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Interiority as Abolitionism

Slavery was critical to the United States' economic growth of the late 18th and early 19th century. Half of all U.S. export earnings came from one crop: slave-grown cotton ("Confronting"). It is now understood that this economic success came at the cost of the mental and physical well being of slaves. However, at the time, many people in the United States considered slaves to be insentient property. In Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1860), she details how her master, Dr. Flint, considers her his property: "he told me that I was made for his use, made to obey his command in *every* thing; that I was nothing but a slave whose will must and should surrender to his" (Jacobs 29). Slaves wrote first-person narratives to reveal their physical and psychological anguish, and therefore argue for the abolition of slavery. Jacobs' *Incidents* is a unique slave narrative because it focuses on a slave's interiority rather than their exteriority. "Interiority" in this essay refers to a person's psychological existence, while "exteriority" is a person's existence outside of their psyche. Jacobs uses a first-person narrative from a mother's perspective to gain the reader's sympathy then demonstrates that slavery's effects on a slave's interiority, regardless of the slave's exteriority, are reason enough for abolition. She argues that exterior concession to slavery, as in following her master's orders and not attacking him, does not imply interior concession to slavery. Jacobs wants abolition. Her book brings new and compelling reasons for abolition by focusing on interiority. Harriet Jacobs' use of interiority in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is an effective abolitionist argument.

Prior to *Incidents* (1860), most slave narratives combined descriptions of a slave's interiority and exteriority as a consolidated argument for abolition. In Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789), he details the dirtiness of his Middle Passage journey: "the galling of the chains . . . the filth of the necessary tubes, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying" (Equiano 79). Equiano then reflects on his emotional state and his changing impression of whites: "Every circumstance I met with served only to render my state more painful, and heighten my apprehensions, and my opinion of the cruelty of the whites" (80). In Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* (1845), he describes his Aunt Hester being whipped by her male master in great physical detail: "he commended to lay on the heavy cowskin, and soon the warm, red blood (amid heart-rending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor" (Douglass 7). Douglass then depicts his trauma: "I was so terrified and horror-stricken at the sight, that I hid myself in a closet, and dared not venture out till long after the bloody transaction was over" (7-8). A slaver may have difficulty sympathizing with Equiano and Douglass' interior accounts. Their interiority depends on their intelligence and honesty. Based on the American slave codes and black codes of the 18th and 19th century, the average slaver believed blacks to be too inferior to have a solid interiority. Slave codes considered slaves to be property, not persons ("slave code"). Black codes included forbidding blacks to carry firearms, testify in court, or work in a skilled trade ("black code"). Also, by detailing both interior and exterior anguish, Equiano and Douglass imply that suffering one is not as bad as suffering both. A slaver might read these narratives and argue that if slavery were reduced to one form of anguish, it would be improved. If children suffocate on Equiano's ship and his apprehensions

don't heighten, slavery is improved. If Douglass' Aunt is whipped and he's not traumatized, slavery is improved. This creates an incentive for slavers to blunt and/or not acknowledge their slaves' emotions. Jacobs' *Incidents* addresses the issues of a sympathetic narrative and uncombined anguish. She gains the reader's sympathy using a first-person, mother's point of view.

Incidents (1861) was one of the first slave narratives written by an African American female ("slave narrative"). African American males had written the majority. If men wrote most narratives, one might infer that male slaves endured more hardship than female slaves. Her writing represented the female population whose suffering was lesser known. Jacobs writes in the first-person because interiority is best captured through this perspective. Every detail of the story is filtered through the storyteller. The reader sees that Jacobs, despite being a female slave, has human desires and emotions. Further than representing her gender, she utilizes her role as a mother to gain the reader's sympathy. In most cultures of the world, a child belongs to its mother. Jacobs summarizes a mother's innate attachment to her child: "She may be an ignorant creature . . . but she has her mother's instincts, and is capable of feeling a mother's agonies" (26). She describes how mothers conflate their own lives with their children's: "I saw a mother lead seven children to the auction-block . . . She wrung her hands in anguish, and exclaimed, 'Gone! All gone! Why *don't* God kill me?'" (26). To break the mother-child bond is heresy. If slave masters consider a slave mother insentient, they can justify breaking the bond. Jacobs challenges this belief by combining the rhetorical devices of first-person and motherhood to create an emotionally rich story the reader can sympathize with. She suffers interior anguish.

At the beginning of the book, Jacobs feels guilty about having children at all: "often does [a mother] wish that she and [her children] might die before the day dawns" (26). She does not want to perpetuate an institution that dooms them. However, she must give birth because her master wants it. Jacobs gets pregnant by the relatively benign Mr. Sands only to avoid getting pregnant by the cruel Dr. Flint. She feels empowered by having any choice at all: "There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment" (85). Mr. Sands and Jacobs have two children, Benny and Ellen, who become slaves by birth. Jacobs continues to feel ambivalent about having children, hating their shackled future and finding escape and love in their existence: "I had prayed for [Benny's] death, but never so earnestly as I now prayed for his life" (96). Benny has not yet been physically injured, but she knows he will at least suffer emotional torment during his life. She declares, "Death is better than slavery" (96). But the two parties, children and mother, continue living. The children fall in love with Jacobs: "O mother! you ain't dead, are you? They didn't cut off your head at the plantation, did they?" (134). Jacobs falls in love with them: "I loved them better than my life" (140). She never wants to be without them: "I feared the sight of my children would be too much for my full heart; but I could not go out into the uncertain future without one last look" (147). Later, Flint sends Jacobs to his son's plantation to be broken as a field hand. She is torn apart from her children. Though she receives no accompanying physical punishment the reader knows that this separation hurts Jacobs and her children. Slavery fractures the ties of a family who care about one another. From an exterior point of view, one cannot see the pain these two parties suffer. From an interior point of view, one cannot help but sympathize with Jacobs, and realize

that slavery can be emotionally punishing to slaves. From the first person perspective of *Incidents*, the reader is positioned in the mind of a slave mother. They experience the emptiness of not knowing one's family's security; the powerlessness of not controlling where one's children will live; the desperation of not being able to protect one's children. Slaves are emotionally vulnerable, and Dr. Flint understands this. Rather than raping her, he persists in making her acknowledge his mastery. Because he does not leave her with physical scars, does not mean she is not scarred.

Jacobs receives little physical punishment compared to most slaves. She is slapped but never whipped. Her master, Dr. Flint, once pushed her down the stairs but apologized: "Linda [Jacobs' pseudonym], I swear by God I will never raise my hand against you again" (Jacobs 118). Jacobs has no physical scars to show, but still suffers. She believes a poor farmer had a better life than any slave: "I would thousand times rather that my children should be the half-starved paupers of Ireland than to be the most pampered among the slaves of America" (49). Equiano and Douglass' argument for abolishment does not represent females' suffering of sexual abuse. Jacobs describes females as being under the constant threat of rape: "The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear . . . her owner, or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents . . . resistance is hopeless" (80). Females can have no exterior scars despite being physically abused. Sexual abuse can only be recounted through one's interiority. Jacobs is subjected to constant sexual advances by Flint, and so remains under his constant supervision. He believes he physically owns her, and so spends multiple years searching for her. She cannot demonstrate this trauma through exteriority. In response to Equiano and Douglass'

limited perspective, Jacobs uses interiority in *Incidents* to capture a female slave's mental anguish and create a new argument. A female's lack of exterior scars and resistance does not imply their consent. A "consenting" slave can want abolition.

From an exterior point of view, one might think Jacobs is consenting to slavery because she doesn't physically lash out like other slaves. For example, an old woman strikes her dead mistress: "[The old woman] gazed a while on [her dead mistress], then raised her hand and dealt two blows to the face, saying, as she did so, 'The devil has got you now!'" (74). Jacobs listens to Dr. Flint's orders. However, Jacobs does rebuff slavery when she can. Later in the book, Flint plans to "break" Jacobs' children by making them field hands. Jacobs devises an escape plan. It is her only option for protest: "Who can blame slaves for being cunning? They are constantly compelled to resort to it. It is the only weapon of the weak and oppressed against the strength of their tyrants" (154). Jacobs hides in the cramped attic of her grandmother, Aunt Martha, to give the impression that she has run away. She hopes Flint will sell her children to the more kindly Mr. Sands rather than risk having them run away as well. The plan works, but Flint continues to search for her. From an exterior point of view, and perhaps Flint's, one might think Jacobs has given up on her children to avoid her own punishment. But in fact, she risks death for the cause of her children's freedom. She spends seven years in a cramped, dark attic to ensure their safety. She watches them through a peephole, loving the sight of them, but under emotional stress because she could not be with them. She hates to see Benny bitten by a dog, and not being able to tend to him: "O, what torture to a mother's heart, to listen to this and be unable to go to him!" (186). Jacobs fights for abolition by diminishing its effects on her children. This is the decision of an emotional

person with interiority. Her demonstration is intangible, but just as with her love for her children, her feelings are unambiguous. She would rather sit in the attic and physically deteriorate than be a well-off slave: "Yet I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave, though white people considered it an easy one" (174). By staying in the attic, Jacobs is choosing physical pain over the emotional pain of slavery: losing complete control of her children and acknowledging Flint's mastery.

Even the most privileged slaves like Harriet Jacobs are denied basic human rights. Jacobs has no legal protection from Mr. Flint, even if she follows the law: "Yet the laws allowed [Flint] to be out in the free air, while I, guiltless of crime, was pent up her" (135). But Jacobs does have the intense love of a mother, and through *Incidents*, she demonstrates that being a slave is emotional. Slaves are not apathetic to this denial of human rights. Slaves like Jacobs are sometimes subjected to physical abuse, and sometimes physically lash out, but much of her suffering and resistance is internal. Sexual abuse might only leave interior scars, but it's still a reason for abolition. Abolitionist texts did not represent Jacobs' perspective, and so she portrays it in *Incidents*. She combines the rhetorical devices of a first-person perspective and motherhood to gain the reader's sympathy and then offers a new and compelling reason for abolition: the female slave's psyche. Harriet Jacobs' use of interiority in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is an effective abolitionist argument.

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