name appeared as editor on the title page of the book.<sup>16</sup> Just as Jacobs’s attempt to give a “true and just account of my own life in Slavery” (Jacobs 242) was published as part of the anti-slavery struggle in nineteenth-century American, so a new and still pseudonymous edition, with introduction and notes by Walter Magness Teller, was published in 1973, in the context of the on-going political and cultural struggle of blacks for visibility, voice, and representation in American literature and history. Whereas the first edition of *Incidents* was authenticated by two “highly respected” white women, Lydia Maria Child and Amy Post, and “a highly respected colored citizen of Boston, “George W. Lowther, it was not until 1981 that Harriet Jacobs’s authorship was verified by a white woman, Jean Fagin Yellin, who

edited an “authenticated” version of the book for Harvard University Press in 1987, complete with a “Cast of Characters” and a documentary apparatus that tends to literalize Jacobs’s creative narration—what she calls her “competition in cunning” – as direct transcription. Before the text was “authenticated” by Yellin in 1981, its validity as a slave narrative had been questioned by several prominent black writers and critics, including Sterling Brow, Arno Bontemps, and John Blasingame, who, in *The Slave Community* (1972), judged *Incidents* to be “not credible.”<sup>17</sup>

The authentication of Jacobs’s authorship of *Incidents* has shifted the focus away from disputes over the text’s complicated and hybrid genealogies (is it black or white, fiction or history, literature or politics?) toward critical approaches that tend to play down or erase the collective and “mixed” nature of the text signified by the simultaneously interactive and resistant relationship not only between Jacobs as “author” and Child as “editor” but also between Jacobs, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and an entire tradition of domestic sentimental fiction. Does life follow art or does art follow life in the intertextual relation between Jacobs’s “Loophole of Retreat” in *Incidents* and Cassy’s garret encloser in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*? The recent feminist emphasis on the essentially maternal and domestic nature of the text, with Linda Brent as an heroic slave mother and the grandmother as the ultimate heroine of the story, also tends to gloss over the fact that Jacobs may not have been a good mother (at least in the conventional terms in which the problem has been posed). In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” for example, Hortense Spillers argues that “under a system of slavery,” “the customary lexis of sexuality, including ‘reproduction,’ ‘motherhood,’ ‘pleasure,’ and ‘desire’ are thrown into unrelieved crisis.”<sup>18</sup> And thus, it is important to note that it was the white woman editor Lydia Maria Child who suggested that a concluding focus on the death of Jacobs’s grandmother would be a more “appropriate” and “natural” end to her story. “I think the last chapter, about John Brown, had better be omitted,” Child wrote Jacobs in August 1860. “It does not naturally come into your story, and the M. S. is already too long. Nothing can be so appropriate to end with, as the death of your grandmother” (Jacobs 244). But while the text’s conclusion with the “tender memories of my good old grandmother”(201) confirms the recent feminist emphasis on familial and specifically mother/daughter bonds among women, by concluding with the death of Jacobs’s grandmother (Child’s suggestion) rather than John Brown (Jacobs’s original manuscript), *Incidents* is in some sense more fully inscribed within a sentimental, domestic, maternal, and “quietist” tradition associated with Child rather than within the more stridently political, insurrectionary, violent, and contemporaneous



narrative suggested by John Brown. Finally, given Jacobs's desire to write her story "in behalf of my persecuted people!" (2), it is at least worth noting that it is not Jacobs's family, heirs, or her "people" but a white woman editor and Harvard University Press that are making literally thousands of dollars on the sale, circulation, and academic canonization of this newly "authenticated" black woman's text. At another American Studies Association Session in 1993 on the "canonization" of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harvard University Press Editor-in-Chief, Aida Donald, noted that sales of the book-of-the-month club edition alone had reached 45,000. In Donald's address, it was unclear whether this was a "success story" about Harriet Jacobs or about Jean Fagin Yellin, Aida Donald herself, and huge profits for Harvard University Press.

What I have been trying to suggest, then, through this brief analysis of the publication history of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is the complicated network of economic, social, political, and cultural relations in which black authors and texts, like all authors and texts are implicated. By complicating the notion of a purely "individual" authorship, a purely "black" text, and a purely "factual" narration *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is in some sense representative of the fluid boundaries, hybrid textualities, and politically situated "identities" and "traditions" that have come to constitute not only ethnic, gay, and women's studies, but also, as Toni Morrison argues in *Playing in the Dark*, the formation of "white" identity and the "white" literary imagination.<sup>19</sup>

## NOTES

01. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York, 1981), 23.
02. The 1989 ASA session on Jacobs's *Incidents* included Frances Foster and Henry Louis Gates among the panelists. The 1993 American Studies Association Convention included another session on Jacob's book. Entitled "Incidents in the Life of a Book: Canonizing Harriet Jacobs's Narrative" and chaired by Robert Stepto, the panelists included Jean Fagin Yellin, who edited an "authenticated" edition of Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* for Harvard University Press in 1987; and Harvard University's Editor-in-Chief, Aida Donald, who worked with Yellin on the project.
03. Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," *Black Film, British Cinema*.

04. For the history of the dispute over the authenticity of Jacobs's work, see Jean Fagin Yellin, "Written by Herself: Harriet Jacobs' Slave Narrative," *American Literature* 53 (Nov. 1981): 479-86 and "Texts and Contexts of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*," in *The Slave's Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., (New York, 1985), 262-82. For discussions of the black female authorship of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, see Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York 1987), 45-61; Valerie Smith, *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (Cambridge, 1987), 28-43; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "My Statue, My Self: Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women," in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Shari Benstock (Chapel Hill, 1988), 63-89; Claudia Tate, "Allegories of Black Female Desire; or, Rereading Nineteenth-Century Sentimental Narratives of Black Female Authority," in *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick, 1989), 98-126. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Hungry Icon: Langston Hughes Rides a Blue Note," *Voice Literary\_Supplement* (July 1989), 8. In recent years, writes the black community organizer Sheila Radford-Hill, black women have been "profoundly immobilized" by a "deep-seated rupture in the structure of self-identity that black women have experienced." In "Considering Feminism as a Model for Social Change," in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Bloomington, 1986), 164.
05. See Houston Baker's criticism of the historical work of black women critics who seek "to incorporate themselves comfortably into an essentialist, northern history," in *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of African-American Women's Writing* (Chicago, 1991); see also Werner Sollors's criticism of literary historians of ethnicity who stress "ethnic roots" while "obvious and important literary and cultural connections are obfuscated," in *Beyond Ethnicity*, 14.
06. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African. Written by Himself*, ed. Paul Edwards (London, 1967), 16.
07. Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, ed. Jean Fagin Yellin (Cambridge, 1987), 1. Subsequent citations will appear in the text.
08. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *New York Times Book Review*, 22 Nov. 1987, 12. Gates, Introduction to *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* by Harriet E. Wilson (New York, 1983), xiii.
09. Gates, "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes," 4. See also Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument", 21-37.
10. Baker, *Workings of the Spirit*, 17, 19.
11. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 130; Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago, 1984), 31; Baker, "Caliban's Triple Play," *Critical Inquiry* 13 (Autumn 1986), 185.

- 12 Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* (Summer 1987), 68.
- 13 *Orientalism* (New York 1978), 28. "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," In *Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York, 1988), 207.
- 14 "New Ethnicities." *British Film, British Cinema*.
- 15 Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 130; Awkward, Response to Deborah E. Mc Doell, "Boundaries: Or Distant Relations and Close Kin," in *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s*, ed. Houston Baker and Patricia Redmond, 76.
- 16 Thayer and Eldridge was the same press that published the 1860 edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. An English edition of Jacobs's book, *The Deeper Wrong: Or, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Written by Herself*. Ed. L. Maria Child, was published in London in 1862
- 17 Blasingame, *The Slave Community* (New York, 1972), 234; Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis and Ulysses Lee, *The Negro Caravan* ( New York, 1941); Arna Bontemps, "The Slave Narrative: An American Genre," *Great Slave Narratives* (Boston, 1969). In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (1987), Hortense Spillers describes the narrative of Linda Brent/Harriet Jacobs as "dictated to Lydia Maria Child" (76).
- 18 "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 76.
19. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992).