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WOMEN BUT NOT SISTERS: HARRIET A. JACOBS'S ANGERED LITERARY REPLY TO HARRIET B. STOWE

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After the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Ralph Waldo Emerson said that the novel «encircled the globe, and was the only book that found readers in the parlor, the nursery, and the kitchen in every household» (Gossett 165). The reaction of its readers was extraordinarily controverted. While some cried their eyes out and wrote enthusiastic letters to the book publishers, others waved the war hatchet against Stowe's antislavery work. Among other things, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* helped to build nationally and internationally an image of slavery and Afro-American identity within the peculiar institution. In fact, in her review on *Dred* –Stowe's second antislavery novel–, George Eliot declared that with both works «Mrs. Stowe has invented the black novel.»[1] William Stanley Braithwaite thought likewise in 1925. For this critic, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was «the first conspicuous example of the Negro as a subject for literary treatment.» (30) Literary replies by Afro-American writers did not take long to appear. According to Bernard W. Bell, the nineteenth-century black authors who responded to the images of blacks created by white literature were mainly influenced by the Bible, popular fiction, and especially abolitionist rhetoric, which became «by far the most useful tradition for the didactic purposes of black novelists.» The elements ingrained in works such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* –«the formal diction, rhythmic cadences, balanced syntax, stark metaphors, and elevated tone...– provided the stylistic blend of matter-of-factness and sentimentality necessary for their initial moral and political appeals primarily to white readers.» (27-28) Richard Yarborough also analyses the impact of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

1. *The Westminster Review*, October 1856. Quoted in Ammons, *Critical* 43-44.

on Afro-American nineteenth-century fiction since, whatever attitude these writers felt towards Stowe or towards her novel, they «inevitably wrote in her wake.» This does not mean that they consciously created their works following this best-seller, but that the novel «embodied a whole constellation of preexisting, often conflicting ideas regarding race, powerfully dramatized them in a sentimental fashion, presented them with an unabashedly didactic reformist message, and, finally proceeded to sell like the dickens.» At the same time, in providing a literary form and a white audience ready to assimilate antislavery protest, Stowe «also helped to establish a range of character types that served to bind and restrict black authors for decades.» (72)[2] Among the Afro-American works that directly responded to Stowe, it is important to mention Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), Frederick Douglass's «The Heroic Slave» (1853) and his revised autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), as well as Martin Delany's *Blake; Or, the Huts of America* (1859), a novel which explicitly calls for a black revolutionary power.[3] Nineteenth-century Afro-American women writers also responded to Stowe. Elizabeth Ammons studies this influence in the work of Harriet E. Wilson, Sarah Lee Brown Fleming, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Angelina W. Grimké.[4]

This is just a sample of Afro-American works written in the light of Stowe's novel, as the list continued well into the twentieth-century.[5] They come to demonstrate what Shelley. F. Fishkin calls «the interplay between Afro-American and white culture in the United States» and Werner Sollors labels as «the pervasiveness of cultural syncretism in America.» (135, 141) Following their pathbreaking studies and retaking

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2. Richard Yarborough states that «black writers could not help but be convinced that if enough of the right ingredients were combined in the right proportions under the right conditions, they too could concoct deeply political novels that might tap the same mass audience that Stowe did and thereby shape the attitudes of whites toward the black minority in the United States» (72). This critic studies this influence in some Afro-American authors: J. W. Howard's *Bond and Free: A True Tale of Slave Times* (1886), Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892), Victoria Earle's [Matthews] *Aunt Lindy, A Story Founded on Real Life* (1892), Walter H. Stowers and William H. Anderson's *Appointed* (1894), and Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901). For William L. Andrews, Harriet Beecher Stowe «provided a powerful impetus to the revolution of literary priorities that would impel black autobiographers further and further away from white precedents» (179).

3. About the ways Douglass revises Stowe in *My Bondage and My Freedom,* see Sundquist, *New Essays* 17-18, and also the chapter «Signs of Power: Nat Turner and Frederick Douglass» in his *To Wake the Nations* (27-134). Likewise Robert B. Stepto's «Sharing the Thunder» makes a comparison between *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Douglass's «The Heroic Slave», as an example of textual conversation on antislavery rhetoric. On the other hand, Sundquist considers *Blake* as a literary reply to Stowe, Douglass, and Melville («Conspiracy» 54). See also the second chapter of *To Wake the Nations*, «Melville, Delany, and New World Slavery» (135-224).

4. Ammons analyses the work of these writers as a reflection and reconstruction of the maternal theme in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. See «Stowe's Dream».

5. Among the best known are, for example, Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), Ishmael Reed's *A Flight to Canada* (1976) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987).

Toni Morrison's call to literary researchers «to acknowledge the very mixed literary bloodlines on both sides», I will discuss that Harriet A. Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* was also written in the wake of Stowe's extraordinarily popular best-seller. The aim of this essay is to analyse how Jacobs manages to fashion a multiple representation in her text that is directly related to the literary modes employed by Harriet Beecher Stowe in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and that they shape not only the presentation of her experience but, also and most importantly, the ways in which she expects to impact readers.

In 1861 Harriet A. Jacobs, after endless efforts to find a publisher, brought out *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* on her own, but soon after, the book and its author fell into oblivion. The few critics who knew about it thought it a dictated narrative by a fugitive slave; others believed it to be a fictional account written in the form of a slave narrative by a white abolitionist.[6] In both cases it was dismissed altogether as a poorly written work marred by its sentimentality and moralizing. Not until Jean Fagan Yellin's research authenticated Jacobs's authorship did the book start to receive its due scholarly attention. Jean F. Yellin explains that «it is no accident that many critics mistook Jacobs's narrative for fiction.» («Introduction» xxix) Linda Brent, Jacobs's alter-ego and her book's heroine and narrator, tells an ambiguous story of triumph. Her confessional account of her fall and guilt is presented to the reader to be judged in the same way as the helpless virtuous Richardsonian or Rowsonian heroine. But this is only apparently because, even if it is undoubtedly true that the strategies Jacobs utilizes in her narrative draw inspiration from well-known popular fiction devices, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the book she responds to and, in her attempt to give a true and just account of the evils of slavery for women, she subverts Harriet Beecher Stowe's text and gives form to her black voice.

The relationship between Jacobs and Stowe can be considered from a twofold perspective: from a personal-professional point of view and from a literary stance. Jacobs was fully aware of the importance of Stowe and of the legitimizing power that her voice could confer to her own story if the white writer accepted to act as a mediator in producing a dictated narrative. But she did not come up to Jacobs's expectations. According to Joan D. Hedrick, «publicly successful, Stowe was not as skillful and sensitive in a private antislavery matter.» (248) First, Stowe declined Jacobs's proposal of her daughters' accompanying her to England. Moreover, she did not believe Jacobs's

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6. John Blassingame is regarded to be one of the most important male scholars who established this train of thought in his *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (1979). For Blassingame, «the story is too melodramatic: misecegenation and cruelty, outraged virtue, unrequited love, and planter licentiousness appear on practically every page» (373). Carby replies to his opinion in 45-6. Yellin presents a summary of the different positions defended by scholars in «Texts and Contexts». For a discussion of the factors influencing the acceptance of a slave narrator's voice as authentic, see Andrews 1-7, 22-31, 97-105.

autobiographical narrative at her first reading and sent it to Mrs. Willis, Jacobs's white northern employer, for verification. If it turned out to be true, then she would use it as material for her *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Jacobs's strategy of hiding in the attic was strikingly similar to the trick Cassy devised to cheat Legree, and Stowe hoped to use it to corroborate her fiction. Both Jacobs and Mrs. Willis were shocked by the way the famous writer had acted. Moreover, she never answered Jacobs's four succeeding letters. As a consequence, she «felt Stowe had betrayed her as a woman, denigrated her as a mother, and threatened her as a writer.» (Yellin, «Introduction» xix)[7] For Hedrick, «Stowe's behaviour –an extreme example of insensitivity bred by class and skin privilege– was probably exarcerbated by her sense of literary 'ownership' of the tale of the fugitive slave.» (249)[8]

There exists another example of Stowe's contradictory behaviour towards another black woman who challenged the system with a voice of her own and from the written word. Among the articles she published during the war years, there is one which actually illuminates how unable she was to «penetrate the contradictions of womanhood instead of merely manipulating them.» (Hedrick 249) In April 1863 «Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl» appeared in *Atlantic Monthly*. Sojourner Truth (c. 1797-1883) was one of the most outstanding black abolitionists of the period. Her speech at the 1851 Akron Women's Rights Convention exposed her awareness of the power of her voice, with the question, «A'n't I a woman?», and she defined herself as a creature of God and suffering Christian and revealed the racism which reigned in the American reform movements. Stowe's article became the most influential contemporary essay on Truth's life but, as Yellin explains, Stowe «created a creature that is passive, mysterious, and inhuman [...] not an enchained queen, but a mutilate [...] a perverse characterization.» (*Women & Sisters* 82)[9] Both cases show that «when Stowe's role was clearly that of patroness of the arts and of 'the race', Stowe functioned comfortably» (Hedrick 249), but when confronted by black women with an assertive voice, her attitude was quite different.

The involvement of Jacobs with Stowe from a literary point of view is much

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7. Goldsby summarizes the risks writing entailed for Jacobs. Firstly, it would launch her into a public forum and she was well aware of the critical reaction against *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and that had been enough to set any antislavery writer off the denunciation tracks. And secondly, it would set her in competition with other antislavery authors, most notably Stowe. But, in spite of these problems, "the prospect of being a published author seemed to intrigue and excite Jacobs", as she shows in her letters to Amy Post, collected in the edition of Yellin. See Goldsby 37.

8. Garfield summarizes the feeling of Jacobs about the attempt of Stowe's appropiation of her narrative in 283-285.

9. During her second trip to Europe in 1857, Stowe told sculptor William Wetmore Story about Truth in Rome. Her account inspired his «The Libyan Sibyl» (1861), a sculpture that celebrates the black abolitionist. For an anlysis of the iconography he displays in this work, see Yellin, *Women & Sisters* 82-87.

more complex and ambiguous, only once in *Incidents* is *Uncle Tom's Cabin* referred to explicitly. In chapter XL, Linda Brent tells how Mrs. Bruce violates openly the laws of the United States and helps her hide in New England where she is sheltered by the wife of a senator. «This honorable gentleman», writes Jacobs, «would not have voted for the Fugitive Slave Law, as did the senator in 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'; on the contrary, he was strongly opposed to it; but he was enough under its influence to be afraid of having me remain in his house many hours. So I was sent into the country.»[10] But *Incidents* distills Stowe's influence in more than just this directly cited occasion as it is the main text against which Jacobs is rewriting.[11] Frances Smith Foster rightly asserts that Harriet Jacobs «used her own experiences to create a book that would correct and enlist support against prevailing social myths and political ideologies.» (62) But I do not agree when she says that when she decided to tell her story «there was no literary model to fit her task and temperament [...] She created a new literary form, one that challenged her audiences' social and aesthetic assumptions even as it delighted and reaffirmed them.» (62-63) In fact, part of her outright demand to readers that they not only acknowledge her story of exploitation but act upon it, is based on their familiarity with Stowe's theme of black women's victimization under the peculiar institution. According to Andrews, Jacobs's text together with Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) are examples of the dialogization that the predominately monologic voice of black autobiography underwent in the black literary renaissance of the 1850s.[12] Hence I consider that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was Jacobs's prime inspiration in this process of dialogization and that this is the reason why readers have read her autobiographical narrative as a novel. In *Incidents* Jacobs revises two of the main strategies used by Stowe in her text: the Gothic motif and the remodelling of her engaging narrator.

When Stowe decided to compose a story that would describe the horrors of slavery in the most graphic and telling manner, she chose a haunted house surrounded by swamps in the midst of a derelict cotton plantation. The garret of the ruined old mansion that Simon Legree occupies is a ghostly place where years before a negro woman who had incurred his displeasure had been confined and tortured to death.[13] Cassy, Legree's quadroon mistress, will «make use of [his] superstitious excitability [...] for the purpose

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10. Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself.* Ed. and introd. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, Massachusettes and London: Harvard U P, 1987. Reprinted 1861 ed.), 194. All further quotations from this text will refer to this edition and will be cited here parenthetically by page number. Jacobs refers to Chapter IX of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, «In Which It Appears That a Senator is But a Man».

11. Zafar states that the book did not have the impact of Douglass's first autobiography (1845), nor «a good-sized fraction of that of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852), a novel against which Jacobs implicitly framed her story» (4).

12. See Andrews 265-292.

13. Chapter XXXIX «The Stratagem» of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The theme of the cruel master imprisoning slaves in a garret was popular and used by antebellum anti-slavery writers and

of her liberation, and that of fellow-sufferer [Emmeline]»[14], and dig up the ghost of this dead woman to put an end to their own bondage. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese draws attention to the fact that more often than not «the autobiographies of Afro-American women have been written from within the cage.» (177) But if in many cases this can be understood as a metaphor of the plight of the black woman writer, in the case of Harriet A. Jacobs this has to be understood literally. For her, the dark night of the soul that slavery represents has no mystical bearing on her spirit but it is a tangible tormenting experience on her flesh. Hence, she transforms herself into a literary subject by becoming precisely that negro woman confined in the Gothic garret who differently from Stowe's passive victim, but similarly to Poe's Lady Madeleine and Ligeia, is buried alive to come back after a time to vindicate her power and assert her womanhood. Jacobs uses the Gothic image not only as embodiment of the evils of slavery, but ultimately to put the standard notions of white female morality and sexuality upside down and justify that they have no bearing in judging African American slave women's experience.

The madwoman's attic is transformed by Jacobs into the bondwoman's military operational centre from which she wages psychological war on her enemy and from which she devises her tactics to counteract the «pelting storms of a slave-mother's life.» (146) Contrary to Stowe's black woman confined by force in the garret of a white owner's mansion, Linda Brent imprisons herself in her own grandmother's house. She thus becomes the owner of her life and deeds who, far from becoming a victimized voyeur of her own destruction, rises to the level of puppeteer controlling her automatons. The slave becomes master and the master slaves of her well orchestrated plans. That Jacobs is deeply aware of the subversive implications of her strategy is made clear in different ways. Firstly, she responds to Miss Fanny's plaintive reaction to the slaves' situation. Miss Fanny, a white lady fond of her grandmother, confesses that she «wished that I and all my grandmother's family were at rest in our graves, for not until then should she feel any peace about us.» (89) Not only does Jacobs firmly reject the fate of the tragic mulatto Cassy and the confined negro woman, but chooses burial alive as the only way to secure her freedom. In fact, even Leslie Fiedler is alert to the dangerous potential imbedded in these motifs and later ignored by readers and critical interpretations. He recognises that Legree's passionate relationship with Cassy and his frustrated attempt to rape Emmeline reach such a degree of complexity that they do not «stick in the collective memory of America.» (264) Furthermore, the story of the decline of Cassy and her degradation to the level of becoming Legree's unwilling mistress has completely «faded from the mind after we have read Un*cle Tom.*» (265) Thus what

postbellum writers discussing racial injustice. See, for example, George Washington Cable's «The Haunted House in Royal Street» in *Strange True Stories of Louisiana* (1889).

14. Harriet B. Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 565. All further quotations from this text will refer to this edition and will be cited here parenthetically by page number.

Stowe just sketches in her book is magnified by Jacobs into the central idea around which her text revolves, which is, according to Carby, «the most sophisticated, sustained narrative dissection of the conventions of true womanhood by a black author before emancipation.» (47)

Secondly, even the title of this chapter, «Loopholes of Retreat», a reference to William Cowper's «The Task» is ironical, especially if we recall the genesis of this work. Lady Austen playfully suggested that the English poet write about a sofa, an idea that grew into the long discursive poem, «The Task», conceived to recommend rural ease and leisure, and which was an immediate success on its publication in 1785.[15] Through Cowper's «loopholes of retreat», the observer can peep at the world, see the stir of the great Babel, and, fortunately, not feel the crowd. The reversal of the function of the hiding place for Jacobs is evident. Moreover, Jacobs uses the image of her imprisonment on two levels. On the one hand, it is the literal physical confinement in the dungeon of the inquisitorial castle of slavery. Linda Brent's plight in revealing the truth is that she is aware of her privileged situation. «The wild beast of Slavery» (35), «the demon Slavery» (83) is pernicious enough in the urban world but in the plantations isolated in the remote rural world is where it achieves its most brutal proportions and where outrages against the humanity of slaves are perpetrated with utmost impunity. The isolated house is an analogical representation of the Gothic horror embodied in the mansion of slavery. «How often did I rejoice that I lived in a town where all the inhabitants knew each other! If I had been on a remote plantation, or lost among the multitude of a crowded city, I should not be a living woman at this day» (35), she declares. Robert D. Hume explains that the Gothic is defined not by its stock devices, but, most importantly, by its use of a particular atmosphere of evil and brooding terror, for essentially psychological reasons, whose purpose is to immerse the reader in an extraordinary world in which ordinary standards and moral judgments become meaningless and good and evil are seen as inextricably intertwined (282-90). This is exactly what she achieves by her constant references to and comparisons between what she is actually suffering and what other slaves might be going through in other latitudes. «The secrets of slavery are concealed like those of the Inquisition» (35), she boldly asserts. Thus she plays with the anguish of her known reality and the even more perverse certainty of the unknown.

On the other hand, Linda Brent's entombment works as redemption for her sins. The text is pervaded with the tension of adhering to the nineteenth-century middle-class white female standards of sexual morality and the urgency of transcending them. Consequently, even if Jacobs tries to toe the line of domestic fiction, she is far from limiting herself to impersonating the figure of the virtuous woman of that same sentimental fiction, or the type of heroic mother Eliza Harris symbolizes in *Uncle Tom's*

15. Olney lists «a poetic epigraph, by preference from William Cowper» as one of the conventions for slave narratives that establish a sort of master outline (152).

Cabin (15). She is the maiden in flight of the Gothic novel and Dr. Flint is Simon Legree's counterpart in this narrative. Flint is transformed into a devil, who enjoys power more than money (80), an «epicure» (12), a «wolf» (59) with a «restless, craving, vicious nature [...] seeking whom to devour» (18); a «vile monster» sporting «terrific ways» trying «his utmost to corrupt the pure principles» instilled in a girl, a violator of «the most sacred commandments of nature» (27); an animal of prey (40), a «persecutor» (35), a «jealous lover.» (81) But even if Jacobs describes Linda Brent as an intimidated cornered defenceless animal reacting to a desperately threatening situation, she still feels that her departure from the sexual moral rules reigning in society needs a corrective and this is where her confinement is tinged with the airs of self-inflicted punishment. And here there is still another link with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that clarifies Jacobs' inner struggle. Karen Halttunen, taking into account G. R. Thompson's opinion on Romanticism and the Gothic tradition, believes that Stowe was «strongly drawn to Gothic fiction's sympathetic representation of the «'tormented condition' of a creature», which is «revealed in her lifelong fascination with Byron», a soul driven into war with itself by its Calvinist upbringing (129). Jacobs also recalls Byron and cites from *The Lament of Tasso*, a dramatic soliloquy, expressing the poet's passionate love and regret, while he is in prison, for Leonora D'Este. By quoting lines 7 to 10 (stanza iv), she draws attention to the fact that hers is also a soul driven into war with itself, «tortured in [a] separate hell.» Thus her seven-year imprisonment comes to symbolize Linda Brent's expiation for her own «tormented condition.» Moreover, it reaches the stage of a mystical purge for her moral deviation with her loss of the power of speech, her near death and resurrection (122). Consequently, Jacobs will fashion it –contrary to the torturing end as Stowe does– as an expiatory station not only on her journey to spiritual cleansing but, most important, to physical freedom. She claims: «I tried to be thankful for my little cell, dismal as it was, and even to love it, as part of the price I had paid for the redemption of my children.» (123)

Yet, in her cell she is active, never passive, that is to say, «passive aggression is substituted for violent confrontation.» (Tate 105) And she does this neither by using «to her advantage all the power of the voyeur», as Valerie Smith states (215), nor by utilizing her sexual potential as Cassy does, but by weaving an elaborate spider's web around her master by writing, thus linking her quest to one of the most important motifs in black literature. Her empowerment as a victimizer is made dependent on her literacy. She then legitimazes her own position as a writer of explosive missives. Writing plays the role of an electrifying umbilical cord between her apparently dead state and her living plight, and she becomes, not the inert victim who sees while remaining unseen, but an ubiquitous plotter, spying on her enemies and embroiling them in her schemes. Furthermore, her condition of fallen woman, her fall into sin, turns out to be a parody of Dr. Flint's fall into despondency. Linda Brent's arrival in the North and her subsequent rise in life is reminiscent of the return of Lady Madeleine and the dead black woman's ghost in Legree's mansion. The fall of the house of Flint is blatantly clear when his

daughter bogged down in economic trouble goes to look for her. The Gothic motif of torture and death of the black female is reversed and made into a white nightmare.

The second element that *Incidents* remodels from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is Stowe's interventions in the text to engage readers. As Robyn R. Warhol explains, Stowe –like other women novelists in mid-nineteenth century England, writing to inspire belief in the situations their novels describe– experimented with what she calls «an engaging narrator», that is to say, a narrator who «strives to close the gaps between the narratee, the addressee, and the receiver.» These narrative interventions are addressed to a «you» that is intended «to evoke recognition and identification in the person who holds the book and reads, even if the 'you' in the text resembles that person only slightly or not at all.» (811) But Jacobs departs from quite a different point. Robert Stepto has explained of Afro-American narratives that «it is the reader – not the author or text and certainly not the storyteller in the text – who is unreliable.» («Distrust of the Reader» 309) When Jacobs opens her preface with the words «Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction» (1), she is tracing a gesture that goes beyond a mere rhetoric purpose of awakening the reader's sympathy for what follows. She is acutely aware that her words will come up against the prejudice, disbelief, and even hostility of the white audience. Stowe relies on an engaging narrator to overcome prejudice, but Jacobs's strategy dodges identification and underscores distance, challenge and even rebuff.

Her appeals to the reader occur in five forms. Firstly, the narrator states the truth of the facts she narrates since her account derives from her living experiences. Besides the first words of the preface, other examples appear in chapter VI, «Reader, I draw no imaginary pictures of southern homes, I am telling you the plain truth» (35), and chapter IX, «You may believe what I say; for I write that whereof I know [...] I can testify from my own experience and observation.» (52) Whereas Stowe's engaging narrator intrudes to remind that her fiction is nourished on sources that reflect real-world conditions, Jacobs's explicit attitude toward the act of narration goes beyond fictionality, since she legitimizes her text with her own voice and without trusting the extradiegetic situation it describes. Secondly, Jacobs addresses free white women to challenge them to draw a comparison between the standards of morality that rule their lives and those governing the slave woman. Examples of this form can be seen in chapter III, «O, you happy free women, contrast your New Year's day with that of the poor bond-woman!» (16); and chapter X, «O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely!» (54) Stowe limits the circle of her readers addressing herself to «mothers» or to the maternal sensibility buried in male readers in an attempt to engage their sympathy and strengthen their values as shapers of middle-class identity and champions of the ideology of true womanhood. However, Jacobs directly questions these ideas as racialized concepts which exclude black women and cast them out into marginality.

A third form of appeal tries to justify the tone of the narrative. In chapter V, she

says, «Reader, it is not to awaken sympathy for myself that I am telling you truthfully what I suffered in slavery. I do it to kindle a flame of compassion in your hearts for my sisters who are still in bondage, suffering as I once suffered.» (29) In chapter VII, she inquires, «Reader, did you ever hate? I never did but once» (40); in chapter VIII, after she explains the manipulation slaves undergo and the disastrous results that make of them ignorant creatures, she asks, «What would you be, if you had been born and brought up a slave, with generations of slaves for ancestors?» (44) If Stowe's acts of comparison between her slave and white characters aim at evoking a recognition of shared emotional traits, Jacobs draws attention to the fact that hers is a collective story rooted in the different economic, political, and social positions that blacks and whites have occupied in the social formation of slavery.

A fourth type of address takes the form of direct accusations against the northern political connivance. In chapter V, we read: «Why are ye silent, ye free men and women of the north? Why do your tongues falter in maintenance of the right?» (29-30) In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe also attacks what Leverenz calls «nice parlour readers» (19), and she repeatedly criticizes northern politicians who support ruthless attitudes for the sake of national union. But she «encourages a relatively comfortable reader refashioning –at least for those who don't own slaves– by frequently acknowledging the reader's upper-class status at the same time as she urges moral improvement.» (20) Jacobs's recriminations sound more vitriolic as she ironically unveils the way genteel northern readers pay lip service to the ideals of «right» and thus she not only excoriates their passivity but implicates them directly in the preservation of the racist oppresion blacks suffered.

Finally, there is a fifth form which sets her narrative in the antipodes of Stowe's figure of the engaging narrator and which challenges the impulse to discover in her text an attempt for a black and white sisterhood.[16] These appeals are strategically placed in the middle and last chapters of the narrative and thus subvert all previous possibilities of identification and compassive patronizing readings. Jacobs here empowers herself as the only source of knowledge and authenticity her text is based on and thus places an apparent insurmountable distance between the narrator and the narratee. She then reveals that the confessional plaintif tone of addresses such as «Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be slave» (Chapter X, 55) are more than hints of her distrust of the reader. They are outright statements of a deep disbelief in the rhetoric of abolitionist protest. In chapter XXIX, she boldly manifests: «I hardly expect the reader will credit me, when I affirm that I lived in that little dismal hole [...] for nearly seven years.» (148) In chapter XXXIX she does not only challenge the reader's capability of credibility but discards it altogether: «O reader, can you imagine my joy?

16. For a discussion on the role of women in the context of the domestic ideology, see Yellin «Doing It Herself».

No, you cannot, unless you have been a slave mother.» (173) She repeats this in chapter XL: «Reader, if you have never been a slave, you cannot imagine the accute sensation of suffering at my heart.» (196) With these challenging appeals that echo the biblical epigraph of the title page of the book –«hear my voice, ye careless daughters!»– Jacobs not only avoids what P. Gabrielle Foreman calls «complete discursive victimization» (79) but ultimately demands a drastic change of the genteel white reader's self image and not just the values they cherish. Jacobs is aware that the mystique of motherhood dominates her society and that, as it appears in antislavery works such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it is a racialized and class-based credo. Her black voice becomes then counterpoint to the white voice in Stowe's novel and shows her doubts about the possibility of developing close cross-racial bonds in the struggle against slavery.[17] In rebuking her readers's knowledge to read her text and the black slave woman's life, Jacobs is explicitly remarking that any sisterhood between white and black women is not feasible if the former do not undergo a change not only epistemic –as John Ernest believes (180)– but, most important, an ontological discovery of the meaning of womanhood in antebellum America.

Her attitude is made clear in chapter XXXIX, placed nearly at the end of the narrative and titled «The Confession», where she dramatizes what could be called the message of her book: «There are no bonds so strong as those which are formed by suffering together.» (148) In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Cassy confesses to Tom her sensational and romantic life story of degradation. In *Incidents* and before chapter XXIX, Jacobs incorporates several confession scenes for both structural and rhetorical purposes,[18] but the one that throws light on her conception of the reader she addresses is that of the confession to her own daughter. The girl understands without explanation and without justification because she herself is part and parcel of her mother's experience. Jacobs writes:

> I thanked God that the knowledge I had so much dreaded to impart had not diminished the affection of my child. I had not the slightest idea she knew that portion of my history. If I had, I should have spoken to her long before; for my pent-up feelings had often longed to pour themselves out to some one I could trust. But I loved the dear girl better for the delicacy she had manifested towards her unfortunate mother (189).

For Andrews, the writer «approaches her woman-identified reader with a perso-

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17. This corroborates Carby's scepticism towards feminist and literary criticism which seek to establish the existence of an American sisterhood between black and white women. See Carby 6.

18. For a discussion of how cross-racial bonds between white and black women were based on the racist presumption of white superiority, see Gwin «Green-eyed Monsters» and *Black and White Women of the Old South*, especially chapters I and II which deal with this peculiar sisterhood in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and in antebellum writings both by black and white women.

nal history of secrets whose revelation, she hopes, will initiate the reader into the community of confidence and support that nineteenth-century women needed in order to speak out above a whisper against their oppresion.» (254) But this key scene of her revelations to her daughter does not underscore this interpretation. Hazel V. Carby sees it as the vindication of the type of motherhood defined in the text which excludes «the need for any approval from the readership.» (61) Notwithstanding this perceptive approach, Jacobs aims at a wider scope. As Sandra Gunning writes, «Jacob's project of re-reading posed a challenge to mid-nineteenth-century literary and social ideologies that fetishized the black female body.» (135) Yellin explains how white women working for suffrage employed the image of the chained, denuded, helpless black female slave as a metaphor to describe their own perceived position as patriarchal wards without the social and political power to control their economic and physical lives.[19] But Jacobs understands that these representations of dispossessed black women, converted into the fundamental icon of abolitionist rhetoric, do not imply an immediate recognition of the condition of female slaves by white readers. To achieve such identification *Incidents* surpasses Stowe's dictum on seeing that you «feel right» (624) and makes necessary not only an initiation into the power and potential of women's community but, most important, an acknowledgement of the white reader's ideological contradictions through remodelation of the self and engagement into political action.

The end of Jacobs's narrative is far from being a happy one since her quest for home remains unfulfilled. Her return to the world of the living is deprived of all its victorious connotations and she is extremely careful to paint it like that. What makes Jacobs's story disturbing is not the fact that she is narrating an exclusively personal experience, although she is deeply aware of it, since «many a slave sister has formed the same plans.» (42) But –as Selwyn R. Cudjoe has tellingly explained about African American autobiographies– that it presents the experience of the individual «as reflecting a much more im-personal condition», which is to say, the autobiographical subject emerges «as an almost random member of the group, selected to tell his/her tale.» This is exactly what Jacobs aims at and achieves with her *Incidents of a Slave Girl* by appropriating the Gothic elements of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: to make a replication of the white text submerged in her own enacting not only a public but also a private gesture. However, Jacobs goes one step further from what Cudjoe contends since *«me-ism»* does not give way to *«our-ism»*, because «superficial concerns about *individual subject*» do not give way to «the *collective subjection* of the group» (Fox-Genovese 184), but stand firmly hand in hand drawing strength from each other.

Far from just inscribing her narrative in the standard coordinates of the slave narrative genre or the sentimental fiction, Jacobs constructs her text subverting the conventions that rule female black characters in the most popular book of antebellum

19. See Yellin, *Women and Sisters* and Andrews 241-47.

America and perhaps of all times. This is an account of a woman who becomes not only free but independent, and is also able to act on her own will, to embrace her womanhood and, most important, to enact the sacred duty of a mother. Jacobs's text justifies the necessity of a new yardstick to measure female black experience and thus is critical of the values cherished and preached by the nineteenth-century white domestic ideology. «Still, in looking back, calmy, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others», she states (56). Her story does not end «in the usual way, with marriage» but «with freedom.» Yet, «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.» (201) Jacobs brilliantly suggests that she has not yet woken up from the nightmare of her life, that America is still a haunted Gothic mansion buried in darkness and the obscurity of the slavery swamp. Consequently, writing provided her with only a partial exorcism for her grief.

No wonder Stowe did not support Jacobs's text. If *Uncle Tom's Cabin* underscores the role of the black woman as secondary and servile and accepts Catherine Beecher's dictums on the predicament of the public role of women, Jacobs activates all their potential –black and white are urged to stand up and fight against injustice, even if she is aware of the fact their hierarchical relationship is «determined through a racial, not gendered categorization.» (Carby 55) Linda Brent is shown agonizing over her decisions and is described as a fully rational creature engaged in the human activity of making moral choices. That painful process is the chore of the development of the action in her narrative and it differenciates her from being a simple natural creature –Stowe's black female stereotype– responding to events. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* she articulates a reaction to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which is far from being what she terms «the delicate silence of womanly sympathy» (162), but the warring response of sisterly understanding built as a celebratory monument of her grandmother's tender memories. All Jacobs's female characters, not only her heroine, become deeply involved in the public struggle against slavery and they do not plunge into escapism, either physical in the form of geographical expatriation, or moral, in the form of spiritual alienation. Here is a black woman embracing political action, infinitely more directly than Margaret Fuller, and as such Jacobs deserves the recognition of being the Dark Lady of the American Renaissance, the black prophetess called to bring women issues to new spheres of dignity and liberty. Linda Brent recounts a tale of a quest for freedom, from darkness into light, while her physical body is confined in a cell, and in the process of telling she not only transforms herself into a literary subject, but defines for the first time, long before Zora Neale Hurston started to cultivate her garden, the female black voice as a powerful representation of both her private self as well as the public conditions of gender, class, and race.

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