Fugitive Slave "Ex-Pat": The Myth of Northern Black Freedom in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

BY RYAN DAVID FURLONG

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William L. Andrews's pioneering *The North Carolina Roots of African American Literature: An Anthology* has found the early seedlings of US black literature to be firmly planted in the rich soils of North Carolina: "No other state in the American South has left a more indelible impression on African American literature before the twentieth century than has North Carolina."[1] Whereas white writers from North Carolina in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries offered us little in terms of establishing an American *belles lettres*, early black writers from the state – George Moses Horton, David Walker, Moses Roper, Lunsford Lane, Harriet Jacobs, Charles Chesnutt, Anna Julia Cooper, and David Bryant Fulton – have emerged today as vital contributors in grounding the very "*roots*," to use Andrews's earthy metaphor, of the African American literary tradition and a US national literature. In the case of Harriet Jacobs, Jean Fagan Yellin's herculean labors have resurrected her life and letters to canonical status. Most notably, Jacobs's autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), fueled her rapid ascension to literary fame as the most popular writer of early black North Carolinians. The book is now widely taught in classrooms across the United States, included in most college-level literature anthologies, reprinted in several critical editions and popular paperbacks, and written about regularly by literary scholars in a wide variety of journals and academic books.

In fact, Jacobs's transformation into a classic American author has not merely come about by critics' expansion of the US literary canon, but also as a result of a growing appreciation for her innovative re-workings of nineteenth-century literary discourses, complex thematic preoccupations, and politically-charged ideas, all of these in service to ending the South's "peculiar institution" vis-à-vis her

ABOVE **Harriet Ann Jacobs, 2002 (oil on canvas, 20x24) by T. A. Charron**

[1] William L. Andrews, ed., Introduction, *The North Carolina Roots of African American Literature: An Anthology*, (U of North Carolina P, 2006) 8.

runaway-slave story. Now, Jacobs certainly intended *Incidents* to stand in as a representative Southern tale of black female suffering, psychological torment, religious loss, sexual degradation, single motherhood, and familial discord. However, the book's opening epigraph – a brusque condemnation of slavery and invitation to Northern readers to join the abolitionist cause – was anonymously attributed to "*A Woman of North Carolina,*" a plea that situated Jacobs's narrative within a much more local setting and personal context: the Old North State. Otherwise put, Jacobs's book is a desperate account of her search for a country or region her family might be able to call home, whether under slavery in North Carolina or in "free" Northern cities like Philadelphia or New York. As *Incidents* attests, however, what it meant to be *in* "slavery" or *in* "freedom" for fugitive slaves was not as self-evident as one might suppose, but depended on multiple definitions of each term that could easily defy, exceed, or upset the neat and tidy regional categories of a free North or enslaved South. Even long after the chains of slavery had fallen to US abolitionism and the Confederacy's surrender to Union forces, African American writers would confront the problem of living as second-class citizens in a post–Civil War society in which notions of black "freedom" and "slavery" were routinely muddied or undercut, from segregationist housing policies and exploited black labor in the Great Migration north to the sharecropping farms and black codes of the Jim Crow South.

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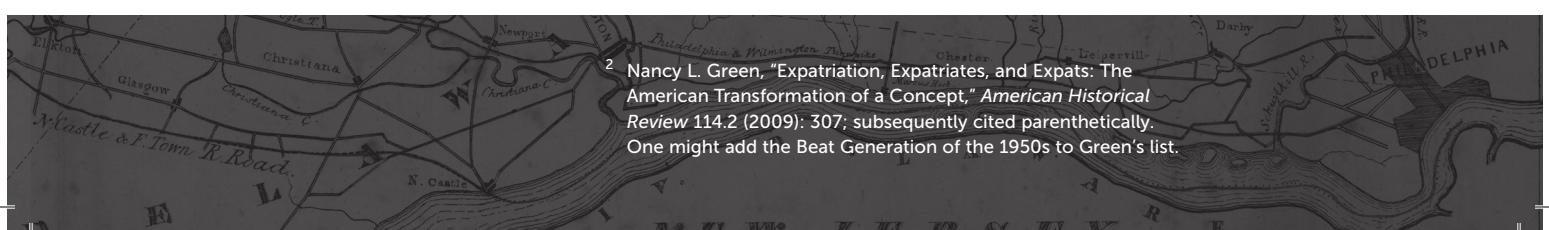
This, we might say, poses an interesting question for this *NCLR* special feature topic: do we consider runaway slaves like Jacobs expatriates, too? We tend to think of literary expatriates from the US as mostly wealthy and elite writers (and largely white) – Henry James, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway, to name an obvious few – who voluntarily left the US in search of political refuge, social experimentation, aesthetic inspiration, and philosophical truth. Nancy L. Green has historicized this popular image of the American "ex-pat":

> Most often, the noun "expatriate" [in the US] conjures up the interwar "Lost Generation" writers [who] . . . captured readers' imaginations and framed an important debate on exile and a comparative critique of the New World versus the Old. The term "expatriate" [also] has been extended backward to refer to Edith Wharton in the early twentieth century and beyond World War II to James Baldwin and Richard Wright. Encompassing everyone from the Henrys – James and Miller – to Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, from White Bostonians and New Yorkers to Black Harlemites, from those escaping sexual and social convention to those fleeing prejudice and discrimination, expatriate writers, artists, and musicians have become a romanticized icon.[2]

KAREN BALTIMORE designed this essay, the essays on Charles Chesnutt and Tony Earley, the interview with Allison Hedge Coke, and the poetry in this issue. She is a graphic designer and illustrator located in Cary, NC, and has been designing for *NCLR* since 2013. Find other samples of her work and contact information for your graphic design needs at www.skypeak.com.



[2] Nancy L. Green, "Expatriation, Expatriates, and Expats: The American Transformation of a Concept," *American Historical Review* 114.2 (2009): 307; subsequently cited parenthetically. One might add the Beat Generation of the 1950s to Green's list.

But, as Green further claims, the term expatriate in the US literary tradition has also carried a range of meanings "from simple residence abroad ('for a considerable amount of time') to the more definitive legal renunciation or destitution of allegiance, 'denationalization' or 'decitizenization'" (307). Etymologically speaking, *expatriate* – composed from *ex* ("out of") and *patria* ("native country") – also indicates a native homeland one departs for some foreign place. But, what happens when one, like Jacobs, neither has a "native country" to begin with, nor another place to live? Or, to return to Green, what if the life of this "romanticized icon," the literary expatriate, did not exist for blacks fleeing the slave South and confronting a racist North? How could they even reject US citizenship or national allegiance since slaves, by definition, were not US citizens or democratic equals, let alone considered human beings?

Jacobs's *Incidents* may subvert what we traditionally associate with the US expatriate writer because, as a nineteenth-century slave woman, her life afforded her neither the rights and privileges of US citizenship and therefore a sense of belonging to a "native country," nor the freedom to move "out of" the South in pursuit of a home to truly call her own. *Incidents* shows us, in fact, that far from later US expatriates (white or black) living abroad, fugitive slaves simply could not partake in the "ex-pat" lifestyle of voluntary choice, foreign escape, or relative freedom as homeless exile and racist dehumanization, instead, faced them at nearly every turn, North or South.

I would argue, first, that Jacobs exposes this racial exile in *Incidents* by disrupting the popular myth of Northern black freedom in pre–Civil War abolitionist discourse, the "slave narrative's conventional vertical trope of movement from South to North, from slavery to freedom," which Charles J. Heglar argues, reinforced the North as *the* site of genuine freedom for runaway slaves, while the South existed as its polar opposite: absolute slavery.[3] Likewise, from the 1830s onwards, abolitionist writers, editors, and reformers incorporated this mythos into many anti-slavery novels, autobiographies, short stories, and poems that readers knew all too well: black freedom necessitates escape from South-to-North.[4] But, as Stephanie Li points out, "Despite this seemingly obvious association, it is important to note that flight did not guarantee [or signify] unconditional

[3] Charles J. Heglar, *Rethinking the Slave Narrative: Slave Marriage and the Narratives of Henry Bibb and William and Ellen Craft* (Greenwood, 2001) 64.

[4] For example, Frederick Douglass, in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), was certainly not blind to the North's lack of freedom and equality – economically, socially, romantically, politically, or otherwise – but his first autobiography, by and large, portrays the North as a place of relative black freedom for himself and others. Similarly, Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (1858; published 2002), an anti-slavery novel written by a fugitive slave, paints the 1850s North in almost Edenic terms within her final chapter, aptly titled, "In Freedom." So too, white abolitionists invoked the North as a beacon of black freedom and hopeful possibility beyond the terrors of the South, like in "The Fugitive Slave's Apostrophe to the North Star" by John Pierpoint (1841).

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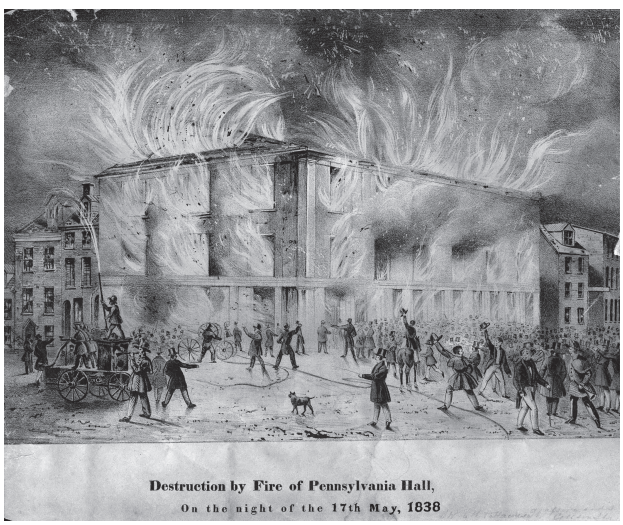
freedom for escaped slaves," as runaways like Jacobs confronted the bitter facts of Northern life for blacks: economic exploitation, racial discrimination, political oppression, and social unrest.[5] Jacobs's encounters with Northern racism impelled her to dramatize in *Incidents* not only black oppression in the South, but also the racist contradictions of a purported freedom to be found once slaves crossed over the Mason-Dixon line into Northern territory. Specifically, as *Incidents* plots Jacobs's escape from Southern slave girl to Northern free woman, under the pseudonym of Linda Brent, her chapter "Incidents in Philadelphia" playfully toys with the book's main title – *Incidents* – to tell a series of Northern incidents focused this time on how the city of brotherly love, Philadelphia, and other cities farther north were, for blacks, anything but free, brotherly, or loving.



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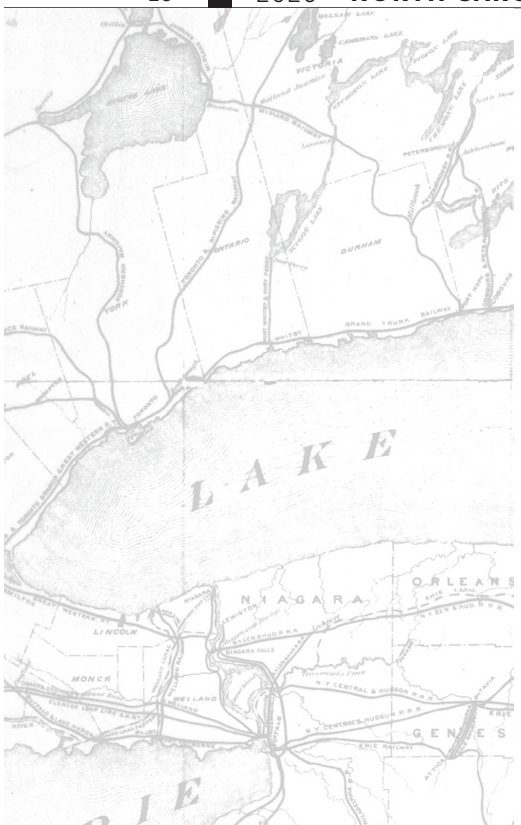
Critics' readings of race and place in *Incidents* have typically assumed and recycled this South (slavery) / North (freedom) divide by simply ignoring "Incidents in Philadelphia," in which the myth of Northern black freedom begins to break down.[6] Jacobs rewrites her main title *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* into her chapter "Incidents in Philadelphia" to reveal a series of incidents that shifts away from a *slave* girl's struggle for freedom to the complications of what exactly black freedom means in a Northern context. Here, Jacobs's political savvy and literary acumen disrupt simplistic narratives that suggest that the conversion from slavery to freedom automatically coincided with exodus from South to North. In "Incidents in Philadelphia," Jacobs instead establishes a counter-narrative

ABOVE **The burning of Pennsylvania Hall by white pro-slavery mobs at an anti-slavery convention, 1838 (an example of the racial tensions happening in Philadephia before Jacobs arrived in 1842)**

[5] Stephanie Li, *Something Akin to Freedom: The Choice of Bondage in Narratives by African American Women* (State U of New York P, 2010) 16–17; subsequently cited parenthetically.

[6] Marilyn C. Wesley assumes black liberation and freedom to be virtually, if not completely, synonymous with Northern place and space, even if it differs quite significantly between males and females ("A Woman's Place: The Politics of Space in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," Women's Studies* 26 [1997]: 59–72). So too, Jill LeRoy-Frazier accepts (il)literacy and gender to be prominent barriers for Jacobs to obtain freedom in the journey North, but fails to show how Jacobs problematizes this concept of a free North itself ("'Reader, my story ends with freedom:' Literacy, Authorship, and Gender in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," Obsidian III* 5.1 [2004]: 152–61. Jennifer Rae Greeson turns to broader cultural depictions in the North of illicit sexuality and female "degradation" and their relationships to Gothic urban fiction, something that Jacobs's *Incidents*, as Greeson argues, speaks to in her harrowing life under white sexual violence in the South ("The "Mysteries and Miseries" of North Carolina: New York City, Urban Gothic Fiction, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," American Literature* 73.2 [2001]: 271–309). Greeson here, unfortunately, misses the opportunity to extend her well-crafted argument on gender and sexuality to Jacobs's wider attacks on the North's hostile racial climate.



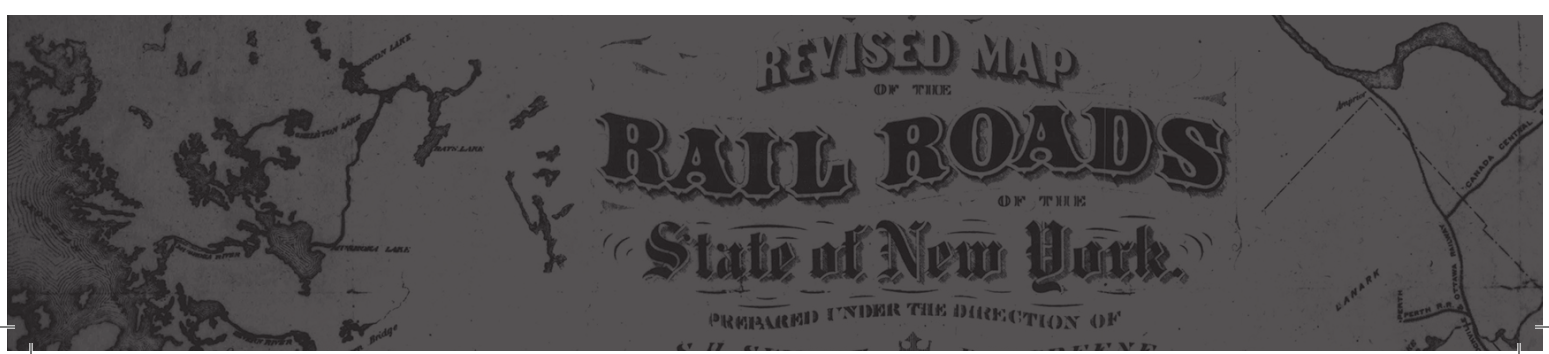
to this myth by alternating between optimism and pessimism, racism and reconciliation, hope and loss as she guides readers through Linda Brent's initial experience of the North as a place of both real and illusory freedom.

For Jacobs, black freedom transcends sectional geography, and she invokes several types of freedom in Philadelphia to unsettle the fictitious relationships between freedom and the North, slavery and the South, retelling the difficult and complex truths of Northern freedom when many readers would have been content to believe a fiction. Ultimately, Jacobs forces her white and black readerships to experience Linda's freedom in Philadelphia and its tragic disappointments, while also foregrounding anti-slavery and anti-racist characters as moral exemplars in the fight against racial injustice and slavery.

We can begin then, through this focus on "Incidents in Philadelphia," to see Jacobs as an "expatriate," but only in the broadest sense, living and moving between two regional worlds in the antebellum US, and critiquing its racism all along the way. Beyond that, however, Jacobs's *Incidents* is not an ex-pat book, as we commonly understand it, but instead a damning testimony against a country whose racial inequalities and human injustices forced slaves like Jacobs to wander and precariously exist as racial exiles in a nation they neither felt at home in, nor truly belonged to, North or South. Jacobs then, on this note, is a US "ex-pat" of a quite different sort – liminal, alienated, and unfree – *from within* (not beyond) the borders of antebellum America.

"Jacobs . . . is a US 'ex-pat' of a quite different sort – liminal, alienated, and unfree – from within (not beyond) the borders of antebellum America."

Turning first to Jacobs's titular wordplay, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and "Incidents in Philadelphia" correspond far beyond mere allusion to one another. Jacobs's stress on place in her chapter title "Incidents in Philadelphia" cues her readers to see for themselves what Northern freedom (or, a lack thereof) looks like for blacks. From the forty-one chapters listed in the book's table of contents, only "Incidents in Philadelphia" shares both Jacobs's direct allusion to *Incidents* and the "Incidents in" syntax of the book's title. By erasing the person and status of "*a Slave Girl*," "Incidents in Philadelphia" shifts its foremost sights from a female slave ("*Slave Girl*") to a Northern place ("Philadelphia") and its related "Incidents." The upshot of this subtly allusive, yet noteworthy play on words at the very moment Linda escapes from South to North encourages readers to pause and reflect on a series of Northern "incidents" that, surprisingly, offer little, if



"Jacobs was not only writing on behalf of suffering slaves all across the South, but also to criticize a Promised Land of Northern freedom for blacks far less 'free' than she had ever imagined it to be."

any, true freedom for Linda as her experiences of Southern slavery and Northern racism plague her at nearly every turn in Philadelphia.

But who exactly chose this title? From its earliest printings to the present day, the book has been received by critics and readers alike with understandable excitement due to its claim to be written by a runaway female slave, as Jacobs's subtitle indicates: "Written by Herself." Jean Fagan Yellin's groundbreaking research into Jacobs's *Incidents* has corroborated it as a story all Jacobs's own, and most critics have accepted Yellin's conclusions. Some, however, have suspected *Incidents* to be one of many white-authored slave stories from the mid-nineteenth century that attempted to ventriloquize black experience in the South. Among the more recent doubters of Jacobs's full authorship, Albert H. Tricomi concludes that the interventions of Jacobs's white abolitionist editor, Lydia Maria Child, were highly self-interested and overly involved, suppressing parts of Jacobs's autobiography, cutting out whole chapters, re-arranging plot events, and even selecting titles.[7] But, even if Child selected the titles *Incidents* and "Incidents of Philadelphia" (and Tricomi believes his "evidence falls short" [223]), Child's and Jacobs's like-minded abolitionist politics and the guesswork of the book's editorial history make the question essentially irrelevant, if not impossible to answer. In other words, regardless of who chose the book's main title, its central point cannot be mistaken: "*Written by Herself*" positions Jacobs as an educated black woman in authority to tell the truth about the horrific "*Incidents*" in her "*Life*" as "*a Slave Girl*." Moreover, as Frances Smith Foster writes, the title's pseudonym for Jacobs, Linda Brent, was printed on the book cover as a textual front to "use her experiences as representative of others," slave women across the South, and her loved ones closest to her North Carolina "home."[8] Thus, in Jacobs's penning of "Incidents in Philadelphia," the substitution of "Philadelphia" for "*Slave Girl*"

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ABOVE **Lydia Maria Child, editor of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, circa 1865**

[7] Albert H. Tricomi, "Harriet Jacobs's Autobiography and the Voice of Lydia Maria Child," *ESQ* 53.3 (2007): 219; subsequently cited parenthetically.

[8] Francis Smith Foster, "Resisting *Incidents*," *Harriet Jacobs and* Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: New Critical Essays*, ed. Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Zafar (Cambridge UP, 1996) 66; subsequently cited parenthetically.

indicates Jacobs was not only writing on behalf of suffering slaves all across the South, but also to criticize a Promised Land of Northern freedom for blacks far less "free" than she had ever imagined it to be.

Prior to the Civil War, Northern territory represented a New Israel in America for many slaves where, by and large, racial equality and human freedom flourished, understandably so, as all Union states by 1804 had either abolished slavery outright or set measures in place to gradually abolish it. During the antebellum period, anti-slavery political rhetoric buttressed this South (slavery) / North (freedom) view, while slave writers themselves dramatized their flights to the North with endings of marital bliss, racial harmony, human dignity, family reunion, spiritual conversion, civic engagement, and newfound livelihoods.[9] To be sure, not all fugitive slave writers ended their works with scenes in an Edenic or, at least, relatively "free" North suffused with racial possibility and human equality, but most did. Yet, with Jacobs's *Incidents*, and especially "Incidents in Philadelphia," her wholesale upending of this fantasy of Northern black freedom was an indictment against a North that was certainly not immune to many of the same racial problems in the South. Hence, in narrating the South-to-North plot structure and then turning it on its head, tossing readers' hearts and minds back and forth between the hopeful promises and pessimistic failures of black freedom, "Incidents in Philadelphia" repeatedly frustrates slave narrative audiences' expectations of a North they believed would make Jacobs, at last, free. Like other literary expatriates in US history, Jacobs criticized American society within a new, foreign place – the North – but, unlike them, found these very surroundings to be, in many ways, as racially alienating and socially degrading as Southern slavery.

> "We had escaped from slavery, and we supposed ourselves to be safe from the hunters. But we were alone in the world, and we had left dear ties behind us; ties cruelly sundered by the demon Slavery."
> – *Incidents* (158)

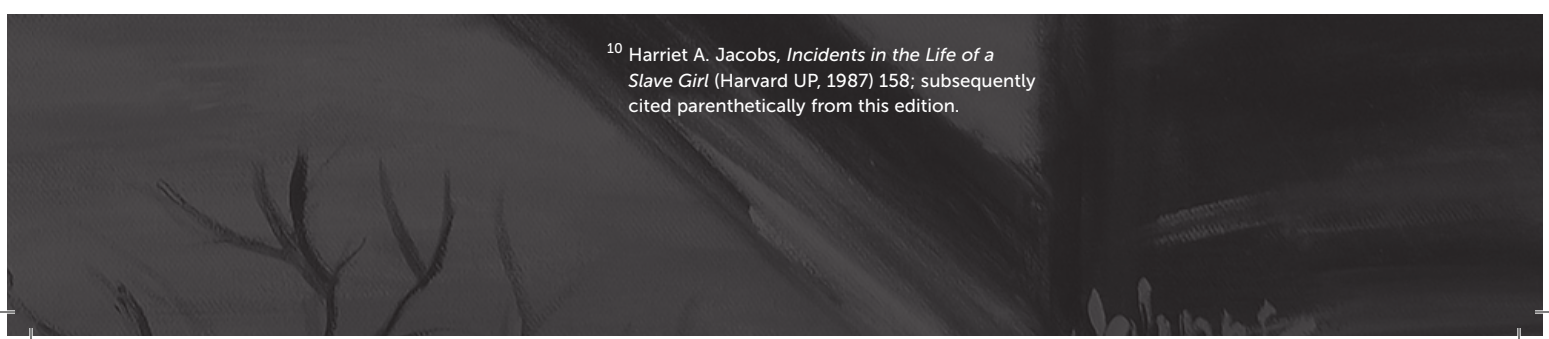
Jacobs, thus, begins to deploy this narrative strategy even before the chapter "Incidents in Philadelphia" opens by eliciting (and denying) readers' hopes for Northern black freedom. Upon Linda's first arrival by boat into Philadelphia, a radiant and peaceful horizon welcomes her to the North and suggests black freedom to be rooted in Northern soil: "The next morning I was on deck as soon as the day dawned. I called Fanny [her friend] to see the sun rise, for the first time in our lives, on free soil; for such I *then* believed it to be." As the "sun rise[s]" to illuminate Northern "free soil," Linda's exuberant joy matches the "reddening sky" and "great orb" that causes the "waves . . . [to] sparkle," while a "beautiful glow" incandescently emanates throughout the atmosphere with the promise of black freedom.

[9] As Foster explains, "Slave narratives generally ended when, upon arrival in the free territory, the former slave assumed a new name, obtained a job, married, and began a new happy-ever-after life" (65). Likewise, John Ernest writes, "In virtually all slave narratives, moreover, readers encounter stories of the journey to relative freedom in the North that quickly became part of the popular legends of the Underground Railroad, and many readers looked to these stories for brave escapes and heroic adventures" in pursuit of a free North ("Beyond Douglass and Jacobs," *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*, ed. Audrey Fisch [Cambridge UP, 2007] 227).

> "I had heard that the poor slave had many friends at the north. I trusted we should find them. Meantime, we would take it for granted that all were friends, till they proved to the contrary."
> – *Incidents* (159)

But, whatever "free soil" shines forth in this scene also reveals itself to be darkened by Linda's own words, "for such I *then* believed [the North] to be . . . as it [only] seemed" to be "free," hinting to the tragic future of Linda's first encounter with Northern racism in Philadelphia. Once on shore, Linda and Fanny feel temporary joy and relief. However, Linda's mind is quickly disrupted by the doubt they were not, in fact, "free," but merely "supposed" themselves "to be safe from . . . [slave] hunters." Linda's racial angst soon descends into utter hopelessness as Philadelphia's "brotherly love" instead becomes a "city of strangers," leading her to lament, "we were alone in the world . . . we had left dear ties behind us; ties cruelly sundered by the demon Slavery."[10] Linda's psychological distress and social isolation reveal the North's inability to provide actual freedom to blacks as slavery's evils transcend Southern borders by haunting her with tragic images of lost family and friends. It is also Linda's painful laments over fellow slaves left behind in North Carolina that also blurs the mapped territories and physical bondage of slavery. Because in Jacobs's writerly flights from hopeful optimism to racial disillusionment, and back again, she reveals the South (slavery) / North (freedom) dichotomy as an unstable border and belief in which the assurance of black freedom – in this case, Linda's psychological freedom – is made entirely uncertain as the North only literalizes one type of freedom for the slave: political asylum. Later on in *Incidents*, however, even political refuge becomes suspect as the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act codified and legalized into federal law what Linda feared most: "I had but one hesitation, and that was my feeling of insecurity . . . greatly increased by . . . the Fugitive Slave Law" (190). Linda, therefore, becomes an "ex-pat" as a Northern black woman, but without the opportunity, in body or in mind, to live freely or happily (or to escape).

As "Incidents in Philadelphia" begins, Linda further diverges from the traditional slave narrative by recounting several experiences that expound upon black freedom's many definitions. Linda reflects, "I had heard that the poor slave had many friends at the north. I trusted we should find them. Meantime, we would take it for granted that all were friends, till they proved to the contrary." Much like earlier, Linda's hope is reflected in rumors of Northern kindness and racial equality by "many friends" of the "poor slave," as "all were friends." Unsurprisingly, in "Incidents in Philadelphia," Jacobs highlights a "friendly" sea captain who conveys Linda to the North, introduces her to other good-hearted abolitionists like the Reverend Jeremiah Durham, delivers a personal message back to loved ones in North Carolina, and secures her a ticket on a northbound train.



[10] Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Harvard UP, 1987) 158; subsequently cited parenthetically from this edition.

In this way, Linda's initial transition into Northern life is a common scene of the fugitive slave's entrance into Northern freedom. But Linda's racial hopes are soon dashed, unexpectedly, after she expresses that, even though "[c]onstant exercise" and "frequent rubbing with salt water . . . nearly restored" her debilitated limbs from a seven-year stay in a Southern garret, the physical pains of slavery do not cease at the Mason-Dixon line (159). Later, Linda's limbs continue to "swell" in her journey north (168), "distrustful feelings" arise of Southern racists in a Northern context, and "insecurity" over her children's future in the South consumes her (169). Linda's bodily injuries, just like her emotional traumas, become another type of Northern bondage that reminds her readers of slavery's far-reaching, long-lasting effects in antebellum America.

Jacobs's "Incidents in Philadelphia" emerges then as an early African American literary experiment in the relationship between content and form: the chapter is an anti-racist critique against discrimination in Philadelphia (content) through a circular narrative (form) of black optimism and racial despair that unmasks Northern cities as "free" *In nomine tantum*. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Linda's confrontation with economic racism. For example, when Linda enters the Northern marketplace as a newly christened consumer, her purchase power is mainly practical: protection from slave catchers. She buys a veil and gloves to shield her from racist law and white prejudice *in the North*.[11] When the clerk asks Linda to pay "so many levies" for the disguise, she recalls, "I had never heard the word before, but I did not tell him so. I thought if he knew I was a stranger he might ask me where I came from" (159). Linda's newfound freedom with capital is clearly overshadowed by the darker costs of this transaction. A few moments later, Linda senses "many people" staring at her in "curiosity" to "decide to what nation . . . [she] belonged" (160). Philadelphia's racist discrimination and threats of re-enslavement strip Linda of whatever freedom she might possess with her new purchase power, leaving her at risk in a dangerous city and nationless in the eyes of others.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. JOHNNIE MAE MABERRY, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ART, TOUGALOO COLLEGE, TOUGALOO, MS

Fascinatingly, Jacobs problematizes the free markets of Northern economies by uncovering their racist antagonisms and white dominations, alongside their gross inequalities and familial destructiveness. One could argue that, in fact, Linda's fiscal empowerment lessens the farther north she treks. In New York, an Irish coachman

ABOVE ***Linda Brent (Harriet Jacobs) Seven Years Seclusion,*** **1997 (acrylic on canvas, 24x36) by Johnnie Mae Maberry**

[11] More optimistically, Virginia H. Cope reads Linda's purchase of the disguise as a clear demonstration of her "ability to compete in a vibrant, competitive market," as well as to hide her "ignorance" and "legal status" as a "free" consumer ("'I Verily Believed Myself to Be a Free Woman': Harriet Jacobs's Journey into Capitalism," *African American Review* 38 [2004]: 13; subsequently cited parenthetically).

> "The old feeling of insecurity, especially with regard to my children, often threw its dark shadow across my sunshine." – *Incidents* (169)

schemes to cheat Linda and Fanny out of their money, an instance Linda fears may "attract attention" from white onlookers (164). Upon reuniting with her daughter Ellen, Linda discovers Mr. Sands (Ellen's white father) has not kept his promise to emancipate her children (166). Linda also worries, "My greatest anxiety now was to obtain employment," but without "recommendation[s]," jobs fail to turn up in the North (168). Even her son Benny, a "colored" tradesman, is called a "nigger" by Northern white workers threatened by his competitive black labor (186). And so Linda realizes to save her children, she must "own" herself first because while she professes, at times, to be free in the North, her "insecure" condition as a poor, unemployed, and homeless fugitive slave makes it impossible for her children, and herself, to be truly "free" (166). Linda's expatriation in the North, then, is as racially estranging and psychologically crippling as it is nationally unsettling and economically crushing.

But, like the chapter's warm-hearted captain, Bethel Church, a local Christian community of Philadelphia's anti-slavery reformers, reverses Linda's estrangement through kindness and hospitality. The Reverend Jeremiah Durham welcomes Linda "as if [she] had been an old friend," offers her a bed for the night and warm meals, and even aids her in a search for a local friend in town (159). Mrs. Durham also greets Linda with a "kindly welcome, without asking questions," and her "friendly manner was a sweet refreshment." Mr. and Mrs. Durham's Christian love and anti-slavery politics represent for Linda the promise of black freedom, but, even here, readers are denied this pleasure when Linda suddenly "sighed" over her "own children" still enslaved in the South (160). Cope is right to register here Linda's economic freedom in the North, but the reader should not overlook its higher costs, the loss of family, and underestimate Jacobs's complex narrative structure intended to complicate the ready association between the North and black freedom.

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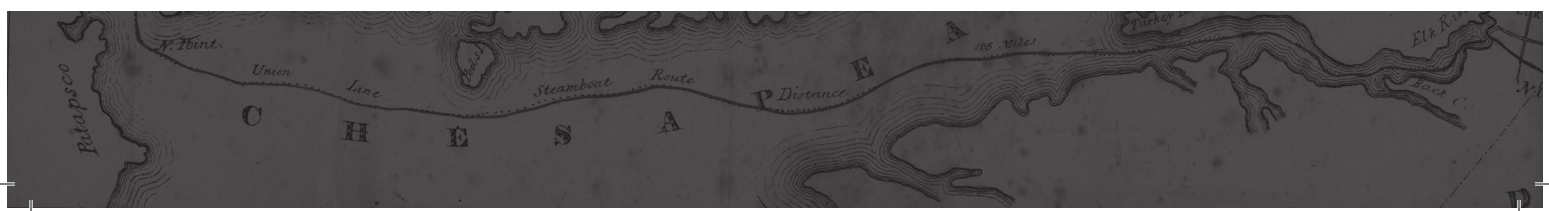
Midway through "Incidents in Philadelphia," Jacobs's narrative structure appears as a clear and distinct pattern in the chapter, laying bare the many freedoms realized and withheld from Northern blacks. As we have seen, Jacobs's category of freedom itself erupts into a multiplicity of racial promises that remain unfulfilled in the North. Not only is Linda extremely disheartened with her first impressions of Northern political asylum and legal protection for blacks, but also her bodily injuries, psychological traumas, economic insecurities, personal heartaches, and family disruptions wrought under Southern slavery – and now, Northern racism – obscure the

ABOVE **Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Philadelphia, July 1829 (lithograph, 8.75x11.5) by William L. Breton**

> "Your straight-forward answers do you credit; but don't answer every body so openly. It might give some heartless people a pretext for treating you with contempt." – *Incidents* (160)

South (slavery) / North (freedom) binary for her, pointing to Jacobs's view on the many-sided nature of black freedom. Recent scholarship, particularly Stephanie Li's *Something Akin to Freedom: The Choice of Bondage in Narratives by African American Women*, reconsiders Jacobs's sense of freedom as a "socially produced concept," whereby "freedom . . . is grounded" in the preservation and care of meaningful social networks" and where "freedom" in the fugitive slave experience resists reduction to just a politics of geography (13). Indeed, "Incidents in Philadelphia" demonstrates Linda's desire for social relationships and underscores the various freedoms won and lost in Philadelphia and beyond. This shows up, too, in unexpected ways. For instance, upon arriving in Long Island, Linda hesitates to reveal her status as a runaway slave since it could jeopardize the fate of "several people" (including herself), rendering her without any "alternative" but to be "crooked" and tell a "falsehood" (165). That is to say, it is because of her past under slavery that Linda cannot speak boldly or even truthfully since the North, run amok with Southern slave-hunters and Northern racists, is not safe for black runaways and thereby constrains their freedom of speech and moral conscience. Ergo, Jacobs subverts the myth of Northern black freedom again and again by embedding these different kinds of deferred black *freedoms* to exhibit their diverse and elastic meanings.

For Jacobs, however, not all black freedoms are created equal. Namely, it is the taboo of Linda's interracial sexuality from her Southern past in "Incidents in Philadelphia" that threatens to foil her personal reputation in light of the North's sexual and racial mores. On a walk to search out nearby friends, Mr. Durham questions Linda on an "extremely sensitive" matter: Linda's love affair with a white man, Mr. Sands, and her two illegitimate children. Linda retells this story, but Mr. Durham warns her, "Your straight-forward answers do you credit; but don't answer every body so openly. It might give some heartless people a pretext for treating you with contempt" (160). Linda hopes friendship and mutual understanding can be achieved; nonetheless, stigmas over her sexual liaisons and extramarital children inspire others' moral contempt and social exclusion. Linda's response to Mr. Durham is indignantly righteous: "God alone knows how I have suffered; and He, I trust, will forgive me. If I am permitted to have my children, I intend to be a good mother, and to live in such a manner that people cannot treat me with contempt." By making Linda's sufferings known, invoking God's forgiveness, and promising moral virtue, Jacobs establishes a wide gulf between her own moral goodness and a heartless North. But it is this public judgment over Linda's sexuality in the past that circumscribes her social freedom in the present amongst Northerners uncomfortable with her moral choices and personal relationships. Even as Linda arrives home, Mr. Durham's words still conjure up "great shadows from the mournful past" (161), that is, sexualized



and racialized specters from a Southern history that continue to haunt her far into a racist North.

Even so, Jacobs reverses Linda's sexual stigma by optimistically turning her readers' attention to the chapter's anti-slavery heroine, Mrs. Durham. As Mrs. Durham knocks on Linda's bedroom door with a "face all beaming with kindness," she asks Linda to meet a generous abolitionist willing to help her escape farther North (161). Like before, racial hope and moral goodness are univocally symbolized in Mrs. Durham's character, as well as the book's cast of other female abolitionists and sympathizers who support Linda along the way, like Mrs. Bruce who offers Linda and Ellen a "home" to live in (166). Mrs. Durham, of course, can be seen further as a sacred ideal of (black) female domesticity in nineteenth-century America in her well-ordered and loving home that she faithfully keeps up for her husband and children, something Linda desires for herself and her own children. As a moral exemplar, Mrs. Durham ultimately pushes readers to choose to either live as "heartless people" or become reformers, like herself, committed to slavery's abolition and racism's end, a plea to end the homeless condition Linda (and other blacks) experience in the North and the South.

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Still, Linda's hope for a black domestic haven and familial unity becomes quite difficult to find in the North. In the chapter "A Home Found," Linda's daughter Ellen lives in a white Northern home that is anything but idyllic. Under the control of Mr. Sands and Mrs. Hobbs, Ellen is nothing more than a piece of useable "property" and menial labor, making it nearly impossible for Linda to free her (170). Mr. Thorne attempts to sell Linda by mailing a letter to Dr. Flint on her whereabouts in New York, forcing Linda to flee to Boston, one of many scenes in *Incidents* in which white racism leads to black familial disruption. Benny and Ellen may reunite with Linda in Boston, but this brief bout of familial bliss pales in comparison to the "pure, unadulterated freedom" Linda experiences in England later in the autobiography (183). Most notably, this transatlantic voyage to England aptly underscores Linda's ironic expatriation and lack of freedom *within* her own home country as a fugitive slave – running from the slave South, trapped in a racist North – without the capability to truly free herself or find a free home. Like elsewhere in *Incidents*, "Incidents in Philadelphia" captures Linda's hope for Northern black domesticity in the character of Mrs. Durham, even as the "old feeling of insecurity," racial exile and homelessness, plague her dream of ever finding

ABOVE **Louisa Matilda Jacobs (called Ellen in *Incidents*), daughter of Harriet Jacobs, circa 1852–1870**

> "I longed for someone to confide in; but I had been so deceived by white people, that I had lost all confidence in them."
> – *Incidents* (169)

a true home – personally, regionally, or nationally – in her difficult journey North. The chapter thereby denies readers the cathartic pleasure of seeing Linda escape into a Northern "home" of true freedom for the black family, while also issuing a clarion call to Northern readers, yet once again, to wake up to Northern racism (169).

Women (especially white Northern women) were at the heart of this call to arms as *Incidents*, and "Incidents in Philadelphia" strongly appealed to these readers by dramatizing scenes of black female suffering and discrimination (especially her own). That is to say, Jacobs reclaims the authority to tell the complex realities of Northern black freedom when many expected far simpler fictions; as Jacobs's preface boldly states, "Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction" (1). Indeed, she voices her own truth to dispel the myth of the North's relationship to black freedom by humanizing Linda as a woman and an equal. As Thomas Doherty argues, "Whether a true believer [abolitionist] or potential convert," Jacobs "straightforwardly addresses" female audiences willing to listen with "'true womanly sympathy'" to a slave girl's story and "speaks to the reader as a (sexual) equal; always . . . play[ing] on values and emotions having a special force and immediacy for female readers."[12] "Incidents in Philadelphia" does likewise by shifting readers' eyes from the horrific incidents experienced by a slave girl in the South to the oppressive incidents of Philadelphia racism that oppress black women in the North. In scene after scene, Jacobs tugs hard on the heartstrings of her white female readers in order to provoke them to emulate someone like Mrs. Durham, whose kind treatment of Linda, "womanly sympathy" towards Linda's sexual biography, and radical abolitionist politics establish her as the highest standard of female sympathy and political activism for combating racial injustice in the North and the South (162).

But Mrs. Durham is also black and signals another of the key readerships targeted in *Incidents*: Northern "free" blacks. As Andrea P. Wolfe reminds us: "Beyond her abolitionist convictions, Jacobs clearly believed in the right of blacks to demand equal treatment from northerners and from the United States government."[13] Jacobs knew all too well how powerful a force Northern racism could be as it convinced many blacks to be just as racially prejudiced as whites. On a New York steamboat, for example, when Linda sits down for dinner at a white table, a black servant quickly interrupts her in a "gruff voice" and hollers, "Get up! You know you are not allowed to sit here" (175). In exposing Northern "free" blacks' own complicity in racism, it is no coincidence Jacobs spotlights Philadelphia's Bethel church as a model for black abolitionism in "Incidents in Philadelphia" since the community harbors fugitive slaves, supports anti-slavery politics, and builds interracial social networks. Far from racial apathy, black

[12] Thomas Doherty, "Harriet Jacobs' Narrative Strategies: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," *Southern Literary Journal* 19.1 (1986): 82

[13] Andrea P. Wolfe, "Double-Voicedness in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 'Loud Talking' to a Northern Black Readership," *ATQ* 22.3 (2008): 518.

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abolitionists like Mr. and Mrs. Durham and the "anti-slavery friend" (mentioned later in the chapter) are self-sacrificial and benevolent and understand Northern black freedom to be, at best, only a partial truth (161). Jacobs, therefore, denies her target readerships, white and black, the pleasure of indifference from anti-slavery and anti-racist politics as she takes up the mantle to present ideal reform-minded characters in the fight to end slavery and racism. So, too, Jacobs's choice to represent black abolitionists aiding and abetting fugitive slaves, like Linda, in a city of white "strangers" who fail to lovingly empathize and serve blacks, powerfully reveals Northern white citizens' direct complicity in the oppression of black communities. If whites would not speak up for their black neighbors in the North, Jacobs urged blacks themselves to "stand up for [their own] rights" and not be "trampled under foot by [their] oppressors" (177).

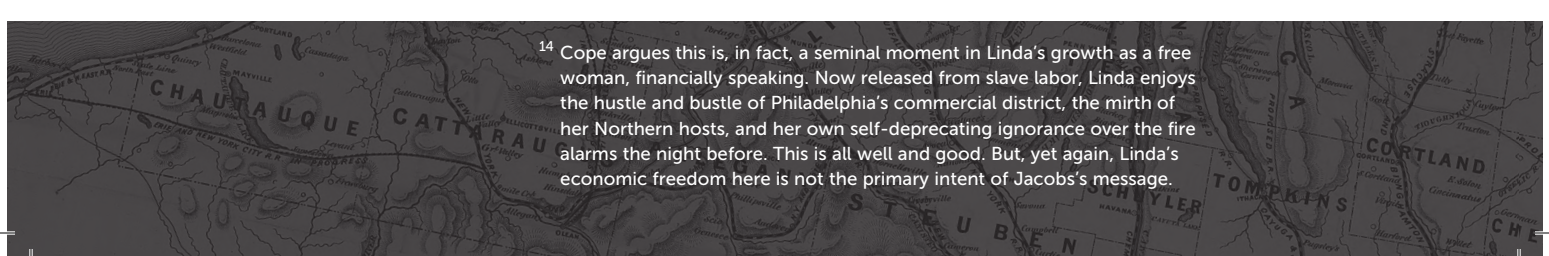
"Incidents in Philadelphia" also brings to light slavery's psychological traumas that refused to be repressed in Linda's mind after she had escaped North. After Linda's encounter with Philadelphian abolitionists, she falls asleep with confidence in Northern freedom: "I verily believed myself to be a free woman." But, as Linda falls asleep, alarming "fire-bells" soon rudely awaken her to racial terror in the middle of the night. As Linda frantically dresses, the violence of slavery comes to her mind: "Where I came from, every body hastened to dress . . . on such occasions. The white people thought a great fire might be used as a good opportunity for insurrection" and "colored people were ordered out to labor in extinguishing the flames" (161). Linda wakes Mrs. Durham's daughter amidst the chaos, but the child is unfazed: "'What of that? . . . We are used to it. We never get up, without the fire is very near. What good would it do?'" Linda's indelible fears over the fearful meanings of Southern fire – forced labor, insurrectionary violence, and white retaliation and brutality – are relived in a Northern context, reducing her psychological identity

ABOVE **Lithograph of wharves along the Delaware River at Walnut Street, Philadelphia, circa 1850 (from which Jacobs would have boarded the steamboat to New York)**

from "free woman" to "ignorant child" (162).[14] Here, it is the haunting power of mental trauma and cultural misunderstanding she suffers under Southern slavery that makes Linda's belief to be a "free woman" only a passing illusion as specters from the Southern past terrorize Linda's psychic life well into Northern territory.

By the chapter's conclusion, Jacobs exposes Northern freedom to be nothing more than a myth for blacks. And she saves her most climatic incident – a northbound train – for her readers' greatest disappointment. Northern freedom (finally) appears hopeful for Linda, and others, as "Incidents in Philadelphia" ends: Mrs. Durham improves Linda's education, Fanny is found to be "well contented," and Linda even visits an artist's room with portraits of black children that come to signify a hopeful future for her own mixed-race children. But Linda soon learns the contradictions of what it means to be a Northern "free" black of low social status, even as artists raise them up in the high aesthetics of portraiture: Mr. Durham fails to procure first-class train tickets for Linda because Northern trains racially exclude blacks from those cars. Linda recalls it as the "first chill to . . . [her] enthusiasm about the Free States" and remembers how it "made . . . [her] sad to find how the north aped the customs of slavery" (162–63). Linda sees Northern racism as Southern slavery in new dress, and her disenchantment only worsens as she boards the "rough" and "crowded" train, as "stowed away" cargo in the poorest and dirtiest of cars. The scene is morally chaotic as the poor of "all nations" crowd together, alongside "screaming and kicking babies," men smoking and drinking "freely," while "coarse jokes and ribald songs" from the men become "sickening," "nauseat[ing]," and "disagreeable" to Linda. Just as literal smoke clouds Linda's vision, the smoke also figuratively obscures the possibility of black freedom as it distorts the nation's moral vision of *e pluribus unum* by stratifying blacks as racial inferiors in a Northern Jim Crow car (163). This racist incident would not be Linda's last as her exclusion from dinners, steamboats, carriages, hotels, churches, ship cabins, and homes in the book's post-slavery chapters all testify to the racial tensions of living in the US North. That being so, Linda's racial "expatriation" as a fugitive slave in the North leaves her without the South as a "native country" (*patria*), a free North to live "out of" (*ex*), or the US itself to call home. Hence, Jacobs concludes "Incidents in Philadelphia" with white racism, homeless isolation, and moral confusion as Linda rides the rails further North – the inverse of her original Northern vision of Philadelphia's "free soil" – in effect, rewriting the myth of Northern

> "This was the first chill to my enthusiasm about the Free States. Colored people were allowed to ride in a filthy box, behind white people, at the south, but there they were not required to pay for the privilege." – *Incidents* (162)



[14] Cope argues this is, in fact, a seminal moment in Linda's growth as a free woman, financially speaking. Now released from slave labor, Linda enjoys the hustle and bustle of Philadelphia's commercial district, the mirth of her Northern hosts, and her own self-deprecating ignorance over the fire alarms the night before. This is all well and good. But, yet again, Linda's economic freedom here is not the primary intent of Jacobs's message.

"Linda's racial 'expatriation' as a fugitive slave in the North left her without the South as a 'native country' (*patria*), a free North to live "out of" (*ex*), or the US itself to call home."

black freedom into a real-life account of the many freedoms denied to blacks all across the North. On the one hand, this striking image of Linda's racial relegation to the worst of Northern train cars based on the color of her skin is a potent call for the book's readers to cultivate a moral imagination and reform-minded politics drawn from Jacobs's anti-slavery and anti-racist characters. On the other hand, it is an ominous warning to a racist nation barreling down the wrong tracks. "Incidents in Philadelphia," ultimately, forces this question: what national destiny would Jacobs's readers choose?

In 1861, nearly twenty years after Jacobs's escape, she returned to Philadelphia as an author-activist selling *Incidents* to a city still rife with racial inequality and oppression.[15] But Jacobs's decision to launch her public literary career in the first Northern city that had promised and refused her freedom testified to her ardent commitment to living out the politics she had asked Northern white women, "free" blacks, and so many others to support. Jacobs, indeed, undermines the notion of the North as the site of black freedom in "Incidents in Philadelphia" in her post-slavery chapters, while simultaneously advocating for the total dismantling of Northern racism. In Jacobs's final chapter, "Free at Last," black freedom is only an ambivalent possibility in the North, one that Linda believes is an "improvement" upon her previous life under the "power of slaveholders," but, as she remarks, that fact ultimately "is not saying a great deal." As Linda complains, longingly, "The dream of my life is not yet realized" – that is, a "home of my own" (201). So perhaps Jacobs's return to Philadelphia, revisiting the place of "free soil" and its racist contradictions, put on display her devotion to realizing this dream of a new home – literal or otherwise, North or South, personal or national – which housed a promising future for blacks truly free from racial oppression, social dislocation, and personal exile that epitomized Jacobs's life as an "ex-pat" *within* a country that was not her own and had simply disowned her. Jacobs was not the iconic writerly "ex-pat" of twentieth-century America, like Gertrude Stein, John Dos Passos, or Allen Ginsberg. Instead, Jacobs was back in Philadelphia to tell her kind of an American "ex-patriate" story, her *Incidents*, which, in its literary publication, became her first attempt, in print and in public, to build that new home for herself and her race. ■

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ABOVE **Former boarding house of Harriet and Louisa Jacobs, Cambridge, MA**

[15] Jean Fagan Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (Basic Civitas Books, 2004) 143–44.