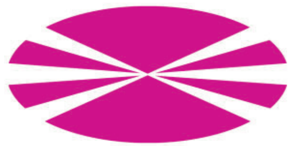

UNIVERSIDADE DA CORUÑA

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GRAO EN INGLÉS: ESTUDIOS LINGÜÍSTICOS E LITERARIOS

Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*: A Feminist and Gender Studies Approach

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Abstract

The object of study of this BA thesis is Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, published in 1861. My aim is to demonstrate that, apart from race, gender conforms a crucial factor around which the mistreatment of slaves revolves. To demonstrate such objective, I will concentrate on three aspects developed in *Incidents*: black female identity, the black female body and enslaved motherhood. Moreover, it is my intention to praise Jacobs' renewal of the slave narrative genre through her inclusion of the slave woman.

The methodology that I followed for the elaboration of this thesis consisted, first of all, in the in-depth reading of Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. It was after this task that I was able to understand the three aforementioned topics as the most relevant for the objectives of my work. Then, I did research on bibliographical resources which aided in broadening my knowledge and thus my capacity for discussion. I consulted several sources, both on line (from *JSTOR* or *Encyclopedia Britannica*) and printed ones. The edition of *Incidents* I used, by Nellie Y. McKay and Frances Smith Foster, is one of the most fruitful references I encountered, since it includes not only annotations, but also "Context" and "Criticism" sections. Some authors whose work I found useful were William Andrews and Philip Gould, regarding the slave narrative formal features and historical context; Hazel Carby, Lana Rakow and C. Riley Snorton, for the examination of black female identity; Mary Vermillion, with regard to the black female body; together with Stephanie Li and Patricia Hill Collins, in relation to slave motherhood as a motif in Jacobs' work.

My end-of-degree project consists of two parts. The first one examines the formal features of the slave narrative and is divided in two subsections: genre and structure. In the first of these, I provide the main characteristics of the genre and its historical context, and I introduce two key aspects: authorship and thematic. As for the structure, first, I comment on the

introductory texts to the narrative; then, I present a suggestion for structuring the book in four stages grounded on the thematic of the chapters.

I titled the second part of my thesis "The Female Slave and the Dangers of Patriarchy." Here, I examine three aspects treated in Jacobs' narrative which demonstrate patriarchy's consequences on the female slave: female identity, its lack and its achieving; the female body, in relation to autonomy and sexuality; and motherhood, as an instrument for resistance. I finalize my project with a conclusion which summarizes and explains its main ideas and in which I also demonstrate that my aims have been fulfilled. I would like to add that the body of the text below is immersed in the analysis of a story of strength, pain, power, sexuality and, most importantly, a defense of womanhood and the right to identity.

Introduction

The nineteenth century was a troubled period for the black community as a result of the horrors of slavery. The slave narrative emerged in the United States as a response from the slave population to denounce the treatment they received in this dreadful (in)human exploitation system. Under this background, Harriet Ann Jacobs, a slave woman born in 1813 in the city of Edenton, North Carolina, becomes the first female writer of said genre. Furthermore, she manages to include in her narrative criticism not only regarding aspects of race, but also gender, demonstrating that life under slavery is even tougher for the slave woman. This end-of-degree project analyzes *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861) from a feminist and gender studies perspective, paying, thus, special attention to the novelty included by Jacobs in her narrative with the vindication of the female slave. To continue this introduction, I will explain the aims, methodology and the structure of this BA thesis.

The primary objective that will be pursued is the study of Jacobs' narrative under the lens of feminism and gender studies.[1] Broad as this objective is, I will divide it into the three topics that I consider the most relevant to this aim. Hence, I will focus on slaves' female identity, female body and motherhood to demonstrate that, in addition to race, gender performs a key part in the mistreatment of enslaved individuals. Moreover, I intend to exalt the thematic renewal which the author carried out regarding the slave narrative genre through the vindication of the slave woman.

[1] I will add that, "succinctly expressed, … feminism [can be defined] as a form of thought that intends to do away with the subordination of women in multiple ways, one of them being the examination of women's creative potential in literature" (Núñez Puente 11). In the literary field, Black feminist criticism concerns an approach committed to exploring how sexual and racial politics and black female identity are reflected in the tradition of black women's writing. (Smith 22). Finally, when applied to literature, gender studies examine "gender inequality, women's lived experience, sexuality, masculinity, and the interaction of gendered social processes with race, class, and other systems of inequality" in books and media to "determine how these … convey meanings of differential value" (Scarborough and Risman 41).

As for the methodology, I began with an in-depth reading of Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, in order to focus on its formal features and to choose those topics which I considered the most relevant to my work. To broaden my knowledge, I then undertook a thorough search for bibliography, both on line (as *JSTOR* or *Encyclopedia Britannica*) and in print. The edition I handled, by Nellie Y. McKay and Frances Smith Foster, was a very useful resource, as it combines explanatory notes; a "Context" section, which includes contemporary responses to Jacob's work, such as letters and articles; and a "Criticism" section with eleven essays. In addition, reading William Andrews and Philip Gould provided me with sufficient understanding of the context and the slave narrative to begin my project.

Regarding the development of the section related exclusively to feminism and gender studies, I also discussed several articles and book chapters, supporting my affirmations with citations from Jacobs' text. In the section about female identity, I followed authors who are experts in the topic of racial identity within feminism and gender studies, such as Hazel Carby, Lana Rakow and C. Riley Snorton. I examined the female body by, firstly, recollecting definitions for such concept from Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan. Furthermore, I found Mary Vermillion's work very helpful since she analyzes Jacobs' relationship with her body after the traumatic experience of rape. Moreover, in reading Audre Lorde, I found inspiration to argue that Jacobs uses her own body as a power instrument. Lastly, for the motherhood part, I followed Bonnie Thornton Dill to explain the figure of the slave mother as well as Stephanie Li, who analyzes how Jacobs uses motherhood as a resistance tool in her path towards freedom. Regarding this section, I also read Patricia Hill Collins, an important critic regarding African American Feminism.

My BA thesis has two parts. The first one corresponds to the examination of the formal characteristics of the slave narrative and is divided into two subsections: genre and structure. Therein, I briefly introduce the genre and its historical context, calling attention to the question

of publication and its difficulties. I also discuss authorship and subject matter, two elements that I consider basic for the study of the genre. Next, I examine the structure of the work, beginning with an analysis of both Jacobs' Preface and the editor's Introduction. I continue with my own proposal to divide the narrative's chapters into four different sections, according to their subject, and I add a critical review of each of them.

The second part of my end-of-degree project is organized into three subsections. In the first one, I survey female identity. To this aim, I explain that the concept of identity was not to be applied to a slave and, in particular, to a slave woman; as a consequence, I demonstrate that female identity is a privilege restricted only to the white woman. However, I argue that Jacobs fights for creating her own identity with her narrative. The second subsection examines the female body. Beginning with critical definitions of said concept, I claim how Jacobs—as any slave woman—does not fit any of them, as she is considered a mere sexual object. Having introduced the topic of sexuality, I then interpret how Jacobs evolves to consider her body as a weapon of empowerment. In the last paragraphs, I analyze the figure of the slave mother and I explain how Jacobs exercises her own motherhood as a resistance instrument.

In my project's conclusion I provide a brief overview of the primary concepts and elucidate how my objectives have been accomplished. Additionally, I emphasize that Jacobs' *Incidents* explores themes like resilience, suffering, authority and sexuality, advocating for the significance of black women's identity and their entitlement to selfhood.

1. The Slave Narrative: Formal Features

The first part of this thesis will examine two aspects of the formal characteristics of the slave narrative. To begin with, I will present the genre, starting with a brief historical context and emphasizing the factors that led to the publication of such controversial literature. Then, I will discuss two basic elements for the study of the genre: first, authorship and the particularities of this type of autobiography; then, the subject matter, paying special attention to Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*.

1.1. Genre

The slave narrative constitutes "one of the most influential traditions" (Andrews "Slave Narrative") within American literature, as it grants a means for slaves to vindicate their situation. This genre constitutes "an account of the life, or a major portion of the life, of a fugitive or former slave, either written or orally related by the slave personally" (Andrews "Slave Narrative"). Firstly, I will introduce some notes on the context and the relevance of the publication of slave narratives. Later on, stemming from the previous quotation, I will examine two of the most significant aspects for the understanding of the genre: authorship and thematic.

To begin, it is relevant to point out some contextual aspects. The first slave narratives emerged in the 1770s and 1780s, in "the context of transatlantic political and religious movements which shaped the genre's publication history, ... its major themes and narrative design" (Gould 11). As Philip Gould recounts, the publication of these first works was possible thanks to Evangelical Christian groups and new political organizations which encouraged the abolition of slavery. In the 1830s, more radical antislavery groups were created; in this context, the genre "sharpened its focus and became an increasingly popular and effective means of fighting slavery" (Gould 12). It is at this point that the life experience of a former slave, a theme previously considered as marginal in writing, becomes of decisive literary importance—establishing "sameness within difference" (Sekora 492). A slave differs from a free person for

obvious reasons; in addition, gender conforms a factor which establishes differences among the slave people, as Jacobs addresses in her novel. Slave narratives aim to persuade the reader to believe in their sameness as human beings by expressing the differences of their lives.

Frances Smith explains the difficulties Harriet Jacobs encountered for several years to find a publisher due to the originality of her narrative. It was thanks to the help of William C. Nell, an African American writer and activist, that Jacobs contacted Lydia Maria Child. The novelist and activist agreed to support the editorial work of the narrative and succeeded to print two thousand copies of *Incidents* with Thayer and Eldrige editorial press. In 1861, when the Civil War started, Jacobs's narrative was finally published after ten years (Smith 319). In her Introduction to the work, Child states how "it will naturally excite surprise that a woman reared in Slavery should be able to write so well" (6) in order to defend Jacobs' figure, whom she defines as an "intelligent and much-injured woman" (6). Also, Child assumes the criticism the narrative may have, even being "aware that many will accuse me of indecorum for presenting these pages to the public" (6). Bravely enough, she claims that slavery must not be veiled anymore, but "the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features" (Child 6).

The figures of the editor and publisher are extremely relevant for the slave narrative. Authors, although already free, would not have had the opportunity to share their life experience with the world without the help of the abolitionist movement. Women slaves' position, especially, was even more difficult. Child specifies that Jacobs and herself are willing to reach women in the North to create in them a sense of "duty in the exertion of moral influence on the question of Slavery" (6). As John Sekora would put it, the intention of the publication of this work is to expand the idea of equality—as women—within difference—Jacobs being a former slave black woman.

Authors of slave narratives bravely use the writing of their story as a means to denounce the cruelty and injustice of it. Jacobs, with the publication of her *Incidents* in 1861, becomes

the first woman in the United States providing a description of slavery “as it is” (Olney 48). In slave narratives, an ex-slave narrator also becomes the main character—the reader encounters, thus, an autobiography. Given the intention of the work, the writer of a slave narrative must stay away from fictionalization and *poiesis*, that is, “creation” (“-poiesis”); the narrative has to constitute a memory exercise (Olney 48).

Autobiographies, nevertheless, offer a “special kind of biographical truth”, since the life-story narrated is “reshaped ... with all of recollection’s conscious and unconscious omissions and distortions” (“Autobiography”). Slave-narrative authors need to omit some elements for their own safety. Without going any further, Jacobs has to recount her story under a pseudonym, Linda Brent. Although by the time of the publication of her work Jacobs had been out of the South for nineteen years and had been legally free since 1952, the fear of being captured and remanded to slavery was still vivid for her. The author also uses fictive names for her masters and some of the members of her family in order to preserve their identity (McKay and Smith 9). Editors and publishing houses, John Sekora explains, are concerned regarding the attitude and disbelief towards the credibility of the narrative (497). Ironic as it may appear, the contemporary reader will, in fact, believe the veracity of the narrative precisely due to the omission of information—“the verifiable truth of that story, according to white abolitionists, is that the slave has precious little control over his life” (Sekora 497).

Furthermore, the complete title of the work, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, *Written by Herself,* hides a relevant clue regarding authorship. Other slave narrative authors include their own name in the title, such as the well-known *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845); Jacobs, however, decides to reduce her identity to “a Slave Girl.” In fact, Linda Brent is not only the narrator of the story in the edition of 1973, but also the author (Casmier-Paz 107); it is only after great research that the real author is identified. In chapter four, Jacobs’ uncle plans to escape and cries that “we are dogs here” (Jacobs 21).

Slave narratives thus make it irrefutable that slaves are subordinated figures not considered human beings. *Incidents* specifies that women slaves, specifically, are under the chains of an even greater exploitation due to gender subordination. Jacobs addresses the sexual discrimination and harassment she suffers under slavery in her mid-teen years and her late twenties, as I will show below. She is the first woman publishing slave narrative while denouncing gender discrimination within the system. To this aim, she reduces her identity to "a Slave Girl" in order to encompass any other slave woman's condition. The author wants to make clear that the situation she experienced is lived by women in the South who are still "in bondage," as she puts it (Jacobs 5). It must be noted, notwithstanding, that Jacobs chooses to maintain the subtitle "Written by Herself." This phrase is extremely relevant: literacy is crucial for self-making and even more in the case of slaves, since it proves their human condition to the whites. It fulfils, indeed, the linkage between literacy and freedom that originates the slave narrative (Gates 9). In any cases, Jacobs undoubtedly asserts her authorship—the female authorship of her work. As Jean Fagan puts it, in her title "she identified herself by gender, and in her text addressed a specific aspect of this subject" (209).

Between 1830 and 1860, the slave narrative evolves as a weapon for former slaves to share their cause. This genre allows the reader to discover the horrors of slavery, yet also to empathize with the author's feelings and condition as a human being trapped in a monstrous system (Andrews 32). Henry Louis Gates explains that the black slave narrator "sought to indict both whose who enslaved them and the metaphysical system drawn upon to justify their enslavement" (9) while building their narrative as an "odyssey from slavery to freedom" (10). This is what had been done by the aforementioned Douglass and many others, such as William Wells Brown or Moses Roper; these male writers, nevertheless, do not speak enough of the female slave.

In a context where the slave narrative was mostly a male-dominated genre, women writers use this type of autobiography not only as a social exposure of slavery but also as a means to celebrate female heroism and black female selfhood (Andrews 30-31). Some critics, as John W. Blassingame, accuse *Incidents* of being "too melodramatic" (Gates 16) as it discusses themes as sexuality and motherhood, which I will study below. Indeed, *Incidents* differs thematically from other slave narratives. The author, however, intentionally suggests a fusion of two major literary forms—the sentimental novel and the slave narrative—as a strategy to reach the audience she writes for: the female one. "*Incidents* is an account by a woman of her struggle against her oppression in slavery as a sexual object and as a mother," which leads Jacobs to a double criticism of nineteenth-century ideas and institutions: slavery and sexism (Fagan 209). To fulfil its objective, the work needs to be marketable; first, the "melodrama" and adventure added to the "simple fact of a slave autobiography" would guarantee the attention of Northern women; then, the moral purpose would be activated when the middle class woman made the slave's cause her own (Doherty 82).

1.2. Structure

To examine the structure of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, I will briefly analyze each part of the text, beginning with the writer's Preface and the editor's Introduction. I will propose a division of the chapters basing on their thematic, consisting on four stages: childhood and discovering of the slave's condition, Jacob's experience as a slave, her intention to escape slavery and her final achievement of freedom. Finally, I will mention Amy Post's appendix to the Norton edition of the text.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl opens with a Preface by the author. Its contents demonstrate Jacobs' need of writing this section to guarantee her validity, while other male authors would only include white people's texts to this aim. To begin, Jacobs directly addresses the reader so as to convince her of the veracity of the narrative, as a *captatio benevolentiae*.

Jacobs assumes the importance of her duty regarding the sharing of her story. Under the guise of humbleness and fake modesty, she explains that her main objectives since living in the North have been working "diligently for my own support, and the education of my children" (Jacobs 5), leaving her nothing but little time to write her piece. To continue with the aforementioned guise, she recounts how she felt "incompetent to such an undertaking" after the suggestion of her publishing a narrative of her life. At the end of the Preface, Jacobs explains that, although she still does not believe to be competent enough for such task, she feels it is something which needs to be done; her motives grow more than her insecurity. To finalize, she confesses that the aim of her work is not to attract attention or to excite sympathy, but 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" (Jacobs 5). Jacobs addresses a gendered reader: the female one. For this reason, a Preface in which she emphasizes this fact is essential for her narrative to be understood—it deals not only with race, but also gender; thus, it is directed towards a female audience.

Incidents continues with an Introduction by the editor, Lydia Maria Child. Child's literary path and editorial work in abolitionist newspapers made her a figure relevant enough to validate Jacobs' work ("Lydia Maria Child"). As previously mentioned, slave narratives include a piece of writing (e.g. an introduction) by a white person in order to guarantee the validity of the text. The editor opens her Introduction by alluding to her close relation to Jacobs, which permitted her being inspired by the author's "conversation and manners" (Child 5). Child addresses as well the matter of gender: she includes a justification for Jacobs, having been a former slave woman, to be able to "write so well" (Child 6). This is based firstly, on her "natur[al]" talent (Child 6); secondly, on the fact that her mistress taught her to read and spell; thirdly, on her favorable circumstances after escaping slavery.

William Lloyd Garrison, in Douglass' *Narrative's* Preface, justifies the author in terms of humankind: "[He] gave the world assurance of a MAN" (qtd. in LeVine 1164). Child, nevertheless, she needs to go one step further and justify Jacobs not only as a human, but also as a woman and a writer. In addition to describing the author as an intelligent woman, Child defends the "delicate subjects" (6)—as the public of the time would judge them—that Jacobs portrays. For this justification, she alludes to the aim of the publication, as Jacobs does too: to prevent the monstrous features of slavery from being veiled, as in any other slave narrative, and "for the sake of my sisters in bondage" (Child 6) especially. Child is enthusiastic for the experiences narrated by Jacobs to be as widespread as possible, since it is the first time they are going to be shared from a female point of view.

The body of the narrative is formed by 41 chapters which I have divided into four sections according to their thematic. The first stage, conformed by chapters one and two, serves as an introduction to what will be recounted afterwards. In these two chapters, Jacobs reflects on her early childhood; most importantly, on the moment she becomes aware of her condition as slave. The author remembers "happy times and carefree feelings" until reaching the age of six, when her mother died (Miller 32). It is after this event that she recalls how "I learned, by the talk around me, that I was a slave" (Jacobs 10). In this first section, the author also mentions her relation with her first mistress, whom she describes as extremely "kind" to her (Jacobs 11). It is relevant to mention that Jacobs' first mistress was the one who taught her to read and write, providing her, thus, with the opportunity to become literate, which will lead Jacobs to communicate with the world and realize the entire meaning of slavery (Miller 32). When her mistress dies six years later, Jacobs is sent to her new master and mistress—from this point, the author will recount the material details of her experience of slave life.

The second stage is devoted to the recounting of the author's experience as a slave and the daily-life of slaves in Dr. Flint's house. This part is formed by more than the half of the

narrative: from chapter three to twenty-seven. It is in this section that it becomes clear how Jacobs moulds her narrative similarly to a sentimental novel. Jacobs exposes the brutality of physical violence; nevertheless, her focus is on the sexual exploitation she suffers from Dr. Flint, her relationship with Mr. Sand and the difficulties and consequences of it. Motherhood also becomes a relevant issue in this part. In chapter seventeen, after Jacobs was sent to Dr. Flint's plantation as a punishment for her affair with Mr. Sands,[2] she discovers that her children are to be mistreated as well. To prevent this, Jacobs decides to hide in her grandmother's roof, hoping for her master to sell her children and thereby free them from their tyranny. Motherhood as a theme will be studied in the following part of this project, yet one can easily consider how the role of the mother and Jacobs' devotion to her children are an essential factor to the development of her story.

The third stage of the narrative, formed by chapters twenty-eight to thirty, revolves around Jacobs' consideration of eloping to the North. The reason that leads her to this decision is, again, the preoccupation about her children's wellbeing. The author quickly mentions the preparation for her journey in a vessel. Section four occupies the last eleven chapters and it recounts her measures to achieve freedom. In chapter thirty-two, Jacobs arrives in New York and reunites with her daughter, Ellen; two chapters later, with her son, Benny. Despite the joy of these reunions, she is still in danger, as Dr. Flint is after her, so she flees to Boston.

The penultimate chapter takes place with the proclamation of the Fugitive Slave Act, which made it a federal crime to aid fugitive slaves, as was the case with Jacobs. Sadly, at this point, the author recounts how "Dr. Flint ... was making preparations to have me caught" (Jacobs 150); she was lucky, nevertheless, to have the support of Mrs. Bruce, the lady she worked for, who protected her after she was out of danger of being captured again. In the last

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[2] See Appendix.

chapter, Jacobs learns of Dr. Flint's death from a letter from her grandmother. It is now the daughter of Dr. Flint, however, who travels to capture her. Mrs. Bruce offered Jacobs to buy her freedom so that she could not be taken back to the South, yet Jacobs felt it "difficult ... for me to consider myself an article of property" again, as in slavery (Jacobs 155). In any cases, Mrs. Bruce did pay Dr. Flint's daughter for Jacobs' freedom. Despite having objected to this, Jacobs confesses that she "felt as if a heavy load had been lifted from my weary shoulders" (Jacobs 155). This benevolent action allows her to go back to New York and finally rejoice her children's freedom.

Finally, there is an appendix with a short text by Amy Post, a close friend of Jacobs and member of the Society of Fiends in the State of New York, in which she pays tribute to the author's hard life and her narrative.

This section has explored the slave narrative genre, beginning with a definition and tracing its history up to the emergence of abolitionist organizations. The difficulties faced by author Harriet Jacobs in publishing her own slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, are highlighted, along with the role of the publisher. The genre's form as autobiography has also been discussed, and Jacobs' decision to adapt it to the structure of a sentimental novel is analyzed as a means of reaching her target audience more effectively. The structure of *Incidents* has also been examined in this section, with the narrative divided into four stages corresponding to Jacobs' life moments: childhood, youth, young adulthood, and her escape from slavery. Finally, the appendix to the text was mentioned.

2. The Female Slave and the Dangers of Patriarchy

The second part of this thesis will focus on three of the most relevant aspects of the female slave—Harriet Jacobs, in particular—from a feminist and gender studies approach. In the first section, I will examine the concept of "identity" within slavery to focus on the slave woman; then, I will argue why female identity is a privilege only granted to white women; and, finally, I will focus on how Jacobs fights for her identity with the power of writing. Regarding the female body, I will gather some definitions for the concept of "body"; I will, later on, introduce the topic of sexuality. To continue with this part, I will present how the female body and sexuality are interpreted in *Incidents*. As for motherhood, I will briefly explain the figure of the slave mother; lastly, I will point out how Jacobs makes of motherhood an instrument for resistance.

2.1. Black Female Identity

In "The Politics of Identity Work," Lana Rakow wonders not only whether identity matters, but rather which person's matters. She argues that, for those who study questions of race and gender, the response is obvious (128). For the aim of this end-of-degree project, which studies the literary work of a black woman, a section regarding identity is, thus, necessary. Firstly, I will explain how slaves were defined in terms of identity; then, I will compare the white woman and the black one to explain how the former is the only one provided with an actual female identity; finally, I will focus on the importance of the slave girl as a writer with the purpose of vindicating her identity.

In chapter eight, Jacobs argues the following: "I admit that the black man *is* inferior. But what is it that makes him so?" (Jacobs 38). Sad as those sentences are, I will contextualize what leads the author to those thoughts. Scholarly discussions regarding identity began with Enlightenment's rationalism (Rakow 134). The only valid answer to the question "Who am I?" was "a thinking man" (from Cartesian "I think, therefore I am"). As a consequence, the

identities of slave people, among others, were “handily defined as partial or dependent humans without full rights to the primary basis for the determination of identity, citizenship” (Rakow 134). Lana Rakow is generous enough by using the term “humans”. Jayna Brown describes how eighteenth and nineteenth centuries natural scientists elaborated systems of classification to define and rank the races. For example, in 1774, the plantation owner Edward Long claimed that there was an “intimate connexion and consanguinity” between blacks and orangutans (qtd. in Brown 29). This is what Brown defines as “scientific racism” hardened in nineteenth century slavery, especially in the United States; that is the reason why people of African descent were designated as lower in the evolutionary scale (Brown 30).

In addition, race and gender were intertwined categories to assess the body (Brown 30). Women of African descent were considered the “proof” that Africans were “closer to animals than to humans” (Brown 30). If race creates a hierarchy of power between blacks and whites, gender creates one “of male dominance to female subordination” (Snorton 90). In this sense, within identity, not only race, but “gender ... becomes a critical mode to examine how blackness is lived and experienced” (Snorton 91). “Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women,” Jacobs famously stated (Jacobs 64). The life of slave girls begins to change once they turn “fourteen or fifteen,” as “her owner, or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents” (Jacobs 44). One may only pay attention to the enumeration provided by Jacobs to understand the anxiety of the situation of harassment from every member of her environment. Moreover, the concept of hierarchy must be remembered: the men mentioned by the narrator are of a higher status than she is; therefore, there would be consequences for her if she resisted—as she puts it, “resistance is hopeless” (Jacobs 44). Jacobs illustrates, “if these fail to accomplish their purpose, she is whipped or starved into submission to their will” (44). Slave women were not only minimized for being black, but also for being women; consequently, they were objectified and, thus, denied an actual identity.

In the nineteenth century, the woman of the growing middle class was lucky enough to possess an identity for herself reproduced in literature. Beth M. Doriani describes this "true" American woman, i.e. the white woman: "pious, pure, submissive, and domestic" (204). This picture of "true womanhood" was "the most subscribed to convention governing female behavior" (Carby 23), but also "the dominating image" which measured how to be or not to be a woman. Black women, nevertheless, have no possibility of entering that picture: they are not "ladies" (Jacobs 45). Moreover, their "ability to survive abuse meant that they could not hope to meet white women's ideal of womanhood" (Doriani 206). They were considered more animal-like on account of their resistance to physical abuse. The fact that the white woman is able to find a representation—better or worse—is, undoubtedly, a privilege. Audre Lorde mentions how the "privilege of whiteness" (117) is ignored by white women. The privileged woman's definition of "woman" is thus constructed only within her own experience. The consequence for this relies, of course, in those of "lower scale," black women, who become "the other" (Lorde 117).

The power hierarchy between women was based not only on race but also on class: the mistress is a privileged lady of the ruling class and the slave, mere property (Doriani 205). Doriani addresses this mistress-slave relationship as follows: the former "tended to see their slaves as necessary nuisance, interpreting any sign of independence as ... imprudence" (206). Moreover, many white southern mistresses, including Jacobs', saw their slaves as incapable of sexual purity (Doriani 206). This is incompatible with the idea of innocence associated with "femininity"—i.e. female identity. It should not be forgotten that "in order to qualify as a paragon of virtue it was necessary to repress all overt sexuality" (Carby 26). The black slave woman, however, has no decision regarding repressing or not sexual encounters—that is her master's power, not hers. Still, she is ideologically punished because of that.

Jacobs herself addresses the character of her mistress in her narrative: for Mrs. Flint, who has “no sympathy” towards her slaves, they are mere “objects of her constant suspicions” (Jacobs 28). Jacobs’s presence becomes “intolerable to Mrs. Flint” (29) once her husband begins paying especial attention to her. Mrs. Flint accuses Jacobs of sleeping in her master’s room and forces her to tell her “everything that has passed between your master and you” (Jacobs 30). After Jacobs’ answer, Mrs. Flint experiments several emotions of inner pain—not as much for her marriage, but for her dignity. At this moment, Jacobs reflects on how her mistress “pitied herself as a martyr; but she was incapable of feeling for the condition of shame and misery in which her unfortunate, helpless slave was placed” (30)—and even less was Mrs. Flint able to recognize the detestable behavior of her husband, unfortunately.[3] I agree with Hazel Carby that the writer demonstrates “the slave’s capacity to analyze the grief and pain of her mistress” (54); yet Jacobs the slave “waited in vain for a reciprocal display of kindness or sympathy” (Carby 54). Reading this episode from the author’s perspective permits the reader not to make a heroine of Mrs. Flint, but to make a victim of Jacobs—contrary to what popular sentimental novels of the period did (see Carby 26). In any case, Jacobs does not define herself around victimization, but highlights her “active role as historical agent as opposed to passive subjects” (Carby 36); represented as basing her actions in her own visions, the female slave attempts to take decisions over her life. What Jacobs does, all in all, is to fight for being recognized an identity.

Audre Lorde confesses that “I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood” (40). Harriet Jacobs, a black, formerly slave woman, was a pioneer in coinciding with Lorde and she was able to recognize a source of power within herself that

[3] “The white slave master was not regarded as being responsible for his actions toward his black female slaves. On the contrary, it was the female slave who was held responsible for being a potential, and direct, threat to the conjugal sanctity of the white mistress” (Carby 27).

came from her own knowledge (Lorde 41). Lorde continues advising her readers that "your silence will not protect you" (41). Jacobs, indeed, decides to transform her silence into action by asking herself what she needs to say. I have already demonstrated that Jacobs's situation regarding the recognition of her identity is not a favorable one. Notwithstanding, it was thanks to African American writers like her that contemporary feminist critics have "questioned the idea that white men's experiences are representative of American culture" (Doriani 199). I agree with Doriani that, exploring the autobiographies of women, including black women, we may come to an understanding of American selfhood (see 200). With the advocating of her own identity and that of "bondage sisters," Jacobs greatly collaborated in the visibilization of black women's experience and the definition of the black female self in American literature.

Carby explains that American literature of the time associated "finer feelings" with the superiority of white sensibilities, as black people were considered incapable of harboring feelings (27). With this in mind, Jacobs builds the creation of her self through "subversive interplay with readers' expectations" (Doriani 200), which ends in the juxtaposition of the slave narrative with the aforementioned sentimental narrative. The combination of both genres allows Jacobs to demonstrate how contemporary ideology regarding black people's feeling was incorrect. In the same way, throughout her narrative, Jacobs shares not only her experience—and consequent emotions—as a slave, but also as a woman. Thanks to her strategy, the reader, who is "completely ignorant of the black female experience" (Doriani 209), discovers in Jacobs' work a definition of personhood that portrays the black slave woman as shaper of her own identity and destiny (see Carby 202-203).

Alice Walker is known for emphasizing the importance of having a model for every artist (12). Interestingly enough, Jacobs decides, for her purpose, to become her own muse; thus, in "shaping the role and character of her narrator ... Jacobs asserts her identity as a black woman" (Doriani 208). In the exercise of creating her identity as a black woman, Jacobs

furthermore constructs herself as a woman artist, thus recalling her intellectual value. Of course, she could not create a fictional story, as she would not be believed; nevertheless, she is brave to encourage an act of self-revelation despite the danger it may have entailed. Walker, who writes a century after Jacobs, still criticizes that "to be an artist and a black woman ... lowers our status in many respects, rather than raises it" (237). Indeed, as Xiomara Santamarina puts it, "Jacobs published her story to gain the least (her children by this time were free) and lose the most (her respectability) from publishing what many would have viewed as a scandalous sexual history" (242), as we will see below. However, as Walker continues, "artists we will be" despite the circumstances (237). It is relevant and worthy of praise, considering this, that Jacobs assumes the "stance of dispassionate observer of her own life" and shows that "the world of the black woman ... demands a revised definition of true womanhood" (Doriani 207). By doing so, I concur with Doriani that Jacobs' values are an infallible proof of "intelligence, will, resourcefulness, and courage" (210).

2.2. The Black Female Body

Patriarchy has turned the female body into both a reproductive machine and a sexual object. In Jacobs' *Incidents*, her black enslaved body is, in addition, property[4]. In this section, I will recollect some definitions that have been provided for "body" as a starting point. Then, I will study its relation with sexuality in Jacobs' narrative. In the second part, I will focus on how the body and sexuality are transformed by the author from an element of trauma to a weapon for freedom, despite the moral consequences this entails.

Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan argue that "within feminism and gender studies, the body has occupied a key position in a wide range of debates" (6). First of all, it must be noted that conceptions regarding the body are usually classified within three categories: the body as

[4] It is imperative to mention that the slaves' bodies are also objects of lashing. In chapter nine, she describes the mistreatment suffered in neighbor plantations: "The back of his shirt was one clot of blood. By means of lard, my friend loosened it from the raw flesh. … The master said he deserved a hundred more lashes" (41).

nature, the body as socially constructed, and embodiment. The first perspective refers to the body as "a natural, biological entity that determines ... differences between women and men" based on reproductive functions (6). This definition, Pilcher and Whelehan continue, ballasts women, characterizing them only on the account of their capacity to "conceive, carry, give birth to and breastfeed a child" (7). This is a classic definition; as Simone de Beauvoir ironically pointed out, "*¿La mujer? ... Es una matriz, un ovario*" (63). The body, as socially constructed, involves social and cultural practices, marked by "behavioral roles" learned during childhood. In this sense, the body serves as a framework for each sex to adopt certain behavioral traits to survive in society (Pilcher and Whelehan 8). From the embodiment point of view, the body is both a natural and physical entity produced through cultural and discursive practices, which either minimize or grow the similarities between male and female bodies. Pilcher and Whelehan conclude that the body is born of nature, but it is constructed through cultural practices and remains an unfinished entity (9).

Controversial as the definition of the body remains, none of them meets entirely what it is found in *Incidents*. This debate is contemporary and I will not find in it the exact answer I seek; notwithstanding, placing it in historical perspective, the slave woman poses a challenge so as to be included in the above explanations. The definition of body as natural is accurate, yet incomplete to my purpose. Patricia Hill Collins argues that "under slavery, having many children enhanced slave owners' wealth and a 'good breeder' woman was less likely to be sold" ("Prisons" 182). That is, despite the fact that the slave woman is, indeed, also the "ovary" mentioned by de Beauvoir, her children are merely not more than property. Moreover, a slave woman would never be able to define herself basing on cultural practices; she would be reduced to a slave since "femininity" is not supposed to be a trait to which she could adapt. The same occurs regarding embodiment perspectives: slave women can only be differentiated from slave

men, yet their bodies had no more importance than the fact that they were an instrument of labor.

There remains one crucial element that is inherent to the female body and has not been discussed yet. From the reading of *Incidents* and Jacobs' experience, I consider that the body as a sexual object must be mentioned. Violent forces of racialization definitely shape gender. C. Riley Snorton claims that "each node of the slave trade produced a critical environment for the numerous ways gender was articulated, disarticulated, and lived" (90). The concept of "gender" is usually linked with "body" and "sexuality". For slaves, these are disarticulated, in the sense that the primacy of the anatomical model of sexual difference shifts to that of the physiognomic model of racial inequality (Snorton 90). Nevertheless, there is a difference regarding sexuality—understood as "someone's ability to experience or show sexual feelings" ("Sexuality")—for male and female slaves. The female slave's sexuality becomes involuntary; that is, she becomes a mere sexual object, whose function is to satisfy her master's sexual desires. In this sense, the female body as a sexual object is crucial to understand how one's experience of blackness—Harriet Jacobs', in this case—is shaped by gender. As Carby puts it, "the effect of black female sexuality on the white male was represented in an entirely different form from that of the figurative power of white female sexuality" (27). It is important to remember that the black woman failed the test of womanhood by becoming a survivor of her institutional rape (Carby 34). In addition, if the black woman intended to feel or show voluntary sexual desire, she would probably be punished for it—as happens to Jacobs.

Mr. Flint is characterized in *Incidents* as the epitome of corrupt white male power. In fact, Jacobs' main struggle during her years as a slave was her "refusal to be sexually used and compromised or to succumb to the will of the master" (Carby 57). As the author recounts how she becomes a sexual object for her master, it cannot surprise us that physical and sexual assaults led to internalizing the psychological effects of trauma, which irrevocably fuse notions

of submission and domination into representations of the black body (Tweedy 21). Jacobs, nevertheless, does not recount all the realities of her traumatic events. See, for instance, her description of when she started to be molested by Mr. Flint, in the first year of her service for him: "my master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him" (Jacobs 27). I find especially noteworthy the passage when she informs about how Mr. Flint wants to build a place to retain her, alone, four miles away from town.[5] Although it is evident that the master's desire is for Jacobs to be secluded so as to force her more comfortably, she leaves this interpretation for the reader to assess. Jacobs' intention, as she continually asserts, is not to produce pity on the reader, but to express her memories in order to achieve self-mastery and bodily autonomy (Tweedy 21). In this sense, Jacobs transforms the black female body into a means to construct autobiographical sites of resistance against trauma.

Rape victims have been portrayed in sentimental literature inscribing the "fallen woman's body as damaged male property" (Vermillion 244). It has been stated that Jacobs builds her narrative combining both slave and sentimental narrative. Thus, the author combines genres in order to emphasize how her body was her master's property (see Vermillion 244). Jacobs' work uses more reconstructed dialogue than male-authored slave narratives; according to Mary Vermillion, this mechanism challenges the perception of her as not more than a body (in contrast to the action represented) (244). Following this line, I want to add that the use of words is always important. Dr. Flint's abuse is not only physical, but also psychological. Jacobs recounts his continuous threats of killing her, e.g.: "I have a right to do as I like with you" (Jacobs 35). His whispers, however, are even a more evident proof of his abuse: it is horrifying

[5] "After my lover went away, Dr. Flint contrived a new plan. … In the blandest tones, he told me that he was going to build a small house for me, in a secluded place, four miles away from the town. I shuddered; but I was constrained to listen, while he talked of his intention to give me a home of my own, and to make a lady of me. … I was determined that the master, whom I so hated and loathed, who had blighted the prospects of my youth, and made my life a desert, should not, after my long struggle with him, succeed at last in trampling his victim under his feet" (Jacobs 45-46).

how he “whispers foul words into my ear” (26). Jacobs recounts how he “peopled my young mind with unclean images” (26). I concur with Vermillion’s interpretation of this passage, in which she places the focus on the word “peopled”. In literature, every word is important: the author deliberately selects the term to suggest that Flint aims to increase his fortune by exploiting her body (see Vermillion 246). In all, Jacobs redefines Mr. Flint's sexual cravings as a way to exert dominance over her body and sexuality (Tweedy 24).

The author’s decision to have sexual intercourse with Mr. Sands becomes her first step in order to claim the autonomy over her own body. This turn of the story is praised by most feminist readers as the author’s “most powerful rejection of sentimental discourse” and the concept of “true womanhood” (Vermillion 247). In any case, sexuality remains a problematic matter for Jacobs, since it is deeply intertwined with psychological, racial and physical trauma (Tweedy 23). The author saw her body, right from a young age, becoming an object for sexual objectification and harassment; later, even if she willingly engaged in a sexual encounter with Mr. Sands, she manipulates him for her own benefit, primarily, and faces severe consequences for her actions. She is reprimanded not so much for her rebellious yearning for freedom as for having tried to declare herself capable of making her own decisions about her sexuality and, thus, considering her body as her own. After confessing her pregnancy to Mr. Flint, he asks Jacobs if she loves the father of her future child. Her answer is “I am thankful that I do not despise him” (Jacobs 50). The difference between both men is that Mr. Sands is her lover, who lacks control over her, “except that which he gains by kindness and attachment” (Jacobs 47). With her decision of being with him, what Jacobs does is to seize control, insisting upon a connection between her sexuality—and, thus, her body—and her autonomy (Vermillion 248).

According to Houston Baker Jr., Jacobs’ narrative seeks, joins, and creates a “community of women [that] controls its own sexuality, successfully negotiates (in explicitly commercial terms) its liberation from a crude patriarchy, and achieves expressive fullness

through the literate voice of the black, female author" (qtd. in Vermillion 248). Harsh as it may sound, it is more than praiseworthy that Jacobs is a pioneer in recognizing the harshness of patriarchy on slave women; what is more, she not only identifies it, but also seeks a way to become free from its chains. I consider it very significant that one of the weapons used for this liberation is her own body, for to achieve her freedom, she first must appropriate something that has not belonged to her for her entire life (i.e. her own flesh).

In this sense, Jacobs uses her body as power; yet she is not objectifying herself, but making herself through her body. Discussing the erotic, Audre Lorde explains that women have been taught to "suspect to this resource" (53), mainly because it makes them weak "within the context of male models of power". In *Incidents*, that "weakness" entails being impure and immoral, especially for the black slave woman. As Jacobs herself advices the reader, "I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others" (Jacobs 48). As soon as her pregnancy is announced, after she employs her body as a path to freedom, her "self-respect was gone" (48)—she is not virtuous anymore. It must be mentioned that, despite the fact she "wanted to keep [herself] pure" (47), her actions were done "with deliberate calculation" (46) because of the despair of the "miserable situation" slavery was for her (47). Jacobs had hoped to be "happy in my triumph over [her master]" when confessing to him; however, her surroundings do not permit her to be so. For Dr. Flint, she has been a "criminal" towards him (50); Mrs. Flint is "disgusted" (50) by her conduct and prohibits her from returning home; even her beloved grandmother tells her that she has become "a disgrace to your dead mother" (48).

In my opinion, the above fragment is a great representation of the power of patriarchy over black and white womanhood in the novel. The authors tries to construct herself through her body, thus erasing it of pejorative connotations. Instead, what she finds is that her environment is unable to separate her conception of her body from notions of impurity and

immorality. We are confronted at this point with the social backlash that Jacobs faces from all perspectives, including even her own family, which underscores the profound patriarchal impact of slavery on the lives of black women.

Lorde vindicates the need to examine the ways in which our world can be truly different (55)—and better, I will add. She continues that Jacobs' decision to try and escape a fate she does not desire should be understood as a celebration of herself, as a human need for freedom and, most importantly, as a conscious decision. In Lorde's words, it should be understood as a longed-for bed which she should have entered gratefully and from which she should have risen up empowered (55)—yet an empowered woman is always dangerous. When Lorde chooses the word "erotic", she means "an assertion of the lifeforce of women; ... the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives" (55). The erotic, in that sense, works as a self-connection as well as a reminder of one's capacity for feeling (57). In a world so contaminated as the world of slavery, where black people is robbed of their inner and outer freedom, the notion proposed by Lorde is inseparable from the psyche of the enslaved person. Jacobs' reinterpretation and application of the celebration of herself in a specific context is what represents a truly ground-breaking achievement.

Harriet Jacobs manages to evolve from Mr. Flint possessing authority over her body to reasserting psychological control over both her body and the traumatic memories related to it. This is extremely admirable as well as a demonstration of Jacobs' strength. As stated by Vermillion, "because patriarchal cultural definition of a woman centre on her body and sexual status, the rape victim not only becomes painfully aware of her culturally defined self, but she also confronts a hideous paradox as she tries to construct an alternate self" (243). Jacobs indicates to her readers that the female body and its worth are able—and must have the right—to exist beyond the functions patriarchy had marked. Jacobs' achievement will be crucial for

contemporary black feminists (Vermillion 243), for it advances the notion that the black female body possesses its own value beyond sexual objectification.

2.3. Enslaved Motherhood

Motherhood conforms another of the various aspects which made slave women's lives the hardest. In this section I comment on the slave mother, a figure desperately characterized by fear, not only for her safety, but also for her children's. Lastly, I point out how Jacobs continues her fight for freedom using motherhood as resistance.

Simone de Beauvoir states that, according to patriarchy, "*por la maternidad la mujer realiza íntegramente su destino fisiológico,*" as "*la sociedad humana nunca queda librada a la naturaleza*" (581). Nature, nevertheless, is not the same for a black and a white woman. In the United States of the nineteenth century, the white woman was protected by her role of wife and mother inside a patriarchal society (Thornton 271). The female slave, of course, was also experiencing the oppressions of patriarchy, yet lacked the "protections" provided by the patriarchal family (273). In this sense, the notion of the black female body as a reproduction machine must be recovered, as it is an "exploitable labor force" (273).

Slaves are denied of the social structural supports to form an ordinary family. There were exceptions, yet these cases are the result of the master's economic interests, not of the family's individual choice (Thornton 274). What most hardens slaves' creation of families is the "threat of disruption" (274). If a slave woman has children, they become her master's property as well—this entails living with the fear of her children being mistreated as she is. If "*engendrar es asumir un compromiso*" (Beauvoir 622) for every mother, it is twice as much for a slave mother. Under this frightening situation, Jacobs states, "I shuddered to think of being the mother of children that should be owned by my old tyrant" (Jacobs 47). In addition, the fact that the children are the property of the master means that they can be sold, and thus separated from their mother, whenever the master decides to do so. Jacobs also refers to this fact by stating

that "the mother of slaves is very watchful. She knows there is no security for her children" (49). The slave mother's role goes beyond being watchful, as she needs her children "to believe in the possibility of a life in which they were not enslaved" (Thornton 274).

In this sense, I argue that Jacobs also writes her narrative for her children. I have shown that her work contributes to the defense and creation of black women's identity. Yet, part of Jacobs' individual identity is precisely her motherhood. By the account of the suffering of the enslaved mother, the author draws attention to the plight of enslaved children who grow up in constant fear of being separated from their parents. Therefore, she also sheds light on the constant fear and anguish experienced by children born into slavery and emphasizes the need to improve the living conditions of these vulnerable minors.

In fact, this will be Jacobs' major battle during the second part of her narrative: to do what is in her power, even placing herself in danger for years, in order to see her children free. Hill Collins argues that "African-American mothers place a strong emphasis on protection" (*Black Feminist Thought* 126). One cannot be surprised by that fact, since maternal instinct urges the black mother to protect their children from the penalties they may encounter due to their race and even more due to their gender. To this aim, Jacobs will use motherhood as a resistance tool, as Stephanie Li puts it (14), in her path towards freedom. From her childhood, Jacobs witnesses how slavery destructs familiar bonds, which are so important for her. Logically enough, when she becomes a mother, she never acts as a master for her children, as her owner. Moreover, to be with her children becomes secondary to her; that her children are free is her main objective—which is extremely humble, although it may seem otherwise. It is not that Jacobs, as many other slave mothers, does not want to put her role as a mother into practice through an active presence; in this desperate situation, it is safer for the children born into slavery to be able to secure their freedom than to be with their mother, even though she is a fundamental figure for their development.

Jacobs, therefore, prefers to forgo the joys of being with her children if it ensures their safety and well-being. Even when she was hiding as she discovers that her children are being sold out of Dr. Flint's house, she emotionally confesses that "it was the first time since my childhood that I had experienced any real happiness", for "whatever slavery might do to me, it could not shackle my children. If I fell a sacrifice, my little ones were saved" (Jacobs 88). The author herself lets it be known that only her children makes her happy in her current situation. One only has to put oneself in Jacobs' shoes to understand why a slave mother would find it so relieving and satisfying to have her children sold. She knows Dr. Flint's character better than anyone else, having experienced it first-hand. Precisely because of the love she feels for her children, she is compelled as a mother to keep them away from this abuse, even if for this she has to stay hidden (also from the children, of course) for years and let them go to a better future. Hill Collins states that black, working women need to take special care to ensure their daughters' survival, basing on their own experiences as women (*Black Feminist Thought* 124). Harriet Jacobs is not a worker but a slave, yet what Hill Collins discloses is also visible in her narrative. Of particular concern is the situation with his daughter, Ellen. As early as the childbirth, Jacobs reveals the added fear that overwhelms her when she discovers that her baby is a girl. This is not surprising, since she knows the added difficulty of being a woman in slavery and, in particular, as property of Dr. Flint.

From the moment she becomes a mother, Jacobs will not fight for her freedom alone: the wellbeing of her children becomes a priority. For the author, her children Ellie and Benny are what motivates her to defy slavery's abuses. The mother, in this sense, works as "the obvious antithesis to slavery" (Li 17). Jacobs proves her intelligence having chosen to defend this issue in her narrative, for her audience is a female one and is thus the one which may empathize the most. Her public "would have been especially sympathetic to Jacobs' struggle to honor the relationship between reproduction and the development of familiar bonds" (Li 17). Jacobs

seeks, to this aim, reinforcements to help her take political action against slavery, deriving from maternal love. In addition, she includes depictions of the sufferings of those to whom she refers as "sisters."[6] By doing so, she does not only criticize the system through actual examples, but also urges the white reader to "conceive black women as members of their own family" (Li 18), creating a sense of community. Other feminist critics agree in understanding motherhood as a symbol of power. It is the black mother's purpose to attract people to "uplift the race" (Hill Collins *Black Feminist Thought* 132) and provide the female community with a support network that facilitates its most vulnerable members to achieve self-sufficiency.

Jacobs encourages her audience of white female readers to remain united to the black ones rather than divided in binary oppositions that serve no other function that to hinder their common struggle against the dangers of patriarchy. The author thus tries to erase this distinction between free and slave women, or black and white women, putting them at the same level so that the former can use their privileges as tools to help those who are disadvantaged.

In the second part of this dissertation, I have studied identity, the female body, and motherhood from a feminist and gender studies approach. In 2.1., I have stated the importance of gender and race in order to praise Jacobs' power in her decision of sharing her story in order to advocate for black female identity. 2.2. examines that sexual exploitation was a basic element of the racism and sexism of slavery, as shown in examples from *Incidents*. Harriet Jacobs, however, rejects the conception of the black, female body as both a reproduction machine and a sexual object. Finally, in 2.3., I have commented on the main fears of slave mother, as, since a child is born, the black woman's life is flooded by fear for both of them. Lastly, I have

[6] "Could you have seen that mother clinging to her child, when they fastened the iron upon his wrists; could you have heard her heart-rending groans, and seen her bloodshot eyes wander wildly from face to face, vainly pleading for mercy" (Jacobs 23).

demonstrated that motherhood, in Jacobs' case, serves as an instrument of resistance in her path towards freedom.

Conclusion

After reading Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* as well as secondary sources, I have been able to examine the female slave's relation to female identity, the female body and motherhood. While the slave narrative had become a means for the social denunciation of slavery, Jacobs, as the first woman writer of slave narratives, adds a gender nuance to the social criticism in her work. To this aim, she addresses a female audience to awake in them a feeling of empathy by recounting the appalling conditions in which the slave woman lives as a consequence of racial and gender subjugation. Slave narratives are built as autobiographies. In relation to this, the title of Jacobs' work is quite significant: she does not use her name but "a Slave Girl", which is a crucial aspect for a feminist analysis. The author's intention is to embody every slave women under the title of her narrative and, therefore, vindicate all of their identities.

To study the structure of Jacobs' *Incidents*, I divided its forty-one chapters into four stages basing on their thematic: childhood and the unveiling of the slave's condition, daily-life as a female slave, arranging on escaping and achievement of freedom. It is in the second of these four sections that Jacobs share experiences regarding female identity. On the one hand, through her relationship with her mistress, she demonstrates that identity is a privilege only granted to the white woman. The slave is mere property; the slave woman, in particular, is not only considered animal-like, but also incapable of sexual purity and, thus, not a lady. On the other hand, it is imperative to note that Jacobs is aware of the injustice of this and defends her identity through as a writing subject. With her narrative, the author transforms her life experiences into words and, consequently, into revolutionary actions. In those words, she explores her selfhood, her womanhood and her desire for her and her bondage sisters to be recognized as human.

The female body is another topic introduced in the second stage of *Incidents*. First, Jacobs recounts how her body was traumatically treated as an object throughout her entire life; then, I consider that she is able to arrive to the understanding of her body as a weapon. In the evolution of the second stage I consider that Jacobs turns her sexuality from involuntary to voluntary. Her master, Mr. Flint, constitutes the epitome of white male power which confines the black female body within submission and domination as a consequence of his persistent violations. Jacobs, notwithstanding, does not settle in the role of the victim, damaged woman. She has voluntary sexual intercourse with another man (Mr. Sands) in order to claim autonomy over her own body, continuing with the development of her identity and thus proving her power.

The figure of the slave mother, mostly a labor force characterized by fear and pain, is introduced when Jacobs' first child is born. Throughout her arranging on escaping and her achievement of freedom, motherhood becomes an instrument for resistance. That is, her children become a great reason for her to outcry the brutality of slavery, since she wishes not more than their wellbeing; furthermore, she uses maternal love as a political device as one of the purposes of her writing.

To sum up, in this BA thesis I have argued that *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* defies the molds of the slave narrative in order to advocate for the figure of the black female slave. In a social context where the black woman was not even considered human, Harriet Jacobs must be praised for introducing issues—from power abuses to sexual subjectivity—that will be pioneering to feminism and gender studies until achieving black women's right to identity.

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Appendix: Character List

Linda Brent (Harriet Jacobs)[7]: She is the author and protagonist of this autobiographical novel. She was born in Edenton in 1813 into slavery. After the death of her mother and her first mistress, she is transferred to Dr. Flint's plantation. In this context, she will learn about the abuses that slavery holds for women. However, she is able to recognize them and fight to solve them. Among her strategies, she hides in an attic for seven years, fleeing from Dr. Flint, renouncing to see her children among other issues. Finally, she manages to escape to the north and achieve freedom.

Dr. Flint (Dr. James Norcom): Harriet Jacobs' second master and a well-known physician in Edenton. He is the ultimate representative of patriarchal oppression in the novel. He sexually and psychologically abuses Jacobs until she escapes his rule. Being a manipulative and vengeful character, he takes advantage of this opportunity to mistreat Jacobs' family members and, thus, harm her.

Mrs. Flint: Second mistress of Jacobs and wife of Dr. Flint. She is severe with her slaves, especially with Jacobs, of whom she is jealous. She proves to be an insecure woman once her husband finds himself attracted to the author. As a consequence, she channels her anger not towards Dr. Flint, but towards Jacobs.

Emily Flint, later Mrs. Dodge (Mary Matilda Norcom): Dr. And Mrs. Flint's eldest daughter. She is Jacobs' legal owner. Under her father's manipulation, she sends letters to Jacobs from the South to invite her to return after her escape. After her father's death, she travels north with her husband, Mr. Dodge, in search of Jacobs to drive her back to the plantation. Although the author

[7] Names in parentheses correspond to the real names of the characters.

is her property, the one who seems the most infuriated about her escape and interested in recovering her is her husband, who even threatens to take the children if she is not found.

Benny and Ellen: Eldest son and youngest daughter of Harriet Jacobs and Mr. Sands.

Aunt Martha (Molly Horniblow): Jacobs' maternal grandmother. She represents the main maternal figure for the protagonist due to the early death of her own mother. Throughout her life she acts as a source of support and loyalty to Jacobs, especially in her most vulnerable moments. Central, for example, is her collaboration with Jacobs in escaping to the North, as she provides him with money and supplies to help her on her journey. She embodies female resilience and strength within the slave community, as well as the importance of family within oppression.

Mr. Sands: A single white man who shows interest in Jacobs when she is 15 years old and with whom she has sexual intercourse. This affair is enhanced not so much by Jacobs' interest in Mr. Sands as by the fact that she tries to challenge her master with it, which some of her contemporaries might consider a scandal. He is clearly a finer man than Dr. Flint; however, he does not go as far as to demonstrate his responsibility or affection for the two children he has with Jacobs. Also, he does not fulfil his promise of freeing them. For example, he takes Ellen to Washington not to free her, but to make her work for him. The girl's job is to care for the baby Mr. Sands had had with his new wife, that is, Ellen's sister, born in freedom.

Mrs. Bruce: Jacobs second employer in New York (she is the second wife of Mr. Bruce) and buyer of her freedom from Mrs. and Mr. Dodge. She is a kind lady who experiences great sympathy for the author. She is the representation of the fair employer in contrast to the slave owner. She is also a great help to Jacobs' safety in the excursions of Dr. Flint and, later, his daughter and her husband, to capture her.