THE SPOKEN AND THE SILENCED IN
INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL AND OUR NIG

By P. Gabrielle Foreman

They were forced to quiet down certain aspects of their experience, aspects they were too kind or too political or too savvy to reveal.

—Toni Morrison

The word has the potency to revive and make us free.

—Ralph Ellison

If slave narratives are the most neglected body of early American writing, as John Sekora asserts, then nineteenth-century Afro-American women’s narratives are more neglected still. Until recently Harriet Jacobs was the lonely black female representative of that era and genre. Critics with specialities in the nineteenth century might have heard of Jarena Lee or Louisa Picquet, but rarely were these authors read. The attention generated by the rediscovery of Harriet E. Wilson, for example, timed as it was, with the growing recognition of contemporary authors like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor, revitalized the field of Afro-American letters. The impact on the Afro-American women’s literary tradition has been significant—recently the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers published thirty volumes, many of which had never been published in this century.

This plethora of “new” material is bound to restructure the critical field considerably. Although to date no full-length study on even a prominent text like Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861) exists, many critics of the nineteenth century examine her work. Unfortunately, until now, she has been considered almost exclusively in the context of Afro-American men’s or white American women’s writing. Rarely have critics had the opportunity to also explore how her work junctures and diverges with texts written by her contemporaries—works such as Harriet E. Wilson’s Our Nig (1859), the first novel authored by an Afro-American woman.

In this essay I will attempt to address how Wilson and Jacobs negotiate the assertion of their voices. I will argue that their voices blur the parameters of the genres they have chosen. Further, I will suggest that these women subvert and invert the authority of audience and mediate the writings of the nineteenth-century unutterable—that space of sexuality around which so many women of that time swooned, or were driven to madness or death, alternatives Wilson and Jacobs refuse for their subjects. Instead, they write the unutterable in a manner which challenges their readers to recover not only their “texts” but their contexts and codes.
Valerie Smith suggests that slave narratives "combine elements of history, autobiography and fiction" (10). Our Nig, similarly, blends aspects of sentimental fiction, autobiography and slave narratives. Throughout Our Nig Wilson invokes conventions of sentimental fiction. Wilson opens her tale with the seduction of "lonely Mag Smith . . . alone and inexperienced . . . as she merged into womanhood, unprotected, uncherished, uncared for . . ." (5). Wilson's language mirrors that of the conventional seduction tale—the isolated (white) young maiden, without a loving family to provide her guidance, falls prey to "the voice" of her ravisher, who leaves her to her fate. Ashamed, she flees to strangers and her infant dies. Here the echoing of conventional seduction narrative dims. Mag does not die, or live out her life as a pariah, branded as an example to the (as of yet) virtuous. Instead, she marries. This act, though, instead of suturing over her past mistakes, reinscribes her fall—for she marries a black man. Wilson deliberately subverts the assumptions of the classic seduction tale she invokes. As Mag and Jim marry she inserts:

You can philosophize, gentle reader, upon the impropriety of such unions, and preach dozens of sermons of the evils of amalgamation. Want is a more powerful philosopher and preacher. Poor Mag. . . . She has descended another step down the ladder of infamy. (13)

Wilson undermines the commodification of "virtue" by juxtaposing with the economic considerations of a single woman, and exposes the valorization of marriage and protection by revealing how that value is inverted when marriage collides with issues of race. Rather than dying, Mag, a white woman, dispenses with the rhetoric of romance, which Wilson uses to introduce Mag's tale, and moves into the realm of the practical, deciding to marry in order to survive. While the child born in her seduction narrative dies, her second child, Frado, lives; it is her story that Wilson narrates.

While Wilson both employs and subverts the conventions of sentimental fiction in Our Nig, her autobiographical voice continually interrupts her fictional fabric. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. outlines the eruptions in his introduction to the second edition. Although Wilson writes in the third person, the opening chapter is entitled "Mag Smith, My Mother." Similarly, chapter two's heading is "My Father's Death"; chapter three's is "A New Home for Me." While Wilson's personal voice and Frado's remain separate throughout most of the text, in the final chapter the "I" voice again asserts itself. Earlier Wilson locates herself in terms of her family relations and voices bonds as she is abandoned at the Bellmonts, as these bonds physically dissolve. In this last chapter, writing of "my narrative" (126), she establishes her explicit relation to her own story.

In other more subtle ways, though, Our Nig can be read as autobiography; Wilson's identification with her subject and her claiming of the narrative merely confirm this reading. Allida, the author of one of the closing letters, verifying Wilson's good character and urging potential readers to buy the book, also situates Our Nig within this genre (137). She begins by claiming that "Truth is stranger than fiction;" and whoever reads the narrative of Alfrado, will find the assertion verified" (133). Allida, like Wilson, reveals the uneasy oscillation between the author's use of the two genres by setting up truth in opposition to fiction, claiming that Our Nig is allied with the former,
as, at the same time, she uses Wilson’s fictional character’s name rather than Wilson’s own.

Critic Hazel Carby argues that “Our Nig can be most usefully regarded as an allegory of a slave narrative, a ‘slave’ narrative set in the ‘free’ north” (43). It is the title of Wilson’s “novel” — Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in A Two-Story White House, North. Showing That Slavery’s Shadows Fall Even There, by “Our Nig” — which most clearly indicates Wilson’s intention that her work be read as “slave” narrative. Wilson proves her ironic and narrative skill in her use of punctuation: setting off “North” to highlight the white house’s association with the Southern plantation and enclosing “Our Nig” in quotations in order to underline both her awareness of the possession it implies, and her own repossession of self.²

Margaretta Thorn also locates Our Nig in the genre of slave narratives, asserting that Wilson “was indeed a slave, in every sense of the word” (139). Her letter, which follows Allida’s, describes Wilson’s story as if it were unmediated by a third-person fictional character. These framing letters themselves, a common slave narrative convention, bolster the connection.

Wilson’s narrator invokes images and situations associated with slavery in depicting Frado’s relations with the Bellmonts. When Frado is abandoned by her mother, Mrs. Bellmont agrees to keep the child on the condition that Frado become the family’s housemaid. Describing her domestic duties, Wilson writes: “Frado was called early in the morning by her new mistress. . . . She was shown how it was always to be done, and in no other way; any departure to be punished by a whipping” (29). Wilson both adopts the specific language of slave narratives and stresses the permanency of Frado’s situation.

Wilson’s depiction of Mrs. Bellmont also allies Our Nig with the slave narrative tradition. “My mistress,” Wilson writes in her own voice, “was wholly imbued with southern principles” (preface). “She was not susceptible of fine emotions. . . . She was self-willed, haughty, undisciplined, arbitrary and severe” (25). Many slave authors, Jacobs and Douglass, for example, contend that transplanted Northern masters were crueler than those born in the South, and many note that mistresses’ excesses sometimes eclipsed those of their mates. Wilson’s language, as applied to a Northern woman, disrupts the notions of True Womanhood and undermines the regional images of Northern restraint. For instance, Mrs. Bellmont,

excited by so much indulgence of a dangerous passion, seemed left to unrestrained malice; and snatching a towel, stuffed the mouth of the sufferer Frado and beat her cruelly. (82)

Not only is Mrs. Bellmont “self-willed, haughty, and severe” — traits assigned by slaves to masters — she is “undisciplined, passionate, and indulgent,” invectives used against overseers. As she did with Mag, here Wilson invokes considerations of class and gender to disrupt the discourse of “womanhood,” and, in this case, to squarely position Mrs. Bellmont in the terrain of the Southern male.

Just as Harriet Wilson’s Our Nig defies easy generic categorization, Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl blurs the parameters of fiction and slave narrative.
Both Lydia Maria Child, who writes the introduction, and the abolitionist Amy Post, whose statement closes the text, claim that “truth is stranger than fiction” when describing *Incidents*. Even more interesting is Child’s relationship to the fictionalizing of the text itself. As Jean Fagan Yellin, whose excellent work has verified Jacobs as the unquestioned author of *Incidents*, points out, Jacobs finished the narrative in 1857, and finally found a publisher four years later. They accepted her manuscript under the condition that Child, a well-known writer and abolitionist, write the introduction.

It was Child who suggested that Jacobs change the names in the narrative, both to protect Jacobs’s friends in the South and “out of delicacy to Mrs. Willis” (Sterling 83), the woman for whom Jacobs worked. Mrs. Willis then became Mrs. Bruce, the employer who buys Jacobs, now called Linda Brent, out of slavery. As all of the changes were substituted after the narrative itself was written, this fictionalizing is as significant in Jacobs’s life as it is in her text. After its publication many abolitionists began to refer to Harriet Jacobs as Linda Brent, or, at best, Linda Jacobs. She herself took on this name in her dealings with them; an August, 1862 letter to *The Liberator*, for instance, she simply signs “Linda” (Sterling 247).³

The language through which Child mediates questions of “delicacy” reveals much about the power issues surrounding the articulation of the “unspeakable” subject of the abuse women suffered under slavery. In her introduction Child notes “The names of both persons and places are known to me; but for good reason I suppress them” (emphasis added). She continues:

> I am well aware that many will accuse me of indecorum for presenting these pages to the public; for the experiences of . . . this much injured woman belong to the class which some call delicate subjects, and others indecent. . . . I willingly take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil withdrawn. . . . I do it with the hope of arousing conscientious and reflecting women at the North to a sense of duty in the exertion of moral influence . . . and with the hope that every man who reads this narrative will swear solemnly before God that, so far as he has the power to prevent it, no fugitive from Slavery shall ever be sent back . . . . (xii)

In this passage, Child reflects the societal sanctions which weighted “sexual” in “sexual abuse” over “abuse” and thus enveloped this common form of slave women’s (and most other women’s, for that matter) abuse into the terrain of the unspeakable. While Child refuses to uphold these sanctions, she does not overstep the parameters of a “woman’s sphere.” Indeed, as she asserts the power of presentation, she quickly reinscribes woman’s duty to remain merely a “moral influence,” and acknowledges the (clearly non-universal) male power of societal change.

As Child takes responsibility for the presentation of the narrative, she also wrests responsibility from Jacobs. Child’s language is informed by a patron-child hierarchy which mirrors the slave patriarchy, where slave is figured as child and master as patriarch. The power she appropriates here interestingly places her in the position of the (benign) Southern patriarch—the same space Mrs. Bellmont, another northern woman, although uncontrolled, occupies.
Jacobs struggles against the usurping of agency which Child articulates in her introduction. In her preface, Jacobs reappropriates authority over her own narrative and takes responsibility for her final decision as she asserts that "I have concealed the names of places and given persons fictitious names" (emphasis added). More importantly, while Child contends that she presents the "veil withdrawn," Jacobs undermines Child's confidence in the Truth, and insists that her "descriptions fall far short of the facts" (xiii). While clearly societal prescriptions work to censor Jacobs's narrative, it is equally evident that she asserts her agency as she refuses to be constrained to the realm of articulation Child has granted her. In many ways Jacobs negotiates her way through her narrative, creating gaps and silences on her own terms.

Carby reads the title "Incidents" in the Life of a Slave Girl as an indication of Jacobs's selectivity in presenting the events of her life, as an admission of absences. Additionally, Jacobs writes absences and gaps into the events which she chooses to present. In a letter to her friend Amy Post she writes not "there are some things I might have included," but that "there are some things that I might have made plainer—Woman can whisper her cruel wrongs into the ear of a dear friend much easier than she could record them for the world to read" (Sterling 81). The implication is that the veil still covers even the events she did choose to include.

Jacobs's move from first person "I" to representative "Woman" in this letter is indicative of a manner in which she evades personal revelations and shields, indeed veils herself, in the move from private to public. For example, early in the narrative, as Dr. Flint her master is in the process of attempting to seduce Linda, Jacobs switches from a shallow description of his harassment to a more revealing direct address to the reader—"O, what days and nights of fear and sorrow that man caused me. . . ." She goes on: "It is not to awaken sympathy for myself that I am telling you . . . but for my sisters who are still in bondage" (28). Jacobs then extends this distancing by switching to a seemingly unrelated story:

I once saw two beautiful children. . . . One was a white child; the other was her slave, and also her sister. . . . She drank the cup of sin, and shame, and misery whereof her persecuted race are compelled to drink. (28–29)

Jacobs fills in her own personal gaps with another's story, which serves as both another, and thus, representative tale, and as a metaphor for her own. She often moves from the personal "I" to the specific "she" to the representative "she" as "slave woman."

Jacobs's title, too, points to this representativeness; it differs from the specific Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass—an American Slave, or the more specific self-naming The Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African, in that "a slave girl" is substituted in the space commonly reserved for a proper name. In Incidents, this distancing is highlighted further in that "a slave girl" occupies the linguistic space which one would expect to be filled by Linda Brent; yet this, too, would act to veil the naming of the narrative of the life of Harriet Jacobs.

As Jacobs translates her life to the level of discourse in writing her narrative, she transcribes the events of her life to that level. Dr. Flint's sexual abuse of Linda takes
place almost completely in the terrain of language. Valerie Smith notes that Dr. Flint, “for some reason reluctant to force Linda to submit sexually, harassed her, pleaded with her, and tried to bribe her into capitulation in the manner of an importunate suitor” (36). Smith’s clause “for some reason” indicates her implicit distrust of Flint’s behavior or Jacobs’s representation of it. The means of this harassment seem veiled—it is this which Smith perceives. Flint whispers foul language, he writes obscene notes and has her read them, both to herself and out loud—yet nowhere is there physical foulplay. For example, Linda describes an incident where

my master, whose restless, craving, vicious nature roved about day and night, seeking whom to devour, had just left me, with stinging, scorching words; words that scathed ear and brain like fire. O, how I despised him! I thought how glad I should be, if some day when he walked the earth, it would open and swallow him up and disencumber the world of a plague. (16, my emphasis)

What is telling here is the imbalance of Flint’s actions and Linda’s reactions; the passion in her language does not seem to have a direct correlation with what she claims Flint “says.” Jacobs transfers Linda’s (unacknowledged) violated body to the body of the word. By serving for and providing the trope for physical abuse, words act both to describe her violation and to absorb it.

Jacobs persists in contending that it is the force of Flint’s language which drives her to Mr. Sands; and indeed it is Sands’s language which provides the bridge from the discursive to the physical. Of her relations with Sands she writes:

I felt grateful for his sympathy, and encouraged by his kind words. . . . By degrees, a more tender feeling crept into my heart. He was an educated and eloquent gentleman; too eloquent, alas, for the poor slave girl who trusted in him. (55)

Later, fearing that Sands has betrayed her trust and has not emancipated their children, Linda laments, “how protectingly [sic] and persuasively he once talked to the poor, helpless slave girl!” (145). In both instances, Jacobs again removes herself from her “fall,” by replacing the personal voice with the sentimental language of an ambivalently-identified first-person/third-person “poor helpless slave girl.” Her retreat into the discursive also serves to distance her from the physical “sin”—again, words and their “eloquence” act as the agent of seduction.

If the word is the agent through which Linda Brent loses her virtue, is the move from the private to the public word a further loss? Or is it possible that Jacobs envisions it as a channel through which to vindicate herself? Her letter to Post resonates with this issue and bears repeating here:

I have Striven faithfully to give a true and just account of my own life in slavery. There are some things that I might have made plainer—Woman can whisper her cruel wrongs into the ear of a dear friend much easier than she could record them for the world
to read. I have placed myself before you to be judged as a woman, to
come to you just as I am, a poor slave Mother . . . (emphasis
added, Sterling 81)⁴

Both Post’s and Child’s accounts, and implicit responses, in Incidents indicate that
redemption does indeed operate in the sphere of the word. Post incorporates these
dynamics in her response: “she [Jacobs] passed through a baptism of suffering, even
in recounting her trials to me in private . . . conversations” (209, emphasis added). In
her introduction Child mirrors Post in asserting that Jacobs’s “conversation and man-
ners inspire me with confidence” (xii, emphasis added). Post’s response is the more
interesting; she assumes that language has a transparent correlation to the state of the
(redeemable) soul, that through suffering one can be born again, baptized, and that
the greater (read: the more public) the suffering, the more assured the redemption.
At times throughout her narrative, Linda too assumes this transparency. For instance,
after Flint joins the church, Linda notes “the conversation of the doctor, the day after
he had been confirmed, certainly gave me no indication that he had “renounced the
devil and all his works” (77).

In valorizing the power of the word, Jacobs’s narrative responds to Benjamin Frank-
lin’s autobiography and his erasable errata—the concept of transferring black marks
inscribed upon the soul to black marks transcribed upon the page. Yet in Linda’s case
transgressions are forgivable because they are not internal or self-generated but rather
forced upon her by a system:

So far as my ways have been crooked, I charge them all upon
slavery. It was that system of violence which now left me no
alternative but to enact a falsehood. (171)

The economy of language under which she operates, then, does not require a move
from the theological to the individual, as Franklin’s does. Rather, Jacobs considers the
juncture of spiritual-religious and slave economies and reveals that it is slavery which
disrupts the correlation between the word and the soul.

Control of the word in male narratives often clears the metaphysical space for phys-
ical freedom. This is particularly true in Douglass. Valerie Smith suggests that there
is no corresponding formulation in women’s narratives. Yet, if the word has a trans-
parent relation to the soul only when it is not disrupted by the slave economy (read:
when slavery as figured in both Jacobs and Wilson does not exist), it can function as
the means through which to reveal a soul revived. The word, then, also holds a val-
orized position in the black female literary tradition, both in relation to spiritual and
physical freedom.

In Our Nig Harriet Wilson, like Harriet Jacobs, admits to the gaps and silences in
her narrative which exist as long as the Northern economies of slavery remain in-
tact. She closes her tale by directly addressing her audience: “Still an invalid, she asks
your sympathy, gentle reader. Refuse not, because some part of her history is
unknown . . .” (130). Frado’s statement here echoes Wilson’s comments in her preface,
in which she states:
I do not pretend to divulge every transaction in my own life, which the unprejudiced would declare unfavorable in comparison with treatment of legal bondmen; I have purposely omitted what would most provoke shame in our good anti-slavery friends at home.

The ironic duality in Wilson’s last sentence is clear. “Shame” here can be Wilson’s—“I did not wish to expose my shame by revealing indelicate events in my life,” or the shame can be read as that of “good anti-slavery friends at home.” The latter reading would indict a system, and those who allow such a system to continue in their own “home,” the North, as they fight for abolition in the South. This reading is bolstered by the narrator’s indictment of the North later in the narrative: “maltreated by professed abolitionists, who didn’t want slaves at the South, nor niggers in their own houses, North. Faugh!” (129). The irony of “good” and “at home” in this context is biting.

Wilson’s silences, though, like Jacobs’s, are inscribed in the terrain of the sexual unspeakable. While the men in Incidents do virtually nothing but speak, in Our Nig they are almost completely mute. Even as Wilson invokes the sentimental convention of the abandonment of her protagonist, she inverts the gendered categories of silence and death in sentimental fiction—abandonment in Our Nig is achieved through the death and silence of its male characters.

Interestingly, almost all of the males in this narrative are figured as fathers—her father, Mr. Bellmont as father, the father of her child. Her biological father, Jim, is absent early. He is “the victim of consumption,” a disease in early American fiction which is almost exclusively gendered female. In the Bellmont house, Frado’s “new home,” the sources of abuse are “Mrs. B.” and her daughter Jane, whose uncontrolable rage parallels depictions of the jealous mistress and sister, who heap abuse upon the father’s illegitimate offspring. John Bellmont’s behavior fits this pattern: the obvious lack of sexual tension from any of the men in the family, despite Frado’s beauty, and his wishes that Frado were not maltreated, but his virtual refusal to stand up to his (metaphorically wronged) wife indicate Wilson’s imaging of him as the metaphorically benign slave father.

Ultimately, though, John Bellmont’s silence functions as abandonment just as Jim’s death did, and, as Jim’s death did, it leaves Frado, unprotected, to suffer Mrs. Bellmont’s abuse. In an exchange between the husband and wife, Mr. Bellmont remarks that Frado not only does the work of two, but gets twice the whippings as well. As he does not respond to Mrs. Bellmont’s retort, “I’ll beat the money out of her, if I can’t get her worth any other way” (90), it is her word which both closes the conversation and determines Frado’s treatment.

Mr. Bellmont abdicates his role as male head of household and leaves the domestic world, Frado’s only world, in the hands of Mrs. Bellmont. Throughout the narrative he, like Jim, is gendered female. In one instance, instead of responding to Frado’s mistreatment verbally, “he exposed a tearful eye” (36). Later, the invalid Aunt Abby catches her brother “muttering to himself,” and confronts him about Frado. To her question, “Why do you have it so, John?,” he responds: “How am I to help it? Women rule the earth and all in it” (44). When Mr. Bellmont does speak to the situation, he
addresses himself to Frado rather than to his wife, admitting that “he had seen Frado many times punished undeservedly” and advising her that “when she was sure she did not deserve a whipping, to avoid it if she could” (104). He thus abandons his domestic and “parental” responsibility and leaves Frado to her own resources.

In the final sections of Our Nig, Frado’s husband’s actions echo Mr. Bellmont’s—he abdicates his responsibility as father and again abandons Frado, whose health is failing due to the harsh treatment at the Bellmonts, to her own support. It is then, to care for her son, that she decides to try to sell her own story. It is in this section that Wilson creates the most gaping silence—not only do we not hear from her husband Samuel, but we hardly hear about him. The chapter in which her marriage takes place is only five pages long, only two of which are devoted to their relationship. Again, in the terrain of the sexual, even though sanctioned by marriage, Wilson avoids speaking. Her explanation is a land-fill lacunae, necessary only in order to justify a legitimate son. Significantly, the boy is the son of an illegitimate father, a freeborn man who “passes” as a slave and lectures on the abolitionist circuit. It is because of her husband’s abandonment and illegitimate status as slave that she is forced to write her novel, a metaphorical slave narrative.

The ending of Our Nig echoes its opening. Again, Wilson reveals the problematics of “legitimate” marriages when marriage as a trope for protective affectional union collides with the Northern economies of race. As she does in her preface, she reveals how this economy is disruptive; it is because the transparency of words is obstructed by the outgrowths of Northern economies of “slavery” that Frado is deceived by her husband, the “slave,” and as a deceived lover suffers the same fate as one illegitimately seduced—she is again abandoned, and six months after Wilson publishes the narrative her son dies. Still, Frado herself, like her mother, does not die, as many deceived heroines do. Instead, abandoned and unprotected by the paternal on all levels, she asserts her own agency by choosing to tell her story.

The problematics of the parental and the assertion of agency also resonate in Linda Brent’s experiences and in her relations with Dr. Flint and Mr. Sands. Jacobs’s text explores the complexities of the “patriarchal institution” and undermines the myth of the Southern extended slave family even as she admits that the ties the myth exploits do exist. For instance, she describes her grandmother’s former mistress as the “foster sister of my mother; they were both nourished at my grandmother’s breast” (5). In exposing their mistress’s betrayal of both her foster mother and sister, Jacobs exposes how the flexible parameters of “family” often are eclipsed by the inflexible parameters of property within the slave economy.

Dr. Flint functions within the terrain of the “patriarchal institution,” which insists that the slave-master union is mutually affectional. He adopts the different roles of “patriarch” throughout the narrative. As “father” he addresses Linda, saying: “If I have been harsh with you at times, your willfulness drove me to it. You know I exact obedience from my own children, and I consider you yet a child” (85). In the language of paternal protector of virtue, he asserts his right to protect her against “the insults of such puppies” as her black suitor (38).

Even in attempting to seduce Linda, Flint seeks to remain within the economy of the affectional, trying to persuade rather than coerce her into a sexual union. Yet, his
language and actions reveal the uneasy tensions created by the conflict between the trope of affectional union and the reality of slavery. This order cleaves as Flint tries to persuade Linda to accept a sexual union which paternal relations both forbid (incest), and against which they are supposed to protect (virtue).

As Jacobs presents it, Linda escapes Flint’s aggressions by choosing to have an affair with Mr. Sands, a white man who is neither married nor her master. Many critics cite the passage where Linda asserts “it seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion” (55) as evidence of Linda’s assertion of agency. Houston Baker comments that “this new code of ethics emphasizes a woman’s prerogative to control her own sexuality—to govern the integrity of her body” (52). Carby, too, asserts that “as Flint’s prey Linda Brent was not corrupted by him.” Additionally, both critics note that Brent ingeniously uses her liaison with Sands to secure freedom for their subsequent children. What seems just as interesting, though, is how Linda also ensures that as long as she is on the plantation, neither she nor her children will be sold. Flint is so enraged by Sands’s offer to buy her that the master tells his slave “I will never sell you, that you may depend upon” (61). By openly aligning herself with a wealthy white man who is willing to buy her and her children, she turns words that most often figure in narratives as (broken) promises into unreserved threats. Linda effectively inverts Flint’s ultimate power—the threat of selling them, and nullifies the possibility that the family separation of New Year’s Day which she describes earlier will affect her, except on her terms, terms which lead to freedom.

While clearly Linda wrests some control from her master, it seems necessary to qualify an assessment of her realization of agency. Brent, in being forced to “choose” Sands, is on some levels corrupted. Responding to historian John Blassingame’s assertion that “slave women were literally forced to offer themselves willingly,” Carby reveals the tension between “forced” and “willingly” and upbraids him for his ambivalence in recognizing that what this juxtaposition articulates is the dynamics of rape (Carby 22–23). Although, in this exchange, they speak to the relations between slave and master, I would suggest that this language, and these dynamics, fit Linda’s situation precisely—she is forced by Dr. Flint’s behavior to submit herself “willingly” to Mr. Sands.

The schism between the Brent narrative and the Jacobs story becomes clear in Jacobs’s discussion of Flint, for she never explains how her relationship with Sands precludes the possibility of continued sexual exploitation by her master. Rather than functioning to stop his harassment, it seems that her abandonment of “virtue” would facilitate his move from the affectional-protective economy to one where he can more easily demand her obedience and submission. Indeed, the only times Flint assaults Linda physically is when she suggests her “fall” (38) with her black suitor, and when she reveals her relations with Sands (79). Yet in Incidents his physical abuse, to use Smith’s phrase of disbelief, “for some reason” never extends to sexual physical abuse. Her “choice” and “control” here, muted as they are by the silences which surround them, point as much to her narrative control and choices as they might to her actual ones.

While Jacobs’s narrative at points is not believable, it operates precisely the way she asserts it will—it is unbelievable in what she does not reveal. Blassingame, however,
follows Child’s vision that this “truth” is stranger than fiction. He diverges with her, though, by branding the Jacobs narrative “fiction,” concluding that it “is not credible,” “that the story is too melodramatic,” and finally that Sands “acknowledged his paternity . . . , purchased their freedom, and is elected to Congress. In the end they all live happily ever after” (Blassingame 373).5 Blassingame, quite clearly, is wrong. Sands marries a white woman, neglects his black children, never buys Linda, and “they” most pointedly do not live out the fictional happily ever after. This is not to deny that Jacobs was not familiar with, and did not employ, the conventions of sentimental fiction. In addition to whatever fiction she found time to read, Mr. Willis, in whose house she lived on and off for nineteen years, was a prominent writer and the brother of Fanny Fern, one of the major nineteenth-century authors of “sentimental” fiction. Still, in closing, Jacobs most pointedly chooses not to end with the typical sentimental closure. In an oft-quoted passage Jacobs asserts “Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way with marriage. I and my children are now free!” (207).

Both Jacobs and Wilson refuse to close their texts romantically. Wilson leaves the ending to her readers who, through supporting her, can help her to achieve the ends Jacobs also desires. Both authors accept the ideology of home and motherhood, but they demand their own power of definition, and of self-dependency, by insisting on the right to support their children and themselves within their own domestic and woman-centered economy. Both texts remain open not because they are not provided for by a husband, but because they do not have the means to provide for themselves and their children. Finally, it is mothering that figures as the most important and articulated aspect of their lives. In a letter written to Allida and revealed to us in Allida’s letter, Wilson writes:

My home, my peaceful, quiet home with you, was before me. I could see my dear little room . . . but more than all, I beheld you, my mother . . . kneeling by my bed to read, as no one but you can read . . . (135)

Jacobs, in a letter to Post, describes herself as a “poor slave Mother” (Sterling 81) and, in an earlier letter, contends that she “could do anything for the sake of a little shanty to call home and have my children to come around me” (Sterling 74). Carby suggests that

the ideological definition of the womanhood and motherhood of Brent (and Jacobs) were excluded from the domain of the home, the sphere within which womanhood were defined. Without a “woman’s sphere,” both were rendered meaningless. (49)

Yet both Jacobs’s and Wilson’s articulations work to redefine a “woman’s sphere”; they insist that they were able to imbue that sphere with their own meaning, to turn “motherhood,” as a noncapitalized object, into a “Motherhood” as self-named subject. Both Jacobs and Wilson insist upon the right to define the integrity of both homes’—and their own—contours.
Notes

1. The examples are too many to delineate here. See Gates, xliii-xlvi, and also p. 130 for specific examples.
2. See Gate’s introduction, and p. 44 in Carby, for close readings.
3. *Incidents* takes place in Edenton, North Carolina. Dr. James Norcom was renamed Dr. Flint, and Mr. Sands was probably Samuel Tredwell Sawyer. Jacobs’s daughter’s real name is Louisa, her son is Joseph. The Mrs. Cornelia Willis, Mrs. Bruce in the narrative, did not know that Jacobs was writing a narrative. Mr. Nathaniel Willis, editor of New York’s weekly *Home Journal*, unlike both his wives, was pro-slavery. See Sterling and Yellin for further information.
4. See Carby, p. 61 for a splendid and very different reading of the issue of “judging.”
5. See Carby, p. 46, for an extremely insightful response which (again) unveils Blassingame’s male-centered readings.

Works Cited


