

“Respatializing” Black Space: Linda Brent’s Paradoxical Garret in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Kei OKAJIMA

1. Introduction: *Incidents* as a Black Feminist Narrative

Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (hereafter *Incidents*) was first published in 1861 under the pseudonym Linda Brent. Jacobs’ narrative depicts her life in slavery in the South and her escape to freedom in the North. Jacobs explored such themes as the horrors of sexual abuses by her master, the bond with her grandmother, and her love for her children.

Brent’s story begins with the shocking news that her first mistress had bequeathed her to Dr. Flint despite her expectation of being free. In Dr. Flint’s house, Brent is physically abused and is repeatedly sexually harassed. In order to shun Dr. Flint’s sexual advances, Brent begins an affair with Mr. Sands, a local white lawyer, and eventually, has two children with him. However, her children legally belong to Flint as his “property.” Hoping that Flint might sell her children to their father, Mr. Sands, Brent hides herself in a garret above her grandmother’s house. She stays there for seven years and eventually escapes to the North. In the North, she finds a job at the Bruce family and reunites with her children. Finally, she gains her freedom after Mrs. Bruce “purchases” it for her.

Incidents has generally been considered to be a precursor of the black feminist narrative. Brent’s narrative has attracted much attention from such prominent feminist theorists as Hortense Spillers, Hazel Carby, and Valerie Smith. Generally, these theorists praise *Incidents* highly for its challenges to Victorian notions of true womanhood and rigid racial categories.

For example, praising the last sentence of the book, Carby argues that Brent’s narrative disrupts conventional feminine qualities of submission and passivity:

Incidents is the most sophisticated, sustained narrative dissection of the conventions of true womanhood by a black author before emancipation ... Jacobs used the material circumstances of her life to critique conventional standards of female behavior and to question their relevance of applicability to the experience of black women. (47)

As Carby asserts, a remarkable characteristic of Brent’s story is that it criticizes and subverts the major

narrative code of conventional standards for female behavior, which were often described in sentimental fiction. Carby also claims that Jacobs reconsiders the concept of slave women's motherhood. To Jacobs, motherhood is no longer a sign of passivity and impurity: rather, it functions as a source of courage and determination (Carby 60). In other words, it is her motherhood that becomes her mental support during the slavery and ultimately leads her and her children to freedom.

Furthermore, Brent's narrative suggests the possibility of the sisterhood of all women. Houston A. Baker contends that *Incidents*, to some extent, depicts the collective experiences of black women. However, it seems that Brent's purpose in her narrative goes even further than that. According to Carby, the narrative describes the shared experiences of slavery and aims to appeal to the sisterhood of all women regardless of regional and racial differences. Brent's aim is manifested in the preface of the book: "But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse" (2-3). This argument is linked to Spillers' psychoanalytic insight. Spillers argues that both black and white women are similarly affected by the terror of slavery:

We consider that African-American women's community and Anglo-American women's community, under certain psychic landscape, were the twin actants on a common psychic landscape, were subject to the same fabric of dread and humiliation. Neither could claim her body and its various products. (79)

Brent's narrative transcends the racial categories in terms of the negative experiences of slavery and ultimately works toward a possibility of a broader sisterhood that unites black and white women.

While all these previous studies of *Incidents* successfully point out the significant aspects and achievements of Brent's narrative, what I find especially intriguing about Brent's story is the way that space (i.e., the garret in which she hides herself for seven years) functions in the narrative. Smith refers to the unique nature of the garret as "the ambiguity of meaning" (212).⁽¹⁾ However, Smith does not fully develop an analysis of the function of the garret. In this paper I try to develop an analysis of the garret. I argue that the space plays a pivotal role in the story and ultimately signifies the paradoxical status of Brent. Before turning to the analysis of the text, I would like to explicate the conceptual studies of how space works for black people, which have provided the theoretical background for this paper.

2. "Respatializing" Black Space: Finding the Trajectory of Black Experiences

In her *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, Katherine McKittrick focuses on the way black geographies work. McKittrick reveals how geography and space work to

advance alternative ways of knowing and imaging black experiences. According to McKittrick, geography is replete with signs and hidden meanings through which various forms of blackness can be understood and asserted (xix). Simply put, McKittrick tries to reconstitute the trajectories of something lost, or seemingly not there. It is necessary to "respatialize" or reconsider the meaning of space from the perspectives of black people, because they have "a different sense of place" (x). That is, geography and space may work differently in black experiences. Seemingly a site of oppression can be a site of contestation as well.

As she admits, McKittrick's challenge to respatialize black space sympathizes with Toni Morrison's attempts. In "Site of Memory," Morrison explicates her attempts to rediscover and reconstruct untold stories of slaves through available "remains" (71). Morrison gives an explanation of how she traces the hidden trajectories:

It's a kind of literary archeology: On the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply. What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image -on the remains- in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of a truth. (71)

As Morrison maintains, "a site" plays a crucial role in her creative work. Similar to McKittrick's claim, Morrison tries to imagine and reconstruct the lost lives of black slaves through the analysis of space.

In this paper, I follow the insights of McKittrick and Morrison, noting that "respatializing" black space reveals an alternative way of knowing black experiences. This paper considers the garret in Brent's story to be a black space that is both a site of oppression and a site of contestation. The garret indicates Brent's different sense of place. How does the garret function in Brent's narrative? How does it enable Brent to battle with her master? By answering these questions, this paper works toward a richer interpretation of *Incidents*.

3. Within the Black Space: Brent's "Loophole of Retreat"

3.1. Paradoxical Functions of Brent's Garret

In this section I argue that the garret where Brent conceals herself is a paradoxical space. Additionally, the closet in Brent's friend's house is examined as another example of black space.

The garret blurs the boundaries of both physical and metaphorical binaries. The garret symbolizes and functions as womb and tomb, self-control and captivity, adulthood and childhood, and real and surreal. To put it another way, the space denies absolute value in many ways.

Knowing that her master Dr. Flint would soon send her children to his plantation to be "broken in"

(80), Brent works out a plan to escape from the plantation. She assumes that Dr. Flint would be so furious that he will sell her children to their father. As she expected, Dr. Flint sells them to Mr. Sands without knowing to whom he is selling them. Eventually, her children are taken by her grandmother. After hiding at her friend's place and in a local swamp, Brent goes into a small garret above her grandmother's house to hide herself, which she calls "the loophole of retreat" (95). She describes her hiding place as follows:

A small shed had been added to my grandmother's house years ago. Some boards were laid across the joists at the top, and between these boards and the roof was a very small garret, never occupied by any thing but rats and mice. It was a pent roof, covered with nothing but shillings, according to the Southern custom for such buildings. The garret was only nine feet long and seven wide. The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor. There was no admission for either light or air (95-6).

As Brent describes it, this 9' X 7' X 3' attic is a harsh space to stay. This makes even more surprising that she stays in the garret for seven years. She stays there at a high cost to her physical and mental health; even after she becomes free in the North, she still suffers both physically and mentally from her experience in the garret. Brent mentions the terror of staying in the dark space: "This continued darkness was oppressive. It seemed horrible to sit or lie in a cramped position day after day, without one gleam of light" (96). It could be said that she is in a constant state of self-captivity. Brent can neither see nor move her own body. Moreover, the description of the dark tight space is linked to the image of a tomb. Brent is as good as buried alive.

Despite its harshness, however, the space functions as the best place for concealment. According to Brent, this garret is "the last place they thought of" (98). It is of great import that her physical presence in the attic is itself a demonstration of her agency: "I have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave" (96). Hence, however painful the concealment is, it is a manifestation of her own will and resistance to her master. As Smith points out, it is noteworthy that Brent implicitly dates her emancipation from slavery to the time she enters the space (Smith 212). Thus, the loophole of retreat directly leads to emancipation. In this sense, the space plays the role of a womb that enables Brent's resurrection as a free woman (it is also important that the garret is located *within* her grandmother's house, which might be interpreted as an embodiment of female body).

Indeed, Brent literally goes back to a pre-sexual, infantile state during her stay in the garret. As Gloria Randle argues, her confinement and constant sickness requires her grandmother and relatives to take care of Brent just as they would an infant. There is a scene where her uncle carries Brent back to her

bed as if she were a baby: "I told her [grandmother] I could not return without assistance, and she must call my uncle ... He carried me back to my dungeon, laid me tenderly on the bed, gave me some medicine and asked me if there was any thing more he could do" (105). Here, her family tenderly cares for her.

On the other hand, we must remember that her retreat to the garret is for the sake of her children. According to Randle, Brent "leaves' her children in order to stay with them" (52). Brent repeatedly shows her motherly love toward her children. Although she cannot talk to them, she can hear them talk and see them play outside through small holes that she bored with a gimlet. Further, she sews clothes for her children as Christmas presents. Moreover, she arranges her children's move to the North. Despite no shared contact with her children and her own child-like condition, Brent remains their mother. In her garret, Brent is practically both a mother who takes care of her children and a baby to be taken care of by her family.

Black spaces can sometimes disrupt the boundaries between the real and the surreal. Her anxieties regarding her children are so strong that one day she hallucinates them:

And now I tell you something that happened to me; though you will, perhaps, think it illustrates the superstition of slaves. I sat in my usual place on the floor near the window, where I could hear much that was said in the street without being seen. The family was retired for the night, and all was still. I sat there thinking of my children, when I heard a strain of music. A band of serenaders were under the window, playing "Home Sweet Home." I listened till the sounds did not seem like music, but like the moaning of children. It seemed as if my heart would burst. I rose from my sitting posture, and knelt. A streak of moonlight was on the floor before me, and in the midst of it appeared the forms of my children. They vanished; but I had seen them distinctly. Some will call it a dream, others a vision. I know not how to account for it, but it made a strong impression on my mind, and I felt certain something had happened to my little ones. (91 emphasis added)

She sees this vision while in her friend's closet, another black space like the garret. This elucidates the complex nature of black space. The surreal figures of her children embody the premonition that something had happened to them. Afterwards, Brent receives the good news that her children are sold to Mr. Sands.

Interestingly, her reference to popular music is symbolic. The lyrics of "Home Sweet Home" include "my mother now thinks of her child," which indicates Brent's situation. Furthermore, the song is a sign of her dream of having her own house, which is unfortunately not realized in this book.

In a sense, Brent's closet resonates with Ralph Ellison's basement in *Invisible Man*.⁽²⁾ In the

Ellisonian black space, the protagonist cuts across the boundaries of time and space and descends into Louis Armstrong's music. Ellison's basement functions as a paradoxical space, obscuring such divisions as darkness and lightness, reality and dream, and presence and absence. Like Ellison's basement, the black space Brent is occupying blurs the boundaries between reality and dream. The surreal space functions as a manifestation of Brent's desire to see her children and ultimately gain her own "sweet home."

Although I have argued that Brent's black space works paradoxically (i.e., both negatively and positively), her invisibility, which is gained through the garret, empowers her in many respects. Her unseen presence becomes a crucial condition of her fight against her master. Eventually, Brent subverts the power structure. I explore the way Brent engages in battle against Dr. Flint in the next section.

3.2. Empowerment by the Garret

This section concentrates on Brent's fight against her master. Through the paradoxical black space, Brent manipulates Flint and eventually subverts the hierarchy between them.

Brent is able to control the physical movement of Dr. Flint even though she herself is in a state of immobility. While Brent is still in the garret, she arranges letters postmarked from New York to make Flint believe that she is in New York. Believing the authenticity of the letters, Dr. Flint makes several trips to New York to recapture her, spending a great deal of money and time, but his trips are in vain. Here, the power structure between them is disrupted. As Marilyn Wesley astutely points out, "his mobility functions as a kind of imprisonment, whereas her immobility allows a measure of genuine control" (57).

Interestingly, in the garret, Brent gains what McKittrick calls "multiple subject positions" (42). Brent is a fugitive, a captive, a witness, and a participant in the fight. Brent's multiple subject positions resonate with the Ellisonian notion of fluid blackness. Rinehart, a black conundrum in *Invisible Man*, a person living in a "world of fluidity," has various identities such as "Rine the runner, Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover, and Rine the reverend" (498). As Anne Anlin Cheng argues, Rinehart is "at once the ultimate outsider and insider, making visible the contingency of division and perverting the lines of power—or at least, exposing power as *positionality*" (131author's emphasis). Like Rinehart, Brent questions the absoluteness of the power structure and perverts the division of power.

Indeed, Brent disrupts power relationships by seeing Flint as an object of her gaze. Brent can observe the outside through her peep hole; through that hole, she can constantly observe Flint's movements and actions from her black space:

Opposite my window was a pile of feather beds. On the top of these I could lie perfectly concealed, and command a view of the street through which Dr. Flint passed to his office. Anxious as I was, I

felt a gleam of satisfaction when I saw him. Thus far I had outwitted him, and I triumphed over it.
(85)

When she finds Dr. Flint, she feels "a gleam of satisfaction." In her youth, Brent was constantly under Flint's gaze as his erotic object, which caused her to suffer from sexual anxiety. Now, thanks to her invisibility gained through the garret, the relationship between the seer and the seen is totally subverted. Brent is the subject who sees Flint as the object of her gaze. To borrow Michael Chaney's words, Brent is like "a vigilant sniper awaiting her public target from a secreted location" (168).

The garret's role as a place of surveillance is analogous to the concept and function of a panopticon. A panopticon is a type of prison or architecture apparatus for surveillance that was first created by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century. The concept was developed by Michele Foucault as an example of discipline in the modern world. According to Foucault, a panopticon disrupts the mutual relationship between the seeing and being seen: "The Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen" (201-2). That is, a panopticon provides the observer with the "automatic functioning of power" via the act of surveillance (201).

Like a panopticon, Brent's garret allows her to observe her enemy without ever being seen. Interestingly, the roles of an observer and a prisoner are inverted: while the self-captured Brent plays the role of an observer, seemingly free Flint becomes a prisoner. To borrow Foucault's words, Flint, a prisoner, "is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (200). As Foucault describes, Flint's actions can be seen and heard distinctly by Brent and he provides her with a great deal of information about her children.

As we have seen, the black space empowers Brent and enables her to fight against Dr. Flint. Ultimately, their power structure is inverted in a metaphorical sense; Brent as a subjective observer reduces Dr. Flint to the role of a prisoner to be seen who serves his observer.

4. Conclusion

This paper focused on how the garret as black space works in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents*. We first explored the meaning of black space. As McKittrick argues, black people have "a different sense of place." The site of oppression becomes the site of contestation as well. To put it another way, black space is "the terrain of political struggle." Following the insight of McKittrick and Morrison, I tried to rediscover and reconstruct Brent's experience in the garret.

I argued that the garret is a paradoxical space. The garret works both positively and negatively to Brent. The garret does not allow any absolute value. Rather, it blurs the boundaries of binaries such as

captivity and freedom, agency and oppression, adulthood and childhood, and real and surreal.

Whereas it is true that the garret tortures Brent in many respects, it certainly empowers her. Brent's invisibility enables her to battle against Dr. Flint. Brent manipulates Flint by making the most of her physical absence. She fools her master by arranging false letters that were posted from New York. Her invisibility provides her multiple subject positions such as a captive, a fugitive, a participant, and a witness. Her multiple subject positions reveal the contingency of power. Eventually, the power relation between them is subverted at least temporarily and in a metaphorical sense. Her constant surveillance inverts the relations between the seeing and the being seen. Similar to Foucault's panopticon, Brent's garret works to observe Flint's movements and actions without being seen.

In conclusion, I argue that the garret becomes a symbolic space that embodies Brent's experiences in her life. Over the course of her life, Brent is always in the paradoxical state. That is, she is always both powerful and powerless. One example is that even after she escapes to the North and gains mobility, she still has to hide herself from Flint's pursuit. John Cox astutely points out: "Denied the freedom to travel as a slave, Jacobs the fugitive is denied the freedom from travel" (139). Therefore, the challenge of respatializing Brent's paradoxical garret enables us to gain a further understanding and richer interpretation of Brent's narrative as a whole.

Note (1) Similar to Smith, Katherine Mckittrick mentions the interesting function of the garret in Brent's narrative. Yet, her argument about the garret is not well developed either.

(2) See my essay on Ellison's basement: Kei Okajima, "Destabilizing Boundaries: Political Possibilities in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*." *The Bulletin of the Graduate School of Education of Waseda University Separate Volume* 17.2 (2010):299-306.

Works Cited

- Baker Jr., Houston A. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984.
- Carvey, Hazel V. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987.
- Chaney, Michael A. *Fugitive Vision: Slave Image and Black Identity in Antebellum Narrative*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2008.
- Cheng, Anne Anlin. "Ralph Ellison and the politics of melancholia." *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison*. Ed. Ross Posnock. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. 121-136.
- Cox, John D. *Travelling South: Travel Narratives and the Construction of American Identity*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2005.
- Ellison, Ralph Waldo. *Invisible Man*. 1952. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.
- Jacobs, Harriet A. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. 1861. New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2009.

-
- McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006.
- Morrison, Toni. "The Site of Memory." *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*. Ed. Carolyn C. Denard. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2008. 65-80.
- Randle, Gloria T. "Between the Rock and the Hard Place: Mediating Spaces in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." *African American Review* 33 (1999): 43-56.
- Smith, Valerie. "'Loopholes of Retreat': Architecture and Ideology in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. New York: Penguin, 1990. 212-26.
- Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *The Black Feminist Reader*. Eds. Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting. Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000. 57-87.
- Wesley, Marilyn C. *Secret Journeys: The Trope of Women's Travel in American Literature*. Albany: State U of New York P, 1999.