

**Slightly Beyond Knowing:  
The Neo-Utopian Vision of Harriet Jacobs**

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In 1861, a book appeared in Boston whose title page named neither an author nor a publisher. It read: *Incidents In the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself, Edited by L. Maria Child*. The first line of the Author's Preface declares, "Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction," and claims that other than disguising the names of people and places (mostly, the author gently implies, to protect the guilty), the incredible tale is "strictly true." This preface is signed "Linda Brent," the pseudonym of the "slave girl" of the title. An Editor's Introduction by Child, a prominent author and a white abolitionist, underscored these claims and vouched for "Linda's" reliability.

The "Linda" of *Incidents* was actually a middle-aged resident of Cornwall, New York, named Harriet Jacobs, who had been held a slave in Edenton, North Carolina, before fleeing North nearly twenty years earlier, at age 29. Jacobs' brother, John, had arrived North before his sister, and was well-known in the abolitionist community, at one time lecturing alongside Frederick Douglass. Harriet, too, had become part of this community. In her correspondence with notable reformers of the time, both Black and white, Jacobs sometimes even signed "Linda" alongside her own name.

Somehow, however, in spite of her relatively high profile during her lifetime, it did not take long for Harriet Jacobs to be all but erased from the pages of history. The style of *Incidents* is unique and its content is so astonishing, that literary and historical scholars came to doubt Jacobs' authorship – and even her existence. By the middle of the twentieth century, it was generally held that the book was another novel by Lydia Maria Child. Luckily, some of Child's correspondence concerning the manuscript was discovered by Dr. Jean Fagan Yellin, a professor at Pace University. Yellin's unflagging scholarship snatched Jacobs from the abyss of obscurity, unearthing the evidence of her authorship and affirming the accuracy of most of the events she described. Yellin did not stop with two editions of *Incidents* (reclassified by the Library of Congress to indicate Jacobs as the author) – she followed the trail of Jacobs' exceptional life past the time of the book's conclusion, publishing a meticulous and engaging biography in 2004, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life*.

With Jacobs definitively established as the narrative's author, we are left to wonder what made this book so unbelievable. Certainly Jacobs' story itself is extraordinary. The events of her life in slavery differ in striking ways from other information we have about the lives of female slaves: learning to read at a young age, rejecting the sexual advances of her master, Dr. James Norcom, entering into a consensual affair with an

unmarried white slave-owner with whom she conceived two children, and escaping from Norcom only to remain right under his nose – hidden in a crawlspace under the roof of her grandmother’s porch for seven long years. The events of her life after slavery seem no less extraordinary. Jacobs, who had become involved in the abolitionist movement and corresponded with prominent figures of the day, went behind the Union lines to serve refugees from slavery as a relief worker and an educator during the Civil War. “We don’t know of any woman who was a slave in the South, a fugitive in the South and the North, who wrote a slave narrative and then went back down South to do relief work and establish a school,” Yellin pointed out. “And she wrote about it in the northern press to publicize the condition of the black refugees from slavery. We just didn’t have that story before; and now we do.” The last point seems particularly salient: we did not have that story before. It is therefore conceivable, even probable, that there are other stories which we still “just don’t have” – some that may bear a similarity to Jacobs’, and some that may be extraordinary in different, unprecedented ways.

Yellin recently published *The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers*, the first scholarly edition of papers of a Black woman held in slavery. That long-overdue volume serves as a reminder that our most familiar stories about Black women in slavery are not in their own voices – in sharp contrast to those of both Black men and white women of the same era. Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of perhaps the most influential abolitionist text, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, was a white woman. Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, female heroes of the slavery struggle, were illiterate; although their stories were transcribed, they were not able to create a written record of their own making. While Frederick Douglass and other men who had been held in slavery touched on the experiences of their female friends and relatives, none was able to be as frank about the experiences of women in the slave-holding South – both Black and white – as Jacobs. In particular, Jacobs describes unconscionable sexual practices that thrived under chattel slavery: the ubiquity of the rape of slaves at the hands of their masters, including the rape of children, and the unnatural result of such an act – a parent owning, and profiting from the sale of, his own offspring. She writes of the spread of this perverted sexual culture to the wives and children of slaveholders, demonstrating the incompatibility of the system of slavery with the era’s emphasis on feminine purity and virtue.

Jacobs’ embarrassment about her own complicated sexual past almost kept her from telling her story. “I had determined to let others think as they pleased, but my lips should be sealed and no one had a right to question me,” she wrote to her Quaker friend Amy Post. “For this reason when I first came North I avoided the Antislavery people as much as possible because I felt that I could not be honest and tell the whole truth.” In all likelihood, if it were not for Post’s encouragement, even insistence, *Incidents* would never have been written, let alone published.

When Jacobs finally did decide to tell her story, she was not only a former “slave girl” – she was a mature woman who had lived for almost 20 years in several northern cities, journeyed to Europe, and worked and corresponded with some of America’s most prominent abolitionists. Her perspective was more expansive than that of many of her readers who may not have traveled or read as widely as she. She had had the chance to observe the response of northern and European audiences to abolitionist arguments, and to gauge her own rhetorical power through anonymous letters she sent to the editors of local newspapers.

Earlier, wanting to tell her story but doubting her ability to write effectively about her experiences, Jacobs had enlisted the aid of her prominent white friends, Amy Post and Cornelia Willis, to contact another white woman whom she thought might be able to help – the day’s most famous abolitionist writer, Harriet Beecher Stowe. When approached with the request to bring Jacobs’ unusual life to the page, Stowe replied dismissively that she would be happy to incorporate an anecdote about Jacobs’ story into her new book, *The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Incensed, Jacobs declared her story “needed no romance” and finally began to write the book herself. Her comment about “romance” is notable, because *Incidents* is frequently cited as employing the conceits of the Victorian romantic novel in order to engage the sympathies of nineteenth-century female readers. Actually, its skillful mimicry of the genre was one of the factors that critics cited when expressing doubt about whether the book was, in fact, an autobiography. But if Jacobs had intended her story as a romantic novel, she could have taken advantage of Stowe’s offer and spared herself the long hours writing in her employer’s attic, late at night, after a full day of work.

Jacobs wanted her story to stand on its own. She clearly intended it to be more than a romantic account, and perhaps even more than an historical document to aid the cause of abolitionism. There is a detectable edge to both the romantic and abolitionist sentiments in her text. Over and over she reminds her readers that the nineteenth-century moral code is in direct conflict not only with the system of slavery, but with the ubiquitous racism she finds in northern states, and with the compromised morality she experiences everywhere in her travels – even in her own soul. When she receives a letter in which her grandmother reports that old Master Norcom has died and expresses a hope that he has “made his peace with God,” she cannot agree. “I cannot say, with truth, that the news of my old master’s death softened my feelings towards him,” she writes. “There are wrongs which even the grave does not bury. The man was odious to me while he lived, and his memory is odious now.”

In the book *Utopia in Performance*, critic Jill Dolan suggests that some contemporary performance may have a “neo-utopian” vision – a perspective inverting the Romanticism inherent in old ideas of utopia, which clung to the idea of restoring the virtues of a foregone golden age. Neo-utopianism, on the other hand, is “romantic about the future –

not about the past.” Inherent in Jacobs’ brand of Romanticism is this kind of neo-utopian vision. Perhaps this is what makes the narrative feel so far ahead of its time. Jacobs of course calls for abolition, but she also calls for human rights and humanity on multiple levels – she indicts everyone from her “kind” white lover (who is willing to treat his own children as property), to a Black preacher (whose warning that Jacobs may be condemned for her sexual history sentences her to years of shamed silence), to the liberal Northerners (who claim to oppose slavery while enforcing the harsh Fugitive Slave Laws), to even her beloved grandmother (who is sometimes blinded by her bouts of anxiety and religiosity). Jacobs’ refusal to let anyone off the hook – least of all herself – is grounded in an implicit sense of faith, of possibility. We can *all* do better, she seems to be telling us, we *must* all do better.

Nearly 150 years after the publication of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, interest in the text has surged. It is being read, taught, and studied extensively, and now performed, thanks to a stage adaptation by playwright Lydia R. Diamond. Jacobs finds a perfect collaborator in Diamond, whose interest in *Incidents* seems to lie not in its incidents, but in its neo-utopian vision. Diamond’s play, *Harriet Jacobs*, places a version of the narrative of Jacobs’ life alongside an inquiry into what we may think we already know about her life. This juxtaposition pointedly performs the question that artists and historians often ask in private, but too rarely put at the center of their work: “Why are we telling this story?” The play does not answer this question, but it implies that if our goal is to learn from the past, we are not served by telling and retelling the same story, learning and relearning the same lesson. “You’ve heard about that,” says Harriet in the play, after a gruesome description of the way slaves are treated on a plantation, “or at least something like it. This is not what I wish to tell you.” Diamond’s text, like Jacobs’, asks us to consider all the ways we *don’t* understand history, all the ways we have become comfortable with one kind of narrative of slavery, and by extension, with one kind of narrative about race, class, gender, power, and privilege.

Jacobs and Diamond, both writing in times and places removed from the incidents they recount, share a keen understanding of the images their audiences have already absorbed of the institution of chattel slavery, and both attempt to use those images in the service of their particular goals. For example, Diamond has set some scenes in the play in a cotton field – though she was well aware that Jacobs lived in North Carolina, a state that grew not cotton, but tobacco and corn. Yet here – like Jacobs who, describing the mistreatment of a slave, concludes, “These God-breathing machines are no more, in the sight of their masters, than the cotton they plant, or the horses they tend” – Diamond invokes cotton metaphorically – as an easily recognized symbol of the labor of slaves in the American South. Diamond then goes on to treat the image of the cotton field in a series of surprising ways – a site for fantasy, beauty, and romantic games. When Diamond re-introduces a familiar role for the cotton field – as a site for a brutal beating by an overseer – it is thrown into stark relief against the lingering sense of beauty and

possibility. While we might once have felt familiar, even comfortable, with the cotton field as a symbol of slavery, we are now experiencing the same image as unfamiliar, uncomfortable, unknown. “I promise that you may believe you have heard it, you may believe you know this,” Harriet says in the plays opening moments, “and I suggest that it is slightly beyond knowing, because still, I hear the stories, I live the stories and I do not yet understand.”

In this most fundamental way, the play hews faithfully to the essence of Jacobs’ life and work. To reach her audience, Diamond, like Jacobs, embroiders with the neo-utopian thread of image, metaphor, and emotional appeal. Each asks her audience to imagine (and re-imagine) the experience of living inside the “peculiar institution” of slavery for Black and white Americans, men and women, free and slave, rich and poor. Each asks us to consider that for those who lived its reality every day, slavery was difficult to comprehend, and that even now – or especially now – it remains “slightly beyond knowing.”

Perhaps as we become more comfortable with the idea that some parts of our history are slightly beyond knowing, the more comfortable we can become with Jacobs’ and Diamond’s neo-utopian vision of America. They insist that we carry the past with us humbly, aware of its mysteries, but not paralyzed by its weight, and not overwhelmed by its shadows – moved by romantic imaginings of our shared future, rather than by imperfect recollections of our shared past.