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THE RECEPTION OF HARRIET JACOBS'  
INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL

Vedoucí práce: doc. PhDr. Mariana Machová, Ph.D.

Autor práce: Barbora Houšková

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I confirm that this thesis is my own work written using solely the sources and literature properly quoted and acknowledged as works cited.

8.5. 2023 České Budějovice

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Barbora Houšková

### **Poděkování**

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor doc. PhDr. Mariana Machová, Ph.D. for her advice and for enabling me to write my thesis about something I can earnestly say I consider important. My thanks also belong to Professor Christy L. Pottroff for providing me with her remarkable article.

## **Anotace**

Cílem této bakalářské práce je zaměřit se na problematiku recepce díla *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* od afroamerické autorky Harriet Jacobs. Ačkoli je tato autobiografie, poprvé vydaná počátkem roku 1861, dnes známá jako jedno z nejvýznamnějších děl tzv. slave narratives, vyprávění otroků, jeho autenticita a autorství byly zpochybňovány po mnoho dekad, a teprve koncem 20. století byla kniha opět uznána jako hodnotné a pravdivé osobní svědectví toho, co pro afroamerické ženy znamenalo otroctví ve Spojených státech před občanskou válkou. Tato práce se tedy soustředí jak na recepci dobovou, s přihlédnutím především k historickým okolnostem abolicionismu a začátku občanské války, tak i na recepci současnou, zejména na kritické ohlasy 20. století a následnou kanonizaci díla. Klíčovým faktorem této analýzy bude mnohonásobná diskriminace, jež ovlivňovala život i práci Harriet Jacobs jakožto sexuálně zneužívané ženy afroamerického původu.

**Klíčová slova:** abolicionismus, otroctví, autobiografie, vyprávění otroků, intersekcionalita, gender

## **Annotation**

The aim of this thesis is to explore the problematics of the reception of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Though this autobiography, first published at the beginning of 1861, is today known as one of the most major works of the genre of slave narratives, its authenticity and authorship have been questioned and denied for several decades, and only by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has the narrative been recognized as a valuable and truthful personal testimony of what slavery meant for African American women in antebellum America. This thesis then focuses on both the contemporary reception, mainly with regard to the historical circumstances of abolitionism and the upcoming Civil War, and a more recent one, predominantly on 20<sup>th</sup>-century criticism and the subsequent canonization of the narrative. The key factor of this analysis will be the multiple discrimination which affected the life and work of Harriet Jacobs as a sexually abused woman of African American descent.

**Key words:** abolitionism, slavery, autobiography, slave narratives, intersectionality, gender

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## Introduction

The objective of this thesis is to explore the reception of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, an autobiography known today as one of the most significant representatives of the genre of antebellum slave narratives, published at the beginning of 1861 by Harriet Jacobs, an African American author and abolitionist. As a literary work highly focused on the sexual abuse of female slaves and long dismissed in terms of authenticity, accuracy and authorship, *Incidents* and its reception is to be studied predominantly with regard to Jacobs' identity as a formerly enslaved Black woman in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The first part of the thesis focuses on the narrative's contemporary reception and is divided into two chapters, the first one of which deals with the years leading up to the publication of *Incidents* – Jacobs' motivations behind the decision to share her life story and the challenges she had to face in the process of writing and publishing. The second chapter directly follows with an examination of the narrative's primal reception during the months immediately following its publication and focuses therefore on the issues of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century literary market regarding anti-slavery literature, postpublication literary labours and contemporary reviews.

The aim of Chapter 3 is to explore the issue of Jacobs' identity as a member of historically oppressed and marginalized groups, and the effect these factors had on the unique voice of her narrative and on its consequent reception – in the final part of the chapter, this will be demonstrated through a comparison with the reception of two of Jacobs' contemporaries.

As the majority of antebellum slave stories was virtually forgotten for several decades after their initial publication, the fourth and penultimate chapter deals with *Incidents*' critical reception in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the period of modern rediscovery of slave literature. This chapter discusses and questions some of the most widely accepted arguments against the historical value of *Incidents* and the true identity of its author and introduces the revolutionary work of the American historian Jean Fagan Yellin, whose studies in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century effectively confirmed the authenticity of the narrative and presented thereby the most valuable contribution to its renaissance and its subsequent entry into literary canon. The fifth and final chapter then deals with the question of *Incidents*' inclusion in anthologies and school curricula and its position in literary canon since the turn of the century, mainly concerning the recent approach to antebellum slave narratives on the academic ground.

As *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was only quite recently granted proper scholarly attention, there is not yet a publication which would offer a complete outline of its reception. This thesis therefore works with a number of various sources, which each in more or less detail deal only with some individual fragments of the narrative's reception, and combines them in an attempt to create a complete picture of the process. Sources for a thorough study of Jacobs' life and work likewise remain limited – it is therefore essential to acknowledge the indispensable information source that has been the rigorous research done by Jean Fagan Yellin, the value of which for the study of Harriet Jacobs remains unmatched by no current publication, and which in essence made this thesis possible. Yellin laid the groundwork for modern criticism of *Incidents*, and her advocacy for and evidence of the narrative's authenticity, as well as her reconstruction of Jacobs' life story prior to and beyond the autobiography, present a fundamental base for this thesis. Similarly noteworthy is the contribution of Professor Christy L. Pottroff, who for the purpose of this work kindly provided her recent article, which offered a unique and unequalled perspective on Jacobs' postpublication works.



## 1. Writing *Incidents*

At the beginning of January 1861, with America edging towards the Civil War, Harriet Jacobs (1813–1897), under the pseudonym of Linda Brent, published an autobiographical narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* – a story of her life and fight for freedom as an enslaved African American woman, and a call to action for those in power to contribute to the overthrow of the institution of slavery. What preceded this milestone in abolitionist and African American literature were years of endeavour and setbacks, a path undoubtedly not less challenging than that awaiting the memoir after its publication. This initial chapter deals with Jacobs’ literary process prior to and in the course of writing her autobiography, as well as with the process of publishing and the obstacles she had to face and overcome therein as an African American author in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### 1.1 Motivation

Though the resolution to write and publish an autobiography ultimately came down to Jacobs’ unyielding determination to devote her life to help the abolitionist cause, the motivations and impulses for this decision were several. Most importantly, the growing force of the abolitionist movement in the antebellum and wartime America automatically meant a demand for an authentic account of a slave’s experience. By extension, Black abolitionists called for more independent African American voices, both in the overall movement itself and on the literary market. This was essentially a call for contribution of their own culture – a call for new stories, new authors and works which would mark the African American literary history in a way significantly less temporary than the anti-slavery publications for the newspapers of the time (Yellin, *A Life* 125).

The passing away of Jacobs’ grandmother Molly Horniblow in 1853, a moment Jacobs herself recalls on the very last pages of *Incidents*, could be considered another catalyst for her decision. To this very time dates also one of the first mentions of her working on the book depicting her life – in a letter to her friend Amy Post (1802–1889), a white abolitionist and feminist, she says:

I must write just what I have lived and witnessed myself dont expect much of me dear Amy [*sic*] you shall have truth but not talent God did not give me that gift but he gave me a soul that burned for freedom and a heart nerved with

determination to suffer even unto death in pursuit of that liberty which without makes life an intolerable burden. (124)

It is apparent from what Jacobs wrote that though determined, she was doubtful about the quality of her writing. What she would predominantly feel insecure about whilst writing her autobiography would however be the heavy, problematic subjects of her life story, and the inclusion of them in such a publication – relating this issue, Jean Fagan Yellin argues that when the death of Molly Horniblow finally prompted Jacobs to begin this journey, it was possibly also due to the fact that she was unable to publicly share the painful story including her sexual history as long as her grandmother would still be able to read it (126).

It was Amy Post herself, however, who first suggested in one of her writings to Jacobs the possibility of publishing an autobiography. But Jacobs, though understanding more than anyone the necessity of contributing to the anti-slavery cause, thought the proposed idea absurd, and did so for understandable reasons – her life was not only a difficult one, but mainly one very painful to recall and even more painful to share. The story Post suggested be shared publicly was a story Jacobs had been hardly able to share with her closest friends or family, and it was a great concern whether she could trust the common reader to accept an account of life she herself struggled to accept with such difficulty. But just as she recognized the gravity of the American slavery situation, she recognized the impact her book could have on the abolitionist movement, and always intent on helping the cause she did eventually vow to do all in her power to get her story out (118–119). The realisation of such a project would nevertheless pose a larger problem than the mere resolution to do so.

In *Harriet Jacobs: A Life*, Yellin talks about Jacobs' minor publications prior to the famous autobiography, but it can be understood from the preserved correspondence that the idea of writing about her own experience on a larger scale, and the necessity of such a text, was present for a notable amount of time before she came to realize it. The first figurative step towards her literary career was made at the beginning of summer 1853, when Julia Tyler (1820–1889), who was in favour of slavery, published *The Women of England vs. the Women of America*. This motivated Jacobs to write the first one of her numerous following public letters on the issue of American slavery. Here she says: “The truth can never be told so well through the second and third person as from yourself” (122), and as the truthfulness of Jacobs' accounts would later be repeatedly

questioned and denied, it is this very line that has a significant meaning for what the future held for Harriet Jacobs and her slave narrative.

## **1.2 Initial Obstacles**

Jacobs would go on to write several more of those letters, signed as a “Fugitive Slave”, to be published in anti-slavery newspapers, but she would work on them secretly – as Yellin reveals in her study of Jacobs’ correspondence, the fear of judgement would keep her from confiding about her aspirations not only in some of her closest friends, but also in her employers, the family of an American writer Nathaniel Parker Willis (1806–1867) (70) for whom she worked at the time. This would later, when she would start writing her autobiography, make the process significantly more difficult, as working for the family was extremely time consuming, and Jacobs was reluctant to ask for the needed free time both out of pride and because of the potential humiliation she feared so much (Yellin, *Written by Herself* 485).

The obvious issue of Jacobs’ not being an experienced writer was something she hoped to avoid by lending her story to an already established writer to publish it on her behalf – this idea shortly proved fruitless when Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896), a successful abolitionist writer, refused her collaborative suggestions, instead proposing to only use Jacobs’ story for her new book *The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1853), a supplement to her successful novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). Offended yet determined, Jacobs realised that if she wanted to assure accuracy and truthfulness, she ought to write the book herself, even though she would remain insecure about the potential formal flaws in her writing (119–121).

### **1.2.1 The Abolitionist and the Slave**

The incident with Stowe raises the question of the complicated relationship between slave narratives and abolitionist literature and their authors; in this specific case of Stowe especially those authors of fictional anti-slavery literature. Kerry Sinanan explores this issue in her chapter for *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* “The Slave Narrative and the Literature of Abolition” (61–80), where she stresses how the texts of white abolitionists and African American writers were inherently interdependent and interconnected, but fundamentally different in that however similar the aims and beliefs of the two parties were, the former never wrote from a personal experience, while the latter did. However an anti-slavery text by

a white abolitionist was intended, if a slave's story was being told, it was a story the narrator could not understand, and a story for which complete veracity and accuracy to real life they could not vouch. Therein arose a twofold issue – firstly, there easily occurred instances where an abolitionist text included racist ideas, and we can see that in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which remains a controversial book for that very reason to the present day. Secondly, abolitionist literature had an inevitable political purpose and therefore arguments to make, and for that reason the power of those texts lied primarily within their truthfulness and ability to convince. When abolitionists would borrow slave stories and possibly even alter them for the sake of abolitionist fiction (such as Stowe), they would not only accentuate the tendency white abolitionist had to use slaves as mere bearers of stories which only they, abolitionists, were capable of putting into eloquent works of effective anti-slavery argument, but they would also set up these texts to the same questioning of accuracy as authentic slave writings had to face – which is a complicated debate to have over texts such as Stowe's *Cabin* or *The Key*, where she would take the truth and make it more or less inaccurate. The line between fact and fiction became even thinner in the publication for which Stowe suggested to use Jacobs' story, as her plan for *The Key* was to compose a collection of documents and materials depicting stories of real-life slaves on which *Cabin* was presumably based. Upon refusing Stowe's suggestion, Jacobs recognized the risk in lending her story for such a publication – “I wished it to be a history of my life entirely by itself, which would do more good, and it needed no romance” (Sinanan 76).

Though *Incidents* would later suffer no lesser questioning of accuracy than Stowe's texts, having decided to not give her story to Stowe to rewrite for the sake of her book did give Jacobs the opportunity to write her story just as it was, and ensure therefore that it would always remain a true account of a slave's life, however it might be interpreted by its readers – “the truth can never be told so well through the second and third person as from yourself” (Yellin, *A Life* 122).

### **1.2.2 Predicted Reception – the American Reader**

Most importantly, Jacobs was aware of the controversial character of her story, and the way it challenged numerous contemporary beliefs, norms and ideologies. Knowing the common American reader of her time, she would be able to conclude how the audience was prone to react to her narrative – a narrative which, for the sake of being truest to the real-life story, was above all highly focused on the sexual abuse of female slaves by

their owners. Such a piece of literature was one of its kind and fundamentally bound not to be accepted easily by the general reader. The core of this reception issue, and the main subject of Chapter 3 of the thesis, was the intersectionality of Jacobs' life, the oppression of her gender and her race alike, and the way they projected in her work. The story Jacobs decided to share with public had to be curated in accordance with those factors; she worked with the presupposition of a reader who was in most cases a free white person, presumably a woman, whose experience was vastly different from hers; a reader who, as much as they could be willing to, could never fully understand the pains of her life, or of any life directly marked by the institution of slavery – not merely for the lack of experience, but also for the lack of knowledge and awareness and for the power of their own convictions. The fragments of her life Jacobs decided to write down were a careful combination of what was completely true, what she would be able to share, and what would keep the readers' attention on the main messages of her story, all while attempting to make them believe, accept, and ideally understand what they read about her life and her decisions (Yellin, *A Life* 145).

The need for understanding and certain empathy is distinct not only in this particular stage of her work, before the story even got on the market, but also in the way Jacobs wrote her book, with the plea for it expressed several times throughout the book itself:

But, 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! ... I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery. (Jacobs 500–501)

For reasons related mostly to the specific character of Harriet Jacobs' life as an oppressed Black woman in America (who beyond that chose to publish a personal story about years of sexual abuse), the acceptance and understanding she sought was mainly that of another woman, and it was Amy Post whom she asked to complete her manuscript with a preface or introduction. The draft of *Incidents* was finished in 1857, almost four years before her book would ever see print, with Jacobs ultimately motivated by the Supreme Court's issuing of the Dred Scott decision, yet another step backwards for abolitionism. In her subsequent correspondence with Post concerning the

requested preface, she expressed her feelings about the anticipated reception of her book in relation to its taboo themes – she was well aware of how the free white reader might struggle with her story, an account notably different from what they knew, or believed they knew, about the slavery culture in America. In this letter, she also wished for the audience’s trust and especially sympathy, not necessarily for her as an individual, but for the whole community of African American women, mothers and slaves – a sentiment some likewise partially connect to the Black female authors’ way of writing, as further examined in Chapter 3. More cautious about the readers’ judgement than any white, and arguably even Black, writer had ever had to be, she even mentioned her concerns about the audience potentially assuming she had published the book for financial profit, and asked Post to mention in the introduction that during writing, the author was indeed still a servant (Yellin, *A Life* 135–136).

### **1.3 Search for a Publisher**

Now with her memoir finished, Jacobs was contemplating the possibility of publishing it first abroad in England before ever setting it up for print in America, knowing that other slave narratives published there were fairly well received among abolitionists. However, her first attempt at doing so promptly failed. Though the exact reasons are unknown, it is assumed it was due to the fear of how British readers would accept the narrative with its sexually explicit themes (137–138). Back in America, Jacobs faced no lesser obstacles – whilst by this time there would be a certain demand for slave narratives amongst many abolitionist publishers, her book was too unusual, too controversial, and perhaps too sensational for the general reader, and the publishers would require more of Jacobs than they normally would of other authors of slave narratives (Foster 63–64). These were often requirements Jacobs was not able to fulfil.

Changes were made to the manuscript after John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859, when Jacobs added a new conclusion, a tribute to John Brown (which would be later omitted, as suggested by her editor), and subsequently sent her work to the Boston publishing house of Phillips and Samson. There she was to face another issue, as the publisher agreed to print her work only on the condition that she obtained a preface for the book by either Nathaniel P. Willis, her employer, or Stowe – both established well-known authors. But Jacobs not only remained hesitant about revealing her efforts to the Willis family, but her relationship with the now openly proslavery Willis got even more complicated, and the idea of asking him for a preface for her slave narrative seemed

absurd. Stowe rejected her again, yet the reasons behind this repeated refusal of collaboration with Jacobs are not specified (Yellin, *A Life* 140). Because helping to give a voice to an African American fugitive slave woman would be in accordance with Stowe's abolitionist political beliefs, it could be speculated whether her decisions to reject Jacobs could be put down to the highly controversial nature of *Incidents* and Stowe's hesitation to associate herself with such text. Phillips and Samson were out of the picture shortly after that.

The next publishing company Jacobs approached was Thayer & Eldridge. Though they did not end up publishing her work, they did originally require her to acquire a preface from Lydia Maria Child (1802–1880), and thereby unknowingly set her on to getting into contact with an abolitionist activist and writer who would later prove to be an indispensable help in her publishing efforts. Despite being wary after her negative experience with Stowe, Jacobs did manage to approach Child with this request, and Child ended up not only providing an introduction to the book, but also becoming its editor and later Jacobs' agent (140–141) – this editorial help would pose some of the most crucial issues in the book's journey towards authentication in the future.

Despite Jacobs meeting the publishers' requirements, the rather delicate business relationship she had established with them seemed to be slowly coming to its end. The reasons behind this were firstly that Thayer and Eldridge were progressively nearing towards insolvency, and secondly that publishing *Incidents* was nowhere near being their priority – the profits they hoped to gain by publishing a slave narrative during a period of American history promisingly lucrative for such a genre could not come soon enough to save them from bankruptcy (Pottroff 228–230). Child then suggested the book be published with an additional help from the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) (Yellin, *A Life* 142), which had a history of financing various abolitionist publications and slave narratives in America, including for instance *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) or *Narrative of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave* (1847) (Gould 23). AASS was an abolitionist organisation founded in 1833 by William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879), a distinguished American abolitionist and founder of a prominent anti-slavery newspaper *The Liberator* (where some of Jacobs' work would also be published in the future), the establishment of which is considered the cornerstone of the rise of American abolitionism (Fisch, *Chronology* xvii) (Bruce 28). Child originally attempted to arrange for two thousand copies of *Incidents* to be printed by Thayer & Eldridge, one thousand of which would then be

promoted and distributed with the aid of AASS, but the publishers went bankrupt before this plan could be realized, and the exact ways in which Jacobs, supposedly along with Child, managed to subsequently have the book printed and bound are unclear – nevertheless, it is certain that it was not by means of any official publishing company (Yellin, *A Life* 143). On February 1, 1861 in Boston, after years of unsuccessful publishing attempts, Jacobs finally made her first major deal, selling over one hundred copies of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* to AASS, who would then go on to spend the following months on its distribution (Pottroff 231).



## 2. Primal Reception

At the beginning of 1861, almost a whole decade after Jacobs first decided to write her life down and after years of onerous labour and repeated attempts to get the manuscript printed, physical copies of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* told by a pseudonymous narrator Linda Brent were finally available for sale. Help in promoting and selling the book was available to Jacobs not only from the American Anti-Slavery Society and her editor and friend Lydia Maria Child, but also from several other anti-slavery organisations and activists. But in spite of various abolitionists assisting in this process, the bookselling industry did not accept *Incidents* easily – Child in her struggle to promote the book on a wider market scale wrote about booksellers in Boston that they were “dreadfully afraid of soiling their hands with an Anti-Slavery book” (Yellin, *A Life* 146). In connection to this issue, Christy L. Pottroff furthermore argues in her article that to this day there is a certain lack of recognition of Jacobs’ work in this phase of her career, as her vigorous efforts in the distribution and promotion of *Incidents*, as well as in the unclear circumstances of the narrative’s printing, tend to be overshadowed in academic publications by those of AASS and Child (Pottroff 230; 232) – but as Pottroff points out in the notes to her article, there is a lack of evidence in favour of the popular claim that Jacobs was provided with such help during the “postpublication literary labors”. She therefore concludes, in agreement with the overall approach she takes to Jacobs’ literary labour history, that majority of this work was in fact carried out by Jacobs herself (242).

### 2.1 The Capitalist Market and Abolitionist Literature

Although the contemporary literary market was in most cases reluctant to associate itself with abolitionist works, much less with works written directly by fugitive slaves, there was still some ambiguity regarding its acceptance of anti-slavery literature, as has been mentioned in Chapter 1. As slavery and abolitionism became major topics both in the antebellum period and during the Civil War itself, there was an increased, albeit sporadic, interest in books and stories dealing with these topics. The demand for slave narratives came not only with the growth of the abolitionist movement, for which they posed an effective means of promoting its cause, but also with the simultaneous rise of capitalist literary market in America (Gould 23). For publishers, then, slave narratives were a genre of lucrative potential, and it was oftentimes for the promised financial income that they were willing to publish such literature, rather than for any abolitionist

sentiments – this is apparent for instance in the example of the publishing company Thayer & Eldridge and their brief business relationship with Jacobs. In majority of the cases, however, the market remained dismissive.

## 2.2 Contemporary Reviews – America

In spite of any difficulties in the process of selling the book to more bookstores and publishers, the reception and reviews of those who did read Jacobs' autobiography – that is in the first few months mostly her acquaintances and people directly involved in the abolitionist movement in her circle – were fairly positive. William Cooper Nell (1816–1874), an African American abolitionist, author and a long-time friend of Jacobs and her family (including especially her brother John S. Jacobs (1815–1873), likewise the author of his own slave narrative *A True Tale of Slavery* (1861) (Yellin, *A Life* 76)), who supported her during the preceding years in her pursuit, and who was also the one to help her get in contact with Child, wrote a noteworthy review on *Incidents*. “This record ... need[s] not the charms that any pen of fiction, however gifted and graceful, could lend. They shine by the lustre of their own truthfulness” (146) he says, focusing particularly on the accuracy and veracity of the narrative. Furthermore, the *Standard*, a newspaper which had previously published one of Jacobs' *Fugitive Slave Letters* (123), proclaimed the narrative to have the strength to “kindle ... a feeling of moral indignation against the system,” and highlighted thereby the significance Jacobs' work held for the abolitionist movement in America. Similar approach to *Incidents* was taken by the *Weekly Anglo-African*, who mentioned in their review, acknowledging with similar sentiment as *Standard* the power Jacobs' words had against the lasting culture of chattel slavery, the “determination arising in [its pages] ... to tear down the cursed system which makes such records possible” (147).

In their publication *The Slave's Narrative*, Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr. provide a collection of reviews concerning a number of autobiographical slave narratives published between the eighteenth and twentieth century, choosing the texts in such a way in which they are able to demonstrate the varying interpretations of and approaches to the individual narratives as well as the genre as a whole, both at the time of their publication and in the decades following. The first full review they present concerning Harriet Jacobs alias Linda Brent and her autobiography is a reportedly anonymous one, written on behalf of *The Anti-Slavery Advocate* newspaper in May 1861 (Davis and Gates 32–34). In the biography, Yellin claims this anonymous author

was most probably Richard Davis Webb, another one of Jacobs' acquaintances whom she met on her above-mentioned trip to Britain during her first attempt to publish the narrative abroad (Yellin, *A Life* 147). In this review, the author – presumably Webb – swore on Jacobs' strong character, and, calling her “one of the truest heroines we have ever met with” (Davis and Gates 33), he assured the reader about the truthfulness of *Incidents*, using his own experience with Jacobs to support his claims, as he had already met with her in Britain and had therefore heard her life story years before the book's publication. He then devoted the rest of his article to putting an emphasis on the power of the narrative and the necessity of the impact it ought to have on free Americans, those in power to make real change to the institution of slavery.

### **2.2.1 The Politics of Abolitionist Literature & the Factor of Truth**

Despite these positive reviews coming mostly from an admittedly limited group of people, the book seemed to be on the right way to fulfil its central goal, that is to have the power to initiate change through its readers – a power these abolitionists recognized. Yet the unavoidable issue with such reviews was that given the nature of the slave narrative genre, especially at this particular time in American history, there were always inevitable politic notions inherent to those stories, and similarly were the reviews written predominantly in the name of the abolitionist cause and printed mostly in anti-slavery publications. More than ever were slave narratives used as means of resistance against slavery and oppression during the antebellum period and for the duration of the Civil War, both to demonstrate the true cruelty of chattel slavery as well as to prove the intellectual ability of Black people. As mentioned in Chapter 1, this “polemical use” (3) of the texts, as Davis and Gates describe it, became the reason behind arguably one of the biggest issues with the reception of slave narratives, that is their truthfulness. If a piece of literature was going to be used to challenge a set system and public mindset, it was important that the stories, in this time and place inherently ideological, be true (3). This posed great issues for Jacobs specifically, as she with her text challenged not only the institution of slavery, but also that of American patriarchy.

Because of their fundamentally political purpose, it was important for slave narratives to be constructed carefully in a way in which they would most effectively get their message across – that is to have the ability to educate and persuade their readers about the true evils of slavery in such a way in which they would be inclined to demand from their positions, in most cases privileged by comparison, a change in the system.

*Incidents* itself suggests this selective way of writing in its very own title, and, as said in the previous chapter, the fragments of Jacobs' story which she decided to share were picked carefully, so as to be believable yet influential, to spur the reader into action yet retain the author's dignity. This was certainly not an easy job to do from a position of the oppressed, when on the opposite side there was a reader with their own convictions and assumptions, whose natural reaction when confronted with evidence and arguments against their deep-rooted beliefs was to question and oftentimes deny. In her essay "Resisting Incidents", Frances Smith Foster talks about this "antebellum reader caution" regarding slave narratives, and deems it understandable in relation to the role these texts had in the abolitionist movement. She furthermore argues that it is a right of every reader to question the literature they read as well as the authority behind it, and to examine its arguments and claims, especially so if that particular piece of literature, like slave narratives did, alters or challenges a tradition, however morally flawed that tradition may be (Foster 64).

The publication of the first edition of Jacobs' autobiography thus brought a certain controversy on the literary marketplace, and did so in numerous ways. Notwithstanding the polite and frequently fairly positive reception it received from the Black press and many abolitionist activists, there was little chance *Incidents* would avoid severe questioning of authenticity in the future. The veracity of slave stories was doubted, as Davis and Gates say, by "friend and foe alike" (Davis and Gates 3) – and especially so in the case of the ever-controversial *Incidents*. Demonstrating this phenomenon thoroughly in the biography, Yellin mentions an incident which occurred a few months after the book's first publication, on August 2, 1861, when Jacobs arrived to one of the abolitionists' annual celebrations bearing a testimonial from her employer Cornelia Willis vouching for *Incidents*' truthfulness, apparently prepared for the possibility that she might have to prove her word by that of a privileged white woman even to the abolitionists (Yellin, *A Life* 151).

### **2.3 Contemporary Reviews – United Kingdom**

Almost a year after the publication, with Civil War well underway and with the question of the position of slavery and Black people in America remaining unresolved, Jacobs decided to try again to publish her book in England, where abolitionists so far kept an ambiguous approach to the situation. With the help of Frederic Chesson (1833–1888), a British anti-slavery activist, the book was printed by publisher William Tweedie and

entered the British literary market, for this edition renamed as *The Deeper Wrong; or, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself* (151–152). Here Pottroff adds a mention of Chesson’s diary entries, which testify to Jacobs’ full control over the printing and publishing process of the British edition, despite not being present in England at the time, instructing Chesson through letters and therewith ensuring no changes were made to the book except for that in its title (Pottroff 234).

In the British abolitionist circles, the reviews of *The Deeper Wrong* were again satisfactorily positive. In her article for *London Morning Star and Dial*, Chesson’s wife Amelia said the narrative was the first of its kind written by a female about her own life in slavery, and stressed the necessity that the people of England urge their country to take the side of Union in the American conflict. With the help of British abolitionists, the narrative got acknowledged not only in the explicitly abolitionist press, but also in the mainstream one, for example in the *London Daily News*, which published a review that was strongly appreciative of the book and its demonstrative power as well as of the heroic character of Linda Brent. The narrative was being recognized both in and outside of London and even in Ireland, where the *Londonderry Standard* recommended it to all their readers, stating no person could not be willing to fight against the American institution of slavery after getting familiar with Linda’s story. The book celebrated what cannot be described otherwise than as success. With its publication, Jacobs managed to get across how essential it was that England take a stand in the American conflict. *The Deeper Wrong* called for action by informing British abolitionists, whose knowledge and awareness of American slavery remained limited, about the true gravity of its horrors (Yellin, *A Life* 152–153).

#### **2.4 The Book Tour – where Linda Becomes Harriet**

Pottroff devotes a significant part of her article to the book tour Jacobs undertook in America during this period. This personal book tour was also fairly successful – in Philadelphia only Jacobs managed to sell fifty copies of her narrative. Providing authentic inscriptions from its readers in the book’s first edition prints, which Jacobs sold to them personally, Pottroff demonstrates how for some of those people the “reception of the book was inseparable from Jacobs herself” (Pottroff 235); it is worth noting that despite *Incidents* being published pseudonymously, these readers did know Jacobs’ true identity, they admired her and directly associated her with the character of Linda Brent and the story at hand.

The first inscription Pottroff works with mentions the interaction between an unknown reader and Jacobs, who they directly name while briefly describing her appearance and life story, that is the life story of Linda. Furthermore, whilst recommending *Incidents* to its readers, an advertising article in the *Christian Recorder*, personally arranged by Jacobs during her book tour, similarly identifies her with the narrative by her own name. The fact that Jacobs did truly meet these people in person when selling her book, Pottroff argues, contradicts the claims of numerous modern critics about the distancing function of the Linda Brent pseudonym. The idea that by using a fake name Jacobs distanced herself from both the story and its readers – an assumption which presupposes no direct interaction between the two parties – is refuted by her own way of promoting the book, by which she not only made Linda become a persona of the author rather than a complete stranger, but also established personal relationships between the author and the reader. Such way of promotion, Pottroff says, had an undoubtably significant impact on how the book was read and perceived (234–237).

## **2.5 After *Incidents***

By sharing her life story, Jacobs made a name for herself, but though the autobiography hitherto remains her best known work and arguably a major milestone in her career, it was not by far the last of her writings, nor was it the last of her great contributions to the fight for equal civil rights. After the publication of her narrative, Jacobs promptly devoted her days to actively helping those whose lives were affected and damaged by slavery and the war, Black refugees and former slaves escaping from the Southern states. During this period of time, in the form of letters and articles she wrote numerous reports concerning the situation of Black refugees in North America. Although these texts are not the subject of this thesis, it is essential they be mentioned, so as to illustrate what *Incidents* preceded and made possible.

The respectability Jacobs' name gained amongst the abolitionists, and perhaps also a certain confidence originating from the initial successful reception of her book within the anti-slavery circle, together with her unyielding character and ever-present need to help those she considered less lucky, whose sufferings she understood more than any white abolitionist ever could, became the driving force of her future acts (Pottroff 238–239) (Yellin, *A Life* 157). Notable here is the article she wrote for the previously mentioned newspaper *The Liberator* about the gruesome conditions in which

refugees in Washington lived, titled “Life Among the Contrabands”. Yellin notes the change in tone this article has in comparison with *Incidents* – Jacobs calls for action not using the voice of the careful alter ego Linda Brent, but rather the voice of Harriet Jacobs, a woman determined to tell nothing but the whole truth in her tireless fight against injustice, speaking directly to those who now recognized her name and who identified with her values and goals. Eventually, the respectability Jacobs gained through her literary work was fully reached with the publishing of this very article rather than with the publishing of *Incidents* (159–161).

### **3. The Double Negative**

Several times throughout the preceding chapters the controversial character and overall uniqueness of *Incidents* has been mentioned regarding its distinctive position in African American literary history and amongst its readers. The following chapter deals in greater detail with how the systematic social inequality Harriet Jacobs experienced as an African American woman in 19<sup>th</sup> century affected by extension her narrative and its reception.

The fundamental fact is that Harriet Jacobs experienced the impact of both systemic racism and sexism, and it is therefore necessary to examine the subject of this chapter regarding both of these factors together, rather than only one or the two of them separately. It is fitting for this purpose to use the term intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989, which in its most basic sense refers to the ways in which various systems of social inequity and categorization based on one's identity intertwine and overlap to thereby shape the experiences of those affected (Crenshaw 1242–1244). In her article “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color” Crenshaw points out the lack of attention feminist and antiracist discourses give to such identities, as they tend to perceive their experiences rather separately as mutually exclusive than as a whole and unique experience of its own:

Many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and ... the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately. (1244)

The aim of this chapter is therefore to look upon the unique position of Harriet Jacobs and her slave narrative with regard to this facet of her intersected identity, and to then accentuate its impact on her reception by comparison with other authors.

#### **3.1 The Slave Narrative**

The genre of slave narratives originated during the 1770's and 1780's, when such literature was sponsored and supported by various religious or political organisations and antislavery societies in the name of the early abolitionist movement. A more radical call for emancipation came about sixty years later, which meant an immense change for



the genre – the antebellum era in America was a crucial shift for the politics of the abolitionist movement, and new literary conventions and standards which came therewith made slave narratives gradually one of the most important means of fighting against the institution of American slavery (Gould 11–12; 18). Some of the most significant representatives of the genre include heretofore arguably the most widely recognized Frederic Douglass and his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* and Olaudah Equiano (1745–1797), who is with his autobiography *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (1789) considered to be the founder of the African American slave narrative (Carretta 44). Though the specific features of the genre vary with time and with particular authors, the fundamental traits essentially stay the same. In the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*, Audrey A. Fish describes slave narrative as a “text with a purpose” (Fisch, *Introduction* 2) – to tell the story of a slave’s life experience would be to contradict proslavery beliefs and ideas, and thereby actively fight them.

What ought to be stressed is the difference between the reception of slave narratives published in different time periods with respect to the changing political and social culture – the responses to early slave narratives would differ from the responses to antebellum slave literature as factors like conventions, demand, commercial potential and the overall publishing market changed. Earlier narratives would often be published and distributed because of the profit their genre promised at the given time on the market, rather than necessarily on behalf of any abolitionist politics, and throughout the years, slave narratives would be read in numerous varying ways, from religious to political to simply sentimental, depending on the contemporary general mindset and ambience (Gould 13–14).

As has been demonstrated in the previous chapters, if we then want to study the reception of *Incidents* in regard to its genre, it is necessary that we consider the fact that the narrative was published at the beginning of 1861, that is at the very end of antebellum period, and has been read and reviewed with the Civil War underway, when the abolitionist discourse was one of the central issues of American society. By this time, slave narratives were an established literary form, and in this historical context even a relatively demanded and sought-after genre, the popularity of which was incomparable with that of the earlier narratives, and which therefore promised great financial profit for editors and publishing companies. For the authors of slave

narratives, this essentially meant two things – on the one hand, an instant increase in sales and audience reach, on the other an unavoidable misuse of their work and doubtfulness about their authenticity (24–25). Harriet Jacobs herself presents one of the most fitting examples of this phenomenon.

### **3.2 Where Race and Gender Intertwine**

Just like any other media created by members of a marginalised group, African American literature, be it an autobiographical slave narrative, fiction or a poetry collection, was bound to face reception obstacles. Frances Smith Foster points this out in her essay “Resisting Incidents,” where she talks about the cultural assumptions made by readers of non-male, non-white authors – “When a writer or narrator is different in race, gender, or class from the implied or actual reader, questions about authority and authenticity multiply” (Foster 57). This of course proves to be especially true for those authors who fit more than one of these categories – such as Harriet Jacobs. Foster offers the example of Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784), an African American writer who was required to provide many authenticating documents in order to be accepted as the author of her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), and even then was still not regarded as a proper poet of intellectual worth (58). More than any other writers, Black authors knew that in order to have their voices heard and their words accepted by their contemporary reader, they had to mind the collective mindset and the overall sociopolitical circumstances of their time; moreover, they were frequently put in a position where they would be expected to prove that they were in fact capable of expressing themselves in such a way, and of putting together an actual quality piece of literature (60).

As mentioned above, in the case of Harriet Jacobs there is not merely her race to be considered but also her gender, and therefore also her sexuality, motherhood and her experience with sexual abuse – all of which are central themes of her narrative, crucial for a true account of her life, and all of which made the autobiography’s journey increasingly difficult. Although a general oppression of women was a norm in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century America, it is understandably not appropriate to look upon the case of Harriet Jacobs as upon a case of a common free American woman of her time, “overworked and underpaid” (White 16). Though suffering partly from the same prejudiced principles, her experience with sexism and gender-based prejudice, just like that of other Black women, would be closely intertwined with the fact that she was of African

American descent, and vice versa – as Deborah Gray White says in the introduction to her book *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, “American white women were expected to be passive because they were female. But black women had to be submissive because they were black and slaves” (17). It is indisputably true that in a society ultimately ruled by free white men, the experience of Black women vastly differed from that of white women – for what they lacked in human rights, white women could still consider their privilege.

For Black female slaves, there was no place to escape oppression; in the hypothetical situation where they would be freed from slavery, they would still be oppressed through the society’s idea of what was a “woman’s place”, just as they would still suffer the innumerable other consequences of systematic racism. The fact that African American women were members of both of these marginalized groups meant that they were dealt with as inferior not only among free white people, but also among other slaves. Moreover, though the popular idea of women as the weaker gender was to some extent applied to Black women as well, it did not necessarily mean that they would not be submitted to labour as hard as male slaves would be, nor that they would suffer less cruel punishments – despite their slavery experience not being necessarily harder or more austere than that of Black men, it was undoubtedly not easier either, and in some aspects it could be even more cruel (16–17; 72). When Jacobs recalls in her autobiography the moment she gave birth to her younger child, a daughter, she laments: “Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own” (Jacobs 526).

### **3.3 The Uniqueness of Harriet Jacobs**

Some of the most critical aspects of the life of a female slave by which it significantly differed from male experience were childbearing, motherhood and frequent various forms of sexual assault (White 72). All of these factors, sexuality and sexual assault in particular, are conspicuous major motives of *Incidents*, and are among the reasons the narrative was so unique and faced more challenging circumstances during its publication and reception. By including them in her book, and therefore giving arguably the most bold and honest account of a Black woman’s life in slavery, Harriet Jacobs introduced to the American reader a perspective so far unknown to them, a perspective which in effect defied numerous of fixed beliefs and ideas about Black women and the

institution of slavery in general, and was thus considerably less likely to be accepted (Foster 60–61). Like Black people, white women too have been in comparison to white men historically treated as promiscuous and submissive, and have been therefore significantly more prone to become victims of sexual assault for which they would in most cases be blamed. Prejudices about the sexuality of Black women, however, would be vastly accentuated by the number of myths surrounding their identity. By speaking out about the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her master, Jacobs went strictly against what was generally believed to be the truth about Black women – in their case, sexual abuse was essentially “made legitimate by the conventional wisdom that black women were promiscuous Jezebels” (White 72) – that is, women “governed almost entirely by [their] libido” (26). Sexual abuse, by these standards, was simply not possible when it came to female slaves, and its inclusion in *Incidents* automatically made the narrative even more controversial.

To publish an autobiographical narrative of slavery as a woman in such time meant for Harriet Jacobs that, however much other abolitionists would support her, she would inevitably be nearly alone in her efforts. Though, as Foster states in her essay, the “heroic African American woman protagonist” (Foster 65) had by the time Jacobs published her autobiography already been introduced on the literary market by other authors, such as William Wells Brown (1814–1884) in his *Clotel* (1853) or Harriet E. Wilson (1825–1900) in *Our Nig* (1859), the controversial alter ego of Harriet Jacobs still notably differed from these characters – Linda Brent was strong, resilient and directly appealing to the readers. Above all, she was not fictional – claimed by the book’s author to be a real-life person confiding in her readers with the true story of her life, she significantly altered what to that point was the traditional slave narrative (65).

### **3.3.1 The Audience and Female Solidarity**

To succeed as a female writer in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was challenging per se, and, as Stephanie A. Smith points out in her chapter “Harriet Jacobs: A Case History of Authentication”, especially so if the text was focused on a woman’s domestic life – whether such works would be written or only perceived as highly sentimental and feminine, it would automatically be regarded as literature of lesser quality (Smith 191–192). But it was crucial for Black female authors to mind their audience – specifically the particular type of audience they ought to reach, as the details and intimacies of a woman’s life were certainly not a favoured topic in literature nor in everyday discourse,

and especially so when the focus was on an African American woman's experience within the perils of slavery.

What Jacobs, like many other authors of slave narratives, naturally strived to do with her memoir was to call for abolitionist anti-slavery action, particularly from those who were in power to do so, that is free white Americans. But as it was more challenging to address the most common reader of her time, a free white American man who might prove hostile to any expression of a Black woman's sexuality and personal narrative, Harriet Jacobs had to appeal specially to that part of demography of free people which was most likely to be able to sympathize with her and understand her decisions, though from their privileged perspective they could never do so completely – white women (Stover 134). This is the audience Jacobs addresses when at the very beginning of her book she cites Isaiah 32:9: “Rise up, ye women that are at ease! Hear my voice, ye careless daughters! Give ear unto my speech.”

Johnnie M. Stover talks about the importance of this “select audience” (134) in her essay “Nineteenth-Century African American Women's Autobiography as Social Discourse: The Example of Harriet Ann Jacobs”, where she stresses how this way of writing, typical not only of Jacobs but of many other female authors of autobiographies, distinguishes them from Black male authors, who would build their narrative principally upon the individual, which in their case was a strong man's independent fight for freedom. But this approach was not likely to be enough for Black female authors in their struggle for recognition, as while the personal stories of a Black man's fight would fit the collective idea of what is “American” with difficulty, the stories of individual experience of Black women would most likely not fit it at all (136–137). Thus, Black women had to create their own means of expression, their own literary form and, as Stover argues in her essay, their own language alteration and communicative techniques. Black women would speak for a whole community rather than merely for themselves, as this very connection to their family and the Black community was one of the most significant aspects of their lives and their escaping from slavery – Jacobs' ties to her children and how they affected her fight for freedom, along with the way she captured them in her autobiography, are a great example of this (137; 140). What Black female writers, and Harriet Jacobs in particular, achieved with this was ultimately the possibility to use their autobiographical narratives not only as a way to express themselves, but also, and most importantly, as means of social and political resistance, one which spoke in a distinctive voice not solely for an individual, but also inherently

for a whole community (152). P. Gabrielle Foreman, who in her essay also deals with this representative character of Jacobs' work, points out that the shift from personal perspective to a somewhat collective one is already apparent in the narrative's title, where Jacobs refers to the events depicted therein as to those from a life of a slave girl rather than of someone specific named Linda Brent. This is especially noticeable if we compare the title *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl* to titles of some other slave narratives, such as e.g. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* or *Narrative of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, which all use the author's name where Jacobs uses only generic wording (Foreman 317). Consider furthermore the above-mentioned letter to Amy Post, sent before *Incidents* went into publication, in which Jacobs expresses her hope that the reader, with the help of her book, finds in themselves sympathy not for her only, but mainly for all the other Black women, mothers and children still in slavery:

...and if their is any sympathy to give—let it be given to the thousands—of Slave Mothers that are still in bondage—suffering far more than I have—let it plead for their helpless Children that they may enjoy the same liberties that my Children now enjoy—. (Yellin, *A Life* 136)

### **3.4 Set Side by Side**

The matter of the intersectionality of Harriet Jacobs' life and the way it affected the reception of her book can be well demonstrated if we compare the circumstances and obstacles of the publication of her narrative to those of a similar publication by an African American man – Frederic Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* – and a white man from the same time period – Walt Whitman (1819–1892), who happened to collaborate with the same publisher as Jacobs on one of his publications, under a fundamentally identical contract as she did during one of her attempts to get her narrative into print.

#### **3.4.1 Frederic Douglass**

What gave Frederic Douglass an undeniable head start compared to Harriet Jacobs in regard to publishing an autobiographical narrative was mainly the fact that he was already a public figure by the time he decided to write down the story of his life in slavery for the first time, and was even considered “*the* representative of all African

Americans” (Ernest 218–219). John Ernest points out in his chapter “Beyond Douglass and Jacobs” that while Douglass’ narrative has been regarded as a great piece of literature to be appreciated alongside the white authors of his time, as well as a unique publication of its own genre, Jacobs’ narrative was long ignored and put aside for a uniqueness of similar nature – she, however, was a woman, by which her narrative was met with the very same intersectionality issue as the one Jacobs had been dealing with her whole life. Her narrative, talking not only about an African American experience in slavery, but especially about that of a woman and a mother, was ultimately way too obscure even for the exceptional literary genre that was the slave narrative (219).

While Jacobs managed to publish her book only after several years of aspiration, attempting to fit her writing time into her daily duties working for the Willis family, albeit as a theoretically free woman, to no avail searching for a publisher and fighting for her recognition as the narrative’s author, Frederic Douglass was already well acknowledged as a successful, eloquent and convincing public speaker as well as a paid lecturer by 1845, when he published his *Narrative* (Stauffer 202) – a man recognized and praised for his speeches and stories of his life in slavery even prior to writing them down. For this number of prerequisites, he was essentially bound to immediately succeed with publishing his life story – that is, undeniably more prone to succeed than Jacobs, an author who faced resistance not only in the process of writing her memoir, but also in its publication and especially in its reception.

The difference between those two great African American authors and their narratives illustrates well the ways in which Jacobs did not fit into the standard form of a slave narrative, as Foster describes it:

The antebellum slave narrative featured a protagonist best described as a heroic male fugitive ... .[The] typical slave narrator secretly plotted his escape and, at the opportune time, struck out alone but resolved to follow the North Star to freedom. Slave narratives generally ended when, upon arrival in the free territory, the former slave assumed a new name, obtained a job, married, and began a new happy-ever-after life. (Foster 65)

While Douglass’ first narrative fits this description nearly perfectly, Jacobs’ story could not differ more. Apart from the untraditional course of events in *Incidents*, Douglass’ being recognized as a strong male persona was unarguably to his benefit, as well as the fact that his *Narrative* was built more upon the notion of a resilient, heroic

man who fought and succeeded to free himself from oppression, contrary to Linda, who told her story from a purely Black female perspective. This by extension meant that *Incidents*, in its effort to capture such life experience in its truest essence, dealt with far more taboo and stigmatized topics – a Black woman’s sexuality and the vulnerable position this facet of her life unavoidably puts her into, in connection to assaults and harassment from her master.

In spite of this, it naturally cannot be said that Douglass’ literary journey was one with no obstacles. His *Narrative* was nevertheless still a piece of literature written by an African American person, and the fact that this posed challenges for him in publishing his book and its reception only emphasizes that the resistance to Jacobs’ narrative ought not to be considered merely from the perspective that she was Black, nor merely from the perspective that she was a woman, but from both of these perspectives simultaneously. Though *Narrative* became an instant hit, for Douglass this immediate success also meant danger of recapture into slavery because of all the information about his former master included in the book, which led to his leaving the country for England (Chesnutt 20). Furthermore, there was a period of time where the very same attributes of Douglass as the ones he had been praised for, such as his intelligence, erudition and the way he expressed and presented himself, started being regarded as too great for a Black man – so much that his own slavery past was being doubted and denied (Stauffer 203). However, those very claims eventually became one of the catalysts of Douglass’ writing and publishing his story – and by doing so, he ultimately concurred them with what was to become an internationally famous bestseller within only a few months of being on the market (204), with translations into French and German and several printings in England in three years’ time (Trotman 50). In comparison to the response to Jacobs’ publication, it is possible to see the major difference in what publishing such a piece of literature did for these two authors, and in the way they were regarded by their audience – while Douglass gained authentication, Jacobs’ struggle with it merely began. Though at the time she decided to write her memoir slave narratives were, especially after the sensation that had been Douglass’ *Narrative*, an established literary genre, and a slave’s story a topic rising in popularity in fiction and non-fiction alike, the road was still not paved for what was to become *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.



### 3.4.2 Walt Whitman

Similarly, it is possible to compare Jacobs' publishing experience and opportunities with those of Walt Whitman, who coincidentally submitted the third edition of his *Leaves of Grass* to the aforesaid publishers Thayer and Eldridge in the same year Jacobs submitted *Incidents*, that is in 1860. Though their contracts with the publishers were almost identical in nature, the outcome of this business relationship could not differ more between the two writers (Pottroff 221–222). As has been established, Thayer and Eldridge went bankrupt before they managed to publish Jacobs' narrative, which subsequently led to her having to do so by herself – but what is notable here are the particular circumstances of this situation and the details behind this failure on the publishers' side.

Thayer & Eldridge was a short-lived company (being in business only for about a year) which gained popularity by essentially exploiting the anti-slavery movement and presenting itself as a business operating to serve the abolitionist cause in a time when such a claim was what could effectively help them to financial profit. In her article “Incommensurate Labors: The Work behind the Works of Harriet Jacobs and Walt Whitman”, Christy L. Pottroff talks about a situation where, though a considerable sum of the proceeds was supposed to go to Brown's family, the publishers would save the capital raised from James Redpath's (1833–1891) *The Public Life of Capt. John Brown* (1860) to publish Whitman's artistically and financially demanding new edition of *Leaves of Grass*, while simultaneously giving the established well-known, widely-read and, most importantly, white author exceptionally free hand in the production process (223–224).

Supported by excerpts from Thayer's autobiography and *Walt Whitman Archive*, she furthermore argues that this very decision was what eventually led to the company's bankruptcy, and therefore to Jacobs' having to self-publish. After the fiasco with *Leaves of Grass*, before Thayer & Eldridge inevitably reached insolvency by the end of 1860, they set to publish several pieces of abolitionist literature, including *Incidents* – publications they hoped to be profitable during the time of the oncoming Civil War. However, the anticipated publication of Jacobs' narrative, now completed with the required preface by Lydia Maria Child, was first postponed and eventually cancelled altogether when Thayer and Eldridge shut down their business for good, ending connections with all of the authors of abolitionist literature mentioned above – thus

leaving Jacobs to arrange the publication and distribution of *Incidents* wholly by herself – and using the remaining financial resources to make the situation as little inconvenient for Whitman as possible. Pottroff then emphasizes the difference in how the two authors are regarded in relation to bookmaking and publishing – Whitman, historically admired for his involvement in the process, and Jacobs, ultimately doing all the work by herself with little to no recognition of her labour (228–230).

#### 4. *Incidents* in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

In spite of how moderately well received *Incidents* was in the years immediately following its publication, mainly in the abolitionist circles, and despite its considerably significant contribution to the anti-slavery movement, by the turn of the century the book was essentially forgotten. The narrative would be included in a small number of collections, but it was sparsely read, and soon Harriet Jacobs, as well as Linda Brent, became names unknown to the common reader. While the exact reasons behind this disappearance from public awareness are unclear, Yellin suggests that the story itself simply did not stand the test of time – perceived mostly as a women’s fiction by white men and perhaps as too sexually explicit by white women, its presumed readership amongst the Black community would not be sufficient to prevent the book from going out of print. Despite its initial success, it would take decades before *Incidents* would be properly re-discovered, and even a longer time before the recognition of its true value would grant *Incidents* its place among the most significant works of American literature (Yellin, *A Life* 262).

The book’s publication in 1861 has been since then followed by a great long journey to acceptance, stretching through years of authentication, evaluation and re-evaluation and societal changes. For modern historians, slave narratives serve as a type of documentaries, providing details of the true form of American antebellum slavery – as such, veracity and accuracy have once again become key factors in the evaluation of those literary works. Slave narratives have therefore been closely examined by historians and literary critics alike, not less keenly than they were being examined by readers during the years of their publication. This has been true especially for *Incidents*, whose authenticity, authorship and truthfulness were being denied most sternly; while other slave narratives were seen as valuable accounts of slaves’ lives, and some of them even as key works of American literature, the events pictured in Jacobs’ narrative have been throughout the better part of late 20<sup>th</sup> century frequently regarded as exaggerated or even entirely false, and the sole existence of a character like Linda Brent highly doubted. If the authenticity of the depicted events was more or less admitted, the dubious extent of Lydia Maria Child’s editorial control over the narrative and involvement in the writing process raised a question of its true authorship; in most cases, it was believed that the book is both a fiction and written by Child to serve the

abolitionist cause, and it would not be until the discovery of Jacobs' correspondence that those beliefs would be refuted.

Though supported by arguments of various kinds, this resistance to *Incidents*, as Foster suggests in her essay, often stems from nothing more complicated than simply the fact that we tend to struggle to accept arguments against our rooted beliefs, and there were numerous things which this narrative asked its readers to reconsider (Foster 61) – rational arguments against its authenticity, like lack of evidence and detail, fake names or editorial help, could be considered valid if it were not for the fact that *Incidents* was by no means special or extraordinary in this particular area. On the contrary, such practices were a norm for antebellum slave narratives, many of which have not faced resistance such as *Incidents* did because of them. The main objective of this penultimate chapter is to explore the 20<sup>th</sup>-century criticism of Harriet Jacobs' autobiography, particularly that questioning its authenticity and authorship, as well as other opposing views on the narrative.

#### **4.1 Lydia Maria Child and the Editorial Control**

It has been already mentioned that the help in editing and publishing provided by Child would eventually complicate the book's authentication and raise the big question of its true authorship. As Yellin says in introduction to the biography, Harriet Jacobs, though always in some way associated with *Incidents*, was for a long period of time not recognized as its rightful author – the belief was rather that Lydia Maria Child had assumed a role significantly bigger than merely that of the book's editor (Yellin, *A Life* xvi), despite Jacobs' and Child's many efforts to prevent such accusations – their claims about the narrative's authorship would, however, not be considered a sufficient evidence to the contrary.

At the very beginning of *Incidents*, both the presumed author of the story, signed pseudonymously as Linda Brent, and Child herself clarify their roles in the composition of the book. Acknowledging the possible flaws and imperfections of her writing, Linda in her preface assures the reader about her authorship as well as about the truthfulness of her words. Furthermore, because it was common to require that African American authors include authenticating documents in their literary works, as has been demonstrated in the preceding chapter on the example of Phillis Wheatley, Jacobs too obtained those for her book. Especially for present day historians, such documents, be they authenticating letters or more firm evidence such as bills of sale or posters about

the runaway slave, are needed for the stories to be accepted as valid accounts of historical circumstances and details of the true characteristics of antebellum slavery (Deck 34–35). *Incidents* include not only Child's introduction, but also letters from Amy Post and another activist George W. Lowther (1822–1898), both of whom testify Linda's authorship and describe their personal relationships with her to support their trust in her veracity.

Child, just as everyone else who was of help to Jacobs in the process of the book's publication and distribution, always made sure to promote the story as a true account of a slave's life written by its pseudonymous author – “The author of the following autobiography is personally known to me, and her conversation and manners inspire me with confidence” (Jacobs 441), she starts her introduction to the book. Most importantly, in her introduction she also clearly states the extent of her involvement and the limitations of her interfering in the author's original manuscript – a statement which would be in the future highly doubted and questioned nevertheless:

I have revised ... [the author's] manuscript; but such changes as I have made have been mainly for purposes of condensation and orderly arrangement. I have not added any thing to the incidents, or changed the import of her very pertinent remarks. With trifling exceptions, both the ideas and the language are her own. (441)

In an attempt to ensure minimal resistance to the narrative, Child also responds to the anticipated doubts about Linda's ability to write on such a great level, given the fact that she had been raised in slavery, and therefore presumably denied proper education. Reasoning the author's literacy, she writes:

In the first place, nature endowed her with quick perceptions. Secondly, the mistress, with whom she lived till she was twelve years old, was a kind, considerate friend, who taught her to read and spell. Thirdly, she was placed in favorable circumstances after she came to the North; having frequent intercourse with intelligent persons, who felt a friendly interest in her welfare, and were disposed to give her opportunities for self-improvement. (441–442)

However, none of those arrangements and precautions managed to prevent the narrative from severe questioning of authenticity – partly so because of the previously discussed uniqueness of Harriet's (or, Linda's) story, which by no means fit the stereotyped norm of slave narratives of her time, and partly because of the long-

questioned involvement of Child as someone who was an active member of the abolitionist movement and a rather well-known writer as well. It is noteworthy here that the discovery and thorough study of Jacobs' correspondence and especially Jean Fagan Yellin's studies of Jacobs' life and work in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were crucial in the subsequent authentication process, and closely tied with a certain renaissance the narrative experienced in recent years. But prior to Yellin's research, which is to be dealt with in more detail in the final part of this chapter, the general academic opinion remained that Child was the author of *Incidents*, which was most probably a work of fiction.

Arna Wendell Bontemps (1902–1973) was among those who strongly questioned the authenticity of *Incidents*. In his introduction to *Great Slave Narratives* (1969), he discusses the “as-told-to narratives”, where the slave's story would be promoted as recorded, edited and published usually by an already established writer (such as, he states, the 1831 *Confessions of Nat Turner* edited by Thomas Gray). Here he talks about the case of *Narrative of James Williams* (1839), which was in this very manner closely connected to the name of the famous poet and abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier (1807–1892), and which was shortly proclaimed as a fraud, accused of a great number of inaccuracies, and subsequently suppressed by AASS, who originally published it – Bontemps then offers Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as edited by Lydia Maria Child as an example of a situation of similar nature (Bontemps xv). Later, Jean Fagan Yellin would also briefly touch on Whittier's case, mentioning the sympathetic letter Child sent him shortly after the incident that caused notable damage to the abolitionist movement – it had been suggested that all other slave narratives were in truthfulness and accuracy not unlike the *Narrative of James Williams*. Child in her letter with regret acknowledged the harm Whittier's editing caused (Yellin, *A Life* xvi–xvii) – it is up for question, then, whether Child, well aware of the risk, would not be more careful than Bontemps suggests not to repeat the history with *Incidents*.

Alice A. Deck explores the frequently discussed details of Child's true involvement in her essay, where she brings up the phenomenon of the so called collaborative slave narratives. In this genre, the writer and the main subject of the story were oftentimes not the same person, which would then lead to unavoidable questioning of both the stories authenticity and of the autobiographical aspect of such works. Because those stories would be retold and/or heavily edited to fit the purpose of

abolitionist agenda, the value of such accounts remains dubious to the present day (Deck 33–34). For that reason, it is necessary that the details of the work relationship between the two parties involved, that is in this case Jacobs and Child, be carefully studied – which, again, was made possible especially by the discovery of their correspondence.

Alice A. Deck wrote her essay after those letters were published, and with this context at hand she, though acknowledging Jacobs as the author, discusses to what extent Child's editing really influenced the final form of *Incidents*. One of Child's letters to Jacobs clearly indicates that from the very beginning of their relationship, which in their situation was a relationship on both personal and business level, she did not intend to edit Jacobs' work in any significant way, other than by rearranging some parts of it so as to make the text more coherent:

I have very little occasion to alter the language, which is wonderfully good ...  
But I am copying a great deal of it, for the purpose of transposing sentences and pages, so as to bring the story into continuous order, and the remarks into appropriate places. I think you will see that this renders the story much more clear and entertaining. (Deck 38)

Although, as Deck argues in her essay, it is debatable how much such alterations really affected the outcome (and, by extension, whether the classification of Child's role as merely a non-interfering editor should be reconsidered), this correspondence serves as evidence for the unarguable fact that the words of *Incidents* were indeed Jacobs' own. There are however more factors which justify Deck's belief in the distinct mark Child's editing left on the book's final version – Child not only suggested that the John Brown tribute be omitted, she also specifically requested Jacobs to depict more details of the gruesome treatment of slaves, which Jacobs herself had witnessed but had not personally lived. By doing so, Deck suggests, Jacobs digressed from the original way of writing her life story, and Child's impact became even more significant.

Furthermore, though ensuring anonymity of the slave and other people involved in their story was a common and necessary procedure when writing and publishing a slave narrative in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both for the safety of the slave as well as because of the laws protecting slaveholders, Deck holds that changing all the names in the story for fake ones (including Jacobs' very own) gave Child more opportunity to alter the text even further in order to make it a better fit for the abolitionist cause (39).

Even though Deck herself does not exactly argue against the truthfulness of the events depicted in the book but rather about the editorial interference and its effect on the final product, we still yet again encounter the issues connected with the problematic position of slave narratives on the antebellum and wartime literary market, and especially how those, somehow, seemed to greatly affect the reception of *Incidents* up until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Publishing a slave narrative anonymously with the editorial help of a more experienced writer and well-known person was not, after all, out of the ordinary, nor was it uncommon amongst other publications. Commenting on this sceptic view on *Incidents*' authorship regarding Child's involvement, Foster asserts that "[n]either the decision to publish the book anonymously, the reputation of Lydia Maria Child, nor the generic modifications and innovations such as changing names and creating dialogue in an autobiography account sufficiently for the resistance that *Incidents* continues to encounter" (Foster 68).

#### **4.2 The Unbelievable Story**

The notion that "truth is stranger than fiction" has been voiced many times regarding the stories described in *Incidents*, by critics and even Harriet Jacobs herself. As has been demonstrated in previous chapters, she was aware of the uniqueness of her story and of how such quality would make the narrative less believable to the reader, especially if they themselves had not been affected by slavery. In the preface to her book, she says: "I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true. I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary, my descriptions fall far short of the facts" (Jacobs 439). Similarly, Child states in her introduction that she believes "those who know [the author] will not be disposed to doubt her veracity, though some incidents in her story are more romantic than fiction" (441).

They were not mistaken in their predictions of resistance. Many of those in favour of slavery (and sometimes even those of abolitionist beliefs) were quick to pronounce slave stories as untrue simply on the basis of them seeming improbable – if the events described appeared as too lurid, the story would be perceived as fiction, and its arguments therefore as not valid. But for *Incidents*, this remained the case well up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Not only did Linda's recount of her family history and ancestry oppose what was a general belief about the majority of enslaved women (that is that they had little to no means of finding out about this part of their identity), but it was



often accused of providing altered information about the author's life, or alternatively omitting them altogether. Several incidents recounted in Jacobs' autobiography have been interpreted as exaggerated or simply made up, either as means of pushing the abolitionist agenda, "in order to enhance her personal reputation", or simply for the sake of some artistic literary performance (Foster 67) – among those Linda's seven years of concealment in a tiny space in her grandmother's attic or her managing to elude Dr. Flint's advances are mentioned most often.

But although not everything Linda says in *Incidents* can be possibly proven to be wholly based upon strictly true events, there does exist some supporting testimony confirming that what she says is indeed the truth. However, not always is such testimony taken as a deciding factor. For example, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (1941–2007), though greatly appreciative of Jacobs' intellect and skill, says in her analysis of *Incidents* that given the many improbabilities present in Jacobs' text, the book should be read as a "crafted representation – as a fiction or as a cautionary tale – not as a factual account", and holds that some of the key features of Linda's character are "rested upon a great factual lie" and "fabricated for the benefit of her northern readers" (Fox-Genovese 392).

#### **4.2.1 John W. Blassingame**

One of the most often quoted criticisms of *Incidents* is that of the prominent historian John Wesley Blassingame (1940–2000), in whose commentary on Harriet Jacobs' work the intersectionality issue of her life comes notably into picture. While in his famous book *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* published in 1980 he does discuss and appreciate the unique value of slave autobiographies as one of the most authentic insights into the details of life in slavery, and stresses the importance of a slave's personal account of events rather than only that of the outsider party, at the same time he refers to said slaves merely as to Black men, and continues to do so repeatedly for several pages of his discussion of slave narratives as sources of historical evidence (Blassingame 367–370). By doing so, he entirely fails to acknowledge the experience of Black women – which, as has been established in Chapter 3, is an experience completely unique and no less significant than that of enslaved Black men.

Furthermore, Blassingame directly deems Jacobs' narrative not credible when he uses it as an example of narratives he categorizes as "fictional accounts [where] the major character may have been a real fugitive, but the narrative of his life is probably

false” (373). The main argument for his objection against *Incidents*’ authenticity is that the narrative is too “melodramatic”, and he supports this statement with a number of examples, the selection of which is not dissimilar in nature to the backlash which has been discussed in Chapter 3 regarding female written literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this case, the aspects Blassingame considers melodramatic are for the most part those very aspects which do not fit the prototypical picture of a strong masculine journey in slave narratives, such as the topics of heartbreak and unrequited love, virtue, or Jacobs’ sympathizing with Mrs. Flint; or, alternatively, those aspects which do not necessarily conform to the typical progress of slave narratives by being, presumably, way too dramatic to the point of not being believable – here Blassingame names for example the very frequent mentions of cruelty, malice and licentiousness, and especially the extraordinary events of Jacobs’ life, from her success in refusing Dr. Flint’s demands, to being able to choose her children’s father (who moreover turns out to be a white man other than her maser), to the very climax of her story, the concealment in the crawlspace in her grandmother’s attic. Finally, as Blassingame puts it, she and her children live an improbable “happily ever after” (373).

It goes unnoticed that such criticism is, albeit perhaps unintentionally, vastly connected with the exceptionality of Jacobs’ experience as an African American woman and a mother. The bond she had with her children, for instance, was an omnipresent motivation for everything she endured in order to stay close to them and keep them safe at all costs – such as the above mentioned seven year long concealment or the, however unfittingly worded by Blassingame, “happily ever after”, which she fought to give them, and which was not, contrary to the undertone of Blassingame’s interpretation, exactly provided by their biological father. Moreover, some of his remarks are simply not factual, which brings up the question of just how un-biased his reading of Jacobs’ book was, as his review of the story makes it sound like an ideal sentimental fiction with no less ideal ending. Gabrielle Foreman also notices this faulty interpretation: “Blassingame, quite clearly, is wrong. Sands marries a white woman, neglects his black children, never buys Linda, and ‘they’ most pointedly do not live out the fictional happily ever after” (Foreman 323).

Hazel Vivian Carby (1948), who pronounces *Incidents* “the most sophisticated, sustained narrative dissection of the conventions of true womanhood by a black author before emancipation” (Carby 47), likewise strongly opposes Blassingame’s view on slave narratives, especially so in his presupposition of the male perspective. In her book

*Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987), she points out how literary critics, the same way that Blassingame did, automatically assume certain direct relations between the pursuit of freedom and literacy and the “establishment of manhood” (46), which the author presumably achieves with the publication of his own life story. Simultaneously, she expresses her belief that the above-mentioned instances of what Blassingame pinpoints as “melodramatic” aspects of *Incidents* are actually quite identical with frequently occurring motives in the diaries of Southern white women, who in most cases spent their lives in the shadows of their husbands, and who were very rarely present in their husbands’ own records (46). What Blassingame concludes as rationally not believable is then nothing more than a purely female perspective, which when included in a slave narrative apparently creates an account of experience so unique and differing from the conventional male autobiographies that critics like Blassingame struggle to regard it as one of any historical testimonial value.

But rather than deeming such accounts not credible simply because they distinctly differ from those written by men, Carby says, we should recognize their significance for that very reason, as such “assumption of the representativeness of patriarchal experience” not only casts aside any possibility for female representation, but it also considers it unnecessary (46). If an environment is hostile enough to regard a woman’s perspective as not credible, futile or overly melodramatic, and a male slave’s story with great apprehension, a female slave like Harriet Jacobs has little chance of being regarded as representative of her community. As Yellin puts it, “moving beyond the established patterns of Black male-authored slave narratives and beyond the structures of white female-authored fiction, Harriet Jacobs told a story new to American letters” (Yellin, *A Life* xxi) – but this new perspective would not be accepted lightly.

It is a prevailing issue with critics that they tend to consider Harriet Jacobs either as a Black person or a woman separately, rather than to consider these two parts of her identity simultaneously, as they create a category of its own uniqueness. If they regard Jacobs’ narrative in the context of 19<sup>th</sup>-century slave narratives, whose purpose was to advocate for Black people by giving a testimony of the true horrors of slavery and whose conventions *Incidents* simply did not fulfil, but at the same time, yet separately, regard it as dramatic and unrealistic whilst comparing it to female-written sentimental fiction, the only possible reasoning behind this reluctance to admit its authenticity would, indeed, not be racial prejudice, nor would it be gender prejudice, but it would be a prejudice specifically towards Black women.

### 4.3 Linda and Harriet

In connection to the more recent reception of *Incidents*, it is furthermore worth making a summary of the issues and debates which arose regarding the Linda Brent pseudonym. As was suggested in Chapter 2, Jacobs' decision to write the story not using real names (though the idea was, as mentioned above, originally pitched by Child) did not necessarily mean she was hesitant to associate herself with the book – contrary to the moderately popular belief that the pseudonym was her means of somehow detaching herself from the book and its audience, it has been shown and proven that when necessary, she was not reluctant to admit the true authorship, and to present herself directly as the story's author, alias Linda Brent, on numerous occasions. Aside from being a common practice and a considerate gesture towards others included in her story, writing the book under a pseudonym and with fictitious names was for Jacobs, as Yellin argues in her study, an initial way of empowering herself to publicly share her experience.

The problem of the connection between the names Linda Brent and Harriet Jacobs were however still topical in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Frances Smith Foster states in her essay. She discusses the issue with the cotemporary readers' tendency to omit Linda from the story altogether (as well as from its original title *Linda: Or, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*), and to rather regard the narrative only as one compiled by the individual Harriet Jacobs, and to interpret it as such. Their attention, Foster argues, is fixed on the character of Harriet Jacobs alone rather than on the representation she originally aimed for:

Referring to the book as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* subordinates the individual protagonist to the general type, as its author intended. Rather than use her experiences as representative of others, however, too many scholars and critics have used the experiences of others to invalidate those that Jacobs recounted. Their interest revolves almost exclusively around Harriet Jacobs as both author and subject and around how her victories and her values contrast with prevailing theories and opinions of slave life. (Foster 66–67)

This added interest attached to the individual character of Linda and/or Harriet puts *Incidents* in an unusual position among other slave narratives, which are to this day typically regarded as true depictions of what life was like for slaves in antebellum America, and which are therefore usually perceived as representative in one way or

another, rather than questioned on the basis of the unique and exceptional character of each of their accounts. However, Foster continues, this is not the case for Harriet Jacobs, whose narrative is more often than not rejected for its lack of credulity (Foster 67).

It is debatable how much value should really be ascribed to the pseudonym, whether it should be omitted or preserved, but it is undeniable that, however we refer to her, the main character of *Incidents* and the exact accuracy of her life's events truly attract a vast amount of attention, which, perhaps, would do more good if given to other aspects of the narrative.

#### **4.4 Jean Fagan Yellin**

To the present day, no academic publications present a more valuable and thorough source in the study of Harriet Jacobs' life and work than those of the American historian Jean Fagan Yellin. Her research like no other contributed to the re-discovery of Jacobs' narrative and its exceptional influential qualities and to the rightful classification of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as one of the key works of American literary history.

Yellin's over twenty years' worth of studying Harriet Jacobs began when she discovered *Incidents* while working on her dissertation, published in 1972 under the title *The Intricate Knot: Black Figures in American Literature, 1776-1863*. Jacobs' narrative, however, would not end up included in this work for obvious reasons – not only did *Incidents* lack many basic information, such as the real name of its author or the publisher (which would pose great complications for a graduate student), but by this time the general belief, as presented above in the chapter, remained that the book was not a work of someone named Harriet Jacobs, nor was it an authentic tale of slavery. However, in her following study of female-authored texts, now undertaken through the specific perspective of gender, a perspective which she had not touched upon in her dissertation, she encountered *Incidents* yet again whilst re-reading Child's works, and this time she gave the work more attention. Being now well familiar with Child, it did not seem probable to Yellin that the author would risk writing and publishing a slavery story and falsely promoting it as an autobiography written by a real enslaved person. Determined to find out the truth behind the authorship of *Incidents*, Yellin began her research.

She had managed to acquire copies of the recently discovered correspondence of Child and Post concerning *Incidents*, quoted several times throughout this thesis, which would then serve as irrefutable evidence of Harriet Jacobs' authorship, due in large part to Yellin's thorough study – she had spotted the similarities between the writing style of *Incidents* and the way Jacobs expressed herself in her letters, and those along with the contents of the correspondence pointed to a single possible conclusion, that is that the pseudonymous Linda Brent was, in fact, a real Black woman by the name of Harriet Jacobs.

With the question about the author's identity answered, it was now time to confirm how true to real life the book actually was – this would be a complicated process given that *Incidents* include little to no exact data to go by, such as dates, locations or real proper names. With the help of various other researchers and historians, among which were for example Dorothy Sterling (1913–2008), American historian and author of a book on Black women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century titled *We Are Your Sisters* (1997), Elizabeth Vann Moore (1912–2010), who despite her help did not initially believe in *Incident's* authenticity nor Jacobs' authorship, or archivist George Stevenson, Yellin managed to collect a fair number of documents and letters through which she was able to track Jacobs' family history and information about her life and relatives, as well as to identify other characters of the narrative, such as Dr. James Norcom, the man behind the book's infamous Dr. Flint, or his wife Mary Matilda Horniblow Norcom. In 1987, after over six years of work, Yellin's edition of *Incidents* was published by Harvard University Press (Yellin, *A Life* xv – xx). Though the first modern edition of *Incidents*, published no sooner than over a whole century after the story went into print for the first time, was that of Walter Teller in 1973 (Ernest 221), it was not until this particular edition, supplemented with Yellin's preface and notes, that the narrative was given a proper re-examination and granted authentication. Without altering the narrative itself and with full belief in its accuracy, Yellin completed her edition with a number of authenticating documents and various archival data and evidence of the correlation between Jacobs' story as she depicted it in *Incidents* and her real life, as well as of its fairly successful contemporary reception; included were for instance the aforesaid correspondence, reviews or various newspaper announcements. With this edition, Yellin changed how *Incidents* and the whole genre of slave narratives were understood, and above all proved that “the stories of Jacobs and her sisters must

no longer be summarily discredited, simplified, and ignored” (McCaskill 456–458; 461) (Smith 189).

But a subsequent discovery of more letters and journals providing details of Jacobs’ life outside of and beyond the story of *Incidents*, such as her fight for the abolitionist cause and the reports and articles she would write after publishing the autobiography as a respectable woman known for her narrative, only later forgotten, motivated Yellin to further help to provide Harriet Jacobs with a well-earned place in American cultural history by writing her biography. This work would be published over a decade later, at the end of 2003, under the title *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (Yellin, *A Life* xx – xxi). Another one of her remarkable contributions are *The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers*, published in two volumes in 2008 – a collection of papers left by Jacobs, an unprecedented testimony of her life in slavery, the only one of its kind left by an African American woman, composed of writings by Jacobs herself, her brother and daughter, as well as writings to and about them. There are around 900 of those papers, 300 of which are now included in the print collection edited by Yellin, divided and ordered by the date and theme (Weierman 61). As the introduction to this publication states, it is significant especially in that it offers a rare insight into Jacobs’ perspective, specific to her experience as a Black woman in antebellum America, as well as into *Incidents* itself and its reception. Furthermore, it serves as a useful source in the study of the abolitionist movement and other historical circumstances of antebellum, wartime and postbellum America (Yellin, *Introduction* xxix–xxx). “Both inspirational and practical,” Weierman says in her review, “this excellent collection lays the groundwork for the next generation of research” (Weierman 65).

Ultimately, Yellin’s work verified Harriet Jacobs as a real enslaved woman, who in the 19<sup>th</sup> century wrote her own slave narrative and published it with the editorial help of abolitionist Lydia Maria Child. Though it was not in Yellin’s power to attest the truthfulness of each and every incident Linda recalls in her story, she was nevertheless able to, through extensive research, confirm many of its key points and existence of the characters and their mutual relationships as depicted in the book, by which she effectively defied the criticism *Incidents* received throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and inevitably granted it nothing short of a renaissance, with renewed scholarly attention, reprints, and most importantly canonization.

## 5. Canonization and *Incidents* in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

The journey to the acceptance of *Incidents*, prior to and after its first publication, during the author's life and following her death, was a long and often difficult one. It is however important to note that the narrative being forgotten within a few years following its first print and up until the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was not rare for publications of similar nature, and nor was a notable deal of the resistance *Incidents* received from its readers; to this day however, the eventual success of Jacobs' autobiography, now along with Douglass' *Narrative* viewed as one of the most remarkable and influential examples of the American slave narrative, remains a nearly unique case in context of the complicated relationship between American literary canon and African American authored works. This is not necessarily for the unique character of *Incidents* itself, nor for the lack of effort, talent or skill of other Black authors – the environment into which Harriet Jacobs published her book was a hostile one, historically reluctant to hear out such a voice as hers, and though we might argue about the significantly changed approach to race and gender in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is an undeniable and unfortunate fact that African American authors still remain severely underrepresented – in literary canon, in anthologies and various academic publications and studies, and consequently in school curricula and the educational system.

The mere fact that it took so many decades before Jacobs' work was to be perceived as authentic and valuable, and that her narrative remains a nearly exceptional case of recognition on academic ground, only shows that we are still nowhere near finished with this process of inclusivity on and beyond the literary scale, and that the fluidity of literary canon perhaps should rise to this notion, to ensure thereby that *Incidents* would not remain only one of the very few authentic literary works representing antebellum African Americans. This final chapter deals with the canonisation of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and its reception towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and during the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, especially in the context of American literary canon and other works by African American authors.

### 5.1 Civil Rights Movement & the Renaissance of Slave Narratives

Whilst it is generally accepted that slave narratives were rediscovered during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is essential to note that the overpower of white mainstream was a significant factor in this process. Despite the fact that today we deem antebellum African American literary works as virtually forgotten for decades after they were first



published, it is nevertheless also true that they have, however sporadically, been studied by Black scholars even in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, prior to what is today recognized as the historical milestone which gave rise to their re-entrance into public view. Though it is then true that slave narratives were never forgotten altogether, they were certainly given significantly more notice with the changes brought by the American 1960s and the revived force in advocacy for civil rights, as only this particular force would ensure them also the attention of mainstream media, historically directed by and concerned with exclusively white people (Ernest 220).

The milestone of this vital change in approach to African American works and cultural heritage, and by extension to the whole notion of literature itself, came with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the Black Studies Movement connected therewith (190; 220). With the advocacy for racial justice came a demand for a recognition of the cultural legacy of minorities, which eventually meant raised interest in Black authors, and among other also changes on the scholarly ground which gave space to the muted voices of American history. In academic circles, a renewed focus was given to Black literature and slave narratives, which would be recuperated, published and republished, evaluated, reviewed and carefully studied (Johns 218–219) – for *Incidents* in particular, as Chapter 4 states, this initial recovered critical attention meant mostly resistance, up until it would be given a proper scholarly treatment by Yellin.

The literary canon and educational system, however, was only marginally touched by this positive change brought upon with the 60s and 70s. Though, as Audrey Fisch recalls in her introduction to *The Cambridge Companion* published in 2007, “in the not-so-distant past, few students read slave narratives in secondary school, in universities, or even in graduate school”, and though with the above mentioned changes “the value of the slave narrative has multiplied exponentially” (Fisch, *Introduction* 1), the inclusion and attention these stories and authors get in school curricula and anthologies remain to this day severely limited.

## **5.2 The Limited Representation – Jacobs and Douglass**

A frequent issue with contemporary reception of *Incidents*, as well as that of other slave narratives and literature written by and about minorities as a whole, is the fact that we fail to notice or acknowledge the individuality of those accounts of real-life stories. Searching for representative works, especially for the purpose of education, a selection

is in most cases made so narrow and limited that less than a handful of autobiographical works ends up generalized to the point of being expected to represent a whole culture, community or fragment of history. For a notable amount of time, Frederic Douglass has been the only widely recognized name of African American literature of his time period. In the section “American Literature 1820–1865” in the first edition of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (1979), he was the only Black author mentioned; apart from him, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century poet Phillis Wheatley was the only other representative of African American descent included in the whole volume of the anthology, which dealt with American literature between the years 1620 and 1865 (Gottesman vii–xxii). In more recent years, Douglass has been joined by Harriet Jacobs, who was in the course of the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century included in both *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* and *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, though only six chapters of the original forty-one of her autobiography were included. It is not an uncommon occurrence in mainstream academic publications and studies, *The Norton Anthology* among them, that the representation of American slave narratives is comprised merely of Douglass and Jacobs (Ernest 218; 222).

John Ernest deals with this issue in his chapter “Beyond Douglass and Jacobs”, where he discusses the representative value of these two authors in the context of American literary canon, in comparison to one another as well as to other slave narratives. Ernest’s conclusion on the long-lasting unequal receptions of these two narratives in relation to gender has already been mentioned briefly in Chapter 3 of the thesis; in his chapter he furthermore reveals how the aspect of gender comes into effect again with the eventual inclusion of *Incidents* in modern anthologies and literary canon. While the recent attention given to Douglass, carrying on with the 19<sup>th</sup>-century notion of him as “*the* representative of all African Americans” (Ernest 219), and the selection of his full autobiography for academic publications as a long-valued text of exceptional quality (though also for a significant period of time out of print) comes with little to no surprise, the uprise in recognition of *Incidents*, a narrative for years dismissed and declared inauthentic, is a noteworthy change, though admittedly not an unexpected one.

Today, Harriet Jacobs serves as the most apt representative of antebellum African American female authors, as her book is not only the most fitting example of an autobiographical book-length slave narrative written by a woman prior to the Civil War, but it is also the only one. Considering these qualities, and with critics and scholars having accepted its accuracy and authorship, *Incidents* has not only been rightfully

acknowledged as a great literary achievement, but by default also as extraordinary, revolutionary, and therefore fully representative of the female experience in what Ernest fittingly describes as a “male-dominated genre” (219). While Douglass’ *Narrative*, being only one out of the fair number of other male-authored slave narratives, is not quite as unique in this particular way, it remains elevated above the other narratives for what has been widely regarded as a particularly articulate and exceptional work of literature, essentially since its primal publication. Ernest therefore concludes that in entering the literary canon, with a selection of representative works so narrowed and limited by the mainstream, Jacobs’ narrative, in comparison to Douglass’, was included more than anything else out of sheer necessity for more diverse representation, as a needed opposing perspective to that of Douglass (219–221). The sole fact that for such a long time Jacobs remained the only female representative in this area of literature should support this view. As Foreman states at the beginning of her article, “if slave narratives are the most neglected body of early American writing . . . , then nineteenth-century Afro-American women's narratives are more neglected still” (Foreman 313). Ernest continues with the statement that “*Incidents* was presented in scholarship and classrooms alike as the necessary corrective or counterbalance to the story of masculine struggle that Douglass presents in his *Narrative*”—next to Douglass’ life story, generalized and viewed as illustrative of an enslaved man’s journey in antebellum America, Jacobs’ account, likewise generalized, then represents simply a different viewpoint of a narrative of similar nature, outside the set norms for slave stories as Douglass embraced them. The specific six chapters of *Incidents* selected for the anthology alone, Ernest argues, make it evident that the reasoning behind the inclusion of Jacobs was in most cases strictly gender-centred, as they are all fairly specific to her experience as an enslaved woman (Ernest 221).

It is obvious then how unreasonably vast the representative weight of these two narratives truly is. Though in her time Jacobs’ aim was indeed to speak for other enslaved individuals, especially for women in a situation similar to hers, to offer a number of her personal stories as representative of a whole female perspective on the matter at hand in today’s academic publications and school syllabi is undoubtedly not only severely limiting, but admittedly also not significantly more inclusive for women’s experience than omitting it altogether. While representation is essential and surely intended, it is debatable whether it is done well; and consequently, assuming we are expected to read slave narratives mainly for the purpose of understanding antebellum

slavery and racism, how much we are truly able to learn about a whole important fragment of American history if usually only a very limited number of individual perspectives is offered to us as a source of information. Ernest concludes that though it is irrational to expect of beginners in the studies of slave literature to immediately get familiar with each and every representative of the genre, it is also very limiting to their understanding of both slave narratives and slavery as a whole to remain fully acquainted only with the handful of examples as the educational system presents them (229–230).

### **5.3 Antebellum Slave Narrative as a Genre Today**

Connected to this representative issue is that of the questionable contemporary approach taken towards antebellum slave literature, especially regarding the appropriate way to read it. Slave narratives in essence remain to this day authentic historical testimonies, and for the most part that is how they are read – with focus predominantly on their content alone and a presupposition of gaining information on the topic of slavery. With such reading, it is important to acknowledge that those works should at the same time be regarded as literature in its basic sense and valued as such. The uneven balance between these two separate characteristics of slave narratives is followed by certain issues with how the genre and its representatives are perceived. With their purpose as history records, a question arises as to what exactly we expect or demand of such a literature when we read it. Because slave narratives are perceived inherently as sources of information, students, teachers, and in some cases even academic scholars approach them with certain set premises for and knowledge of the principles of the genre and with what little they might understand of the basics of slavery – subsequently, they expect slave narratives to be in accordance with those assumptions.

Ernest's answer for what therefore makes an individual narrative stand above the others in terms of literature, the way that Jacobs' and Douglass' narratives do, is the author's ability to "demonstrate familiarity with the literary conventions and standards of their day, ... especially those conventions and standards associated with white American literary history" (223) and to simultaneously utilize those conventions with distinct skill in a way that is above the standard – which is something Jacobs and Douglass both successfully achieved. The fact that those accounts were written by formerly enslaved individuals however tends to incline the readers to perceive their achievements and abilities strictly as exceptional in comparison thereto – in other

words, as Ernest suggests, the readers' presuppositions indicate a certain undermining of the text and author alike (Ernest 222–224):

Their skill as writers is celebrated, in effect, as an exceptional achievement – so that these writers who are asked to represent the slave narrative genre are considered as not representative at all but exceptional in their talent, and therefore in the position to represent the realities of enslavement. For many, what makes Douglass and Jacobs representative are the conditions under which they lived; what makes them remarkable is that they have reached a level of achievement that meets the standards even of those who have enjoyed the benefits of education and a privileged life. (224)

There is also a notion in such a perception of the formerly enslaved authors' achievements that their success is directly linked to their escape from slavery in a way that suggests that the realities and impacts of enslavement vanish where the author succeeds. In a similar way, the course of events in a typical slave narrative tends to be regarded as starting with a life in slavery and ending with a complete escape from it. The reality is, however, and the very story of Harriet Jacobs herself illustrates this well, that such a fight does not end with a triumphant escape, and slavery was not merely something that happened to a person and could be so easily overcome. Jacobs was not rid of all impacts of systemic racism and institutional slavery when she gained her freedom, nor did she clear herself of its consequences by publishing an eloquent and well-written autobiography. Her success, just like the success of Frederic Douglass and other, lesser known authors, is not one coming with the full defeat of slavery and its effects, but rather in spite of them.

#### **5.4 Incidents Today**

As one of the key works of American literature, now commonly taught and studied, *Incidents* has been published in a number of editions in English as well as in translations into German, Spanish, French or Portuguese (Yellin, *A Life* 262). Especially notable is the modern Japanese translation, which was first published in 2013 and subsequently became a bestseller in Japan. The author Yuki Horikoshi did an interview in 2017 with the American magazine *Forbes* for an article titled “Why A 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Slave Memoir Is Becoming A Bestseller In Japan's Bookstores”, where she talks about this fairly unexpected success of a translation which initially struggled to even find a publisher, of her motivations and of her belief in how Jacobs' narrative is still relevant

today, especially for women – “There are many passages in the book that resonate in a country where sexual equality is far from being achieved, sexual harassment is a perpetual problem, and sexual assault effectively hidden” (Adelstein). In the story of a fight for freedom and equality, she believes that the contemporary reader can and should learn from Harriet Jacobs as well as feel inspired by her.

## Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to explore the reception of Harriet Jacobs' 19<sup>th</sup>-century slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. This reception was studied both in context of the historical circumstances of Jacobs' own time, meaning predominantly abolitionism and the Civil War, as well as in context of the present-day approach to slave literature. The key element of this thesis was Harriet Jacobs' identity, and the ways in which being a sexually abused African American woman in the 19<sup>th</sup> century affected the reception of her autobiographical work.

The first part of the thesis discussed the obstacles Jacobs faced prior to the publication of her narrative. With the information drawn mainly from the biography written by Jean Fagan Yellin, this chapter sought to demonstrate what the possibility of publishing such a controversial story meant for its author, and the difficulties Jacobs would inevitably have to overcome in her pursuit to realize such a project as a Black woman. Presenting some contemporary reviews, the following chapter showed that the response *Incidents* received shortly after its publication was fairly positive – while the position of slave narratives on the literary market was proved to be quite ambiguous, as their inherent political nature and usage for anti-slavery purposes inevitably caused a distrust in their veracity, in the abolitionist circles *Incidents* was being recognized as a literary achievement and a significant testimony of what slavery meant for Black women and mothers.

The objective of Chapter 3 was to discuss how Jacobs' identity as an enslaved woman of colour in the 19<sup>th</sup> century affected the way her narrative was written and later accepted. The term intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, was key for this chapter, as it describes the ways in which the impacts of various social inequities combine and intertwine to create a fully unique experience for those suffering the consequences of such discrimination as members of numerous marginalized groups – in the case of Harriet Jacobs, this intersection is mainly that of being a woman, a Black person, and a victim of sexual abuse. This chapter attempted to show how the form of a slave narrative and its reception can be altered if the main subject of the story, presumably the autobiographical author, is a Black woman, and to then discuss the specific ways in which this applied to Harriet Jacobs, as someone whose story was highly focused on the sexual assault female slaves suffered at the hands of their masters. In the final part of the chapter, this discriminatory treatment of Jacobs' work was further

demonstrated by comparison with the reception of Frederic Douglass' *Narrative*, likewise a slave narrative but male-authored, and, using the article provided by Professor Christy L. Pottroff, with the favourable treatment Walt Whitman received from the publishers who at the same time fully neglected Jacobs under a nearly identical contract.

The aim of Chapter 4 was to explore the 20<sup>th</sup>-century criticism of *Incidents*, especially in terms of its authenticity and authorship, as well as the pseudonym problematics. First recounting the ways in which both Jacobs and Lydia Maria Child, editor of the narrative and a significant author herself, attempted to avoid such questioning of truthfulness, the chapter went on to discuss in more detail the issue of Child's editorial help and the extent of her involvement in the writing process. Again touching upon the notion of intersectionality, this chapter introduced the prominent historian John W. Blassingame, whose criticism represented the most widely accepted approach to *Incidents* in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, dismissing it as inaccurate and therefore of little to no historical testimonial value. Chapter 4 argued against the accuracy of Blassingame's statements, and using some supporting reviews of other critics then linked his dismissal of *Incidents* to the aforesaid intersectionality issue. The last part of the chapter closely introduced the work of Jean Fagan Yellin, whose thorough research of hitherto unacknowledged or undiscovered evidence confirmed *Incidents*' authenticity and authorship and contributed to the narrative's canonization.

The final part of the thesis discussed *Incidents*' position in literary canon as a work of great representative value. This position was first set by a recount of the narrative's inclusion in significant anthologies of American literature, which proved to be in comparison with other works of similar genre and/or authorship a fairly rare occurrence. Highlighted were mainly the problematic present-day approach to slave narratives and the issues of their representation in both scholarly studies and school curricula, more often than not limited merely to Jacobs and Douglass.

Providing an outline of *Incident's* reception, from its initial publication up to the current approach to the autobiography and slave narratives as a whole, this thesis furthermore accentuated how the issue of intersectionality of race and gender is crucial for the study of Jacobs' work and its criticism. As has been demonstrated, Jacobs' identity of a member of historically oppressed and marginalized groups affected not only the voice and form of her narrative, but also its ambiguous reception. This reception, however, was not limited merely to the postpublication period – social



discriminations and inequities affected not only contemporary reviews of the book, but also the sole resolution to share the story. They played a role in *Incident's* several decades long disappearance from public awareness and in the severe questioning of its value and authorship, which came with the 20<sup>th</sup>-century rediscovery of slave literature. Discriminations and inequities shaped the mainstream form of literary canon, in which Black authors and slave literature are underrepresented to the present day, and caused that even *Incidents'* eventual inclusion in the canon, though unarguably deserved, remains a subject to this inequity.

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