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Reclaiming Black (Female) Subjectivity and the Othered Gaze in Harriet's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: Analyzing White Representation in the Black Imagination

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Abstract

This essay explores the representation of whiteness and the reclamation of black (female) subjectivity in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Written by a black female author during the antebellum period, Jacobs' narrative offers a unique critique of the hegemonic power structures that defined her era. The essay examines how Jacobs uses her narrative to subvert the dominant racial and gender ideologies, presenting whiteness as the Other and reclaiming her identity and agency through the act of writing. By analyzing the text through the theoretical lenses of Slave Narrative, Feminist Discourse, and Otherism, this paper highlights the complex ways in which Jacobs negotiates her subjectivity in a society that systematically denies (her) black humanity.

Keywords: Black Subjectivity; Analyzing White Representation; Slavery; Female Subjectivity, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

1. Introduction

The genre of slave narratives holds a crucial place in the history of American literature, offering veridical accounts of the brutal realities of slavery and the resilient spirit of those who endured it. The source of their appeal lay in a number of factors: an evangelical reading market, the motifs of captivity and enslavement, the allure of sea narrative and high adventure, and, often, the allure of the exotic. Most importantly, these narratives were able to combine multiple genres - spiritual autobiography, travel narrative, ethnography, political commentary - as well as religious, sentimental, and gothic discourses. They were flexible enough to appeal to various readerships simultaneously (Fisch 21). Among these narratives, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* stands out not only for its graphic depiction of the trials faced by enslaved women but also for its stentorian critique of whiteness. As a black female author, Jacobs provides a unique perspective that interrogates the hegemonic power structures of her time. Her narrative challenges the dominant cultural norms by reclaiming black female subjectivity and othering whiteness by providing an alternative gaze for "it is the gaze that enables the subject to recognize that the Other is also a subject" (Buchanan 196).

Jacobs' narrative is remarkable for its exploration of how whiteness is imagined and represented in the black imagination. Writing during a period when African Americans, particularly women, were systematically denied the tools of literacy and authorship, Jacobs' act of writing itself became a powerful mode of resistance. Her narrative not only documents the dehumanizing experiences of slavery but also serves as an assertion of her agency and identity. Through her portrayal of white characters, Jacobs subverts the traditional power dynamics, presenting whiteness as the Other, inverting the Manichean Self/Other ontological opposition, and reclaiming her subjectivity against the backdrop of white hegemonic oppression (Ogunbemi 2016, 2018).

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The analysis of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* will be grounded in three primary theoretical/conceptual approaches: feminist criticism, otherism, and the slave narrative. Feminist criticism deals with how women are represented in texts. In general, feminist literary criticism can be philosophically theoretically oriented differently, but one thing remains common to all its varieties - this is the recognition of the special way of female life in the world and the corresponding female representative strategies (Dhivya 2). Recognizing the numerous mechanics that either deny voice to women or render their discourse meaningless, a feminist politics of voice often aims to rescue what has been silenced and disregarded (Kaplan 12).

Slave narrative is the kind of narrative in American Literature that foregrounds the experiences of slaves in vivid details. Nineteenth-century readers of antislavery literature, particularly the slave narrative, became familiar, for example, with the powerful literary trope of the slave auction. A major convention of the slave narrative, this scene, where the African American family is mercilessly separated, is premised on the affective reality of the racial family (Gould 90). Slaves' (or more accurately, ex-slaves') autobiographies record the process in which the ex-slave writes his or herself into an existence recognized by dominant American society. The author portrays the way he or she overcomes the slaveholding society's continuing attempts to eradicate his or her identity; simultaneously, s/he rewrites that identity to fit the dominant culture's norms, despite the fact that these norms tend to conflict with his/ her own experiences during and after slavery. These autobiographies thus provide dramatic models of the textual construction and development of "American" identity (Drake 91).

2. Black (Female) Subjectivity and the Agentive Gaze

In reclaiming black female subjectivity, Jacobs' novel engages in varying degrees of reclamation. First and foremost, the text itself is a mode of inscribing subjectivity. Slavery's constant attack upon the body and mind of the slave can result in a destructively circumscribed identity (Drake 91). Hence, to inscribe her subjectivity the instrumentality of writing then becomes a mode of reclamation. Slavery is a series of traumatic experiences and writing about these experiences can serve as recuperation of the psyche and also a cathartic essence for the writer, as memory becomes a medium of memorial interrogation.

Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* serves as a profound example of how writing functions as a mode of inscribing subjectivity, particularly for those who have been denied the ability to write and, by extension, to fully express their identities. Forced mass illiteracy was mandated during the 1830-1850 by the government of slave states in a manner that had never been seen before (Cunningham 12). For enslaved individuals, the act of writing was not merely a form of communication but a radical act of resistance against a system that sought to erase their humanity. In this context, Jacobs' narrative becomes a powerful tool for reclaiming her identity and asserting her subjectivity. This is evident in the text as the white Cartesian male, the ideal white man, becomes threatened by the latitude for logic for his slaves. For the ideal white male, the ability to think circumscribes his existence. Hence, to deprive the slaves of literacy is to deny their humanity.

In the text, literacy is "a privilege which so rarely falls to the lot of a slave" (Jacobs 10). For Kaplan, the act of writing itself is a claim to personal power. She argues:

the celebration of Jacobs's agency has often rested on valorizing the act of writing itself as a signal achievement of personal power. The conditions slave narrators faced make any published and self-authored account a remarkable achievement. Historically, (il)literacy was used as a measure of slaves' (in)humanity. More specifically, the attester, juridical position of slave narrators, denied traditional modes of literary—and social-authority, generated the use of certain literary forms which strategically authenticated and legitimated their discourse. Such forms included modes of disavowal—elaborate apologies for putative inarticulateness such as Brent's request that her readers "excuse deficiencies in consideration of circumstances (52)

Writing serves as a crucial act of resistance, particularly given that literacy and authorship were systematically denied to slaves. For enslaved women, this denial represented a double marginalization, exacerbating their oppression within both racial and gendered hierarchies. Linda's act of writing, therefore, becomes a powerful mode of inscribing her subjectivity, challenging the societal structures that sought to silence her. By documenting the experiences of slavery, she not only textualizes the ontological reality of the black (female) subject, but also provides a counter-narrative to the dominant cultural discourse that dehumanized black people. The act of writing enables Linda to reclaim her voice and identity, making her narrative a potent form of resistance against the systemic erasure of black (female) subjectivity.

The text restores the centrality of the black (female) subject from the margins of existence. It makes a potent case for the humanity of black people by accentuating the power of oneness, familial relationships, love, and desires—everything

that undergirds the basic condition of humanity. While the instrumentality of writing becomes a potent mode of self-recovery, Linda herself recognizes the inadequacy of words to bear the burden of such experience.

No pen can give an adequate description of the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery. The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear. The lash and the foul talk of her master and his sons are her teachers. When she is fourteen or fifteen, her owner, or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents. If these fail to accomplish their purpose, she is whipped or starved into submission to their will. She may have had religious principles inculcated by some pious mother or grandmother, or some good mistress; she may have a lover, whose good opinion and peace of mind are dear to her heart; or the profligate men who have power over her may be exceedingly odious to her. But resistance is hopeless (57)

This poignantly illustrates the pervasive corruption and moral degradation inherent in the institution of slavery, particularly for enslaved women. Linda shows language itself cannot account for the pervasive dehumanization, lending credence to the assertion that “trauma is an unsolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent contradictions of experience and language” (Balaev 1). Nevertheless, Linda uses her narrative to shed light on the specific abuses faced by slave girls and emphasizes the double marginalization of being both black and female. The detailed depiction of the licentiousness and fear that enslaved girls are subjected to serves as a powerful act of resistance, as Linda exposes the brutal realities that were often ignored or sanitized in mainstream accounts. By writing about these experiences, Jacobs reclaims her subjectivity and challenges the societal structures that sought to silence her voice.

Throughout the text, Linda asserts her voice within the ambit of various agentive modes. Moments of resistance, such as her refusal to submit to Dr. Flint’s advances and her eventual escape, further demonstrate her agency. At first, the formation of her agency takes initial form in her ability to write. It further develops with her interrogation of the systemic representation of the black (female) subject as inferior and morally depraved. This interrogation is realized by the imbrication of *seeing*, casting the othered gaze at whiteness (ably represented by Dr. Flint), and establishing an ontological demarcation between the black subject (Self) and the ideal white subject (the Other).

In the text, Linda foregrounds the crushing objecthood to which slaves are mired in, interrogating the question of agency when the dehumanization of the body and the psyche is the order of the day:

Some poor creatures have been so brutalized by the lash that they will sneak out of the way to give their masters free access to their wives and daughters. Do you think this proves the black man to belong to an inferior order of beings? What would you be, if you had been born and brought up a slave, with generations of slaves for ancestors? I admit that the black man is inferior. But what is it that makes him so? It is the ignorance in which white men compel him to live; it is the torturing whip that lashes manhood out of him; it is the fierce bloodhounds of the South, and the scarcely less cruel human bloodhounds of the north, who enforce the Fugitive Slave Law. *They* do the work (49)

By the interpellation of the readers in this discourse, Linda proves her latitude for rationality, thereby erasing the notion of the non-being of the black subject in the gaze of the Cartesian white male. By the virtue of this erasure, she inverts the gaze and provides an alternative look at the Self/Other relationship that characterizes racial relations in the text. The sense of female subjectivity begins to form as Linda navigates these experiences, using them as opportunities to assert her agency and challenge the oppressive structures around her.

In the text, Harriet Jacobs (writing under the pseudonym Linda Brent) uses her body as a site of resistance and agency, particularly in her interactions with Dr. Flint and her decisions regarding her romantic relationships. Jacobs’ narrative demonstrates how the body, often a site of control and exploitation under slavery, can also be reclaimed as a tool for asserting subjectivity and autonomy. Dr. Flint’s persistent sexual advances and manipulations represent the pervasive corruption and moral degradation of the institution of slavery. Linda’s refusal to submit to his will is a powerful act of resistance. Despite the constant threat of violence and coercion, Linda maintains her dignity and autonomy by rejecting Dr. Flint’s attempts to dehumanize her. Linda makes it known that “he told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection?” (Jacobs 30).

By rejecting Dr. Flint’s advances, Jacobs subverts the traditional power dynamics of master and slave. Her body, which Dr. Flint seeks to control, becomes a site of resistance and self-assertion. This act of defiance is not only a rejection of Dr. Flint’s authority but also a reclamation of her own agency and subjectivity. Linda’s decision to enter into a relationship with Mr. Sands, a white slave owner, is another reference to how she uses her body as an agentive tool. Although this relationship is complicated by the power dynamics of race and gender, Linda frames it as a choice she makes to assert some control over her life and body.

These acts have been the focus of a number of critical interpretations which argue that Linda Brent undermines structures of domination through strategic subversions which assert her own agency...by opposing freedom and marriage she undermines the nineteenth-century ideology of marriage as woman's "sacred absolute," the means of her personal fulfillment and the proper end of her life. By suggesting, moreover, that freedom does not have the "usual" meaning for black slave women that it has for free white women, she challenges us to think about freedom and agency as specific and contextual, not as abstract and universal, to think about freedom, as she puts it, "not in the usual way" (47-54).

Notably, Jacobs' decision to engage in a relationship with Mr. Sands is driven by her desire to gain some measure of protection and autonomy for herself and her children. She considers it "desperate...a plunge into the abyss" (59). This choice, while fraught with ethical and moral complexities, highlights her agency in navigating the oppressive structures of slavery.

3. Motherhood as Reclamation of Subjectivity

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, motherhood is a powerful force that drives the actions and decisions of both Linda (Harriet Jacobs) and her grandmother, Aunt Marthy. Through their experiences, the narrative illustrates how motherhood serves as a means of asserting black womanhood, despite the oppressive conditions of slavery. Motherhood instigates actions rooted in protection, resistance, and the desire for a better future for their children, highlighting the resilience and agency of enslaved women. Within the last three decades, as motherhood studies has emerged as a distinct and established academic discipline...indeed, a central aim of motherhood studies is to articulate and theorize "the voice of the mother"—that is, to analyze becoming and being a mother from the perspective and subjectivity of mothers themselves (O'Reilly 16).

Aunt Martha, Linda's grandmother, embodies the nurturing and protective aspects of motherhood. Her role extends beyond her immediate family, encompassing a broader sense of collective responsibility and spirituality. Aunt Martha's efforts to shield her family from the harsh realities of slavery reflect her deep commitment to preserving their dignity and well-being. Her entrepreneurial spirit, demonstrated through her successful baking business, allows her to provide for her family and resist the dehumanizing aspects of slavery. Her protective fervour is evident in how she manages to extend love, particularly to her relations, even when to love is more of a burden for slaves because as Linda rhetorically asks, "WHY DOES THE SLAVE ever love? Why allow the tendrils of the heart to twine around objects which may at any moment be wrenched away by the hand of violence?" (41)

Because food is a source of energy, power, and in the house of the ideal white man in the text, little attention is paid to what the slaves eat, Linda, through her dependence on her pragmatic grandmother, shows the collective responsibility of a mother. She says:

I passed my grandmother's house, where there was always something to spare for me. I was frequently threatened with punishment if I stopped there; and my grandmother, to avoid detaining me, often stood at the gate with something for my breakfast or dinner. I was indebted to her for all my comforts, spiritual or temporal. It was her labor that supplied my scanty wardrobe (13)

In the text, black womanhood is circumscribed by familial love and collective responsibility that further accentuates the being-ness of blackness, particularly the female slaves. Slave women asserted their womanhood by appealing to a variety of cultural narratives about gender that included narratives of motherhood, labor, entrepreneurship, spirituality, and collective responsibility. They used their narratives to broaden the nation's limited understanding of how slave women asserted their femininity, despite their nationally disadvantaged status (Santamarina 234). Grandmother enjoys community love and spirituality as "she had for a long time supplied many families with crackers and preserves; consequently, "Aunt Marthy," as she was called, was generally known, and everybody who knew her respected her intelligence and good character" (14). In a word of advice to Linda, Grandmother appears as an indefatigable mother whose love for her children is unbending. She says to Linda, "Stand by your own children, and suffer with them till death. Nobody respects a mother who forsakes her children; and if you leave them, you will never have a happy moment" (Jacobs 102).

Motherhood also drives Aunt Martha to take significant risks to protect her loved ones. Her decision to purchase Linda's brother William's freedom exemplifies her dedication to her family's liberation and her role as a matriarch. In a dialectical relationship with whiteness, Mrs Flint, the wife of Dr Flint, is portrayed as full of vile and lacking human empathy. Linda in the text says "Mrs. Flint, like many southern women, was totally deficient in energy. She had not strength to superintend her household affairs; but her nerves were so strong, that she could sit in her easy chair and see

a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash. She was a member of the church; but partaking of the Lord's supper did not seem to put her in a Christian frame of mind" (14).

Motherhood as a status could also account for Jacobs' claim to agency as reclaiming the voice of the mother becomes a necessity to evince the struggles of slave women who have become mothers. Following the birth of her daughter, she despairs with her heart "heavier than it had ever been before" (86), knowing that "slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women" (86). This declaration augments the notion that women are the recipients of the greater violence performed on the female body by the institution of slavery, which is phallogocentric. Such a narrative, as the one Linda highlights, delineates the double-bind misery of the black slave woman and it "shows how slave women used their narratives to represent themselves as women in relation to more than just their sexuality. Harriet Jacobs was right to counter abolitionists' focus on slave men's experiences by alerting her readers to the special, yet unrecognized, gendered nature of slave women's domination when she stressed that slavery was 'far more terrible for women'" (Santamarina 234).

Linda's journey is profoundly influenced by her role as a mother. Her determination to protect her children from the horrors of slavery motivates many of her decisions and actions throughout the narrative. For her, the choice was between "save my children...or perish in the attempt" (94). Linda's realization of the additional sufferings that her daughter would face under slavery fuels her resolve to secure freedom for her children. This protective instinct is a defining feature of her motherhood, guiding her actions and instilling in her a fierce determination to resist Dr. Flint's advances and ultimately escapes.

4. Whiteness Represented within Black Imagination: The Othered Gaze

One of the most significant aspects of Jacobs' narrative is how she uses writing to invert the Manichean relation of white as Self and black as Other. By acquiring the agency of writing, Jacobs asserts her subjectivity and challenges the fixed alterity imposed by white hegemony. Her narrative becomes a tool for redefining her identity and positioning whiteness as the Other. In her narrative, Jacobs presents whiteness as the Other, challenging the traditional power dynamics that positioned whiteness as the normative and dominant racial category. This representation is not only a critique of white supremacy but also a means of reclaiming her own subjectivity. By othering whiteness, Jacobs reasserts her identity and agency, challenging the structures that sought to dehumanize her.

In Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, whiteness is critically examined and othered within the black imagination. This representation allows Jacobs to subvert traditional racial hierarchies and assert her subjectivity against the oppressive forces of white supremacy. The inversion of the Manichean dyad between Self and the Other in this text is not a result of antagonism, but it only "emerges as a response to the traumatic pain and anguish that remains a consequence of white racist domination, a psychic state that informs the way blacks folks 'see' whiteness" (hooks 341).

Dr. Flint is the central figure representing whiteness in Jacobs' narrative. His character embodies the brutality and moral degradation of white supremacy. Jacobs depicts Dr. Flint as a manipulative and abusive individual who uses his power to exploit and dehumanize slaves with every opportunity he gets. As a slave owner, he perpetuates violence and metes out severe punitive measures on 'erring' slaves. The terror he makes Linda go through in the text exposes the underhanded notion of whiteness as synonymous to goodness. During the pubescent period of her life, which Linda calls "a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl", Dr Flint makes advances to her, knowing she is powerless. This is evident in Linda's comment that "no matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men" (30).

By calling white slave owners fiends in the shape of men, there is an attempt by Linda to strip whiteness of all claims to humanity. Linda also declares that "[Dr Flint] peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of" (30). By describing Dr. Flint in such terms, Jacobs not only otherizes him but also portrays whiteness as morally bankrupt. This portrayal dismantles the perceived superiority of whiteness and asserts the dignity and humanity of black individuals.

The rhetoric of white supremacy supplies a fantasy of whiteness... [and] socialized to believe the fantasy, that whiteness represents goodness and all that is benign and non-threatening, many white people believe this is the way black people conceptualize whiteness (hooks 340-341). However, Jacobs' narrative inverts the traditional Self/Other relationship of white supremacy. Through her writing, Jacobs reclaims her subjectivity and asserts herself against the alterity imposed by whiteness. For the white subject, the black other is everything that lies outside the self. For the black subject however, the white other serves to define everything that is desirable, everything that the self desires (Loomba 144). By

documenting her experiences and critiquing her white oppressors, Jacobs positions herself as the subject and whiteness as the object of scrutiny, the Other stripped of power and the allures of authority.

This scrutiny is significant in the text as it symbolizes the agency of the black subject to *see* and cast a gaze at the white hegemony, thereby concretizing visibility. For hooks, one mark of oppression was that black folks were compelled to assume the mantle of invisibility, to erase all traces of their subjectivity during slavery and the long years of racial apartheid, so that they could better less-threatening servants (340). This invisible omnipresence gives "whiteness" a rarely acknowledged position of dominance and power. As Henry Giroux suggests, "whiteness," domination, and invisibility are intimately related. He asserts that although " 'whiteness' functions as a historical and social construction," the dominant culture's inability or reluctance to see it as such is the source of its hidden authority; "whiteness" is an unrecognized and unacknowledged racial category "that secures its power by refusing to identify" itself (Keating 905).

Jacobs' narrative also explores how whiteness is a source of trauma for black individuals. It also demythologizes the notion of whiteness as morally upright as against 'uncivilized' slaves. Characters like Dr. Flint embody this trauma, using their power to exploit and oppress. Jacobs' portrayal of these characters highlights the psychological and emotional toll of whiteness, providing a critical perspective on the dehumanizing effects of white supremacy.

An instance of this misuse of power by Dr Flint is his refusal to allow Linda marry who she wants, claiming control over her body. During an exchange of words on this issue, he says to her, "Do you know that I have a right to do as I like with you, that I can kill you, if I please?" (44). Additionally, the riot that followed The Nat Turner Rebellion plays a significant role in illustrating the collective white fear and subsequent brutality towards the black community. Following the rebellion, white people indiscriminately attacked and murdered free black individuals and slaves, showcasing the irrational and violent nature of white supremacy.

Everywhere men, women, and children were whipped till the blood stood in puddles at their feet. Some received five hundred lashes; others were tied hands and feet, and tortured with a bucking paddle, which blisters the skin terribly. The dwellings of the colored people, unless they happened to be protected by some influential white person, who was nigh at hand, were robbed of clothing and everything else the marauders thought worth carrying away. All day long these unfeeling wretches went round, like a troop of demons, terrifying and tormenting the helpless. Murdered free black individuals and slaves, showcasing the irrational and violent nature of white supremacy (71)

The reaction to the rebellion exemplifies the terror and moral bankruptcy of whiteness, further demythologizing its supposed inherent goodness. This event highlights the collective white hysteria and the extent to which they would go to maintain control, reinforcing Jacobs' portrayal of whiteness as a source of terror and trauma. More notably, the use of plural nominal/pronominal items ("these wretches", "a troop of demons") to box the plundering whites into a collective inverts the longstanding individuation of the white man as Albert Memmi argues that "the mark of the plural is a sign of the colonizer's depersonalization" (Lomba 137). So, Linda calls them "they", that is, *not like us*, in a manner that textualizes the non-being of the Other to the Self, a perpetuation of the collective as an anonymous collectivity.

5. Conclusion

Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* masterfully employs the othered gaze to subvert traditional racial hierarchies and critique the construct of whiteness. Through her vivid portrayal of characters like Dr. Flint, the aftermath of the Nat Turner Rebellion, and her long walk to freedom, Jacobs demythologizes whiteness, depicting it as a source of terror and moral corruption. This narrative technique not only exposes the inherent brutality of white supremacy but also reclaims black subjectivity by positioning whiteness as the Other. By documenting her personal experiences and the collective trauma of the black community, Jacobs inverts the Self/Other relationship, asserting her identity and agency against the dehumanizing forces of slavery.

Drawing on bell hooks' insights from "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination," Jacobs' narrative occupies a critical space that challenges the normative status of whiteness and highlights its role in maintaining systemic oppression. Hooks' concept of whiteness as terror aligns with Jacobs' depiction, reinforcing the narrative's function as a powerful act of resistance. Jacobs' writing becomes a tool for reclaiming her subjectivity and critiquing the dominant cultural narratives, ultimately asserting the dignity and humanity of black individuals. This inversion of traditional power dynamics is central to Jacobs' narrative, offering a profound commentary on the complexities of race, gender, and identity in antebellum America.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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