# HARRIET JACOBS AND THE SENTIMENTAL POLITICS OF FEMALE SUFFERING

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When Harriet Jacobs confesses her sexual relationship with Mr. Sands, a white lawyer, she is alternately apologetic, a pathetic victim appealing to her audience for sympathy, and defiant, a renegade claiming that her choice was made with "deliberate calculation" and cannot be understood let alone judged by an audience that knows nothing of slave experience.[1] Throughout *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs vacillates between the highly stylized and oblique language that characterizes the sentimental and domestic fiction of the antebellum period, and a direct, succinct and descriptive style. Jacobs's self-presentation and her attitude toward her audience fluctuate with these stylistic vacillations. She alternately describes herself as a victim of circumstance, pleading for pity and assistance, and as a discerning actor who exercises significant control over nearly impossible conditions. Employing well-tried sentimental forms to apologize for her sexual demise, Jacobs implicitly endorses the shared value of sexual purity as the grounds for communication with her genteel audience. Asserting illicit sexuality as an instance of her autonomy, Jacobs rejects the conventions of sexual purity altogether, defining her relationship with her audience as adversarial rather than cooperative.

Critics, while taking note of these stylistic and substantive inconsistencies, have emphasized the unconventional aspects of Jacobs's address, focusing on her refutation of dominant ideology at the expense of fathoming her significant adherence to both literary and social conventions. Situating Jacobs's account of her sexual demise and her emancipation in relation to the "cult of true womanhood," Hazel Carby provides an exacting analysis of Jacobs's challenge to antebellum culture. In *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Carby argues that Jacobs must contend with conventions which, as they promote female chastity and submissiveness, deny her experience, her femininity, and, by extension, her humanity. From this position of exclusion, however, Jacobs is able to condemn and modify the models of female character and behavior that insistently marginalize her. Depicting the material discrepancies between her circumstances and those of her white, female audience, Jacobs is able to "critique conventional standards of female

behavior and to question their relevance and applicability to the experience of black women."[2] Recounting her decision to engage in an illicit sexual relationship in order to escape the abuse of her master, Jacobs asserts liberty and autonomy as alternative values for slave women, priorities that supersede chastity and submissiveness. By narrating her experiences in the context of sexual and domestic ideologies that discount or condemn them, Jacobs manages to articulate the limitations of those standards, thus redefining black womanhood and devising alternative narrative structures for describing black female experience.

Carby offers a brilliant account of the ways that Jacobs uses marginality, the differences between herself and her audience, to expose the hypocrisy of the dominant culture and to assert competing formulations of black female experience. But emphasizing Jacobs's exclusion from the ideology of true womanhood and consequent mastery of its assumptions, Carby overlooks her inclusion in abolitionist discourse. While Jacobs must grapple with a cult of sexual purity that cannot account for, let alone tolerate, her experience, she is, at the same time, writing within an abolitionist tradition that relies on the revelation of the slave woman's sexual degradation. Abolitionist discourse does not significantly counter or refute the assumptions of true womanhood, but deploys them in a particular way: abolitionists, accepting female sexual purity as paramount, publicized the sexual abuse of slave women as a means of discrediting slavery itself. In order to fully comprehend the complexity of Jacobs's position as a black female narrator, and the implications of her intermittent rejection of sentimental forms and the corresponding assumptions of domestic culture, we must understand her troubled adherence to these forms in the context of their particular application in abolitionist discourse.

Critic Jean Fagin Yellin has discussed Jacobs's work in the context of an abolitionist tradition. But she, like Carby, locates Jacobs at the margins of discourse, describing her as a literary and political innovator. In her introduction to the 1987 edition of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Yellin pays tribute to Jacobs's decision to publicize the sexual exploitation of slave women at the cost of personal humiliation. She argues that Jacobs "addresses this painful personal subject in order to politicize it, to insist that the forbidden topic of the sexual abuse of slave women be included in public discussion of the slavery question" (xiv). Understanding Jacobs's narration of her sexual experience as itself unconventional, Yellin asserts that Jacobs modifies the contours of public discourse. In her recent book, *Women and Sisters*, Yellin offers

an extensive reading of the various feminist and abolitionist permutations of the antislavery emblem (found in visual art and literature) in which the supplicant female slave appeals to the white female liberator for assistance. Yellin poses Jacobs against this tradition, describing her as an outsider who, by refusing to depict herself as a victimized, supplicant slave, "gained her triumph in and through the process of recreating herself as the subject of her own discourse."[3]

While there is no doubt that Jacobs describes her sexual victimization at great personal cost, in the context of an abolitionist tradition that is preoccupied with slave suffering, her revelations are not innovative. Idealizing Jacobs's autonomy as a self-fashioned subject, Yellin exaggerates the singularity of Jacobs's account. When Jacobs wrote her narrative (between 1853 and 1858) the sexual abuse of slave women was hardly a forbidden topic. On the contrary, it had been extensively publicized by the abolitionist writing of white women. The antislavery arguments of writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe and Lydia Maria Child relied on descriptions of the defiled slave girl and the bereft slave mother. Because their own authority was founded on the proposed preservation of sexual purity and the dissemination of domestic values, white female abolitionists often took the sexual and maternal suffering of the female slave as their object. By showing that slavery entailed the sexual abuse of black women and the fragmentation of the black family, they could at once condemn slavery and extend the sexual and domestic values they were entrusted to protect. Far from denying the slave woman's humanity, abolitionist narration hinges on the utter availability of her humanity, as evidenced by her pain and suffering. When she wrote *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs had to cope with the already canonized figure of the suffering slave, particularly the sexually degraded slave woman.

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* cannot be adequately understood as an outsider's heroic refashioning of convention: Jacobs exposes the assumptions of abolitionist discourse, and ancillary sentimental forms, not by definitively rejecting them, but by elaborating them from within. The narrative's formal and political import, therefore, can best be comprehended not by overlooking or excusing its conventionality, but by examining the sources and consequences of its conventionality. What is innovative about Jacobs's narrative is not that she publicizes her sexual abuse, but that she, a black woman and ex-slave, uses techniques typically employed by white abolitionists to tell her own story. What makes this text remarkable is that it combines the conventions of abolitionist sentimentality with the utterly unconventional

use of these structures by a black female narrator. Jacobs steps into an abolitionist tradition that takes the revelation of slave suffering as the means to politicizing a white audience and mobilizing them to abolish slavery. Her first person narration, however, radically alters the structure of a discourse that typically constructs the suffering slave as a mute object whose experience must be translated by an empathic white observer. Employing the conventions of abolitionist sentimentality, Jacobs reveals the logic and the limits of that discourse, and the need for alternative forms of address. Rather than valorizing this text as an ambitious rejection of dominant discourse, I would like to consider the way sentimental conventions and values generate and determine Jacobs's critique.

By reexamining the tensions of Jacobs's address in light of her vexed relatedness to an audience of white women and their narrative traditions, I hope to show that her intermittent rejection of a sentimental style is not the sign of her exclusion from dominant discourse but of her expulsion from it: she writes as an insider who, by virtue of her race, is repeatedly marginalized in relation to the very conventions she employs. The text's cultural significance lies neither in Jacobs's acquiescence to social and literary standards nor in her defiant rejection of them but in her restless movement between styles of address. Caught between a domestic ideology that relies on female sexual purity and an abolitionist discourse that insistently publicizes the sexual victimization of slave women, Jacobs is peculiarly able to elaborate on their interrelatedness, the ways they concur and conflict, and their particular limitations for the narration of black female experience.

When Jacobs wrote to her friend Amy Post of her decision to write *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, she told her that one of the reasons it had been so difficult for her to decide to tell her story was that recounting it would necessarily mean offering the "whole truth" of her past life: she would be obligated to describe the sexual abuse she suffered as a slave (232). Accepting the publication of her suffering as a precondition for her narrative, Jacobs embraces a tradition that takes slave suffering as the origin of abolitionist utterance. Abolitionist authors frequently describe the mute suffering of the victimized slave prompting and justifying the articulate protest of the responsive white observer. According to Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Author's Introduction" to the 1878 edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the novel was inspired by a vision that Stowe received, after taking communion, of a slave being beaten to death. Her account of the novel's genesis, like the

novel itself, puts a tormented slave at its center.[4] Stowe describes the suffering slave not only as the object, but also as the source of her narrative, imagining the slave's suffering as causal and her own literary production as responsive. Inverting what modern observers would take to be a contrast between the slave's passivity and the abolitionist author's agency, Stowe attributes political force to the mute, tormented slave, while depicting herself as a medium.[5] Describing herself in the third person, she writes that after having had this vision, "the story can less be said to have been composed by her than imposed upon her. Scenes, incidents, conversations rushed upon her with a vividness and importunity that could not be denied."[6] Stowe does not imagine herself mastering or transforming slave experience, but being subjected to it.

Stowe portrays herself as helpless and submissive not only in relation to the slave's suffering, but also in relation to her own literary production. The passivity of the slave has its shadow in Stowe's construction of her own artistic humility. While Stowe refashions the slave, the object of her text, as its agent, she presents her artistry as a form of enslavement. By transposing her own authorial agency and the helplessness of the suffering slave, Stowe can present her literary production as an exemplary instance of feminine self-denial. Her ability to receive her vision, and to translate it into novel form, is a not a sign of personal ingenuity or political self-assertion but of her willingness to be inhabited by the suffering, the story, of another. Authorship is imagined, quite literally, as self-sacrifice: Stowe must put herself aside in order to become the medium for another's experience.[7]

While the figure of the physically abused of slave, male and female, appears throughout abolitionist literature as both the inspiration and justification for abolitionist writing, the texts of black and white women concentrate on the sexual and maternal suffering of the female slave and its particular ability to authorize the political voice of white female activists. As early as 1836, black abolitionist and poet Sarah Forten wrote that "long as mothers' hearts are breaking / Beneath the hammer of the auctioneer / . . . So long should woman's melting voice be heard, / In intercession strong and deep."[8] Lydia Maria Child obliquely acknowledged the extent to which her success as an anti-slavery writer depended on representing the sexual degradation of slave women when she declared that "the world does not afford such materials for tragic romance, as the history of the Quadroons."[9]

In *Women and Sisters*, Yellin traces the relationship between the passive female slave and the empowered white female liberator through

a variety of abolitionist texts. She claims, however, that in Jacobs's narrative "it is not fruitful to search . . . for characters modeled on the passive chained female supplicant or on the chain-breaking liberator . . . Jacobs's book centers on the figure of a woman struggling to break her own chains."[10] Yet in their prefaces to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs and her editor Lydia Maria Child seem to appeal to this well-tried association between the slave woman's sexual suffering and the white woman's political authority. They propose that by describing the suffering she has undergone as a slave Jacobs will awaken the sentiments of white northern women and, in doing so, spur them to political activism. Jacobs writes that she aims to "arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse" (1). And Child hopes that by exposing the "monstrous features" of slavery this narrative will "arouse conscientious and reflecting women at the North to a sense of their duty in the exertion of moral influence on the question of Slavery on all possible occasions" (4). Jacobs and Child agree that the narrative's purpose is to prompt the political agency of white middle-class northern women by communicating the extremity of the slave woman's sexual degradation.[11]

When Jacobs and Child propose that the revelation of individual suffering can move readers to action, they, like Stowe, participate in a female abolitionist rhetoric that attempts to mobilize the political implications of sentimentality. Sentimental narration assumes that emotional experience can be directly embodied, and thus perfectly communicated, in written language. If experience and language are fundamentally transparent, radically communicable and communicative, then it becomes possible to imagine that the revelation of a particular felt experience can communicate across boundaries of race and class, founding a coalition between diverse populations. Ideally, sentimental narration can offer readers the experience of people unlike themselves, thus supplanting social disparities with political unions.[12] Abolitionist texts rely on the techniques, images, and assumptions of sentimental narration to figure the possibility that social unity can be discovered and expressed through the communication of slave suffering, that "victims" and "fortunates" can be unified by the narration of marginal experience. Employing a sentimental investment in the perfect communicability of intense feeling, abolitionists can imagine the slave's excessive pain as representative and her victimization as a form

of political agency. Sentimentality allows abolitionists to refashion the slave's exceptionality as the basis for shared political endeavor.

In his work on sentimentality, Philip Fisher has emphasized the centrality of the victim in sentimental literature, arguing that sentimental narration is preoccupied with "the experimental extension of . . . primary states of feeling to people from whom they have been previously withheld."[13] By making an array of traditionally marginalized and neglected figures—prisoners, children, animals, and slaves—into objects of compassion, sentimentality grants them the privilege not only of having feelings but also of deserving sympathy, if not aid, on account of those feelings. But if the fictional victim's suffering is, as Fisher claims, an occasion for "lending out normality," it is also a type of borrowing: sentimental representations of suffering will allow both author and reader to experience types of suffering that are unfamiliar to them. In this sense, the expression of suffering in sentimental literature is an exchange between a victim and an observer in which both are significantly humanized. The sentimental author and reader at once donate feeling to the fictional victim and are rendered compassionate by the experience of imagined suffering.

This sentimental exchange assumes that reader and character are essentially alike. Sentimental narration can aspire to the complete and reciprocal communication of feeling because it believes in universal sentiment, native human responses that are not bound by circumstance. Sentimentality relies on generic rather than eccentric reactions—fear, sorrow, and indignation—which can be broadly and flexibly applied. This belief in common feeling allows sentimental communication to proceed by analogy. While Harriet Beecher Stowe's readers had not had their children sold on an auction block, many of them had lost children to illness and could, she assumed, empathize with the slave mother on the basis of their shared experience of loss. As her account of authorship proceeds on the basis of an analogy between enslavement and composition, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* persistently associates the experiences of her white middle-class audience with the trials endured by slave women. In her *Letters to Mothers*, Lydia Sigoruney describes the power of maternal sorrow to eclipse social divisions: when a mother who has lost an infant "sees a little coffin pass, no matter whether the mother who mourns, be a stranger, or a mendicant, or burnt dark beneath the African sun, is she not to her, in the pitying thrill of that moment, as a sister?"[14] As sentimentality assumes that people are related by feeling rather than by status or

circumstance, a reader of sentimental fiction can identify with the remote conditions of a victimized character by conjuring an associated emotional experience.[15]

The communication of suffering is not only sentimentality's object, but also its method: sentimentality relies on bodily suffering, or bodily manifestations of emotional suffering, to signify and convey feeling. The body can communicate universal sentiment most effectively because its responses, particularly to pain, are predictable and legible.[16] Sentimental authors employ a limited repetoire of physical reactions and gestures to express emotional anguish. Stowe uses the graphic image of the bodies of slave mother and slave child torn from one another to convey the psychological trauma of this separation. Tears and scars and cries so insistently connote both psychic and spiritual suffering that in many sentimental tales any distinction between the two entirely collapses. Particular experiences are translated as broad gestures that can become the site of readerly association and identification because they are capacious rather than precise. A belief that pain can be externalized and expressed by the body's reliable reactions facilitates a sentimental commitment to the communication of marginal experience.

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt claims that pain is "the most private and least communicable" human experience. She explains that "pain . . . is so subjective and removed from the world of things and men that it cannot assume an appearance at all."[17] But in sentimental narration, generally preoccupied with common rather than subjective experience, physical pain is communicated quite easily.[18] Rather than describing the ultimate isolation of the individual, physical pain communicates so effectively as to transcend physical boundaries, enabling a public recognition of private trauma. Arendt wants to know whether or not an individual can convey the experience of pain—she is interested in the original ordeal and in the accuracy of communication. But in a sentimental context, the signs of pain are privileged over the experience of pain: the body's reactions to pain manifest shared rather than particular experience. Because sentimentality pursues the possibility of a correspondence between private and public experience rather than the vicissitudes of an individual intelligence, it finds pain expressive precisely to the extent that it resists individuation.

Represented in pain, the victim becomes transparent, her peculiar experience available to a reading public. In an abolitionist context, this sentimental preoccupation with the revelation of individual suffering as a means of constituting continuity between individual and

communal experience takes a particular form. Abolitionist narration employs the revelation of slave suffering as a means of exposing the nation's sins and affecting corporate reform. Abolitionists, associating secrecy with corruption and revelation with progress, frequently describe their political efforts as attempts to bring to light what has been hidden, to speak the unspeakable, as the means of purifying and regenerating a sinful nation. Angelina Grimke describes slavery as "a whited sepulchre full of dead men's bones and all uncleaness," and continues, "Blessed be God, the Angel of Truth has descended and rolled away the stone from the mouth of the sepulchre. . . . The abominations so long hidden are now brought forth before all Israel and the sun."[19] The slave's pain, as it reveals the "abominations" she has suffered, is the transparent medium through which the nation's sins are illuminated. In this sense, the victimized slave is representative by virtue of her marginalization: the suffering that distinguishes her is the embodied effect of collective corruption. In her appendix to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Amy Post claims that Jacobs's strange story is indeed representative, "a sad illustration of the condition of this country" (204). As in sentimental narration, suffering is meaningful precisely because it is not singular, not aberrant, but the sign of collective experience. Describing Jacobs's marginality as a form of exclusion, Carby and Yellin can in no way account for the inclusive relationship that sentimental and abolitionist narration establish between marginal and common experience.

Abolitionist depictions of the tragic mulatta provide the paradigmatic instance of how the abused body reveals collective sin. The tragic mulatta is both the sign and the site of sexual abuse: the color of her skin makes visible the fact that her forefathers raped her foremothers, and she is imagined as the object of the white man's continued violence. White antislavery authors imagine slave suffering as a form of agency, the moving force behind abolitionist narration and, by extension, the prospect of national reformation. What treatments of the tragic mulatta make clear, however, is that the only action that the female slave is imagined capable of—and it is certainly significant—is the revelation of her victimization.

But in abolitionist literature, slave suffering only becomes visible through the articulate reaction of an empathic white spectator. Theodore Dwight Weld's influential *American Slavery As It Is* offers an insistent example of how a white spectator's confrontation with the physical torture of a slave generates abolitionist narration.[20] Weld's book is a compilation of "evidence" of the brutalities committed against

slaves. While he includes sermons, congressional speeches, criminal trials, and warrants for the capture of runaway slaves, the bulk of the text is composed of the testimony of various "witnesses"—both opponents and proponents of slavery—who recount their observations. The testimony of slaves themselves is conspicuously absent; these are tales of suffering witnessed rather than suffering endured. As in Stowe's account, the slave's suffering prompts the narration of white observers. The reader, who witnesses suffering at an additional remove, is asked to adjudicate slavery in the "court of conscience."

Just as Stowe responds to a vision of enslavement by experiencing subjection, the white observer's receptivity to slave suffering culminates in the experience of pain. Abolitionist Angelina Grimke describes seeing itself as a form of suffering when she writes: "None but those who know from experience what it is to live in a land of bondage can form any idea of what is endured by those whose eyes are open enough to feel for these miserable creatures."[21] This conflation of felt and observed experience validates the sentimental premise that intense feeling can be transmitted: the observer's seemingly extravagant reaction testifies to the radical communicability of pain.

Because the responsive pain of the sentimental author and reader marks the achievement of identification, sentimental commentary is largely concerned with documenting this pain. Female abolitionists, employing sentimental conventions, frequently write their own pain and the pain of their reader into their accounts. In her preface to *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe tells her readers that "the work which the writer here presents to the public is one which has been written with no pleasure and with much pain."[22] Lydia Maria Child concludes her first influential and controversial abolitionist tract, *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans*, by declaring that "the expectation of displeasing all classes has not been unaccompanied with pain." In the text, Child interrupts her description of the conditions on board slave ships, warning her readers that "here the scene becomes almost too harrowing to dwell upon." But she does proceed, and counsels her readers to persevere as well, explaining that "we must not allow our nerves to be more tender than our consciences."[23] By writing a contest between nerves and conscience into her narrative, Child makes it clear that moral duty requires the discomfort of frayed nerves. The sensationalism of abolitionist literature—its tendency to describe the physical abuse of slaves in great detail and to claim the power of these descriptions to induce readerly and authorial suffering—cannot be separated from its moral claims.

The endurance of imagined pain, or the imagined endurance of pain, signifies the abolitionist writer and reader's successful attempt to identify with the suffering slave.

In response to the representation of physical or emotional pain, distinctions between the sufferer and the authorial or reading observer collapse. Because the body's responses to pain externalize emotions, in pain the victim's internal life becomes entirely visible, available to the observer. And in response to that vision, the reader suffers.[24] The observer's pained response to the victim's suffering is not the equivalent of the sufferer's own experience but is analogous to it; sentimental identification does not require the replication of pain but its represented approximation. When Stowe received her vision, "she was perfectly overcome by it, and could scarcely restrain the tears and sobbings that shook her frame."[25] The pain of the sufferer is a vehicle of communication, while the trauma of the reader signifies the success of that communication. The victim's transparency is matched by the reader's permeability; the sentimental narrative assumes a reader who is deeply receptive to the pain of another. Bound by an experience of suffering which is by definition reciprocal, character and reader are allied in the reader's imagination.

When Jacobs and Child propose that by disclosing her suffering Jacobs can inaugurate a political alliance between white and black women they call on a sentimental model of communication: they assume that Jacobs can successfully communicate her degradation to women who have never experienced its equivalent, and that these women will receive this communication, responding to her subjection as if it were their own. But while Jacobs and Child embrace the structures of abolitionist sentimentality, they also significantly alter them. Claiming that her narrative aims to "arouse the women of the North," Jacobs locates political progress in the responsiveness of white women; hoping that the narrative will move white women to "the exertion of moral influence on the question of Slavery," Child grants agency to this responsiveness. The expression of the slave woman's suffering is a means to the political agency of white women: Jacobs and Child endorse a hierarchical model of political communication in which black women suffer and white women agitate. But while their proposal supports this conventional abolitionist configuration, it disrupts a narrative hierarchy, central to abolitionist sentimentality, in which a white narrator mediates between sufferer and community. While the sexually degraded slave woman typically inspires the writing of white women, occasioning their translation of her inarticulate suf-

fering to an abolitionist audience, Jacobs describes her own experience. Jacobs's publication of her sexual history is an attempt to transform an abolitionist preoccupation with the suffering slave as the origin and object of reformist discourse into a vehicle for the slave narrator's description of her own experience.

This transformation significantly complicates the revelation of slave suffering. The agency denied to slave women by the political alliance in which white women speak for them is resurrected as narrative agency when the slave woman speaks for herself, thus disrupting a delicate balance between the slave woman's helplessness and the white woman's responsive generosity. When Jacobs narrates her own suffering, the political inadequacies of sentimental communication become apparent: by employing sentimental structures to narrate her own experience, Jacobs is able to expose the reliance of these structures on a mediated account of slave experience, and their inability to admit the slave woman's authorial agency.

Jacobs accepts the revelation of sexual suffering as the political imperative of her account; the narrative is centrally concerned with recounting the abuse she endured as a slave, as well as the trauma she undergoes exposing it. From the first, Jacobs is pained at the prospect of disclosing her history. Her story is one of sexual misconduct; to tell it she must recount the advances of her owner, Dr. Flint, and describe her relationship with a white lawyer, Mr. Sands. In response to Amy Post's suggestion that she make this story public, Jacobs writes "your proposal to me has been thought over and over again but not without some painful remembrances. Dear Amy if only it was the life of a Heroine with no degradation associated with it" (232). Jacobs laments that she has not, like the traditional heroine of the seduction novel, resisted sexual abuse. In telling of her sexual suffering, she must undergo not only the pain of reliving her subjection, but also the pain of revealing that humiliating experience to an audience that reveres sexual purity. But the pain she suffers contemplating the composition of her narrative is not ultimately an obstacle to her communication. In fact, in the tradition of abolitionist narration, the pain of telling the story becomes one of the narrative's central themes. She introduces the narrative by telling her readers "it would have been more pleasant for me to have been silent about my own history" (1); she concludes by reminding them "it has been painful to me, in many ways, to recall the dreary years I passed in bondage" (201). Because Jacobs experiences exposure itself—the project of disclosing her sexual past—as painful, she is able to put her suffering at the center of her

narrative by insistently enacting the pain that writing causes. The suffering that Jacobs undergoes composing her narrative refigures the pain that she suffered as a slave.

The persistence of Jacobs's suffering in the narrative present not only testifies to the severity of her past experience, but also authorizes her testimony. Like Stowe, Jacobs insists that writing is an act of self-denial rather than self-assertion: she recounts her history at her own expense. Jacobs enacts both her unwillingness to describe her experience and her triumph over her own reluctance. Before describing her relationship with Mr. Sands, Jacobs tells her reader "now . . . I come to a period in my unhappy life, which I would gladly forget if I could. The rememberance fills me with sorrow and shame. It pains me to tell you of it; but I have promised to tell you the truth, and I will do it honestly, let it cost me what it may" (53–54). In her preface, Jacobs tells her readers that although she would prefer not to tell her story she feels that she must speak for the sake of "two millions of women at the South, still in bondage" (1). Throughout, Jacobs insists that she does not want to write about her experiences, but that she endures the pain of recounting her history in order to obtain sympathy for the suffering of others. Jacobs must choose between shielding herself and protecting others; deciding to tell her story, she places the interests of others before her own. Her willingness to undergo the trials of confession proves her selflessness. By dramatizing the suffering that self-exposure entails, Jacobs participates in the practice and rhetoric of self-abnegation that justifies female authorship and political agency during the antebellum period.

Yet while Jacobs insistently declares her decision to reveal her sexual degradation and to endure the pain of that disclosure, she never offers a complete account of her experience. Before beginning her narrative, she wrote to Amy Post of her intention to tell the "whole truth" of her life as a slave. But writing to Post five years later, upon the completion of her narrative, Jacobs apologized for not having been more straightforward. She admits "there are somethings that I might have made plainer I know" and she goes on to explain that "Woman can whisper her cruel wrongs into the ear of a very dear friend much easier than she can record them for the world to read" (242). While she was able to reveal the sexual abuse she endured as a slave in private conversations with Post, she failed to disclose the details of her experience in her public address. In the narrative itself, the promised revelation of sexual suffering consistently gives way to the practice of evasion. Rather than detailing Dr. Flint's aggressions, Jacobs claims

that the suffering he caused her cannot be communicated: "I cannot tell how much I suffered in the presence of these wrongs, nor how I am still pained by the retrospect" (28). Torn between the need to declare her sexual humiliation and the need to disguise it, Jacobs must continue to whisper her sexual history, suggesting the details of her past rather than speaking them aloud.

This recoil from the details of a sexual encounter is typical of sentimental narration. While sentimentality can confidently represent the physical pain of torture or the emotional trauma of losing children, the transmission of sexual suffering complicates the sentimental ideal of transparency and seamless communication. The influence of the cult of female purity made it impermissible for women to write of sexual behavior, so their disclosure of sexual abuse relied on euphemism and innuendo. While Jacobs's evasions are not atypical, I would argue that they express the particular insufficiency of a sentimental model for a black female narrator, and help to explain why Jacobs intermittently abandons sentimental conventions in favor of alternative forms of address. The confession of sexual abuse is the political imperative that prompts and authorizes the narrative, giving it value in an abolitionist context. But the exposure of sexual degradation threatens so dramatically to exclude Jacobs from domestic culture that its full articulation proves impossible. Jacobs is effectively caught between a sentimental politics that takes the sexual suffering of the female slave as the occasion for an imaginative identification between black and white women, and the politics of true womanhood that distinguishes between women on the basis of sexual purity.

To the extent that antebellum culture associated female virtue with revelation and honesty, Jacobs's disclosures authorize her as a public speaker. But to the extent that the culture associated female virtue with sexual purity, her confession dishonors her. Jacobs's suffering may prove her victimization, but because that suffering is the result of sexual transgression, it also discloses her deviance. Jacobs's audience would probably not have blamed her for her sexual transgressions; during the antebellum period, fallen women were generally regarded as victims of male lust—the slave woman's degradation was typically construed as the consequence of male brutality. In fact, the slave woman's transgressions offer a particularly dramatic example of how the reformist literatures of antebellum culture managed to sever crime from guilt in their treatment of marginalized populations. Jacobs's transgressions are clearly the result of victimization. Nonetheless, while the slave woman was not held responsible for her sexual crimes,

they situated her outside the pale of feminine virtue. While Jacobs's confession establishes her blamelessness, it also publicizes her sexual misdemeanors. By organizing her narrative around her sexual victimization, Jacobs solicits the sympathy of women schooled in domestic virtues while alienating herself from prevailing standards of femininity. It seems finally that the "whole truth" of Jacobs's life in slavery, as it is indeed a story of pain and suffering, must remain to some degree occulted or secret not because suffering is fundamentally inexpressible but because in antebellum culture a sentimental commitment to the expressibility of pain collides with a profound reverence for sexual purity which works to maintain social distinctions rather than to transcend them.

Jacobs, seemingly aware that her disclosure may perpetuate her exclusion from domestic culture, encourages her audience not to use her confession to judge her, but to receive it as an occasion for womanly sympathy. Early in the narrative, Mrs. Flint asks that Jacobs swear on the Bible that she will tell the truth, and proceeds to interrogate Jacobs as to what has transpired between her and Dr. Flint. Jacobs complies, hoping that her revelations will bring recognition from Mrs. Flint; Jacobs hopes that they will be able to identify with one another on the basis of shared abuse. But Mrs. Flint insists on regarding Jacobs as her enemy. She responds to Jacobs's confessions with rage rather than compassion. Jacobs's desire for recognition from a white woman is enacted in relation to the Bible which represents the possibility of communication and shared values. Mrs. Flint's inability to recognize and honor the Bible's significance makes communion between the two women impossible.

This scene obliquely dramatizes Jacobs's interaction with the white women who have sponsored her narrative and with her white female audience: the narrative itself is Jacobs's response to a request from Amy Post that she tell the truth about her sexual history. Jacobs, sworn to honesty, offers revelations that she fears will be grounds for her condemnation in hopes that they will be accepted as the basis for an alliance between northern and slave women. Jacobs's use of the Bible in this early scene warns her reader of what a failure to sympathize would mean. By associating the southern woman's mistreatment of her slave with her misuse of the Bible, Jacobs heightens the gravity of any hard-hearted response to her literary plea. The selfishness of Mrs. Flint's response to Jacobs's story is blasphemous; northern readers will either evidence a similar hypocrisy in their response to this text or they will prove the strength of their religious and moral convictions.

While Jacobs uses the action of the narrative to urge her readers to exemplary sympathy, she also uses incidents in her story to dramatize the difficulty of disclosing the information that would demand such sympathy. In order to communicate her suffering, Jacobs must recount illicit sexual behavior. And yet how can she relay incidents that are unspeakable in northern, middle-class society? Calling on a convention of the seduction novel, Jacobs describes sexual abuse as being forced to listen to vulgar words. She tells her reader that when she was fifteen her master began to "whisper foul words" in her ear (27). She writes that Flint's foul words "peopled her mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of" (27). Jacobs uses explicitly sexual imagery to describe Flints's verbal assault—his words enter her and reproduce in her mind. Jacobs is corrupted by the communication of sexual knowledge. This verbal rape mimes a sentimental model of communication in which descriptive language enters the body of the listener directly and alters it. Sentimental narration assumes that the emotions of a narrator or a character can be seamlessly communicated to an audience. As proof of the narrative's success, the reader will feel what the narrator or character has felt. But when the content of felt experience is unspeakable the promise of identification sours and the transmission of suffering threatens to sever the narrator from her audience. How can Jacobs recount what Dr. Flint has said and done to her without polluting her reader in the same way that she has been polluted? If innocence is threatened by "foul words" how can she describe Dr. Flints's conduct to a presumably virtuous audience?

Jacobs uses the image of whispering to figure both her revelations to Amy Post and Dr. Flint's sexual abuse, suggesting that the two acts have, at least potentially, something in common. Jacobs's victimization secures the sympathy of a female audience; to violate the virtue of that audience by communicating corrupting knowledge would be an act of narrative aggression and would shatter the premise of her appeal. By describing her sexual corruption in terms of narration, a listener's vulnerability to linguistic aggression, Jacobs dramatizes the problematic relationship between her narrative and antebellum culture's sexual taboos. The narrative's efficacy relies on Jacobs's willingness to disclose her sexual degradation, but to the extent that her disclosure threatens the virtue of her audience, she must avoid candor. The violence that one woman suffers threatens to become, when narrated, violence between women.

As in her account of her confession to Mrs. Flint, Jacobs uses the action in her narrative to dramatize her problematic interaction with

her readers. While sentimentality assumes perfect communication between author and reader, Jacobs must rely on indirection to negotiate her relationship with her audience. The sentimental exchange relies on the mediation of a narrator whose experience remains pain-free. Ironically, because Jacobs speaks of authentic rather than imagined or analogized experience, she must speak obliquely. The third-person narrator, by segregating sufferer and reader, facilitates their communication; in the absence of such a medium, Jacobs must devise narrative strategies to temper the communication of delicate material and to attenuate the unconventional immediacy of her first person address.

Jacobs originally tried to offer her history in a more conventional fashion: she hoped that Harriet Beecher Stowe would write her story. Jacobs asked Amy Post to send Stowe a letter of inquiry. Post's request included her own brief account of Jacobs's life. Stowe evidently responded to Post's letter by sending it to Cornelia Willis, Jacobs's employer, for verification. Stowe expressed her great interest in the story, telling Willis that, if it were accurate, she would like to include it in her *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. These exchanges would seem to enact a sentimental ideal in which experience is not individual property, but effortlessly transferred from one person to another. Jacobs was, however, extremely offended by Stowe's behavior. Stowe's letter violated a respectful silence that Jacobs and Willis had maintained on the subject of Jacobs's past. Jacobs told Post, "I had never opened my lips to Mrs. Willis concerning my Children—in the Charitableness of her own heart she sympathised with me and never asked their origin" (235). Jacobs's anger focused not on Stowe's presumptuous plan to use Jacobs's story inside her own critique of slavery, but on Stowe's publication of her sexual history. In her outraged letter to Post, she does not object for herself but for Cornelia Willis, complaining that "it was not Lady like to treat Mrs Willis so" (235). Jacobs's desire not to have her sexual history publicized ultimately cannot be distinguished from her reluctance to offend the polite sensibilities of white women. Both are motivated by the belief that sexual abuse effects a definitive loss of virtue, and that the communication of abuse recapitulates this original violence: recounting sexual suffering, Jacobs will reexperience the pain of her own corruption and she will inflict that pain on her genteel audience. While within abolitionist narrative the white narrator serves as a structural buffer between a victim and a receptive audience, Jacobs regards Stowe's actual interventions as dangerous.

In her comments to Post, Jacobs suggests a standard for commu-

nication between black and white women which, far from being founded on the complete disclosure of feeling, depends on the exercise of reserve. By sparing Mrs. Willis the details of her sexual history, Jacobs can at once protect her employer's virtue and in doing so become, unlike Stowe, ladylike. While unreserved communication with an audience of white women is the premise for Jacobs's narrative, her authorship resulted from an instance in which complete revelation proved unacceptable. Stowe's indiscriminate revelation of Jacobs's past prompted Jacobs to tell her own story. Jacobs asked Willis to write to Stowe "begging that she would not use any of the facts in her key saying that I wished it to be a history of my life entirely by itself" (235). Jacobs's refusal to let Stowe relay her history is prompted by the desire to protect both herself and others against the revelation of sexual information. While Jacobs and Child present the narrative as proof of Jacobs's selfless willingness to tell all, it is in fact the result of her refusal to have all told, her insistence that she have some amount of control over the dissemination of her history. While the promise of revelation is narrative's premise, the unacceptability of entire disclosure is its practical occasion.

According to Fisher's argument, the possibility of an egalitarian literature in which readers donate cultural citizenship to marginalized populations relies on the communicability of suffering across a social divide. These sentimental communications, however, are always prompted by inequality. Suffering is the experience of a victim, and not that of a reader, whose sympathy depends on her actual privilege.[26] The suffering that invites the reader's identification also distinguishes between reader and sufferer. The title page of the narrative's first edition cites Isaiah 32:9: "Rise up, ye women that are at ease! Hear my voice, ye care less daughters! Give ear unto my speech." The premise of the narrative—that white women will be politicized by the disclosure of the slave woman's suffering—depends, from the first, on contrasting Jacobs's trials with the leisure of her readers.

Jacobs tries to work within a sentimental tradition and its particular application in the abolitionist community, using self-revelation to effect an alliance between white and black women that will transform the radical inequality that her suffering denotes. But because the social consequences of this project—Jacobs's publication of her sexual impurity and her consequent violation of the purity of her female audience—are intolerable, sentimental conventions are, for her, dysfunctional. In the context of a cult of sexual purity, the revelation of

sexual suffering divides Jacobs from her female audience, reiterating rather than transforming the differences in status and circumstances that motivate her narrative appeal. The era's mania for sexual purity functions to segregate women in terms of both race and class, thus complicating the organization of female communities around the issue of sexual victimization.[27]

Frustrated by the constraints of a sentimental address, Jacobs, at points in the narrative, abandons a sentimental rhetoric of identification in favor of a rhetoric of contrast that seeks to acknowledge and mobilize, rather than overcome, the differences between black and white women. In a direct address to her reader, Jacobs compares their circumstances to her own:

> 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 . . . If slavery had been abolished, I also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am about to relate. (54)

Here Jacobs employs suffering to assert the irreducible distance between white women and slave women. The narrative is not a bridge between enslavement and freedom, but is itself a sign of the difference between the white woman's circumstances and her own. She equates "the painful task of confessing" with slavery itself; having to write this narrative is another instance of her misfortune.

The rhetoric of contrast is Jacobs's aggressive reaction to the limitations of a sentimental model. But while she jettisons the fundamental features of a sentimental address—the declaration of victimization, the evasion of graphic detail, the excessive politesse, and, most importantly, the commitment to the universality and communicability of feeling—Jacobs never abandons a preoccupation with suffering as the basis for communication with her white audience. The rhetoric of contrast, like the rhetoric of sentimental identification, relies on suffering, but uses it to figure the opacity rather than the transparency of the slave woman's experience. Jacobs uses her inability to communicate her suffering to demand sympathy and attention on the basis of exceptionality rather than universality—she employs difference itself as a means of conveying marginal experience. Describing her decision to become Sands's mistress, Jacobs implores, "Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader!" (55). But what follows is hardly an apology: "You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom . . . . You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding

the snares, and eluding the power of a hated tyrant; you never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice" (55). By reiterating "you never," Jacobs places a barrier between her experience and the reader's own, asserting that the reader cannot imagine her suffering. And if her audience is unable to identify with her experience, they are not qualified to assess it: Jacobs claims that "the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others" (56). In this passage, Jacobs uses the specificity of her suffering to deny the possibility of any empathic response from her readers.

Jacobs's account of her seven year captivity inside her grandmother's attic pivots on an implied contrast between the domestic comfort of the reader and the physical torture that Jacobs undergoes inside her family home. The discrepancy between the idealized domestic space—the site of comfort and safety—and Jacobs's domestic prison is encoded in the chapter title, "The Loophole of Retreat." This phrase comes from William Cowper's poem "The Task": " 'Tis pleasant, through the loopholes of retreat / To peep at such a world, to see the stir / Of the great Babel, and not feel the crowd."[28] Cowper's poem describes the home as a sanctuary that shelters women and children from a chaotic world. But Jacobs's "loophole" is a tiny crawlspace that receives little light, is infested by insects, and exposed to summer heat and winter rain. In her account, the ideal of domestic sanctuary and familial unity is toppled by the reality of domestic imprisonment and a bizarre version of familial fragmentation.

In the attic, Jacobs is perfectly concealed because "it was the last place they thought of . . . there was no place, where slavery existed, that could have afforded . . . so good a place of concealment" (117). In light of slaveholders' insistent attempts to fracture slave families, no one imagines that a runaway would choose her own family home as a place of refuge. Having escaped surveillance by running to the attic—"the last place they thought of"—Jacobs can watch her children, the comings and goings of Dr. Flint, and her inquisitive neighbors through a small loophole that she has carved in the roof, while she remains invisible. Her incarceration in the attic inverts the sentimental paradigm in which the suffering slave is the object of contemplation. From the attic, where Jacobs suffers unseen, she can use her observations to plot her escape to the north and to secure the emancipation of her children.

Jacobs uses the term "loophole" to thematize the relationship between observation, subversion, and escape. *Webster's New Interna-*

*tional Dictionary* defines "loophole" as "a means of escape, especially an ambiguity or omission in the text through which the intent of a statute, contract or obligation may be evaded." While it is doubtful that this usage would have been available to Jacobs, it supplements our understanding of the relationship between the narrative's central episode and Jacobs's authorial dilemma. Webster's definition is suggestive not only in relation to the noncontractual "obligations" of slavery, but also in relation to the contract Jacobs makes with her northern readers. Jacobs proposes that by showing how much she has suffered she will encourage white women to fight for the emancipation of women who are still enslaved. But at the center of this narrative is an account of a slave woman engineering her own escape by going into hiding; in the story she tells, visibility is a form of vulnerability while invisibility is a means to freedom. Just as her emancipation proceeds by way of secrecy, Jacobs's unwillingness to give her readers the full disclosure that she has promised at the narrative's outset suggests that her authorial liberty relies, similarly, on strategic concealments.

Jacobs's imprisonment in her grandmother's attic not only describes the dramatic difference between the white woman's domestic experience and Jacobs's own, but also implicitly contrasts an abolitionist interest in the revelation of suffering with the secrecy that is necessary for the slave's self-liberation. Concealment enables both Jacobs's escape from slavery and the literary endeavor that she hopes will secure the freedom of those still enslaved. While Jacobs tells Post that she writes her narrative in hope of coming "before the world as I have been an uneducated and oppressed slave" (236), she must hide her literary efforts. Fearing the disapproval of Nathaniel Willis, her proslavery employer, Jacobs writes her narrative late at night after she is exhausted by her day's work. And writing under the pseudonym Linda Brent, Jacobs attempts to disguise the identities of her acquaintances and herself. Jacobs relies on secrecy to free herself and to write her abolitionist narrative.

While Jacobs uses contrast to distinguish herself from her audience, at points in the narrative these distinctions become the basis for communication. Because the physical suffering that Jacobs undergoes in the attic is in no way related to the circumstances of white women, she can fully describe it in a way she cannot describe her sexual suffering. While Jacobs never discloses the details of her sexual experience, she offers painstaking accounts of the discomforts of her seven year captivity: her illness, the oppressive weather, the psychological effects of sensory deprivation—all are described in a straightforward

and complete manner, without the fanfare or the reluctances characteristic of sentimental narration. The experience that most completely figures the difference between white and black women, which is least available as a basis for identification, is the experience that Jacobs is able to communicate most accurately. The contrast between the circumstances of black and white women not only permits Jacobs's most aggressive denunciations of slavery, but also allows for her most extensive and detailed communication of the conditions of enslavement.

At the conclusion of the narrative, Jacobs uses her exclusion from domestic life, the enduring discrepancy between the circumstances of white and black women in the "free" North, to critique the very notion of sentimental union. When Jacobs is reunited with her employer, Mrs. Bruce, after Mrs. Bruce has bought her freedom, the sentimental overtones are obvious: "When I reached home, the arms of my benefactress were thrown round me, and our tears mingled" (200). But their union, despite Mrs. Bruce's claims to the contrary, is premised on Jacobs's continued servitude. Now Jacobs is "bound" in service not by the law or by force, but by Mrs. Bruce's pity and generosity: "It is a privilege to serve her who pities my oppressed people" (201). Mrs. Bruce has offered the response that the narrative itself begs from its audience: acting out her feelings of sympathy and moral outrage, she has secured Jacobs's freedom. But despite this triumph, Jacobs is still excluded from domestic culture. She concludes by expressing the gross difference between Mrs. Bruce's circumstances and her own, lamenting that "the dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble" (201). While Jacobs works to maintain the Bruce household and family, she is unable to provide a home for her own children.

Jacobs's situation in the Willis household resembles the plight of the slave woman on the southern plantation. Throughout the narrative, Jacobs describes how the demands of white mistresses and their children make it impossible for slave women to adequately care for their own children. Her Aunt Nancy, for example, repeatedly miscarries because waiting on Mrs. Flint during and after childbirth has impaired her health. In the North, both Jacobs's family life and her literary production are significantly constrained by the needs of the Willis family (the Bruce family in the narrative). She writes to Post of being "tied down to the baby house" and complains that "with the care of the little baby and the big Babies I have but a little time to think or

write." When Cornelia Willis gives birth prematurely, Jacobs must cancel her plan to visit Lydia Maria Child in Boston where she had intended to go over Child's editorial work.[29] Jacobs must continue to work for white women: the possibility of political union between black and white women is compromised by the demands of servitude, which constrain Jacobs's freedom as a mother and as an author.[30]

While sentimentality aspires to the unmediated exchange of felt experience, it relies structurally on the translation of marginal experience by a privileged and unimplicated author. Jacobs, telling her own story, must find ways to mediate its transmission. Emphasizing the distance between her experience and that of her readers, she critiques a sentimental model of communication that aspires to the expression of universal feeling. In the narrative, the inadequacy of a reformist rhetoric, dependent on the possibility of empathic union, generates a more fundamentally critical and aggressive rhetoric of contrast. Both rhetorics rely on the articulation of suffering, suggesting, I think, the politically volatile nature of suffering itself in an antebellum context. The representation of suffering will always express the difference between those who have suffered and those who have not, but this distinction can have radically different political applications. In the context of sentimentality, suffering presents an opportunity for realizing the universality of human experience. But suffering can as easily be employed to articulate the dramatic differences between the experiences of white and black women. At points in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the distance between Jacobs and her reader invites the reader's imaginative and practical efforts to overcome this difference. But at other times, Jacobs claims that difference is definitive, the sign of constitutive and enduring oppression, and that, as a result, the reader cannot have access to her experience.

Certainly Jacobs's critique of sentimental principles appeals to a modern critical audience that is suspicious of claims to universality, impatient with the conciliatory quality of a sentimental address, and perhaps with its optimism. But to privilege or condemn either of these rhetorics is, I think, to miss the point. The interest of Jacobs's narrative lies in the fact that she attempts to become the subject of a discourse that typically takes her, the abused slave woman, as its object; the sustained tension between conventional and unconventional forms of address in the narrative expresses the political, psychological, and discursive complexities of this effort. While white abolitionists' publication of the slave woman's sexual victimization certainly contributed

to the politicization and ultimate eradication of slavery, it also institutionalized and maintained the image of the sexually degraded black woman. Jacobs's narrative is, in large part, a response to this legacy.

Jacobs is included in an abolitionist discourse that takes the abused slave woman as representative. Her representative status, however, depends on her being represented: she reveals both the presence of communal sin and the possibility of communal purification when she is animated by a white community. The empathic identification of a white audience, and their consequent mobilization, is largely the product of their own efforts to imagine and to articulate the slave woman's plight. While Stowe presents herself as a conduit for slave experience, it seems more accurate to say that the figure of the silent slave provides a medium for the abolitionist community's influential construction of slave suffering. When Jacobs tells her own story, however, she speaks simultaneously as a narrator and a character, complicating, indeed contaminating, a narrative voice that typically serves to attenuate slave suffering while providing an example for readers' imaginative exertions. Jacobs is unable to describe herself as either the observed sufferer or the compassionate observer of the sentimental exchange. She is an articulate sufferer, who, having acquired literacy is able to address, and perhaps to redress, her own suffering.

To valorize Jacobs as a social critic is to flatten her as a psychological and political subject, at once influenced by and determining cultural forms. The cumulative play of appeal and denial in Jacobs's narrative—her vacillation between evocations of universal sentiment and claims to exceptionality, pleas of helplessness and declarations of self-determination, appeals to the sympathy of her audience and assertions of their ignorance—suggest that her ability to react to an abolitionist tradition, thus providing significant criticism and alteration of its conventions, is inseparable from her subjection to it. Jacobs does not triumph over the complexities of her situation, nor does she succumb to them: at once a victim and an agent, a speaker and a sufferer, she expresses them.

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NOTES

[1] Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Jean Fagin Yellin (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), 53–56. All citations from Jacobs's narrative and her letters will refer to this edition unless otherwise noted.

[2] Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 47.

[3] Jean Fagin Yellin, *Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989), 96.

[4] Cited in Charles Foster's *The Rungless Ladder: Harriet Beecher Stowe and New England Puritanism* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1954), 29.

[5] In 1853, France Ellen Watkins Harper writes "To Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe" in praise of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: "I thank thee for thy pleading / For the helpless of our race / . . . I thank thee for thy pleading / For the fetter'd and the dumb." While Harper emphasizes the passivity of the slave, she too understands slave suffering as the origin of Stowe's political speech. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, ed. Frances Smith Foster (New York: The Feminist Press, 1990), 57.

[6] Foster (note 4), 29.

[7] In her preface to *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe again claims that her book originated not in her own intention but in her obedient reception of God's will. Here she describes herself as the "unwilling agent" of a divine command. The interchangeability of slave and god in these similar accounts of artistic genesis suggests that what is at stake for Stowe is not so much who has authored her text but the assertion that it wasn't her.

[8] Cited in Yellin (note 3), 66.

[9] Lydia Maria Child, "The Quadroon," in *The Other Woman: Stories of Two Women and a Man*, ed. Susan Koppelman (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1984). Jean Fagin Yellin credits Child with having invented and popularized the quadroon as a literary type.

[10] Yellin (note 3), 88–89.

[11] For a discussion of the relationship between the representation of suffering and political reform see Thomas Laqueur's "Bodies, Details and the Humanitarian Narrative," in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989). In this essay, Laqueur proposes that by extensively documenting physical pain, the "humanitarian narrative" arouses compassion in its readers and encourages them to undertake "ameliorative action." While Laqueur convincingly documents a cultural preoccupation with the detailed comprehension and communication of bodily pain, his account of how this documentation prompts action remains vague. One purpose of this essay will be to understand the dynamics of this extension, both ideologically and practically, in the context of the American antislavery movement.

[12] Another instance of antebellum culture's interest in trascendent forms of communication is the popularity of spiritualism during the era. Like sentimentality, spiritualism was largely a female practice—seances were generally organized and led by women. When the dead speak to the living, distinctions between body and soul, heaven and earth, give way as language traverses the boundary between life and death. For a discussion of the relationship between spiritualism and female activism see Ann Braude's *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

[13] Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 98.

[14] Lydia Sigourney, *Letters to Mothers* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1839).

[15] At its most extreme, this procedure will allow white feminists to take the enslaved woman as a figure for their own oppression. Karen Sanchez-Eppler and Jean Fagin Yellin have discussed the tendency of white abolitionist feminists to conflate the actual enslavement of blacks with the figurative enslavement of women, thus using slavery as a metaphor to dramatize their own oppression and struggle for self-liberation. Both Yellin and Sanchez-Eppler regard this as a form of appropriation, which by disregarding the crucial differences between actual and figurative slavery obscures the conditions of enslavement. See Sanchez-Eppler's "Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition," *Representations* 24 (1988), and Yellin's, *Women and Sisters* (note 3).

[16] See Sanchez-Eppler's (note 15) discussion of sentimental fiction's "reliance on the body as the privileged structure for communicating meaning" (40).

[17] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958) 50–51.

[18] While Elaine Scarry is interested in "the relation between expressing pain and eliminating pain" (11), she, like Arendt, departs from the premise that the experience of pain, as it "resists objectification in language" (5), is difficult, if not impossible, to describe. In Scarry's view, the difficulty of expressing pain makes the transformation of silence and isolation, pain's attributes, heroic as well as necessary. In a sentimental context, the expression of pain does not signify an effort to articulate an essentially private experience, thus building a bridge between consciousness and community. On the contrary, the legibility of pain on the victim's body testifies to a prior commonality, obscured perhaps by social circumstance, which unites the suffering victim and the spectating community. The very facility with which sentimentalists objectify pain expresses their assumption that community, in the form of shared sentiment, already exists and must, simply, be revealed. See *The Body In Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985).

[19] See Theodore Weld's *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (1839; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1968), 55.

[20] Weld (note 19).

[21] Cited in Yellin (note 3), 30.

[22] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Arno Press, 1968), v.

[23] Lydia Maria Child, *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1972), 216.

[24] I am not concerned here with the actual experience of the sentimental reader, but with the readerly response assumed by, indeed written into, sentimental conventions. Typically scenes of suffering in sentimental fiction are attended by observers who do not suffer but respond to the sobs and moans of the victim with identical gestures.

[25] From Stowe's "The Author's Introduction" to the 1878 edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Cited in Foster (note 4), 21.

[26] Bruce Franklin interprets Jacobs's narrative as ironic commentary on the disparity between the imperiled heroine and the sheltered reader conventionalized by the "novel of victimization," one version of the romance. See *The Victim as Criminal and Artist: Literature from the American Prison* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), 24–30.

[27] For a similar understanding of how dominant ideology influenced female reform movements see Estelle Freedman's *Their Sisters' Keepers: Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830–1930* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1981). Freedman argues that the ideology of separate spheres dramatically influenced the women's prison reform movement, largely undermining its radical potential.

[28] This poem was presumably a favorite of Lydia Maria Child's as the same citation appears in her 1824 novel, *Hobomok*. Its appearance in this crucial chapter of Jacobs's narrative casts doubt on Child's claim that she made no significant editorial alterations or additions to the narrative, but merely transposed "sentences and pages, so as to bring the story into a continuous order." See *Lydia Maria Child: Selected Letters, 1817–1880*, ed. Milton Meltzer and Patricia G. Holland (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 357.

[29] Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 81, 83.

[30] Jacobs associates her desire for a united family with the production of her narrative when she asks Post to find a photograph of her brother, explaining that "If this said Book should ever come in existance I want to have an illustrated Edition and the whole family in." While Jacobs has no home to shelter her family, her narrative may unite them symbolically. See Sterling (note 29), 80.