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Publication Date

2014

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

SANTA CRUZ

**“IS THIS FREEDOM?” A POLITICAL THEORY OF HARRIET
JACOBS’S LOOPHOLES OF EMANCIPATION**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

POLITICS
with an emphasis in
FEMINIST STUDIES and
HISTORY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

by

Jasmine K. Syedullah

DECEMBER 2014

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My journey to this project was paved by mentors who were in the university but not of it, of it but not beholden to it, and some who were never in it at all. There was no short supply of inspiring sources funneled into its creation and recreation. Without the sustained persistence and rigorous support of an unbelievably and diversely dedicated community of intellectual marshals, political allies, and loved ones -- all of whom had a hand in keeping my eyes on the prize -- all that inspiration could so easily have remained mere aspiration. From beyond its walls and from within its loopholes, navigating the university has required finding ways to inhabit the rage it awakened, learning how to guard against the sense that survival was a solitary endeavor.

The generous presence, witness, and professional guidance of my incredible dissertation committee members Bettina Aptheker, Gina Dent, and Mayanthi Fernando were constant reminders in themselves to trust the process, to trust them, and through their example, myself. Their confidence in my efforts helped me narrow the initially unwieldy scope of this project and focus on the pieces that brought the stakes of my own questions into view. My fearless advisor, Robert Meister, who saw me through endless conversations about this project stretching from its inception through to its end, challenged and sharpened my voice, giving me permission to explore the nether regions of disciplinarity in both my research and teaching. I am incredibly grateful to several additional faculty whose sage advice and selfless feedback helped refine the focus of this project from beyond my home campus --

thanks in particular to Jean Fagan Yellin and Heather Ann Thompson who were of incredible assistance in the beginning stages of this process and to Sarah Haley, Jared Sexton, Erica Edwards, and Tiffany Willoughby-Herard whose reading of chapters, feedback and moral support through the final stretch made all the difference. My sister-friend and platonic soul mate Olivia Ford was true blue and unrelenting in her close scrutiny of nearly every word of several chapters of this work -- her syntactical and grammatical expertise were outshined only by the light of her faith in it.

During my tenure at UC Santa Cruz students and faculty came together to realize the more than forty-year student struggle for ethnic studies at UC Santa Cruz. The community that dedicated itself to this cause in these years became not only my political allies, but close intellectual comrades, my academic heroes through whom I saw this project anew; remarkable among them were Cindy Bello, Sara Benson, Nick Mitchell, Suzy Zepeda, Marcia Ochoa, and Christine Hong, all of whose tireless commitment to student leadership planted the seeds of the inaugural activist origins of the ethnic studies struggle at the center of the institutional formation of Critical Race and Ethnic Studies. In connection with these efforts I was fortunate to be welcomed into Christine Hong's dissertation writing group, which was an experience ripe with valuable opportunities to workshop chapters and build community with scholars working in the fields of literary criticism and ethnic studies. Exchanging work with the exceptional and inspiring Christine Montgomery was particularly exciting as her writing on slave narrative helped me to hone my own.

I am grateful to the Presidents Dissertation Year Fellowship Program and the Politics Department at UC Santa Cruz whose contributions supported the writing of this project. An immeasurable amount of gratitude is owed to the three Graduate Program Advisors who spanned the over eight years of my years in the Politics department, Anne Spalliero, Cindy Morris, and Sarah Arantza Amador as well as Marti Stanton in the Humanities office – they all moved mountains without ruffling feathers and I am still not sure how they managed it all with such grace and compassion. I would surely have been lost without their covert sleuthing, advocacy and solidarity.

Much of the conceptual development of this project took place in the classroom – the clarity of its formation have been impossible without my brave and brilliant students at UC Santa Cruz and University of San Francisco; their questions and insights challenged me and far exceeded my expectations. Friends across the country and around the globe gave me to the moral support and sense of community needed to ward off suffering the alienation of writing in isolation. To Andrea Henderson, Emily O’Dell, Timothy McKeon, Andrea Mercado, Reed Aubin, Patricia Borrego, judy b, Michelle Mulholland, Stephanie Milton, Marina Marazzo, angel Kyodo williams, Vincent Spina and the bartenders and regulars at the Rush Inn -- many rounds of applause to you for your ears, shoulders, reassurance and companionship. In addition I owe a tremendous amount of gratitude to all the amazing life-long connections I made with fellow graduate students while struggling to survive this rite of passage –

the long hours spent writing, brainstorming, dancing, worrying about what to write next, talking it out and writing more were perfect antidotes to this crazy-making process. Jeff Sanceri, John Johnson, Sandra Alvarez, Jin You, Jenny Hubbard, Jessica Roa, Karen deVries, Ruth Kim, Soma de Bourbon, Erin Grey, Elyse Banks, Cassie Ambutter, SA Smythe, and Johanna Rothe you are rising stars all – I hope we have only just begun to see how our lives and work will inspire and motivate each other.

Finally, I would like to thank my family,
immediate and extended, present and departed.

Your contributions to this project are legion.

Each of you is my heart, my compass, and my song.

I dedicate this work to your testaments, may they remain beacons in the storm.

ABSTRACT

“Is This Freedom?”

A political theory of Harriet Jacobs’s loopholes of emancipation

Jasmine K. Syedullah

This dissertation theorizes Harriet Jacobs’s politics of abolitionist emancipation as a loophole in modern theories of freedom. Jacobs’s narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, is an immeasurably valuable critique of the sexual politics of the peculiar institution. Our return to Jacobs wonders what additional value might be gleaned from reading her contributions to the abolitionist tradition as a social critique of slavery animated by an immanent critique of the virtues of modern political emancipation. Though most studies of Jacobs’s work focus on her narrative this project places *Incidents* in the broader context of her Civil War writings and subsequent contributions to national reconstruction. I argue that Jacobs’s slave girl protocols of emancipation shift the sexual politics of slavery’s domestic order from the margins of the abolitionist tradition to its epistemic center. The question of freedom at the core of Jacobs’s abolitionism directed itself to both proslavery supporters and antislavery activists alike. It was a question that asked when and for whom is self-defense a crime, and when and for whom a virtue? Her philosophy of freedom challenged conventional figurations of freedom foundational to American political theory, and anticipated analytic innovations of the twentieth century wrought to repurpose them, in particular feminist of color interventions to conventional notions of national belonging, political justice and a radical ethics of freedom.

“IS THIS FREEDOM?”

A political theory of Harriet Jacobs’s loopholes of emancipation

A Preface

“Dear Amy, if it was the life of a heroine with no degradation associated with it! Far better to have been one of the starving poor of Ireland whose bones had to bleach on the highways than to have been a slave with the curse of slavery stamped upon yourself and children...”
Harriet Jacobs

Soon after Harriet Jacobs’s manumission, the former slave girl’s friend and ally, Amy Post, entreated Jacobs to write the story of her life and escape as a testament to the wrong of slavery and to bolster the cause of abolition. The quote above, published in 1981 by Jean Fagan Yellin in her first essay authenticating Harriet Jacobs’s authorship of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861), is a curious response to her friend Post’s request. Having finally found herself a free woman, in this passage Jacobs does not present us with a yearning to narrate freedom as an experience that culminates in a badge of victory. The comparison Jacobs draws between the “starving poor of Ireland” and “the curse of slavery” instead suggests that, from her perspective, the dignity of dying hungry would be preferable to the degradation required to survive slavery.

Incidents challenged the conventions of slave narrative by telling a story of freedom that exposed the degradations of both being enslaved and being formerly enslaved. It’s perspective on freedom aligned with the familiar nineteenth century tropes of suffering, overcoming, and redemption common within abolitionist literature in the

United States. Yet, Jacobs herself never became a champion of the cause in quite the way other black women of her time did. While her contributions to the abolitionist tradition came comparatively late in the lifetime of the movement, *Incidents* was published the same year the Civil War began, Jacobs's choice to narrate the "degradation associated with" her experience of slavery and escape added something to her abolitionism less readily associated with the righteous warrior spirit of her predecessors Harriet Tubman or Maria Stewart.

Yellin's 1981 essay, "Written by Herself," proved the historical figure and her slave girl's journey out of slavery was, indeed, no fiction. Yellin's essay opened with the quote above, an excerpt from one of thirty letters exchanged between Jacobs and Amy Post. Yellin writes, "This correspondence establishes Jacobs' authorship and ... in doing so, it ... enriches our literary history by presenting us with a unique chronicle of the efforts of an under class black woman to write and publish her autobiography in antebellum America" (480). The story Jacobs's narrative tells also lends credence to an argument against slavery made by both leaders in the early women's rights movement and antislavery abolitionists alike, that there was a distinctly gendered dimension at work in slavery's ordering of rights and racial difference, a dimension that rendered even the liberal figurations of freedom used to justify slavery's abolition the real fiction.

As a precursor to black feminist interventions in Civil Rights debates over a century later, Yellin read Jacobs as a kind of political figure who stood in a company of

women situated at the intersections of the movements for race and gender equality in a manner that did not hesitate to address issues that exposed the internal conflicts that divided each. The picture of freedom Jacobs gave voice to in *Incidents* reflected the tensions between respectability and justice that plagued both antislavery activists and suffragists. Yellin's readings of Jacobs focused on the challenge Jacobs posed to her readers to interrogate the intragroup dynamics within both the women's movement and abolition.¹ Despite the fact that some of the female leaders of the antislavery movement were the framers of the discourse that distinguished the 1848 Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention as the beginning of women's suffrage in the United States and openly spoke out against the sexual violence of slavery, their ability to do so publically was bolstered by their status as married middle-class women. As a woman who never married, who had children out of wedlock, and with a man whom the law prohibited from publically being father to her children Jacobs was and was not the ideal advocate for the cause of enslaved women. In her own words, Jacobs's contributions to the genre of slave narrative document "the life of a heroine" whose journey to freedom was without escape from "degradation."

Throughout her text Jacobs voices anxiety about the consequences of revealing the truth of her entanglements with the domestic order of slavery even in the course of

¹ This articulation of intersectionality is attributable to the work of critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw who writes, "The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences. In the context of violence against women, this elision of difference in identity politics is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class (357).

securing her emancipation. As Yellin writes in her 1981 essay, “Her distress about the content of her book was even worse than her embarrassment about its formal flaws” (485). To evade the threat of social ridicule Jacobs anticipated from her peers she requested Amy Post write some identifying letter to endear her readers to her struggle. She even went so far as to conceal her own identity with the pseudonym “Linda Brent.”

Rather than read Jacobs’s distress over the content of her narrative as a consequence of her investment in the preservation of the cult of true womanhood in what follows I consider how her narrative struck at the core of a contradiction between the modern virtues associated with the liberal idea of freedom and liberal protocols for exacting justice in response to wrong. In *Incidents* personal wrong-doing cannot be redeemed or forgiven, emancipation is not a sufficient form of escape from slavery, and all forms of resistance are criminal acts. Harriet Jacobs’s escape from slavery begins with a nearly seven yearlong period of internment she terms the “Loophole of Retreat.” Before emancipation the loophole provided its concealed captive much needed and critical perspective on the quotidian violence of plantation life, particularly the ideological constrictions of slavery’s domestic order. Jacobs’s abolitionism is informed and shaped through her inhabitation of the loophole, a counterpoint to the ethical literacy of political resistance based upon narratives of personal overcoming and self-possession as agency. Jacobs’s loophole of retreat

invites us to contemplate the merits of retreating from domination while remaining an object of its subjection.

Valerie Smith places Jacobs's anxiety within a larger context of "the prodigious restraints historically imposed upon women that led to the recurrence of structures of concealment and evasion in their literature" (30). Though Jacobs had occupied a comparatively privileged position as a slave prior to her escape North in 1842, her experience as a domestic and proximity to the inner workings of the slave-owning household precluded her assimilation into a class identity of respectable womanhood more so than did her race or gender alone. Respectability and freedom were such entangled and interdependent virtues that manumission could not undo the "curse of slavery" as she wrote to Post.

Themes of concealment, evasion, and retreat dominate both the content and context of *Incidents*' production. The story *Incidents* tells as well as the means by which she manages to be able to tell it, are filled with narrow escapes from direct threats of violence that end not in safety but in additional opportunities to devise, what Jacobs at one point in the narrative refers to as "something akin to freedom"(55). In *Incidents* Jacobs's narrator wards off threats of sexual violence from her master with acts of sexual transgression with a white man who does not own her. She spends seven years hiding out from her master and his patrolmen when she can no longer protect herself from his coercive power. She struggles to orchestrate the manumission of her children while still in hiding. She disguises herself, escapes North, and evades recapture while

living under the constant threat of the Fugitive Slave Act. The truth of Jacobs's testament of escape from the sexual violence of her master was not only deemed an implausible representation of slavery, it compromised the fiction of freedom even radical abolitionists of the North had fought to preserve.²

Part of what makes *Incidents* so interesting to return to now is the way it can be read as a defense of abolition that enacts its end not only as an escape that attempts to leave slavery in the past, but as an act of retreat from the regimes of exchange that made slavery profitable. Abolitionists created opportunities to exploit the shifting terrain of ethical mores and justice in the antebellum U.S. As a result, what in the early half of the twentieth century evidenced the fictional origins of *Incidents'* cultural production by the end of the century saw the vindication of the slave girl as an authentic narrator of a documented history. The "Loophole of Retreat" that was central to her escape from slavery was also an apt metaphor for her escape from the subjections of her class status following her manumission. As Houston A. Baker Jr. argues, "The 'slave girl,' in effect, contests and revises conventions that would have kept her accessible to her master's lust, excluded from the Afro-American slave narrative's male heroics, and an anomaly in the chartings of the white (woman's) sentimental novel. In a word, [she] converted bodily confinement into expressive insurgency by working in the metaphorical interstices" (14).

² For more on the implausibility of the text as read by historian John Blassingame and Robert Stepto see Stephanie A. Smith's "Harriet Jacobs: A Case of Authentication" *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*. Edited by Audrey A. Fisch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 189. Print.

Concealment and evasion become covert and credible in the eyes of late twentieth century readers of *Incidents*. In 2007 Fred Moten writes,

“[Jacobs’s] work exemplifies that operation under the constraints of anti-abolitionist discipline and surveillance that is essential to black intellectuality... Black art is often concerned with showing this operation. Black art stages it, performs it, by way of things breaking and entering and exiting the exclusionary frame of the punitively ennobling, quickening representations to which they submitted, paradoxically, as the very enfleshment of the un- or sub-representable.” (218)

Though she was not the most outspoken abolitionist figure of her time, Jacobs’s narrative continues to be recognized as a powerful representation of a black woman’s refusal to consent to the degrading conditions of slavery. The authentication of her narrative contributed to the archive of African Americans’ noncompliance to slavery and helped to challenge ideological justifications for slavery in the name of racial and gender equality long after mainstream political historians agree abolition ended. *Incidents*, like much of the documented history of slave resistance and rebellion, was largely suppressed within the academy for much of the first half of the twentieth century, but managed to survive without authentication, passed down by archivists and librarians until it enjoyed a renaissance in the late 1960s and 1970s aided in no small part by the birth and institutionalization of Black Studies departments in universities across the country.

Moten's depiction of *Incidents* elides her struggle for representation with that of the black radical tradition. His indication of the un- or sub-representable quality of Jacobs's relationship to captivity explains Jacobs's concessions to the hegemonic conventions of antebellum culture she inhabited as a necessary, though uneasy, way to inhabit the systems of domination to which she refuses to fully comply. More pessimistic readings of *Incidents* see Jacobs's resistance as a limited and ineffectual form of resilience, acts illegible to the law as anything but a crime – acts that engender a merely provisional kind of freedom, less the result of a free choice than an abolition of slavery's domination. Saidiya Hartman writes,

Jacobs's argument ... maintains that being forced to submit to the will of the master in all things defines the predicament of enslavement, yet this condition of subjection, resignation, and enforced will-lessness imposed by domination should not be mistaken for compliance or assent. It simply registers the fact that resistance is hopeless ... Jacobs contravenes this argument and inadvertently reinforces the idea that if determined enough, one can escape violation, thereby implicitly suggesting that submission is to some degree an act of compliance and that utmost resistance establishes the meaning of noncompliance. (110-111)

What Hartman's reading of Jacobs emphasizes is that there is a materiality to the form of modern freedom that resides in the relationship between the slave and her subjection. While one could choose to read Jacobs as a figure who inhabits the places

of her containment in ways that might imply submission and resistance are mutually exclusive, her testimony repeatedly narrates her experiences of their co-arising and simultaneity, literally occupying the same place at the same time, not as paradox or contradiction, but as the only condition of resistance slavery made possible for other than death. By describing her own journey out of slavery as a path riddled by routes that point to both submission and resistance to conditions of containment, Jacobs's narrative implies that resistance can be something more than the antagonist of domination, that the condition of freedom slavery made possible contains acts submission, places wherein subjection is inescapable but resistance is not futile.

Rather than read Hartman reductively, what her reading of Jacobs is the relationally of freedom and the material conditions of domination. I read it as a critique of the kinds of freedom slavery made reasonable. Domination in this sense was detailed not only by the immoral spectacle of personal injury, but as a phenomenology of self-defense that necessarily included subjection and dispossession, an essentializing disorientation of the grammar of political agency itself through the degradation that accompanied compliance to it. The reasons for her domination were etched into the very infrastructure of her containment, into her relationship to domination itself.

Abolition, by Jacobs's account then, would require not only the dissolution of a social status, but also the disorientation of the social order that made that status reasonable, a divestment from the matrix of place, policing, and surveillance that restricted her idea of herself as respectable or free to her material relationship to domination.

As both subject and author Jacobs's relationships to power and resistance cannot easily be reduced to a story of either heroism or victimhood. The intertextuality of the narrative does not resolve differences between the literary traditions it brings together. It raises questions. Rather than ask whether her escapes constitute acts of resistance or if her incorporation of the sentimental novel is an act of assimilation or innovation, or if its adherence to literary convention is in fact the abolition of convention, in what follows I am interested in reading Jacobs for the loopholes in conventional antebellum ideas of virtue and emancipation her retreats from them made legible. The debate surrounding *Incidents* is, in itself, illustrative of the complex questions of political agency the liberal tradition imposes upon modern subjects. Emancipation, a clear way out, may not exist in either the law or its abolition, but what we inherit from Jacobs is proof that all structural impositions have loopholes and it is in the loopholes that we may work toward, "something akin to freedom" (55).

Jacobs's writing documents freedom as an ongoing labor of emancipation oriented toward the future. Despite her anxieties regarding the inescapability of degradation, in what follows I take up her possessive investments in the future of abolition as a desire for something more than a personal desire for moral redemption. My reading of her here does not constitute a comprehensive account of the competing interpretations of literary convention that surround her narrative. Rather, with Jacobs as its beacon, this project seeks to theorize freedom as only a fugitive could see it, as a loophole -- a site of ambiguity within the common sense of the domestic institution through which the

protocols of abolition could be passed on beyond the victory of Constitutional emancipation and into an as yet unrealized future.

In an interview literary critic Hortense Spillers reminds us that the point of commemorating histories of resistance is not to make heroes of nearly forgotten figures from the past, but to mine those histories for the “sets of protocols” through which their stories of struggle were popularized and passed on.

In the context of the interview Spillers was specifically speaking to the tenuous future of Black Studies, nevertheless, her analysis also applies to the study of abolition and the ideas of freedom that animated its dissolution following Constitutional Emancipation. “Fifty years from now”, writes Spillers,

... if young, apprentice scholars are trying to put together this period of American culture and global culture, and if somehow they lose sight of Black Studies and the Civil Rights Movement and its aftermath, that means that something didn't happen right today... There has to be a way that you help to make it possible for somebody down the line to put the picture together. And so that means that the Black Studies project is greater than any generation of individuals or of any individuals. You know, it just keeps going because it's not about individuals alone. It's a set of protocols working through individuals and what you want to survive are the protocols. (Leonard, 1058)

In order to put together the kind of picture of abolitionist cultural production and emancipatory political praxis then that frames freedom as a loophole in the logic of slavery, let us consider the interplay of discursive tensions we find in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself* as the passing on of a set of protocols.

Protocols of inquiry that ask: What if, the phenomenology of fugitive abolitionism were a retreat from ideological justifications for respectability, a retreat from the ethics of domestic tranquility buttressing the moral authority of the antislavery project on the eve of its political realization? What if her critique of slavery were in fact a critique of the kinds of emancipation slavery made desirable?

Incidents not only documented the evils slavery imposed on black families, it also displaced figurations of slave women popular as abject victims in need of saving by antislavery advocates. In going public, so to speak, Jacobs's representation of herself had to transform, what Lindon Barrett refers to as, "the figure of the black woman in bodily distress ... employed by male narrators to provide dramatic testimonies concerning the evils of slave-holding," (431) into a political actor. Approximating, or even surpassing conventional gendered and classed expectations of black subjection and white female virtue was something of a precondition for any black women who dared permeate the color line of the public sphere in the nineteenth century. For Jacobs in particular, striving to appear as if untouched by the brutality of slavery's domestication while remaining all the time still proxy for others' access to first-hand accounts of sexual violence placed her at the mercy of her reader in ways many of her allies would never experience.

Degradation, though seemingly a superficial concern had political consequences for the future of her contributions to the antislavery effort beyond the Constitutional end of slavery. The undercurrents of class allegiances that punished female victims of sexual violence for sexual transgression before the war also sought to police the political status of the recently emancipated in its aftermath. As a consequence in her later years the relationships with women in the North that had sustained her relief work with the refugees fell away. Divisions within the women's rights movement over black male suffrage alienated both Jacobs and her daughter from public participation in the struggle for equal rights. As Yellin writes in her biography of Jacobs, at a meeting of the Equal Rights Association in which Louisa, Jacobs's daughter was in attendance, "[Elizabeth Cady] Stanton famously opposed extending the vote to black men and male immigrants while denying it to women: 'Think of Patrick and Sambo and Hans and Yung Tung, who do not know the difference between a monarchy and a republic ... making laws for Lucretia Mott, Ernestine L. Rose, and Anna E. Dickinson' " (208). The possessive investments of antislavery activists in abolition did not universally extend to supports of white solidarity with black struggles for equal rights in the North. The outrage of the South was erupting with impunity, eviscerating the infrastructure of reconstruction and resulting in the violent repression of racial integration, equal rights, and public safety for the newly emancipated populations who lived there.

In our own time, *Incidents* is often pulled forth in an attempt to save black women from historical degradation, to guard against public perceptions that we, in our movements or in our syllabi, still regard the political struggles of black women as inferior to the virtue of those who defended their right to freedom. The inclusion of *Incidents* in discussions of American literature has become so common, in fact, as to have become canonical. The inclusion of her story of escape from slavery in discussions of political theory however, complicates the idea of modern freedom through its representation of political agency as a loophole rather than an entitlement. Returns to *Incidents* that seek to elevate her struggle with slavery to a story of heroism, overcoming the domination of her master with cunning and will, reinforces the logic of domination already present within much of the moral philosophy that informs possessive individualism and its investments in the personal entitlements liberal freedom.³ By calling her readers' attention to the ethical entanglements of slavery's loopholes, I would suggest Jacobs invites her readers to disidentify with the license to liberate as the sign of civic virtue and awaken their dissatisfaction with the concessions liberation has historically won.

We might consider reading Jacobs's concerns with regard to the inescapability of degradation in her letter then, as a longing for justice after emancipation rooted in an unrealized desire for the moral redemption of the domestic institution in the form of material reparation. In a letter to her British antislavery allies in 1866 Jacobs appealed

³ For a more complete discussion of this trope of modern philosophical thought see Judith Butler's *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in the Twentieth Century France* (New

for their financial support to help to start a school for orphans in Savannah since the Freedmen's Bureau had only arranged for the children to be apprenticed. Jacobs writes, "I know the degradation of Slavery... it not infrequently happens that the apprenticeship is to the former master. As it is that the spirit of slavery is not exorcised yet, the child, in many instances, is surely treated... penniless, homeless, they wander about dependent on charity for bread and shelter" (214-215).

The entanglements of liberty and domesticity Jacobs explores in *Incidents*, in many ways anticipated the problems of freedom and national security that would follow the victory of Constitutional emancipation. From within the "hidden internal corners" of both the text's content and form, Jacobs creates the appearance of an absence -- what transpires within those loopholes politicizes abolition such that liberty becomes a pretense for subjection and emancipation more than a declaration of independence. From the loopholes emerge a dream of freedom, a "politics," as Gillian Rose describes that, "begins not when you organize to defend an individual or particular or local interest, but when you organize to further the 'general' interest within which your particular interest may be represented" (4).

The global perspective of Jacobs's slave girl abolitionism begins within the loophole of retreat itself. One of the most poignant illustrations of the phenomenological power of her retreat occurs in reaction to her brother's escape. While Linda is still in hiding her brother, named William in the narrative, but known throughout the antislavery

community as John S. Jacobs, escaped, supposedly decoyed away from his master by abolitionists while they were traveling in the North. His master was Mr. Sands, a white lawyer-turned-congressman and father to Linda's children who bemoaned the loss of this property proclaiming that he had trusted William, "as if he were my own brother and treated him as kindly" (135).

When news of William's escape reached Linda in her hideaway, instead of being happy for her brother's newfound freedom, Brent was filled with the anxiety that his escape would curtail her own.

A new anxiety began to trouble me. Mr. Sands had expended a good deal of money, and would naturally feel irritated by the loss he had incurred. I greatly feared this might injure the prospects of my children, who were now becoming valuable property. I longed to have their emancipation made certain. The more so, because their master and father was now married. I was too familiar with slavery not to know that promises made to slaves, though with kind intentions, and sincere at the time, depend upon many contingencies for their fulfillment (134).

When John had not returned of his own accord a few weeks later as his master had expected, Jacobs writes, "you would have thought the messenger had brought tidings of death instead of freedom"(134). An old woman, named Angie, responded the fugitive's grieving grandmother and Linda's children who had been nearby complaining of missing their mother, by reminding them of the difference between losing a loved one to slavery and losing one to freedom.

... Poor old Aggie clapped her hands for joy. "Is dat what you's crying fur?" she exclaimed. "Git down on your knees and bress de Lord! I don't know whar my poor chillern is, and I nebber 'spect to know. You don't know whar poor Linda's gone to; but you do know whar her brudder is. He's in free parts; and dat's de right place. Don't murmur at de Lord's doings, but git down on your knees and tank him for his goodness." (135)

Linda, overhearing their conversation from the safe distance of her loophole of retreat, quietly reflected upon the significance of her neighbor's words, and finally decided that the contingencies of the unknown were preferable to the certainty of bondage.

... My selfishness was rebuked by what poor Aggie said. She rejoiced over the escape of one who was merely her fellow-bondman, while his own sister was only thinking what his good fortune might cost her children. I knelt and prayed God to forgive me; and I thanked him from my heart, that one of my family was saved from the grasp of slavery. (135)

William's escape brought the slave girl face to face with the uncertainty of emancipation. To gain a global perspective on the problem of slavery she had first to embrace the ambiguities of emancipation. Armed with the knowledge that slavery threatened the security of her future in any location whether she was on the plantation or in hiding on it, whether she was a fugitive or manumitted slavery made self-interest a risky desire, and regardless of the totalizing embrace of slavery's domestic

order, escape from it was an insufficient form of self-preservation. Abolition was an ethical imperative.

The present project is divided into five chapters. Chapter one explores the political implications and literary significance of Jacobs's loophole of retreat. Chapter two establishes the philosophical foundation of Jacobs's abolitionism as a politics rooted in the inescapability of degradation. Chapter three takes up Jacobs's proto-feminist contributions to both the abolitionist tradition and the early women's rights movement. Chapter four turns to the questions of national identity, diaspora, and political allegiance Jacobs's abolitionism raises.

There is a recurrent quality to the ethical entanglements of slavery's loopholes. The fact that there is no redemption for the efforts Linda expends in this world, no act of retreat that grants her immunity from the dangers of having once belonged to a captive class, despite the valiant display of her struggle for her freedom does not dissuade her retreat to them because her desire to escape was not an declaration of independence. The victory of the liberation she won had no guarantees other than the solidarity of those who helped her make escape possible. The loopholes in *Incidents* were not showdowns to the death for domination but way stations— secreted opportunities to organize and undermine, if only temporarily, the constraints of captivity. The loopholes facilitated both space and time to counter the dehumanization of the plantation and take hold of another sense of self, place, and purpose than that which slavery imposed upon people from birth.

An inversion of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, whose retreat is described in the prologue as a reaction to others' refusal to see him, we can read Jacobs's retreat as the antebellum precursor to his sense of social alienation, an exercise of her own ability to seek refuge in the uncertainty that comes of refusing to let others ever fully see her at all. Since there has, historically, been such unlimited political power in social anonymity, Jacobs's conversion from slave girl to absent fugitive is also a metaphorical move from the property to person through the crime of self-possession. An act of self-reclamation she never directly addresses with her reader, we turn to Jacobs's loophole of retreat to understand the sense in which abolition was meant to end not only an institution, but a social relation. As Marx's *18th Brumaire* so famously reminds us, the kinds of freedom we fight for can far too easily become extensions of our bondage dressed up in new chains. Rather than race to the North, another place where the social relations of slavery would eventually constrain her mobility, she placed herself in the loopholes of the plantation. In the loophole Jacobs finds not a way out, but a vantage point from which to abolish her own possessive investment in the domestic order of her containment.

CHAPTER ONE

A Phenomenology of Retreat

“The war of my life had begun; and though one of God's most powerless creatures, I resolved never to be conquered. Alas, for me!”
Harriet Jacobs

Harriet Jacobs is celebrated for authoring one of the most critically acclaimed and widely circulated American slave narratives. As the only of its kind to have been written by a fugitive woman and former slave girl, Jacobs's narrative offers an immeasurably valuable critique of the sexual politics of the peculiar institution. Our return to Jacobs in the present project wonders what additional value might be gleaned from reading her contributions to the abolitionist tradition as a social critique of slavery animated by an implicit critique of the virtues of modern political emancipation. Jacobs placed the sexual politics of the plantation at the center of her story of escape, not only challenging prevalent ideological justifications for slavery, but also threatening the social orientation of the domestic order of slavery itself. The question of freedom at the core of Jacobs's abolitionism directed itself to proslavery supporters and antislavery activists alike. It was a question that asked when and for whom is emancipation a crime, and when and for whom a virtue?⁴

In “The Loophole of Retreat,” the twenty-first chapter of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself* (1861), Harriet Jacobs invites her readers to share in a vision of Southern plantation life as witnessed from a hidden cell positioned just above the streets that bordered her owner’s plantation. In this chapter Jacobs tells her reader of her escape from the plantation into a secret reserve crafted by her uncle and tucked inside the roof of a shed on her grandmother’s property, just out of sight of her master and his patrolmen. When she escapes to a den too small to stand, Jacobs’s narrative diverges at this point in the story from the conventions of the slave narrative form in which fugitives might smuggle themselves North in tight crates or barrels, to take her readers on a journey out of slavery that begins with a seven-year period of self-imposed internment on the land where she was hunted and once held captive. Jacobs revises the slave narrative paradigm to fit the contours of her struggle for family, dignity, and autonomy. As a fugitive mother invested in maintaining her ties to her children her struggle for freedom is not desire for independence so much as it is a desire for a different relationship to domesticity.

As Karen Sánchez-Eppler writes:

Unlike the heroes of slave narratives, Linda escapes not by fighting or running but by burrowing into domestic spaces ... Linda hides beneath kitchen

⁴ The framing for this question is inspired by one originally posed by Barry Goldwater and later used as the title of an address given by Malcolm X at Oxford in 1964. In his address in Malcolm stated, “Anytime anyone is enslaved, or in any way deprived of his liberty, if that person is a human being, as far as I am concerned he is justified to resort to whatever methods necessary to bring about his liberty again.” For more on this speech see Saladin Ambar’s *Malcolm X at Oxford Union* Oxford University Press, 2013.

floorboards and atop the spare featherbeds in the home of the sympathetic, but slave-owning white woman. She locates freedom in feminized spaces; but while she haunts these houses, she cannot occupy them. She never comes to occupy the domestic; rather, as a slave and particularly as a female slave, she *is* the domestic. (87)

The loophole is one of most effective metaphors of the narrative, representing the kinds of relationships to national belonging she can access but never possess. The relationship to domestic space the loophole stands for here is not only a powerful metaphor, it is also a literal reflection of Jacobs's historical journey after the Civil War and her ongoing search for a place to homestead with her children, a search that never manifest an end. Like so many others who were displaced after emancipation in addition to political recognition, belonging would require land, property, and the local protection of the law.

In Jacobs's case the relationship to placelessness the loophole of retreat afforded was both a form of exile in a modern sense of being removed from the fray of civic inclusion and a distance from which her relationship to her grandmother, uncle, aunt, brother, children and children's father could be maintained undetected by her master. Unlike an exile severed from home but free to wonder the earth, the placelessness of her loophole was contained. Instead of being outside the borders that divided her from her home she was trapped within it.

The literary implications and political aims of the text's contribution to the abolitionist tradition are, like Jacobs in the loophole, both distanced from and trapped within Western liberal notions of freedom and the virtues of political recognition they represent. *Incidents* was and continues to be a controversial text at least in part because its narrator, Jacobs's avatar Linda Brent, admits to her own compliance with the coercive culture of sexual impropriety embedded within slavery's domestic order.⁵ Perhaps more transgressive however is the subtle tension within her narrative between her desires to occupy domestic spaces, but to do so on her own terms. We see this in her reticence to invite her readers' judgment of her relationship with Mr. Sands – however, in so doing she not only implies that her slave status would impede her ability to accord to their standards of virtue, it also seems to insinuate that since their standards accept slavery they might not be so superior to her own after all.

Despite the confessional tenor of her narrative, the emancipatory limits of Jacobs's literal and metaphorical loopholes of retreat are more probably due to the constraints of her social, legal and discursive context and not ultimately the result of sense of true personal moral failing. The problems posed by her retreat from social convention, the restraints they impose upon the kinds of freedom she could secure in both her life and in her text, are political in nature and, as I argue, implicate not only the immediate

⁵ As Lois Lamphere Brown writes, "The African American sentimental tradition... values some of the principle aspects of the Anglo-American form – namely, modesty and virtue, though the latter is often more in principle, owing to the awful slavery experiences of so many... religious practice, domestic order, organized communities and adherence to family roles are also central to these texts" (56).

beneficiaries of her captivity, but the virtues of the domestic order of the institution as a whole.

In the preface to her narrative, Harriet Jacobs shares with her reader an acknowledgement that this act of writing her life as protest against Southern justifications for slavery bore its own set of limitations. Her testament, like her loophole of escape from slavery, required moves of both capitulation and concealment, both cunning and conscription.

She begins,

READER, be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true ... I have concealed the names of places, and given persons fictitious names. I had no motive for secrecy on my own account, but I deemed it kind and considerate towards others to pursue this course. ... I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself; on the contrary, it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history. Neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings. But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is. Only by experience can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that

pit of abominations. May the blessing of God rest on this imperfect effort in behalf of my persecuted people! (1).

The overriding sentiment of Jacobs's preface is not only one of political provocation, but in keeping with the protocols of the cult of domesticity she claims to aspire to, it is a text shot through with concerns for family, integrity, and loyalty – values of an ethical nature, generally the preview of the propertied class and certainly foreclosed by the restrictions of her slave-born status. This “realizing sense” to which she refers here is an invitation for her readers to escape the common sense of slavery along with her, to gain an embodied understanding of fugitivity, and see freedom from the perspective of her escape. *Incidents*, like most slave narratives of its era, had the potential to become a loophole of affective and thus epistemic retreat for its immediate audience, an escape into the life of another, a tour through the horrors of slavery that granted its readers the benefits of a captive's perspective without the consequences of their direct embodiment of it. The practice of reading her testament could, in itself, she seems to suggest, stimulate a sensory response, an impulse to retreat from hegemonic ways of sensing and thus understanding the wrong of slavery.

Though Jacobs capitulated to the desires of her readers to bear witness to her life through the act of reading, her narrative did not adhere in every sense to their expectations. The spectacle of horrors she presented were less focuses on the physical abuses of slavery and more attentive to the affective and epistemic constraints of its social control and dehumanization. In 1986 Joanne M. Braxton wrote an essay that

asks how the recognition and inclusion of *Incidents* might redefine the slave narrative genre. Braxton reminds us, “the treatment of the slave narrative genre,” writes Braxton, “... has been almost always the treatment of the narratives of heroic male slaves, not their wives or sisters” (380). Black women’s testaments to the wrong of slavery appeared as early as 1787 and their contributions to slave narrative were less declarations of independence than they were critical perspectives that concentrated on the challenges escape from slavery posed for fugitive slaves’ relationships to civic life and political justice.⁶ Liberation from slavery in these texts required not only the will to escape slavery, but the witness and collaboration of friends, family, and political allies to confront the limits of legal emancipation.

The decision to write *Incidents* at the behest of her antislavery friends and allies was likely agreed to as the fulfillment of an ethical obligation to those who had sacrificed for her freedom. Though the final decision was hers alone however, the reward for having done so was never entirely credited to her. Throughout the twentieth century scholars largely attributed the work to her editor, Lydia Maria Child, and disregarded the narrative as a work of fiction.⁷ As a critique of slavery it belonged to the public archive of antislavery discourse. As Valerie Smith writes, “Harriet Jacobs’s freedom to reconstruct her life was limited by a genre that suppressed subjective experience in

⁶ Though *Incidents* was the first narrative to be authored by a formerly enslaved woman, “written by herself,” earlier narratives, often transcribed by white abolitionist allies included, “Belinda, or the Cruelty of Men Whose Faces Were Like the Moon,” (1787); “The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave. Related by Herself,” (1831); and “The Narrative of Sojourner Truth,” (1850).

favor of abolitionist polemics” (28).⁸ Jacobs’s absence from the plantation is echoed in her distancing herself from the standards by which women of North might judge her negotiation of captivity. There are a series of literal and metaphorical loopholes Jacobs retreats to by way of her escape from slavery that challenge common sense notions that mobility constitutes agency and escape leads to freedom. Taking Braxton’s provocation seriously, *Incidents* is a text that adds a distinctly gendered perspective on slavery to the abolitionist tradition, but also complicates conventional understandings of escape as the realization a slave’s dream of emancipation. The ethical investments and ideological implications that come of her use of loopholes in her effort to achieve, what at one point in the narrative she refers to as “something akin to freedom,” are, metaphorical as well as practical responses to the all-encompassing domination of slavery’s domestic order.

As Jean Fagan Yellin writes in her 1987 introduction to *Incidents*, Jacobs’s text integrates “contrasting literary styles.” It, “utilizes standard abolitionist rhetoric to lament the inadequacy of her descriptions of slavery... to urge her audience to involve themselves in antislavery efforts”(Jacobs, xiv). Even the title of Jacobs’s narrative emphasized her of identification within the frame of slavery’s domination

⁷ As Braxton notes, through “Marion Starling, a black woman, had argued for the authenticity of the Jacobs narrative as early as 1947 ... male critics like Sterling Brown and Arna Bontemps contested that authorship” (382).

⁸ In addition to popularizing antislavery sentiment Joanne M. Braxton describes the conventions of the slave narrative as follows: “the genre has been defined as ... including a narrator who speaks in a coherent, first person voice, with a range and scope of knowledge like that of an unlettered slave and a narrative movement which progresses from South to North, and culminates in an escape from slavery to a freedom which is both an inner and outer liberation” (380).

while also suggesting her distance from it. Nominating the persistence of her identity as that of a slave girl even after her acquisition of freedom suggests that the claim to freedom her narrative represents did not carry the same credibility as did the life-long claim on her identity the domestic order of slavery imposed upon her political subjectivity. The singularity of her narrative within the antislavery archive further confirms that the identity politics of antebellum culture constrained the expression of black women's self-representation such that despite the possibilities for liberation acts of sexual transgression might have afforded, public descriptions of such experiences were largely suppressed and when made public, had to conform to paradigms of respectability governing social definitions of white feminine virtue. By nominating herself in the language of her captors but opting to engage her readers in a revision of antebellum standards of female respectability Jacobs, as I argue, challenged not only moral justifications for slavery, but so too the identity politics that regulated public demands for its abolition.

Incidents addressed the immorality of slavery as an ethical injustice and crime of sexual violence that punished its victims with silence and the dispossession of political representation. Her narrative suggests that the practical solution to the threat of sexual domination is not allegiance with or acceptance of existing conventions of respectability, but the abolition of their ideological standards of virtue altogether. In every instance, Jacobs's desires for emancipation represent the inherent ambiguity of national belong for former slaves and the contingent conditions of freedom slavery created as a condition of its abolition.

Both Smith and Baker read Jacobs's reworking of the slave narrative, and its recognition of the threats of gendered violence it presents as the embodiment of a strong intellectual tradition expressed through "the power of metaphor," the power to reconfigure the image of the female slave as a self-familiar figure, embodying the desires of their voyeurs, a subject whose inclusion would not pose a threat to the spheres of belonging from which she was formerly alienated. Baker writes, "*Incidents* states its goal as arousal—'to arouse the women of the North.' What better tale for such arousal than one of concubinage unredeemed by marriage—sexual taboo violated without expiation of death ... White desire wants only the flash dance of the scarred black body; the dance should be followed by an altogether domestic tranquility ... The only desirable presence is a domesticated one" (21). Jacobs's appeal to the women of the North is an ambiguous form of identification with them, a expression of her desire for the domestic tranquility they enjoy, undercut by a sense of disapproval of it.

Rather than submit to the will of her master, and enter into a relationship of concubinage with him Jacobs's narrator defends her virtue by entering into a less coercive sexual relationship with a man who did not formerly own her, a white lawyer who in the narrative is known as Mr. Sands. She reasons that the children she bears with him will have a greater chance at freedom than they would were their father her master and hopes that Mr. Sands's personal investment in the freedom of

his children would supersede the children's legal obligation to "follow the condition of the mother."

As one reviewer of Jacobs's narrative wrote in the February 9th 1861 edition of the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* of Salem, Ohio, "her revelations of the domestic character of the domestic institution unfolds a fearful sum of infamy, that demands the active opposition of every wife and mother in our land" (*Papers*, 327). As the reviewer notes, the sense of freedom her testimony works to realize is not a moralizing mission chiefly concerned with the saving of innocents or the conversion of slaves to fit existing models of modern citizenship. Instead it reads as a desire for freedom invested in the possibility of justice despite the reality, despite the fact that under slavery justice was the providence of rights-bearing perpetrators of sadistic violence, and righteousness the reward for those with the power to pursue freedom with impunity.

The loophole of retreat was both a material and metaphorical space that provided much-needed physical and critical distance from standard notions of freedom. Jacobs's revision of the slave narrative authored a vision of freedom that denied readers the redemptive tropes of struggle, conversion, and liberation that defined the genre, while simultaneously challenging her allies to consider the violence their own ethical investments in the domestic order antislavery culture upheld.

Lindon Barrett writes,

... just as Brent/Jacobs's "loophole of retreat" proves the site of her most graphically recounted bodily distress, so too it proves the site of her most effective manipulation of her adversaries. From her garret she manufactures false evidence of her presence in the North. She writes letters to Flint and to her grandmother that are carried North and mailed from there by "a trustworthy seafaring person" (128); she watches with great satisfaction as Flint is entirely duped and believes she has truly escaped to the North: "This was as good as a comedy to me" (130). At this point in the narrative, Jacobs controls her own situation, as she does at no other point in the text, as well as controlling those vying to impose hostile authority on her. These moments of self-authorization even surpass those gained later by an actual escape to the North, where she is forced, for example, to take an ambivalent stand toward a bill of sale that bears her name and where she is never fully in control of the activities of such benefactors as Lydia Maria Child or Harriet Beecher Stowe (see Yellin, "Texts" and Introduction) or of her own situation vis-a-vis these benefactors. (434)

Though often taken up as either a concession to the mores of a nineteenth century cult of domesticity, as an allegory for the resilience of the human spirit, or as a testament to the history of slaves' will to resist the middle passage, forced exploitation, and anti-black racism, I take up the abolitionist legacy of Jacobs's writings as an interdisciplinary corpus of work rooted in a desire to expose the inherent contradictions submerged within the internal logic of both slavery and its antithesis, antislavery discourse. The revelatory power of Jacobs's contribution to the

abolitionist tradition, I argue, lies not only in the literary figurations of freedom she narrates as having secured for herself, but in the exchange of ideas about the contours of that freedom—the quandaries about its limitations her writings facilitate, thereby revealing the foreclosures of justice and hidden contradictions that abide within modern liberal theories of freedom. By foregrounding her own as yet unattainable desire for freedom in both her narrative and in her Civil War writings, she provoked something akin to it in her readers, daring them, by example and metaphor, both to reflect upon the logics of virtue governing their own relationships to freedom and captivity, and to consider what kinds of emancipation might be born from their abolition of them?

I open my analysis of her abolitionism with a close reading of the phenomenological implications of *Incidents*' loophole of retreat. A closer look at Jacobs's loophole of retreat reveals the metaphorical force of Jacobs's contribution to the work of abolition, framing it as a political project that cannot simply succeed slavery, but one which must interrogate the ideological loopholes of modern freedom that justified slavery in the first place. If, as contemporary political theory after the influence of Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* would suggest, our personal relationships to ideas of freedom and captivity indeed own us more than we own them—if they are historically and socially constructed phenomena that do not exist independent of the reality of class politics to which we are subject—then the implications of Jacobs's loophole are both greater and more narrow than readings of her work commonly lead us to believe. I suggest that the critique of captivity the loophole of retreat represents

is derived from but not limited to the distinctly gendered nature of her personal struggle to overcome the impositions of her enslavement. At the same time, the loophole is not an analogy for an existential struggle for universal human emancipation. In what follows I read the sexual politics of slavery's subjection in *Incidents* as both historical and metaphorical points of departure for a formulation of political freedom a slave girl could only dream of.

Though Jacobs's story begins with slavery it does not end with her arrival in the North or with her manumission. "Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! We are," writes Jacobs, "as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the North; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in my condition" (201). *Incidents* ends with the inescapability of the impositions of slavery, not only for the formerly enslaved, but as we are to infer from the last lines of her narrative freedom, for the nation as a whole.

In the end of her story Jacobs's narrator points out that she and her children, as manumitted slaves,

are as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the North; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in *my* condition. The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone

of my own, however humble. I wish it for my children's sake far more than for my own. But God so orders circumstances as to keep me with my friend Mrs. Bruce. Love, duty, gratitude, also bind me to her side. It is a privilege to serve her who pities my oppressed people, and who has bestowed the inestimable boon of freedom on me and my children (201).

It is hard to not hear a tone of bitter disillusionment in the narrator's final address. Perhaps we can surmise that while the narrator of *Incidents* neither wholly identified with the tranquility of white bourgeois standards of liberal domesticity, nor aspired to modern Enlightenment conventions of self-mastery, she did want to pass on a sense of place and belonging, rather than a fugitive subjectivity, to her children. Implicit in her final statement I would suggest that Jacobs's narrative offers her readers an imminent analysis of the material limits of modern liberal freedom based on her lived experience of them as both a domestic slave and as a domestic worker. The social and political constraints on her freedom do not end with her manumission. Without derailing the present study with more contemporary discussion of the omissions of the Wagner Act and present-day debates over domestic workers' rights, let it suffice to say that the abolition of slavery in the United States was not sufficient to protect against the persistent exploitation, sexual violence, and political disenfranchisement of waged domestic labor.⁹

As Saidiya V. Hartman attests,

Although no longer an extension and instrument of the master's absolute right or domination, the laboring black body remained a medium of others' power and representation. If the control of blacks was formerly effected by absolute rights of property in the black body, dishonor, and the quotidian routine of violence, these techniques were supplanted by the liberty of contract that spawned debt-peonage, the bestowal of right that engendered indebtedness and obligation and licensed naked forms of domination and coercion, and the cultivation of a work ethic that promoted self-discipline and induced internal forms of policing. (120)

If criminality, as Hartman reminds us, was the loophole of abolition and New World slavery was the loophole of modern freedom, then the victory of waged labor must have been quite disillusioning indeed. It was not a privilege Jacobs enjoyed for long. With the publication of her narrative and the beginning of the Civil War she did not stay with employer but left to serve on the front-lines of the battlefield and attend to the refugees that traveled there with not much more than the clothes on their backs. Retreat to the loophole is a counterintuitive but recurrent move throughout her life in which Jacobs removes herself from the fray of social production and, at times literally, situates herself within the scaffolding of its domestic order. What makes that move legible as an act of rebellion is her public authorship of it. The limited freedom she experiences within the loophole not only anticipates the problem freedom poses for refugees and freedmen after slavery, it frames that problem as a struggle for

⁹ For more scholarship on the relevance of the history of slavery to contemporary struggles for domestic workers' rights see Grace Chang's *Disposable Domesticity: Immigrant Women*

power that cannot be won by mastery of the other, but only through a praxis of abandon, public divestment from concessions of domestic tranquility.

Abolition: a praxis of abandon... or abandonment?

Unlike her twentieth century counterparts, the proto-feminism of Jacobs's divestment from domestic tranquility was not an expression of her personal right to a freedom of choice. By politicizing her escape from slavery, first in the narrative and then by joining the relief effort, Jacobs did abandoned the privileges of privacy her civil rights might have afforded her and her children. This is not because she sought liberation from them, but because she saw them as too limited a form of freedom in themselves.

Lauren Berlant writes in her reading of *Incidents*,

sexual knowledge derives from private experiences on the body and yet operates as a register for systemic relations of power; sexual knowledge stands for a kind of political counterintelligence, a challenge to the norms of credibility, rationality, and expertise that generally organize political culture; and yet, as an archive of injury and of private sensation, sexual knowledge can have the paradoxical effect of *delegitimizing* the very experts who can represent it as a form of experience (245).

By the end of her narrative, Jacobs's narrator is disillusioned by the promises of civil rights; as Berlant writes, "the national discourse itself has become a mode of memorial rhetoric, an archive of dead promises" (235). We might read in Jacobs, however, as the author of the end of her own narrative, a hope that by making her

disillusionment public, it may be more likely redressed through the activist solidarity it seeds in her readers. My own reading of *Incidents* finds her possessive investments in freedom less likely evidence of a personal concern for political redemption and more likely concerned with making sure her readers are clued into the limited possibilities of rights discourse for the realization of justice within the time of slavery, even if it costs her her own sense of personal security.

If we were to read Jacobs's abolitionism as a praxis of abandon rather than an expression of melancholy her critique of slavery becomes a critique of liberal abolitionist investments in personal redemption for the national sin of slavery, a demand for political justice rather than spiritual salvation.¹⁰ In an essay in which he refutes the relevance of returns to the history of slavery to redress present problems of racism Steven Best writes that, "it is futile to attempt to redeem the past." In a generalizing sense, desires for redemption, rather than justice, were precisely what could be understood as the driving force of ideologically motivated support for antislavery abolition in the North. For working class, fugitive and emancipated men and women however, the desires for redemption abolitionists voiced were rooted in questions of civil rights and economic justice. One might read the positive effect of the slave narrative as its power to bridge the racial and class differences that divided in the antislavery cause and sentimentalize the material consequences of slavery's

¹⁰ In Mark A. Noll's *God and Race in American Politics*, Noll writes that, "while [Evangelical Protestantism] had the strength to animate the division over slavery, it did not display the political wisdom required to resolve the issue of slavery or the political strength to unify the halves of the nation divided by war over slavery"(65).

injustices as the moral failures of a well meaning nation. As Best writes, “narrative and the act of reading together sustain the feeling of loss. It is a feeling that literature produces, not history, because literary texts, as intentional objects, possess silences and ellipses that are structural, whereas silence in nonliterary discourse is not always the sign of an intention”(461).

Jacobs’s refusal to fill in the gaps of the end of her narrative, and make the dream of her life more explicit allows her reader imagine their own disillusion with modern freedom as her own. to remain silent about the crippling effects of the domestic order and the dispossessions of sexual autonomy was an invitation to her readers to not only empathize with the injustices of slavery, but also to reflect upon the meaning and ethical implications of its abolition. As a politics interested in more than a metaphorical opposition to the moral sin and suffering of captivity but a praxis of historical reorientation to the meaning of freedom itself we might read *Incidents* as a testament to the social obligations of emancipation. The material implications of the meaning of freedom *Incidents* presented to the antislavery community are evidenced throughout Jacobs’s writing and witness. Jacobs’s slave girl abolitionism suggested that freedom after slavery ought not be premised upon the pretense of a right to property, but upon the insight that such forms of righteousness are historically contradictory and, consequently, full of loopholes.

In “The Loophole of Retreat,” the narrator, Linda Brent, details the cramped conditions that greeted her in her newfound freedom:

A small shed had been added to my grandmother's house years ago. Some boards were laid across the joists at the top, and between these boards and the roof was a very small garret, never occupied by anything but rats and mice. It had a pent roof, covered with nothing but shingles according to the southern custom for such buildings. The garret was only nine feet long and seven feet wide. The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor. There was no admission for either light or air. My uncle Philip, who was a carpenter, had very skillfully made a concealed trap door, which communicated with the storeroom ... To this hole I was conveyed as soon as I entered the house. The air was stifling; the darkness total (110).

It is important to note here that the narrator's perilous ascension to freedom in this passage is not staged as an act of transcendence but something closer to a praxis of abandon. The world she leaves behind is not abolished by her reorientation to it.

Though she is literally raised up out of slavery, the conditions of freedom that greet her in her tiny loophole are arguably less inhabitable than those she left behind. The language the narrator uses to describe her escape here invokes images of death. She paints the loophole as an inhospitable coffin-like dwelling, both an exit from slavery and a dead end. Still situated very much within the bounds of her domestic confinement, however, she becomes a subject both protected from and invisible to it, like a living ghost, haunting the very places in which she was presently being hunted. "I heard many conversations not intended for my ears," she writes. "There was no place, where slavery existed, that could have afforded me so good a place of concealment" (110).

Jacobs's narrator Linda assures her readers that she views her life as a slave as more of a living death than her life in the loophole of retreat. Nevertheless, the conditions of bondage Linda has escaped slavery to experience are horrific. The fact that she is still captive, still culpable for her refusal of her master's will and for her own will to escape does not lead us to rejoice in the victory of her self-emancipation. The material limitations of the kind of freedom she secures for herself metaphorically foreshadow the material limitations of the kinds of emancipation that become possible for her, and those millions like her, in the aftermath of their mass exodus to the North during the Civil War. In juxtaposition to other slaves' testimonies that narrated more seemingly direct routes to freedom, Linda's retreat from the constant threat of her master's domination over her body and sense of security for herself and her children to a tomb for rats and mice is both a metaphor for the inescapability of slavery's domestic order, and a practical solution to the political reality of constant surveillance and anti-black vigilantism she occupied.

...or a people abandoned

Throughout the chapters leading up to "The Loophole of Retreat" the narrator tells readers several stories of escape attempts gone wrong. One in particular, about the escape attempt of her uncle, her grandmother's youngest son Benjamin, reads as the more pessimistic version of Frederick Douglass's slave narrative and is worth quoting at length. In the chapter of *Incidents* titled "The Slave Who Dared to Feel Like a Man," Benjamin bests his owner—rather than his overseer, as did Douglass—in a

physical confrontation, and runs away soon thereafter. Under false pretense he boards a ship headed North as his means of escape. A violent storm causes the ship to dock unexpectedly, and when news of a recent runaway becomes known to the ship's captain, Benjamin's escape is thwarted. "Benjamin so exactly answered its description, that the captain laid hold on him, and bound him in chains. The storm passed, and they proceeded to New York. Before reaching that port Benjamin managed to get off his chains and throw them overboard. He escaped from the vessel, but was pursued, captured, and carried back to his master" (21).

Despite the incarceration, lashing, and various other forms of torture that meet Benjamin upon his return to the plantation, his desire for freedom remains undeterred. Linda and her grandmother are permitted to meet with him. The combination of his frail state and his unwavering resolve for freedom seems to frighten them, for they are chiefly concerned with his personal safety. In response to his apology to his mother for causing her such worry she says,

she could not blame his desire for freedom. He told her that when he was captured, he broke away, and was about casting himself into the river, when thoughts of her came over him, and he desisted. She asked if he did not also think of God. I fancied I saw his face grow fierce in the moonlight. He answered, "No, I did not think of him. When a man is hunted like a wild beast he forgets there is a God, a heaven. He forgets every thing in his struggle to get beyond the reach of the bloodhounds."

"Don't talk so, Benjamin," said she. "Put your trust in God. Be humble, my child, and your master will forgive you."

"Forgive me for *what*, mother? For not letting him treat me like a dog? No! I will never humble myself to him. I have worked for him for nothing all my life, and I am repaid with stripes and imprisonment. Here I will stay till I die, or till he sells me." (22)

Over the course of the brief exchange between the reunited family members, there is a subtle slippage in the object of Benjamin's discontent; from his anger with God to his rebellion from his earthly master, his antagonists in this passage are conflated. Though his mother's effort to reassure him seems an encouragement for her son to place his faith in the power of the divine, his response to it seems to elide the two. There is no higher power to which he can appeal for justice. Benjamin's rejection of his grandmother's attempt to soothe him and assuage his lack of faith is symbolic of a larger generational shift within the black abolitionist community, away from the religious-based pacifist abolitionism of William Lloyd Garrison and the Quakers to the more radical insurgency of the Hicksites, Nat Turner, and John Brown. Douglass's second narrative, following his break from Garrison evidenced by his focus on his physical confrontation with his overseer Covey, ultimately reinforces the authority and fundamental principles of liberal freedom premised upon the righteous ethics of liberation seeded by Western Enlightenment. Benjamin's manhood, and thus his freedom, in juxtaposition, are premised upon the foreclosures of that kind of freedom for fugitive slaves. Tropes of dispossession rather than belonging color both

Benjamin's escape from slavery and the victory of his self-won freedom. Following a series of trials, being chained and left for the vermin to feed on in jail, sold south to New Orleans, escaping to Baltimore, discovered by his master's neighbor and given safe passage to New York, Benjamin does finally find his freedom. In so doing, however, he also severs his connection to his family, knowing his mother would stay in the South until all her relations were freed. After a brief encounter with his brother Philip in which Benjamin relays to him the details of his escape, none of his family ever sees or hears of him again.

The chapter ends with an ominous statement. After describing how her grandmother used the \$800 she had saved to buy Benjamin's freedom to purchase that of her only remaining son Philip, the narrator writes, "The happy mother and son sat together by the old hearthstone that night, telling how proud they were of each other, and how they would prove to the world that they could take care of themselves, as they had long taken care of others. We all concluded by saying, 'He that is willing to be a slave, let him be a slave'" (26).

This statement concludes the section of the narrative preceding the portion of it dedicated to telling the reader of the various perversions to which slavery subjected captive women. Benjamin's story provides a stark counterpoint to that which Jacobs is about to tell, not only in the ways it demonstrates the gendered differences of the forms of violence men and women endured under slavery; perhaps more important, while Benjamin's story concludes with an air of redemption, Jacobs's ultimately does

not. It is particularly interesting that the final line is not attributed to a single speaker; Jacobs writes “We all concluded by saying ...” implying that the common sense among her family members was that the freedom of the slave, be it secured by bill of sale or larceny, was a matter of personal will.

The tribute to self-determination we see at the conclusion of Benjamin’s story later comes unraveled through the remainder of Jacobs’s narrative. In its place is the dream of freedom born out of her loophole of retreat. The loophole was a double signifier, as Smith writes, a place of both withdrawal and confinement (29), and as such severely disoriented Jacobs’s orientation to her primary goal of self-preservation. With a gimlet leftover from her uncle Philip’s construction of the concealed space in the roof of her grandmother’s shed, Linda gouged out a series of tiny holes in the wood planks and then used the pointy tool to carve out a peephole large enough to observe the comings and goings of the world below and discreet enough to remain imperceptible to passersby. From this almost surreal and precarious vantage point, being captive became both emancipatory and self-negating because, though being visible could mean bondage, being blinded would be worse. The course of time itself slowed inside her loophole, succumbing to the fate of the stifling air, disorienting her in every sense of the word. Her relationship to her children, their father, her master, her family, and network of nameless friends all continue from this maligned position, but in new form, allowing the possibility of a reformation of her critique of slavery to take hold. While feelings of disorientation are often linked with despair and nihilism, a loss of a moral grounding that accompanies modern man’s reaction to the death of God in the

Western philosophical tradition, Jacobs's sense of disorientation is the material consequence of her leaving the scenes of her physical subjection to a mortal master.

Disorientation yields to restlessness in chapter twenty-three, "Still in Prison." When the narrator describes herself as "restless for want of air" (183), we might imagine the sequestered slave girl as a restless ghost struggling to maintain the silent secrecy of her concealment not only in service of her own self-preservation, but so too for the safety of her children, friends, and family, whose lives would be placed in even greater peril should her presence have been discovered. Restlessness, like disorientation, has some similarly negative connotations in the Western philosophical tradition, the resolution of which often is meant to lead one out of the darkness of ontological despair and into the light of modern self-determination.

In Julia Stern's reading of the narrative, she describes Jacobs's loophole of retreat as a space "suspended . . . between the social death of slavery and the living burial of her hiding place" (66). Though it is not a central piece of her argument, Stern's suggestion here that the loophole itself represents the conditions of someone living in suspended animation has stark implications, not only for our readings of Jacobs's narrative, but for all who identify with the ideas of freedom the text represents. Suspension implies a state of physical and even phenomenological stasis. Though stuck in a prison of her own and her family's making, for Jacobs her loophole of retreat is a place of both joy and sadness, a place of cramped limbs, discomforts, and trap doors. The restlessness she finds there is the kind of animation that yields not

only the conditions for her self-emancipation, but a way to transform the sense of freedom for which she struggled.

Notwithstanding the negative connotations of disorientation and restlessness in both Western religious and philosophical discourses, in Jacobs's loophole of retreat they become something of a refuge. The physical description of the loophole itself reads very much like a return to the middle passage. The cellular form of her forebears' arrival in this land, conveyed across the sea as cargo, the loophole is reminiscent of the hull of a ship—except that what it transports is not human cargo, but a stowaway. The architectural transformation of the middle passage as refuge in Jacobs's narrative has both material and metaphorical implications for the kinds of freedom Jacobs's abolitionism will seed. Edward Said's description of the "Intellectual Exile" describes well the kind of restlessness that does not seek resolution to the disorientation of political alienation. Said describes this figure as

the intellectual who because of exile cannot, or, more to the point, will not make the adjustment, preferring instead to remain outside the main-stream, unaccommodated, unco-opted, resistant ... while it is an actual condition, exile is also for my purposes a metaphorical condition ... Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others. You cannot go back to some earlier and perhaps more stable condition of being at home; and, alas, you can never fully arrive, be at one with your new home or situation. (52-53)

The loophole of retreat is, similar to the metaphorical condition of the exile, a metaphysical state with metaphysical consequences. Like the exile, the narrator of *Incidents* could not so easily return to her “home” without being further punished, cast out of her place with her family by being either raped, killed, or sold.

For seven years Linda’s children grow up without their mother. Her grandmother’s health is chronically afflicted by the stress of keeping the presence of their mother a secret from her master. While the metaphorical power of the loophole returns with each imposition Jacobs’s desire for freedom places upon those who remain captive, the impositions to which the title of this dissertation refer elude to the intersecting series of tensions within Jacobs’s abolitionism between a fugitive slave mother’s desires for freedom and the costs of their realization. We might then read the kind of freedom Jacobs seeks through the abolition of slavery as one in which the human costs freedom incurs are not disregarded as casualties, but are no longer presumed as criminal from the start—thus replacing possessive investments in slavery’s domestic order with the protocols of their abolition.

Hidden from view, in this tight dark space of uncertain unfreedom, Jacobs’s wonderings about the presence of justice or mercy in a world of sin and suffering echo the woeful plea of religious angst, of one stuck in the doubt before the dawn of religious awakening. Disoriented and restless, Jacobs certainly seemed to borrow from biblical tropes and narratives of religious confession—though, I would argue, her struggle cannot be sufficiently explained as a story of personal conversion. What

is transformed by her emancipatory act of escape by means of loopholes is her phenomenological orientation to the meaning of freedom. Though the loophole is no catalyst for personal conversion in itself, its provisions of proximity to and critical distance from the plantation became the condition of possibility for her relationship to freedom to transform from one rooted in the private fear surrounding self-preservation into a political desire—animated by her brother’s escape and his communications with her about his own work as an abolitionist.

In its most metaphysical sense, the loophole of retreat was an act of self-reclamation, a negation of the right of humans to claim other humans as their own property. The gendered element of this act, however, also reveals that the prevalence of the practice was not limited to slaves, but extended to women, and waged workers as well. In Karen Sánchez-Eppler’s essay on the intersecting rhetorics of feminism and abolition in the antebellum U.S., she writes that “the essential dilemma of both feminist and abolitionist projects [is that] the recognition of ownership of one’s own body as essential to claiming personhood is matched by the fear of being imprisoned, silenced, deprived of personhood by that same body” (31). Just as contemporary rape culture has had a tendency to blame the victims of sexual violence for inviting harm upon themselves, white women, waged workers, and enslaved people were punished and held culpable for the threats, temptations, or transgressions their mere existence imposed upon the rights-bearers of the nation.

Sánchez-Eppler's essay centers the archive of political debates on the sexual rights of women in the nineteenth century. Though discussions of such a nature were generally restricted to private spaces, the slave narrative was a common place for vetting competing readings of the issues women's rights brought to bear for antislavery debates. Such was the case in the 1849 narrative Sánchez-Eppler discusses by Caroline Healey Dall entitled "Amy." This was a story about an ambiguously free and willing alibi to the preservation of the perversion of slavery's domestic order, a white Southern woman named Edith, and her decision to avail her slave and half-sister Amy of the kinds of freedoms Edith herself enjoyed. Sánchez-Eppler writes,

The problem of Amy's ancestry is not, despite prevailing cultural expectations, that as the child of lawless sexuality she has inherited lascivious desires but rather that as the child of sexual exploitation she has inherited the role of being exploited. Her body displays not only a history of past miscegenation but also a promise of future mixing ... as Charles keeps pressing Edith to procure Amy for him, she comes to see her slave's sexual modesty as a threat to her own delicacy. (41)

The story Dall tells illustrates to antebellum and contemporary readers alike that what we find at the intersection of the legal and psychological identity crises of a feminist abolitionism are the impositions of women, enslaved women in particular, on theories of liberation broadly conceived in their attempts at self-possession. In her essay, Sánchez-Eppler quotes Lucy Stone who, in a letter to Susan B. Anthony in 1839, asks, "Has woman a right to herself? It is very little to me to have the right to vote, to

own property etc., if I may not keep my body, and its uses, in my absolute right. Not one wife in a thousand can do that now” (33).

While the idea that freedom comes at a cost to current rights-bearers would not have been news to activists in 1861, *Incidents* introduced the notion to both Jacobs’s early women’s rights and antislavery allies that, for enslaved women, emancipatory acts are impositions; and impositions, though immobilizing at times, can also become portals of self-reclamation—sites of elision, obfuscation, subversion, or redirection through which to challenge the conventional tropes and trajectories of personal self-determination as an act of political solidarity.

By the time Jacobs wrote her narrative, abolition had become something of a rite of passage for black, formerly enslaved fugitives. As Walker’s Appeal, Douglass’s break from Garrison, and Nat Turner’s confession attest, abolition for fugitives was not only an ideological agenda; it was a political struggle to transform the meaning of freedom on a global scale. In effect, whose testament would frame which vision of abolitionist freedom mattered enough to split antislavery support into a series of competing factions. Divisions fell along lines of race, gender, class, and regional differences. Immediate abolitionists opposed the moderation of those fighting for the social reform of the institution. Proponents of armed insurrection were opposed by pacifists and their strategy to win their adversaries over by appealing to their hearts and minds. The terms of the struggle were as contentious as its aims; *Incidents* arrived on the eve of the Civil War as a most unconventional, counter-intuitive

articulation of abolition, one that ultimately implied self-imposed captivity was the answer to the problem of slavery.

The present project is one which reads Jacobs—the publication of *Incidents*, as well as her subsequent writings from the front lines of the Civil War—as a praxis of abolition all its own. The myriad literal and analogical linkages she raises between the wrong of slavery and the context of her own captivity break the silence surrounding the sexual violence of slavery, along its way to building a case against the patriarchal order of domestic violence that gave slavery such global moral legitimacy. When we take up Jacobs’s work, her public impositions, the sight-lines of her loopholes, her hiding places within the domestic sphere, we cannot help but attend to her contribution as the embodiment of a praxis: a politics of struggle for liberation that is, as Yellin notes, not only recurrent but ubiquitous (xxvii).

It is not clear from Jacobs’s narrative whether domestic tranquility is the aim of her dream of emancipation. What we know for sure is that Jacobs authors a narrative that exposes the injustice of the sexual politics of slavery in a way that suggests she seeks more than personal redemption for her sexual transgression. The metaphor of liberation her narrative represents is one of escape from the evil of slavery not only in the form of bondage but also in the threat of rape. There is great metaphorical power exuded through the retelling of her story as public justification for the moral authority of abolition, however the material consequences of Jacobs’s literal and literary

transgressions, exploiting the loopholes of slavery's domestic order by living inside them, were more than metaphorical acts.

Exposing the actual fissures in the discursive and architectural framework of respectability within antislavery society rendered Jacobs herself vulnerable to the exclusion and judgment of her political allies. Jean Fagan Yellin writes that Jacobs's narrative "embodies a social analysis asserting that the denial of domestic and familial values by chattel slavery is a social justice issue that its female readers should address in a public arena ... *Incidents* is an attempt to move women to political action" (Yellin, xxxii). Situated as she was, in the disposable army of domestics created and reserved for the will of others, Jacobs's testimony of the lives of enslaved women is novel precisely because it posed a viable threat to the standards of antebellum domesticity by seeking to arouse an interracial network of domestics against a common enemy.

CHAPTER TWO

A Philosophy of Wrong: Jacobs's Disorientation of Mastery and Concubinage

“When women are in charge of government, the state is in danger...”
Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, was published in 1861 on the eve of the American Civil War. It was one of the last slave narratives to detail the dehumanizing effects of chattel slavery before the signing of the Thirteenth Amendment. The present chapter returns to *Incidents* as a distinctly gendered, historically situated perspective on the injustice of the antebellum master/slave relation and the reasons fugitives sought its abolition. Speaking in broad strokes on the gendered divisions of agency under slavery, Sabine Brock writes “the black woman's predicament has been different ... in that there was respectively, hardly any way out for her. Flight (or marrying a rich man) was rarely considered an option; to stay and survive was, in most cases, the moral and political imperative” (79-80). The picture of slavery *Incidents* seems to paint indicates that the dialectical nature of the slave girl's racial and gendered domination, the negation of her humanity through the negation of her sexual autonomy, was carefully constructed and scrupulously maintained to insure the quality of goods she produced.

As Claudia Tate writes, “Freedom in *Incidents* is less a region—North—than a place that sustains an opportunity for Jacobs to grant herself the authority of personal inviolability ... the text characterizes freedom not so much as a political condition as

the domestic desire for the nurturance of free black children”(27). Jacobs’s critique of slavery implicates the country as a whole in the domestic violence of this particular master/slave relation. The notion that freedom itself is a uniquely gendered possession from which women across lines of racial difference were barred, is central to the critique of plantation political life *Incidents* introduces. In *Incidents* emancipation requires a retreat from modern freedom’s possessive investments in masculinity, a loophole in the political redemptive arch of escape from South to North, the archetypical ascent from chattel to man, the iconic conversion from captive to compatriot.

To live as an enslaved woman, within the loopholes of domestic virtue that permitted slave masters to rape and kill with impunity, required an understanding of abolition that exceeded the victory of Constitutional emancipation over the life of the institution. It required a open interrogation of the social relations the domestic institution authorized. Jacobs’s attention to the sexual politics of the plantation anticipated the kinds of violence emancipation permitted in the after-life of slavery, the sanction of rights bearers to impose their will on black bodies largely unimpeded throughout the era of Reconstruction and into the twentieth century. From the legal loophole of the Thirteenth Amendment to the social disenfranchisements of freed black people, Jacobs’s testament attests to the hidden forms of domestic violence slavery concealed. It was a history rooted in a master/slave relation that could not be overcome by a single act of rebellion or redeemed by personal narratives of escape, but one which would require ongoing disorientations of the domestic order slavery

built, public forums to account for the various forms of domestic violence the institution sanctioned, and confessions that confirmed how precarious the proverbial foundations of the master's house were. For the rough grounds upon which they were built were made not of rock, but sand.

The biblical analogy to mastery I reference here is one meant to gesture as much to flawed notions of racial dynasty implicit within the rape culture of the plantation South as to the flawed ideology of its conflation of property ownership and personhood. The experience of slavery *Incidents* laid bare, the dispossessions of sexual autonomy and motherhood, exposed both the impositions of the matrilineal status of slaves on the future of black kinship and the impositions of patriarchal exploitations of that status on Southern families in general. The domestic sphere was a site of dispossession for white and black women alike and as such provided a powerful place from which to stage a practice of resistance, not only against slave owners themselves, but against the patriarchy of the slave system as a whole. Jennifer Fleischner's work on antislavery literature reminds us that,

However necessary 'family' was for the psychological and physical wellbeing of slave narrators as children... 'family' was [also] a common metaphor of master-slave relations... it served as a justification for slavery. Calling the plantation household a 'family' served rhetorically to sentimentalize and naturalize slavery as a structure of relations based on domination and dependence. (31)

The internal contradictions of plantation family values recurrent throughout *Incidents* extended into the paternalism of antislavery discourse as well. As Shirley J. Yee writes in her work on the exclusion of black women abolitionists from antislavery societies, “The exclusion of black women from the New York society... did not stop the members from proclaiming a ‘sisterhood’ between themselves and slave women. Their first annual report in 1836 emphasized the bonds of womanhood” (92).

Donald B. Gibson writes that though the revolutionary ideology did result in the manumission of many blacks in the North, its liberal paradigms of natural rights were overshadowed in the South by a culture of paternalism and patriarchy:

In opposition to natural rights doctrine, slaveholding ideology portrayed slavery as deriving its character not from philosophical principle but from institutional mandate, its relation to family. Slavery was defined as an extension of the traditional patriarchal family. The slave occupied a station within the family hierarchy of the ‘domestic’ institution, not entirely unlike that customarily belonging to servants or apprentices. Not only did such an analogy allow one to subject the relationships between slaves and others to order and understanding (as imaging God as father leads to an order and understanding--of sorts--of the universe), it also justified imagining slaves as subservient, as children who, as such, needed paternal control, direction and support. (158)

Discursive apologies for the perversions of the plantation family underwrite progressive politics far beyond the historical time of slavery and well into the twentieth century such that the “degradations of slavery” inscribe themselves in the discourse of racial difference and blackness becomes the sign of resignation to the constraints of structural domination. The feminist French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir invokes the historical conditions of slavery in her discussion of modern freedom in the *Ethics of Ambiguity* (1948) as examples of those whose civic maturity suffered a kind of arrested development attributable to confluences of his class and racial inferiority:

There are beings whose life slips by in an infantile world because, having been kept in a state of servitude and ignorance, they have no means of breaking the ceiling which is stretched over their heads. Like a child, they can exercise their freedom, but only within the universe which has been set up before them, without them. This is the case, for example, of slaves who have not raised themselves to the consciousness of their slavery. The southern planters were not altogether in the wrong in considering the negroes who docilely submitted to their paternalism as "grown-up children." This is also the situation of women in many civilizations... they adopt without discussion the opinions and values recognized by their husband or their lover, and that allows them to develop childish qualities which are forbidden to adults because they are based on a feeling of irresponsibility... it is the absence of the serious... the difference which distinguishes them from an actual child the child's situation is imposed upon him, whereas the woman (I mean the western

woman of today) chooses it or at least consents to it. Ignorance and error are facts as inescapable as prison walls. The negro slave of the eighteenth century, the Mohammedan woman enclosed in a harem have no instrument, be it in thought or by astonishment or anger, which permits them to attack the civilization which oppresses them. Their behavior is defined and can be judged only within this given situation, and it is possible that in this situation, limited like every human situation, they realize a perfect assertion of their freedom (37-38).

Analogies for the domination of slave masters and the dependence of the enslaved sedimented within differences of race, class and gender abound in discourses of modern liberation. They borrow from a vast range of cultural, religious and political justifications for the superiority of masters and the inescapable inferiority of those they subordinated. The benchmark of fugitive claims to freedom however were largely framed as claims to the right to modern liberal subjectivity. In antislavery discourse and slave narrative in particular personal struggles for the sovereignty of self-determination are narrated through the language of the enlightenment and its tropes of individual overcoming the constraints of natural inferiority. As Kimberly Drake writes,

Douglass and Jacobs wrote their autobiographies only after they had experienced the dominant culture's ideologies about the self, ideologies which... stress a norm for development... both attempt to depict models of selfhood which will be acceptable to white readers. Yet these writers also

wish to remain true to their experiences under slavery, which were certainly not "normal" ... They are forced by mainstream culture into a "feminine" position of objectification, of submission to the white "father." Yet their attempts to build identities by acquiring literacy and entering patriarchal society, attempts to free themselves, in other words, are more in line with male-centered models of development ... which foreground self-sufficiency and independence ... because these models insist that the self must overcome the dependency on the past (or the mother), represented in this case by slavery, and become autonomous and self-sufficient—masculine—they threaten to cause Douglass and Jacobs a different kind of damage: the loss of their communities, their culture, and their history. (94)

The classic formulation of freedom illustrated by the struggle for self-determination in Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* is often cited in discussions of Frederick Douglass's narrative and in particular his physical confrontation with his overseer Covey. Unlike many of those that came before it, in Hegel's particular formulation the master/slave relation is not one which values expressions of piety, submission, or obedience, but one in which the act of risking one's life for the potential to win the recognition of the other as master is the only aim. Failure to succeed is not rewarded with honor or sainthood but servitude.

Following the Civil War American Hegelians read this often referenced section of the *Phenomenology* as ideological justification for the domestic order of slavery and interpreted the oppressive conditions of its social relations as essentially consensual

since one party chooses bondage over death (Zamir 1995). This kind of apology for the master/slave relations of the antebellum South remained largely uncontested by philosophers and historians throughout the first half of the twentieth century. By the time the rise of the Civil Rights, Black Arts, black feminist and Black Power movements began to inspire students of color and their allies to organize for the institutionalization of ethnic studies departments in high schools and universities in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the history of American slavery was displacing histories of happy docile slaves with evidence of slave resistance and rebellion. Harriet Jacobs's narrative was written, in part, as a refutation of this perception. The sentimental form of the narrative aided her depictions of the misery of enslaved life and the proximity to death that kept many from rebelling against the conditions of their captivity. Kojève's popular reading of Hegel had begun to influence political theorists' interpretations of the master/slave allegory and shifted ideological justifications of white supremacy embedded within it to critiques of its virtues. From his interpretation domination was merely the beginning of a dialectical process of emancipation through labor (Kojève 1969).

The student struggle for ethnic studies carried with its incorporation of unsanctioned activism to the university reformations of protocols of academic knowledge formation that challenged the disciplinary hierarchy of intellectual mastery itself. Demands for interdisciplinary approaches to the study of histories of racial domination and expressions of their social, cultural and political resistance challenged not only the content of common sense understandings of slavery, but with the incorporation of

activist scholars, so too the role of the university as a space for generating such forms of historical and cultural understanding. One of the framing discourses of the student struggle for black studies borrowed from a discourse of black nationalism which originated in radical abolitionism. Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton's *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* define the work of "self-mastery" as racial solidarity:

The concept of Black Power rests on a fundamental premise: Before a group can enter the open society, it must first close ranks. By this we mean that group solidarity is necessary before a group can operate effectively from a bargaining position of strength in a pluralistic society ... The point is obvious: Black people must lead and run their own organizations. Only black people can convey the revolutionary idea—and it is a revolutionary idea—that black people are able to do things themselves. Only they can help create in the community an aroused and continuing black consciousness that will provide the basis for political strength . . . Black Power recognizes—it must recognize—the ethnic basis of American politics as well as the power-oriented nature of American politics as well as the power-oriented nature of American politics. Black Power therefore calls for black people to consolidate behind their own, so that they can bargain from a position of strength . . . The ultimate values and goals are not domination or exploitation of other groups, but rather an effective share in the total power of the society. (Rojas 5)

Separatist rhetorics and movements for black solidarity helped to found the field of black studies and shaped the course of its discursive and epistemic retreat from the notions of disciplinary mastery that dominated academic spaces of knowledge production. By the 1990s the institutionalization of the field had made it intellectually and structurally vulnerable to an ethos of neoliberalism, a depoliticized multiculturalism which tended to conceal important historical differences of ethnic struggles and racial formation in favor of universalizing the struggles of marginalized people under the rubrics which celebrated the resilience of the human will to freedom.

In order to overcome the centuries of doubt the history of slavery imposed upon the merit of black intellectual tradition scholar-activists had to confront not only the degraded conditions of their intellectual production, but so too the possessive individualism of the protocols of knowledge production they inhabited. In their introduction to a collection of essays on the theory and practice of African American Studies *Not Only the Master's Tools*, Jane Anna and Lewis R. Gordon invoke the statement made famous by the black feminist critique of Audre Lorde in reaction to the racism and classism she faced from her white feminists allies. The Gordons implicitly extend Lorde's critique of the conscription of white feminists by the pervasive forces of their civil entitlements to what they term the "epistemological colonialization" of black cultural and intellectual production. The concern for African American Studies their introduction articulates as the field's guiding purpose is one with "the express purpose of *decolonizing the minds of people, especially black people*" (xi, emphasis is their own). Echoing the nationalist sentiments of its founding

moments, the Gordons caution that developing disciplinary independence from theoretical frameworks uncritical of Western paradigms of modern reason is the solution to the problem of epistemological colonialization.

Leslie W. Lewis cites the work of Melvin Dixon and his essay, “Swinging Swords: the Literary Legacy of Slavery,” to suggest that it is this sense of solidarity that is the overcoming of the master/slave relation. Rather than subscribe to modern notions of personal sovereignty as an individual's relationship to themselves or their condition, Lewis uses Dixon's contextualization of black liberation theology to explain the significance of black liberation as the work of a collective consciousness. She writes:

Dixon sums up his own argument by emphasizing that ‘slaves were not converting themselves to God, but were converting themselves to each other’ ... In Black experience, he says, the moment of self-discovery is ‘the beginning of a collective consciousness and group identity,’ which, to return to Hegelian terms, suggests that the self-consciousness of the bondsman as such is as much tied to the collective consciousness of the group as to a confrontation with the master ... A rebellious or resistant attitude toward slavery ... is one demonstration of this consciousness; escaping from slavery is another ... this collective consciousness also guarantees the dialectical engine will continue to move consciousness toward freedom. (16-17)

For Lewis the metric of modern liberal subjectivity Hegel gives allegorical force to in the form of the master/slave relation is animated by a redefinition of selfhood

premised within the context of slavery, upon a shared identity of collective subjection. Confrontation in the form of disobedience, physical overcoming and escape all could be met with fatal consequences for the slave and/or their loved ones. In Harriet Jacobs's narrative however, the collectivity that makes her escape and her seven years in hiding possible are only a piece of the praxis of reclamation she undergoes overcome the constraints of her condition. To have entered the loophole of retreat a slave girl and emerge a politicized fugitive Jacobs's narrator required not only a collective consciousness but so too an ethical obligation to it born out of a conversion from a prerogative of self-preservation to one of collective emancipation.

While Lewis attributes this difference in Jacobs's narrative to the taboo of her secreted relationship of sexual entanglement with Mr. Sands, the loophole itself seems to be the place through which the social relations the domestic order of slavery sanctioned get disoriented. Metaphorically speaking, the solutions to "mastery" that emerge out of the black radical tradition reason that "dismantling the master's house is a misguided project" (Gordon, ix). Modern-day fugitives ought to build houses of their own. Though this line of thinking certainly reflects the original nationalist sentiments of black cultural and intellectual production I would propose that the reason dismantling the master's house is a misguided project is not because it would be epistemically colonizing to do so. Embedded within the premises of such a proposal is the presumption that we are not all already trapped inside. As Jacobs's work suggests, there is no exit from the degradation of slavery and since the master's

house is already falling, the solution to the independence we seek just might be to collectively hasten its collapse from within.¹¹

As Martha J. Cutter writes in a 1996 essay on *Incidents*, “The problem Jacobs faces in her narrative, then, is how to use language as a way of achieving liberation, when language itself is a large part of her oppression. To speak in the ‘master’s’ language is to remain trapped within a system of discourse which denies her subjectivity”(209). Rethinking master/slave relations through the anamorphic vantage point of Jacobs’s phenomenology of retreat reframes debates on the meaning of modern freedom, its ethical foundations and formulations for justice as the raw material through which reasons for abolition become not only morally superior to slavery, but historically inevitable. Though Jacobs rarely, if ever, takes on the giants of Western political philosophy directly, the competing notions of rights, will and justice that riddle her text with questions of autonomy that face enslaved women engage her readers in generative dialogue about the limitations of liberal democratic politics and the possibilities for other kinds of freedom that exist within it.

Disorientations of Seriousness

¹¹ The dynasty of slavery’s protocols of domination literally seeded their own demise through the rape of enslaved women Jacobs saw and exploited this fact knowing it to lead to the inevitable outcome that either all the slaves would eventually become masters or-- more likely-- all masters slaves.

Jacobs's phenomenology of retreat began not with the loophole, but with the series of incidents that disoriented Linda's relationship to the domestic order of slavery's domination in the period of childhood and young adulthood that led her to it. Until the age of six Harriet Jacobs lived a happy and comfortable life with her mother, father, and brother. Her father was a skilled laborer who supported himself. His mistress allowed him to "manage his own affairs" in exchange for payment of \$200 a year. It was Jacobs's mother's death that brought the little girl into awareness of the precarity of her legal status. "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" (1). Though both her father and eventually her grandmother tried repeatedly to buy the children's freedom, neither Linda nor her brother were ever emancipated by members of their family. Linda's mother's death was followed by the death of her mother's mistress, an older woman who had taught the young Linda to read and write. Rather than free Linda in her will as the old woman had promised Jacobs's dying mother, the young girl was bequeathed to another child, one younger than herself, and sent to live with her on a plantation owned by a man known in the narrative as Dr. Flint.

From the very beginning of her narrative Jacobs presents herself as someone who had a sense security, family, and freedom, as well as a sense that each could be taken away at any moment. In chapter seven of *Incidents*, entitled "The Lover," Jacobs plaintively asks her reader, "WHY does the slave ever love," (37)? Her question evokes the romantic longings of any ingénue from the pages of Jane Austen or the

Brontës' novels. The correlation between love and freedom she draws out for her would-be abolitionist audience however is no accident. The co-arising of love and freedom Linda experiences as the unattainability of the free black lover is the analogical incarnation of that litany of entitlements which slavery foreclosed in the inescapability of degradation. She writes, "We had been well acquainted in childhood... I loved him with all the ardor of a young girl's first love. But when I reflected that I was a slave, and that the laws gave no sanction to the marriage as such, my heart sank within me. My lover wanted to buy me..." (37). This is the only instance of romantic love Jacobs confesses to, not only in her narrative, but throughout the whole corpus of her writings. Even if the romance of their courtship could have unfolded in such a way that the unsanctioned aspect of the love affair had been overcome, its outcome would never have been that domestic victory marriage found within the Victorian novel.

Even personal relationships of romantic love were underwritten by relationships of private property and domination. The privatizations of personal space slave codes regulated in the antebellum era in some ways prefigure eroding demarcations of personal and private spaces today. The pretenses of liberty that could come of Linda's lover's purchase of her freedom, limited as they may have been, were thwarted by her master's refusal to sell her. Her lover's presence in her life however temporarily disoriented Linda's sensibility of deference to Dr. Flint's authority over her. "Many and anxious were the thoughts I revolved in my mind. I was at a loss what to do... This love-dream had been my support through many trials; and I could not bear to run

the risk of having it suddenly dissipated” (38). In this passage we begin to see how closely knit are romantic love and political freedom in Jacobs’s formulation of abolition. An ethics of intimacy rather than one of ideology prefigures the orientation of her own “realizing sense” of freedom and radical kinds of political affiliations her narrative is meant to arouse in its readers.

When confronted by her master about her illicit feelings for the free black man, who curiously remains unnamed throughout the narrative, Linda responds saying, “Don't you suppose, sir, that a slave can have some preference about marrying? Do you suppose that all men are alike to her” (39)? The experience of romantic love grants Linda opportunity to articulate the difference between her desires and those of her master for her in a way that both renders her will independent of his and lays her claim to the privileges of womanhood her position as a slave had yet denied her. As the extension of her master’s will however, such forums of seduction are never innocent; and when her master strikes her for defending the virtue of her lover’s love for her, Linda responds with such a display of disdain for him that he threatens her both with imprisonment and death.

There was silence for some minutes. Perhaps he was deciding what should be my punishment; or, perhaps, he wanted to give me time to reflect on what I had said, and to whom I had said it. Finally, he asked, "Do you know what you have said?"

"Yes, sir; but your treatment drove me to it."

"Do you know that I have a right to do as I like with you,

—that I can kill you, if I please?"

"You have tried to kill me, and I wish you had;

but you have no right to do as you like with me."

"Silence!" he exclaimed, in a thundering voice.

"By heavens, girl, you forget yourself too far! Are you mad?"

If you are, I will soon bring you to your senses. (39-40)

The disjunctions of sensory knowledge and identity Dr. Flint's reprimand implies here remind us that even a slave's internal sensibility was not hers alone. His threats are both punitive and disciplinary attempts to control her sense of self and ensure his claim on her as his property. Jacobs responds with an appeal to a higher order of righteousness. "You have no right to do as you like with me" rejects not only her master as a potential lover, but so too the authority of the social system that entitles him to do with her as he wills. Dr. Flint, knowing perhaps that further injury to her body would only undermine his attempts to win her will to consent to his desires, instead opts to secure her obedience by threatening her future with her lover, swearing that should he see her lover "lurking about my premises, I will shoot him as soon as I would a dog" (39).

Dr. Flint's violent response to Linda's courtship with a free black man is a telling metaphor for the particularly gendered property relationship of slave masters to enslaved women, and by extension the domestic subordination of the slave family. It not only signals his claim to her biological body and labor, including but not limited to the children she can birth, but so too his right to ransom the lives of those she loves

in exchange for her obedience.¹² Though he cannot force her consent to him sexually, his control over her sexual orientation away from him and toward freedom, still remains squarely within his control. His punitive impositions on her desires for romantic love have direct implications for the possibilities of her political freedom as well as those of their potential children. Recalling the Hegelian allegory of self-determination Linda has the realizing sense to pursue her love-dream despite the threat of death until it is not her life that it would risk but the life of her lover.

The dispossessions of personhood and family Jacobs narrates in *Incidents* are not limited to her condition as an enslaved woman and eventual mother, but are the conditions of this class of enslaved people as a whole. As Gibson writes of Douglass, “The emphasis on home, present in the 1845 *Narrative*, is maximized in *Bondage and Freedom*... The family is described by absence, by negativity” (161). Sara Ahmed’s work in *Queer Phenomenology* bears perhaps surprising relevance for readings of Jacobs’s master/concubinage relation wherein one’s orientation to forbidden forms of intimacy contains the germ of one’s orientation to the conditions of possibility for freedom. Ahmed writes,

... Being in place, or having a place, involves the intimacy of cohabiting spaces with other things ... For Fanon, racism "stops" black bodies inhabiting space by extending through objects and others; the familiarity of "the white

¹² As Angela Davis writes, “Given the already terroristic texture of plantation life, it would be as potential victim of rape that slave woman would be most unguarded. Further, she might be most conveniently manipulable if the master contrived a ransom of sorts, forcing her to pay

world," as a world we know implicitly "disorients" black bodies such that they cease to know where to find things-- reduced as they are to things among things. Racism ensures that the black gaze returns to the black body which is not a loving return but rather follows the line of the hostile white gaze. The disorientation affected by racism diminishes capacities for action.

For Fanon, racism "interrupts" the corporeal schema. Or we could say that "the corporeal schema" is already racialized; in other words, race does not just interrupt such a schema but structures its mode of operation. The corporeal schema is of a "body at home." If the world is made white, then the body at home is one that can inhabit whiteness. (111)

The placelessness that results from Jacobs's domestic deviance from her master to her free black lover itself anticipates the disorientation that follows from her retreat to the loophole and the kinds of freedom the Constitutional end of slavery make possible; it is indeed a diminished capacity for action, but so too the abolition of the old social relation. Not unlike the contexts of sexual orientation Ahmed's discussion of phenomenology discuss, these are not instances of subordination that can be overcome by resistance under threat of death, but only abandoned. For two weeks following her confrontation with Dr. Flint the man refuses to speak to her. "He thought to mortify me, to make me feel that I had disgraced myself by receiving the honorable address of a respectable colored man, in preference to the base proposals of

with her body for food, diminished severity in treatment, the safety of her children, etc." (123).

a white man”(40). The consent that Linda’s master sought from her would paradoxically have signaled both her independence and his mastery over it. Irony is not strong enough a word to express the strangeness of that implicit desire for her freedom expressed through means of threats of violence and sexual domination. Without her consent his authority contradicted his own ideological justifications for his authority over her. His sovereignty required her endorsement and so long as his desire for her was met with dissatisfaction, his dominion over her was incomplete.

Deviance becomes a guiding principle as well as a mode of reorientation for Jacobs. Long after the loss of her love-dream and the birth of her children Linda shares her hopes of freedom with her reader saying, “My drooping hopes came to life again with the flowers. I was dreaming of freedom again; more for my children’s sake than my own. I planned and I planned. Obstacles hit against plans. There seemed no way to overcome them; and yet I hoped” (83). Her acts of practical and political refusal of the “master’s” plan for her, the house he constructs for her to enjoy the privileges of his affections and “make a lady of her” at a safe distance from both his wife and the other slaves, are expressions of her fugitivity, acts that foreclose the possibility of safety with the certainty of bondage.

Linda, you desire freedom for yourself and your children, and you can obtain it only through me. If you agree to what I am about to propose, you and they shall be free. There must be no communication of any kind between you and their father. I will procure a cottage, where you and the children can live together. Your labor shall be light, such as sewing for my family. Think what

is offered you, Linda—a home and freedom! Let the past be forgotten. If I have been harsh with you at times, your wilfulness drove me to it. You know I exact obedience from my own children, and I consider you as yet a child."

He paused for an answer, but I remained silent.

"Why don't you speak?" said he. "What more do you wait for?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Then you accept my offer?"

"No, sir."

His anger was ready to break loose; but he succeeded in curbing it, and replied, "You have answered without thought. But I must let you know there are two sides to my proposition; if you reject the bright side, you will be obliged to take the dark one. You must either accept my offer, or you and your children shall be sent to your young master's plantation, there to remain till your young mistress is married; and your children shall fare like the rest of the negro children. I give you a week to consider of it." (83-84)

Simply put, Jacobs's deviance positions her in hostile relationship to her master's domination of her. As she notes, her "master's offer was a snare and that if I entered it escape would be impossible." It is a punishable position precisely because it is one which fails to fall in line with the existing paradigms of power and domination she inhabits. The inescapability of degradation Jacobs mentions in the letter soliciting funds for reconstruction following the War are foreshadowed here. Linda's escape North would not protect her from his personal desire for his authorization of her

freedom, nor from the authority of the patriarchal power his desires represented. When he has occasion to experience her insubordination again he does not hesitate to strike her in her grandmother's house. Shortly thereafter she opts for exile over concubinage and is sent away to another plantation owned by one of her master's relatives to be "broke in." When her master fear her a flight risk he plotted to have her children sent to join her, "to fetter me to the spot" and "break us all in to abject submission." It is knowledge of this impending fate that, "nerved" her to "immediate action" (93-94).

In Jacobs's case, risking departure from her master's house was a practical dilemma of displacement and the placelessness of ongoing sense of retreat; a politics of self-imposed disorientation that takes refuge in the uncertainty of fugitivity itself. Rather than attempt to resolve the problem of subjection through domination of the other, Jacobs's narrator opts to absent herself from a struggle for recognition she knows cannot be won. She finds something akin to freedom not in her master's physical subordination to her will, but in a form of retreat that did not sever the ties to familial belonging that kept her dream of freedom alive. The perspective she gains in the loophole of retreat is not only the will to overcome the tyranny of her master then, but the realizing sense that her possessive investments in freedom were not about her or her children's safety alone, but would require the abolition of the whole social relation of mastery to slavery to make the kind of future she imagined for herself to be realized.

As an endorsement of self-determination that was explicitly oriented toward a collective struggle for liberation *Incidents* brought an attention to family and community to a narrative genre dominated by themes of independence espoused by formerly enslaved men. Expanding their moral critiques of the wrong of slavery to call attention to the material consequences of its paternalism for the black community as a whole Jacobs's narrative returns again and again to the significance of the black male figures in her life whose embodiment of self-possession guided her to refuse to succumb to the degradations of slavery.

My father, by his nature, as well as by the habit of transacting business as a skillful mechanic, had more of the feelings of a freeman than is common among slaves. My brother was a spirited boy; and being brought up under such influences, he early detested the name of master and mistress. One day, when his father and his mistress both happened to call him at the same time, he hesitated between the two; being perplexed to know which had the strongest claim upon his obedience. He finally concluded to go to his mistress. When my father reproved him for it, he said, "You both called me, and I didn't know which I ought to go to first."

"You are my child," replied our father, "and when I call you, you should come immediately, if you have to pass through fire and water." (9)

Competing orientations to family and by extension freedom converge in this passage. Though the loophole represents a retreat from masculine representations of

domination, Jacobs is clear that her solidarity and indebtedness to the struggles of black men for freedom are intimately tied to her own. In juxtaposition to the desire of her grandmother, Linda does not think buying her freedom and remaining on the plantation to maintain family ties is preferable to the uncertainty of leaving. As Daneen Wardrop notes in her article “I Stuck the Gimlet in and Waited for Evening,” it is perhaps fitting in that the gimlet was left behind by her uncle, as Jacobs’s work, both in her loophole of retreat and in her narrative, must build upon the work of the men whose contributions to abolition preceded her own (226). Her slave girl abolitionism is made possible by the leadership and examples of noncompliance set before her by her father, uncles, and brother; in their construction of the loophole itself, and stories of escape these men laid the foundation for her own journey toward freedom.

A politics of friendship

The second section of this chapter takes up Jacobs’s abolitionism as a political theory of emancipation as a philosophy of wrong. Read as a critique of the ethical orientation of modern liberal personhood to the right to own property, Jacobs’s work displaces the domestic order of Hegel’s philosophy of right with a fugitive slave’s politics of subordination. By fighting for family and working through an interracial network of community alliances Linda animates a route to freedom rooted in her interdependence with the domestic order of the institution rather through a declaration of her independence from it.

Liberal rights discourse traditionally orients itself around the illusive and often disembodied figure of the modern liberal subject. Though theoretically free of the particular marks of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or age, this Enlightenment figure is not without a host of significant attributes. First among these is the attribute of self-possession—a kind of personal sovereignty that simultaneously empowers the modern liberal subject to defend himself and his property while limiting his power to encroach upon the privacy of other similarly recognized persons.

A product of the Enlightenment, modern freedom was born out of the democratic desire to balance the unfettered interests of one's will, a capacity for self-determination, against the anxieties of its propensity for systemic dispossession. Freedom from the tyranny of the state became a popularly recognized economic as well as ethical virtue of the modern liberal subject, and a so-called just response to actual histories of the monarchic, colonial, and imperial dispossession of peoples' rights to personhood.

In Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* the modern liberal subject, the individual whose self-possession is evidenced in his right to defend himself and his property, emerges as the foundation, or grounding, for Hegel's formulation of an "Ethical Life." Hegel describes the double bind of modern liberal subjectivity as the cornerstone of modern ideas of freedom. One who is free in respect to his will is also necessarily bound with respect to his sense of duty to represent the moral virtues to which his social environment traditionally subscribes. In his 1821 textbook on rights Hegel writes, "In

the ethical community, it is easy to say what someone must do and what the duties are which he has to fulfill in order to be virtuous. He must simply do what is prescribed, expressly stated, and known to him within his situation. Rectitude is the universal quality which may be required of him, partly by right and partly by ethics” (193).

Rights then, by Hegel’s own account, are the coming together of an individual’s ethical sense of “the right”—a fettering of good feelings with the material consequences of a social order that reinforces the modern liberal subject’s political autonomy. In other words, the idea of “Ethical Life” that is the sui generis premise of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* presumes that the autonomy of the individual political subject and the universal emancipatory spirit of the modern state are mutually reinforcing and reciprocal—a deep and abiding relationship without remainders. The right to protect one’s choice to labor or own property is intimately linked to the ethical duty of heteronormative social reproduction in the form of the nuclear family unit; the sanctity of marriage is bound to the economic certainty that one will be able to pass what one accumulates on to one’s descendants. This social relation of the individual to the family, and family to property, theoretically culminates in the formation of a robust and productive civil society and a free and just state.

Civil society is the space beyond the domestic sphere wherein the promotion of individual interests intersects with the individual interests of all others who make up the social space of the public. The equanimity of civil society for Hegel is implicit in the self-interested drive of the individuals who make it up. “The selfish ... establishes

a system of all-round interdependence, so that the subsistence and welfare of the individual and his rightful existence are interwoven with, and grounded on, the substance, welfare, and rights of all” (221). This model of the liberal political order was inspired by the democratic fever that birthed the French Revolution and the rebellion from colonial rule on the American continent.

The symbiotic relation between the modern liberal subject, the family, the protection of private property, civil society, and the state then cohere around the ethically justifiable and economically sensible control of all those whose presence is deemed a threat to the good sense of liberal emancipatory desire. Part of the problem with Hegel’s approach to ethical life is that it organizes itself around more of a metaphorical rendering of a desire for freedom based upon existential anxieties about the dominion of man over creation rather than basing itself on the manifestly less abstract and verifiably abject reality of everyday people and the dominion over the domestic order that justifies the dispossession the rights of those persons deemed a threat to the law.

As figural aspiration rather than historical phenomenon, the modern liberal subject presupposes that everyday people have the right to defend themselves, their bodies, the labor their bodies produce, and the communities they labor to protect from the tyranny of the state. Personhood was an impossible possession for enslaved populations, but it was also an unattainable politically recognized identity for white

women, white laborers, and recent immigrants; the vast population of people lived as property-person hybrid subjects.

In direct counter-distinction to both the horror/sentimentality binary of masculinist slave narratives and the benevolent liberal humanist representations of the slave girls' condition espoused by antislavery supporters such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Jacobs's *Incidents* presents the dispossessions of the fugitive family as the ethical foundation for an abolitionist, and as yet unrealized, dream of freedom. To invoke a term first used by DuBois and later taken up by Angela Davis, we might imagine this alternative ethical orientation to family, property, and rights as a kind of Abolition Democracy—an ethical order that, rather than seeking the end of slavery in name alone, was based upon a praxis of fugitive acts, disorienting and upending the kinds of desire for emancipation that justified the perversions of the domestic order that slavery produced. Instead of basing a political order on the ethical integrity of an anomalous figural abstraction, Jacobs suggests we base our ethics on the testimonies of struggle articulated by the actual casualties of this idealistic liberal order—on fugitive subjects such as herself. While other slave narratives typically champion the virtues of personal freedom as the right to own and exchange property, *Incidents* mines the desires of those subjects still in bondage, holding the impositions of their dispossession as a given.

Susan Buck-Morss theorizes in her essay “Hegel and Haiti” that it was this collision of actual and allegorical forms of captivity that might have led Hegel to hang a theory

of liberation on an analogical figuration of the emancipation of the slave. In counter-distinction to Hegel's winner-take-all idea of history however, Buck-Morss writes in the conclusion to her essay,

If the historical facts about freedom can be ripped out of the narratives told by the victors and salvaged for our own time, then the project of universal freedom does not need to be discarded but, rather, redeemed and reconstituted on a different basis. Hegel's moment of clarity of thought would need to be juxtaposed to that of others at the time: Toussaint-Louverture, Wordsworth, the Abbe Gregoire, even Dessalines. For all his brutality and revenge against whites, Dessalines saw the realities of European racism most clearly. (75)¹³

Whether you are persuaded by the historical connections Buck-Morss draws between Hegel and the Haitian rebellion earlier in her essay or not, her work invites her reader to revise, reanimate, and if necessary even disavow Hegel's philosophical aversion to conditions of captivity and its overcoming as chiefly a matter of will. The critique of Hegel's figuration of liberalism Buck-Morss gestures to troubles our cultural attachments to the ideal of liberation as premised upon an analogy of enslavement by reminding us that it is an abstract ideal with material and historical consequences.

"Does it not sound incredible," writes Amelia Chesson, daughter of English abolitionist George Thompson, in an 1862 review of *Incidents*, "that a young woman

in whom domestic and social qualities were strongly developed, and whose frame was already enfeebled by sorrow and hard treatment should patiently dwell in this stifling den, never breathing the open air, and communicating only with two or three relatives who were in the secret of her retreat for seven long years?" (*Papers* 367). Chesson's reading drew an analysis of slavery implicit in *Incidents* that the domestic sphere was the domain of the slavocrats. As such the perversions of the domestic order, a realm in which women and slaves were linked by their collective exclusion through the law from the rights of property ownership that protected the power of slave owners, became the point of departure for the formation of an abolitionist critique of the wrong of slavery.

Chesson was a close friend of Jacobs's and among the first female reviewers of Jacobs's narrative immediately following its publication in England. Chesson and her husband abolitionist Frederick Chesson, had arranged for the publishing of Jacobs's narrative under the title "The Deeper Wrong." As a woman and an abolitionist, Chesson's review of Jacobs's work was less concerned with the personal moral failings of Jacobs's means of escape than it was with the problem of freedom Jacobs's narrative raised. Chesson's reading emphasized the implications of *Incidents's* immanent critique of the implicit ironies of American patriarchy.

¹³ To take her analysis a step further, I would add that we may in fact want to juxtapose their visions of universal freedom with those of the black revolutionaries' wives and mistresses.)

Chesson's review, titled "Domestic Slave-Life in the Southern States," shifts focus from questions surrounding the ethics of Jacobs's actions to those individuals and industries Chesson holds responsible for orchestrating the conditions of Jacobs's relationship to both captivity and freedom. "Readers have ... not only the incidents of a slave woman's life brought vividly before them, but have the opportunity to judge of what materials are made the minds of those whom 'a nation of gentlemen' sell and chain like oxen" (*Papers* 367). The latent irony in U.S. liberalism Chesson's reading of *Incidents* explodes is what she sees as a distinctly American tendency to corroborate and rationalize its entitlement to slave ownership as part and parcel of the paternalism of its preservation of personal freedoms.¹⁴

There is a modern sentimental attachment to gentility and civility in liberal subjectivity that is of course not limited to American sentimentality. It is a sentimental ideological perspective of freedom rooted in the values of the Enlightenment, a way of seeing the self as sovereign, which maintained an idea of selfhood that was premised upon one's dominion over their immediate surroundings. The slave owner's relation to the land, his wife, his slaves, and all they produced placed an implicit claim over the creative force and future of life itself. Civility served as alibi for what Georg Lukács would later refer to as "the bourgeois legends

¹⁴ In the footnotes of Chesson's review, Jean Fagan Yellin, Jacobs's biographer and editor of the *Jacobs Family Papers* in which the review can be found, notes that the reviewer's ironic reference to the phrase "a nation of gentlemen" dated back to 1822, when it was used unironically by George IV upon his return from a visit to Scotland. Its use as a dig against Americans and their views of themselves reads not only as an ironic turn of phrase in this passage, but as a curious moment of insight into what Chesson later refers to as "but one of the 'mounts of anguish' which slavery is perpetually piling up before High Heaven" (369).

of the ‘creativity’ of the exponents of the capitalist age” (98). The objectification of social relations in the form of property became part of the ideological justification for the appropriation of people as objects. The rights bearers came to see their sovereignty as a righteous dominion. It was a phenomenological substitution of possession for individual freedom, which Gillian Brown describes in her work

Domestic Individualism as

the integral relation between human rights and human possessions ... the mass production of sentimental accessories [that] signifies the widening sphere of democracy ... this liberal scenario, of course, forms a standard of rationalization of market expansion; indeed market growth historically has extended individual rights—for white men ... the same market economy that circulates white freedom circulates black slaves. (43)

At the epicenter of this vortex of dialogical misrecognition, the master came to see himself as the victim of the slave girl’s seduction, while she in turn became, in his eyes, the perpetuator of potential violence against his sovereignty. As Hartman’s reading of *Incidents* reminds us, “Seduction was central to the very constitution and imagination of the antebellum South for it provided a way of masking the antagonistic fissures of the social by ascribing to the object of property an ensnaring and criminal agency that acted to dissimulate the barbarous forms of white enjoyment permitted within the law” (87).

From the domain of the plantation to its encroaching domestication of the national struggle for freedom, the sovereignty of slavery required not only the slaveholder's domination over potential threats to his power, but also over all possible sites of creative potential independent of him. Jacobs's narrative departed from this domestic order by posing a critique of the institution rooted in a phenomenology of retreat from it. Hiding away from its collective cultural appreciation of enslavement as a sign of personal sovereignty, her escape doubled as an act of self-preservation and a kind of monastic retreat from the subjective world slavery had created. The absence her retreat created laid the groundwork for the production of a protocol of resistance that did not rely upon her appropriation of her master's power, but made it possible for her to acquire agency outside the purview of his power altogether.

If the point of political action were not to be recognized by the existing political process but to create another political reality with which to oppose it, then the act of retreat inaugurates a protocol, not of participation, but of disidentification. As Lukács described in the section we began quoting above:

the better we are able to close our minds to the bourgeois legends of the 'creativity' of the exponents of the capitalist age, the more obvious it becomes that we are witnessing in all behavior of this sort the structural analogue to the behavior of the worker vis-à-vis the machine he serves and observes, and whose functions he controls while he contemplates it ... it depends on the degree to which the contemplative stance is repudiated. (98)

The paternalism of possessive individualism in the West has created an industry of ethics and ethical action that seeks reflections of itself and its desires in every instance of resistance to it. Not unlike the rhapsode who prides himself as an artist, mastery takes only the observation that he creates nothing himself to begin to topple his sense of self-identification.

Hegel's allegory of slavery, on the other hand, universalizes the experience of captivity as a problem of modern freedom. Characterizations of bondage elide with victimhood, and situate captivity within a relationship of competition wherein survival is rewarded only by means of the elimination of the threat of domination posed by the other. Though it is framed as the primary condition of modern consciousness, as a tenet of liberal politics it is an ahistorical analogy for the captive's "fear of death, the sovereign master" (§ 194) from which follow material histories of dispossession as rule of law. From the monastery to the penitentiary to the colonial context, struggles for liberation from captivity could be conceived of allegorically in ways that manifest as justification for historical violence. A powerful metaphor representative of the ethical bounds of political action, the Hegelian master/slave binary reinforces modern virtues of consciousness-raising as secularized forms of civic virtue. Both the virtuous conversion of one's consciousness and the conversion of the soul cultivate an internal sense of being free despite still being bound, so go the hermeneutics of secular humanist salvation. Overcoming the limits of mortal life through an internal process of confession and conversion, captivity in the Hegelian

context is not only a spiritual experience but so too a discursive one, validating one's contributions to history, yet another form of mortal transcendence.

As a kind of apotheosized inversion of the Pauline call to conversion, the master/slave dialectic pivots on the “vanishing moment” of the captive's fear of death, culminating in a fleeting revelation of one's god-like agency over and against the limitations of one's mortality. Hegel's allegory is a secularization of the hierarchy of power in the medieval allegory of domination from which it draws. Rather than a story of freedom that begins in history and ends in heaven however, Hegel's master/slave relation begins where the Christian mission ends, in the universal, the ideal, and ends on earth. Hegel's modern subject is the historical incarnation of pre-Enlightenment theology—an attempt to reclaim the transcendent as material, returning it to the actual, to earth through a telling of history.

The work of liberation, especially within the tradition of Western political theory, has been to overcome the fundamental ambiguities and ever-recurrent enclosures of the master/slave relation by confronting threats of domination head on. Retreat would be a sign of submission. Implicit within the dialectical process by which a creature recognizes itself as creator, propriety is the premise from which modern subjectivity is born: the mastery of self-apprehension laid the ideological groundwork for framing the entitlements of personhood in terms of material accumulation in its objective or secular rather than sublime or idealized state of being.

New World slaves were relegated to states of complete material and cultural dispossession. They were prohibited from learning to write, prevented from leaving account of what they thought and felt about being captives. Nevertheless fugitive disorientations of power were persistent and posed a constant threat to the authority of slavery's domestic order. Captives were not completely isolated but through the conditions of their labor had occasion to interact, to talk with each other and in sharing their experiences came to see their captivity as a social construction that could be dismantled. Many found ideological justification for the wrong of slavery in their own wounded flesh, others in their identification with divine incarnations of it. As religious scholar Albert J. Raboteau writes in his seminal *Slave Religion*, "The danger beneath the arguments for slave conversion which many masters feared was the egalitarianism implicit in Christianity. The most serious obstacle to the missionary's access to slaves was the slaveholder's vague awareness that a Christian slave would have some claim to fellowship, a claim that threatened the security of the master-slave hierarchy" (102).

Fugitive fellowship become, in fact, the fuel that fanned the flames of abolition across lines of race and class differences, beyond the victory of Constitutional emancipation and well into twentieth century movements of civil liberty in the U.S., not just for the descendants of the formerly enslaved, but for much more global movements of liberation. The volumes of historical evidence produced by recent work in the history of American slavery of the last forty or so years in particular have devoted much archival research to unearthing evidence of enslaved peoples' resistance to the

conditions of their captivity, reorienting the history of slavery around the pervasive culture of these subversive and surreptitious political acts that expressed both a self-apprehension of the condition of the slave, as well as a collective critique of its internal contradictions of virtue, so strong at times that it manifested in violent acts of collective refusal, revolt, and escape. In short, it is the actual modern captive subject's realization that emancipation is no guarantee of freedom that is the condition of possibility for an abolitionist consciousness. The protocols of self-defense actual captives enacted in their struggles for liberation sought to abolish altogether the binary that stabilized the master/slave allegory.

In the course of historical accounts of slavery passed down to us by allies and archivists, the perspective of a young slave woman's experience is always already suspect. Her contributions were marginalized on account of both her legal status and gender. These markers of identity followed her North and inhibited her fellowship with those who convened to fight for freedom on behalf of those she had just left behind. According to her own allies, women's contributions could only be deemed righteous when aligned with "the highest tone of purity and strictest observance of duties pertaining to woman's sphere" (quoted in Bland 120), as Frederick Douglass wrote in the August 25, 1849 edition of the *North Star*. The creative element of their contributions to the tradition were rehearsals of their adherence to narratives of freedom bound to the very conditions of captivity they sought to escape. Often maligned and suspect for breaching the boundaries of domesticity they occupied, when speaking out on political affairs in public spaces fugitive slave women's

accounts of their lives were not often deemed their own. The credibility of their claims to fellowship required the witness of less suspect subjects. Even still their perspectives were circulated by few, fictionalized by others, and consistently valued more for the consciousness they raised than the social conditions they challenged.

The fundamental question raised by a political theory of Harriet Jacobs's disorientations of the master/slave relation asks, what if the project of abolition were to successfully succeed slavery as a new protocol of American freedom? Might slavery then not only have to be abolished in name, but also the liberal political system upon which it was based somehow displaced with an abolitionist economy of freedom, an economy of freedom premised upon constant acts of distancing ourselves from the time of slavery and disorienting our relationship to the domestic order slavery sanctioned? How might a philosophy of wrong differ in form from a liberal phenomenology of domination and subjection?

Incidents places actual stories of the politically irrelevant, civically disposable, or socially criminal causalities of modern liberal subjectivity as the point of departure for an abolitionist vision of freedom that begins with fugitive disorientations of domination. The dispossessions of the fugitive slave girl serve as the shadow saboteur to the subjectivity and self-interest of the modern liberal individual. To be on the wrong side of the law as a fugitive slave is now, in the hindsight of the present day, to be on the right side of political progress. The story of American slavery with which we have become accustomed then is one in which fugitive slaves helped to create, but

somehow the realizing sense fugitive formulations of freedom created are still the purview of those who permitted slavery.

In the antebellum moment as well as our own, in order to be nationally recognized for being a patriot, righteous and therefore justified in one's rogue pursuits of freedom, one's fugitive orientation to the domestic order of the nation would have to appear unthreatening. Any deviation from, or heaven forbid disidentification with, the ethical foundations of liberal rights as we have come to know and protect them typically results in further forms of social isolation and accusations of deviant behavior.

There are several moments within Jacobs's work that evidence protocols for how the emancipatory desires of fugitive slave girls might be protected, fostered, and fueled despite the foreclosures of their guarantees of rightful incorporation into the national body. Through the figure of the slave girl and the particular politics of emancipation she enacts and displaces, we encounter, a series of important deviations from the largely disembodied Enlightenment discourses of emancipatory desire central to the Western liberal tradition. Jacobs's slave narrative works to refuse and re-imagine a lineage of abolitionist praxis commonly regarded as derivative of, rather than distinct from, the Western canon of political theory. Shifting Jacobs's slave girl protocols of emancipation from the margins of the abolitionist tradition to its epistemic center however exposes the hybridity of its discursive assemblage -- an orientation to political power that relies not only upon the sharpened analytic tools of political

philosophical thought, but so too those fugitive analytics wrought by experience to repurpose them. The birth of black feminist interventions to both early women's rights movements and antislavery societies disoriented conventional binaries that typically reinforced categories of essentialized difference the domestic order of slavery struggled to maintain. As historically grounded approaches to the political formation of slavery's domestic order, slave girl abolitionism fueled a precarious but powerful fellowship of solidarity across lines of racial and ethnic differences that lived on far beyond the victory of Constitutional emancipation.

Namely, a political fellowship manifest in the text as Jacobs's unnamed and unimpeded network of friends. Her friends appear throughout her narrative like the late antebellum equivalent to a Greek chorus, an amorphous non-individuated collective that aid her through moments of tragic despair, moral ambiguity, and unrelenting violence. Jacobs's friends come to represent the unnamable, vouchsafed, and invaluable kinds of contributions to ethical life that might displace Hegel's reliance upon the modern preoccupation with the protection of private property for the realization of freedom because while one is fortunate to have them they cannot be possessions.

As the ethical center of Jacobs's story, her friends hold an impossible space of possibility from within which to imagine a way out of captivity, a way out that is neither assimilation nor suicide. It is through her friends that she learns how to struggle against the dehumanizing social isolation of chattel slavery. Jacobs's friends

are often evoked as a defense against her own submission to the self-negating force of her own enslavement. In the wake of one of the many violent assaults Jacobs suffered as a consequence of her refusal to consent to her slave master's sexual desires, she admits, "I begged my friends to let me die, rather than send for the doctor. There was nothing I dreaded so much as his presence" (78). It is her friends who secured her passage from the self-sequester of her grandmother's garret/prison cell into the provisional protections of the North. It was her friends who facilitated her conversion from the private life of a domestic worker into the public space of abolitionist organizing and urged her to tell her story in her own words as a form of social protest against the "deeper wrongs" of slave girls' subjection. It is on behalf of a dream of a community of friends "not yet realized" that Jacobs returns to the South even after having procured the bill of sale that purchased her own freedom so that she might attend to the refugees and soldiers at the frontline of the Civil War. It was in anticipation of a future in which like communities of friends would form to redress the dispossessions of Constitutional emancipation that she writes her life in protest to arouse the women of the North to the cause of abolition. It is for them that Jacobs passed on the inheritances of a fugitive ethics of dialogue rather than domination, an ethics that suggests we may need to disorient our national relationship to the discourse of rights according to a slave girl's philosophy of wrong.

CHAPTER THREE

A Search for Domestic Tranquility Beyond the ‘Embrace of the Law’

The value of testimony is by no means to be measured by the novelty of the horrors which it describes. Corroborative testimony,--facts, similar to those established by the testimony of others,--is highly valuable. Who that can give it and has a heart of flesh, will refuse to the slave so small a boon?
American Slavery As It Is (1839)

“Eager not to disappoint, I try my best to offer my benefactors and benefactresses what they most anxiously yearn for: the possibility of a difference, yet, a difference or an otherness that will not go so far as to question the foundation of their beings and makings... Authenticity in such contexts turns out to be a product that one can buy, arrange to one's liking, and/or preserve.
“Difference” Trinh T. Minh-ha (1987)

Wherever Harriet Jacobs’s writing is celebrated it is typically for her self-authored slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. In *Incidents* Jacobs deployed the discourse of abolition in the service of politicizing the culture of gender violence slavery made reasonable. “It is the voice of a woman who,” as Yellin writes, “although she cannot discuss her sexual past without expressing deep conflict, nevertheless addresses this painful personal subject in order to politicize it, to insist that the forbidden topic of the sexual abuse of slave women be included in public discussions of the slavery question” (xiv). In addition to the slave narrative however, Jacobs also made active contributions to the work of abolition that extended the life of the antislavery effort to the front lines of the Civil War. Overwhelming critical attention to the gendered quality of Jacobs’s abolitionism-- the sexual abuses of slavery she politicized-- often relegate her intellectual contributions to a sub-category, a special interest of abolition. This chapter builds upon scholarship from the field of feminist theory that has elevated critical attention to the intersections of racism, economic exploitation and gender violence *Incidents* chronicles. This chapter argues that Jacobs’s representation of rape culture in the plantation South sets an important

precedent for her critique of slavery as a whole; as the kind of injury that cannot be morally redeemed, legally repaired or physically overcome without first establishing some protocols to distinguish the moral authority, legal reason, and common sense of abolition from that which sanctioned it in the first place.

For contemporary readers Jacobs's texts become blueprints from which to trace the fugitive circumlocutions of enlightenment thought abolitionists mass marketed on the eve of the Civil War. *Incidents* serves as a primer for the kinds of fugitive slave girl inflections Jacobs's protocols of public address lend to her readership. Her style of narrative disidentification with tropes of modern progress and the linearity of historical social change prefigures the kinds of discursive abolition of enlightenment figurations of captivity and emancipation that abolition would require beyond Constitutional end of slavery.¹⁵ "No pen can give an adequate description of the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery," writes Jacobs in chapter nine of *Incidents*, "Sketches of Neighboring Slaveholders." Rather than reinforce the experience of slavery as a universal experience of human suffering, *Incidents* presented the as-yet rarely told first-hand perspective of a slave girl as an experience

¹⁵ As many scholars of American slavery have written, notably Ariela Julie Gross and Saidiya Hartman, the time of slavery is not yet complete as evidenced in the preservation of the master/slave relation in the exploitation of the punitive practice of convict lease system, the sadism of lynch culture, the systemic social fracture and disenfranchisement of mass incarceration, not to mention that the end of slavery did not abolish what Spillers terms the "originating metaphors of captivity." In *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe* she writes, "Even though the captive flesh/body has been 'liberated,' and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not matter, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography or its

of captivity situated within its historical context, a system of slavery that used rape as a technology of population control, for breaking the human will by breaking familial ties.

The “forbidden topic” *Incidents* helped make public was then not a phenomenon that targeted enslaved women and girls alone but one which delineated lines of gender and racial differences through the legal discourse of rights, national belonging, equal protection under the law. Since the advent of colorblind jurisprudence in the mid-twentieth century, legal delineations of gender and race typically arise only in instances wherein the injury they experience is deemed discrete and insular.

However, as Patricia Williams suggests in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, there is much insight to be gained from thinking about legal delineations of race and gender as the incarnation of liberal rights discourse and the material consequence of the moral authority it grants possessive investments in personhood as a property relation.

As Williams writes, “My students... are confused enough by the idea of property alone... paralyzed by the idea that property might have a gender and gender might be a matter of words”(13). As we saw in the previous chapters, the fugitive slave girl marked both the identitarian positionality of Jacobs’s abolitionist politics as well as the method of disidentification by which she performed her critique of it through her retreat to the loopholes of her subjection. By claiming to speak on behalf of those

topics, show movement, as the human subject is ‘murdered’ over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise” (208).

“still in bondage,” Jacobs’s contributions to the abolitionist tradition both represented a discrete and insular class of underrepresented enslaved subjects within the abolitionist tradition while simultaneously formulating a critique of slavery that attacked the moral authority of property relations that organized not only enslavement, but the domestic order of the institution as a whole.

Trinh T. Minh-ha’s discussion of Third World Feminism quoted in the epigraph above reasons that “genuine change” is a matter of differentiating the kinds of freedom we want to realize from those responsible for the conditions that defer its realization. In her work she critiques feminist demands for solidarity as a rhetorical pretense of political discourse that co-opts and essentializes the differences that delineate the effects of power to marginalize, exploit, and disenfranchise various populations in interconnected ways. She writes:

If feminism is set forth as a demystifying force, then it will have to question thoroughly the belief in its own identity... for the most fundamental of these differences does not, obviously, allow us to depart radically from the master’s logic ... The constant need to refer to the ‘male model’ for comparisons unavoidably maintains the subject under tutelage. For the point is not to carve one’s space in ‘identity theories that ignore women’... but patiently to dismantle the very notion of core (be it static or not) and identity. (16)

Similarly, while the condition of enslaved women is Jacobs’s explicit point of departure, her work as an abolitionist could arguably be characterized as a meta-critique of the whole intellectual tradition of abolitionist discourse. Its

essentializations of enslaved people, and women in particular, as innocent victims, often inferred that what enslaved subjects needed was not political equality but saving, inclusion within the human family as its domesticated subordinates. What is compelling about Jacobs's intervention is how she complicates the constraints of her identitarian positionality, coupling conventional tropes of possessive individualism with the inescapability of slavery's domestic order to mobilize a critique of slavery that ends not with the redemption of political recognition, but with her disidentification with its moral authority.

As much of the literary and historical scholarship on *Incidents* attests, Jacobs's narrative cloaks its fugitive slave girl dream of emancipation in the familiar sentiments of a Victorian novel, the pious redemptive fortitude of the suffering supplicant, as well as the Revolutionary fervor for liberty, individualism, and independence of the ante-bellum era. While Jacobs speaks these discourses with the precision of a native's tongue however, the aim of her intervention is not merely assimilation, incorporation and legal recognition, but a dismantling of the implicit social relations of its domestic order. By coupling the concerns of marriage held by women of respectable social standing with those of slave girls with next to none, Jacobs's narrative anticipated an articulation of abolition that appeared two decades later in Frederick Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884).

The ruling class remains dominated by the familiar economic influences and therefore only in exceptional cases does it provide instances of really freely

contracted marriages, while among the oppressed class, as we have seen, these marriages are the rule. Full freedom of marriage can therefore only be generally established when the abolition of capitalist production and of the property relations created by it has removed all the accompanying economic considerations which still exert such a powerful influence on the choice of a marriage partner. For then there is no other motive left except mutual inclination. (144)

Linda's loss of her love-dream in the form of a future free from both the uncertainty of fugitivity and the threat of sexual domination at the hand of her master in her relationship to the free black man whom she loved, is reanimated when presented with an immanent threat to the livelihood of her children. What begins as a critique of the prohibition of enslaved women's right to sexual autonomy becomes a social analysis of the domestic order of slavery and the dispossession of enslaved people's right to love. With the exception of her longing for union with the man her master threatened to kill, Linda's expression of love are all directed toward members of her family. Privileging the allegiances to love's bond over the missives of the slave-owning class could be deemed a punishable offence for an enslaved mother while such devotion to family would have been revered as the pinnacle of feminine virtue for a free-born woman.

Though Jacobs's narrative makes clear the metaphorical power of likening sexual autonomy to political liberation in the context of her love-dream, her depiction of life

after slavery does not shy away from relaying to her readers the inescapable consequences of degradation this history of dispossession have for the formerly enslaved. While Linda must mortgage her love to save her lover's life, she opts not to make such a wager for her children. We might speculate that by publicizing the so-called sexual transgressions that paved her route to freedom Jacobs left herself vulnerable to never again being seen as virtuous enough to marry. As Angela Davis's portrait of the black woman's role in the community of slaves reminds us,

In its political contours, the rape of the black woman was not exclusively an attack upon her. Indirectly, its target was also the slave community as a whole.

In launching the sexual war on the woman, the master would not only assert his sovereignty over a critically important figure of the slave community, he would also be aiming a blow against the black man. (124)

Dispossessions of sexual autonomy in this respect not only shape and constrain the political lives of enslaved women, they shape the conditions of possibility for political equality of every class of person they impact.

In his work on *Beloved*, Dariack Scott theorizes a scene in Toni Morrison's novel in which a chain gang succumbs to the sexual subordination of white jailers. His reading considers the implications of historical and literary attempts to recuperate the autonomy and resilience of black enslaved men in particular and their best intentions to disappear the spectrum of dispossessions that racialized masculinity in the afterlife of slavery. Scott writes, "The figure of the black male has been recovered in a long tradition of black historical scholarship, as a hero, on Civil War battlefields, in slave

revolts, and as scholar/writer-warriors, such as Frederick Douglass or W. E. B. Du Bois... In this recitation the black man is, in effect, more of a man than the men who enslaved him”(135).

In counter distinction to narratives that realize the heroism of enslaved men, Jacobs’s narrative speaks for those, “millions of women at the South, still in bondage,” and in so doing announces for all who will listen the powerlessness of black men to redress the states of injury women bore as a badge of bondage. The tenants of moral piety, conventional acts of heroic determination and redemption were no contest for the pervasive dispossessions of sexual autonomy slavery sanctioned. Without naming the dispossessions of black masculinity as acts of sexual violence that targeted men per se, Jacobs’s narrative makes clear the connections between sexual violence and political disenfranchisement that rendered black communities with little claim to author their own standards of moral authority and social respectability.

In order for her readers to relate to the critique of slavery her narrative put forth, Jacobs had to rework the symbolic patterns through which antislavery discourse typified representations of freedom, to make them think abolition, not merely as the extension of an abstract moral ideal of national salvation or revolutionary heroism, identifications with white male power as Scott suggests, but as a strategic response to the dispossession of credibility sexual violence engendered. Violations of the will that could not be redressed by legal reparation alone, *Incidents* offered a critique of slavery that highlighted the fetish of manhood embedded in antislavery discourse.

Replacing manhood with intersections of racial and gendered sexual subordination constitutive of a slave girl's subjection Jacobs exposes the sadism of slavery as unreasonable and grounds for its abolition.

Her desires for a home of her own and the ability to care for her family echoes tenets of liberal domesticity without ever committing themselves to the tropes of possessive individualism upon which such desires were traditionally staked. This is in part a consequence of slavery itself. Scott writes, "The founding story of black male subjectivity in slavery is one in which the family as such does not necessarily— or frequently cannot— form the crucible of identity. As W. E. B. DuBois observed, the black church preceded the black family, and here this originally scene, as elsewhere... it is not solely or primarily in the nuclear family that the black male forms the basis of his sexuality." (151)

Speaking to her readers from the cross-roads of women's suffrage, slave rebellion, and the fugitive exodus from the plantation South, *Incidents* along with Jacobs's subsequent writings reflect tensions between an immanent critique of slavery's domestic order and a desire to enjoy love's bond without the impositions of slavery's domestication of them. Jacobs's confession to the dual-degradation of sexual violence and opportunism that haunted her life, become an apt metaphor for considering how this tension imposed itself upon the internal organization of the antislavery movement. As a taboo allegiance of men and women, both black and white, contributing to public debates that discussed all manner of topics typically suppressed

within antebellum culture, antislavery communities were precisely the political amalgamation the domestic order was meant to preclude.

As the unlikely courier of a critique of captivity rooted in the social taboo of amalgamation within the abolitionist tradition, *Incidents* attempts to pass on a dream of freedom that is, like her own, not yet realized in the world-historical moment of liberal democratic politics. In the end of her narrative Jacobs points out that she and her children, as manumitted slaves, “are as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the North; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in *my* condition. The dream of my life is not yet realized.” (201) Scott’s theorization of black male sexual subordination is important to our present reading of Jacobs then precisely because of its relevance to her own depictions of her master’s prohibitions of her desire for freedom in the form of union with her free black lover. In doing so she appeals to the reason of women of the North, displacing proslavery fears of black masculinity by appealing to their own vulnerability to patriarchal power.

In its disavowal of the provisions of privacy political freedom secured fugitives particularly under the Fugitive Slave Law, *Incidents* frames slavery as a social technology whose effects were not only experienced as morally reprehensible acts of interpersonal injury, but as historical occasion to catalyze the formation of racial difference through, to borrow from Angela Davis in 1975, a “dialectics of rape.” The systematic dispossession of sexual autonomy the property relation of slavery made

rational subsumed political differences of civil status in biological discourses of racial difference, and justifications for racialized divisions of labor.¹⁶ What is more, the culture of rape the plantation socialized through the slave codes mediated the risk of rebellion by punishing noncompliance to master/slave sexual relations with threats to further destroy slave family and community-ties, claiming the casualties of noncompliance as it collateral, assurance that acts of racial subordination would have returns far into the future.

“Reflecting on what she feared civilized society would view as inexcusable sexual transgressions,” writes Ann DuCill, “Jacobs asked if perhaps, ‘the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others’ (44). More than the legal end of slavery, the ethical standards of liberal domesticity Jacobs’s narrative touts then—sexual autonomy, family and freedom— extend the ideals of her intended readers in the North toward an abolition of economic order of liberal domesticity itself. As we will see in our discussion of Maria Lydia Child’s antislavery literature and Jacobs’s war correspondence with Garrison in this chapter, though public critiques of the sexual abuses of slave masters were not new to antislavery discourse, public confessions to one’s implication in their sphere of sexual transgression unsettles the perpetrator/victim dyad such that political emancipation alone could not redeem the sin of slavery.

¹⁶ The dialectics of rape Davis theorizes in her essay identifies a co-constitutive relationship between, “On the one hand the slave master [who] made use of his tyrannical possession of slave women as chattel in order to violate their bodies with impunity. On the other hand, rape

“The Gallant South”

In “Whiteness as Property,” Cheryl Harris suggests that the right to have rights is not merely a matter of social standing in the present, but a claim on the expectations one has for one’s future. “Whiteness was an object over which continued control was—and is—expected,” writes Harris. “The protection of these expectations is central because, as Radin notes... your personhood depends on the realization of these expectations” (1730). Claims to personhood are, by her account then, claims on time-orientations toward the realization of a precarious future, one which we might not yet own, but to which we feel entitled. For subjects whose futures are deemed the property of the state, any deviation from the future others realize for them risks criminalization, and as such, requires not only the power of an undivided will, but more contingently, the common sense recognition that that will is reasonable.

Jacobs’s slave girl abolitionism arrived on the tail end of the antebellum era and as such offered critique of the antislavery literature that preceded it. From her writings we can begin to imagine abolition as a claim, a kind of possessive investment in a future after slavery which could not be satisfied by existing protocols of legal emancipation. Abolition in this sense was a politics rooted in a phenomenology of self-defense that diverged from the tenets of possessive individualism precisely

itself was an essential weapon utilized by the white master to reinforce the authority of his ownership of black women.” (149-160)

because it imagined a future that fell outside what Harris in her essay referred to as the “embrace of the law.” Jacobs adopted a discourse of moral suasion popularized within the abolitionist tradition and remade it in her own image as an indictment what her editor and friend Lydia Maria Child referred to in her 1860 antislavery pamphlet as the Patriarchal Institution.¹⁷

The central argument Child advances in her antislavery pamphlet published just one year before *Incidents* was made, implies that the ever-expanding tendencies of slavery’s dominion was not merely fueled by racism, but was a phenomenon Patriarchal in nature, and as such, threatened to extend the domain of difference the color-line afforded to others whose personal freedom had not yet been politically recognized. As Child notes in her pamphlet, the protocols of kidnap, capture, and breeding were already not limited to black bodies in 1860, and the impending threat of slavery’s mass destruction threatened to make the systemic dispossession of the personal freedoms of any one too poor to prove they had done nothing wrong an exercise of democratic freedom.

It was poet, novelist, activist and abolitionist Lydia Maria Child who won the honor of introducing readers to Jacobs. Thayer and Eldridge, the same company that had

¹⁷ Child’s 1860 antislavery pamphlet, “The Patriarchal Institution, as described by members of its own family,” used the want ads for fugitive slaves to document the abuses of the institution. The pamphlet will be discussed more in the following section. Its focus on the variables of gender and age as determinants for certain protocols of punishment lay a stunning backdrop against which to consider the intersections between the early women’s rights movement and the antislavery movement as encapsulated by Jacobs’s and Child’s friendship.

published James Redpath's *The Public Life of Captain John Brown*, would only agree to publish Jacobs's manuscript if Lydia Maria Child agreed to supply the preface. When Child agreed, she also offered to edit it "to bring the story into continuous order." (*Papers* 279). With Child Jacobs was able to endear her white abolitionist audience to her, both at home and overseas. Child's introduction to *Incidents* both verifies Jacobs's capacity to author her own narrative and justifies her author's choice to "unveil" the sensitive indignities of this "slave girl's" story of self-defense and escape. Child writes,

for the experiences of this intelligent and much-injured woman belong to a class some would call delicate subjects, and others indelicate ... I willingly take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil withdrawn. I do this for the sake of my sisters in bondage, who are suffering wrongs so foul, that our ears are too delicate to listen to them. I do it with the hope of arousing conscientious and reflecting women at the North to a sense of their duty in the exertion of moral influence on the question of Slavery, on all possible occasions. I do it with the hope that every man who reads this narrative will swear solemnly before God that, so far as he has power to prevent it, no fugitive from slavery shall ever be sent back to suffer in that loathsome den of corruption and cruelty. (Jacobs 4)

Though Child, the Massachusetts-born protégée of William Lloyd Garrison, was Jacobs's second choice for an editor after Harriet Beecher Stowe, the pairing of Child and Jacobs was auspicious. The critique of slavery the two shared was not bolstered

by a sentimentality with regard to the injuries slaves incurred or by salvific impulses to rescue them from their condition. Antislavery ideologies that sought to redress the wrong of slavery by abolishing the symptoms of its sin generally led to gradual and moderate calls for the social reform of the institution. Both Child and Jacobs hailed from much more radical branches of the movement whose aim was to save the nation. Though neither had started there, their critiques of slavery grew out of a common analysis of the material consequences of the patriarchal power and the impossibilities for freedom should that power remain unchecked.

As Margaret M. R. Kellow writes in her account of Child's political development, concerns that the problem of slavery would result in either insurrection or disunion had plagued Child since the 1820s. She was convinced that partisan politics, and Northern investment in the economic stability of the slave economy in particular rendered party politics an insufficient solution to redress the wrong of slavery. Child determined that the failure of politics in the face of abolition resided in the feminization of civic virtue in antebellum political culture. So long as virtue remained a private attribute feminine civility citizenship would not be beholden to its mores. The right to bear arms in defense of the country then was not an act of virtue and honor, but one of bravado and intimidation.

Following the Compromise of 1850 and the passing of the Kansas–Nebraska Act of 1854, Kellow writes,

Child believed that the solution to the political crisis also required the infusion of a new sense of civic virtue into public life, one that would be grounded in morality and integrity and not in a false sense of masculine pride. Child perceived that a misguided notion that equated masculinity with power led to a determination to dominate others that sustained slavery and undergirded the sectional crisis. This aggressive posturing also mandated women's confinement in the private sphere.

One way of bringing about this change was the admission of women to citizenship. Child recognized that manhood suffrage had formalized the gender connotations of citizenship. One need only be male (and white) to participate in the affairs of the polis. Child saw that the identification of women and the private sphere with morality encouraged men to regard the public arena as a place where moral considerations had no relevance. Only by breaking down this dichotomy could public life be infused with morality and integrity. Child called here for an end to the artificial segmentation of life that excused men from the obligation to act morally outside the home. (38)

Child was a third generation abolitionist and as such adopted a historical reading of the moral wrong of slavery which detailed the material consequences of its reign with regard to the censure of free speech, economic impediments to the support for free labor, and the disenfranchisement of women and formerly enslaved men and women. “Although Child did not consciously equate slavery with the condition of women with the same frequency as did some other antislavery women (e.g., the Grimké

sisters),” writes Kellow, “she did link the attitudes that permitted slave owning with those that sanctioned the subordination of women.” As a nonresistant abolitionist Child was critical of Northern political investments in the antislavery cause. Nevertheless in 1856 she published “The Kansas Emigrants,” to appeal to her readers to support the case for Free Soil as an extension of the abolitionist effort. “The Kansas Emigrants,” was a sentimental short story crafted to solicit votes for the Republican Party, and as, “a call for the admission of women to public life.” In it Kellow adds that “Child refused to cast the women as victims. Instead they actively resist the oppression they experience. They are full partners in the struggle to make Kansas free. Her narrative constitutes a concerted attack on the relegation of women to the private sphere” (42).

In 1860 Maria Child produced an over-fifty-page anti-slavery pamphlet, “The Patriarchal Institution, as Described by Members of Its Own Family.” Printed in New York by the Anti-Slavery Society just one year prior to the release of *Incidents*, and just one year prior to the start of the Civil War, “The Patriarchal Institution” staged the antislavery debate as a discursive contest between Northern and Southern sensibilities about slavery and its orientation to the founding principles of American political life. Rather than corroborate the testaments of former slaves, Child’s pamphlet is largely a compilation of language taken directly from the tomes of proslavery advocates and slave owners themselves. The pamphlet opens with a quote from Thomas Jefferson, “Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure, when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these

liberties are the gift of God?" Throughout the text her assemblage of quotes from political theorists, leading politicians, antislavery apologists and slave owners stress the centrality of moral virtue to American theories of political freedom while showcasing the disjunctures of political theory and the practice of slavery.

Maria Child's pamphlet is organized as if it were a courtroom drama. She presents her readers with proslavery arguments and then pummels them with a litany of evidence to contradict Southern claims to moral virtue in the form of want-ads, requests and rewards for the return of runaways printed and reprinted, in some cases, in newspapers throughout the South. Announcements for escaped men, women and children detailing the complexion, character, markings and mutilations of their fugitive bodies facilitated the return of lost property and were accompanied in Child's pamphlet both by advertisements for auctions and packs of bloodhounds and the regional language of the slave codes prohibiting aid to runaways. Markers of identification were wrought by instruments of torture — hot iron, shackles, the lash — and inscribed on foreheads, cheeks, chests, backs, arms and legs. A payment of twenty-five dollars was offered in exchange for, "the apprehension of my man Charles; about twenty-seven years old, a well-proportioned mulatto, very active and sensible. He has a mild, submissive look, and if taken, will no doubt show the marks of a recent whipping." R. H. De Jarrett. From the South-Side Democrat, Virginia, Oct. 25, 1852...

"Committed to jail, a negro boy named John, about seventeen years old; his back badly marked with the whip; under lip and chin severely bruised." John H. Hand, Jailer. From the Francisville Journal, July 6, 1837.

"Committed, a mulatto fellow. His back shows lasting impressions of the whip, and leaves no doubt of his being a slave." John A. Rowland, Jailer. From the Fayetteville (N. C.) Observer, June 20, 1838.

"Ranaway from the plantation of James Surgette, the following negroes: Randal--has one ear cropped; Bob--has lost one eye; Kentucky Tom--has one jaw broken. "F. L. C. Edwards. From the Southern Telegraph, Sept. 25, 1837.

"If any person, or persons, shall cut or break any iron collar, which any master of slaves shall have used, in order to prevent the running away, or escape, of any such slave or slaves, such person or persons, so offending, shall, on conviction, be fined not less than \$200, nor more than \$1000, and suffer imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years, nor less than six months."--Louisiana Act of Assembly, 1819.

Child organizes her evidence so that the reader advances from advertisements that exhibit the injuries slave-owners inflicted to punish and track enslaved men, to those that marked fugitive slave women, to those that identified children and infants by their scars and physical mutilations. Her pamphlet not only provided her readers with reason to admonish the sins slavery imposed on innocents, but also served as a cautionary maneuver, to warn her fellow white antislavery allies to heed the colorblind tendency of slavery's ever-expanding machinations. Though Child's own voice is largely absent from the pamphlet, she concludes with a statement that makes clear her unique indictment of the sins of slavery as a threat to the autonomy of the white working class.

Her closing remarks read, "The Power that rules the nation has announced its decision, that the right to hold slaves "does not depend on difference of complexion"; and advertisements show that "very intelligent" men and women, with "clear white

complexions, blue eyes, and sandy hair,” are continually sold upon the auction-block ... (Child, 52). Child had already surmised that, if left uninterrupted, the institution of slavery would likely be limited neither by the political cartography of the nation nor, perhaps more shockingly, by the “complexion” or “intelligence” of those who sought refuge in its borders. The suffragist and abolitionist goes on to list examples of white, specifically blond haired and blue eyed immigrant children who, being mistaken for light-skinned fugitive slaves, were routinely captured and sold South by traders.¹⁸

Accounts of such sales throughout the time of slavery in the United States raise questions as to the historical explanation of these racially ambiguous figures. Carol and Calvin D. Wilson describe this phenomenon in their work on “White Slavery,” by reminding us that unlike in places like South Africa and Brazil, “multiracial systems of identification never developed in the United States, because in part, many Americans sought to deny the existence of miscegenation. The implications of which have led to such stark black/white binaries in discourses of race and the politics of slavery that the historical threat the patriarchal institution posed to whiteness, and the civil liberties of working class white people in particular, are largely disappeared.

¹⁸ Child writes, “In 1834, I talked with a blue-eyed Irish girl, named Mary Gilmore, who was claimed as a slave, and was with difficulty proved to have been free-born. A few weeks ago, I saw a notice in the papers of an Irishman in the Western States, who was claimed as a slave, and was foolishly trying to prove himself free. In 1855, a white girl, fourteen years old, daughter of Mr. Samuel Goodshall, of Downington, Chester Co., Penn., while walking in the road, was seized by two men, a plaster put upon her mouth, hurried into a carriage, and driven furiously toward Maryland. They threatened to kill her if she made any noise. But she was taken from them by a company of colored men on the road, and was restored to her parents.

Concluding her abolitionist pamphlet with an air of secular sarcasm rather than with the Christian sentimentality for which her literary work was known, she ends with the following provocation.

It is very possible that our opportunities for enjoying the beneficent institution of slavery will not long be limited to the chances of kidnapping successfully. The blessing seems to be in a fair way to be universally disseminated. Gov. Wise of Virginia wants to have ‘no limit but the ocean’... Mr. Brown of Mississippi is so benevolent that ‘rebellious and wicked as the Yankees have been, he would extend the blessings of slavery even to them’... But those who are impatient to become slaves need not wait for the result of political movements. I dare say Gov. Wise and Mr. Brown would kindly raise a subscription for paying their expenses South. Would it not be a judicious move for our “greasy mechanics, filthy operatives, and small-fisted farmers,” to apply to them immediately for the privileges of the auction-block? How happy they would be, having enlightened owners to vote for them, and with no necessity of troubling their own heads about laws or elections! With no wives to clothe, and no families to care for! Knowing that their children will be sure to grow up in blessed ignorance, and that their daughters will be cared for as tenderly as “brood mares!” How enviable would be their situation, working in those sunny fields from dawn till dark, with the fragrance of orange blossoms on the air, and the varied melodies of the mocking-bird,

About the same time, an attempt was made to carry off, by violence, a white lad of fifteen; but he succeeded in making his escape, after the darkness of evening came on” (Child 52).

occasionally accompanied by the quick staccato movement of a kind driver's whip! (52-53)

Child's jeremiad prophesies the dystopic future the patriarch institution could have if left unhindered by the advancing of abolition. Child critiques slavery here not in the language of sin but as a class war, highlighting the tenuous ambiguities color and coercion in relationship to political power and credibility. The democratization of rights in this moment was as precarious as the reach of federal powers and thus the regulation of slavery, both the conditions of possibility for one's sale into slavery and the "face-value" of potential slaves' sale were left to the discretion of merchants and consumers. Drawing from the slave narratives of William Wells Brown and William Craft, the Wilson's recall the kidnap, tanning, and staining of a boy from Ohio by slave traders in their essay.

Lewis Clarke, a fugitive from slavery in Kentucky, knew a slave he described as "all white." This boy was kidnapped from Virginia when he was very young... the owner feared that the youngster might learn of his status, "if they didn't keep him down right hard." Part of this attempt at suppression included severe physical punishment: "If any whipping was to be done he was sure to catch it" Clark was perhaps sensitive to this slave's plight because of his own complexion: Clark was described by noted New York abolitionist Lewis Tappan as being nearly as white as he. (6)

By the end, the reader of this booklet understands the moral virtues of the American political freedom translate well into the equal opportunity of the auction block, and its indifference to one's degree of pedigree, virtue, complexion, intellect, or obedience. Child's articulation of the indiscriminate reach of slavery across the black/white binary cautioned against the short-sightedness of those within the anti-slavery movement who were against slavery's expansion into the Western states, but remained apologists for its persistence in the South. Child's pamphlet outlines the dangers of bondage the institution imposed upon working-class whites should Southern slave culture be permitted to exist in competition with waged labor. She reminds her readers that being antislavery isn't sufficient to realize the political entailments of abolition, but would also necessitate an abolition of the class formations slavery made inevitable.

While Child mobilizes this critique of patriarchy with the sardonic irreverence of a sailor on a soapbox, she instructs Jacobs to temper the militancy of her slave girl critique of the domestic violence of the patriarchal institution by eliciting her reader's sympathy for her sufferings rather than by launching into systemic indictments of their conditions of possibility.¹⁹ The consensus of contemporary scholarship on Jacobs contends that Maria Child's imposition on Jacobs's narrative arch is proof of

¹⁹ In an early piece of correspondence between Child and Jacobs, the editor asks Jacobs to expound on the inflictions enslaved women, men, and children suffered in the wake of the Nat Turner Rebellion rather than end with a tribute to the John Brown raid on Harper's Ferry (*The Harriet* 279). By emphasizing the victimization rather than the self-determination of black bodies, Child mentors Jacobs away from her own combative style of political analysis and towards an articulation of appropriateness and virtue not typically attributed to slave girls with histories of licentious behavior.

the limited “privileges” of the metaphorical “auction block” upon which Jacobs’s narrative had to stand in order to be consumed. Rather than endorse abolitionists appeals to the use of violence to redress the wrong of slavery as a concluding tribute to John Brown would suggest, Child guides Jacobs to end her narrative with images of her grandmother.

Quoting Child, Yellin writes, “It does not naturally come into your story, and the manuscript is already too long. Nothing can be so appropriate to end with as the death of your grandmother” (141). Bruce Mills suggests that Child’s “advice to Jacobs underscores her conviction that a female slave narrative would be most forceful if it invoked the sanctity of motherhood. In choosing to emphasize the importance of the grandmother-granddaughter relationship throughout the text, both author and editor affirmed the role of domestic values in resolving the national crisis” (256).

Though it can certainly be argued that the gendered limitations of Jacobs’s narrative constrained her readers open reception to more radical endorsements of armed abolition, the affirmation of domestic values Child instructs her to return to at the end of her narrative are conventional, but “not in the usual way.” Throughout the narrative Linda Brent’s relationship with her grandmother comes to represent the relationship of enslaved women to the possibilities for becoming the embodiments domestic virtue their communities would require should the noncompliance of slaves be preserved. By ending with dreams unrealized and memories of her grandmother “like light, fleecy clouds floating over a dark and troubled sea,” we can speculate that

while Maria Child was certainly focused on upholding the virtues of family values, her advice to Jacobs was not perhaps meant to uphold the existing domestic virtues of the patriarchal order, but to expose the internal contradictions of its moral authority and sexual politics. Though steeped in sentimentalism, Child's earlier work made effort to degender attributes of feminine virtue and encourage their cultural incorporation into public life across lines of gender difference.

By attempting to rebrand domestic virtue a necessary political identity for abolition in both her sentimental literature and anti-slavery pamphlet, we might then read Child's advice to Jacobs to shift attention away from Brown and towards the Grandmother, as a both a critique of the moral bankruptcy of domestic virtue in American political life as well as a reflection of Child's own convictions of nonresistance, a radical arm of abolition that sought both the immediate and uncompensated end of slavery but did not endorse the use of preemptive force as a just means of realizing that moral end. Self-defense was a tool of justice for the frontier only when all other measures of civility failed. Dramatizations of violence in Child's interpretation of the struggle for Free Soil in Kansas were distinctly staged as acts in which self-defense was a last resort, enacted only after attempts to "follow the Christian ethic of returning good with evil" had failed effective. Kellow's essay details this moment in Child's short story, "The Kansas Emigrants."

The climax comes during the "Sack of Lawrence." In the face of Ruffian determination to drive free state settlers out of Kansas, the settlers decide they must defend themselves. Without help they are beaten, and in the aftermath of

the fall of Lawrence, they suffer great privation. The health of the young widow, Alice, fails. Her call for her mother in Massachusetts, of course, goes unanswered. Just before her death Alice has a vision of her slain husband. Together they walk through a Kansas that has become just like New England. Kate's son, "Little Johnny is President, and the Blue Mound [site of the future free state university] is called Free Mont." The story closes with the survivors hoping this vision will prove an omen. (40)

While we can only speculate as to the possible tensions that may have existed between Child and Jacobs with regard to their chosen tactics and strategies for abolition, the difference in their investments in abolition is implicit in the divergent visions or dreams of its political entailments with which both their antislavery manuscripts conclude.

Both Free Soil and fugitive women bore the costs of their retreats from patriarchy and coercion as the price for contesting their station. While Child's ends with a utopian realization of the northern bourgeois New England domestic order on the frontier, Jacobs's narrative highlights a dream of freedom that remains troubled, unnamed and unrealized. As Kellow points out there are few black people among the characters featured in "The Kansas Emigrants" and the preservation of free labor over slavery, while no doubt abolitionist, is not clearly specified as a critique of racial inequality. While Child's support of Jacobs certainly signaled a political solidarity and shared analysis of the wrong of slavery, it stands to reason that the reasons for and protocols

of abolition they both envisioned emanated from different experiences of the impositions of the patriarchal institution. Though the antislavery pamphlet Child published in 1860 indicates how fragile and contingent categories of racial differences were to the sustainability of slavery, the sexual politics of abolition Child took on by attaching her name to Jacobs's narrative a year later had the potential to disrupt colorblind demarcations of the lash, the shackle, the hot iron and other instruments of torture by advancing the virtues of political amalgamation – the formation of interracial alliances of forbidden friendships formed to oppose the sin of slavery as a social and historical construct.

“Is This Freedom?”

In order to be heard, Jacobs had to write her narrative from within existing protocols of feminine virtue and repurpose their good for her own use, a long-standing strategy of resistance within the black radical tradition. With the publication of a letter written in response to William Lloyd Garrison's request for a report on the “condition of the contraband,” Jacobs secured her position as a war correspondent. The imminent critique of slavery Harriet Jacobs testified to in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* became the basis from which her challenge to the conventional silence of feminine virtue became an impassioned critique of the legal virtue of political emancipation. Jacobs's letter challenged those for whom freedom was a right of birth to consider their legal obligation to those their antislavery efforts helped to free. She bears witness to the victory of emancipation as a tragedy of freedom's precarity for

formerly enslaved and fugitive subjects under the law and holds her readers to account for their welfare, not as charity, but by way of reparation.

The second longest of her documented writings after *Incidents*, Jacobs's letter to Garrison appeared in the September 5th 1862 edition of the *Liberator* as critical reading of the abolitionist project and the value it placed in the desire for freedom. It described in detail the dilapidated, barely tenable welfare of the "contraband" as they were popularly called. Her visit to the makeshift hospitals, slave holding pens turned prisoner-of-war jails, and orphanages hastily erected throughout Alexandria, Virginia and the District of Columbia was a last minute relief mission, an activist response following President Lincoln's abolition of slavery within the capital. Jacobs's mission produced a letter that called her fellow anti-slavery supporters to take up more than the charitable act of saving the recently emancipated from suffering the pains of poverty. Rather than present the deprivations of the formerly enslaved as extraordinary or sentimental spectacle, Jacobs testifies to their condition as an extension of a contradiction inherent within the protocols of liberal humanism and the kinds of value it placed on the modern desires for freedom. Though manumitted, the formerly fugitive slave girl was, as was previously discussed, not content with the kind of freedom that could be won by means of a bill of purchase. Her letter deviated from, without abandoning, the intimate persuasions of the slave narrative form, in a way that "opens itself," as Hortense Spillers suggests in her essay "Variations on the African American Sermon," to the analogical dimensions at play in the work of representing the condition of the disenfranchised.

Tragically, the kinds of freedom Jacobs finds at the edge of the battlefield were, in several incidents, merely fleeting moments of gratitude that preceded a free, rather than captive, death. Jacobs's writes, "...one mother passed away as the setting sun threw its last rays across her dying bed, and as I looked upon her, I could not but say—"One day of freedom, and gone to her God" (*Papers*, 401) The analogy Jacobs touches on here between the physically fatal and politically redemptive conditions of emancipated life for the formerly enslaved may have recalled for her readers the material limits of religiously or ideologically-motivated longings for freedom. The letter serves as a testament not only to her experiences of life among the contraband, but so too the precarious nature of their lives and the lack of basic provisions needed to prevent their ability to hold onto them.

Jacobs's letter is sure to frame the fugitives' will to live and their will to be free as interconnected, mutually constitutive political desires that would not be satisfied by the abstract or idealized rewards of legal personhood. Her depiction of their depravity amounted to more than a demand for national belonging and civic recognition. What Jacobs's letter does is effectively teach her reader to see the condition of the contraband as more than an abject and pitiable subject, but a person whose welfare was the material consequence of the rapid and uncompensated context of their political emancipation and incorporation into the American polity.

“If African-Americans have been “taught” anything under the regimes of New World domination,” writes Spillers,

...it adheres in the very close analogy between dominant behavior and the shape of information in which it is conveyed.’ If “I am” captive and under dominance, there can be no doubt of this “reading” in the woundings and renderings of “my” flesh. As African-Americans read their own history in the United States, the wounded, divided flesh opens itself to a metaphorical rendering both for the principle of self-determination and as a figurative economy for its peculiar national encounter. In other words, one seeks an adequate expression of equivalence, in “reading” the culture, between the situation of captivity and its violent markings. The imprint of words articulates with “inscriptions” made on the material body, so that an actual “reading” of captivity brings us to consider those changes in the tissue-life of the organism; to consider those differences of nuance inflicted on individual and collective identities, which help create the American regime of difference...” (272)

By representing the refugees’ lives as she does, as subjects unapologetically vulnerable to disease and death, Jacobs imparts her own readings of their condition to her reader as evidence that emancipation does not manifest as an inalienable right here but as insurance against the risk of re-enslavement. The security of this risk comes at their own expense not that of the emancipators.

Their freedom is a costly possession many paid for with their lives. Jacobs's representation of such a figurative economy of material dispossession and death implicates her audience in the physical violence the disposable value of human life modern emancipation suppresses, a dialectic phenomenon Lindon Barrett calls "seeing double." "Value is a twofold action or structure, a presentation and representation, a performance riddled by the dialectic nature of its disjunctive binarism," Barrett proclaims. "Always inherent in value is the trace of an original, violent, expenditure. Value is violence and, more to the point, value is violence disguised or dis-figured" (28). By revealing what the apparent virtues of modern emancipation makes invisible, the physical costs of freedom in the diminished health and well-being of the recently emancipated, Jacobs exposes her readers to the masses behind the moralizing messages of their movement, and the kinds of readings of its value their embodied experiences of emancipation make possible.

Acting as a war correspondent on behalf of the abolitionists in 1862, Jacobs borrows from the rhetorical traditions already established in its protocols of public address -- the Western biblical, philosophical, and the historical tropes of freedom. At moments however, Jacobs displaces these familiar images with the voices and figures of the refugees from slavery themselves. Rather than allow them to rely on the authority of their own reading practices, Jacobs teaches her abolitionist allies in the North how to read the "condition of the contraband" like a fugitive, displacing masculine representations of freedom as a fetishized form of manhood by revealing the fugitive embodiments abolitionist demands engender.

When Jacobs arrived at the frontlines of the Civil War bearing copies of her book for sale and items donated for distribution among the formerly enslaved refugees, Jacobs writes that she had come in search of the “glorious echo from the blow [that] had aroused the spirit of freedom” (*Papers*, 400). What Jacobs found was not a transcendent chorus of mass emancipation, but something more akin to the silence of unanswered questions about the assurances emancipation ought to have insured. In her opening paragraph her readers are confronted with the scenes not of glory but of desperation. She writes,

“I found men, women, and children all huddled together, without any distinction or regard to age or sex...Many were sick with measles, diphtheria, scarlet and typhoid fever. Some had a few filthy rags to lie on; others had nothing but the bare floor for a couch. There seemed to be no established rules among them; they were coming in at all hours, often through the night, in large numbers, and the Superintendent had enough to occupy his time in taking the names of those who came in, and of those who were sent out... Each day brings its additions of the hungry, naked and sick. In the early part of June, there were, some days, as many as ten deaths reported at this place in twenty-four hours. At this time, there was no matron of the house, and nothing at hand to administer to the comfort of the sick and dying. I felt their sufferings must be unknown to the people. I did not meet kindly, sympathizing people trying to soothe the last agonies of death. Those tearful

eyes often looked up to me with the language, “Is this freedom?” (*Papers*, 400)

“Is this freedom?” is, of course, Jacobs’s perennial dialogic provocation. It rings out from the end of *Incidents* as it does here as a mode of address meant to remind her readers that the political objective of abolition does not end with emancipation. The lack of resources, aide, and oversight that culminate in the void of an unanswered question in this passage displaces sentimental stories of individual struggle and redemption to which her reader would have become accustomed through their encounters with the slave narrative genre. The narrative form, with its conventionally gendered transformation of slaves to “men” represents emancipation through tropes of direct physical confrontation with cruel and violent captors. The form of the letter offers an alternative to the narrative focus on the individual and allows Jacobs opportunity to subvert her readers’ expectations for sentimentality by presenting them with the intimate details of her encounter with this conversion of the so-called contraband to states of citizenship as a systemic confrontation with the physical constraints of personal freedom and social welfare.

Jacobs’s own fugitive route to freedom could not have been more readily visible in the litany of lack with which she frames the “condition of the contraband.” Her readers’ first image of the newly emancipated, emerging en masse, without ceremony, and “without distinction,” is a monstrous inversion of the modern avatar of liberal political subject-hood, what Arthur Riss would call, “an identity immunized from

history.” (8) The name itself connotes the arrival of desired undesirables, black market imports. Though they are no longer slaves, their status has not yet fully divorced them from their previous incarnation as “God-breathing machines.”

Jacobs introduces this startling image of human embodiment void of human consciousness only once in passing at the end of the earliest chapter in *Incidents*, but it haunts the rest of her narrative structure nevertheless. After telling her reader of the death of her mother and the decision of her mistress to disregard the promise she had previously made to free Linda, Jacobs writes,

My mistress had taught me the precept of God’s Word: ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’ ‘Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even unto him.’ But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor... Notwithstanding my grandmother’s long and faithful service to her owners, not one of her children escaped the auction block.

These God-breathing machines are no more, in the sight of their masters, than the cotton they plant, or the horses they tend. (8)

Less than strangers, God-breathing machines connote a hybrid form of mechanized beast, or automated man-- a kind of undead, unconscious worker-zombie even less relatable to its human counterparts than was Mary Shelly’s monster. The idea that familiar outer forms may be forcibly inhabited by unfamiliar configurations of a fabricated inner life not only exemplifies the condition of the enslaved and the terms of their dispossession, it is also a configuration that finds expression in the

unconventional “fugitive” means by which enslaved subjects pursued and secured their self-emancipation. Though the social death and physical violence of slavery rendered its captives nonhuman, the so-called contraband swarm out of the storm of Civil War, the harbingers of the implicit alienation of American idealism, to weaken both the figural and material fortitude of the slave economy and prefigure the contradictions inherent in American political development.

Georg Lukács describes this dynamic in *History and Class Consciousness* in teleological terms, “the fate of the worker becomes the fate of society as a whole,” as the “reified structure of consciousness.” He writes,

The transformation of the commodity relation into a thing of ‘ghostly objectivity’ cannot therefore content itself with the reduction of all objects for the gratification of human needs to commodities. It stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man; his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can ‘own’ or ‘dispose of’ like the various objects of the external world. (100)

In the American context however, the teleological force of this commodity relation is rendered illegible. Without the help of Jacobs’s letter, and the continued activism of her fellow abolitionist into the era of Reconstruction more generally speaking, the continuities between the states of dispossession that characterized the condition of the slave prior to her emancipation and their persistence even after its arrival, had no guarantees of being documented. The ‘qualities and abilities’ of the formerly enslaved

would ever truly become the whole of history's to either own or dispossess. Jacobs's representation of the formerly enslaved in her letter to Garrison depicts the so-called contraband as a people experiencing the kind of liberation that might befall outmoded machines from exhausted factory-lines, or the release of wild animals back into their natural habitats. The seeming futility of the fugitives' condition has a definite, however indeterminate, pedagogical value for its abolitionist audience.²⁰ In a departure from the form of personal testimony she employs in her slave narrative, Jacobs, the war correspondent, employs something of an ethnographic lens to illuminate the material limits of legal emancipation. In the opening passage from her letter above, Jacobs anticipates her readers' sympathies for the undifferentiated suffering of the formerly enslaved, but then couples this portrait with a question that asks that the formerly enslaved not be forgotten along with the institution they managed to escape, but not yet abolish. No longer the noble creatures of a noble cause, Jacobs introduces the newly unfettered fugitives from slavery to her readers as potential critical compatriots whose dreams of freedom are bound up in their own.

Unaddressed Redress of Undressed Address

As readers of Jacobs's report will note, her "Life Among the Contraband" was written in the form of a personal letter addressed directly to Garrison himself. By blending

²⁰ In Barbara Rodriguez's chapter on Jacobs entitled "Commodities That Speak," Rodriguez builds upon Karl Marx's observation that a commodity's value is only realized through exchange to theorize the tension in Incidents between Jacobs's narrative use of both candor and decorum to win over her readers. Rodriguez reads a sense of self-determination into the steps the slave girl takes to repurpose the "use" for which she was valued by her master and the slave owning class in general through the work of writing for the very public that prohibited her access to such forms of address.

the intimate literary form of the letter with ethnographic narrative and political analysis in anticipation of addressing a wider audience of readers however, Jacobs reoriented abolitionist protocols of public address away from the lofty sensational sentimentality of moral suasion and towards a more empirically grounded accountability for the wrong of slavery. Taken up as a piece of political literature, many have read Jacobs's "Life Among the Contraband" as a request for charitable assistance from her allies in the North. Read as mode of public address meant to call attention to the limited sensibility of sentimentality in the face of abject poverty however, Jacobs's letter builds upon the kinds of emancipatory desire she illustrates in her earlier slave narrative in ways that subvert, in this instance, her readers' self-interested attachments to the end of slavery and its relative disregard for the condition of those its end set free.

Jacobs's portrayal of the "condition of contraband" animates a protocol of public address that brings the unaddressed interests of the dispossessed into the literary commons by appealing to the aesthetic sympathies of its readers and at the same time refusing to be consumed as a mere appeal to its readers' sympathetic reception. This is a protocol of public address that both exploits the intimacy of undressed autobiographic form of personal correspondence previously popularized through the slave narrative genre, and simultaneously implicates the reader by exposing their ambiguous proximity to the causes for their suffering as beneficiaries of the conditions Jacobs's address is addressing.

Zoe Trodd sees a similar dialogic art of public address emerge in John Brown's letters from prison just prior to his execution. Trodd writes of Brown's letters that they,

bridged the divide between the “autobiographically undressed” / “rhetorically addressed” original letter and its reinscription as “readdressed” / “redressed... He combined memoir, political treatise, and epistle, to craft a rhetorically powerful marriage of the public and private. To read Brown's prison letters is to encounter a man who was conscious and manipulative of historical and mythic precedent and who wrote himself into both myth and history— while retaining the aura of intimacy and authenticity conferred by the conventions of “private” correspondence. (Gaul 199)

Zoe Trodd borrows from Janet Altman to describe this line of protest literature as “an epistolary fusion of addressed/readdressed and undressed/redressed.” As the title of this section suggests, there something productive in pointing out the dialogic tension between unaddressed approaches to political redress for not only the crime of slavery, but for its systematic dispossession of a right to the commons, particularly in the case of those who worked collectively to survive and escape slavery.

In addition to her own critical perspective, Jacobs also includes the voices of the fugitives themselves in her letter. Their testimonies occupy prominent space in ways that neither echo nor assuage her readers' need for reassurance that their pity is a sufficient response to the material limits of political emancipation. Quoting a former enslaved woman who remains unnamed, Jacobs writes in her letter to Garrison,

“One old woman said—“Honey tink, when all get still, I kin go an fine de old place? Tink de Union 'stroy it? You can't get nothin on dis place. Down on de ole place, you can raise ebery ting. I ain't seen bacca since I bin here. Neber git a libin here, where de peoples eben buy pasly.” This poor old woman thought it was nice to live where tobacco grew, but it was dreadful to be compelled to buy a bunch of parsley.” (*Papers* 405)

Jacobs features the woman’s complaint as an effect of the ironic affects of freedom. The fact that feelings of unrestrained volition can be accompanied by a sense of isolation from access to familiar opportunities for employment marks emancipation for her as a social status of vulnerability, a state-sanctioned proximity to premature death Ruth Gilmore describes as the definition of racism.²¹ As living “contraband” the formerly enslaved occupy emancipated spaces of captivity that are no longer bound by the perimeters of the plantation or the reach of the slave codes. Nevertheless, the older woman’s concern for the destruction of the “old place” reveals the woman’s own attachments to the past, perhaps as a place of nostalgia, but then again, perhaps just practically speaking, as one where there remained for her the bare possibly for her survival.

Jacobs’s letters are compelling critical reinterpretations of the abolitionist aesthetic precisely because they neither attempt to resolve the internal contradictions within

²¹ Gilmore writes, “Racism, specifically, is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.” (28)

American liberal political praxis, nor merely interpret them. Rather, her letter prompts her readers' accountability for the dispossession of the formerly enslaved. Returning to the opening scene of Jacobs's letter, the images of dispossession she presents for her readers' contemplation serve as both the objects and the objective of her protocols of public address. The sense of uselessness palpable in its litany of lack-- no rules, no matron, nothing at hand, sufferings unknown, no kindness, no freedom-- works to both seduce her reader's sense of empathy without allowing her readers off the hook for their implied culpability. Jacobs draws her readers' attention not only to those places where they can be of help, but so too to how such an individual act of charity might not, in this particular case, be sufficient compensation for the injury of having endured and survived enslavement. The social chasm between her immediate readership and the object of her correspondence is all the more exposed in a style that is both political and incriminating while remaining personable and familiar. Its cumulative affect has the power to transform the ethical indifference of moral sympathy into a collective activist concern for extending the abolitionist cause beyond the event of emancipation to redress the welfare of the people the movement successfully helped to liberate from slavery. The supposed victors of slavery's abolition become, in Jacobs's report, the perpetrators of another kind of captivity, complicit in the conservation of conditions of unfreedom that are still far from human, only marginally less involuntary than slavery, and for many, the ultimate stage of their escape from captivity.

In the most arresting moment of Jacobs's letter she writes,

Do not say the slaves take no interest in each other. Like other people, some of them are designedly selfish, some are ignorantly selfish. With the light and instruction you give them, you will see this selfishness disappear. Trust them, make them free, and give them the responsibility of caring for themselves, and they will soon learn to help each other. Some of them have been so degraded by slavery that they do not know the usages of civilized life: they know little else than the handle of the hoe, the plough, the cotton pad, and the overseer's lash. Have patience with them. You have helped to make them what they are; teach them civilization. You owe it to them, and you will find them as apt to learn as any other people that come to you stupid from oppression. (*Papers* 406)

Rather than repent to God, Jacobs's letter massages allegiance from its readers by mirroring their interests back to them, the condition of the contraband are "like other people" and demands her readers participate in the repair of the condition of the contraband, because the benefactors of slavery OWE them that. Many appeals to the sympathies of abolitionists in the North for aid for those on the front lines filled the broadsides and weeklies of anti-slavery print media, asking their friends to send supplies and such down south. The fellowship Jacobs describes in her letter, the connections of fidelity she discovers among the self-emancipated slaves and white allies who helped them find food, shelter, education, and employment signals more than an appeal for humanistic sympathy however. It exhibits a politics of friendship tantamount to what was, arguably, the most taboo objective of abolitionist praxis—to

struggle to secure not only the legal victory of emancipation in itself, but in so doing, to also set the stage for the work of abolition as a practical foundation for the realization of a new set of protocols for national filiation. The politics of friendship Jacobs places at the center of the anti-slavery movement was not only the taboo of amalgamation which we began to discuss in the first chapter, it was also the materialization of an ethical relationship to the victims of slavery that had until then remained a much more paternalistic philanthropic affair. If radical abolition began with the desire to see the immediate, uncompensated end of the American slave economy, Jacobs's letter suggests abolition ought to end only when the debt of slavery's systemic dehumanization of all whom it held captive was fully redeemed, ushering in a culture of amalgamation not only of persons and communities, but the national economy of belonging and social welfare writ large.

Jacobs draws her readers into a scene of freedom that is neither familiar nor heroic in order to have them reflect upon their own place in the uneven progress of freedom's maligned arrival through the providence of its, then, most sidelined subjects. The anamorphic perspective of this most fugitive post-emancipatory orientation to liberal freedom becomes, in Jacobs's hands, a satire of the kinds of sentimentality Garrison's well-intentioned request for her report seemed to have had in mind, a critique of what commonly appealed to the moral sympathies of her Northern abolitionist readers as woefully insufficient to meet the very materials needed for the so-called contraband to gain access, not only to something akin to liberal freedom, but merely to have some autonomy over their means of potential survival. At the very least it had the

potential to make the nameless mass individuated members of civic life, rather than merely enumerated wards of the state.

abolitionist audiotopia

The abolitionist protocols of public address performed by formerly enslaved men and women were, as a historian of abolitionist rhetoric contends, popularized as a hybrid form of protest literature combining and recombining both oral and written traditions.

“The line between a speech and an anti-slavery tract or an essay in an antislavery newspaper is difficult to draw. Even items published as speeches were heavily edited and the essays or tracts were often derived from a speech or a series of lectures”

(Bormann, 5). To take up the study of abolitionist literature then requires that we not dismiss the theater of participation, the calls and the responses, the whispers and rallying cries which co-authored the historical record of its creative formation.²²

In the opening of an article on the abolitionist aesthetic of black public performance, Alex W. Black writes, “The primary texts of radical abolitionism demand a reader who has an eye for sound” (619). To have an eye for sound, readers of texts such as Harriet Jacobs’s “Life Among the Contraband” must surrender to their encounter with

²² Reference to the transformative power whispers here refers back to the preface of *Incidents* and the Child’s comparison of the style of Jacobs’s text to the whispers of a woman to her confidant. While there is some gendered hierarchy of value generally ascribed the difference between whispers and rallying cries, I would like to suggest that in fact they are reflective of the desire to have different effects upon their immediate audiences. Should she have roared her testament, ironically, it was surely less likely anyone would have heard her. For Jacobs, a woman whose intention it was to remake her grief as gift to the movement that had helped to ensure freedom for her and her children, the ability to properly contain the sound of her fury

her testimony and strain against their own resistance, to listening to an already incredible witness, to hear the embodied truths of her experience above the bass line of their own understanding of their responsibility for the “condition of the contraband.” They would have to learn to listen as she does, as a racialized though freed, gendered yet ungendered, particular yet tokenized, dutiful messenger for the dispossessed.

Many scholars of the black intellectual tradition have placed various soundscapes of antiracist struggle along with the limits of political representation they make visible at the center of their objects of study. Ronald Radano’s work on the seductive relationship between black music, racism, and popular culture he terms “hot rhythm,” points to the creative dispossessions folded into acts of public address that attempt to be heard across borders of racial difference.

The primitivist orthodoxy of ‘natural rhythm’ afforded a new sense of racial pride that was ironically reinforced by white supremacist assumptions of a bestial Negro instinct. This exalted hotness in turn supplied the creative and economic basis of an emerging urban subculture of black professional musicians, whose traditional proclivities toward performance were soon marketed as expressions of racially inherited rhythmic gift... It is precisely this facility to convey a complexity of frequently paradoxical meaning that

in the form of a whisper was essential for its successful transmutation. Even whispering then becomes a powerful weapon against the silence of the “unspeakable.”

has made hot rhythm so vital to modern American culture and, in particular, to the ontology of 'blackness' itself. (459-60)

In order to hear the “paradoxical meanings” that make the soundscapes of antiracist struggle audible in the first place, Radano suggests its audiences have to learn to hear past the seductions of its commodified form. Late-Abolitionist protocols of public address were enmeshed in a culture of rapidly industrializing possessive individualism in which, as Etienne Balibar writes, “‘Capital’ in general, as a substantial process, appears to be the model of every subject-formation, and hence of the category ‘subject’ itself.” (311) The unwitting precursors to present-day digitally rendered mashups fugitive acts of abolitionism in particular combined and recombined the rules of representation and commodification to bridge the gap between, what Radano identifies as both the “unspeakability” of the black experience and the “displacement” of its representation from the public sphere (462).

Alex W. Black interprets this phenomenon as an effect of the irrepressible resonances, in the case of abolition, of the sounds that prefigured new ideas about the meaning of freedom.

Those who sought to “choke free words before they’re spoken” sought not only to silence dissent but to assault the bodies of the dissenters. Legislative gag orders, suppressed mailing campaigns, and antiabolitionist rioting were not merely violations of the right to free speech. The circulation of David

Walker's *Appeal* and the *Liberator* depended on the mobility of black and white bodies: Walker sewed his text into the jackets of southbound sailors; Garrison employed subscription agents throughout the northeast. If these people could not travel, these visual texts would not be heard. More than sound was being abridged, though it was as sound that abolitionists figured these restrictions. When we read an abolitionist text we perceive a material process in which a sound is realized as an image that has the force of a statement. (619)

The re-combinations of nineteenth century theories of liberation that resound in fugitive acts not only upend conventional notions of the political process, they also challenge modern ideals of historical progress. Improvised performances of protest are generally recognized by historians and scholars of politics as the pre-political precedent for the development of a political consciousness; the precondition for one's subsequent incorporation into the organization of a more formal social movement.²³ What is interesting however about fugitive slaves' contributions to the abolitionist tradition is the way the traces of their transgressions have become ends in themselves, celebrated places of return for the popular consumption of protest culture throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. The fact that fugitive slaves and their acts of class and race disidentification with their condition have become a symbol of

triumph in the modern pursuit of universal human emancipation however blurs important distinctions between the story of the abolition as either a narrative of historical progress or a missed opportunity for national redemption. Rather than concede to polarizations of this debate and err on the side of defending one reading of the tradition against the other, consider instead what audiotopic work fugitive acts did for captives to prefigure a future for their condition beyond the time of slavery? I borrow the notion of audiotopia here from Josh Kun's work and his use of the concept to think about sound and its ability,

to point us to the possible, to help us remap the world we live in now— and because of its uncanny ability to absorb and meld heterogeneous national, cultural, and historical styles and traditions across space and within place, the possibility of the audiotopia makes sense: sonic spaces of effective utopian longings where several sites normally deemed incompatible are brought together, not only in the space of a particular piece of music itself, but in the production of social space and the mapping of geographical space that music makes possible as well. (23)

As a kind of audiotopic metaphor then, how did the work of being a fugitive become a method of abolitionist praxis for prefiguring an alternate eschatology for modern progress itself, forever changing the way the abolitionist intellectual tradition traveled through history to remain pertinent to the framing of political movements today?

²³As Eric J. Hobsbawm's notion of pre-political action suggests that there are, "people who have not yet found, or only begun to find, a specific language with which to express their aspirations about the world. Though their movements are often blind and groping, by the

One need only see the enormity of W.E.B. DuBois's over one thousand page volume on the period in American history following the end of slavery to grasp what chasm of silence his study on the condition of freedmen and freedwomen attempted to fill in the public record. Contestations over the meaning, means, and ends of abolitionist desire played out during the Civil War and Reconstruction in struggles to transform the lofty universalist virtues of humanist emancipation into practical applications of freedom, collective acts of what DuBois termed abolition democracy were themselves fugitive artifacts not two generations post-emancipation. In an interview discussing DuBois's concept of abolition democracy and its relevance to contemporary movements to abolish the prison-industrial-complex, Angela Davis explains, "it is not only, or even primarily, about abolition as a negative process of breaking down, but it is also about building up, about building new institutions... DuBois pointed out that in order to fully abolish the oppressive conditions produced by slavery, new democratic institutions would have to be created" (73). Abolition by this definition constitutes a speculative politics, marked as both criminalized and deviant for the way it dares to break away from sites of certain immobility and rebuild the social order from outside of it.

To become the courier of the contraband's prefigurative utopian longings often acquired representation either through the appropriation of popular narratives or the

standards of modern ones, they are neither unimportant nor marginal... their acquisition of political consciousness has made ours the most revolutionary century in history" (2-3).

impersonation of the spectacle of utopian longing itself. Returning for a moment once more to Jacobs's letter, we see the sonic spaces of silence she makes visible by placing the stories of individual fugitives on display as testament to commemorate the paradoxical meaning of their struggle.

...the scenes have become familiar. One morning, as I looked in, I saw lying there five children. By the side of the inn lay a young man. He escaped, was taken back to Virginia, whipped nearly to death, escaped again the next night, dragged his body to Washington, and died, literally cut to pieces. Around his feet I saw a rope; I could not see that put into the grave with him. Other cases similar to this came to my knowledge, but this I saw (*Papers* 404).

The emancipated kinds of captivity Jacobs witnesses in the depilated hospitals and orphanages at the fringes of the Civil War disfigure conventional oppositions of captivity and emancipation through the work of ethnographic analogy. To travel without detection and smuggle the "contraband" and through the discursive quagmire of public discourse was akin to the sojourn the fugitives from slavery had followed themselves all through the southern swamps and along the outskirts of cities as the formerly enslaved had to do to reach sanctuary behind Union lines. As a messenger for the dispossessed, Jacobs not only offers her readers an account of the practical means by which she and thousands of others escaped slavery, but so too an effective metaphorical method for representing for her abolitionist allies what a fugitive's desire for freedom might feel like. What it sounds like from the sidelines of the Civil War the public redistribution, circulation, and consumption of Jacobs's letter

facilitated the couriating of subsequent messages out of the intimate exchange of personal correspondence into the political contexts of their public reception. The means of their mass consumption are, for this reason, as significant to our reading of them as is their content itself.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Not contrabands, but soldiers”: A fugitive call of patriotism and liberation ²⁴

"The white men of the North have helped us thus far, and we want to help them. We would like to fight for them, if they would only treat us like men."
"Colored Refugees in Our Camps" (1863)
Harriet Jacobs

"Perhaps the lesson in all this is that we need to find ways of contesting the absolute authority of the law... we naturally assume that justice and equality are necessarily produced through the law. But the law cannot on its own create justice and equality"
"Abolition Democracy" (2005)
Angela Davis²⁵

In 1859, John Brown made a statement to the master of the armory upon his capture following the raid on Harper's Ferry saying,

We are Abolitionists from the North ... come to take and release your slaves; our organization is large, and must succeed. I suffered much in Kansas, and expect to suffer here, in the cause of human freedom. Slaveholders I regard as

²⁴ Union General Benjamin F. Butler had only recently rebranded Black military servicemen the "contraband of war," a discursive move that Kate Masur writes, "provided a legal veneer for holding the men and avoided challenging their status as property" (1050). A telling name for the intermediary space of embodiment between chattel and citizen, the so-called contraband occupied the landscape of the Civil War as both casualties and collateral the Union Army hoped would guarantee the disintegration of the slave economy and thus the countervailing force of the Confederate troops. Following the President's decision to officially abolish slavery within the nation's capital, the new name for the black soldiers traveled quickly to become common parlance encompassing not only those who had gained freedom by enlisting, but so too included the overflowing population of fugitives and refugees who had chosen to flee along with them rather than wait for others to fight on their behalf, those who chose to steal under cover of night in search of protection behind Union Troop lines, out of the reach of the Fugitive Slave Law. Though Jacobs had gone fugitive in 1842 and was manumitted along with her children ten years prior to this mass exodus, the letter she writes to Garrison for her allies in the North manages to represent both the condition of the contraband as she was asked to do, as well as the protocols of their escape and self-possession.

²⁵ *Abolition Democracy*, 92

robbers and murderers; and I have sworn to abolish slavery and liberate my fellow-men. (Sanborn 561)

In his statement Brown declared that the purpose of abolition was an organized sacrifice for “the cause of human freedom.” His vision of abolition appealed to a higher authority than that imposed on the enslaved by existing positive law and in so doing reclaimed a popular ideological defense of freedom previously used to justify slavery to justify slavery’s abolition. Brown’s appeal to natural law in defense of abolition in this passage expanded the domain of the law’s protection to include enslaved people within the domain of human rights. Though the antislavery movement as a whole did not readily embrace Brown’s tactics, his framing of abolition as an issue of human rights was a sentiment shared by many. In framing the work of abolition with an imperative not only of freedom but also of fellowship we might deduce that Brown’s declaration implied that the end of slavery would require more than the liberation of the enslaved. Including the liberated within the embrace of the law would also require the restructuring of freedom’s protocols of justice.

In the years preceding the start of the Civil War the raid on Harper’s Ferry hastened a paradigm shift within the antislavery community with increasing numbers of abolitionists abandoning their pacifism for more immediate action. While war militarized the cause of human freedom and helped to cement a path to black liberation, it did not ensure fugitives’ and refugees’ protection from what Guyora Binder terms, “the slavery of emancipation.”

In a society defined and bounded by the possibility of unfreedom, free status may be nothing more than a trench, hastily dug to offer temporary protection from the assault of the privileged that, because it is too dangerous for its inmates to leave, fixes them within range of their oppressors' weapons. The success of some in reaching this refuge may merely reinforce the boundary between them and those who remain in the line of fire. (2073)

The boundary Binder gestures to here, that which divides the marginally free from those still in bondage, secured the domestic order of the plantation as effectively as it secured the domestic order of the nation. While the promise of collective liberation compelled many fugitive slaves and refugees to confront the slave power by joining the Union effort, the kinds of liberation they sought were diverse and in some cases, like Brown, interested in an end of slavery that could guarantee the abolition not only of the status, but of the boundary itself - the master/slave relationship slavery institutionalized. In his essay Binder argues that the kinds of mass emancipation the United States saw throughout the Civil War and in the wake of the Constitutional amendments that followed, might be understood as a form of freedom more akin to an act of conscription than the result of racial equality. By liberating former slaves into something like a loophole in the logic of slavery, emancipation preserved the continuation of the master/slave relation in more morally justifiable form – one in which the signs of degradation followed the condition of the former captive rather than her captors. Binder writes,

Viewed as an ongoing process, American emancipation conformed to a tradition in which emancipation was more a variation on slavery than a

rejection of it, an alternative strategy for mobilizing and managing an alien population ... Implicit in the role of emancipator is a claim of political authority that may be grounded in cultural condescension to barbaric masters and helpless slaves alike. Thus the "international" crusade against the slave trade served to legitimize first British domination of Caribbean trade and finally British rule over much of Africa. (2075)

As Harriet Jacobs's own account of loopholes shows, "temporary protection from the assault of the privileged" is often a useful but not sufficient means of realizing the dream of emancipation. From her literal retreat to the hiding space near the plantation, to her fugitive slave status, to her manumission, loopholes sufficed in the face of the immediate need for freedom captivity created, when, as Binder writes, "it is too dangerous for its inmates to leave." Jacobs returns to the idea of freedom in her narrative and in so many ways reminds her reader that the cause of human freedom cannot be won nobly if accompanied by compensation to the purveyors of injustice.

As Lauren Berlant writes in her account of Jacobs's narrative, the freedom from harm enslaved women and men were permitted to imagine was routinely degraded as a result of having become "actively compliant in the scene of sexual savagery" in order to attain it. Berlant notes a passage in which Jacobs writes about enslaved men "actually sneaking 'out of the way to give their masters free access to their wives and daughters.' Because sexuality is the only exchange value the slaves pseudopossess" (225). While the historical veracity of her statement may be overblown (some skilled enslaved men and women were permitted by their owners to receive modest wages

for their labor as we saw in the case of Jacobs's father) Berlant's emphasis on the active compliance of the enslaved community to the sexual savagery of the slaveholders is instructive in helping us to consider the various forms of freedom slavery made imaginable, not only for its victims, but so too for its beneficiaries. In her narrative Jacobs's ideas of justice are conjoined to a vision of freedom enabled by a moral authority that outranks that of the state. Like Brown, Jacobs's moral critique of slavery had political consequences, but also because the injury abolition was meant to redress was not only the wrong of the slave status itself, but the deeper wrong of the master/slave girl relation the institution justified.

At the closing of a chapter, "What Slaves are Taught to Think about the North" Jacobs combines the image of militarized justice with kind of liberation she seeks in the figure of a female saboteur of slavery.

I have spoken of the pains slaveholders take to give their slaves a bad opinion of the north; but, notwithstanding this, intelligent slaves are aware that they have many friends in the Free States. Even the most ignorant have some confused notions about it. They knew that I could read; and I was often asked if I had seen any thing in the newspapers about white folks over in the big north, who were trying to get their freedom for them. Some believe that the abolitionists have already made them free, and that it is established by law, but that their masters prevent the law from going into effect. One woman begged me to get a newspaper and read it over. She said her husband told her that the black people had sent word to the queen of 'Merica that they were all

slaves; that she didn't believe it, and went to Washington city to see the president about it. They quarrelled; she drew her sword upon him, and swore that he should help her to make them all free.

That poor, ignorant woman thought that America was governed by a Queen, to whom the President was subordinate. I wish the President was subordinate to Queen Justice. (45)

By imagining slavery as an evil permissible only in the absence of a higher authority, the old “ignorant” woman suggests that the eclipse of the executive power of slavery is not only conceivable, its surrender would be immanent with the intervention of black people themselves. While the woman’s story conjures a figure of female royalty to deliver the people of the South to freedom it the word of the black people to which she responds. The dispersal of “word” refuses the active compliance of slavery’s subjection even as it is being imposed on the bodies of those it ravages.

On April 12, 1861, a mere four months following Harriet Jacobs’s publication of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the Confederates attacked Fort Sumter. The narrative’s popular reception brought Jacobs to Washington and to the front-lines of the battlefield. In her life as an abolitionist following the publication of her narrative Jacobs’s gendered ideas of justice and their relationship to freedom as a matter of words arise again to contest normative meanings of emancipation in her First of August speech to the black regiments before the Toussaint L’Ouverture Hospitable in 1864.

Though resolutely critical of the wrong of slavery Harriet Jacobs's abolitionism neither led her to break away from her residence within the United States, as her brother John S. Jacobs and son, Joseph, had done, nor did she share her fellow Quakers' skepticism about direct involvement in party politics -- their "declaration of non-collaboration with a state that depended on force" -- as did many of her suffragist-turned-abolitionists allies of the North (Ginsberg 17). Jacobs's political affinity for the abolitionist effort shifted with the coming of the war, along with many other fugitive abolitionists along with her -- most notably Frederick Douglass.

As diverse and contested the ideological aims of abolition had been, the amalgamation of grassroots antislavery interests across line of race, gender and class differences were centralized around support for the first-hands accounts of slavery fugitives procured. Quoting historian R. J. M. Blackett David Brion Davis writes "the black's goal of exposing the evils of American slavery and racism brought unity to ... the fractured Anglo-American abolitionist movement ... As Blackett observes ... As products of American slavery and discrimination, they brought an authenticity, a legitimacy, to the international movement that their white coworkers could never claim" (*Age of Emancipation* 333).

With the advent of civil war fugitive abolitionism began redirecting the exchange value of its legitimating power of direct representation through partisan party channels to support the Union effort. Just as the old woman in Jacobs's narrative predicted, word of the plight of the slaves had gotten around and a higher authority

was on its way. Unlike Queen Justice however, the contest over the reach of the slave power, as it was then called, did not, so riddle American history with misrecongnition, as Berlant suggests, that its history, “as a narrative about sovereign subjects and their rational representation,” becomes unthinkable (226). Instead civil war reinforced the boundary between free and those still in bondage, subsuming the threat of the fugitive within a paradigm of the loyal militarized subject, and rendering acts of insubordination acts of treason.²⁶

The threat of slave rebellion was not only an existential anxiety for the proponents of abolition, its disregard domestic tranquility in general posed a threat to the national narrative of sovereignty modern liberal politics conspired to protect. Whatever competing ideas of freedom abolitionists held up in opposition to the national expansion of slavery however, even fugitive figurations of freedom were largely premised upon notions of it already embedded within the international contexts and political communities from which they arose. Though there were anarchists among the abolitionist movement, nonresistance, not armed uprising informed the

²⁶ Thavolia Glymph writes in her essay on slave women during the Civil War of a cook in North Carolina still serving her mistress towards the end of the war who, “considered herself fortunate to be in the path of General William Tecumseh Sherman’s famous army.” After welcoming the troops and feeding them “the choicest meats” extracted from her mistress’s hiding places, she publically proclaimed “the slave woman forthrightly claimed her freedom. Moreover, she insisted that in doing so, she aimed to emancipate her mistress as well. At stake was the destruction of the larger world of slavery and her mistress’s privileged position in it ... for starters, she would have to cook for herself.” (498-499) After confessing her declaration to a Union soldier sent to investigate the threat to the mistress’s safety the soldier shot the cook and escorted the woman’s mistress and children to safety to await her confederate husband’s return from service.

ideological basis of their vision of emancipation and decentralizing the slave power.²⁷

As Binder reminds us, “in time of war many regimes have sought to preserve themselves and prevent slave unrest by placing slaves under military authority” (2075).

The ally-ship of an international community of anti-slavery activists fostered support for the Union’s eventual arming of fugitives while it simultaneously conscribed slave liberation within a modern liberal narrative of national sovereignty, civic virtue, and a protracted path to citizenship. As W. Caleb McDaniel writes, “Transnational antislavery networks not only g[a]ve tangible meaning to abolitionist slogans like “Our Country Is the World,” but they also help[ed] illuminate abolitionists’ internally contested understandings of race, nationality, democracy, gender, imperialism, religion, public opinion, and much else” (86). Though the dictates of moral suasion had color-blinding properties, political incorporation through the militarization of the fugitive would only reinforce existing boundaries of racial supremacy, civic participation and national belonging.

Black enlistment bears the double signification of both an act of coercion as well as one of self-determination. As a form of mass emancipation the paradigm of enlistment carries an echo of the kinds of active compliance Jacobs attributed to the helplessness of enslaved men on the plantation in the face of slavery’s sexual

²⁷ For more on the anarchism within abolitionism see Lewis Perry’s *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought* (U of Tennessee Press, 1995)

savagery. What was aggravated reticence on the plantation repeats itself in this figure of the fugitive soldier as patriotism and civic virtue. As James M. McPherson writes in his essay, “Who Freed the Slaves,”

Union officers, then Congress, and finally Lincoln decided to confiscate this human property belonging to the enemy and put it to work for the Union in the form of servants, teamsters, laborers, and eventually soldiers in northern armies. Weighed in the scale of Civil War, these 190,000 black soldiers and sailors and a larger number of black army laborers tipped the balance in favor of Union victory.”(1)

While the Union arguably could not have won without the assistance of black servicemen, and though black enlistment was, in effect, the active confiscation of personal property for the purpose of national security, the North’s incorporation of fugitives and refugees also complicated the popular discourse of the war effort, effecting a sharp infusion of fugitive justifications for abolition, “the cause of human freedom” into the political imperative of national unification. Fugitive abolitionists themselves rallied behind calls for black enlistment, invoking the moral authority of black liberation and armed struggle with reference to figures such as Toussaint L’Ouverture and the revolutionary virtues of self-emancipation. The battlefield entangled histories of conscription, moral benevolence and the civic virtues of self-determination, in this context liberation and loyalty overlapped to complicate already tenuous distinctions between mastery and slavery. In the face of overwhelming

obstacles to freedom enlistment promised a loophole in the links of slavery, a way out of bondage premised upon providing a way into the embrace of the law.²⁸

This chapter revisits Jacobs's First of August speech and takes up her allegiance to the Union articulated within it as both an extension of her abolitionism and an invocation of a higher moral imperative than that of maintaining the domestic order and ensuring national belonging. In what follows I argue that the language of self-emancipation she employs in her speech articulates an appeal to human rights based in a transnational solidarity with the virtues of slave rebellion. As a result of her continued efforts to resist slavery's savagery, Jacobs cultivated an ethical orientation to virtue conceived from within the loopholes of slavery's domestic order. Armed with the perspective of one who had watched slave owners rape and kill with impunity, she knew too well the costs of self-preservation. With each instance of escape Jacobs found a victory in freedom buttressed by sheer uncertainty. So long as those in bondage remained captive, she knew her freedom remained contingent upon her ability to secure the difference between her uncertain future and the fate of those still in bondage.

In defiance of prevailing tendencies within the free black people of the North to distance themselves from slavery, Jacobs repeatedly returned to the violence she had

²⁸ As Gary Kynoch writes, the long standing debate over the administration of equal wages for black servicemen in the army was undermined by claims that national belonging *was* remuneration. "*Christian Recorder* implored: 'We hope that our men will not stand on dollars

escaped by authoring the narrative, returning to the South, and availing herself and her daughter to the education of the freedmen in the aftermath of the war. Solidarity with those still in bondage was a broadly employed rhetorical tactic to embolden black servicemen to fight for their country despite the racial subjection that came with enlistment. In the only documented speech of her career, Jacobs boldly proclaimed her support for an armed struggle for black liberation in service to the Union but derived her sense of civic virtue from her loyalty to a political community whose bounds exceeded the boundaries of national belonging. Though Jacobs's address could be read as an act of capitulation to the will of the Union, it also posed an implicit challenge to the Union's view of itself as the moral authority of modern politics and emancipator of suffering servants. As both a formerly fugitive slave mother and recently manumitted woman Jacobs understood too well the slavery of emancipation and her call for solidarity with the Union echoed a critique of the kinds of freedom that privileged the exchange value of black loyalty over the inalienable right of black people to justice and human freedom we find at the end of her narrative.

For women within the antislavery movement black enlistment implied that the path to political recognition was paved with military service. For formerly enslaved black women in particular, the path to citizenship was murky indeed. Women circumnavigated these obstacles to join the war effort as nurses and aids to the

and cents, but will consider that their country has called for their services, and if it has not heretofore been considered their country, it will be hereafter" (110).

refugees as Jacobs did. Records of fallen soldiers also show that several hundred disguised themselves as men to fight on the battlefield. Harriet Tubman led covert missions through the South and was known to many as General Tubman. The militarization of the fugitive was, however, a distinctly gendered form of emancipation. As Douglass proclaimed in an essay aimed at the recruit of black servicemen, “You are either for the Government or against the Government. Manhood requires you to take sides, and you are mean or noble according to how you choose between action and inaction”(1). The precarious and covert character of women’s participation in the war brought with it public attention to the limits of political recognition as did the racism black soldiers faced as active members of the army -- “the sight of a black man in uniform being sufficient to incite murderous assaults on a number of occasions.”²⁹ Although extralegal violence was as much the providence of powerful political and economic forces before the war as it was in its aftermath, civil war expanded the legal right to wield rights, temporarily extending justification for armed struggle to a fugitive potentially abolitionist population who may or may not have shared a common vision of what justice after slavery may require. Before launching into the discursive loopholes of national loyalty and black liberation Jacobs’s First of August speech lays bear, we first must establish her

²⁹ As Gary Kynoch reminds us in his essay on black enlistment, “The Union army reflected the views of the society from which its members were drawn and although they risked their lives in the service of their country, black soldiers enjoyed no special protection from racism ...Although African Americans made up less than ten per cent of the Union army, nearly twenty-five per cent of the 272 troops executed by the end of 1865 were black. The vast majority of troops executed for mutiny (72.2 per cent) were members of the United States Colored Troops, as were nearly half of those executed for rape” (117).

occupation of it within a broader intellectual history of fugitive abolitionist calls for armed defense of the “cause of human freedom.”

‘Men of Color, to Arms!’

John Brown was, of course, not the first abolitionist to endorse the use of violence in defense of the “cause of human freedom.” Inflections of enlightenment thought had been an integral part of the antislavery discourse from its inception in the eighteenth century. As David Brion Davis writes, in its earliest incarnations antislavery sentiment risked association with anti-revolutionary sentiment. During the American Revolution Quaker pacifism, which provided the ideological basis for much of the early antislavery movement, in particular raised suspicion concerning Quaker loyalty to the Crown. Rather than abandon their ethical stance writes Davis, “American Quakers could appeal to the principles of natural rights or the Declaration of Independence. When Quaker merchants called for an end to the slave trade, they were in effect supporting colonial grievances against British imperial policy” (*Age of Revolution* 222).

Not unlike the suspicions of loyalty raised by Quaker pacifism, the prospect of enlisting black men also raised questions of loyalty in a time of war. Antislavery activists rallied for black enlistment by framing it as an act of civic virtue, an act of personal sacrifice for the nation that reinforced a perception of black folks’ loyalty to their Northern liberators. Enlistment itself repeated tropes of armed struggle, black liberation and masculine sovereignty made prominent by black nationalists in

antislavery papers, tracts and pamphlets throughout the mid-nineteenth century. As Matthew J. Clavin writes, Frederick Douglass's 'Men of Color, to Arms!' was "among the most widely reprinted articles of the Civil War era, and the slogan quickly became the rallying cry of black soldiers and recruiters." Clavin adds that, "In the text, Douglass insisted that African Americans live up to the revolutionary standard set by John Brown, Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner. He exhorted black men to redeem their manhood, for 'Liberty won by white men would lose half its luster'" (89). The liberal sentiment of Douglass's caveat, that freedom could not be gifted but ought to be gallantly won, was echoed in political cartoons which appeared on posters and in papers, images that characterized the slave-turned-soldier as a symbol of black liberation, self-determination and national sacrifice. These images represented black enlistment as an act of loyalty to the "cause of human freedom" as a domestic political goal, rather than one which would pose a threat to the unification of the nation. While refusing enlistment would have meant submission to the domestic institution's dispossession of their manhood, by joining the Union black men subjected themselves to a new master in exchange for their loyalty. As Gary Kynoch writes, "For free men in the North, enlistment involved surrendering oneself to white authority and military discipline with no chance of advancement to officer's rank; yet many were convinced that fighting on behalf of the Union provided their best opportunity to secure equal rights"(105).

For fugitive abolitionists, black enlistment was not only a testament of black loyalty to their political liberators, it also bore the mark of earlier, less patriotic sentiments

within the black community, interests that aimed more towards black self-dependence than national belonging. Creative acts of self-emancipation included but were not limited to what Du Bois termed the “mass strike” that took place on Southern plantations during the Civil War. Work slow downs had long preceded the war. The formation of maroon societies, underground networks to aid fugitives in their escapes and other numerous acts of insubordination throughout the antebellum era only escalated during the war. The noncompliance of black communities in the South reinforced the efforts of their Northern counterparts whose demands for civil liberty and rights to free labor took the form of Free Produce boycotts, vigilance committees, black suffrage societies, education initiatives, aid societies, and women’s rights associations. Though many of these efforts worked within the infrastructure of antebellum civil society, many everyday forms of black resistance to slavery, including creative political writing, testimony, song, prayer, story-telling, and armed rebellion, constituted a political tradition that ran coterminous with, but not always in allegiance with the principles of American governance.

Throughout the antebellum era racial solidarity was, for some black supporters of the antislavery effort, a virtue in competition with the ideal of national incorporation and the protection of civil rights. Black radical abolitionism, often animated by separatist sentiment, and black liberal abolitionism, which sought the protections of political recognition, shared common set of ideals, vocabularies and principles, but organized themselves around competing trajectories of black liberation. The double-

signification of the fugitive-soldier conjoined these competing ideas of freedom under a single cause.

The fugitive-soldier was not a monolith but something more like the hybrid category of persons Jacobs described in her narrative as “god-breathing machines.” Conjoining the will of the nation in a body created for just such a purpose, the hybrid figure concealed the violence that birthed blackness behind the veil of the patriot. While there were a number of incentives responsible for consenting black enlistees to join the Union army, namely wages, the manumission of family, and pride, if captured by the Confederates black soldiers were identified as insurrectionists, subject to the death penalty (Kynoch 120). As the by-product of what legal scholar Cheryl Harris describes as “a peculiar, mixed category of property and humanity – a hybrid possessing inherent instabilities that were reflected in its treatment and ratification by the law,” (1718) the fugitive-soldier embodied the boundary of the master-slave relation in new form.

As Matthew J. Clavin writes, “The men and women who seized upon the revolutionary symbols of Toussaint and the Haitian Revolution at this critical moment in the history of the American republic advanced a subversive ideology that undermined the white supremacist ideas that buttressed both the institution of slavery as well as the republic itself” (87). The dissemination of David Walker's appeal in September 1829 popularized antislavery sentiment with an argument which coupled popular indictments of the moral wrong of slavery with a political demand for its

immediate abolition by any means necessary, and the establishment of equal civil rights for blacks. Walker's '*Appeal... To the Colored Citizens of the World But in Particular and very Expressly to those of the United States of America*' was arguably the most significant antislavery pamphlet of its time precisely because it situated the problem of slavery in a global context expressed through language that bridged enlightenment ideals, liberation theology, and a militarized urgency rooted in the spirit of the American Revolution but animated on behalf of those black people still in bondage.

Vincent Harding writes, "Walker was perhaps the first writer to combine an attack on white racism and white economic exploitation in a deliberate and critical way"(86). Walker's critique of slavery supported the call the insurrection and was considered contraband throughout the South. Rather than oppose slavery on the grounds of moral sin alone it found fault with the institution as an unjust combined condition of social alienation, political disenfranchisement, racial subjection and economic dispossession. The ethical imperative of Walker's *Appeal* was not an abstract ideal of freedom but a practical politics of black solidarity, especially between free and un-free people of color, an appeal modeled, in many ways, upon the dialectic of domination from which they sought freedom. Harding argues that this "sense of solidarity was the deepest source of Walker's radicalism... it was this advocacy which posed the most obvious, if not the most profound, threat to the American social order" (87).

Harding follows with a quote from the *Appeal* itself. "Let your enemies go with their butcheries, and at once fill their cup. Never make an attempt to gain *our* freedom or *natural right*, from under our cruel oppressors and murderers, *until you see your way clear*-- when that hour arrives and you move, be not afraid or dismayed; for be you assured that Jesus Christ the king of heaven and earth who is the God of Justice and of armies, will surely go before you" (87). The possessive investment in emancipation Walker names here differentiates itself from liberal rights discourse by raising the figure of blackness not in the image of an isolated suffering servant seeking salvation, but as a distinctly collective, divinely authorized, and extralegal category of persons.³⁰

On January 1, 1832 the doctrine of immediate abolition was signed at a meeting of the New England Antislavery Society. In 1843 abolitionist students in Quincy, Illinois adopted the slogan, "Universal Freedom, or death on the battlefield," and Reverend Henry Highland Garnet gave his famous "Address to the Slaves of the United States of America" (Dillon 221). In his address Garnet rejected the passive gradualism of divine deliverance and called instead upon what Glaude calls, "the existential pain that drives people to force the End... Unlike most of his fellows Garnet was ready to force the End in the face of white America's indifference to black

³⁰ Prior to the start of the war, abolitionists who supported moral reform over political revolution often "reconstituted such attributes of emasculation as passivity and submission into virtues, encouraging "nonresistant Negroes" to interpellate themselves into or position themselves within the Christian archetype of the 'suffering servant,' (Jasinski 29).

suffering and its support for the evil of slavery" (146). In his address Garnet proclaims

But you are a patient people. You act as though you are made for the special use of these devils. You act as though your daughters were born to pamper the lusts of your masters and overseers. And worse than all, you tamely submit while your lords tear your wives from your embraces and defile them before your eyes. In the name of God, we ask, are you men? Where is the blood of your fathers? Has it run out of your veins? Awake, awake; millions of voices are calling you! Your dead fathers speak to you from their graves. Heaven, as with a voice of thunder, calls on you to arise from the dust. (Davis 278)

By 1848 the rise of the Free Soil Party became a public platform for the reissuing of *Walker's Appeal* following Walker's murder. In the reissued edition Reverend Garnet contributed an addendum from his 1843 address adding, "You had far better all die - die immediately, than live slaves, and entail your wretchedness upon your posterity" (xii). Garnet adds this dimension of historical redemption to Walker's appeal to interclass racial solidarity, suggesting that the relationship of bondage was not only an injustice of social alienation, but so too the severing of a people from history itself. By repeatedly associating the active compliance of the enslaved with disloyalty to their past Garnet sets the stage for the black leadership during the war to invoke images of black insurrection as incentives for black enlistment, melding a history of black liberation to the political project of national reunification.

For Garnet, however, a possessive investment in freedom was an attempt to disorient the slave from the precarity of the time of slavery and align blackness with alternate history of national belonging, one in which black people could procure a kind of freedom in the future that did not require the compliance of military service to their liberators. To risk criminalization for the realization of such a history would not only require the individual power of an undivided will, but more contingently, the popular recognition that that will was just and reasonable. While Garnet's address “shocked” even his fellow black abolitionists, historian James Jasinski argues that more than an unequivocal call for slave rebellion Garnet’s Address,

negotiated the disjunctive logics of submission/resistance, emasculation/brutish violence, and “suffering servant”/“avenging messiah” by drawing on and exploiting the resources of these and other performative traditions in order to fashion a tertium quid, a middle course of action capable of constituting a new mode of African American agency and an alternative form of civic identity. (29)

Representations of black heroism in Garnet’s call to arms echoed both the revolutionary spirit of American independence and the spiritual fervor of a Christian soldier. Historians such as Eric Foner interpret such confluences of symbolic representation as a discursive adoption and reinterpretation of hegemonic discourses of Western lexicons of freedom.

Adopting the nation's democratic and egalitarian rhetoric as their own, slaves interpreted it in light of the compelling biblical story of Exodus, in which a

chosen people suffers.... bondage only to be released through divine intervention. Slaves saw themselves simultaneously as individuals deprived of their rights, and as a people lacking political self-determination. Thus, freedom meant both escaping the myriad injustices of slavery--punishment by the lash, the separation of families, denial of access to education, the sexual exploitation of black women by their owners— and achieving a collective empowerment, a share in the privileges and entitlements of American citizenship. (13)

However, it is important to distinguish demands for political recognition from armed struggles for self-emancipation. Garnet's call to rebellion came together with Nat Turner's confessions, Walker's *Appeal* and Douglass's break with Garrisonian abolitionism to give rise to a figuration of black masculine might that bore the mark of personal sovereignty within an international context of black nationalism. For Garnet the fugitive soldier was more a messianic embodiment of the black radical tradition than an American patriot. In its essence the fugitive soldier was a figure that transcended the constraints of white masculine domination by insisting that black self-defense was reasonable and morally superior to the submission of the suffering servant.

With the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 the militancy of radical abolitionism grew. Justifications of black liberation through armed struggle were increasingly popularized as specters of the American Revolution. The “spirits of ‘76” became the rallying cry for the opponents of slavery's ever-expanding tyranny. In a

letter written by William P. Newman to Frederick Douglass, October 1st 1850, the Baptist clergyman wrote,

Do they not saint the spirits of '76 for their noble defense of their inalienable rights? Why then damn me for doing the same? 'Tis the 4th of July. Hark! What means this cannon's roar? 'Tis the joyful voice of a free people, eulogizing the man who condemned the tyrants, and gave to American colonies freedom. Why, on a public day, those oratoric sounds falling from human oracles – those words that burn—words mingled with eloquence divine—words that raise the dead... Who that is oppressed himself, is not ready to do like deeds for his race to come? (Ripley 64)

Abolition haunted the future of American unity. Political visions of racial equality fueled fugitive and free-born blacks to fight for their own emancipation in increasingly organized and aggressive ways. Newman was one of many formerly enslaved men and women who abandoned nonresistance to embrace more activist interpretations of the abolitionist project, one which grew impatient with moderate, supporter for social reform throughout the North.

Militant abolitionism brought the material exigencies of the moral arguments against slavery to bear on the injustice of slavery's ever-present threats of expansion culminating in what historian Willie J. Harrell Jr. identifies as, “a deliberate fusion of rhetoric and social protest that represented a transformation from a religious to a socio-political evaluation of the ills of slavery while inspiring moral uplift and elevation in its black audience; it is concerned with the promotion of black

consciousness while it involves a commitment to an unrelenting rational examination of selfhood and socio-political practices of blacks” (10). Though the passivism of religiously-motivated abolitionists was still pervasive among populations of free-born blacks and whites in the North, increasing numbers of fugitives were reading the experience of slavery itself as a form of warfare, an injury which warranted the use of armed defense for the realization of justice.³¹

“Dear Old Flag”

The image of the fugitive-soldier raised by black nationalists in the antebellum era greatly shaped the emergence of the fugitive-soldier during the Civil War. By the time Harriet Jacobs stood before a crowd of soldiers in Alexandria, Virginia, in celebration of the First of August, 1864, former fugitives and recently enlisted refugees had been fighting and dying on behalf of the Union for over a year. The message she unfurled with the American flag that emancipation day resonated with both the radical emancipatory desires of a black nationalist while simultaneously espousing her loyalty to the land and ideals of American freedom. She distances her vision of emancipation from the paradigms of manumission by calling out the costs of compensation in the work of liberation. Jacobs’s address began,

“PHYSICIANS, SOLDIERS AND FRIENDS: For the first time in Alexandria we have met to celebrate a day made historical to our race--the day of BRITISH WEST INDIA EMANCIPATION. It is thirty-one years today since

³¹ Merton Dillon writes, “some abolitionists found a way out of the dilemma [posed by the virtues of nonviolence] when they realized, as Abby Kelley did in 1857, that slavery itself

the shackles fell from the British slave--since his fetters were broken. British gold paid for that emancipation act. We are passing through times that will secure for us a higher and nobler celebration” (*Papers* 182).

First of August celebrations had become a popular abolitionist tradition throughout the North; a day to commemorate the signing into law of black emancipation from British slavery in 1834, the writ which freed over eight hundred thousand by means of twenty million pounds compensation of the colony’s planters. Abolitionists of the North had begun holding “First of August” picnics in commemoration of the emancipation of the British slave as early as 1834. Jacobs’s 1864 commemoration of the day was to be among the first to bring this young tradition south. By that time August First Day, or Emancipation Day as it was also called, had become the most important standing tradition for antislavery advocates.

Though they were popular, public celebrations of the victory of the emancipation of British slaves were also deemed criminal. As social historian Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie writes on the celebrations of the British Emancipation Act of 1833 in the North, the violent repression of what was perceived as blacks’ open defiance of civic order often accompanied such celebratory displays of solidarity with black liberation in the Caribbean.

It also highlighted the dangers of public space for African Americans. Indeed, these dangers were serious enough for the National Convention of Colored People— due to meet in Philadelphia— to cancel their summer meeting. Most

was warfare” (223).

important, this commemorative march occurred at a time when the struggle against American slavery was undergoing a basic strategic shift from moral reform to more militant and demonstrative expressions. (56)

Kerr-Ritchie writes that there is a very particular relationship between the national, the local, and the international iteration of opposition to slavery forged through the performance of these festivities throughout the States and indeed around the globe.

In counterdistinction to what Kerr-Ritchie terms the “church rites” that governed many of the First of August commemorations, Jacobs’s appeal to the newly enlisted black soldiers might be read as a critique of the implications of manumission. In pronouncing the “gold paid for that emancipation act” insufficient compensation for the crime of slavery, Jacobs exposes the double signification of national acts incorporation by manumission conceal, what Trinh T. Minh-ha refers to in *Elsewhere Within Here* as “the continuing struggle between official and unofficial narratives—those largely circulated in favor of the State and its policies of inclusion, incorporation and validation, as well as of exclusion, appropriation and dispossession” (56).

Jacobs’s speech was described in a prominent abolitionist weekly, *The Anglo-African*, as “calm and unassuming.” In its September 3rd edition the paper featured a transcription of Jacobs’s keynote with the notable mention that her address was both “timely” and “admirably done” (*Papers* 578). Perhaps her fellow abolitionists were impressed with the way Jacobs’s speech so keenly laid bare the uneasy tension

between those past victories of emancipation won by mass manumission and those that would have to be won by a protracted armed defense of the ideals of abolition as the new basis of ethical virtue for the civic order.

The hospital was the setting for the First of August festivities. Jacobs had arranged the August First festivities as an occasion to commemorate the renaming of a hospital in Alexandria after the Haitian revolutionary, Toussaint L'Ouverture. By coupling commemoration of Haitian revolution and British manumission the on the front-lines of the Civil War before former enslaved soldiers in the Union army the event itself represented the competing discourses of national loyalty and national liberation in a single signification of civic virtue. It was a segregated hospital, especially designated to serve the hundreds of newly enlisted slaves-turned-soldiers. Community leaders including the Chaplin, Rev. Chauncey Leonard spoke at the event though Jacobs's was the only of the speeches of the day to be printed in the antislavery presses.

Even in the first few lines of Jacobs's speech, the fugitive-slave-girl-turned-Union recruiter invites us to reorient our modern understandings of political freedom toward the conditions of possibility for the American slave's abolition of it. Liberation is not won but monetary compensation to the liberators, but by exploiting the loophole of the meaning of liberation with which they themselves identify. By empowering her audience to imagine themselves "passing through" the time of slavery as a contingent rather than ontological condition of utter domination Jacobs recast the evil of slavery as a temporality all its own, a historical loophole of contingency imbued with its own

messianic uncertainty. Abolition in this instance was a politics animated by an reorganization of domestic ideals to authorize a series of covert actions, fugitive escapes, and collective uprisings—protocols of a hive-like mass exodus designed to reconfigure the domestic order itself.

“American gold will never secure freedom, equal rights and justice to our race,” Jacobs declared in her speech. “No! before these can come,” she went on to explain, “American slavery must be crushed, and its foul stain wiped from the Nations escutcheon” (*Papers*, 578). Though many within the Union agreed that the institution of slavery had overstayed its welcome, the terms and conditions of its abolition, which wrong its end ought to right, was as much a topic of consternation, debate, and disagreement during the war as it had been since the first publications of abolitionist print media in 1700.³²

The *Anglo-African*, the most widely read black abolitionist paper, was a particularly adamant proponent of the immediate abolition of slavery without compensation to the slave economy.³³ Jacobs’s support of military force over monetary compensation to

³² While many today would more than likely agree with the moral humanist grounds of Samuel Sewall's critique of captivity in his 1700 tract “The Selling of Joseph”, the first anti-slavery treatise published in New England according to the Massachusetts Historical Society. However there would likely be slightly less unanimous sentiment shared in his concerns that the competition of slaves with whites for employment would result in both a shortage of jobs and the vulnerability of their daughters to the allures of miscegenous union with free working black men.

³³ For more on the history of this paper see the introduction to *Pamphlets of Protest: An Anthology of Early African-American Protest Literature, 1790-1860* ed by Richard Newman, Patrick Rael, and Philip Lapsansky (New York: Routledge, 2001). Also see Debra Jackson’s “A Cultural Stronghold”: The “Anglo-African” Newspaper and the Black Community of New

bring about the end of slavery echoed this turn from discourses of passive nonresistance to demands for direct action that were at that perilous stage of the Civil War, demonstrative of much of the more radical factions of abolitionist print culture.

In the days leading up to the August First celebrations in 1864 Jacobs obsessed over the presentation of her keynote address. Yellin writes that when the time for Jacobs's much anticipated speech finally arrived it was, "as if she had been preparing all her life for this moment" (182). Before Jacobs passed the ceremonial flag on to the Surgeon in Chief of L'Ouverture Hospital to the backdrop of cheering troops and the first patriotic bursts of the waiting band's obligatory rendition of "The Star Spangled Banner," Jacobs's only documented political lecture concluded with a direct address to the servicemen,

Soldiers, when you return from the field of blood and strife, sick, wounded and weary, you will find welcome here. We will bind up your wounds and administer faithfully unto you. Then take the dear old flag and resolve that it shall be the beacon of liberty for the oppressed of all lands, and of every soldier on American soil. (*Papers* 182)

Jacobs's concluding call to arms conjoined powerfully contrasting representations of militancy, human rights, national reconstruction and international solidarity with "the

York" *New York History*, Vol. 85, No. 4 (FALL 2004), pp. 331-357. Her article is mostly focused on the founders of the magazine and its place in the community, but she does state the following: "While the eminent and highly principled editors of the paper did not advocate anarchical behavior, they were keenly aware of the myriad injustices endured by blacks in the North and by their brethren in bondage in the South. This awareness made for spirited reporting and editorials fiercely critical of American society. Some news reports, for

oppressed of all the lands.” By endorsing the war effort Jacobs also attacked the image of the enslaved subject as the suffering servant awaiting salvation. Destroying the logic of liberal selflessness that rendered armed struggle for captives a crime punishable by death her embrace of national reconstruction as a “cause of human freedom” positions the fugitive-soldier in a place that legitimates the moral authority of the North.

Three years ago this flag had no significance for you, we could not cherish it as our emblem of freedom. You then had no part in the bloody struggle for your country, your patriotism was spurned; but today you are in arms for the freedom of your race and the defense of your country--today this flag is significant to you. Soldiers you have made it the symbol of freedom for the slave, unfurl it, stand by it and fight for it, until the breeze upon which it floats shall be so pure, that a slave cannot breathe its air. Through the kindness of friends in Pennsylvania I present this flag to you. Soldiers they have confidence in your loyalty, aye in your courage and daring. They remember Wagner, Fort Pillow, and Plymouth. On the record of this rebellion your names will occupy no mean place. On the pages of history that honored grave at Wagner will make you glorious: then make that spot a sacred shrine where your countrymen, your children, and children[']s children, shall visit and revere, even to their latest generation. (*Papers* 182)

example, detailing physical resistance to slaveholders and professional slave catchers, contained laudatory editorial commentary, though such resistance was illegal” (340).

Rather than a politics of absolution or forgetting, in Jacobs's hands fugitive abolition-turned-Union ally animated acts of destruction, suppression, or annihilation in rebellion against the material injustices of slavery. While some her criticisms targeted the nation itself, the aim was to abolish the master-slave relation upon which the nation prospered. Abolition was a mark progress for both the black nationalist fugitive soldier and the Union fugitive-soldier that aided in the creative destruction of the historical circumscription of blackness to the time of slavery, forcing a chain of temporal breaks from the plantation from which the nation could begin, as Saidiya V. Hartman writes, "reckoning with our responsibility to the dead" (Hartman, 757).

"We are not contrabands"

In the body of her First of August speech Jacobs folds a ritualized memorialization of national belonging into the fugitive identity of the black Union soldier. By December 1864, only four months following Jacobs's Flag Presentation at L'Ouverture Hospital, four hundred and forty-three soldiers petitioned for the honor of being buried in Alexandria National Cemetery (then Soldiers' Cemetery) alongside the other members of the Union Army so that they might be, as Jacobs had envisioned, visited and revered for generations to come. The Union Army Quartermasters had refused to recognize the Colored Troops for having fought and fallen for their country with the same regard given their free-born counterparts. Rather than consent to this elision and burial in what was known as the unmarked and unheralded Contraband or Freedman's burial ground, they wrote a petition on behalf of the colored troops of the United States Army and sent it all the way up the chain of command. It stated,

We are not contrabands, but soldiers of the U.S. Army, we have cheerfully left the comforts of home and entered into the field of conflict, fighting side by side with the white soldiers, to crush out this God insulting, Hell deserving rebellion. We ask that our bodies may find a resting place in the ground designated for the burial of the brave defenders of our countries flag.³⁴

L'Ouverture Hospital opened in February preceding Jacobs's First of August address to serve African American soldiers wounded in battle. According to the National Archives and Record Administration nearly 185,000 men enlisted in the United States Bureau of Colored Troops. The soldiers' desire to see the Union's commemoration of them as patriots in life as well as death echoes Jacobs's dream to have the names of the escaped slave soldiers remembered "on the pages of History." It also evokes a prophetic interpretation of Jacobs's promise at the end of her address, to welcome the wounded in Alexandria upon their return from the battlefield. The terms of their burial was not only a desire for political recognition, but also a desire to have their sacrifice for the cause of black liberation to become part of the national memory of the story of emancipation. To be administered to faithfully as a casualty of war carried with it both the acknowledgement of their loyalty as Union servicemen, and symbolically aligning the Union cause with that of abolition, forever integrating the

³⁴ For more on the petition see "Written in Stone, but Petitioned on Paper: African American soldiers, fighting for the Union, joined together to demand where their fallen should lie" By Paula Tarnapol Whitacre (<http://www.freedmenscemetery.org/resources/documents/louverture.shtml>)

nation's history of reunification to the transnational spirit of black liberation and slave rebellion.

Jacobs's organization of the August First festivities in Alexandria marked, as the weekly reported, "a day of great interest to every colored American." With all its discursive subversions of national loyalty however, Jacobs's patriotism also signals something of the costs of formal emancipation for former slaves into the national family. What Jacobs's ceremony and the Colored Troops petition later that year, perhaps purposefully, commemorated was but a shift in the racial composition of the kinds of domestic order militarized agents of the state were dispatched to protect. Though the fugitive-soldier linked Northern victory to transnational black liberation in theory, the political practice of emancipation fell short of realizing the transformation of customary racism into equal rights under the law.

The loopholes of liberation war afforded increased enslaved people's access to freedom. Though they expanded the number of persons included within the class of free political subjects however the underlining infrastructure of anti-black racism remained intact. Along with the petition for burial in the Soldier's Cemetery, by December of 1864 there was also an abolitionist push within the legislature at this time for an added incentive of familial emancipation for African Americans enlistees. Wilson's Military Affairs Committee declared that any men who enlisted in the Union Army would be ensured, with sufficient proof of marriage, their own manumission as well as that of their wives and their children. Though this protocol of

emancipation is less activist than that enacted by means of armed rebellion, the wholesale manumission of the former slave soldier and his family in return for service certainly exposed existing class division within the black community. The legislation only benefited those who could provide proof of marriage and sales of manumission. While the passage of this legislation in 1865 facilitated both the increased enlistments of African American men in Maryland, Missouri, Tennessee, and Kentucky and the emancipation of their wives and children prior to the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment it left slave-born blacks in the South without such forms of compensation for their military service.

Recalling the uneasy correlation Jacobs made earlier on in her August First speech between American gold and its inability to “secure the freedom, equal rights and justice” of the enslaved class, we might consider the added significance an act of manumission has when not only monetary compensation to the slave owner facilitates the freedom of an individual and his family, but when military service becomes the currency by which slaves compensate their liberators for the costs of their freedom. In either case the enlightenment ideal of freedom is reconfigured as a status of contract from than an inalienable right. The political relation of the slave to freedom then is a problem of proper association. Not unlike the unwed white women of that era, who relied upon the marriage contract to gain access to the political arena, a slave’s access to liberation relied upon a relationship of association with a potential liberator.

If manumission and enlistment are along the same continuum of emancipation by way of compliance to slavery then the question is how we might decipher a difference between the kind of freedom Jacobs and the fugitive-soldiers fought for and the kinds of freedom they procured to fight for it? In her article, “Instead of Waiting for the Thirteenth Amendment,” Amy Dru Stanley argues that there is an unexplored counterpoint between the political and ethical objectives of antislavery sentiment institutionalized in the Constitutional amendments and in the congressional act to incentivize enlistments by compensating service for the emancipation of the black family. Stanley makes the point that while the Thirteenth Amendment was not based in the discourse of moral suasion or human rights but upon the legitimating logic of the congressional right to regulate commerce, the enlistment act espoused “universal emancipation” through “domestic ties” (750). Stanley writes,

In that counterpoint lies a wealth of meaning about the opposition of slavery and freedom at the moment of abolition and the nature of personal and political sovereignty to be transformed—meaning that bears on both the disappearance of the badges of woman’s slavery after abolition and a rights tradition stamped with the trademark of commerce. At bottom, the juxtaposition of the two abolition decrees reveals that the enigmas of the Thirteenth Amendment began in the slave household, where the master possessed dominion over both his wife and slaves. (736)

Stanley’s article suggests that while the conflation of interests that accompanied the two pronged approach to legalizing abolition were many, the enlistment act went

further than any previous legislation in emancipating enslaved women and children in the South. While the Amendment itself was crafted to avoid the universalism of human rights discourse in favor of prohibiting rights-bearers from the coercion and possession of persons, the enlistment act aimed to emancipate the nation from the dubious domestic order slavery had made southern custom by liberating enslaved women from moral degradation into the legal loophole of respectability afforded their white counterparts by means of association with a free man.

The implication of the passage of the enlistment act as Stanley points out is, however, curious indeed. The estimated cost of compensating slave-owners in states loyal to the Union would have cost the North over eight million dollars. The framers of the act reasoned that given the choice to buy, free, or hold off for the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to decide the fate of enslaved women, the moral problem posed by slavery began to eclipse the political consequence of forgoing slavery's own protocols of just compensation. Stanley argues, "It was the subjection of the slave wife that answered this fundamental question raised by the soldier's *quid pro quo*" (754). In addition to the depreciating value of slave women as a result of the war, mass strikes, work slow downs and escapes, Stanley writes that

The vindication of her freedom—of immediate abolition by Congress—ultimately rested on her torment at the loyal master's hand. In the evidence of a slave wife being beaten and sold and refused subsistence, wrongs that negated her humanity . . . And so inventories of her misery filled the halls of Congress. "A sight greeted me such as I never beheld in the world, . . . a

colored woman, whom I should suppose to be thirty years of age, appeared before us, all bruised to pieces,” cried out Ohio senator Benjamin Wade, describing a scene he had witnessed in Kentucky in the summer of 1864. “Her face was all whipped to a jelly . . . Her head was all cut to pieces . . . her skull was laid bare almost, and her back perfectly mangled.” (755)

In the context of war, where the sure path to national belonging was paved in personal sacrifice in the form of military service, the badges of women’s enslavement had not yet been counted among the casualties of the North. The enlistment measure was in process for over a year and in that time the violence against women whose loved ones joined the Union escalated. Black service men were returning from the battlefield early to protect their families. Women and children were sold, whipped and raped to punish black men who left to join the Union. Firsthand accounts detailing the abuses of loyal masters on black women’s bodies was deemed intelligence and informed the congressional support for the immediate uncompensated emancipation of slave women rather than wait for the amendment. Stanley writes, “Justifying the amendment, abolitionists imagined an “angel from the skies” descending to behold a slave wife doomed to “avarice” and “lust.” Impatiently, however, they answered the question of immediatism by asking: “Do you propose to stand here and let these wives and children be abused three months, six months, or a year, until you can amend the Constitution” (756)?

Recalling the image from *Incidents* of the nearly divine intervention of Queen Justice on behalf of the enslaved, the abolitionist angel in the passage above evokes a similar sense of gendered reclamation of the enslaved woman over the meaning of her degradation. If the purpose of revealing the mental and physical abuses of slavery is to embolden the moral conviction of antislavery supporters then the slave girl transforms herself through her account from a victim into a soldier. Stanley writes “The figure of the ravaged bondswoman validated not simply slave emancipation but also affirmations of freedom as an inalienable right” (757).

As American intellectual historian Lewis C. Perry notes in a rare essay on Jacobs’s West Indian Emancipation Day speech, on that particular Monday afternoon Jacobs, “did not speak, as in *Incidents*, as a slave girl, but instead as an accomplished author with years of experience among abolitionists with a keen understanding of the events through which she lived” (596). In point of fact, Jacobs’s biographer, Jean Fagan Yellin, added that by that period in her life, Jacobs had done much work to establish herself not only as an author, but also as a social reformer; aiding and organizing relief efforts for soldiers and establishing a school for refugees among her many recognized achievements. Gendered labors though they may seem, her dedication to remain at the front-lines of the battle against slavery never wavered even after the war was officially “won,” until at last her battle wounds cost her the ability to protect herself and her daughter from the Klan in the South, then, some thirty years after presiding over the August First ceremonies, breast cancer forced Jacobs to finally sell her family’s homestead property in Edenton in 1892 and retreat to a boardinghouse in

Washington D.C. where she then died March 7, 1897 of chronic intestinal nephritis and asthma.

As Perry points out in his article on Jacobs's speech, "women were rarely the featured speakers at August First festivities." He goes on later on to suggest that though there were conventionally gendered incantations within Jacobs appeal to the troops, "her speech transcended these gender issues when she spoke of liberation. She was not domestic, or ladylike. No one patronized her or called her girl. She was too old for that" (601-2). Perhaps, in fact, the common knowledge of her narrative, and its accounts of the battlefield that conjoined the plantation to the North through the Fugitive Slave Act, reinforced Jacobs's authority as a witness to the costs of freedom and the benefits of gaining the confidence of friends. As she proclaims there is liberation, "in your loyalty, aye in your courage and daring."

Although the plight of American slaves was often framed as an extension of white American subordination to British rule, first hand accounts of the slave experience disputed the relevance of the metaphor as a device that bore little more than rhetorical value. Canonical metaphor was valuable moral currency and as Lewis Perry writes, "the attack on slavery by abolitionists, Garrisonian or otherwise, was frequently metaphorical... Although abolitionists generally held advanced views on the questions of racial equality, they sometimes attributed submissive "feminine" qualities to Negroes" (233). As we have seen metaphor is a central device of both radical and moderate critiques of slavery. Use of metaphor in itself did not pose

problems for a coherent abolitionist movement, it was what those metaphors implied about the actual possibilities of political freedom, what the material consequence of emancipation from captivity practically inferred that really mattered.

The popular reproduction, dissemination, and mass consumption of the figure of the fugitive soldier in abolitionists' writings, speeches, and art so informed antebellum culture that it not only evidenced their will to freedom but so too transformed the way the law recognized rights bearing persons and the reasons they were included within the protections of the Constitution. As Guyoa Binder suggests in his 1993 essay, "Did the Slaves Author the Thirteenth Amendment?" it is important to consider the role enslaved people themselves played as active contributors to their own emancipation as well as the ideal of civic virtue for the country as a whole. Though Binder may not have had Jacobs in particular in mind, she, like the many rogue social theorists whose desires for freedom emanated from the depths of slavery's dubious domestic order, helped to frame the kind of emancipation that made the end of slavery possible. Fugitive slaves and free black abolitionists in the North combined to "urging," as Binder writes, "contemporary Americans to see themselves as the political descendants of slaves" (472).

Attention to the protocols and intellectual histories of antislavery abolition within Ethnic Studies and American Studies of the past twenty years has elevated the study of black people's contributions to the abolitionist tradition and transformed public perceptions of black self-determination in the antebellum era. Nevertheless this area

of literature is still typically marginalized as an elective aspect of the historical formation of American political thought. This pattern of marginalization represents larger tendencies to either forget black contributions to the composition of the national political tradition or misrecognize their investments as the by-product of their loyalties to their liberators. Binder argues that,

Characterizing the slaves' redemption as a gift from whites makes freedom a privilege that could be granted or withheld rather than an anterior right that slavery violated. In this way, popular memory perpetuates and participates in slavery's original dispossession on the slaves' dominion over themselves... In treating freedom as a gift freely granted rather than a right defended, the dominant narrative also dispossesses the slaves of their historical agency, and the dignity American culture has always conferred on the self-reliant... popular memory dispossesses the slaves not only of their agency, but also of their authorship of the post-Civil War Constitution. (474)

Binder's essay goes on to describe this dispossession of historical agency and authorship in the language of a copyright violation. "In denying that the nation already owed the slaves a mounting debt, and in denying slave agency in limiting and partially forgiving that debt, popular memory dispossesses slaves of a claim on the nation's conscience" (474). Though attempts to determine a dollar amount symbolic of just compensation for the emancipation of enslaved women and children floundered, the notion that the debt incurred by the North upon the act of mass emancipation might be due to the slaves themselves was not a factor of their

discussion. Popular memory's dispossession of slave's "dominion over themselves" in their contributions to their own emancipation are evidenced in their accounts of struggle, escape, and in the detailed visions of their ideas of freedom. If the demands of marginalized subjects within the abolitionist tradition, women and African Americans in particular, remain marginalized areas of study distinguished and tokenized by essentialized categories of identity-based representations of existing ideas of freedom rather than sites generative of ideas of freedom of their own, then historical contestations for racial and gender equality will be forever collapsed into the uniform univocal narrative of American nationalism and modern liberal progress.

As Jacqueline Bacon writes in her work *The Humblest May Stand Forth: Rhetoric, Empowerment, and Abolition*, "Abolitionists who were African Americans or women were marginalized not only in their own time. Historians have also silenced their voices by predicating their accounts of the antislavery movement on the experiences of white male abolitionists... We must focus on the unique experiences, concerns, and beliefs that shaped the rhetoric of female or African American abolitionists" (15). Recuperative projects such as Bacon's invite contemporary returns to the study of marginalized voices and revisions of outmoded ways of reading their contributions to the abolitionist tradition that refuse the tendency to essentialize or dehistoricize women's accounts. This recuperative approach has the potential not only to evidence the presence of marginalized voices within the tradition, but so too to trace the particular influence such experiences had upon the public debate on slavery more generally speaking. Not only does this ancillary space of resistance attribute agency

to the “helpless victims of slavery,” it also reframes our understanding of the time of Civil War as a battle that began with the abuses of enslaved peoples bodies and did not end with the Battle of Palmito Ranch. As Bacon writes, “In spite of the theoretical commitment to equality for African Americans shared by both of the major abolitionist camps, many white antebellum reformers believed in fundamental racial differences, often holding a view that George Frederickson calls ‘romantic racialism,’ which proposed that African Americans were more ‘innocent,’ ‘childlike,’ and innately religious than whites. This view led to paternalistic and condescending treatment of African American abolitionists by their white colleagues” (27).

How we read the abolitionist tradition as a part of and not wholly in opposition to the political history of anti-black racism shapes how we understand representations of the suffering of the slaves, as senseless or sensational, voyeurism or valiance. The paternalism of the white allies was implicit in the romanticizing of the slave as the suffering servant, and yet also present in the conscription of slaves to military service. The challenge then is how not to reduce the badges of slavery to the analytic resolution of the problem slavery poses for the integrity of American politics, but rather how abolition reinterpreted the meaning of American integrity in complex and not always complementary ways.³⁵

³⁵ Recent historical and literary scholarship on abolitionist discourse from Patrick Rael, Philip Lapsansky, Gayle Tate, and Karen Sanchez-Eppler have broken with the imperative to reduce contestation within the abolitionist tradition to explanations of identity politics, calling attention instead to the multi-vocal, improvisational, fugitive dimension of the abolitionist tradition and interrogate the rather non-linear and unharmonious relationships that created factions within antislavery discourses.

POSTSCRIPT

The Precarity of a Loophole, or a fugitive love-dream of liberation

“Some will call it a dream, others a vision”
Harriet Jacobs

Some people live in igloos, quite a few others do not, but in any case, something is made with the ready-to-hand, something that is new on the landscape, or new enough.”
Hortense Spillers

To turn a phrase from Karl Marx’s first chapter of *Capital*, we might begin to conclude this discussion of Jacobs’s abolitionism with a question that asks: If god-breathing machines could dream, what would they see? Would what they saw matter more than how they saw it? Would their accounts have merit apart from the use for which they were created? If the dream Jacobs refers to in the closing of her narrative is not yet realized then how might we, her latter-day readers, imagine whether we are living the dream or have lost the ability to see what is not yet realized like dreamers do.

Despite the concerns both Lydia Maria Child and Harriet Jacobs expressed in the front matter of Jacobs’s narrative with the “indelicate” nature of its testimony, reviewers of *Incidents* throughout the northern states and Great Britain generally embraced Jacobs’s contribution to the antislavery movement. Portions of *Incidents* appeared in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* and the *Weekly Anglo-African*. Jacobs’s manuscript was reviewed and highly recommended by *The Christian Recorder* in Philadelphia, both the *Morning Star and Dial* and *Daily News of London*,

as well as the *Londonderry Standard* in Ireland and the *Caledonian Mercury* in Edinburgh (*Papers* 361-387).

“*Incidents* appealed to the public sphere of its own time” as Caleb Smith notes in a recent essay on Jacobs; “... the anti-slavery press ... foresaw the narrative’s reception not only by an isolated, sympathetic “Reader” but also by a counterpublic, a collective readership animated by a common assent to its invocation of higher law” (746). Jacobs’s was one of many voices contributing to the international chorus that gave the antislavery movement its multi-vocal force. It was a dynamic movement in contention with its moment in history and with itself. As the moral conscience of American political ideals antislavery abolitionism had the opportunity to not only dream a kind of freedom that transformed the Constitution, but so too to empower the nation to see itself differently, to become conscious of itself as a work-in-progress replete with all the internal contradictions of a nation founded by both its opposition to tyranny and the genocide of nations.

Turning popular antislavery attention to face the everyday violence of slavery’s dispossession of family, sexual autonomy, public respectability Jacobs’s dream of abolitionist emancipation bridged political desires for civil rights animated by the early efforts of the women’s rights movement with the trials and tribulations of a slave narrative. The rape of enslaved women was already well-established moral justification for advancing the cause of abolition long before Jacob introduced her readers to Linda Brent. What her testament added however, was proof that the effects

of slave owner's use of rape as a weapon of social control was weakening. Its strength was in its secrecy and the more fugitive slaves spoke out on their own behalf the more difficult it would be for Southern communities to keep their public secret silent.

In addition to the consciousness-raising mission of her text, Jacobs's narrative invites her readers into an open conversation about the ethical questions of personal integrity, virtue, and obligation escape from slavery raise for the political costs of emancipating black women. Rather than preaching the merits of nonresistance or armed rebellion outright, her rhetorical style elicits her readers endorsement of abolition as a politics of friendship, a unity across differences of experience that required more a sense of solidarity than consensus and belonged to a strategy of social reform rooted in the church, but which could lead to a much more secular realization of universal fellowship and collective emancipation. Jacobs lives within the loophole of retreat not only in the context of her narrative but also as a protocol for surviving within the precarity of ongoing struggle without either opting out, or trading the option to dream at all.

By publishing the details of her life in protest to the conditions of sexual domination slavery sanctioned she exchanged the virtue of her privacy for the vigilance of her potential allies. Amy Post reported that Jacobs, in retelling her friend the story of her time in slavery "passed through a baptism of suffering, even in recounting her trials ... The burden of these memories lay heavily upon her spirit—naturally virtuous and refined" (Jacobs, 203). Though the ethical foundations of her abolitionist praxis were

guided by the values, virtues and ideals of the cult of true womanhood Jacobs donned them to bear the badges of slavery. Reading Jacobs as neither an apology for her complicit relationships to domination, nor as a complete disavowal of the constraints she and those her testament represents endured under slavery Jacobs's abolitionism retreats from modern paradigms of domination, conventional boundaries of mastery and bondage to reveal freedom as an untenable solution to the problem of slavery. While antislavery literature often leveraged the popularity of liberal humanism in the antebellum era in defense of the innocence of the slave, Jacobs's narrative identifies figures for whom claims to innocence are foreclosed and in this way anticipates the racialized politics of criminalization that follow Constitutional emancipation in the form of convict leasing, chain gangs, and lynch mobs.

Over the last forty or so years a major query in recent scholarship on *Incidents* has been concerned with how we might interpret the unconventional representations of escape Jacobs narrates and the conditions of unfreedom they engender. The seemingly negative dialectic of her movement toward liberation in her narrative anticipates the negative progressions of political life for formerly enslaved free citizens living in the South in the era of reconstruction. The inescapability of the time of slavery is a common trope of African American literature, one which usually fixes upon the possibility of social change in the emancipatory figure of black mobility. From black missionaries to mass exodus, to the great migration and black uplift -- the condition of possibility for black liberation has historically privileged the ability to be on the move. The moral of the loophole however would imply that there is, in fact,

nowhere to run to. In Jacobs's narrative the point of departure is not settle for something less severe than slavery. For Jacobs the loophole is a way-station that represents the kind of freedom slavery made possible. The moral of the loophole is reflected in the work of abolition, the victory of Constitutional emancipation, and the nation itself. For Jacobs, movement towards freedom means realizing why you might choose to comply to extended periods of self-imposed immobility and knowing when to risk leaving. Rather than a story that sees freedom itself as the effect of mobility Jacobs narrates a story in which freedom is a loophole in the immobility of unfreedom. Though her manumission culminates, in her own words, in an "improvement" in her "condition," the mobility lawful manumission grants them could not secure the realization of her dream of freedom.

Two general points should be raised with regard to what remains unrealized in the end of Jacobs's narrative. The first is that the movements of fugitive, formerly enslaved women cannot readily conform to the conventions of traditionally male-bodied modern liberal subjects. The second is that we often see impossibility where we ought to be looking for loopholes. Danielle Goldman writes, "Escape for Jacobs always meant flight from a regime of exchange... if Jacobs's freedom could only come by way of exchange, she would need to escape from freedom too" (4). Though the regimes of exchange Jacobs sought escape from were totalizing, her strategy for persisting to struggle within them was to admit to the futility of escape as an end in itself. From her loophole of retreat to the publication of the narrative itself Jacobs's expression of abolition seems to suggest that escape is an insufficient strategy for the

realization of her dream of freedom. While the fantasy of escape brought with it the persuasive rhetorical advantages of ideology, inescapability required a reckoning with the ethical implications of having to remain within the constraints of unfreedom while continuing to contest them.

In this sense the nineteenth century fugitive slave girl has represented, in a historical light, the limit case of American realizations of liberal democracy, a distinctly gendered and raced counterpoint to the twentieth century exile or refugee. Jared Sexton, makes a similar point in his essay “People-Of-Color Blindness,” in which he describes the totalizing effects of slavery’s domination as the “singularity of racial slavery and its afterlife” (44).

It goes without saying that the slave also suffers the exploitation of her labor, the expropriation of her land and resources, the loss of her political sovereignty, the disruption of her cultural heritage, but she suffers all of this as contingencies of her captivity, rather than as the essence of her dominated position. Which is to say that socializing the economy, reclaiming the land, and reviving languages and customs offer no reparation in lieu of her freedom. Such welcome developments would be necessary but insufficient (fn 61).

Sexton’s essay on the afterlife of slavery opens with a quote from *Means without End*, in which “Giorgio Agamben suggests that under present conditions “we will have to abandon decidedly, without reservation, the fundamental concepts through which we have so far represented the subjects of the political (Man, the Citizen and

its rights, but also the sovereign people, the worker, and so forth) and build our political philosophy anew starting from the one and only figure of the refugee” (31). Agamben centers the social sacrifice of the refugee as the crucible from which the modern sovereign subject rises, a figural point from which progress can be measured and upon whose marginalization political dimensions of modern anxieties regarding the, “permanent crisis of the political system of the modern nation-state” can be framed. Sexton’s essay argues that the condition of the refugee overlooks the historical precedent for it set by the institution of slavery and the fugitives the institution sought to contain, criminalize, or conscript.

The afterlife of slavery, Sexton argues, is a phenomenon which stands both as a specific historical event and one often subsumed by, “the peculiar and long-standing cross-racial phenomenon in which the white bourgeois and proletarian revolutions on both sides of the Atlantic can allegorize themselves as revolts against slavery, while the hemispheric black struggle against actually existing slavery and its afterlife cannot authorize itself literally in those same terms” (42). He argues that the sexual regulation of race under slavery sets the proverbial stage for the development of the modern democratic state in ways studies of it too often conceal or explicitly disavow. By Sexton’s account the consequences of such selective historical theorizing give more than adequate cause for our insistence upon the reinstatement of the enslaved woman’s own testament to her understanding of the particular sexual politics of her captivity, commodification, and representation as precedent for state of exception implicit in Agamben’s refugee.

To begin a critique of modern freedom with the afterlife of women's badges of slavery then requires not only an analytic shift of perspective, but a new cartography of the nation as a loophole rather than homeland. The abolitionist ethic would have to be privileged as a method of social critique rather than a dogmatic ideology of sentimentality. Sexton writes,

the intimate relationship between the censure of black inquiry and the recurrent analogizing to black suffering... bear a common refusal to admit to significant differences of structural position born of discrepant histories between blacks and their political allies, actual or potential. We might, finally, name this refusal people-of-color-blindness, a form of colorblindness inherent to the concept of "people of color" to the precise extent that it misunderstands the specificity of antiblackness and presumes or insists upon the monolithic character of victimization under white supremacy — thinking (the afterlife of) slavery as a form of exploitation or colonization or a species of racial oppression among others (48).

The myriad of discursive disconnects that constitution a fugitive dialectic of freedom in the form of a right to literacy, family, property, and options for them in the future details by fugitive slaves and their descendents are so easily subsumed by the universality of liberal rights discourse and the cult of domesticity that those disconnects are quickly dismissed as the inevitable consequence of personal failing, poor parenting, or the lack of will to succeed. The all-of-us-or-none politics a fugitive

dialectic of freedom fuels is not easily contented by the concessions of liberal progress. In response to would-be allies whose impatience with returns to the history of race and gender inequities seem to only immobilize our national progression away from the time of slavery, Robin Kelley's "Identity Politics and Class Struggle" so aptly suggests,

Whatever cul-de-sac we might have entered, the "Enlightenment train" will not lead us out. These people assume that the universal humanism they find so endearing and radical can be easily separated from the historical context of its making; indeed, that it is precisely what can undo the racism and modern imperialism it helped to justify. The racialism of the West, slavery, imperialism, the destruction of indigenous cultures in the name of "progress," are treated as aberrations, coincidences, or not treated as all. They insist that these historical developments do not render the Enlightenment's radical universalism any less "radical," and those who take up this critique are simply rejecting Enlightenment philosophers because they're "dead white males." Their uncritical defense of the Enlightenment (which includes a strange tendency to collapse Marx, Locke and Jefferson into the same category), betrays an unwillingness to take ideas, let alone history, seriously.

Just as fugitive escapes from the plantation led from one treacherous "zone of non-being," to another to borrow from Franz Fanon, the loophole of abolition led out of slavery and into the era of reconstruction. The time of slavery continues to be rewritten in the unfolding historical returns to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 found in

the PATRIOT emancipation in the wake of 9-11. The swamps, mountains, attics, hauls of ships, and ships of barrels fugitives occupied became the underground of the late twentieth century. Provisional and precarious describe the conditions of freedom for fugitives but, also for the kinds of freedom the time of slavery made tenable.

Emancipated from the injury of slavery into compliance with the liberators or the consequences of insurrection, mastery was the providence of those who could not be penalized. The provisional interracial alliances of abolition were undermined by the prevalence of white supremacy and the protocols of self-emancipation they made possible were subsumed by sweeping narratives of uplift, progress, and assimilation and all but lost. Manumission not only discredited and erased the success of Jacobs's self-emancipation in her own mind it threaten its credibility within the historical record. In *Incidents*, when her liberator suggests Linda allow her employer to purchase her to afford Linda and her children the protection they seek, Jacobs's narrator confesses,

I felt grateful for the kindness that prompted this offer, but the idea was not so pleasant to me as might have been expected. The more my mind had been enlightened, the more difficult it was for me to consider myself an article of property; and to pay money to those who had so grievously oppressed me seemed like taking from my sufferings the glory of triumph... such a great obligation could not be cancelled. (199)

The language of obligation here suggests that Jacobs's wish to be free from regimes of exchange is more than vanity. There is also a suggestion here that because the institution of slavery itself is premised upon imposing a sense of indebtedness upon the enslaved that could only be repaid with a life-time of consent and service, just compensation replaced natural right as the moral authority for human freedom after the mass emancipation of enslaved people in the United States. Emancipation democratized the master/slave relation slavery imprinted upon the god-fearing machines and consecrated it as a path to national belonging. Though just compensation paid for fugitives in the form of cash sales, military service and public display of the wounds of insurrection, the repayment for the debt of having being captive continued far beyond the end of the Civil War and the signing of the Constitutional Amendments. Freedom became but a loophole of escape from the degradations of the after-life of slavery.

As John Ernest points out, "*Incidents*... was long ignored or devalued *because* it was an exception, both because it represents a woman's perspective and because scholars suspected that white writers were involved in the production of the narrative" (219). To become her readers, we are asked in the narrative's preface to believe a world in which insight is fragmentary and truth, indeterminate. She promises not to exaggerate the wrongs she's experienced under slavery; neither does she presume we would *want* to know "all the facts" of its inflictions. Rather than require that we identify directly with her, she asks that we simply bear witness to her testaments of sexual exploitation, enslavement, and subjection she endured, not for her own redemption,

but “to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage” (1). She closes her preface with a prayer that pronounces: “May the blessing of God rest on this imperfect effort in behalf of my persecuted people” (2)! The resounding refrain of her work is the as yet unrealized resolution to the problem of slavery, and yet there is refuge in that, for that which cannot be seen cannot be stolen. The fugitive dialectic refuses realization as a means of revisiting the wrongs of the past and unsettling our relationship to their restlessness.

Rather than rehearse the ideological tensions that separate those who read resistance in *Incidents* from those who read only its scenes of subjection, I read the slave girl’s commitment to fugitivity as a kind of loyalty that haunts both historical and present valorizations of autonomy as a realization of possessive individualism. The fugitive dialectic of Jacobs’s disidentification with enlightenment tropes of freedom and possessive investment in solidarity, the realization of her all-of-us-or-none orientation to freedom may be a kind of autonomy the law has not yet learned how to embrace.

The ebb and flow of *Incidents*’ cultural value— celebrated then deferred and forgotten, discredited then authenticated, canonized, over-consumed and catalogued away constitutes a perfect metaphor for the movement of the fugitive dialectic – its relationship to political rebellion and recognition, escape, assimilation, and dreaming of how to escape yet again. With more than one hundred and fifty years distance from which to reflect upon Jacobs’s variation on the slave narrative, what the unusual

cycles of its revival and reception seem to suggest is that Jacobs's contributions to the abolitionist tradition matter not simply for the ways *Incidents* compliments or challenges the conventions of slave narrative genre, but so too for how it established the fugitive slave girl as a political figure who posed a significant challenge to conventional meanings of modern emancipation.

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