

STRATEGIES OF EMPOWERMENT:¹ TWO NARRATIVES BY AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

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The thesis of this essay is that for pre-civil rights American women authors of African descent empowerment was not simply a social issue taking the form of manumission or emancipation. The struggle for empowerment engaged many strategies, not least that of establishing a literary voice where traditionally only male voices –mostly white, but some black– had been heard. Separated though they are by nearly 80 years and the historical convulsions of the American Civil War, Reconstruction and the Great War, the two texts I have chosen –*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) (hereafter referred to as *Incidents* and *Eyes*)– confront and attempt to resolve certain givens which informed the authors' condition and status as African American women writers.

First among these, as I have indicated, involved establishing a narrative register, a task which required contesting «a literary history and system of conventions shaped primarily by men.»² In what follows I will explore how African American women authors simultaneously subverted and reconverted from a very early stage the overwhelmingly white male literary and gender traditions by which they were constrained. Hazel Carby has convincingly argued how *Incidents* challenged such discourses as the 19th century domestic novel and the female paradigm enshrined in the «cult of true womanhood.» Along the way it also proposed alternatives to such

1. This title was suggested by Mary Helen Washington's identification of the work of Zora Neale Hurston and Gwendolyn Brooks as «narrative strategies whose major concern is the empowerment of women» (xxv). *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1850-1960*. London: Virago Press, 1989.

2. Maryellen Bieder. «Plotting Against the Reader. Strategies of Subversion in Stories by Emilia Pardo Bazán.» *Indiana Journal of Hispanic Literatures*. 2:1 (Fall 1993): 137.

black canonical forms as the slave narrative, in which the female voice, as has been variously pointed out, is scarce.³

It is as well to recall here the enormous significance literacy has in the African American experience as a means by which to overcome various modes of enslavement, institutional and inter-personal. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., slave narrators equated «the mastery of slavery» with «the 'simple' mastery of letters. Their dream of freedom [was] figured in tropes of writing» (*Signifying* 167).⁴ He adds later: «the concern to depict the quest of the black speaking subject to find his or her voice has been a repeated topos of the black tradition, and perhaps its most central trope» (239). It is this 'central trope' of empowerment through freedom, and freedom through verbal self-expression that this essay is chiefly concerned with.

Literary and gender shibboleths, however, were not confined to white male discourse. Black women writers faced a dual challenge: that of creating a voice which not only narrated their individual experience within white American society, but also and simply the experience of the African American woman. The latter involved, as we shall see, a process of social and literary re-definition of self which subverted literary and gender codes of the sort mentioned above –but in a cultural battlefield much nearer home. Gender subordination was an unfortunate fact of the black woman's life within her own community as well.

This essay, then, will discuss ways in which African American women created an alternative and dissenting system of literary and gender conventions by first assuming, then subverting, and ultimately reconverting paradigms which were shaped by the white and black male status quo.

The cult of true womanhood has been amply discussed by feminist scholars in recent years. It was one of the cultural buttresses of the ascendancy of white society, many of whose members were dependant on the economic system of slavery as it existed in antebellum America. The supreme defining characteristic of the master class was, as has been pointed out by Catherine Clinton, racial purity.⁵ This emblematic distinction, brutally enforced by the notorious «one drop rule»⁶ was, needless to say, identifiable by means of skin colour –white skin colour. Hazel Carby states that the «physical, external» attributes of the white woman were furthermore «evidence of the presence of a pure soul» (26). Quoting feminist historian Barbara Welter, we read that «Piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity» defined the moral boundaries for white women from the 1820s to the Civil War (23). Conspicuously but unfaithfully absent from this chilling list was sexuality.

3. «Black women wrote about 12 per cent of the total number of extant slave narratives.» Washington 7.

4. *The Signifying Monkey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

5. Quoted by Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood. The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, 24.

6. «...what does it mean if in one body the black blood and the white blood are inextricably mixed? For a hundred years dominant Southern whites had solved that problem quickly by embracing the 'one drop rule,' that is, one drop of black blood makes a person all black...» Joel Williamson. *William Faulkner and Southern History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, 270.

The cult of true womanhood established, according to Carby, a «dominating image, describing the parameters within which women were . . . declared to be, or not to be, women» (23). In the case of black women, then, the colour of one's complexion was more than a skin-deep issue. Lacking as they did fair skin, «fair hair and celestial blue eyes,» (26) they could not possess a 'pure soul' and hence lay beyond the pale of true womanhood. «The idea of modesty and virtue in a Louisiana colored-girl might well be ridiculed; as a general thing, she has neither,» pontificated a white male pre-emption writer (26).

Non-white women not only suffered a lack of 'true' womanly virtues; they were also considered the repository of all those qualities or aspects proscribed by the cult of true womanhood, chief among them being sexual awareness. *Incidents* exploits this assumption as a central plot and narrative device and sexuality itself as a sustained metaphor for the black (slave) woman's quest for self-determination, in explicit defiance of the precepts of the cult of true womanhood.

Harriet Jacobs, who was so anxious about revealing herself as the true subject of her book that she published it under the pseudonym Linda Brent, achieves a remarkable feat. She exposes the inner contradictions of the cult of true womanhood by assuming its tenets and, in so doing, revealing them to be impracticable. Thus white moral conventions are measured and found wanting by a non-white standard: they are impracticable *because she, a black woman, cannot practice them*. The story is a simple one: Linda Brent, house maid and slave to Dr. Flint becomes, on reaching her fifteenth year, the object of his relentless and profoundly unwelcome attentions. As a last resort, she takes a white lover, with whom she has two children, hoping Dr. Flint will sell her in an act of revenge. Instead, he intensifies his harassment, prompting Linda to go into hiding for 7 years. She finally gains freedom for herself and her children, who, being born of a slave woman, by law initially followed the condition of the mother.

Linda/Harriet proposes through her actions and story an alternative morality to that of true womanhood and which is grounded in her own experience. Her discourse initially assumes the prevailing gender conventions, leading to self-censure for being sexually knowledgeable and thus failing to pass moral muster. Leading up to her decision to take a white lover, she writes, «And now, reader, I come to a period in my unhappy life I would gladly forget if I could. The remembrance fills me with sorrow and shame. . . The influences of slavery had. . . made me prematurely knowing, concerning the ways of the world» (53-4).⁷

The next sentence is extraordinary, given the moral climate of the time and the overwhelmingly white, nineteenth century readership Jacobs was writing for: «I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation» (54). Jacobs neither appeals to the reader for understanding nor rebukes herself any longer. The sentence occurs in the pivotal chapter «A perilous passage in the slave girl's life,» marking Linda/Harriet's

7. Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself*. (1861). Ed. Jean Fagan Yellin. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987. 53-4.

transition from defensive to offensive strategy. The strategy, as I have indicated, consists of consciously opposing her own sexual project to the powerless and subordinate sexual identity which her master attempts to impose on her. She becomes, in short, the creator of her own deflowering. The reasons Linda/Harriet states for taking a lover deserve repeating here: «to be an object of interest to a man who is. . . not her master, is agreeable to the pride and feelings of a slave, . . . It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment. . .» (54-5). I need hardly stress that the key lexical items of this passage –master, slave, 'give one's self,' freedom, compulsion, control– reveal a firm understanding of the fundamental issue: power. As has been so frequently pointed out, sexual abuse is as much about power as it is about sex.

Linda/Harriet, then, fights fire with fire, plotting and enacting her own strategy of empowerment which takes the form of an alternative gender discourse and sustains to the last its dissent from established conventions of gender. Here is her final address to the reader: «Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! We are. . . free from the power of slaveholders. . .» (201). She has achieved her dearest goal: freedom. She moreover subordinates if not actually scorns the prescribed goal of true (white) womanhood: marriage and its suggestion of subservient sexuality.

In staking her claim to an alternative sexual, that is, gender discourse, Harriet Jacobs had to adopt an appropriate narrative strategy. The textual paradigm she adopted, the domestic or sentimental novel, obliged her to follow certain conventions –modesty, delicacy, obliqueness rather than statement– which would not alienate the white audience she was trying to reach. Consistent with her simultaneous adoption and subversion of a gender system, Jacobs initially appears to assume a discourse acceptable to her white readers. The subject of her work, of course –premarital sexual knowledge and experience, sexual abuse, illegitimate children– made open discussion impossible. Mary Helen Washington explains the tension that binds the shape and content of Jacobs' narrative thus: «If the domestic novel of sentiment and melodrama helped [Jacobs] to reach an audience of women who were familiar with this form, it also severely limited her ability to produce a written account of her life as profound as her own experiences» (5).

Earlier scholarly work on *Incidents* criticized its author for allowing herself to be imprisoned by the sentimental novel. Recent studies, however, conclude that Jacobs resisted its formal and ideological dictates in the same way she resisted those of the cult of true womanhood. I leave the final word to Jean Fagan Yellin who has done most to reinstate Harriet Jacobs as the true author of *Incidents*: «Despite her language (and what other, one wonders, was available to her?) this narrator does not characterize herself conventionally as. . . passive. . . On the contrary, she asserts that she was. . . an effective moral agent, and she takes full responsibility for her actions» (Yellin 273).⁸

8. *The Slave's Narrative*. eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, 273.

Critics have noted that Jacobs' subversion of textual and gender categories simultaneously involves subversion of the overwhelmingly male, African-American ur-text: the slave narrative. The standard version traces the male slave's flight from bondage to freedom, a flight which is also a metaphor for the passage from slavery to manhood. Women, if they figure at all in these reports, are depicted as «pitiable subjects of brutal treatment, or benign nurturers who help the fugitive in his quest for freedom, or objects of sentimentality» (Washington 8). As I have already noted, the critical consensus is that *Incidents* departs from this model by recording Linda/Harriet's victimization but within a context of resistance. Nor, as in the case of most (male) slave narrators, does she abandon family and friends in her flight to freedom. Indeed, rather than flee, she goes into hiding until she can take her children with her.

Lastly, sexuality is *the* central narrative element in which the text is grounded, further distancing it from the pattern of the male slave narrator. To quote the invaluable Mary Helen Washington again: «The male narrator could write his tale as a reclamation of his manhood, but under the terms of white society's ideals of chastity and sexual ignorance for women [Linda/Harriet] certainly cannot claim 'true' womanhood» (19). Jacobs invokes instead a dissenting alternative to true womanhood, creating thereby the only female slave narrative extant in which the narrator acknowledges –one could almost say flaunts– her own sexual experience.

Dissenting textual and social conventions also distinguish Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The publication date, 1937, situates it two generations on from *Incidents*. We are now in postbellum, post-World War I and almost post-Harlem Renaissance America. How does *Eyes* stand in relation to the practice of literary and gender subversion we noted in *Incidents*? Is there a continuation, even progression of this practice? In what follows I will argue that there is.

I focus on two examples from *Eyes* that illustrate how black American women authors grounded their discourse and literary lineage in a submerged challenge to standard (male) textual practices and gender systems. My first example comes on page one of the novel, where Hurston recasts a canonical instance of the black American literary tradition. Hurston's appropriation and subsequent re-vision of Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* establishes a sisterly literary bond not only with Douglass himself, but also with Harriet Jacobs in the simultaneous adoption and adaptation of the slave narrative form. As elsewhere, we have to thank Henry Louis Gates, Jr. for drawing attention to Hurston's re-writing of Douglass' famous apostrophe to the ships departing from Chesapeake Bay. Here, then, in chronological order, are the two passages:

Our house stood within a few rods of the Chesapeake Bay, whose broad bosom was ever white with sails from every quarter of the globe. Those beautiful vessels, robed in purest white, so delightful to the eye of freemen, were to me so many shrouded ghosts, to terrify and torment me with thoughts of my wretched condition. I have often, in the deep stillness of a summer's Sabbath, stood all alone upon the lofty banks of that noble bay, and traced, with saddened heart

and tearful eye, the countless number of sails moving off to the mighty ocean. The sight of these always affected me powerfully. My thoughts would compel utterance; and there, with no audience but the Almighty, I would pour out my soul's complaint, in my rude way, with an apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships:

'You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! You are freedom's swift-winged angels, that fly around the world; I am confined in bands of iron! O that I were free!' (106)⁹

Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.

Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly (9).¹⁰

As Gates indicates, in the first two paragraphs of her novel Hurston engages the freedom metaphor of the ships' sails yet rewrites it at the semantic and the formal level. She retains the male gender of the central metaphor –ships– transforming the literal meaning from freedom into desire. Ships bear «every man's wish on board». For some, the wishes «come in with the tide;» for others, they «sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing.» Desire, then, does not translate into fulfilment and if it does, it is through men's expectancy and not their direct agency.

I propose, however, that Hurston further subverts Douglass. Her second paragraph omits the central metaphor, but retains its tenor: desire. A change in the subject's gender signals a discourse of opposition or, at least, tension between the two main subjects, 'men' and 'women.' The chiasmus in the first sentence of the second paragraph –«Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget»– moreover posits an equivalence between desire and doing, as it does between subject and implied agent: women 'forget' and 'remember.' These are verbs which denote a certain kind of activity. Agency is confirmed in the last sentence: women 'act' and 'do things.' In her opening two paragraphs, then, Hurston at a single stroke prefigures the oppositional gender strategy which subtends her novel and reinforces a bond with such antebellum texts as *Incidents* by «simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards»¹¹ such as Douglass' canonical text.

9. Frederick Douglass. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845). Ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986.

10. Zora Neale Hurston. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. London: Virago Press, 1990.

11. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer in the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979, 73.

In *Eyes*, Hurston shifts the focus from the white man/black woman tensions of Jacobs' work to a woman's struggle for self-determination within her own black community. Briefly, the plot is as follows: Janie is married at the age of 16 to an affluent, older man whose gross insensitivity dashes her dream of self-fulfilment through love. The pattern is repeated in her second, bigamous marriage to the influential and self-serving Joe Starks, who dies. Emotional and personal self-realization come with Janie's third and final partner, Tea Cake. Janie's story has become obliged reading for women and has been upheld as a model of self-empowerment, as exemplified through Janie's relationship with Tea Cake.

Recent criticism, however, has contested this reading and stressed Janie's passivity towards the male patterns of dominance and abuse which are repeated in all her relationships. While conceding that Janie's emotional and personal self-realization are flawed, I believe nevertheless that she performs one clear act of challenge and self-assertion. It occurs while Janie is still married to Joe. Her sphere of action at this stage is limited to serving customers at the general store she and Joe have set up in the all-black town of Eatonville, of which Joe is the first mayor. He excludes Janie from participating in community life, typified in the marathon porch-sessions in which people gather to talk and exchange stories. Joe also requires her to gather up and conceal her luxuriant long black hair, a powerful composite symbol in the novel of female sexuality, authenticity and liberation. Hence Janie's presence is defined in terms of absence and silence: she cannot be seen as she really is nor be heard as she wants to be. Early on in their marriage, Joe says of his wife, «. . . mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin.' Ah never married her for nothin' like dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home» (69). We have been caught, it would seem, by the long arm of the cult of true womanhood. It is no coincidence that Joe consciously emulates white male standards, represented in the novel as a false value system insofar as its source lies in white patriarchal authority.

Janie's initial response to Joe's subjugation is, typically, defensive. She experiences a profound self-alienation, with her true self splitting off and retreating inwardly. Time, however, erodes Joe's physical strength and attributes, symbols of his authority. The terms in which his decline is described have a strong sexual resonance: «His prosperous-looking belly that used to thrust out so pugnaciously and intimidate folks, sagged like a load suspended from his loins» (119-20). Similarly, the terms in which they engage in (verbal) battle demonstrate once more that the exercise of sexuality and the exercise of power are inseparable. Joe berates Janie for wrongly cutting some chewing tobacco, publicly accusing her of being «as old as Methusalem» and «rollin yo' pop eyes. . . with yo' rump hanging nearly to yo' knees!» (121). Emboldened by a prior yet mild retort before a group of (male) customers, Janie now gives as good as she gets: «Ah ain't no young gal no mo'. . . Ah'm uh woman every inch of me. . . Dat's uh whole lot more'n *you* kin say. . . Talkin' 'bout *me* looking old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life» (122-3).

Though nearly eighty years apart and contextually different, the terms of Linda/Harriet's and Janie's struggle are identical. The exercise of their sexual prerogatives becomes a means by which to assert their personal autonomy within male-defined parameters. In Janie's case, she not only subverts her husband's

authority, she actually inverts the power structure by duplicating his insults and ultimately invoking and reversing the standard menopause jibe to make him, the man, its object. It is a scene of profound emasculation in which Joe loses his virility while Janie regains her womanhood, in which he loses his voice («Joe didn't know the words» (124) to express his sense of defeat) and Janie recovers hers.

Significantly, Janie gains her voice in public, a forum long denied her. Though her public voice is not consistently sustained in what remains of the novel –Mary Helen Washington notes her «stunning silence» (243) when Tea Cake slaps her– Janie unquestionably ‘speaks herself into being.’ (*Signifying* 243) as Henry Louis Gates has pointed out. Indeed, the whole novel may be described as a speech act in which Janie gives verbal account of herself (albeit in a private space) to her friend Phoeby.

From the impressive roll-call of contemporary African American women novelists the question of literary tradition, in which Zora Neale Hurston has become a pivotal reference point, would not appear to be especially problematic. Much of current scholarly work is dedicated to tracing a literary heritage which extends far beyond Hurston, however. The title of Hazel Carby's landmark study, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, speaks for itself. Mary Helen Washington borrows from postbellum writer Anna Julia Cooper the eloquent metaphor –«a darkened eye restored» (xxvii)– to describe her attempt to reinstate what another critic has called «a tradition of work that is quite recent, its continuities broken and sporadic» (xx). This essay seeks to contribute to that ongoing recuperative scholarship.

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