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DISMANTLING "THE MASTER'S HOUSE"
Critical Literacy in Harriet Jacobs'
Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl

by Martha J. Cutter

In 1861, Harriet Jacobs published Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, a pseudonymous account of her life in slavery. Although Jacobs states in her preface that she “earnestly desire[s] 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,” she also remarks, “it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history” (1). What accounts for Jacobs’ desire for “silence,” despite her ardent political purpose? Jacobs’ desire for silence reflects an understanding of the problematic nature of speaking in a language which denies her subjectivity, as well as her understanding of the uses and abuses of white, phallocratic discourse. Throughout her twenty-one years in slavery, Jacobs is typified, abused, sexually harassed, and attacked by racist and sexist discourses. Language is also wielded by her owner, Dr. Flint (James Norcom), in a way which is directly phallocratic: he seeks to induce her to become his mistress through a form of sexual abuse which uses language as its mechanism for power.¹

The problem Jacobs faces in her narrative, then, is how to use language as a way of achieving liberation, when language itself is a large part of her oppression. How can Jacobs use her literacy in a way which liberates her from the dominant discursive practices of her society? To speak in the “master’s” language is to remain trapped within a system of discourse which denies her subjectivity. Audre Lorde has said that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (99). One cannot overcome oppression by using the master’s tools, and if language is an instrument of oppression, simply taking hold of it will not lead to liberation, nor will it lead to a dismantling of the master’s house. For a time, Jacobs does try to use the “master’s tools” to dismantle his house; she tries to use language against the master without rejecting its abusive and coercive underpinnings. Ultimately, however, she realizes the oppressive nature of “the master’s tools” and strives to move beyond them.

In striving to move beyond the master’s tools, Jacobs demonstrates her attainment of what educational theorists Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo have called “critical literacy.” According to Macedo and Freire, individuals who are critically literate can begin “transforming the social and political structures that imprison them in their ‘culture of silence’” (159). Literacy, in this sense, is not simply reading the word, but reading the world. And literacy also involves transforming the world; literacy “becomes a vehicle by which the oppressed are equipped with the necessary tools to reappropriate their history, culture, and language practices” (157). According to this
definition, “a person is literate to the extent that he or she is able to use language for social and political reconstruction” (159). Applying Freire’s and Macedo’s concept of critical literacy to Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl demonstrates that for slave narrators like Harriet Jacobs, the real struggle is not learning to read and write the word, but learning to read and write the world. Critical literacy involves an understanding of how language practices have functioned to keep slaves disempowered, imprisoned in a “culture of silence.” But critical literacy also involves an attempt to transform the structures of oppression: not simply to replicate the master’s house, but to dismantle it. Jacobs does gain critical literacy: she understands how language has functioned to disempower her, but she also begins to challenge these signifying practices. Jacobs fashions a new relationship to language and finds a voice which challenges her culture’s language practices even as it creates its own. In so doing she achieves the critical literacy described by Macedo and Freire; she begins transforming, rather than merely serving, the dominant social order.

I. “The Quest for Literacy and Freedom”: The Example of Frederick Douglass

Although many critics have noted the importance of literacy in slave narratives, there has been little explicit theorization of literacy itself. James Olney, for example, states that slave narratives usually contain a “record of the barriers raised against slave literacy and the overwhelming difficulties encountered in learning to read and write” (153); here Olney seems to define literacy simply as reading and writing, and he does not tie it into a larger politics of liberation. Indeed literacy has been seen as one of the most essential components of the slave narrative genre and it has often been associated with freedom, but the link between literacy and freedom is rarely presented as problematic in any way. Henry Louis Gates argues that freed black slaves “created a genre of literature that at once testified against their captors and bore witness to the urge of every black slave to be free and literate. . . . [T]here is an inextricable link in the Afro-American tradition between literacy and freedom. . . . the slave who learned to read and write was the first to run away. In literacy lay true freedom for the black slave” (The Classic Slave Narratives ix). Gates repeats the link between freedom and literacy three times in this short passage, and then explains a few lines later that “The black slave narrators sought to indict both those who enslaved them and the metaphysical system drawn upon to justify their enslavement. They did so using the most enduring weapon at their disposal, the printing press” (ix). In this scenario, words fight the ideological system that condoned slavery, because writing challenges the notion that slaves are sub-human, animals or chattel to be traded. To write is to move from object to subject; as Houston Baker puts it, the slave narrator had “to seize the word. His being had to erupt from nothingness. Only by grasping the word could he engage in the speech acts that would ultimately define his selfhood” (The Journey Back 31).

Thus the attainment of literacy is a crucial part of the slave narrative genre. Yet literacy—while absolutely necessary to freedom and the tool for challenging the
ideological view of slaves as sub-human—is also the tool wielded by hegemonic society to maintain slavery, for a system of laws and legal discourse, Biblical rhetoric, and propaganda was used to keep slaves "in their place." To use Macedo and Freire's terms, literacy is a "set of practices that functions to either empower or disempower people"; literacy must thus be analyzed according to whether it "reproduce[s] existing social formations or serves as a set of cultural practices that promotes democratic and emancipatory change" (141). Therefore, it is crucial that slave narrators not only become literate, but critically literate; it is crucial that they read the word and the world, and that they come to see that language can be used either to transform, or to serve, the dominant social order. Slave narrators must see that literacy is both the key to freedom and the grounds upon which slavery is justified. Language is intertwined with reality, and critically literate slave narrators will understand that particular uses of language reflect particular—and often oppressive—realities. And they will work to change these oppressive realities. Learners who are critically literate can see the power struggles within language, but they can also conceive of ways of transforming language and transforming reality.

Many slave narratives do reveal an understanding of the power struggles which intersect in language. Frederick Douglass, for example, understands that reading is "the pathway from slavery to freedom" (275). However, Douglass also acknowledges the abuses and misuses of language when he speaks of slave owners who justify slavery by invoking the Biblical prophecy of God cursing Ham (257), or who cruelly beat their slave while quoting the scripture: "He that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes" (288). Because of this, Douglass finds literacy to be a mixed blessing: "I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. ... In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast" (279). Literacy may be the pathway to freedom—to a full assertion of humanity—but it is also the pathway to a fuller understanding of enslavement.

Moreover, time and again in his narrative, Douglass claims that his literacy fails him. In a famous passage, he comments upon the horrible beating of his aunt: "It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle" (258). Yet after graphically describing this event and his own reactions, he ends by saying: "I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it." Again and again, Douglass presents a description which implies he has told his feelings, but undercuts the description by stating that his words cannot convey his emotions:

I saw ... a white face beaming with the most kindly emotions; it was the face of my new mistress, Sophia Auld. I wish I could describe the rapture that flashed through my soul as I beheld it. (273, my emphasis)

At this moment, I saw more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder ... I have no language to express the high excitement and deep anxiety which were felt among us poor slaves during this time. (282, my emphasis)
It is impossible for me to describe my feelings as the time of my contemplated start drew near. I had a number of warm-hearted friends in Baltimore,—friends that I loved almost as I did my life,—and the thought of being separated from them forever was painful beyond expression. (319, my emphasis)

If, as Henry Louis Gates has stated, Douglass “was Representative Man because he was Rhetorical Man, black master of the verbal arts” (Figures In Black, 108), then these places where Douglass cites the failure of his language must be seen as something more than platitudes or apologies.

Knowing the duplicitous nature of language, as well as the ways it both under-mines and supports enslavement, Douglass strikes a narrative stance which allows him to maintain control over his text. He tells his story but then asserts that he has not told everything; he gives a detailed account of events but then creates a gap or lacunae in the text which indicates that he has not told all, indeed that to tell all would be impossible. This authorial strategy—positing that there are things not told, that Douglass cannot or will not tell—allows Douglass to maintain control over his text. Houston Baker states that “Douglass grasps language in a Promethean act of will, but he leaves unexamined its potentially devastating effects” (The Journey Back 38). Yet as these examples show, Douglass is aware of the effects of language—the way it inscribes him within a white, Christian, abolitionist ideology—and he works to counteract these effects. Knowing that the text will become a part of the larger abolitionist project (a tool of propaganda, after all) and knowing how duplicitous language can be, Douglass maintains his authority over the text by positing that there is something beyond language, something beyond the literal words on the page which he cannot or will not tell.

Douglass’ narrative therefore manifests a sophisticated awareness of the link between language and freedom and also an awareness of the abusive qualities of language. Does this mean, then, that Douglass attains critical literacy? Certainly, Douglass is aware that language can either liberate him from the dominant social order or mire him within it. But does Douglass conceive of a way of using his language to transform the dominant social order? Douglass mimics the mastery of language which he sees demonstrated by the white world around him, but he cannot conceive of a language which would move him beyond mastery of the dominant discourses and into a voice of his own. Macedo and Freire remind us that although “it is through the full appropriation of the dominant standard language that students find themselves linguistically empowered to engage in dialogue with the various sectors of the wider society,” a learner’s “voice should never be sacrificed, since it is the only means through which they make sense of their own experience in the world” (152). Douglass’ own voice is sacrificed in his search for mastery, in his appropriation of the master’s discourse. The text ends, in fact, in a babel of heteroglossia—in an eruption of contradictory voices. Douglass does maintain his authority over the text, but he does not find a way to use his literacy as a means of resistance to the dominant discourse and the dominant social order around him.

Like Douglass, Jacobs understands that language is an instrument of both oppression and liberation. Yet unlike Douglass, Jacobs does not seek mastery of the master’s
discourse. Jacobs understands that to use the master’s discourse is to remain trapped within it; in Freire’s and Macedo’s terms, she understands that “to continue to use the language of the colonizer . . . is to continue to provide manipulative strategies that support the maintenance of cultural domination” (117). Rather than trying to control the duplicitous and coercive qualities of language, as Douglass does (to manipulate the manipulative quality of language, we might say), Jacobs rejects the authoritative, abusive, and misleading functioning of language. According to Laura Tanner, Jacobs has only “the vehicle of a purely ‘white’ language,” a language which is “inherently inadequate for portraying her ‘form of life’” (419). But any given language is made up of a number of different language games, games which may overlap but which certainly change. As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein explains, “There are . . . countless different kinds of use of what we call ‘symbols’, ‘words’, ‘sentences.’ And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten” (11). Jacobs takes advantage of this multiplicity, and brings a new language game into existence. Jacobs radically reconfigures her culture’s language game, seeking a language game based in truth, community, and a shared sense of experience. In so doing she demonstrates her ability to use her literacy as a narrative for agency, as an attempt to rescue her history, experience, and vision from the dominant social and discursive patterns of her society.6

II. Linguistic Inferiority: Legal, Religious, and Spoken Discursive Power in Incidents

According to Freire and Macedo, “reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world. Language and reality are dynamically interconnected” (29). From an early age Jacobs sees that language and reality are intertwined. Jacobs’ earliest understanding of herself as an enslaved individual is in fact transmitted through language, as she explains: “When I was six years old, my mother died; and then, for the first time, I learned, by the talk around me, that I was a slave” (6, my emphasis). Moreover, Jacobs’ earliest associations involving literacy show Jacobs decoding both the word and the world. Jacobs blesses her first mistress (Margaret Horniblow) for teaching her to read and spell, but she is also bitter towards her, for when Margaret Horniblow dies, she does not set Jacobs free. Margaret Horniblow teaches Jacobs the Bible, but does not see its application to slaves: “My mistress had taught me the precepts of God’s word: ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’ ‘Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them.’ But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor” (8). In this passage, Jacobs questions literacy as both the practical and the symbolic “pathway to freedom.” Practically, Jacobs’ ability to read and write does not set her free, and symbolically it does not convince her mistress that Jacobs is “her neighbor,” that Jacobs is fully human and warranting treatment as such. Jacobs decodes her mistress’s practices, and sees the hypocrisy and oppression they contain.

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Jacobs’ later experiences with language promote her understanding of both its uses and abuses. Legal, Biblical, and spoken discourse are marshalled against slaves, and it is difficult to combat the ideological force of these powerful sources of authority. Jacobs herself may be literate, but her own words have no status since “according to Southern laws, a slave, being property, can hold no property” (6). So “no promise or writing given to a slave is legally binding . . . .” (6). Jacobs discovers that laws—a system of discourse—deny slaves’ humanity by indicating that slaves are not subjects qualified to produce and receive certain discursive transactions. Legal discourse places Jacobs in an objectified position, and she understands the difficulty of overcoming this inferiority. For example, she feels that even a written promise of freedom from her master would not be legally binding: “I knew him so well that I was sure if he gave me free papers, they would be so managed as to have no legal value” (84). Jacobs cannot overcome the denial of legal and linguistic humanity promoted by Southern laws; her literacy does not yet offer her a way of reconceiving, and thus transforming, these discursive practices.

Religious discourse is also used by Southerners as an instrument of suppression; as with the law, a powerful system of authority is in place to confer upon slaves an inferior status. Jacobs describes an old man who must be taught to read the Bible in secrecy because according to law, slaves will be whipped and imprisoned for teaching each other to read. In an extended reflection, Jacobs depicts the way both religious and legal systems of discourse conspire to keep slaves “in the dark”:

There are thousands, who, like good uncle Fred, are thirsting for the water of life; but the law forbids it, and the churches withhold it. They send the Bible to heathen abroad, and neglect the heathen at home. I am glad that missionaries go out to the dark corners of the earth; but I ask them not to overlook the dark corners at home. Talk to American slaveholders as you talk to savages in Africa. Tell them it is wrong to traffic in men. Tell them it is sinful to sell their own children, and atrocious to violate their own daughters. Tell them that all men are brethren, and that man has no right to shut out the light of knowledge from his brother. Tell them they are answerable to God for sealing up the Fountain of Life from souls that are thirsting for it. (73)

Jacobs begins this passage by arguing that slaves should be allowed to seek religious salvation. But when Jacobs casts white Southerners as the real “heathen” in need of salvation, she begins to undermine and even reverse the process whereby religious discourse has been used to promote the enslavement of her race. Through this reversal and through its repeated emphasis on “talking” and “telling,” this passage transforms religious discourse; Jacobs uses her critical literacy to change religious discourse so that it does not perpetuate injustice.

The Southerners also perpetuate injustice through a spoken language which creates a false reality. When slaveholders visit the North and return home, for example, they tell their slaves of the horrible condition of runaways. Unfortunately, as Jacobs notes, “many of the slaves believe such stories, and think it is not worth
while to exchange slavery for such a hard kind of freedom. It is difficult to persuade such that freedom could make them useful men...” (43). Jacobs and other slaves also find that to verbally contest the false reality created by slaveholders is futile and frequently dangerous. One female slave is sold to a slave-trader because Flint suspects she has revealed that he is the father of her children. Her protests are of no avail: “When the mother was delivered into the trader’s hands, she said, ‘You promised to treat me well.’ To which [Flint] replied, ‘You have let your tongue run too far; damn you!’ She had forgotten that it was a crime for a slave to tell who was the father of her child” (13). Speech does not function as an instrument of power for slaves; it does not help them create a valid representation of reality. In fact, slaves are often punished for speaking out and contesting the false reality created by slavery and slave-holders.

Jacobs’ narrative carefully presents the way religious, legal, and spoken discourses are used to create a false reality which imprisons slaves in a culture of silence. Her culture’s language games revolve around using language for duplicitous means, as an instrument of oppression and individual power. And although Jacobs and other slaves resist this linguistic oppression, their efforts are often futile because they find themselves caught within a system of discourse which defines them as inferior and subhuman. As Ann Berthoff argues, “liberation comes only when people reclaim their language and, with it, the power of envisagement, the imagination of a different world to be brought into being” (xv). The slaves are unable to conceive of a different use of language and of a different world, and because of this they remained trapped within the “master’s” house.

III. Inside the Master’s House: The Horrors of Phallocratic Abuse

Jacobs experiences all these forms of linguistic disempowerment, and she struggles to find a way of liberating herself from the master’s oppressive system of discourse. But Jacobs also experiences a sexual/linguistic oppression unique to female slaves. As Jacobs explains, women in slavery have gender-specific problems: “Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own” (77). Of course, Jacobs is speaking of sexual harassment and rape, and much of this oppression uses language as its medium. Jacobs recalls that even at an early age she suffered verbal harassment: “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” (18). Flint’s early abuse is a precursor to the more systematic abuse that begins when she is fifteen and that is again verbal: “My master began to whisper foul words in my ear... He tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled. He peopled my young mind with unclean images...” (27). Moreover, Flint’s verbal abuse is not limited to spoken words; when he finds that Jacobs can read, he sends her letters with a lascivious content. As Katherine Bassard has noted, Jacobs’ “ability to read actually aids Flint in his sexual advances... his awareness of her literacy works against her
as he is now positioned to mediate the distance between them through written notes” (125). For Douglass, reading becomes the pathway to freedom, but for Jacobs it becomes yet another vehicle for violation and abuse. As P. Gabrielle Foreman explains, figuratively at least, “the word is the agent through which Linda Brent loses her virtue . . .” (318).

Yet Jacobs’ situation is not unique, as she stresses repeatedly. Slaves—but in particular female slaves—are subjected to both verbal and sexual abuse condoned by a system of legal discourse: “No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death . . .” (27). Knowledge of evil comes early to slave girls, and language is frequently the conduit for this knowledge: “The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear. The lash and the foul talk of her master and his sons are her teachers” (51, my emphasis). Moreover, a conspiracy of silence protects the abuser, as is the case in Jacobs’ situation: “The other slaves in my master’s house noticed the change. Many of them pitied me; but none dared to ask the cause. They had no need to inquire. They knew too well the guilty practices under that roof; and they were aware that to speak of them was an offence that never went unpunished” (28). Masters abuse, slaves are silent: this seems to be the game’s unbroken rule. And for a long time Jacobs herself follows this rule because, “Dr. Flint swore he would kill me, if I was not as silent as the grave” (28).

Eventually Jacobs does try to use language as an instrument of resistance, only to find that Flint usually wins these battles. She openly expresses her contempt for Flint, but still finds that “the state of things grew worse and worse daily” (32). In a later chapter, Jacobs responds honestly to some of Flint’s questions and is violently struck (39). Of course, Jacob’s strongest resistance to Flint centers on her affair with a white man—“Mr. Sands.” Jacobs believes this affair will give her some sexual freedom, but she also seeks a discursive power: “As for Dr. Flint, I had a feeling of satisfaction and triumph in the thought of telling him” (56). When the time comes for her revelation, Jacobs does seem to have turned the discursive tables on her master:

At last, he came and told me the cottage was completed, and ordered me to go to it. I told him I would never enter it. He said, “I have heard enough of such talk as that. You shall go, if you are carried by force; and you shall remain there.”

I replied, “I will never go there. In a few months I shall be a mother.”

He stood and looked at me in dumb amazement, and left the house without a word. (56)

Jacobs seems to have beaten the master at his own game. As Ludwig Wittgenstein remarks, “One learns the game by watching how others play” (27). Jacobs has watched Flint and learned how to silence him.

Yet Jacobs is not happy in her “check-mate” of Flint: “I thought I should be happy in my triumph over him. But now that the truth was out, and my relatives would hear of it, I felt wretched. . . . My self-respect was gone!” (56). Although she has won this
round of the language game with Dr. Flint, Jacobs has lost her self-respect and the respect of the people she loves. The consequences of playing Flint’s language game are too high for Jacobs; beating him at his own game separates her from those she loves most: “I went to my grandmother. My lips moved to make confession, but the words stuck in my throat” (56). Jacobs’ “victory” over Flint is only a momentary gain achieved at the cost of her own long-term happiness. Perhaps Jacobs has learned that using the master’s tools, as Lorde explains, may allow women “to temporarily beat [the master] at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (99).

Jacobs has learned that when she uses language within the master’s house, within the parameters of the master’s system of discourse, she can only mimic, not transform the dominant order. This lesson is repeated in Chapter Twenty-Five, when Jacobs engages in a battle of texts and words with Flint. Hoping to convince Flint that she is in the North, she has a friend mail letters from New York and insists on hearing Flint’s reaction: “I concluded I should hear my letter read the next morning. I told my grandmother Dr. Flint would be sure to come, and asked her to have him sit near a certain door, and leave it open, that I might hear what he said” (129). Jacobs again believes she has turned the discursive tables on Flint: she believes that she is in control, creating and manipulating language and texts, using her literacy to create a false reality. Unfortunately, Flint still controls the creation of a false reality through language; Jacobs is still within the master’s system of discourse. Flint has suppressed the letter Jacobs prepared, substituting his own letter which has Jacobs apologizing for “the disgraceful manner in which I left you and my children” (130) and begging to come home. Jacobs succeeds in her practical aim—she convinces Flint that she is far away. But she does not succeed in her discursive aim—she does not gain control of her voice, or of her representation of herself. For although Flint believes her original letter, he still rewrites it, coopting her voice. Jacobs continues to write these letters from time to time to convince Flint that she is in the North, but she never again takes the same pride and glee in her “mastery” of language.⁷

Indeed, mastery of language itself is suspect, being allied with “the master,” Flint. Later in her narrative, when Jacobs contacts Mrs. Hobbs about her daughter Ellen, Jacobs takes a radically different attitude towards the production of a false reality through language. Jacobs writes another duplicitous note, but takes none of the pride in doing so that she had with Flint: “I like a straightforward course, and am always reluctant to resort to subterfuges. So far as my ways have been crooked, I charge them all upon slavery. It was the system of violence and wrong which now left me no alternative but to enact a falsehood” (165). One critic has argued that Jacobs uses sass and enjoys being a trickster.⁸ Yet this passage suggests that Jacobs is aware of language’s potential for duplicitous functioning, and that she dislikes this duplicity because she associates it with being trapped within the master’s discourse, the master’s house.

Jacobs herself is reluctant to resort to falsehood, yet she now knows that her culture’s language games revolve around it. She continually suspects everyone around her of linguistic subterfuge, and this isolates her in her own discursive world: “I longed for some one to confide in; but I had been so deceived by white people, that
I had lost all confidence in them. If they spoke kind words to me, I thought it was for some selfish purpose” (169). Having realized—and rejected—the duplicity of language, Jacobs finds herself excluded from any language game, isolated outside the world of discourse. Eventually, however, Jacobs’ faith in language is renewed by friendship, and she postulates a language game which revises the discursive politics of her own world. In so doing she attains critical literacy, and begins to use her language as an instrument of liberation and transformation.

IV. Critical Literacy: A New Language Game

Ultimately, words themselves are not duplicitous; it is the way they are used and the context in which they are placed by human beings which makes them so. In short, it is the language game, not language, which creates problems. So although words are the tool which promotes Jacobs’ degradation, they can also facilitate her redemption; as Foreman explains, the word “can function as the means through which to reveal a soul revived” (319). Yet the word must be understood in a certain way by a certain type of listener if it is to reveal “a soul revived” rather than “a fallen woman.” At this point in her narrative, Jacobs is not sure that such a listener exists; Jacobs distrusts human beings, so it is not surprising that she also distrusts language.

As she develops friendships with women in the North and renews her relationship with her daughter, however, she reaffirms her faith in language, her understanding of how language can be cleansed of its tainting duplicity. She finds a sympathetic listener in Ellen, who hears the story of her mother’s loss of virtue but still affirms a daughter’s love (Chapter 39). Mrs. Bruce also welcomes Jacobs back into a discursive community: “I had entered this family with the distrustful feelings I had brought with me out of slavery; but ere six months had passed, I found that the gentle deportment of Mrs. Bruce and the smiles of her lovely babe were thawing my chilled heart. My narrow mind also began to expand under the influences of her intelligent conversation . . . “ (169). Jacobs also finds a sympathetic listener in Mrs. Bruce, to whom she pours out her full heart: “She listened with true womanly sympathy, and told me she would do all she could to protect me. How my heart blessed her!” (180). Mrs. Bruce does not condemn Jacobs, and Jacobs’ faith in communication is renewed. She is no longer isolated in her discursive community of one.

Furthermore, in the end, it is the word “friend” which renews Jacobs’ faith in language. After Mrs. Bruce manumits Jacobs, Jacobs comments: “God had raised me up a friend among strangers, who had bestowed on me the precious, long-desired boon. Friend! It is a common word, often lightly used. Like other good and beautiful things, it may be tarnished by careless handling; but when I speak of Mrs. Bruce as my friend, the word is sacred” (200-01). Language is relative, and a single signifier such as “friend” can come to have a multitude of significations. But in this extraordinary passage, Jacobs holds the word “friend” to a true and untarnished meaning; as she says, “the word is sacred.” Jacobs uses her critical literacy to transform language: words can be made sacred by the context in which they are placed, and by a shared sense of communication and community.
Therefore, although Jacobs rejects the duplicitous, individualistic, and coercive language game promoted by Flint (and by herself for a time in Chapter 25), she does not reject language. Instead she changes the rules of the language game by positing that words can be “true” and that a supportive and sympathetic discursive context can engender communication. Beyond inverting the principles of the master’s language game, Jacobs’ new rules create a game which is qualitatively different. In effect, Jacobs seeks to replace the master’s language game with a language game of her own—one which undermines the master’s house by asserting entirely different principles of operation. Jacobs’ critical literacy allows her to conceive of a language game that does not reflect the dominant reality, but produces a new reality—a new reality in which she can be present to herself, present in her own history.

Flint revels in the production of false discourse, but Jacobs insists that in her language game discourse must reflect a true reality, a reality in which her own experiences are not denied. After her escape, she is told by a minister that she should not “answer everybody so openly” about her past because “It might give some heartless people a pretext for treating you with contempt” (160). Nonetheless, Jacobs refuses to erase the truth in her narrative, she refuses to erase parts of her experience which might be deemed indelicate. For example, in describing her relationship with Sands, she states that she conceals nothing: “And now, reader, I come to a period in my unhappy life, which I would gladly forget if I could. The remembrance fills me with sorrow and shame. It pains me to tell you of it; but I have promised to tell you the truth, and I will do it honestly, let it cost me what it may” (53-54). Jacobs also claims to be truthful about slavery and the South, and to be writing from her own experiences within the master’s house: “You may believe what I say; for I write only that whereof I know. I was twenty-one years in that cage of obscene birds. I can testify, from my own experience and observation, that slavery is a curse to the whites as well as to the blacks” (52); “Reader, I draw no imaginary pictures of southern homes. I am telling you the plain truth” (35).

Jacobs also uses her true history as an “antidote” to the spread of false histories. She cites a variety of actual texts written about slavery but demythologizes them with her own truthful text. For example, she shows that Northern clergyman are duped into believing slavery is pleasant and even into publishing texts on the subjects, such as a “South-Side View of Slavery”; these texts assure people that slavery “is a beautiful ‘patriarchal institution’; that the slaves don’t want their freedom; that they have hallelujah meetings, and other religious privileges” (74). After quoting this false discourse, Jacobs corrects it with her own more truthful and full history:

What does he know of the half-starved wretches toiling from dawn till dark on the plantations? of mothers shrieking for their children, torn from their arms by slave traders? of young girls dragged down into moral filth? of pools of blood around the whipping post? of hounds trained to tear human flesh? of men screwed into cotton gins to die? The slaveholder showed him none of these things, and the slaves dared not tell of them if he had asked them. (74)
Like slaves, Northerners such as Nehemiah Adams are duped by the master’s false discourse, but Jacobs’ text presents the true and horrifying picture of slavery.

Many of these false discourses are based on ignorance and/or a selective presentation of details—a selective presentation which creates a distorted picture of slavery. Jacobs counterpoises such ignorance and selectivity with her own knowledge of the truth, of the whole picture which comprises slavery. As Jacobs says of “the Hon. Miss Murray,” who paints the conditions of slaves in rosy colors: “If she were to lay aside her title, and, instead of visiting among the fashionable, become domesticated, as a poor governess, on some plantation in Louisiana or Alabama, she would see and hear things that would make her tell quite a different story” (185). If Miss Murray were to see the whole picture of slavery—not just the selective details which are shown to her when she is visiting among the fashionable—her text would tell quite a different story. In effect, Jacobs does make Miss Murray “tell quite a different story,” for Jacobs uses Miss Murray’s false text as a foil for her own true text. Jacobs also carefully uses antithesis to lace such correctives into her text; for example, she describes in detail the torturing of various slaves and then quotes a Southern senator’s words that slavery is “a great moral, social, and political blessing; a blessing to the master, and a blessing to the slave!” (122). No further comment from Jacobs is necessary; these words, counterpoised by Jacobs’ graphic descriptions, seem patently hollow, false, and uninformed. Jacobs presents the whole picture, after which it is clear that the senator’s words are based on a partial, distorted vision of slavery.

As these passages indicate, Jacobs uses her ability to read and write to promote what Macedo and Freire would call “emancipatory literacy”—literacy which “reveals the reason for being that is behind the facts, thus demythologizing the false interpretations of these same facts” (157). Jacobs undercuts the master’s language by showing that it is grounded in a distorted and selective interpretation of facts. Jacobs uses her own truthful and full text to demythologize the master’s false and partial texts. Jacobs is also adept at using reading and writing to reclaim texts the master has usurped; in so doing she forces these texts back to a true (or truer) meaning. As noted earlier, religious discourse is marshalled against slaves, and slaves cannot protest this false use of Biblical texts. When Jacobs attempts to combat Flint’s use of the Bible, she is rebuked:

“You can do what I require; and if you are faithful to me, you will be as virtuous as my wife… “
I answered that the Bible didn’t say so.
His voice became hoarse with rage. “How dare you preach to me about your infernal Bible!” he exclaimed. “What right have you, who are my negro, to talk to me about what you would like, and what you wouldn’t like? I am your master, and you shall obey me.” (75, emphasis added)

Here Flint rebukes Jacobs for quoting the Bible, but Jacobs’ text as a whole asserts a right to reclaim religious discourse. In a passage which functions as a strong contrast to Flint’s denial of Jacobs’ right to quote scripture, she attacks the use of the Bible to
support slavery: “They [masters] seem to satisfy their consciences with the doctrine that God created the Africans to be slaves. What a libel upon the heavenly Father, who ‘made of one blood all nations of men!’ And then who are Africans? Who can measure the amount of Anglo-Saxon blood coursing in the veins of American slaves?” (44). Quoting the Bible against the master, Jacobs also asserts the arbitrariness of the construction of race. After all, aren’t all men and women “made of one blood”—the human blood? This is Jacobs’ strongest rejoinder to Flint, her strongest and most subversive transformation of his discursive practices.

Jacobs thus uses her critical literacy to demythologize false texts on slavery, race, and religion. Moreover, Jacobs’ narrative stance acknowledges that there is both truth and falsehood in language, yet still holds her own language game up to a standard of veracity. This violates the language games of her culture, at least as they are practiced by Flint and others. For her culture’s language games use language as a mechanism for power over Others, and this often involves duplicity, not truthfulness. Jacobs critical literacy thus involves not only an attempt to use language, but an attempt to transform language and in so doing to transform reality, to make herself and her race present in history.

Jacobs also transforms language and reality by insisting on a communal discourse which is strongly action-oriented. The paradigm for such a discourse is first presented when Jacobs’ grandmother is freed from slavery. Although Aunt Marthy has been promised her freedom, Dr. Flint attempts to sell her. In a quite remarkable example of a discourse which is both communal and performative, Aunt Marthy is rescued:

When the day of sale came, she took her place among the chattels, and at the first call she sprang upon the auction-block. Many voices called out, ‘Shame! Shame! Who is going to sell you, aunt Marthy? Don’t stand there! That is no place for you.” Without saying a word, she quietly awaited her fate. No one bid for her. At last, a feeble voice said, “Fifty dollars.” It came from a maiden lady. . . . The auctioneer waited for a higher bid; but her wishes were respected; no one bid above her. She could neither read nor write; and when the bill of sale was made out, she signed it with a cross. But what consequence was that, when she had a big heart overflowing with human kindness? She gave the old servant her freedom. (11-12, my emphasis)

In this passage the discursive community works together to free Aunt Marthy. First, many voices shame Flint and discourage those who might bid on Marthy; then, after the stage for a rescue is set by the communal recognition that this sale cannot be allowed to occur, the feeble voice makes her low bid; everyone else is silent; and Marthy’s freedom is finally sealed with an “X.” Indeed, in this odd chiasma, white interests in freeing Aunt Marthy mesh with black interests, and she is rescued by a communal, performative discourse.

Of course, the Southern community rarely functions in this way, but this incident is a paradigm for the kind of communal (rather than individualistic) discourse promoted by Jacobs’ narrative. In speaking of the Fugitive Slave Law and the horrors
of slavery, Jacobs attempts to marshal just such a discourse: “Surely, if you credited one half the truths that are told you concerning the helpless millions suffering in this cruel bondage, you at the north would not help to tighten the yoke. You surely would refuse to do for the master, on your own soil, the mean and cruel work which trained bloodhounds and the lowest class of whites do for him at the south” (28). With its constant references to “you at the north,” this passage is clearly addressed to a community of readers—readers who can use their understanding of the facts of slavery to rescue slaves from the yoke of slavery, just as Aunt Marthy was rescued.

Jacobs’ own discourse therefore calls upon those principles of community and action which she seeks in others. As she explains, her words are spoken on behalf of others to a community of readers who should take action: “Reader, it is not to awaken sympathy for myself that I am telling you truthfully what I suffered in slavery. I do it to kindle a flame of compassion in your hearts for my sisters who are still in bondage, suffering as I once suffered” (29). Jacobs’ critical literacy involves finding a new way of conceiving of language, a new discourse which is spoken on behalf of many individuals, to another group of individuals. She opposes Flint’s “masterly” and individualistic discourse with a discourse which is communal and even “sisterly.”

Moreover, this discourse is sympathetic and redemptive, rather than aggressive and abusive. Beyond the direct addresses to the reader, she also makes direct addresses to the readers’ experiences. In trying to explain her feelings about Flint, for example, she calls on the reader’s own realm of experience: “Reader, did you ever hate? I hope not. I never did but once; and I trust I never shall again” (40). Jacobs also makes direct appeals to emotions, speaking in a voice that demands sympathy: “Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another” (55). Often, these appeals to the reader’s sympathy involve a plea for the kind of performative language which rescued Aunt Marthy: “In view of these things, why are ye silent, ye free men and women of the north? Why do your tongues falter in maintenance of the right?” (29-30).

Jacobs thus uses her critical literacy to create a reconfigured discursive community—a community in which language is true, communal, and sympathetic. Jacobs’ “Preface by the Author” (which introduces her narrative) also shows Jacobs using critical literacy to transform the discursive patterns of her world. Jacobs makes clear her communal (and action-oriented) motives for writing; her goal is not to promote herself or even to “excite sympathy for my own sufferings,” but rather “to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse” (1). Jacobs uses language in a way which is sympathetic and experiential. She does not seek to “master” her reader through tactics of coercion or domination; rather, she seeks to persuade her reader through a “realizing sense” of the suffering of others—through sympathetic experience. For it is only in the realm of the experiential that true understanding occurs: “Only by experience can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations” (2).
Jacobs’ preface also posits a radically reconfigured language game in which understanding is created through experience, and communication occurs through a sympathetic interplay between writer (or speaker) and reader (or listener). And ultimately, Jacobs places a great deal of responsibility in the reader’s hands by repeatedly stressing her difficulty with writing:

I wish I were more competent to the task I have undertaken. But I trust my readers will excuse deficiencies in consideration of circumstances. (1, emphasis added)

I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is. (1-2, emphasis added)

When I first arrived in Philadelphia, Bishop Paine advised me to publish a sketch of my life, but I told him I was altogether incompetent to such an undertaking. . . . I still remain of the same opinion. . . . (1, emphasis added)

Such statements are a common rhetorical device in the slave narrative. Yet Jacobs’ appeals are a way of sharing (rather than containing) textual authority. Jacobs has given her readers the hint, and it is their job to spread the message. This stance allows Jacobs to dissipate narrative authority, rather than collecting it or locating it in one place—the authorial self. While Douglass uses gaps in his text to maintain authority over the actual narrative, Jacobs creates gaps or deficiencies in her text to disperse the author’s authority, sharing it with her readers. Meaning will be created communally, in tandem, between readers and writer. And power means power with and for others, rather than over Others.

In short, Jacobs’ preface shows her using critical literacy to create a radically reconfigured relationship to language. Yet the actual text of Incidents often does not affirm Jacobs’ new language game. No matter how much Jacobs’ preface asserts her humanity and claims a sympathetic communion with her readers, at the narrative’s actual end she finds that, as her own “bill of sale” documents, “women were articles of traffic in New York, late in the nineteenth century . . .” (200). Jacobs still finds herself enchained by a system of political and legal discourse. Moreover, although Jacobs posits an ideal and sympathetic community of readers in her preface, actual “sisterhood” is often absent from her text itself. Certainly, Jacobs is befriended by women like Mrs. Bruce, but the ideal community of readers Jacobs envisions goes beyond her actual experiences. As Hazel Carby puts it, “Jacobs’s appeal was to a potential rather than an actual bonding between white and black women” (51).

These details reveal that Jacobs’ language game is still under construction; it is still in the process of becoming. Critical literacy allows individuals to understand “the social and historical reality, not of a given fact, but of a fact that is ongoing. Reality in this sense is the process of becoming” (Freire and Macedo, 131). Jacobs’ language game reflects her understanding that reality itself is always in the process of becoming; reality is always changing, even as it is being produced. The facts are that Jacobs
must be bought out of slavery, and that she still distrusts many white men and women she meets. But these facts are facts in the process of changing, and Jacobs’ practices with language are meant to facilitate these changes. Jacobs’ critical literacy, then, does not solve all of her problems, nor does it set her free. But Jacobs’ critical literacy is the necessary precondition for an emancipation of both self and society. Henry Giroux states that although critical literacy “is not the equivalent of emancipation, it is in a more limited but essential way the precondition for engaging in struggles around both relations of meaning and relations of power”; thus “to be literate is not to be free, it is to be present and active in the struggle for reclaiming one’s voice, history, and future” (11). Jacobs’ critical literacy enables her struggle for freedom, her reclamation of her history and her voice. And Jacobs’ critical literacy enables her creation of a future where language and abusive power are no longer synonymous, a future where individuals can be free and active in their own histories—a future where the master’s house has finally been dismantled.

NOTES

1. Throughout this essay, I use the term “language” broadly to mean all systems of communication, and “discourse” to mean a specific system of communication within language. However, I do not treat language as a monolithic structure, but rather follow Julia Kristeva’s notion that language is a heterogeneous signifying process (27).

2. Several recent critics have paid attention to how language may function differently for female slave narrators than for male slave narrators; see Valerie Smith, P. Gabrielle Foreman, Katherine Bassard, and Joanne Braxton’s Black Women Writing Autobiography.

3. Baker later argues that Douglass sees his alternatives as “inner silence or risky and resonant engagement with the inordinately complex signification of his era” (Workings of the Spirit 14). A number of critics have noted Douglass’ facility with language, and see this as his primary strategy for controlling his narrative. See, for example, Robert Stepto, 16-26, and Stephen Butterfield, 65-89.

4. In choosing to adopt a role as a master manipulator of language, Douglass may inscribe himself within a white ideology. For arguments supporting this idea see Annette Nienitzow, Laura Tanner, and Valerie Smith. For critics who argue that Douglass subverts white discourse, see Keith Byerman and William Andrews.

5. Tanner claims that Jacobs uses “the language of a narrow white Christian morality” (418) and that therefore her representation of herself “has been shaped and distorted by the consciousness inherent in the language game she has assimilated” (419). Most writers on Jacobs argue like Tanner that Jacobs has to make use of a language that is not her own; see, for example, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, 169.

6. This is a paraphrase of Henry Giroux’s definition of critical literacy (10).

7. Thomas Doherty discusses Jacobs’ use of deception and masking as a narrative strategy, arguing that while in her preface Jacobs “effectively masked her literary sophistication” (80) behind an innocent and unlettered facade, elsewhere Jacobs “takes every opportunity to expose the reality behind appearances” (88).

8. For discussion of Jacobs as trickster, see Braxton’s “Harriet Jacobs’ Incidents” and Black Women Writing Autobiography.

9. For an alternate view, see Baker’s argument in Workings of the Spirit that in the North Jacobs’ language is “reduced to an orderly record of indignities” (20), a mirroring of the didactic white discourse of the abolitionists (32-33).

10. Foreman argues that Jacobs’ preface “reappropriates authority over her own narrative” and that Jacobs “writes absences and gaps into the events which she chooses to present” (317) in order to counteract Lydia Maria Child’s textual control. But for an alternate view, see Andrews statement that Child (as well as Post) provided Jacobs with “the kind of implied reader who Jacobs needed to believe was out there in the white world ready to listen empathetically to her story” (247).
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