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THE INTERSECTION OF MOTHERHOOD AND MANIPULATION:
HOW SLAVERY INFORMS THE MATERNAL IDENTITY

A Thesis Presented

by

Meghan O'Day

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts
Specializing in English

May, 2020

Defense Date: March 16, 2020
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ABSTRACT

One of the 19th century's most prominent slave narratives is Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. This thesis will examine Jacobs' invocation of the maternal identity in her autobiographical account of the slave system, specifically focusing on the intersection of various maternal identities and how they were impacted by the ubiquitous influence of slavery. In her writing, Jacobs presents deviating experiences of motherhood. Primarily, she discusses the accounts of the black mother through her protagonist and autobiographical narrator, Linda Brent. Linda depicts the dichotomies of the emotional experience for the slave mother: an experience both of hope and of fear, of defensiveness and of vulnerability. Linda also invokes the experience of the white slave mother, through her knowledge of the relationship between Dr. and Mrs. Flint. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is the ideal text to consider the complex nature of the maternal with respect to slavery, for it represents the exploitation of motherhood and reproduction in support of regeneration, while also characterizing maternal figures in the book who represent the agency of the mother to subvert the system.

The current critical conversation surrounding Harriet Jacobs' text seems to isolate the complications associated with motherhood in slavery. Where some authors focus on the slave household as a site of oppression for the mother who is unable to provide protection for her children, other authors argue that the mother is the most powerful figure of resistance to slavery. Few texts do the necessary work of merging these two maternal perspectives. Moreover, the figure of the white mother in slave narratives hasn't been adequately addressed in order to truly contrast differing maternal motivations influenced by race. The role of racial identity significantly impacts the maternal in Jacobs' text, demonstrating the profound connection between motherhood and the slave system in early America.

With Jacob's writing as the forefront focus of consideration, this thesis paper will highlight textual analysis through close reading. It will also reflect and expand upon the current existing criticism to enhance the effect of the literary analysis. Some comparison may be invoked between Jacob's text and others closely related, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but these invocations will only be for the purpose of highlighting Jacobs' use of the maternal. Ultimately, the methodology of this thesis will be presenting the differing maternal perspectives through the combination of scholarship and analysis with the purpose of proving the maternal identity is both a liability and a power in the system of slavery.

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Introduction

Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* tells the harrowing narrative of a young enslaved woman named Linda Brent who educates readers on the challenging experiences she encounters as an oppressed enslaved person. Despite what the title suggests, this narrative does not solely focus on Brent's life as a "slave girl" but extends into the beginnings of her journey through motherhood and even beyond that, in the years of her own children's upbringing. Linda Brent acts as an autobiographical narrator for Jacobs, providing a method by which she can utilize her voice without endangering herself through direct association in writing. The progression of the nation after the nineteenth-century depended largely on the documented narrative accounts of people's express experiences within slavery, which have become central to the scholarly understanding of the time period. Jacobs' narrative account is so important due to its honesty, in which she engenders to disclose the horrifying abuse she suffered at the hands of white slave masters, as well as drawing attention to the implicit relationship between sexual violence and captivity. However, the theme that became most prevalent in my own interpretation of the text, as well as in my interaction with the literary criticism surrounding the text, concentrated centrally on the figure of the mother in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

After Jacobs was freed in 1853, she aspired to write a narrative about her experience in slavery, and Lydia Maria Child acted as her editor in this endeavor. Child was a white abolitionist and author herself, who believed Jacobs' story would prove

highly influential to the larger project of abolishing slavery. Due to the nature of the writing itself, historians and literary critics have argued about the genre of *Incidents*. Its imaginative characters suggest it to be a fiction, but its close resemblance to Jacobs' life suggest it to be much more closely aligned with a memoir. Jacobs' position as a freed black slave didn't give her the authority to write her own truth. Her life was still threatened by the persistence of slavery, and her voice would not have been received as fact by so many. Child's function was to support Jacobs' voice, by providing in introduction to *Incidents* certifying the claims to be based on truth. For these reasons, it's important to consider genre when examining the themes of Jacobs' work. Though it's written like a fiction, it should be read as deeply rooted in reality.

The maternal figure can be regarded as the predominant point of intersection between many other aspects of the text worth considering, including gendered sexual violence, racism, and the economics pertaining to slavery. Linda Brent embodies the predominant maternal figure in the text, but there are also allusions to other black mothers, white mothers, surrogate mothers, and young girls who are not yet mothers but have the threat of compulsory motherhood impacting their lives nonetheless. The enslaved black mother plays a significant role in racialized regeneration, in that she is often forced to reproduce for the purpose of capitalistic gain for the white male slaveholder. Within the text, the rape of black people is depicted as a mechanism of achieving monetary gain associated with whiteness. The reproduction of labor in children produced by rape significantly benefited plantations of enslaved people compulsorily contributing to the wealth of the white man at the top of the societal hierarchy of power. The discrepancies in motherhood between white women, as wives of slaveholders, and

black women, as enslaved themselves, enunciates the clear influence of racism in domestic experiences. Likewise, the economics of slavery appear as fundamental to the premise of black women's bodies as objects of capitalism, subjected to dislocation, exploitation, and perversion. As all of these themes traverse each other, and each is vital in deliberating the others, I found that the most purposeful area of emphasis for my thesis project resides within the enslaved mother.

The existing critical conversation surrounding the maternal figure in American slavery complexly comprises itself of many different areas of specific study. It can be hard to integrate so many diverse subtopics within a larger, general area of focus. Some articles situate *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in relation to other texts published during a similar timeframe. For instance, Carolyn Berman's article discusses the similarities between Harriet Beecher Stowe's protagonist Cassy and Jacobs' protagonist Linda, the shared sexual corruption as well as their mutual cunning character qualities. Similarly, Kristin Herzog relates the same two narratives in her article, which focuses more specifically on violence, contemplating the conditions that enable it and subdue it. Somewhat differently, within a chapter of her book, Andrea O'Reilly Herrera compares the interesting dynamics of the domestic novel in Bronte's writing and Jacobs, distinctly separating her article into the first half, with a focus on Bronte, and the second half, the integration of Jacobs.

With an analogous attention to the domestic realm of Jacobs' writing, several other critics converge on the aspects of family within the text. Caroline Levander argues that the American child has become an inherent figure in establishing the modern culture of nationalism and white supremacy, and the literary child has been an influence in

establishing public opinions on race. Levander also investigates President Jefferson's involvement in American slavery, from his own plantation of slaves to his political practices that enabled slavery to persist in the early founding of the United States. She also authored a second, pertinent article, which reads Jacobs' text as a rebellion against the classical domestic novel, which is critical to differentiating Jacobs from other fictional writers of her time. In her writing, Frances Foster assesses the autobiographical commentary on familial relations in early American texts, demonstrating a general consensus of the extensive presence of slavery's influence on black American families. Finally, Anthony Parent publishes an article in a larger collection of writing about African American and Indian abuse in early America. Parent's article scrutinizes the diction surrounding the home, as well as the symbolic domestic emotionality surrounding the home lifestyle in Jacobs' narrative.

A few critics of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* observe the methods of narration in the text, particularly as it occurs across generations in a discourse between mothers and daughters. Holly examines verbal relational associations between mothers and daughters within Jacobs' text. Similarly, Rachel Feinstein's book illuminates the frequency of sexual violence within slavery, highlighting specific correlations and undermining previously accepted justifications. Robyn Warhol's writing, though primarily focusing on Victorian Britain, is highly applicable to the discussion of nineteenth-century deliberations on gender distinctions. Warhol uses a "feminist poetics of detail" (Warhol 75) to identify gendered differences in texts. Gender is obviously highly implicated in the control of the maternal body, as well as in the narrative process,

with women being generally regarded as less intelligent and important in society during different historical moments.

Finally, a collection of critical articles consolidates its focus on the obviously intrinsic reproductive feature of maternity, both as a form of power and exploitation within slavery. Molly Ball's article works to reveal the influence of motherhood on reestablishing domestic temporality away from racialized trends that have historically disproportionately damaged black families. In her book, Jennifer Morgan characterizes the specific capacity of the female gender to be especially exploited in slavery, due to women's vulnerability as mothers with children who can't protect themselves in a system of exceptional manipulation. Within this larger subcategory of reproduction in slavery, Grace McEntee provides an article, which positions motherhood as one of the foremost contributors to racial progress through Jacobs' text. From this angle, McEntee suggests that motherhood is actually a strength in obstructing slavery and in fostering early integrated understanding between races. Lastly, Charles Wilson's article is useful in discerning colonial influences and considering the imperative role of the fugitive enslaved person within the text.

Though all of these articles can be located within categories of interpretation, and can even constitute a category all of their own, they each relate to the broader category of motherhood within the slave era. Where so many of these articles seem to be limited is in their scope of orientation, being that they often argue in favor of motherhood as a liability or as a force within slavery. Few, if any, complete the necessary work of relaying the dynamism of Harriet Jacobs' narrative. This is a work that communicates the multifaceted emotionality of motherhood, as well as its ability to be controlled by forces

external of the immediate family unit. While some criticism, such as that of Herrera and Levander, examines the subversive qualities of *Incidents* in relation to the tropes of other renowned domestic novels, even they fail to specifically locate motherhood itself as a resistance to slavery in Jacobs' text. My thesis seeks to synthesize the existing criticism on Jacobs, as well as to extend beyond it and resolve the fissures in other critical arguments.

In this thesis, I argue that the existing critical conversation lacks necessary integrative work, work which establishes the enslaved maternal experience as both a limiting and expanding influence within Jacobs' text. Furthermore, I suggest that by integrating these two opposing aspects of the maternal identity, Jacobs successfully accomplishes the project of her writing, which is to emphasize the centrality of the maternal identity within the system of American slavery. My first chapter outlines the different emotional experiences Jacobs presents through the mother figure, highlighting the exceeding risks and rewards for enslaved mothers. Next, in my second chapter, I emphasize the vulnerability of enslaved women as compulsory to the capitalistic venture of reproducing free labor through rape. I then transition to the third chapter, which develops a larger discussion on masculine manipulation of the maternal identity. Finally, in my fourth chapter, I examine the indispensable identity of the surrogate mother in Jacobs' text, and I use the expansion of the surrogate mother to provide some concluding commentary on the text itself, as well as the critical conversation that surrounds it. The body of this thesis pursues to feature the most important aspects of *Incidents* as it relates to the maternal. It incorporates discussion surrounding race and relationships. It refers to the role of economics, as well as law, in the preservation of early American slavery. It

demonstrates a clear challenge to genre and form in Jacobs' writing. Most importantly, though, this thesis draws on prominent scholarship to prove that *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl* amplifies our contemporary understanding of early American enslavement and liberation through the narration of the enslaved mother.

Chapter 1 - The Maternal Slave: Multiplicities of Sentiment

The device that distinguishes some authors from others is not in the stories they tell but in the way they tell them. Jacobs is among the few authors in history who tell an important story and tell it well. She creates characters based on people she's known herself, and thus they are rich with complexities. Her characters are capable of feeling a variety of emotions simultaneously, enabling them to represent the reality of the human experience in their depth. Additionally, she describes the setting of her stories in detail, constructing a world that can not only be imagined but can also be seen as real, because it is. Jacobs, more than any other author creating a fictional story, must make her writing believable and conceivable. The stakes for her are higher *because* what she is writing about is authentic. She has to depict a world that is able to be understood by people who have never seen the world in such a way, and she has to make her characters into people worth supporting. The text is technically a fiction, an autobiographical fiction as it is based on the true events of Jacobs' life. Due to its autobiographical nature, though, it masquerades as novel asserting strong truth claims. It is therefore critical to read the text as a fiction but perhaps consider it as a memoir of Jacobs' life as well, not just a fictional account of Linda's life. If Linda is not a likeable character, then the white women reading about Linda's life will use the story as ammunition to fuel their racist beliefs. The burden of the truth, of communicating the truth in an accurate and receivable way, weighs heavy on Jacobs as an author. In this chapter, I will unite the multiplicities of sentiment presented in Jacobs' text, to demonstrate how Jacobs is successful in depicting a maternal

experience that is both vulnerable and formidable, a portion of integrative work that appears to be missing from much of the current critical conversation.

Jacobs' work has been used for over a century as a glimpse into the reality of slavery where it otherwise wouldn't have existed in such a capacity, creating an honest balance of sentiment between hopeless and hopeful. Though other slave narratives have been written, only few have been physically recovered, preserved through time, and reproduced in wide circulation. Since so many enslaved people were never educated properly, it was impossible for the vast majority to document the atrocities that occurred in their lives due to their illiteracy. Enslaved people who could write, and therefore could document the cruelties committed against them, were seen as voices of resistance, and their writing was often confiscated as a result,

Certainly one reason for the relative lack of attention to Africans in early New England is the problematic state of surviving evidence. Recorded references to African slaves in the seventeenth-century New England are often little more than a line or two, and multiple entries concerning the same slave are almost entirely lacking. Nameless Africans appear and then disappear in court testimonies, in deeds, in wills, in letters, in inventories, and in diaries; their anonymity makes it very difficult to trace their lives with any certainty (Warren 1033).

Likewise, since white people were responsible for determining worthwhile literature at the time in which Jacobs was writing, many slave narratives that were written and did survive were subsequently lost or destroyed, being considered insignificant. Jacobs represents one of the few voices that was not silenced, that was not lost. Her narrative has a significant historic impact, especially since there are so few slave narratives that are widely distributed like hers. Even Harriet Beecher Stowe, who is often considered a critical member of the American literary canon, depicts slavery through the fictional lens of a white female author, rather than recounting the experience of a real black woman.

It's quite problematic to read about slavery from the perspective of a white woman telling the story of an enslaved black person, even if she was an abolitionist, when there are black women, such as Jacobs, who can speak for themselves. It's of the utmost importance to truly understand history, that it be recounted through those who actually experienced it. Otherwise, how is it any different than reading a regular fiction that is not based on true experience? Reading the account of an event from anyone other than those who truly experienced it merely continues to discount their experiences by reframing them into a more consumable, comfortable misrepresentation. The uncomfortable comes in the manifold emotional experiences of enslaved peoples, rather than a singular, flat representation which appears in so much criticism.

For Jacobs, the project of writing *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* must not just recount her own truth but the truth of so many other enslaved people who did not have the opportunity to ever stand up for themselves. It matters what she says and how she says it because it's what we will know as truth from a time in history that has been so distorted, when it deserves to be understood in the cruel context for which it genuinely occurred. Not only is Jacobs successful in providing a raw and real depiction of motherhood in slavery, she is able to give humanity back to historically dehumanized people. On page 44, Jacobs defines the treatment of women in slavery by their slave owners, comparing them to animals,

Women are considered of no value, unless they continually increase their owner's stock. They are put on par with animals. This same master shot a woman through the head, who had run away and been brought back to him. No one called him to account for it. If a slave resisted being whipped, the bloodhounds were unpacked, and set upon him, to tear his flesh from his bone. The master who did these things was highly educated, and styled a

perfect gentleman. He also boasted the name and standing of a Christian, though Satan never had a truer follower (Jacobs 44). Once again, as is continually used throughout the narrative, Jacobs references the regeneration of enslaved people through calling them “stock.” She uses diction such as “stock,” “animals,” “unpacked,” and “flesh” to iterate the dehumanization of enslaved women. In comparing women with animals, Jacobs clearly depicts how women are stripped of their humanity, their most basic human rights to safety and agency. Similarly, women who attempt to escape the brutality in which they are treated are once again retrieved by their slave owner, as though they are a piece of property he is entitled to. She describes the violence they are subjected to, that they are threatened with if they are not compliant. She alludes to the probable possibility of death, the threat of the master who “shot a woman through the head” because she had disobeyed him and attempted to flee his violence. Women are not protected, as is clear through “no one called to account for it”. Jacobs uses “it” instead of “her” to show the dehumanization in action, the linguistic objectification. Slave women in the narrative demonstrate a larger problem of women being unable to defend themselves against cruelty inflicted by men.

In addition to the problem of slave women as objects of violence, Jacobs dismantles the perception that a “perfect gentleman” is incapable of being abusive or even murderous. In referencing a higher education, as well as Christianity, Jacobs represents duality in “the master,” that he is capable of being seen as both a character of goodness and evil, that this particular double standard actually serves to dismiss his sadistic actions. However, in contrasting the highest level of education and faultless religious values with enacting the behavior of a rancorous murderer, it is impossible to view any goodness in the same person. It forces the reader to consider how a man can

believe in God and still shoot a woman in the head, how he can be highly educated and believe women are on par with animals. This juxtaposition only serves to strip the man of his title of gentleman, not to suggest he can maintain both roles and keep one compartmentalized from the other. Presenting the fear of the enslaved woman so starkly, without room for disguising the horror, satisfies Jacobs' purpose of accurately presenting the truth of the experience of the captive enslaved person. To soften it would be to do injustice to her experience and the experience of others in a similar position, so she must be factual in her narrative account, especially in presenting the dichotomy of the master as he is seen by society. She has to identify the absurdity of considering a violent man still benevolent, as though the part of him that sits in the pews at church each Sunday is somehow severed from the part of him that unleashes bloodhounds on an enslaved person "to tear his flesh from his bone" because he attempted to resist being whipped. In calling attention to the contradiction, Jacobs aptly disassembles the dichotomy that has been preserving men for centuries prior, the assumption that they can violate and abuse women while maintaining the pretense of an honorable gentleman. Disassembling this contradiction takes power from the men who attempt to maintain two opposing identities and rightfully returns it to the victimized women of Jacobs' plot, for they are the ones who are presented as honorable figures of moral decency and intellectual stature. The contradiction Jacobs presents in the master not only gives human complexity to her characters, it provides the story with a clear villain, the abusive man.

In addition to the complexity present in the master, Jacobs uses juxtaposition to demonstrate complexity within Linda's experience, beginning first with her experiences of romantic love and marriage. For Linda, as an enslaved woman, marriage is not based

on love but on the economics of slavery. Marriage is a small method by which she can control who owns her, so that even though she is still not autonomous, at least she has some autonomy in her lack of freedom. When Linda chooses to be in a relationship with Mr. Sands, a friend of hers, she is certain it will be better for her than the alternative option of staying under the full control of her master, Dr. Flint, who is abusive. Linda engages in a sexual relationship with Mr. Sands, a young, white man she believes will protect her from the abuse of Dr. Flint and his family. Through this choice that Linda must make, Jacobs makes apparent the empowering possibility of choice in love. She presents the reality of love as a sanction, rather than a fairytale. In this example between Linda and Mr. Sands, romantic love is both freeing and further confining, a multiplicity of sentiment Jacobs captures in Linda's thought process, "I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favored another; and it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way. I thought he would revenge himself by selling me, and I was sure my friend, Mr. Sands, would buy me" (Jacobs 49). Jacobs presents the question of whether the relationship between them even contains love or just the absence of abuse.

In addition to communicating a multiplicity present within love, this aspect of the narrative also functions as a mockery of other traditional domestic novels. Where some authors have the joyful freedom to muse about love in their works, to create a character who is allowed to have the experiences of fruitful love and a resulting efficacious marriage, this is not a possibility for most enslaved people. The slave narrative tells a harsh reality of marriage as an economic authorization when one's personhood is

considered an object under the law rather than a subject. Herrera describes this realization for Linda and the impact it has on her reality,

Linda soon discovers that the “dream of her youth” is thwarted by the realities of her own plight, for the civil laws to which she is subject as a slave give no sanction to marriage or love. In her description of her first disappointment with love, Jacobs cleverly parodies the plot of the sentimental romance novel, which often centers around the combatting tropes of marriage based on love and mutual respect as opposed to the idea of arranged marriages, which are tantamount to political or economic exchanges. Linda describes her relationship with her ‘lover’ as one found on ‘mutual attachment’ and love; however, she undercuts this vision by pointing out that in order for them to realize their dream of happiness, her lover must offer to buy her (Herrera 70).

Whereas Jacobs presents marriage initially as a potentially freeing concept relative to the little freedom Linda otherwise maintains, Herrera notes that this possibility of freedom is always accompanied by the confining quality within Linda’s “plight.” As an enslaved woman, she does not have any right to marriage or love, something that seems to be incumbent of so many other female protagonists in female-driven novels of the era. Instead of the concept of love being hopeful, it is presented as a “disappointment,” a spoiled “‘dream’.” Perhaps the best that can be hoped for is a marriage that lacks the consequences of violence, but even this isn’t a choice of Linda’s own. Love, along with being disappointing, is another modality by which Linda is forced into a life she otherwise wouldn’t have chosen. The sole purpose she engages with Mr. Sands is to escape the torment of Dr. Flint even if only by a small degree, though Mr. Sands cannot ensure complete protection by any means. Once again the traditional tropes of the domestic novel are usurped by the reality of slavery as an economic, objectifying concept. Jacobs uses the juxtaposition of mutual attachment, perhaps even love, with

acquisition of sale to remind the reader that even the most personal parts of an enslaved person's life are monetized, and therefore, impersonalized.

Though at times, Jacobs allows her authorial voice to question the point of positive emotions in a life of slavery, they ultimately prove to be necessary to her survival, as depicted through Linda's life. Before Linda is bought by Mr. Sands, she falls in love with another character as a young girl. The relationship they have is described as passionate, youthful love, something that much more closely resembles the classic domestic romance story. We learn very little about her love interest, other than this is Linda's only experience of being in love in the whole book. She loves Mr. Sands as well, but in a very different capacity, given that he was an outlet for her escape rather than a choice for her free will. By presenting these two varying romantic experiences, Jacobs demonstrates how enslaved people are capable of feeling all the same emotions as white people, but they are restricted by their position in society in so many of these positive sensitive experiences. Jacobs doesn't have to give us details about Linda's love interest; all we need to know is that he existed and how she felt about him. His function within the text is to present another instance of loss in a series of so many for Linda. First, the loss of her parents, and now the loss of her love. Both were enforced by Linda's enslaved identity, which prevents them from marrying or even interacting.

The loss of Linda's first loves allows Jacobs to relate dissimilarities within the text, demonstrating the multiplicities of the emotional experiences of an enslaved person. At points throughout the text, including this moment, Linda often asks rhetorical questions to the reader, wondering how such opposing things can exist and why people allow themselves to feel their impact, "Why does the slave ever love? Why allow the

tendrils of the heart to twine around objects which may at any moment be wrenched away by the hand of violence?" (Jacobs 33). The questions must be rhetorical. Despite the fact that the relationship between narrator and reader is always interdependent, the reader cannot respond to the speaker. Linda's questions are therefore posed in a limited capacity, representing a kind of desperation in her tone. The questions act more as a statement of experience, rather than a solicitation for a response, given the circumstances. Likewise, in this passage, Jacobs also compares two thematically juxtaposing concepts: love and violence. In slavery, violence intercedes in love for Jacobs. Jacobs uses "objects" to define Linda's loved ones, feeding into the involuntary position Linda and other enslaved people exist within, as human subjects experiencing complex human emotions. Her ability to fully experience these emotions is hindered by enslaved people's legal status as objects, which can "at any moment be wrenched away," showing how negative emotions such as anxiety are embedded within even positive experiences, anxiety that they might end without notice or cause. Apart from her purposeful marriage to Mr. Sands, which is presented as satisfactory but not quite enlivening, Linda's preliminary instance of being in love also concludes in disappointment. Jacobs uses each of Linda's two romantic relationships to demonstrate that in either scenario, the enslaved person is prevented from having a fulfilling romance, even though the opportunity often exists. In employing "allow," Jacobs demonstrates that Linda believes people have control over their emotions and possibly even the ability to discontinue their occurrence. As Linda muses over these questions in her narration, she inclines towards a more hopeless existence prevailing as more adaptable than a reality filled with love. Linda's questions inform the reader about the terror of loving someone whose safety is always

threatened, and her proposition that it might be better not to love someone in such a situation suggests that the terror rests close to the threshold of entirely unmanageable.

Jacobs' ability to represent Linda's contrasting emotional experiences, interweaving love and fear, also serves to exemplify Linda as a character full of empathy and compassion, who is deserving of the same sentiment from readers. After Linda's brief love affair ends and she engages sexually with Mr. Sands, she requests forgiveness from the reader, believing her submission to sex as self-serving and reflective of impropriety. Linda exposes her reasoning, which is mostly that she is seeking shelter from violence and hoping for freedom for herself and her children. Based on her cultural conditioning through slavery, she believes she owes the reader an apology for desiring a life free from suffering, because she has been taught it is incumbent upon her, "Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of chattel, entirely subject to the will of another" (Jacobs 49). This is a different type of interaction with the reader that Jacobs is evoking, as opposed to a rhetorical question that readers are incapable of responding to. This is a specific request for emotion from readers which we are able to oblige. It's also written in a commanding tone, in the imperative form, as Jacobs knows the understanding from readers is imperative to the abolition of slavery. The focus of these lines is on the laws, where they are at fault and how they are provisioned in racism. Jacobs demonstrates here an understanding of her white readership, indirectly addressing the fact that they "never knew what it is to be a slave." She may also be catering to the cultural perception of an enslaved person's duty to slavery, even though she clearly doesn't believe it herself in abdicating for her freedom.

Linda may be the compromise Jacobs must make in order to gain sympathy from readers, by acknowledging that many white readers who haven't experienced slavery will believe an enslaved person seeking freedom is detestable. Linda concludes the paragraph by saying, "Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others" (Jacobs 49). Jacobs appeals for sympathy by asking authoritatively and by demonstrating that Linda is a character of love and understanding, a figure of slavery who is the furthest from deserving of such horrible treatment.

Jacobs' specific approach to the domestic novel and to addressing her readership are what enable her to gain the sympathy she so requires for the success of her project on a larger scale, as Levander notes in her assessment of the text,

At first, many of Jacobs' peers refused to believe that a former slave could so successfully reproduce domestic prose, but recent critics have concluded that the domestic themes and language that pervade *Incidents* are what enable Jacobs to gain the sympathy of readers who, because they are the products of their nonslave domestic culture, are ill equipped to understand how slave women's experiences diverge from it (Levander 28). Ultimately, as Levander explains, it is incredibly necessary for Jacobs to present many opposing emotional experiences, to exemplify the slave experience as a conglomerate of positive and negative feelings, allowing a foundation of mutual understanding between people who have lived vastly different lives in enslaved people and non-enslaved people. However, the opposing emotional experiences Jacobs presents vary from the traditional white domestic novel, in that they are not focused on the prospects of love but on slavery's renunciation of it.

Lastly, Jacobs presents dichotomies within the maternal experience itself, beginning during pregnancy, which insinuates that the maternal body is intellectually

incompetent but physically indestructible. Margaret Fuller, in her political treatise writes on the injustices against woman incurred by the law which is nearly entirely determined and enforced by men. She writes about pregnancy, with specific attention to enslaved women, highlighting how they are reduced to working bodies.

Those who think the physical circumstances of woman would make a part in the affairs of national government unsuitable, are by no means those who think it impossible for the negroes to endure field work, even during pregnancy, or the sempstresses to go through their killing labors (Fuller 14).

Her early critique of women as illogical proves their purposes are reduced to bodies as objects, rather than people with minds. While it's important that she specifically calls attention to pregnant women continually mandated to "endure field work," her critique is limited in that it doesn't extend to women as mothers. The process of motherhood automatically situates women in a position of vulnerability, as their safety is disregarded and so is that of their children. Jacobs notes this sense of vulnerability in Linda's experience as a mother throughout the text, specifically with immediacy after childbirth.

Jacobs describes the dual maternal experience as being both hopeful and fearful, another example of contrasting emotionality in the slave narrative. Linda becomes pregnant with Mr. Sands' child, her first pregnancy, and she gives birth to a baby boy shortly after within the text. Linda recalls feeling deeply connected as well as greatly burdened by the presence of her new baby and what it signifies in her life, "When I was most sorely oppressed I found a solace in his smiles. I loved to watch his infant slumbers; but always there was a dark cloud over my enjoyment. I could never forget that he was a slave. Sometimes I wished that he might die in infancy" (Jacobs 53). Jacobs uses juxtaposition between "oppressed" and "solace" to explain the joy Linda derives from

being a mother and being able to take part in the most basic aspects of life, watching her baby smile and sleep. The “dark cloud” is symbolic for the negative affect Linda feels, including fear and anxiety for her child’s welfare. For Linda, “enjoyment” is never an exclusive reaction because slavery is always present despite any positive experience. Since Linda so often derives positive affect in the text from her loved ones, there is always anxiety surrounding the possibility of forced separation, caused by geographic relocation or even the ultimate forced separation of death. Linda worries so intently about the life her child may grow up to experience in slavery, knowing the reality of that suffering herself, that “sometimes” she “wished that he might die in infancy.” Infanticide is one mechanism of control within the text that enslaved people have, and Jacobs offers it as a form of kindness in opposition to a life in slavery. For slave women whose bodily autonomy is stolen away from them, the process of regaining minimal control of their lives and also of resisting a larger attack against their gender often occurs through contesting reproductive repression. Whether it be through birth control, abortions, or infanticide, mothers in slavery use a range of approaches to assert their reproductive control in order to combat the feeling of being “sorely oppressed.” When Linda gives birth to her second child, she experiences an even greater negative affect surrounding the realization that her baby is a girl, “When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own” (Jacobs 66). Jacobs acknowledges the gender disparity that Linda experiences at this point in the text as a mother, noting that slavery is “far more terrible for women.” The “wrongs, and

sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own” is in reference to the reproductive power of the female body that the male body does not obtain. Women, in their capacity to reproduce children, can also reproduce free labor and objects of capitalism for slave owners, which is why they are targeted more explicitly in acts of sexual violence and involuntary conception through rape. Linda knows this experience firsthand as a young enslaved woman herself, which is why her “heart was heavier than it had ever been before,” despite the joyous experience of having a new baby to love and care for. In the process of racialized regeneration, mothers have an integral role, which Jacobs exemplifies through an adverse take on the typical domestic fiction.

Chapter 2 - A Mother's Role in Racialized Regeneration

Implicit in Harriet Jacobs' opening line of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, "I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away" (8), is a paradox between domesticity and slavery. Domesticity is a primary principle of American society, not in reference to the dutiful domestic entwined with the feminine but the domestic in connection with property, an early preview of owning a home as the symbol of the American dream in the twentieth century. The opening line of Jacobs' text immediately establishes a domestic focus for this narrative, given its reference to "childhood." Readers can expect references to the home and to family, as well as conflicts which will likely exist within the domestic realm rather than the external, societal realm. Using this as her opening line is an interesting move for Jacobs, because the reality is that her narrative undermines the typical domestic novel by destabilizing its reliance on traditional domestic tropes. An early glimpse of this trend occurs even within the first line, as Jacobs references childhood having "passed away," creating a paradox between youth and death.

There are instances of domestic diction regarding property and protection interspersed across the documents of establishment. First, the promise with which the United States was created lies in its original document of foundation. The Declaration of Independence (US 1776), authored and ratified by Thomas Jefferson, a slaveholder himself, states "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (Jefferson). Then, the Constitution of the

United States, the piece of paper that declares a set of collective values and behaves as a reference for all judicial proceedings since the origins of the nation, proceeds in its opening sentence, “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America” (Art. I, sec. 1). Finally, the Bill of Rights asserts ten initial amendments to the Constitution, and dictates in the Sixth, “the right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects” (US Const. amend XI) and in the Tenth, assures the people that they will be protected from “cruel and unusual punishments” (US Const. amend XX). Cruel and unusual punishments are typically excluded from the realm of the domestic, given its emphasis on comfort and the idyllic. Therefore, this is an indirect reference to the domestic, as the domestic seems to be situated in the absence of cruel and unusual punishment, though in Jacobs’ discussion of the domestic, this of course isn’t true.

In her opening line, Jacobs reflects the paradox that is implicit within the three most influential founding documents of the United States. The documents that have established the system of American government and have survived through time, were not originally written to protect the rights of those they are intended to protect even now. As it was written, “All men are created equal” did not apply to “all men,” and in fact, excluded most men, being that “men” refers to the collective mankind. “Unalienable rights” designates the inability of an outside force to restrict the domestic promises of the Creator, alluding to the Protestant God, promises which are defined as life, liberty and the

pursuit of happiness. In slavery, one's life and liberty (we can disregard the pursuit of happiness because the supposition that such a sentiment could exist fairly for people in captivity is merely an insulting illusion) are determined not by a God but by other men, by white men. The insurance of "domestic tranquility" does not exist for enslaved people, for as Jacobs says, she only spent the first six years of childhood in happiness, which was solely due to her privileged naivety towards the world's injustices, as afforded by a set of protective parents. Enslaved people do not have the right "to be secure in their persons, houses, papers and effects," and they are not protected from "cruel and unusual punishments." Unmistakably, the very foundational values that create the ideals of domesticity, of America as a whole, are rooted in racism, and therefore, as Jacobs' opening line indicates, there is a very stark opposition between slavery and the traditional American ideal of the domestic household. Where are enslaved people located in these words, in the promises of protection for "all men"? They are not. In "the right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers and effects" enslaved people are not "the people." They are not "the people" that are provided the rights to their own bodies and properties, but they are the "effects," the bodies that are labeled as belongings in which *other* people, white people, are provided the right to. The very language in the founding documents of the United States make non-white bodies the objects, rather than the equal subjects, and the objectification of their bodies are beholden to white people as property. The founding documents use the word "domestic" explicitly, in reference to the nation as a whole, though it can also apply to a single household and family. The denotations of this word, the way it serves both functions, makes its use in the founding documents noteworthy. Rather than explicitly refer to the nation, the authors of the

founding document reference the “domestic,” perhaps establishing the whole nation as a personified household itself. In such a reading of the founding documents, the national household annihilates certain types of people from existing within a domestic sphere, whether it be countrywide or familial, and Jacobs seems to use this exclusion to structure her own narrative style as a subversion of the expected domestic narrative.

While Jacobs’ narrative can be read as a work of domestic fiction, it subverts the traditional roles of the domestic novel, revealing the ability of slavery to collapse family structures for all parties involved, regardless of race. Following the opening line, Linda describes what made her “happy childhood” such, beginning with her parents, “They lived together in a comfortable home; and, though we were all slaves, I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise, trusted to them for safe keeping, and liable to be demanded of them at any moment” (Jacobs 8). Thus her narrative begins as any domestic novel would, with two parents “living together” with their children in a “comfortable home.” However, immediately, within the same sentence, Jacobs juxtaposes the reality of a domestic novel with the reality of slavery. The diction relating to her childhood, including “fondly,” “shielded,” “dreamed,” “trusted,” and “safe” starkly contrasts the diction of commodification, such as “merchandise” and “liable.” For Linda, though she describes how she was protected by her parents from being aware of her existence as an object in society, the reality in which her parents are living still comingles with her own imaginative reality. Not only is Jacobs depicting the possibility for two realities to exist together, through Jacobs’ language, Linda actually narrates in a way that represents on the page the co-existence of her two realities through the childhood she describes. The words themselves are physically enfolding around each

other, working both in resistance and in unification to demonstrate linguistically how slavery and the domestic both amalgamate and combat each other.

Unlike any other domestic novel, though, the source of conflict in Jacobs' story does not originate within the household. Largely speaking, the conflict occurs within the physical household that Linda and her family are occupying at the beginning of the narrative; representationally, however, the conflict is presented as exclusively external to their family structure. Jacobs does not write about an "unhappy family," as Tolstoy does in his opening line of *Anna Karenina*, or a fragmentary marriage plot seeking resolution, as Austen does in *Pride and Prejudice*. The greatest trope of the fictional domestic novel is that it always typically develops a conflict structure within a home, predictably within a home that appears initially to be notably without conflict. In another of Jane Austen's novels, *Emma*, the opening line begins, "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her" (Austen 1). In this opening line, Austen's protagonist "seemed" to be without any conflict, experiencing the best blessings and very little to distress or vex her, but even just a few paragraphs later on down the first page, we learn the inherent irony in Austen's first sentence: Emma's mother died when she was young and her surrogate mother, Miss Taylor, is getting married and moving away. Always there is a conflict of the family within the happy household, and archetypally it can be located within the first line of the domestic novel, as Jacobs parodies in the opening few lines of her narrative. Blackford talks about what the domestic sphere represents in Jacobs' text,

Early in the text we witness pivotal events in the Flints' kitchen; this kitchen epitomizes the kind of abuse the community cannot see--the sexualized abuse of slave women in the (so-called) private, domestic realm. Both master and mistress expend enormous amounts of energy as sexual voyeurs in the kitchen, revealing how this food chain is far from economic, far beyond the bounds of the rational, (Blackford).

Blackford focuses on the kitchen as a room that “epitomizes the kind of abuse the community cannot see,” which is what the domestic home signifies within Jacobs’ text.

The boundaries of the physical house are a shield intended to keep the outside world from viewing the “sexualized abuse of slave women,” as well as a space consistent with abuse and burden.

There are several striking similarities between Austen’s opening line of *Emma* and Jacobs’ opening few lines of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Both mention their protagonists growing up in a “comfortable home.” Both use the word “happy” – Austen to describe Emma’s disposition and Jacobs to describe Linda’s childhood. Both mention the age of their protagonists; Emma Woodhouse is twenty-one years old when she finally confronts the problem of her existence, while Linda Brent is only six. The obvious and unavoidable difference between these two stories is that one tells the tale of a young adult beginning her quest to find a husband, while the other tells the tale of a child realizing she is an enslaved person. Also important to note is that Austen is a white author writing a fictional novel that will be praised through time, while Jacobs is a black author writing a fiction closely constructed from her own reality, which though extremely well-written and important, is largely only considered a part of the literary canon if the context of the canon’s study specifically focuses on race relations. Therefore, in addition to subverting the traditional tropes of the domestic novel, Jacobs’ first few lines also force us as readers to consider why certain authors are more revered in literary history, as well as the

opportunity cost of praising an already privileged author for her ability to entertain, instead of a fundamentally disadvantaged author for her ability to scrupulously represent society's deficiencies. Simply put, we as readers have an obligation not to allow ourselves to turn away from authors who make us uncomfortable, because if we do, then the lessons we can learn from that discomfort are lost to our own negligence.

As proven, Linda's happy childhood was only a kind of alternative reality that allowed her the privilege of ignoring the unseen truth surrounding it, demonstrating how enslaved children are innocently implicated in a system that can be appropriately deemed as anti-domestic. Slavery is an anti-domestic system because it mimics the features of the domestic, while separating members of the family from each other and forcing children to live without the protection of their parents, thereby making them exceptionally vulnerable to abuse. However, it is also an austere domestic system from a national perspective, in defining the domestic in terms connotated with the national exercise of slavery as a nation. The practice of slavery is both a private function which contrasts the archetypal domestic idealization, and it is simultaneously consistent with the national domestic laws which protect and defend the institution of slavery across the country. An example of these laws is the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which required that people who escaped enslavement be returned to the slave masters who were keeping them, even if they were found in free states, effectively containing slavery nationwide. The commodification of people intrinsically does not allow them any measure of protection, and it does not allow any agency in selecting with whom they live with or where they are physically located. As such, Linda proves that an enslaved person is never detached from his or her reality as a slave, even if the person does not know that they are one. Even within a safe and happy

home, the threat is always looming that the slave-owner will disrupt the family structure through dislocation. Repeatedly throughout Jacobs' text, and other slave narratives alike, the narrator emphasizes the importance of sustained familial relations, because in slavery, all an enslaved person has left to care about is the safety of their loved ones, having been previously stripped of all other possessions and prospects. Therefore, Jacobs forces readers to confront the privilege of the domestic novel, its ability to focus on the internal conflict as a result of a lack of conflict surrounding the home. In most domestic novels, the protagonists depicted are white and wealthy, enabling them a sheltered existence from any sense of potential problems the novel nods to in its peripheries. By focusing so heavily on the power of the family, Jacobs accomplishes several authorial endeavors key to the approaches of her work. First, she accentuates the importance of community in tragedy, that her oppressed characters rely so heavily on one another to hope and to survive. Also, though, she makes other domestic novels, like those of Austen, look insubstantial. Jacobs actualizes how class disparities create stark differences in the focus of the domestic lifestyle. Whereas characters in Austenian novels have the ability to focus on manners, money, and marriage, Linda Brent sheds light on the domestic as a site of turmoil, as a place of innate fear instigated by enslavement.

The slave-owners depicted prey on susceptibilities such as emotional attachment, and therefore, Linda's love for her family is also presented as a personal weakness in the text, because it is something that can be taken away from her. Whereas in a typical domestic novel, a loss within the family is due to some type of natural cause, such as death, Jacobs shows that slavery forces losses that otherwise wouldn't have happened. Linda describes a discussion with her brother, whereby he proclaims that everyone in the

world appears to be angry, and her response succinctly encapsulates the distinction between those held captive as enslaved people and those who are not, “I told him that every body was *not* cross, or unhappy; that those who had pleasant homes, and kind friends, and who were not afraid to love them, were happy. But we, who were slave-children, without father or mother, could not expect to be happy” (Jacobs 18). When Linda is first entered into the slave system, she is taken away from her parents as a young child.

Linda’s position within slavery also restricts her from undergoing traditional mourning rituals through the subsequent losses she experiences, due to its emphasis on her productive capabilities, which contrasts the emphasis of the domestic novel on the emotionality surrounding the family. Though her parents do eventually die, she is not allowed to grieve their deaths or attend the services. The narrative acts as though her parents had died long before their material bodies stopped working, because she was restricted from seeing them even when they were only a few streets away, “I spent the day gathering flowers and weaving them into festoons, while the dead body of my father was lying within a mile of me. What cared my owners for that? He was merely a piece of property” (Jacobs 12). In describing the aftermath of the death of her father, Linda articulates the callousness of slave owners, how they are capable of defining her as an object, therefore undeserving of human emotional processes. She is not even allowed to grieve, to mourn, except silently while continuing to complete the work that is forced upon her. Jacobs uses the death of Linda’s father as a specific instance in which Linda’s identity as an object under American law dehumanizes her authentic experiences. She attributes the reason she and her brother “could not expect to be happy” to the fact that

they are “slave-children,” representing one of the many disjointing aspects of the system for children, parental schisms. Likewise, Linda specifically notes that the absence of her mother and father, a result of being enslaved children, makes her and her brother’s lives “unhappy.” Here Jacobs influences the emotions of her readers, based on America’s culturally heavy focus on the domestic. A successful domestic lifestyle does not disconnect the parents and the children; the children are always meant to be in the care of the parents. Readers will sympathize with Linda in this passage even more than in other instances, because she expresses the emotional abrasions of a child in slavery missing her parents, the figures who are intended to offer consolation and comfort during times of tribulation.

As the text progresses, Linda transitions from an enslaved child herself to a mother of enslaved children, denoting a narrated account of how racialized regeneration was allowed by the system of slavery. Slavery not only enabled the confiscation and abuse of children, it also propagated sexual violence against women’s bodies particularly for the purposes of selective reproduction. Jacobs outlines this problem, thereby demonstrating the prevalence and pervasion of its occurrence. Predominantly, she narrates the differing outcomes for the enslaved child depending on the race of the parents, beginning with the white mother, “In such cases, the infant is smothered, or sent where it is never seen by any who knows its history. But if the white parent is the *father*, instead of the mother, the offspring are unblushingly reared for the market” (Jacobs 46). Though in both scenarios, the white parent sustains authority regardless of gender, the chosen execution of authority for the white father oftentimes, as Jacobs stipulates, is to subject the child to the slave market. In cases where the infant was born to a white

mother, the infant is “smothered,” which refers to suffocation. In either case, the child produced from interracial sex was always punished as a result. Specifically, though, the motive of the white man impregnating the black enslaved woman is not to produce a child that they will love together as parents; the rape of the black woman (and it is always rape when the power dynamics are so skewed) results in an intentional pregnancy whose purpose is to produce a child for profit and labor. Therefore, Jacobs once again contradicts the customary domestic narrative by classifying conception as a capitalistic venture, absolutely isolated from the aspiration to create a loving family in the safety of a nurturing domestic environment. Likewise, Jacobs intentionally makes conception within the narrative a result of rape, a part of the narration which subverts the typical notion of the family structure beginning with two willing and warm parents.

In its quest for expansionism, capitalism relies on imperialism, the colonization of a piece of land that belongs to someone else by another. Slavery is both consistent and distinct from this historical trend. It represents capitalism as an economic system that operates on profit, characterized by its focus on labor, industry, and competition.

More than one thousand African slaves lived in New England by the end of the seventeenth century, and slave trading was a crucial part of the early modern market that joined Africa, the West Indies, and England (colonies and metropole) to make early New England prosper as the century progressed (Warren 1032).

Slavery also represents the cruelties of capitalism in that it exploits many for the benefit of some, and it uses imperialism to do so. Through Jacobs, readers are presented with an alternative imperialism, one that still relies on the expansion of power through force, but instead of the force being exerted against people for their land, it is exerted against people for their bodies. In this way, the female body is shaped historically as a commodity, as a

site of controversy, as a piece of property to be controlled by another. The assumption that a woman's body should ever be the property of anyone but the woman to whom it belongs takes its roots long before slavery, something that can be traced in the histories uncovered and documented through literature. So many of society's most renowned and influential stories invoke the feminine body as an object independent from the woman herself, as though such a concept could ever exist. Even originating in Greek mythology, Helen of Troy is acknowledged as the embodiment of pure beauty in human form. Thus, her experiences are marked by the attempts of men to harness and benefit from her beauty. Her life is filled with abductions, which characterize the male struggle to regulate the female of his desire, first seen by Theseus and then later in a war between Paris and Menelaus. Helen's body is depicted as an object to be obtained by men, in the period of antiquity that establishes a founding cultural perspective which later informs the development of so many subsequent Western cultural perspectives as well. Likewise, Roman history recounts the stories of women like Lucretia, who is most famously remembered for her rape by Sextus Tarquinius which caused a coup of the Roman monarchy. The transition of the monarchy into a republic, resulting from a war first initiated by the rape itself, later prevented Julius Caesar and Octavian Augustus from ruling as monarchs over Rome. Though it is less known in history, the rape of Lucretia still impacts all of the Roman history that follows it and is recollected through time. After she experiences a rape, Lucretia commits suicide, and her body is carried around by her husband and his army as a symbol of what they are fighting for. Even those who loved her still objectified her body after death for the sake of war. These are only two examples, from two different cultures, of women's bodies as objects in a war of men. The stories

that are told through time, those which transcend so many others lost in their era, have an impression on the world as it continues to develop. Slavery is simply another war of differences, one which is largely based on race and class. However, like every other war in history, the war of slavery invokes the abuse of women's bodies as weapons to obtain more power for men. In representing the evolution of Linda from a child of slavery to a young woman of fifteen years old, Jacobs demonstrates both how the sexual reproductive power of women, and their children as the actualization of this power, are extorted by men as weapons with which to further strengthen their dominance in society.

Even though these examples are myths and are from other cultures, they are relevant in that they establish a revolutionary basis for the United States to shadow during the age of early America. In her article, Katharina Erhard writes about the importance of mythological precedents in establishing early American culture, "The Revolutionaries did not invent the gendered and sexualized language and imagery. The Americans' attempts at fashioning their fledgling republic after ancient models provide a clue as to why they mediated their struggle for nationhood through images of abused female bodies" (Erhard 510). As Erhard describes, the established history of gendered and sexualized language, particularly in its correlation with violence, critically implicates the worldwide chronicle of slavery, as well as more specifically in the United States, "The image of the raped woman captured the Revolutionaries' imagination, because it built upon a culturally resonant image: the captive women'" (Erhard 512). As the captive woman seemed inherently embedded within countless mythical, yet culturally significant oral traditions, it became a figure for early American white men as well in establishing a successful and independent nation.

Once Linda begins to describe her experience as a mother, Jacobs exhibits the maternal experience as contrasting what is expected, that it is not gentle or tender but punitive and unforgiving. Linda describes the first few months following the birth of her first child, her son, specifically recanting the illness and fear that accompanied her new identity as a mother, “For a year there was scarcely a day when I was free from chills and fever. My babe also was sickly. His little limbs were often racked with pain. Dr. Flint continued his visits, to look after my health; and he did not fail to remind me that my child was an addition to his stock of slaves” (Jacobs 53). A moment of irony occurs in this description, in that the doctor intended to care for Linda and her child is her abuser and slaveholder, the person responsible for the terror she feels every day. Her slaveholder also being her doctor is yet another example of the expansion of male control in the lives of women. Mothers necessitate a certain type of healthcare during pregnancy and after labor, making them vulnerable in that they require proper care. Jacobs uses the maternal slave experience to exemplify the vulnerability of being a mother, specifically from a physical perspective. The health of the female body is at risk during pregnancy and after, especially during the nineteenth-century, in which healthcare as a whole, as well as maternal healthcare more specifically, was not very sophisticated. Maternal mortality rates were already extremely high and were disproportionately higher for black women, due to the fact that slavery prevented them from obtaining proper care and rest. In addition to these most basic hindrances, Jacobs establishes irony in that the person responsible for Linda’s health has little incentive in keeping her alive. As a result, both Linda and her newborn baby suffer from illness, and she suggests through her sarcastic tone that Dr. Flint’s visits are not related to her health at all.

Linda knows that Dr. Flint's visits are solely for the purpose of reminding her of her role as a mother in the regeneration of his "stock of slaves," and Jacobs makes Linda an embodiment of the disregard for the domestic maternal beyond birth. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs creates a world or rather, recreates a world, where the inherent power of females to reproduce does not belong to them in any capacity. Reproduction is either restricted or forced in early American novels, especially novels based on the reality of slavery such as this one. It appears more like breeding than conceiving, something inhumane and emotionless. While the female is necessary, procreation does not require her participation, only entreats her powerlessness to refuse. For example, the conception of the child often occurs through rape, and even though Linda is a figure who chooses her partner, it is not out of love but out of fear of an alternative reality of abuse. The narrative depicts a world where the only part of motherhood in which women are required is through the physical acts of carrying and birthing a baby. After this, Dr. Flint's reminder to Linda is that she is not afforded any rights as a mother to her own child. Caroline Levander notes the dichotomy present in this supposition,

In addition to using Linda's changing understanding of the power relations between maternity and slavery as a way of expressing her developing consciousness as a slave, Jacobs further represents the dehumanizing impact of slavery on female identity by carefully delineating white southerners who, on the one hand, demand that slave women reproduce, but, on the other hand, deny them their maternal rights (Levander 31). Jacobs' story begins with Linda describing herself as a child who believed she lived a wonderful life, blind to the reality that at any moment, she could be forced away from the protection of her parents. As her narration continues into the second half of the book, the perspective from the first few pages is inverted. Suddenly, Linda becomes the parent who

attempts to shield her children yet is acutely aware of the limitations of her identity as a mother. Just as she was apart of a “stock of slaves” from birth, an object to be collected into the keeping of someone else, now her children bear the same fate. Through the inversion of perspectives, Jacobs is able to classify the cyclical nature of slavery through regeneration, it being something that persists through generations strictly by violating the mother. As Levander notes, reproduction is not synonymous with rights, and slavery certifies that a woman not only be restricted of the rights to her own body but also to any bodies she produces within her own as well. The child is an extension of the mother, literally in physical form and also legally.

The exploitation of the female has persisted throughout centuries, as well as across cultures. Though early American values clearly exhibit an emphasis on the domestic as an imagined aspiration, Jacobs proves that the concept of the American domestic is actually founded on anti-domestic practices. The early American domestic alienates the mother from her role as caregiver, in its concrete exercise of serving the capitalistic and imperialistic project of exploiting black female bodies in order to reproduce laborers in service to the authority of the white man. In portraying the reality of the domestic life for black women, who are so classically absent from other Western novels authored by white women, Jacobs undertakes the important project of destabilizing the canon of white women’s literature. In presenting a voice capable of relaying the reality of slavery for so many, Jacobs gives a voice to those black women who would otherwise never be provided one in a Jane Austen novel or another of similar stature.

Chapter 3: Masculine Manipulation of the Maternal Identity

Originating from the nation's founding, American ideals surrounding the female have always been deeply intertwined with motherhood. A woman's reputation depended on her reproductive power, a power that was fastidiously managed by the coinciding evolution of patriarchal supremacy in early America. In order to be favored within society, a woman was forced to conform to stringent reproductive restrictions, including reproducing only within the same race, within a marriage and without failure. Though most women sought to abide by the patriarchal expectations, for the sake of societal survival, it was unfortunately unmanageable on the whole. Whether through sexual exploitation, miscarriage, or infertility, women were often branded inadequate due to their inability to reproduce appropriately or even at all. A "woman's reproductive power" was therefore an oxymoron.

In early American novels, the identities of female characters are just as interwoven with motherhood as was the reality, but these novels depict another element of maternal identity: race. The experience of motherhood differed largely between blacks and whites, something readers notice across slave narratives and others alike. In Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Stowe, a white author and abolitionist, includes a selection of mothers across these two races. In a letter in 1853 defending her book to critics who argued she failed to accurately depict the severity of slavery, she inscribed, "I wrote what I did because as a woman, as a mother, I was oppressed and broken-hearted with the sorrows and injustices I saw." Though Stowe's account can only imagine the injustices and finds immunity from them through

whiteness, her novel attempts to denigrate the system of slavery through the sympathetic maternal figure. Meanwhile, Jacobs' novel (1861) recounts the harrowing truth of life within the slave system, painting characters based on her authentic encounters as an enslaved mother herself. Perhaps both women embarked on the project of engendering women to oppose slavery by uniting the maternal identity, but in Jacobs' narrative we certainly see a more focused and purposeful, as well as authentic, authorial endeavor. Whereas Stowe's racial privilege sanctioned her a wider audience before her writing even began, Jacobs' race would likely have limited her audience to a certain subset of women, Northern women who were willing to read the words of a black slave writer. Jacobs' endeavor through her narrative, then, was to relay the internal experience of slavery to women who had perhaps had no prior exposure to it, except through the safety of stories envisioning the lives of strangers. *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl* is therefore centered around the racialized maternal identity before it is even written, and it requires that Jacobs' autobiographical narrative voice demonstrates a complex opinion towards white mothers, both by condemning their vindictiveness and empathizing with their reasoning. It is a delicate balance that must be sustained in her narrative, for the absence of adequate conviction sacrifices the project's purpose of assigning responsibility, while a deficiency of empathy would alienate white mothers from a yearning to commiserate in response.

In Jacobs' narrative, the role of white women in black women's maternal experience initiates from, and is perpetuated by, a centrally-situated male figure. The white women in the America that Jacobs portrays maintain multiplicities of existence, and in order for Jacobs to acquire their understanding, she endeavors to better appreciate the origins of their participation in protecting the abuse of enslaved people. As she

describes their mistreatment of her central figure, Linda Brent, she mitigates the harsh descriptions of abuse with sentiments of empathy and compassion, to prevent the narrative from assuming a tone veiled with accusation and judgment, as readers might expect from someone in her position.

“She spoke in tones so sad, that I was touched by her grief. The tears came to my eyes; but I was soon convinced that her emotions arose from anger and wounded pride. She felt that her marriage vows were desecrated, her dignity insulted; but she had no compassion for the poor victim of her husband’s perfidy. She pitied herself as a martyr; but she was incapable of feeling for the condition of shame and misery in which her unfortunate, helpless slave was placed” (Jacobs 31).

At this point in the text, Linda is sixteen years old, and she is describing the jealousy and anger her master’s wife, Mrs. Flint, has for her. The master finds Linda more attractive than his wife, often attempting to rape her and thereby inciting feelings of dejection in his wife. In expressing her concern for Mrs. Flint, through the personification of being “touched by grief,” as well as demonstrating a resounding sense of emotional intelligence in attributing Mrs. Flint’s response to “anger and wounded pride,” Jacobs styles her narrator as an ally for the hurt white woman. In using comparable diction to describe both Linda’s own experience, and Mrs. Flint’s experience which Linda observes secondarily, including “sad,” “desecrated,” “insulted,” “pitied,” “shame,” “misery,” and “helpless,” she assimilates the two experiences in order to validate both. Jacobs acknowledges that both white women and black women have been dishonored by the “husband’s perfidy,” thereby uniting two identities that otherwise would have been still severed by race.

However, Linda does not alleviate blame from white women entirely; she still maintains that Mrs. Flint “had no compassion” and was “incapable of feeling,” thereby allocating responsibility to white women for their failure to empathize outside of their

own experiences. Jacobs uses the empathetic muscles of her narrator to ironically contrast the lack of empathy within Mrs. Flint's character, who exemplifies the larger group of white women as a whole. Furthermore, Jacobs reports that the participation of white women in slavery cannot be limited to their complicity; in fact, it is their failure to respond to the source of their negative affect, their relationship with men. Jacobs uses Mrs. Flint as a tool to demonstrate how white women allowed themselves to wrongly attribute their jealousy and rage to another object of male abuse, the sexually exploited enslaved girl. Certainly, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* demonstrates the blame that Mrs. Flint places on Linda for being violated against her will, a systemic injustice she enables by misattributing the responsibility in order to avoid risking the security of her marriage. Jacobs is aware, however, that the relationship between Linda and Mrs. Flint is not the sole exchange between white women and black women of the time. There were movements and relationships, such as the one between Jacobs and Lydia Maria Child, that were propelled by the shared desire to abolish slavery. In writing Mrs. Flint as so abhorrent, in contrast to other white women such as a Mrs. Bruce, Jacobs entreats white female readers to choose the admirable response to enslaved black women. Ultimately, Jacobs is able to both chastise and support white women through this passage, contributing to the goal of her narrative to illuminate the injustices of white women in slavery *and* entreat white women to fight with black women against their larger shared enemy, which is that of patriarchal oppression.

Jacobs includes a mention of the husband in the middle of the passage, to represent his centrality in both Linda's and Mrs. Flint's shared emotional melancholy. The disaffected figure of the husband, who has both violated his marriage vows and

threatened the safety of a young woman, provides a point of origin for negative affect. Jacobs even affirms this point at the beginning of the chapter prior, “No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all of these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men” (Jacobs 26). Explicitly, she removes race from the platform for a moment, long enough to unite “slave girl” and “mistress” against the “fiends who bear the shape of men.” While she cannot expunge the mistress, or the rest of the white female population, of their failure to condemn the mistreatment of enslaved people, she notes that they must unite against the derivation of women’s “insult,” “violence” and “death” for which men are responsible. In such an argument, Jacobs may have been a premature advocate for intersectional feminism. She seems to recognize that the oppression she experienced in slavery extends beyond the system of slavery, to a larger system of gender violence. Even in the face of mistresses who enable and even perform so many of these abuses against her, Jacobs uses the power of empathy to make her readers aware of the ubiquity of the problem. The woman who abuses another woman has herself already been abused by a man, and within her narrative, Jacobs chooses to approach this woman with disappointment and understanding.

Jacobs’ awareness of her readership, discounting the slight possibility of male engagement, especially white male engagement, also refocuses her project towards a feminist angle. Therefore, it is not necessary for Linda to find consideration for this aggressor, because Jacobs does not expect to have any prospect of reaching the male platform. There is too much, for Jacobs, that separates the genders and especially genders who already are disconnected by racism in America. With an understanding that the

trench between black women and white men is far too wide to address positively, she narrows her focus to the audience of white women. Here she is able to find commonality in the emotional experience, in the shared biological experiences that cannot be culturally discounted through racism, including childbirth. The reason Jacobs is so comfortable in depreciating men in her writing is because she does not expect them to read it, and even if they were to read it, she does not expect them to be convinced by her words.

Jacobs recognizes that she lacks any kind of shared experience with which to emotionally transform the male perspective through mutual empathy, so she is able to concentrate on motherhood and manipulation as sites of shared experience between black and white women. Mari Ruti, a modern, third-wave feminist theorist in the twenty-first century, discusses the progress of evolution so that culture, rather than biology, is the only predictor of race and gender distinctions anymore. In her feminist criticism which chastises evolutionary psychologists for failing to recognize their own racialized and gendered biases, Mari Ruti writes in response to Geoffrey Miller's *The Mating Mind*,

“If it's conceivable – as Miller maintains – that a degree of altruism at some point became a desirable trait in a potential mate, then it seems to me that it's equally conceivable that an egalitarian mindset, in today's society, is one of the strongest indicators of reproductive fitness. Miller himself appears to deny this when he claims that ‘women's ongoing liberation from the nightmare of patriarchy has been due to cultural changes, not genetic evolution’ (83)” (Ruti 98).

Ruti herself, with the support of Miller, is acknowledging the cultural progress required to reach our modern notion of gender equality, which even most feminists can only accept as lethargic progress towards the elusive idea of equality, an idea which still feels very far away. As a member of third-wave feminism, Ruti refers to “today's society” as the society we occupy in twenty-first century America. The cultural changes to which she

cites, through Miller, have only taken place *since* the era in which Jacobs was writing. Surely, Jacobs' book is a major contribution both to the history of feminism and the deconstruction of racism, but to examine Jacobs' writing requires an awareness of the limitations of her radicalism at the time. In order to have any kind of impact, perhaps it was inconceivable for her to attempt to fight on behalf of both her race *and* her gender.

Though it is clear Jacobs would endorse what Ruti and Miller are saying, that there are no evolutionary differences that would enable men to commit acts of violence against women, the cultural progress that would enable this larger societal consensus had not happened yet, and maybe still is in progress well into the twenty-first century. Jacobs' authorial cognizance brought her to a goal of unifying women of different races because it was more possible through their shared collective experiences. In her contemporary feminist approach, Ruti notes, "Modern societies have migrated to a place where there is absolutely no advantage – evolutionary or otherwise – to extreme gender differentiation. There is no adaptive benefit to modern women in spending all their time having and taking care of children" (Ruti 84). Though this may be true, or at least more true, now, Jacobs' vital strategic move towards radical feminism is to exploit the patriarchy's emphasis on the integration of the female identify with motherhood in order to unite black and white women in 19th century America against the mistreatment of women by men in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

In searching for sympathy for the abusive white female mistresses, Jacobs discovers that the woman who manipulates another has herself already been manipulated by an anterior male figure. Linda describes her awareness of Mrs. Flint's anger, and the wives of abusive slave-owners more generally, "The young wife soon learns that the

husband in whose hands she has placed her happiness pays no regard to his marriage vows” (Jacobs 33). Without the momentum of women’s rights in early America, something that wouldn’t really begin to gain national appreciation until the Suffrage movement of the 1920s, there was no cultural knowledge surrounding sexual violence. Sexual violence was not a secret spectacle to be uncovered and condemned by a national movement, as it is today, but rather an accepted part of society. Men maintained the power to enact their will due to their financial, legal, and political advantage over women, as there is an obvious and significant correlation between sexual violence and power dynamics. Ultimately, sexual violence is an additional method of ascertaining power over another individual, which is why women as a collective were the recipients of so much sexual violence. They were already disadvantaged in the national dynamics of power, having no political representation or financial independence, and the violence committed against their bodies only further reduced their personal power over their lives, even within their own homes. It wasn’t until the 1990s in the United States that marital rape was considered illegal, and even then, there were still discrepancies in how the law perpetrated offenders of martial rape vs. non-marital rape. Likewise, it was fully legal for male slave-owners to rape their enslaved women.

Sexual violence therefore largely initiated from the dominant male figure in the household, and it was likely common that sexual violence was performed against both the wife and the enslaved woman alike; the only difference being that sexual violence was tolerated within marriage, while it was considered a form of infidelity outside of marriage. Rather than view the violence against enslaved women as an assault against the notion of womanhood, the larger sense of safety white women themselves were not

afforded either, they viewed it as a justified punishment for what they considered as a participation in adultery. Linda describes the way Mrs. Flint often stalked her as a result of her master's sexual interest, which is described to be almost as terrifying as the predatory nature of the master himself, "At last, I began to be fearful for my life. It had been often threatened; and you can imagine, better than I can describe, what an unpleasant sensation it must produce to wake up in the dead of night and find a jealous woman bending over you" (Jacobs 31). In her depiction, Linda's character focuses on the "threat" of the mistress, due to her "jealousy," rather than the original threat of the master. Becoming "fearful" for her life is a serious horror that is assigned to the actions of the white woman. Regardless of the originating emotion, the jealousy, which prompted the response, the threat produced by Mrs. Flint further exacerbates Linda's sense of danger. Therefore, Jacobs is presenting the fissure between the mistress and the enslaved woman as widening because abuse is not rightfully identified as such. By describing her terror, Jacobs allows her readers to see white women misdirecting their negative affect towards the wounded woman rather than the man who wounded her initially. Jacobs' first instruction to readers seems to be that women need to understand the difference between abuse and adultery. White women perpetuate the abuse because in believing their husbands are being disloyal, they feel insecure relative to the enslaved girl who is found to be more attractive. The subsequent abuse stems from, once again, power dynamics when white women attempt to reassert their authority as a response to an illusion that the enslaved woman ever maintained more power amongst the two. If white women could relinquish their role in exploiting domestic hierarchical structures of oppression, in punishing the enslaved people for which they are above because they cannot reprimand

the master for which they are below, they would have true influence in reducing abuse. The male figure, the primary figure of abuse, would hold significantly less power if he did not have the secondary support of his wife who refuses to acknowledge him as the greatest threat, not only to her enslaved people but to her as well.

Racism further separated already divided women from each other, from the larger project of fighting for their rights and against their own abuse, and Jacobs' writing works to correct that through the unifying identity of motherhood, "This poor woman endured many cruelties from her master and mistress; sometimes she was locked up, away from her nursing baby, for a whole day and night" (Jacobs 15). In the passage, Jacobs groups the "master and mistress" to exemplify the power of marriage. Even the alliteration and the bisyllabic nature unite them in sound and in rhythm within the passage. Meanwhile, in contrast, the "poor woman," an enslaved woman, is given the identity of the mother in the passage, and her partner in the passage is a helpless and hungry baby. Jacobs plays with the coupling in her passages in order to determine the response she elicits from the reader. While in some cases, she sides wounded women with each other along gender lines, in others she clarifies the racial barrier by uniting the white master and mistress as a solitary, cruel force against the enslaved person. Still, though, she makes the figure of the enslaved woman an empathetic figure by making her a mother. One of the greatest problems Jacobs approaches is the inability of white women to identify their husband's sexual relationship with an enslaved woman as unsolicited acts of violence rather than a welcome affair. She knows that violence is not a source of abuse worth trying to extract empathy because if it was, the wives of slave-owners would not allow it to have happened in reality. Jacobs has to find an alternative method of displaying abuse that

panders to the emotions of white women, without initiating their anger and resentment towards the enslaved women. Jacobs uses the mother to both label manipulation and to motivate outrage, because the mother is a unifying identity.

The mother figure is prevailing because it cannot be understood intimately by the male, only secondarily at best, but the experience of motherhood transcends racial boundaries and it can be intimately understood by many women. When white women read Jacobs' book, they will not identify as the vindictive white woman in this passage, the one whom they are racially aligned with, they will identify with the mother, the one whom are emotionally aligned with. In positioning the vulnerability of the abused mother so it performs its duty in uniting women across races who share a common identity of mother, Jacobs is able to be more honest about the role of white women in perpetuating the abuse of the black mother. One of the most powerful forms of abuse, second to physical and sexual violence, within Jacobs' text is the manipulation of the maternal identity. White masters and mistresses would withhold the child or abuse the child in order to seek absolute submission from the enslaved black mother, and readers of Jacobs' narrative through generations have identified with Linda's instinctive maternal response to protect the safety and innocence of her children most primarily. Susan Staub writes about the influence of the mother in early American culture, "In an era that saw mothering as women's highest calling, thwarted motherhood made an emotionally powerful argument against slavery" (Staub 202). Though at points in the text, Jacobs appears to be critiquing the close cultural alignment between the individual identity of a female woman and the identity of the mother, there being almost no possibility of a

woman's value without her reproductive capacity, she also seems to know that within this cultural emphasis on procreation is a site of potential alliance.

The role of the mother, which has historically been venerated to the point of idealization, is a figure of dignity. Early American novels such as Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* and William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy*, among others, demonstrate the cultural emphasis on the consequences of a woman's disregard for the economics of conception. Likewise, these novels emphasize the importance of valuing the role of the mother in society, as the exemplification of the most respectable conceivable position a woman could attain within society. As Desiree Henderson notes in her article, "They all recount a heroine's seduction and fall, typically culminating in her death as she gives birth to an illegitimate child" (Henderson 495). The esteemed women in early American novels are those who appropriately marry and actively reproduce, while the women who eventually encounter consequences such as forced exile, loneliness, and death are the ones who disrupt the defined route to motherhood. The culture in early America values women if they are capable of achieving their ultimate utility in reproducing, and Jacobs' readers would've found a personal affront to the dignity of motherhood as it is debased in her narrative account.

Most centrally, Jacobs' writing illuminates how manipulation of the maternal identity through sexual exploitation benefits white masculinity as a whole in early America. An enslaved man or woman would abide by a master's commands under any circumstances because they were primed to know that consequences would be enforced should they attempt to oppose, something Rachel Feinstein, "While white men clearly exerted their power through the act of rape, they also demonstrated their control by

threatening and instilling a collective awareness among enslaved women and men with regard to potential sexual violence and consequences for resisting” (Feinstein 18). Among these potential consequences were “fear of physical injury, threats to harm children and family members, and the threat of being sent to another plantation and separated from one’s family” (Feinstein 19). In her research, Feinstein uncovers that the most common concern among enslaved people was the safety of their family and especially for mothers, the safety of their young children. Children were a weapon of a cultural war used to further exploit already imbalanced power dynamics in order to incontrovertibly favor the influence of white males in society. Furthermore, the identity of the American white male, which prospered greatly from the sexual exploitation of black bodies, seemed to be in a multifaceted relationship with abused mothers, such as Jacobs. From one perspective, the white male controlled not only the actions and consequences of the enslaved mother and also of the “free” white woman who participated in the abuse. However, simultaneously, and perhaps as a result, the white male relies on the abuse of the black mother as a foundational aspect of a newly establishing form of self-identification, which requires sexual exploitation in order to achieve a sense of power. The relationship between rape and power therefore develops a long-standing tradition in America, finding its origins in the slave system, where a mother protecting her children from violence is associated with misbehaving, while forcibly isolating a mother from her children or abusing them in front of her to seek her submission is customary. Moreover, the accepted reprimand for a mother protecting her children was rape while the consequence of raping a mother who was protecting her child was enriched authority. The reason the figure of the mother is an apt example for study is

because she is naturally more vulnerable to a man in power, as she is not solely protecting her own body from suffering.

Chapter 4 - The Figure of the Surrogate Mother

As Jacobs' text is rich with arrays of emotions and experiences, it is also crowded with contrasts between villainous characters and honorable characters. Wickedness is often presented through depictions of slaveholders, as well as their mistresses, and even in some cases, their children who will inherit enslaved people as their own during adolescence. Dr. Flint, Mrs. Flint, and their daughter Emily Flint are the classic family to represent evil within the text, though at points Mrs. Flint and Emily are shadowed with some understanding and exception. Mr. Sands is another figure of contrast within the text, as he is seen as a figure of promise, the potential for freedom, often making offers to buy members of Linda's family for exorbitant sums of money. However, at the conclusion of the narrative, he becomes a figure of abandonment. He marries a white woman and has a child with her, disregarding the plight of Linda and her children to escape their reality as enslaved people. Though Linda always imagined him as a loving partner and father, Ellen, Linda's daughter, notes that he was never a father to her as he was to his white daughter.

For the most part, though, Jacobs writes in a way that allows for liminality within her characters. Most are not wholly evil or good but maintain some paradoxical traits of each, which make them appear more flawed and realistic. Dr. Flint may be one of the only figures in the text that is seen in a completely monocentric capacity, as malicious due to his actions and intentions. There are also several women in the text who are so overwhelmingly compassionate that Linda views them only as such and speaks the kindest sentiments in their honor. These women are the heroines of the story, who protect

and defend Linda as she seeks her freedom. Without their aid, she would not have been able to escape the persecution of her master, and without their company, she would have suffered far more in the desolation of her experience. The women in the text who are revered as heroines are often figures of the surrogate mother, relatives or friends of Linda's, who use their maternal instincts to provide much needed care to a neglected and abused woman. In this chapter, I argue the importance of physical surrogacy of mothering in uniting mothers across races, as well as the potential of the emotional maternal surrogate in offering care and protection to displaced women in slavery.

The surrogate mother is an interesting persona in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, creating a reciprocal relationship in many cases between the white mothers and black mothers of infant babies. At different points, Jacobs writes of black mothers nursing the babies of white mothers, exchanging milk as a source of sustenance and nourishment regardless of the female body. The exchange of services demonstrates the utility of the female body but also serves to exemplify how mothers entrusted each other's bodies with the care of their children. For example, Linda recounts meeting Mrs. Bruce for the first time. Mrs. Bruce is the final woman in the story that Linda works for, and she is undoubtedly the most esteemed in the text, "One day an acquaintance told me of a lady who wanted a nurse for her babe, and I immediately applied for the situation. The lady told me she preferred to have one who had been a mother, and accustomed to the care of infants. I told her I had nursed two babes of my own" (Jacobs 138). Here, Jacobs alludes to the common practice of offloading infant care unto a nurse, which makes the white woman and the black nurse function in tandem as primary caregivers for the new baby. In her article, Holly Blackford writes about the symbolism of food and the

role of food economics in Jacobs' work, arguing that the power of the female body to nourish humanity extends beyond infancy,

Jacobs begins to address her readers as mothers when she confesses her illicit sexual affair. If all women, as mothers, occupy the center of a feeding economy between men and infants--both eaters of female bodies--then maternal power to nourish and suffocate must be together digested by readers for them to realize the strength of the maternal voice, a voice that can enter the male political sphere, (Blackford).

Blackford refers to the relationship that Linda has with Mr. Sands, prompting her to become pregnant outside of marriage, a condemnable action that she feels so guilty about in her narration. However, this instance is when the figure of the mother becomes much more prominent and centralized for readers, as the economics of the body shift from the capitalistic reproduction of cheap labor in children to the capitalistic process of feeding the population. Blackford also relates the maternal ability to provide sustenance with the maternal voice, arguing that mothers have a stake in politics simply by acting as a mass producer of food which sustains the population. The maternal body, then, is inherently political in that it becomes necessary to multiple groups of people, almost as though it is an object being vied for. For Jacobs, the process of becoming a mother both establishes interpersonal connections and also creates political capital.

Blackford also discusses the process of Linda's sexual affair creating a biblical-type fall from innocence but a fall that is necessary in order to create a voice for enslaved mothers. After Linda becomes a mother, the text aligns itself with a clearer purpose for Linda as the protagonist, which is that of protecting her children.

Ironically, from her sexual "fall" comes her voice, an abolitionist voice the slave mother is depending on her white, Northern, female readers to find within themselves. It is crucial that her readers be positioned as "careless," unknowing female bodies, for Jacobs' strategy is to coerce daughterly readers into a fall from their innocence by taking them through the sexual

fall of the representative slave girl, imagined in precisely the terms of Eve's fall from the Garden, (Blackford).

As Blackford argues, Linda finds her voice through the necessity to provide for her children and assure their freedom, something she didn't appear as passionate about when it was only her own life at stake. The power of the maternal instinct is echoed throughout the text, which presents multiple surrogate mothers who act as a maternal figure of protection and guidance for other characters who are not biologically their children. For example, Linda's grandmother becomes the most primary figure of the maternal, since Linda's own mother dies shortly after the beginning of the narration. Linda's grandmother, known as "Aunt Marthy" to others, substitutes as a mother for many of the characters when they are without one. She is the primary mother figure for William and Linda after their mother dies, and when Linda is separated from Ellen and Benny, her grandmother becomes responsible for them as though they were her own children. She is fiercely defensive, as exemplified through Linda's description of her, "I had been told that she had once chased a white gentleman with a loaded pistol, because he insulted one of her daughters" (Jacobs 27). She is the ideal maternal figure within the text because of her bravery and pride but also because of her gentleness, which Linda also alludes to throughout her narration, "I longed for some one to confide in. I would have given the world to have laid my head on my grandmother's faithful bosom, and told her all my troubles. But Dr. Flint swore he would kill me, if I was not as silent as a grave" (Jacobs 27). Linda's grandmother, though initially disappointed in what Blackford refers to as Linda's "sexual fall," eventually offers the necessary aid in harboring Linda as a fugitive slave and providing for Linda's two children while she is in hiding and cannot provide for them herself.

Linda's "sexual fall," as it enables her to become a mother, actually gives a voice and a cause to many of the maternal figures within the text. Women across the narrative appreciate her abolitionist voice and stand in solidarity with her as a mother, which further encourages readers to respond in the much the same manner. Charles Wilson writes about Linda's sexual fall as empowering. He claims Linda's autonomy actually occurs prior to her role as a mother, "The rage defining Linda's character is invoked even before Linda becomes a mother. In fact, this anger is what propels her into motherhood. When Linda willingly accepts the attention of Mr. Sands, she empowers herself by making choices that have been denied her in the face of Dr. Flint's vile advances" (Wilson 171). Dr. Flint is a figure who constantly threatens Linda through her mere potential to be a mother. He uses the threat of rape and unavoidable motherhood to intimidate her into behaving, something not uncommon according to Carolyn Berman,

Like torture, rape is not what happens when slaves fall into the hands of bad men in *Incidents* (as it is in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) but rather, part and parcel of the slave-breeding system. It is a form of consumption endemic to "domestic slavery," consonant with what the slavery advocates called the "promotion of families" among the slaves (Berman 24).

The culture of rape in slavery, as Berman synthesizes, was an intentional practice premeditated to domestic slavery, forced marriages and children, or lack thereof. Since slavery is so deeply intertwined with the domestic realm, as well as with reproductive patterns, it is also critical in understanding the consumption of the female body. The cross-consumption in surrogacy also occurs somewhat in rape, the act of preying on the female body by the male for the purpose of nourishing a desire. Mothers becomes especially involved within the text when their children, specifically their daughters are threatened in the same sexual predatory manner that they were. Linda's plunge into

motherhood actually occurs, as Wilson argues, through an empowering act, and her newfound identity as a mother regenerates this empowerment. The network of mothers within the text also bolsters the strength of Linda's empowerment, expanding her support in order to challenge such a large system of oppression. Therefore, the maternal experience is presented as compulsory to the abolitionist movement, due to its purposefulness and perseverance.

In addition to providing fire to the abolitionist movement, the surrogate mother also transcends temporality, creating a connection across and through generations of women and mothers. Molly Ball's article, which focuses its discussion on temporality within *Incidents*, explores differing forms of temporality,

My discussion first examines how *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* depicts mothering and time, arguing that Jacobs' depictions of motherhood highlights how white domesticity's generational temporality depends on stolen labor. Jacobs responds to this theft—and to natal alienation—by crafting a nongenerational temporality through strategic surrogation (Ball 422).

Ball's point that white domesticity depends on stolen labor can be seen through the inheritance of enslaved people through the generational passage of objects and money to offspring. Just as black women's bodies are raped to replicate objects of labor and money, creating a new generation of enslaved children, so too are generational configurations implemented in the tradition of whites imparting the abuse of blacks as preordained gifts to their white children. Ball relates temporality and surrogation, in that surrogation enables a break from the generational pattern of white domesticity within Jacobs' text, which can be specifically exemplified through the character of Aunt Nancy,

Contrasted with the symbolic auction block, which signals the slave family's *geographical* dispersal, Nancy's childlessness illustrates how slavery disrupts linear, generational time, scattering families *temporally*.

Moreover, Jacobs shows how the Flints' abundance of generational time requires that Nancy have proportional scarcity. Mrs. Flint's unborn children take priority when she forces Nancy to sleep on the floor; she and Nancy are both pregnant, but she demands that Nancy be near should she require anything in the night (146). (Ball 427).

Generational time is another mechanism of racial control within the text, as the birth of white babies, and therefore the prerequisite care of imminent white mothers, prevails over the same needs for black babies and women. Aunt Nancy, due to the care she is neglected having to prioritize the corresponding pregnancy of Mrs. Flint, miscarries each child. Nonetheless, she still maintains her status as a mother in the text, despite the "proportional scarcity" which is propelled into her life. I find it compelling that Ball uses the term "scarcity" to describe gestation, given the context of the term as strictly economic. It lends itself to her point that "generational temporality depends on stolen labor." With Aunt Nancy in particular, we see that surrogate motherhood enables her to satisfy her position as a mother, though she lost all of her babies, with other family members who have lost mother figures,

I would beg her not to worry herself on my account; that there was an end of all suffering sooner or later, and that whether I lived in chains or in freedom, I should always remember her as the good friend who had been the comfort of my life. A word from her always strengthened me; and not me only. The whole family relied upon her judgment, and were guided by her advice, (Jacobs 119).

The diction of "comfort," "strengthened," "relied" and "guided" all serve to prove Aunt Nancy's role as a maternal figure for the Brent family, regardless of her specific relationship to any individual member. The surrogate mother fulfills an empty space in a family, as Linda's grandmother and aunt both clearly represent for Linda and her brother most prominently. Using Ball's analysis, both figures of maternal surrogation transcend the generational temporality inherent in upholding white domesticity; in doing so, they

challenge the standard history of motherhood as corruptible. Intercepting the history of white domesticity creates a new history of abolitionist domesticity, or anti-racist domesticity, in which the process of mothering outside the typified constructs allows blacks to find consolation where it otherwise would've been expunged due to slavery.

Jacobs also presents an interesting mirroring between mother and daughter within the text, suggesting a reverse temporality in mothering through daughter. Due to the uniformity in the slave experience for women, the subjection to inappropriate sexual advances and embedded fear, Linda knows what her daughter is likely to experience as she gets older. Jacobs even alludes to the threat of sexual assault at her daughter's birth, noting her "heart was heavier" (Jacobs 66) upon learning her new baby was a girl. Linda is aware of the risk that slavery incurs to women, so her bond with her daughter Ellen becomes more immediate to her existence, knowing Ellen will likely have experiences more closely aligned with her own in slavery. "Although the enslaved mother knows her daughter will face sexual exploitation in her relationship with the master, she still wants to remain a paragon of virtue" (Wilson 172). As Wilson recapitulates, Linda feels tremendous shame for the sexual experiences she has encountered, even though they were forced upon her, due to the cultural propensity to fault the assaulted woman rather than the man who assaulted her. Linda carries her shame into her experience of motherhood, creating a tension between her own lived history and her maternal aspiration, while also simultaneously highlighting a disparity between the white mother and the black mother,

Unlike the white mother, who serves as the model for her daughter, the black mother can only exemplify a conditional brand of womanhood. She does not want her daughter to suffer the sexual traumas she has suffered,

but she must still prepare her child for that possibility. The daughter's potential sexual availability to the white master is a constant source of anxiety for the black mother, who may seem hypocritical as she navigates between her daughter's tenuous virtue and her own forced participation in sexual turpitude (Wilson 172-173).

Though Linda clearly experiences anxiety for her daughter and residual shame for herself, apparent through her frequent requests for forgiveness from the reader, she also is aware of the unavailability of sexual turpitude. Slavery associates women's bodies with food, not just from the maternal perspective of surrogate feeding habits but also through the economic contributions women provide through work, always within the domestic sphere, as Blackford writes in her article.

As all humans are born of women and find their first satisfaction of hunger and human touch in the female bosom, female bodies get metaphorically and economically associated with food and food production. Black women, by virtue of their place in the Southern economy as wet nurses, cooks and "breeders," consistently face the literary trope of the black female body as food abundance, an abundance often irrationally translated into sexual promiscuity, (Blackford).

In its biological methods of producing literal food with which to feed a human infant, the maternal female body is inadvertently always tied to food production economically, as Blackford articulates. Blackford takes her analysis one step further and relates food production to sexual promiscuity, the ways society nonsensically relates the bareness of the black female body to promiscuity, rather than to its more appropriate relation to cultivating existence for society as a whole. Due to the unfounded relation of the black body to inherent sexual promiscuity, the relationship between Linda and Ellen is especially complex in terms of surrogacy.

Linda and Ellen, as mother and daughter, undergo a sort of reverse relationship at times, in that Ellen is able to provide maternal comfort to Linda during her most distressed moments, thereby further proving Molly Ball's point about maternal surrogacy

transcending generational temporality. Though much of the story progresses without the two physically together, due to their expansive separation at times, their relationship as mother and daughter keeps them tautly attached nonetheless. Likewise, for a significant portion of the text, Ellen is an infant incapable of communicating, yet Blackford aptly reports that communication between mother and daughter still occurs regardless, “The first aspect of mother-daughter communication to note is thus its non-verbal tendency; nevertheless, eloquent communication it is,” (Blackford). For the case of many mothers, initial non-verbal communication occurs through the physical touch, as well as through the intimacy of the breast-feeding process. However, for Linda, the non-verbal communication continues mentally after Ellen is older and the two are separated. Linda often imagines Ellen as a mature and kind child, which provides Linda with psychological comfort though she is otherwise so alone in her mind whilst in hiding. In such a capacity, Ellen acts as a figure of maternal surrogacy for Linda even when they are not explicitly within each other’s company. When the two are finally reconnected, after both have escaped North to New York, Ellen is very compassionate with her mother, who feels deep shame for the life in slavery she’s inflicted on her children. Jacobs describes Linda as being receptive to this compassion and seems to suggest it as an act of tenderhearted motherliness, “But I loved the dear girl better for the delicacy she manifested towards her unfortunate mother” (Jacobs 154). Though it may be controversial to argue that Ellen is a figure of maternal surrogacy for Linda, it would seem injudicious to exclude her from the discussion, given her close relationship with her mother. At many times in the text, Linda relies on Ellen just as much (if not more) than the inverse. Ellen provides comfort, love, and loyalty to Linda, all characteristics of an

attentive and devoted mother figure. The relationship the two share seems to be constructed by Jacobs as a reciprocal relationship because the two are so intertwined in their experience as young black women in slavery. The surrogate mother, therefore, certainly surpasses generational temporality, and even extends throughout the entire slave system so that many women act as mothers to each other, though they may not necessarily be biologically associated.

Through surrogacy, Jacobs is able to suggest that the maternal figure does not inherit the concerns of the past but rather redefines the approaches for the future. At the conclusion of Molly Ball's article, she determines that the maternal figure within *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* provides a positive change that is necessary for adaptation of the future generations to abolitionist movements,

Rather than suggesting that future selves inevitably inherit the past—or that a total break with the past provides the only route to positive change—Jacobs repurposes the sentimentalized figure of the mother to model an innovative temporality: one that recognizes the past's influence on the present yet authorizes a future with the potential to differ from what came before. (Ball 437).

Linda and Ellen are the best exemplification of the struggle between the past and the future, the inheritance of the traditions enforced by white domesticity or the embrace of black abolitionist movements going forward. For Linda, Ellen may be the most crucial figure of maternal surrogacy within the text because she demonstrates the possibility of reversal, renewal, and restructuring. We never see Ellen as a mother to her own children in the text, but we do see her behave as a mother towards her own mother, and through that, we see Ellen as a woman who reimagines the temporality of the maternal experience. Likewise, since Linda works so assiduously to ensure that Ellen does not experience life to the same horrifying degree that she did as an enslaved girl, we see

Ellen's adolescence as a redefining of the slave experience for young girls, despite it still being in place as she grows up. Ellen provides a hopeful note that the maternal project has been successful in its attempts to shield and sustain women from slavery, so successful that perhaps the conclusion of the book arrives at a point of peace in the process,

“Kind Mrs. Bruce came to bid me good by, and when she saw that I had taken off my clothing for my child, the tears came to her eyes. She said, “Wait for me, Linda,” and went out. She soon returned with a nice warm shawl and hood for Ellen. Truly, of such souls as hers are the kingdom of heaven” (Jacobs 147).

Though it's certainly not enough to accept the premise of a happy slave or a kind master, the conclusion of the narrative suggests that progress has been made throughout the passage of textual time. Mrs. Bruce, being a northern white woman, employs Linda rather than owns her and seems to express the compassion Jacobs originally sought to derive from white women. Moreover, Jacobs uses the shawl and hood to exemplify the shift in wellbeing for Ellen, as well as for Linda as a mother who can finally retain her own clothing. The tears shed by Mrs. Bruce highlight the fostered connection between mothers Jacobs needed to be successful in her project. The conclusion of the text therefore seems to provide a hopeful outlook on the maternal experience, that with the compassion and connection of so many mothers, the surrogate maternal in everyone will heal the broken system through time.

Through *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs produces a fiction that's based on the truth, a domestic novel that destabilizes both the national and familial sense of the term. She uses traditional forms of genre and style to create a piece of writing which profoundly dislocates the practice of these forms. In doing so, she reveals that

literature is capable of more than the telling of fabricated stories. She uses her own narrative, which is a story fabricated from the roots of reality, to expose the horrors of slavery in the nineteenth-century. She depicts the relationship between slavery and sexual assault, as well as economics and reproduction. Within these horrors, she also weaves in elements of hope, which makes her plot extend beyond simply condemning a broken system. The hopeful undertones she includes, present through the connections between mothers and among women, insinuates a belief that revolution is possible inside oppression. She locates the revolution specifically within the maternal identity, as a source of extreme power and vulnerability. The duality of the maternal identity makes it often a central figure of exploitation but also a figure capable of transforming abuse into authority. Jacobs, as an enslaved mother herself, represents a person dispossessed by a defective nation who is able to surpass its limitations. By using her voice through writing, Jacobs transcends temporality herself, redefining the literary canon through history.

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