# SIGNIFYING IN *INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL:*

# HARRIET JACOBS' USE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH

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*Dedicated to:*

Doug, Natalie, Adam, Joseph, Nathan,

Stephen, Kayla, and Shane

*and my beloved*
Gideon

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## Introduction

Research on Harriet Jacobs' slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* exploded after 1981, when Professor Jean Fagin Yellin discovered textual evidence for refuting then-current claims that Lydia Maria Child was the author of this engrossing story. Child was indeed the book's editor, but Yellin discovered letters from Jacobs among the papers of abolitionist Amy Post that proved that the ex-slave was the author of her own narrative. Though the research this discovery engendered has been quite extensive, especially regarding the narrative's close adherence to the conventions of a sentimental novel, very few scholars have attempted to deal with a feature relatively unique to Jacobs' narrative: the use of African American English (AAE) in representing the speech of a number of her characters. Nor has any scholar exclusively focused on the authenticity of her representation of AAE. This paper, a first step in such an effort, demonstrates that Jacobs' use conforms to features found by linguists in their studies of contemporary AAE and Early Black English (EBE).

When Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was published in 1861, it was to sustained acclaim. One reviewer wrote:

> If this narrative of the terrible experiences of a noble woman in slavery could be read at every fireside in the free States, it would kindle such a feeling of moral indignation against the system and its guilty abettors, and such a determination to resist and exterminate it by every legitimate and rightful means, as would put an end, at once and forever, to all those projects of compromise by which politicians are now endeavoring to "reconstruct" the broken Union between the North and the South. (Yellin, *Papers* 333.)

Such a response to *Incidents* was in the mind of Amy Post, who in 1852 wrote to her good friend, Harriet Jacobs, and suggested that it was time for her to tell her story of

slavery to the world. Post was deeply concerned about Jacobs' mood; recent letters indicated that Jacobs was troubled about money and depressed that she saw no way to reunite her far-flung family. Jacobs' brother and son had shipped out to Australia to look for gold and her daughter was away at school in upstate New York. Jacobs' employer, Mrs. Nathaniel Willis, had recently (and without Jacobs' knowledge) bought her freedom and that added a burden of guilt, as well as some muted outrage. Jacobs wrote to Post that "the freedom I had before the money was paid was dearer to me. God gave me that freedom; but man put God's image in the scales with the paltry sum of three hundred dollars" (Yellin, *A Life* 117). Post suggested that by writing her story, Jacobs could earn money as well as advance the cause of abolitionism.

Jacobs was initially reluctant to follow her friend's advice. Her tale began in an unremarkable way, just as most of the best-selling slave narratives by men: she was born into slavery but because of a childhood spent in a loving home instead of a plantation field, she was unaware of her status as a slave until she was six years old. It was then that Jacobs' mother died and little Harriet was sent to live with her mother's mistress. Even then, she lived an uncommon life for a slave, for she found it a "happy one" with "no toilsome or disagreeable duties." Little Harriet's mistress taught her to read and she was free to "run and jump," and to "gather berries or flowers." Because a "slave child had no thought for the morrow," these "were happy days" for Harriet (Jacobs 7). Her life again changed when she turned twelve years old and her kind mistress sickened and died. She had hopes of being freed, but she was left to her mistress's niece. This child was only five years old at the time, which meant that Jacobs was placed into the hands of her new

mistress's father, the lecherous Dr. Norcom (Dr. Flint in *Incidents*).

It was at this point that Jacobs' tale radically diverged from those of previously published slave narratives and caused her to later wonder whether she should put pen to paper. Her story, if completely told, is overtly sexual in nature. Even though only twelve years old, Jacobs experienced constant sexual harassment by Dr. Norcom. For reasons known only to him, Norcom never raped Jacobs, but was intent on having her submit to him willingly. He whispered lewd suggestions in her ear and when he realized she could read, sent vulgar notes to her through her own brother, John. After a number of years of rejection, Norcom began building a house for Jacobs to live in as his mistress. She knew further refusal would be pointless. Making a bold decision, Jacobs took another white man as a lover and became pregnant. She said that "it seem[ed] less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. 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" (55). Harriet Jacobs wanted not only freedom, but the freedom to live her life on her own terms: she wasn't happy to have her freedom bought by her mistress later in her life and here she decides that giving herself to another man is better than being forced. Although Jacobs felt "wretched" and "humiliated" in her "degraded" (56) state, she soon achieved a type of respite from the daily stalking by Dr. Norcom. As he put it, his wife was "disgusted by your conduct, [and] forbids you to return to the house" (59). For a few years, Jacobs was left in the comforting arms and home of her free grandmother.

Norcom never gave up, though. After her second child was born, he decided that it was time to break Jacobs and her children. He sent them off to a plantation run by his son. Soon, Jacobs realized that she must escape. While hiding in the garret of her grandmother's shed, Jacobs skillfully manipulated events around her. She was able to get her children's father to buy them from Norcom, then convinced the old doctor that she had escaped North. After seven years holed up in that garret, Jacobs finally made her way to freedom.

Because of the sexual nature of her story, Jacobs was initially reluctant to follow her friend's advice to write her story and advance the abolitionist cause. She did relent, though, insisting that she must "conquer her pride" (119) for the sake of her people by "telling her whole story" (126)—which included her sexual history. Jacobs desire for truth also included the style of her writing, for she decided to use African American English while depicting the speech of some of her slave characters. Although a number slave narratives had been published before Jacobs', most did not use AAE at all. African American English was prevalent in many publications during Jacobs' time, but it was mainly confined to novels about slavery by white authors (see Tricomi 619).

Why did Harriet Jacobs use AAE when other slave narrators eschewed the practice? For example, Frederick Douglass did not include AAE in his first autobiography, but when he alluded to it in later editions, he made "every effort to separate himself from the speech patterns typical of the slave community" (Sundquist 80). Douglass equated African American English (or "plantation speech") with ignorance (Douglass, *Life and Times* 202). In these later editions, he discussed his impression of

arriving at Colonel Lloyd's plantation: "there is not, probably, in the whole south, a plantation where the English language is more imperfectly spoken than on Col. Lloyd's" (Douglass, *Bondage and Freedom* 45). Douglass wrote that even the master's son, Daniel, "measurably adopted [the slaves'] dialect and ideas, so far as they had ideas to be adopted" (45). This insinuation of ignorance was made explicit when Douglass wrote that "Mas' Daniel could not associate with ignorance without sharing its shade" (45–6).

Douglass' outlook toward AAE speaks to another question that must be addressed in this paper: that of attitudes toward AAE, especially how the language was perceived by the audience of white women Jacobs sought to influence. And why does she have everyone in her own family speak in General American English? Why do some of her black characters speak in dialect, but others do not? In order to answer these questions, we must first determine what AAE is, where it came from, and its status as a form of English. This paper will discuss some of the theories surrounding the genesis of AAE (the "what"), what regular features scholars have determined make up authentic AAE (the "how"), and finally, the possible answers to the "why" questions asked above.

In answering the "why" questions, this paper will discuss a unique form of communication within the African American community called *signifying*. Signifying is an oblique way of using language. It is a nod toward some conventional way of communicating, whether that communication be through the written or spoken word. But along with the nod comes a wink to a subversive message underlying the communication that an initiate to signifying can understand, but those who are only steeped in convention can not.

Jacobs was familiar with the popular sentimental novels of her day and, most importantly, knew of one of their conventions: the use of AAE when slave characters spoke. Jacobs chose Lydia Maria Child, herself a sentimental novelist, as her editor. Jacobs' original manuscript has been lost to history, making a collation and comparison of her original work and the final, edited version impossible. Therefore, this paper compares Jacobs' AAE in *Incidents* with Child's own portrayal of the dialect in order to assess the possibility that Child herself imposed dialect on the narrative in order to make it read more like one of her own books (see "Whose Book is This?" by Alice A. Deck or "Lydia Maria Child and the Endings to Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*" by Bruce Mills). Although a relationship between Child's and Jacobs' AAE is not found, there is a relationship between the dialect represented in the writings of Child and one of the mid-nineteenth century's American literary icons: Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Jacobs initially saw Stowe as an obvious choice to ghost-write her story because, as noted earlier, she was at first reluctant to write it herself. But, in the end, instead of relying on Stowe's writing ability, Jacobs used Stowe's writing itself as a template, a literary starting line, and then subverted it to fit her own goals. Jacobs nodded and winked specifically towards Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin—and did so because of its author's behavior. While still hoping to employ Stowe as a writer, Jacobs contrived to have her daughter, Louisa, accompany Stowe on a trip to England, but Stowe would not take Louisa, saying condescendingly she was afraid that "if her [Louisa's] situation as a Slave should be known it would subject her to much petting and patronizing which would be more pleasing to a young Girl than useful and the English was very apt to do it and she

was very much opposed to it with this class of people" (Yellin, *A Life* 121). Jacobs was furious. She wrote to her friend Amy Post: "think dear Amy that a visit to Stafford House [a center of British reform] would spoil me as Mrs. Stowe thinks peting [*sic*] is more than my race can bear weell [*sic*] what a pity we poor blacks cant have the firmness and stability of character that you white people have" (121). Jacobs' animosity towards Stowe grew. As she was reading Stowe's book *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands,* she came upon Stowe's description of the introduction of an ex-slave, Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, to the Duchess of Sutherland. Stowe writes:

> To-day the Duchess of Sutherland called with the Duchess of Argyle. Miss Greenfield happened to be present, and I begged leave to present her . . . I was pleased with the kind and easy affability with which the Duchess of Sutherland conversed with her, betraying by no inflection of voice, and nothing in air or manner, the great lady talking with the poor girl . . .Miss Greenfield is a dark mulattress, of a pleasing and gentle face, though by no means handsome. She is short and thick set . . . I have never seen in any of the persons to whom I have presented her the least indications of suppressed surprise or disgust, any more than we should exhibit on the reception of a dark-complexioned Spaniard or Portuguese" (Yellin, *Papers* 222).

After reading this passage, Jacobs wrote to Amy Post that she "could not but laugh to day [*sic*] in reading Mrs Stowes [*sic*] new book page 319 her account of Miss Greenfield believe me my friend I would not have you[r] Mrs Stowe nor the Great Lady either" (221).

Her feelings of anger led her to decide that she must write her own story in order to explain the true nature of slavery for women and in a way that would shock, but also rouse to action, her white audience. To accomplish this she chose to use the conventions of white authors such as Stowe, manipulating them for her own purposes.

## A. The What

***The History of African American English and American Earlier Black English***

The history of languages is often controversial, even more so for the English language dialect African American English (AAE), along with its ancestor, American Earlier Black English (EBE). Because of the history of racism in the United States, these dialects were not recognized as distinct varieties of English, but as "inferior" or "illiterate" ways of speaking. Additionally, histories are often traced by the written record, but literacy was outlawed for slaves, so that avenue of memory and recollection was not open for them. Although there is an abundance of white-authored literature depicting black speech, these examples may often be suspect because of the politics of race in the United States.

As the scholarly study of AAE began in the early twentieth century, there were two competing explanations for its development. The first theory has gone by various names through the decades of the twentieth century, but is most consistently called the Dialectologist theory based on the assertion that AAE "derives primarily from the dialects spoken by British and other white immigrants in earlier times" (Mufwene 154–55). It supposes that slaves who spoke various African languages just learned the regional dialect of the whites that surrounded them. An early twentieth century researcher into AAE, George P. Krapp, concluded that "very little of the dialect . . . perhaps none of it, is derived from sources other than English" (Jones-Jackson 422). The proponents of this theory assume that only a few minor traces of the ancestral African language remain in

modern AAE and that the dialect itself has remained unchanged over the centuries since Africans were first brought to America.

The second of these original explanations is called the Creole hypothesis. The creolists maintain that AAE is a pidgin that developed into a creole. A pidgin is a contact language that occurs when two groups who do not speak the same language come together for specific purposes, such as trade. A pidgin is an impromptu, simplified language that the two groups develop together. A creole is often a pidgin that stabilizes into a language handed down through the generations. Creoles that develop from a pidgin usually draw heavily on the lexicon of the dominant group (for the purposes of this paper, General American English or some British English dialect) while retaining some features of grammar of their own language. Some creolists (see De Camp 1971) believe that AAE began with the pidgin that slaves developed to communicate with one another, as they initally would have spoken various African languages. This pidgin would develop somewhat further as they began to communicate with certain whites, but that was not always necessary. Other creolists believe that the initial pidgin was developed on the coast of West Africa as whites began to trade with the Africans there (see both Stewart and Dillard). It developed further as the slave trade grew and the African slave-traders began to communicate with the various Africans who were brought to the coast to be sold to whites. No matter where the pidgin was first formed, both groups of creolists agree that the initial pidgin developed into a creole on the islands off the American continents and spread from there to the plantations of the American south.

Varying forms of this earliest African American language are still spoken on the islands of the Caribbean and in some isolated coastal communities of South Carolina and Georgia (there the creole is called Gullah). But the creole hypothesis claims that, these remnants notwithstanding, AAE has changed greatly over the years, although a remainder of the original creole is still found in some of the features of contemporary AAE.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, other theories have been proposed. Linguists such as Walt Wolfram took data from studies such as those of black expatriates who have lived in isolated communities in Nova Scotia (where they moved in the 1800s), Dominican Republic (where they moved in the 1820s), and secluded groups in Appalachia and South Carolina. Although these linguists assumed that their isolation would not encourage any evolution in their language, they found the opposite true. These linguists proposed a neo-Anglicist theory for AAE, saying that, although the dialect is based on Early European American English, it has not remained stagnant. Therefore, contemporary AAE is quite different from the Early European American variety. They stake out a position that the changes come from the evolving nature of AAE in the twentieth century, and not from any underlying influence of an original African language.

A final hypothesis straddles the Anglicist and Creole hypotheses. It is called the substrate hypothesis and "argues for durable substrate influence that was part of earlier African American English and perpetuated in the contemporary version of [AAE]" (see Wolfram and Thomas for complete definitions of the various theories regarding the origins of AAE). A substrate is an original language that influences a language that displaces it. The proponents of the substrate hypothesis have studied black enclaves that

show a remarkable resemblance to early European American dialects spoken in North America. There are differences in some pronunciation and grammar, and this theory suggests that these differences are from the influence of a native African tongue.

Whatever its genesis, linguists agree that instead of being a regional dialect like many varieties of English in white communities, AAE has become a super-regional and ethnically-based dialect. Although more mobility has been available to blacks in the last few decades, a persistent pattern of segregation served as a foundational social environment for developing and maintaining a distinct language variety based on race.

## B. The How

### *Features of African American English and American Earlier Black English*

The features of AAE can be divided into a few major categories: phonological; pre-verbal markers of tense, mood, and aspect; other aspects of verbal tense marking; nouns and pronouns; negation; questions; existential and locative constructions; and the use of the complementizer/quotative *say* (see Rickford 4–9). For the purposes of this study, only the categories of features used by Harriet Jacobs will be detailed. Of course, we have only written evidence for earlier forms of AAE. In order to discuss phonological features in Jacobs' narrative, we rely on her nontraditional spellings as representations of pronunciation.

The phonological features of AAE include a reduction or deletion of the final consonant in word-ending consonant clusters. Rickford says that this is especially prevalent in words ending in [t] or [d] (4). For example, General American English (GAE) *old* becomes *ole,* or *hand* becomes *han'*. Further, a single consonant at the end of a word, when it is preceded by a vowel, is often deleted. Thus, GAE *cat* becomes *ca'*. In contemporary AAE, this second feature is not as frequent as the first (4). Additional features are listed below, with illustrative examples from Jacobs and linguist John Rickford (see Rickford 4–9).

a. AAE replaces the final [ŋ] with [n] in gerunds (progressive -ing); this change is acceptable in many American English dialects; e.g., *workin'* for GAE *working* or *waitin'* for *waiting*.

b. The GAE voiceless [θ] is stopped and becomes [t] in AAE; e.g., *ting* for GAE *thing*.

c. The GAE voiced [ð] is stopped and becomes (especially word-initially) [d] in AAE; e.g., GAE *they* becomes *dey* or *that* realized as *dat*.

d. AAE deletes or vocalizes [l] after a vowel; e.g., *he'p* for GAE *help* or *toah* for GAE *toll*.

e. The vocalization or deletion of [r] after a vowel, especially when the next word begins with a consonant; e.g., *sistuh* for GAE *sister* or *fouh pears* (but *four apples*).

f. AAE deletes the unstressed initial or medial syllables; e.g., *'pears* for GAE *appears* or *p'raps* for *perhaps*.

g. AAE features the transposition of certain consonants (metathesis); e.g., GAE *ask* becomes *aks*.

h. The voiced fricative [v] becomes the voiced stop [b]; e.g., GAE *never* becomes *nebber* or *have* becomes *hab*.

i. AAE stresses the first rather than the second syllable in some words; e.g., *POlice* for GAE *poLICE* or *HI[GH]sterics* for *hiSTERICS*.

j. The dental suffix [t] or [d] is often deleted; e.g., *laugh* for GAE *laughed*.

In addition to the above contemporary AAE phonological characteristics, Harriet Jacobs used features that have been found to be qualities of what Edgar W. Schneider calls "American Earlier Black English" or EBE. Schneider studied the transcriptions of interviews with ex-slaves (as well as a handful of extant voice recordings) done under the auspices of the Federal Works Project (FWP) during the years 1937 and 1938. In analyzing these interviews, he was able to distinguish features of an earlier form of AAE. Many of these features are still found in the contemporary dialect, but some have

disappeared. Even though Schneider's work is based on language use later than Jacobs', his informants could have been born as early as the 1870s and therefore part of a generation whose language would have come from Jacobs' time.

Gullah is another source of Jacobs' phonological features. This language is a creole found on the barrier islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. For decades, these islands were extremely isolated, and linguists hypothesize that language change in the original creole, developed in the early days of slavery, was not affected in any significant way by exposure to English (see Turner 1–14). If the creolists (and to some extent, the proponents of the substrate theory) are correct, then Jacobs represented some features of an original plantation creole that spread from the Caribbean and barrier islands of North America, while the language was still in flux. Some evidence for Jacobs' features is also found in a study of an isolated community of both black and white residents in Hyde County, North Carolina (see Wolfram and Thomas 126–29 and 186–88), which is not far from the town of Edenton, where Jacobs was raised and served as a slave.

A number of these features are listed below:

a. The pronunciation of the vowel sounds [ɝ] and [ɛɹ] are lowered and rounded to [ɑɹ]. In the first instance, this may be Jacobs' attempt at replicating a Gullah pronunciation of this vowel sound, which shortens the [a] and deletes the [r], as in [æmi] for *army*. In the second instance, Jacobs may be trying to imitate the lowering and rounding of this vowel sound as spoken by older informants in the Hyde County, North Carolina study

(see Wolfram and Thomas 100); e.g., GAE *where* becomes *whar* and *learn* becomes *larn*.

b. In Gullah, [w] is pronounced as [v] (see Geraty xiii). In addition, the Hyde County study found that older speakers pronounce [w] as [ʊ] (see Wolfram and Thomas 126–27); e.g., GAE *will* is pronounced *vil/vill*.

c. The GAE word *bless* or *blessed* is pronounced *bress* or *bressed* in Gullah (Geraty 13).

Verbal tense marking is another category of AAE features. Again, most of Jacobs' features can be found in contemporary AAE, but a few must be traced back to Gullah or other EBE varieties because they are not found the current dialect.

Below are some features of AAE or EBE verbal tense marking found in Rickford and Schneider:

a. The use of *is* with plural and second person subjects instead of *are;* e.g., *you is gone* for GAE *you are gone*.

b. The past tense regularization of irregular verbs; e.g., *knowed* for GAE *knew*.

c. *Have* is predominate over *has*, especially in EBE; e.g., *who hab* (*have* with [v] realized as [b]) *cut* for GAE *who has cut*.

d. EBE and AAE also have various predominate forms of irregular verbs; e.g., *sees* for GAE *see* in first person singular; or EBE or AAE *gives* for GAE *give* in second person singular.

e. The perfect tense in EBE can be expressed by a form of *be* or *have* plus a past participle or by *is* (which can be contracted to *'s[e]*) and a past participle; e.g., *white man is got* for GAE *white man has*.

f. The use of *got* instead of *have/has* (to possess) or the use of *got to* instead of *have/has to* (this feature is shared with other Southern North American dialects); e.g., GAE *I have to* becomes *I got to* in EBE.

g. AAE and EBE adds the morpheme *-s* in the first person singular for regular verbs; e.g., *I walks* for GAE *I walk* or *I spells* for GAE *I spell*.

h. For the third person plural, EBE and AAE add the *-s* morpheme; e.g., *dey finds* for *they find* (also the replacement of [ð] with [d]).

i. AAE and EBE have special plural forms for some irregular verbs; e.g., *children* (the GAE plural form of child) is pronounced *chillern* in EBE (and can be found in AAE).

j. EBE sometimes adds the suffix *-[e]n* to the past tense of *hear* (the GAE *heard* becomes *hearn*) (Schneider 91), based on other past participles that are similar (e. g., *ride, rise, and write* become *ridden, risen, and written* in GAE).

k. Some AAE and EBE words (as well as Southern American dialects) form their past by a non-GAE vowel change; e.g., *brung* for GAE *bring* or *gub* for GAE *gave*. These forms are analogous to the GAE past tense form for sing *(sung)* and ring *(rung)*.

The above lists for pronunciation and inflection differences show many, but not all, of the differences between AAE (plus EBE) and GAE. No such list could be exhaustive, as there are many differences in language use among regions and socio-economic groups. But there is another difference which does not fall into the above two categories. It is the use of double negation. For example, in GAE, one would say "He doesn't do anything." A perfectly correct AAE form is "He don't do nothin" (Rickford 8).

Finally, the last attribute that must be discussed when studying literary AAE is not a feature of the language at all. It is a literary device that purposely misspells a word based on its standard (GAE) pronunciation. For example, *been* is often spelled *bin,* or *says* written as *sez*. This purposeful misspelling of words is called eye dialect, because it looks like dialect when reading but almost always conforms to the GAE pronunciation. The technique is often used by writers to emphasize the illiteracy or socio-economic status of a speaker.

***Use of AAE in Jacobs' representation of dialect***

In this study, a thorough reading of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* indicates that the dialect features used by Jacobs correspond to linguists descriptions of AAE discussed above. Thus, a good argument can be made that Jacobs provided a reliable representation of the dialect. She did leave some inconsistencies, as not all black characters speak the dialect and even those that do, do not speak dialect at all times. This will be explored later in the discussion of Jacobs' purposes in using dialect. The table below lists the features of AAE that are found in her characters' speech, as well as her written representation of words containing those features and GAE spellings.

| FEATURE | JACOBS' USAGE | GENERAL AMERICAN ENGLISH |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Unstressed syllable reduction | 'pears | appears |
| | 'bout | about |
| | p'raps | perhaps |
| | 'long | along |
| | 'nuff | enough *see also 27* |
| | 'spect | suspect |
| | 'mong | among |
| | I 'specs | I suspect; *see also 20 and 2* |
| | stam'ring | stammering |
| | afore | before |
| 2. Final consonant cluster simplification | ole | old |
| | spen | spend |
| | Lor | Lord |
| | an | and |
| | roun' | round |
| | tole | told |
| | hans | hands |
| | chile | child |
| | understan' | understand |
| | 'specs | [su]pect; *see also 1 and 2* |
| 3. Deletion of dental suffix [t] or [d] | I'se laugh | I [have] laughed; *see also 15* |
| 4. Realization of [θ] as [t] | ting[s] | thing[s] |
| | tink[ing] | think[ing] |
| | tought | thought |
| | tanks | thanks |
| | someting | something |
| | notin' | nothing |
| 5. Realization of [ð] as [d] | dey['ll] | they['ll] |
| | dem | them |
| | den | then |
| | dat | that |
| | dis | this |
| | dar | there/their *see also 6* |
| | de | the |
| 6. Hyde County speakers realization of [ɛɹ] as [ɑɹ] | whar | where |
| | car | care |
| | thar | their/there |
| | dar | their/there |
| 7. Possible represention of Gullah vowel [ɒ] | sartin | certain |
| | larn | learn |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 8. Realization of [ŋ] as [n] (most American dialects allow) | rummagin’ | rummaging |
| | sarssin’ | sassing |
| | notin’/nuttin’ | nothing *see also 27* |
| | huntin | hunting |
| | findin | finding |
| | workin | working |
| | waitin’ | waiting |
| 9. Realization of [w] as [v] | vil/vill | will |
| | vish | wish |
| | vouldn’t vant | wouldn’t want |
| | ven | when |
| | vont | want |
| 10. Realization of [v] as [b] | hab | have |
| | gub | gave |
| | nebber | never |
| | debble/debbil | devil |
| | ebery | every |
| | ob | of |
| | lib | live |
| | gibs | gives; see also *16* |
| 11. Realization of [θ] as [d] | wid | with |
| 12. Gullah word or pronunciation | bressed | blessed |
| | ’em | them; *this is an approximation of the Gullah* um *for* him/her/it/them |
| | git | get |
| | fur | for |
| | tuk | took |
| 13. Use of *is* with plural and second person subjects instead of *ar* | you is gone | you are gone |
| | all is bought | all are bought |
| | where is you | where are you |
| | chillum is | children are; *see also 22* |
| | Linda, is you | Linda, are you |
| | when you is | when you are |
| | you is safe | you are safe |
| | what’s you crying | *contraction of* what is [are] you crying |
| | whar is you | where are you; *see also 6* |
| 14. Past tense regularization of irregular verb | ketched | catched [caught]; *see also 27* |
| | knowed | [knew] |
| | runned | [ran] |
| 15. Predominant *have* instead of *has* | who hab cut | who have [has] cut |
| | I’se laugh | *contraction of* I [have] laugh[ed]; *see also 3* |
| 16. Predominant irregular verb forms | who hab cut and make my | who have [has] cut and [made] my; *see also 15* |
| | I sees | I see; *see also 20* |
| | You nebber gibs | You never give; *see also 10* |

| 17. *I'se* as a reduced form of *be* and the EBE form of the present participle of *go* or a replacement of *have* | I'se gwine | I [am] going |
|---|---|---|
| 18. EBE feature for expressing perfect tense (*have* + auxiliary) | white man is got | white man has; *see also 19* |
| | you's got | you [have]; *see also 19* |
| 19. Replacement of *have/has* (to possess) with *got,* or *have to* with *got to* (shared with Southern American dialect) | white man is got | white man has; *see also 18* |
| | you's got | you [have]; *see also 18* |
| | I got to | I [have] to |
| 20. Verb inflection, first person singular; additon of -*s* morpheme | I gibs | I give; see also *10* |
| | I knows | I know |
| | I sees | I see |
| | I prays | I pray |
| | I only wants | I only want |
| | I larns | I learn; *see also 7* |
| | I spells | I spell |
| | I reads | I read |
| | I 'specs | I suspect; *see also 1 and 2* |
| 21. Verb inflection, third person plural; addition of -*s* morpheme | dey finds | they find; *see also 5* |
| | dey comes | they come; *see also 5* |
| | dey knows | they know; *see also 5* |
| 22. Special plural forms of irregular verbs | chillern/chillum | children |
| 23. Suffix -[e]n added based on other past participles | hearn | hear[d] |
| 24. Non-standard vowel change to form past | gub | gave; *see also 10* |
| 25. Stress on first rather than second syllable | high-sterics | hysterics; *stress on first syllable changes pronunciation of* [ɪ] *to* [aj] |
| 26. Double negative | ain't seen notin' | [haven't] seen [anything] |
| | don't want no | don't want [any] |
| 27. Eye dialect | 'nuff | enough; *see also 1* |
| | missus | Mrs. |
| | bin | been |

Jacobs was most accurate in her depiction of the phonological features of AAE. For example, she consistently replaced [ð], the voiced interdental fricative, with [d], replicating the AAE feature of syllable initial fricative stopping (unless otherwise noted, the features cited here are from Mufwene 88–89 or Rickford 4–9). For example, Jacobs depicted Aunt Aggie rebuking her grandmother when the latter is mourning the loss of her runaway grandchildren: "Is dat what you's crying for? . . . He's in free parts; and dat's de right place" (Jacobs 135). Jacobs also replicated the AAE feature of the stopping of voiceless interdental fricatives: that is, she replaced [θ] with [t]. Aunt Aggie continues her rebuke of grandma by telling her to pray to the Lord and "tank him for his goodness" (135). Jacobs did not replace the [θ] with [t] in the word *with,* however. Instead, she replaced it with [d], as she does when Betty tells her: "I'll sleep wid you to-night" (108). On the surface, this seems an inconsistent application of the features of AAE that govern the use of interdental fricatives. But researchers have noted that AAE speakers "pronounce the word *with* variously as [wɪt], [wɪd], [wɪf], and [wɪv]" (Mufwene 87). The voicing of [t] that results in [d] may be analogous to the voicing of the final voiceless interdental fricative in *with* when, for example, people say *without* and use the voiced interdental fricative instead. This often happens because the following vowel creates a highly voiced environment. So perhaps what Jacobs is capturing in her representation of *with* with a word-final [d] is that the following *you* makes for the vowel__glide environment for [t], hence the occurrence of [d]. This suggests that Jacobs was quite astute in her observations and representations of AAE.

Another phonological feature found in Jacobs' narrative is the realization of [w] as [v] in the word-initial position. The GAE words *will* and *won't* are often (but not consistently) rendered *vill* and *vont*. While the absence of an apostrophe is a form of eye dialect, the initial consonant replacement is the interesting thing here. In Gullah, the GAE sound [w] can be pronounced with the bilabial fricative [β] (Turner 28). And although this feature is not found in any of the literature as a facet of contemporary AAE, there is "evidence that [this feature] has changed from earlier forms" (Wolfram and Thomas 126). *The Development of African American English* details a study Walt Wolfram and Erik R. Thomas did on the dialects of both African- and Anglo-Americans in Hyde County, North Carolina. They choose this area because of its unique "socio-linguistic context involving a long-term, relatively insular, biracial situation" (4). The study's goal is to look at the results of "intra-community" interaction (specifically, the close proximity of the white and black communities) on AAE. In particular, the study compared AAE with a "distinct regional variety associated with Outer Banks English" (Gullah) and Pamlico Sound English, the dialect the Anglo-Americans speak in Hyde County (Wolfram and Beckett 3).

What is especially interesting is Wolfram and Thomas's notation of a pattern that has all but died out in Hyde County. Earlier studies indicated a "merger of [v] and [w]" in an earlier Pamlico Sound English dialect. Their interviews include a Hyde County speaker born in the late 1850s in which there are "a number of instances . . . the voiced labiodental approximant [ʋ] is transcribed for either [v] or [w]" (Wolfram and Thomas 126–127). The authors also found other records that show the transcription of the initial

consonant sound in wife to be either [ʋ] or [β]. Other examples of "[w] . . . realized as [ʋ] in syllable-onset positions" are words such as *"wound"* or *"midwife"* (127). Important to Jacobs' rendering of dialect is their statement that "the extent of the merger in terms of phonetic environment and lexical items suggests that it probably was quite robust in this region at one time" (127).

Hyde County is less than 50 miles from Edenton, North Carolina, where Jacobs grew up in slavery. It is more than conceivable that she is accurately reporting, in literary form, a feature of a North Carolina dialect that would have influenced pronunciation in the AAE dialect of the region. Her dialect may also represent remnants of an original creole from which both the North Carolina and Gullah dialects evolved. Her transcription of the [ʋ] sound as [v] is understandable given that the pronunciation of [ʋ] is close to the *"voi"* in *voila,* where the initial articulation is labiodental.

Other phonological or morphological expressions in Jacobs' narrative are consistent with features found in studies of EBE. She regularly presented *children* as *chillern* or *chillem*. Both of these forms were present in the FWP interviews (see Schneider 159). Although not as consistently represented as *chillem, gwine,* a form also found in EBE (240, 275-76), was also used by Jacobs. She frequently dropped the initial [h] in words such as *here* and *him* (*'ere* and *'em*). This seems to be a representation of the pattern of the historical deleting of the syllable-initial [h] sound in very early English pronouns such as *it* (for *hit*) and the negation *ain't* (for *hain't*) (Wolfram and Thomas 126). Although *hit* and *hain't* may seem to be examples of adding the [h] sound to

English words, the opposite is true. The Old English neuter singular pronoun was *hit,* which was later reduced to *it*. And *ain't* "long ago took over . . . the function of the obsolete *hain't,* formerly used indiscriminately for *have not* or *has not*" (Foley 101, italics Foley's). The study of dialect in Hyde County, North Carolina shows retention of the [h] sounds for the words *here* and *him*, especially in older African-Americans, but a deletion of syllable initial [h] in casual speech styles for most other words. Jacobs' use of this deletion seems to be a true record of the speech patterns she would have encountered.

Morphosyntactic representation of AAE in Jacobs' narrative is not as frequent as her depiction of the phonological features. She incorporated some features of AAE syntax, while shunning others. She never used zero copula, nor did she drop the possessive *–s*. She did add *–s* to verbs in all persons (first, second or third), which is an aspect of early AAE noted in Schneider (see 253, 258, 265–67, 269, and 276). For instance, an elderly slave, Uncle Fred, asked Jacobs for help in learning to read. After commenting on his remarkable progress, Uncle Fred replied to Jacobs: "you nebber gibs me a lesson dat I don't pray to God to help me understan' what I spells and what I reads" (Jacobs 73). The second person *give* (*you give*) is here rendered *gibs,* adding the verbal *–s* morpheme; first person *spell* and *read* also have verbal *–s* added.

But Jacobs was extremely consistent in her use of the predicate construction *I's* or *I'se* in *Incidents*. Although Rickford and Rickford state that the use of *I'se* for *I've* or *I'm* is a "convention of dialect writing rather than an accurate depiction" (Rickford and Rickford, 19), and say that *I'se* "is not heard today" (19), they concede that its use may represent a convention that "has since vanished" (19). That idea is supported by

Schneider. He says *I'se* is a perfectly valid rendering of *I am* (or *I was*) plus an EBE form of the present participle of *go*. *I'se* is also a correct EBE realization of *I have* (Schneider 125). In "I'se gwine to tell you all 'bout it" (Jacobs 108), Jacobs correctly used this form as "reduced preterit form of *be,* that is, as a variant of *was*" (Schneider 125). "I's bin huntin ebery whar for you" is an example of Jacobs using *'s(e)* to replace *have* (Jacobs, 152). Schneider says that *'s(e)* is a valid "variation in the perfective construction" and that although early AAE speakers did use *have,* the *'s(e)* form was used more frequently.

Jacobs never used the auxiliary verb *are* in her AAE dialect. She used *is* in all persons. Thus, she wrote "when dey finds you is gone" instead of "when dey finds you are gone" and "chillern is" instead of "chillern are" (96). The use of this form of the verb is found in the FWP slave narratives and is noticed by Schneider (125). Although the FWP slave narrators are not consistent in this use, its existence suggests that Jacobs represented a valid form of such usage in her AAE dialect.

Other reported aspects of AAE that Jacobs represented, but only rarely, are the double negative ("Dey don't know nottin," [Jacobs 103]); first syllable stressing ("high-sterics" [108]); and deletion of [r] after a vowel ("massa" [15]). She also used eye dialect, but infrequently. For example, she transcribed *Mrs., been,* and *catch* as *missis, bin,* and *ketch* (108, 193). Additionally, Jacobs replaced [l] with [r] in the word *bress* (73) (for *bless*). This correlates with Gullah pronunciations of the word (see Geraty 13) and Jacobs' consistency in its use when rendering dialect is quite remarkable.

Other words presented in dialect that can be traced to Gullah vowel sounds are *fur* [ɹ̩ ]for GAE *for* [ɔj]; *git* [ɪ] for *get* [ɛ] *get* (this is also a pronunciation found in many

Southern American regional dialects); and *tuk* [ʌ] for *took* [ʊ] (see Geraty 44, 47, 101–02). The final pronunciation of *tuk* for *took* is an inference-based interpretation of evidence of the pronunciation of other Gullah words with the initial [tʌ] sound. For example, in Gullah, *too much* is pronounced [tʌ′mtʃ].

### ***Perceived Problems***

Andrew Levy, in his article "Dialect and Convention: Harriet A. Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," argued that Jacobs was inconsistent in her use of AAE and called into question the authenticity of her dialect. But the evidence is strong that, in all aspects, Jacobs presented an AAE dialect that is true to her region and time. For instance, although no current AAE speaker has been noted to replace [w] with [ʋ], Jacobs did approximate that pronunciation by replacing the [w] with [v] in her black dialect of Edenton, in agreement with findings in nearby Hyde County, North Carolina.

Levy notes that Jacobs was sometimes *internally* inconsistent. "A single character," he says, "will say both 'going' and 'gwine,' or 'it was' and ''twas'" (Levy 209). Even if you take into account that there is often a continuum of use in all languages (all speakers of a specific language use a range of styles), this may be a fair criticism, until you consider the nature of the utterances rendered in dialect. Jacobs was very careful about the *content* and *substance* of speech recorded in AAE. Her dialect was for a very specific purpose which will be addressed later in this paper. But Levy goes further to say that Jacobs was not "consistent with the patterns described by nineteenth-century observers . . . or contemporary reporters" (209), although he does not state specific examples where this inconsistency is evident. He charges Jacobs with using AAE dialect as a way to "manipulate set responses from her reader" (210). Levy even goes so far as to say that "her particular version of the Slave Dialect is not so much an attempted transcription of a genuine African-American para-language, but rather a manipulation of a malleable *conventional* dialect" (210, emphasis Levy's).

Assuredly, Jacobs used her depiction of the AAE dialect for purposeful reasons and most certainly they include evoking "set responses" from her readers. But based on the research in this paper, one can argue that she was not simply manipulating a conventional dialect. Indeed, Levy's phrases "para-language" and "conventional dialect" are problematic. He says that a "para-language" is one that has an "overlapping vocabulary" with GAE, but also has "different syntactical rules, and double meanings designed to clarify ambiguity through context and tone to speakers while withholding information from non-speakers" (208). But studies have shown that AAE is much more than just that. And which dialect is the *conventional* one Levy is referring to? Is he turning around and referring to AAE as a dialect, or is he referring to American Southern regional dialect, or even some other dialect of GAE? If not AAE, why would it not be considered "conventional"? To be fair, Levy's article focuses mainly on the literary and sociolinguistic functions of Jacobs' use of dialect and only briefly discusses the accuracy of her representation. But according to his article, Levy has only researched features of AAE dialect in two works: *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* by Eugene D. Genovese and J. A. Harrison's "Negro English" (209). Neither is an in-depth linguistic source. Together they provide insufficient evidence to make a blanket censure of Jacobs' AAE.

**C. The Why**

Since Jacobs' use of dialect has been shown to correspond to recognized features of African American English, it should now be compared to the AAE dialect found in her editor's writing to determine if there is a possibility that Lydia Maria Child—who was an author of many sentimental novels and anti-slavery tracts—imposed dialect on Jacobs' text as claimed by Deck or Mills (see page 6). Because Child was a prolific author, this small study uses only her best-selling *Romance of the Republic,* published in 1867, for comparison. Although this novel was published post-bellum, and long after Child edited Jacobs' text, it was a popular book that many contemporary readers are familiar with, and it has abundant evidence of Child's use/misuse of AAE.

In order to compare these two authors' use of AAE in their writings, it is necessary to examine the extent to which each of their representations employ the features of the dialect outlined by scholars and to compare their uses of eye dialect. In addition, this study analyzes the relationship between various characters' language use and such factors as skin color, education, and status in the slave hierarchy.

A close comparison of *Incidents* and *Republic* demonstrates the presence of two different authors. Although the phonological features of AAE depicted in Jacobs' narrative have been shown to be valid, Child's AAE is quite different. She did not represent a dialect that consistently followed the features of AAE (as outlined by scholars). In fact, her dialect is so "thick" as to be practically unintelligible in parts. For instance, a house servant named Venus responded to a question regarding the whereabouts of her master with: "He said he war gwine to turrer plantation on business.

He leff dem flower dar, an' tole me to say he'd come back soon" (Child 137). There are a few recognized features of AAE in this response. The word *dem* is an example of a standard AAE feature where a syllable-initial fricative (ð in *them*) is produced as a stop (d in *dem*). Child also rendered leff, an', and tole in accordance with AAE features. All three represent a final consonant cluster reduction, but leff is problematic. By representing the pronunciation with two [f]s rather than one, Child exaggerated this feature of AAE, which produces the effect of highlighting the difference between the pronunciation of *left* in AAE and GAE. The *war* in the above sentence is problematic in another way: although using *is* instead of *am* or *are* in first- and third-person sentence construction is a feature of AAE and EBE, scholars have not identified the use of *were* for *was*.

Although *gwine* was noted by scholars as a possible representation of *going,* inaccurate representation of other words is rampant throughout Child's novel. The use of *turrer* for *the other* is in the above sentence as well as other places in the book. Additional representations of pronunciations for which there is no linguistic evidence include *pooty* for *pretty, curus* for *curious, hus* for *house, yer* or *ye* for *you, ab-lish-nishts* for *abolitionists, perlite* for *polite, fotch* for *fetch, grat* for *great,* and *wakum'd* for *wakened*. And this list is not exhaustive.

Unlike Jacobs' narrative, Child's novel is rife with eye dialect. Examples include *Missis, hansome, sperit, bin,* and *tought* (for *taught*). Jacobs rarely resorted to eye dialect, and the few times she did have been noted above. Jacobs was very careful to use her

AAE in a way that will not highlight the "condition" of the speakers or undermine their message.

Child depicted all slaves (and all of her black characters are slaves at one time or another) as using AAE, with only one exception. This character is George, who although white, was enslaved by a baby-switching in infancy. Although he was a slave and was intimate with slaves all of his life, George speaks in GAE. His language reflects his race. Another character, Tulee, although a slave, speaks in a very limited AAE dialect. She has spent most of her life in the company of "refined" whites who have given her every opportunity for education and advancement (every opportunity except freedom). Although thus "refined," Tulee, it seems, must speak in some form of AAE because authors and readers in Child's time used language as a marker for race. But in reality, language arises from a variety of environmental and social influences. Jacobs, while not entirely free of the thinking of her time, tried to represent language in a more accurate, sophisticated, and respectful way. But she did not, like some other authors of slave narratives, feel the need to disparage AAE or pretend that it wasn't used by the most admirable characters.

Although Tulee must speak in some form of AAE, she does pride "herself on speaking like white people." She likes to visit "black Tom" and "black Chloe," which was "the greatest treat Tulee had" (82) and "often remarked that she couldn't understand half [of Chloe and Tom's] 'lingo'" (82). Additionally, Tulee's mistress Floricita learned AAE "to perfection, and excited many a laugh by her imitations" (82).

The humor elicited by parodies African American dialect was one of the goals white authors aimed for by using AAE in their novels. Both Floricita and Tulee's attitude toward the dialect reflect the general white attitude. It was devalued, disparaged, and used to dehumanize African Americans. In fact, anti-abolitionists of the time used African Americans' language to "prove" their inhumanity, or at the very least their inferior status as a type of human. An undated anti-abolition tract entitled "The Six Species of Men" lists these so-called "species" in order, from the most superior to the least. The six species are: the Caucasian, the Mongolian, the Malay, the American Indian, the Esquimaux, and the Negro. In this tract, one of the characteristics of the negro that make him the "lowest *Species* in the human family" (Smith 18) is his language. The anonymous author says that every "*Species* of created beings has its own specific language. The hiss of the snake, the growl of the tiger . . . are all peculiar, and one cannot exchange with the other. . . . Suffice it to say the vocal cords of the negro differ widely from those of the white man, and no typical negro can speak the language of the white man, no matter how much effort may be made to 'educate' him" (15).

Child, along with other white novelists during Jacobs' era, even those sympathetic to the abolitionist movement, advanced these "theories" of language and [in]humanity by their depiction of AAE as a humorous, uneducated, and even infantile dialect. Child was a few times explicit in describing AAE in a belittling way. Floricita eventually lives with Mrs. Delano, an elite Northern woman, and the two meet up with Tom in New Orleans. "Tom went on to state, in 'lingo' that had to be frequently explained, that he wanted to run away to the North . . ." (Child 261). Tom's speech is so unintelligible to the refined

Northern lady that the more “experienced” Floricita must explain it, much like a child’s babble can be understood only by those who are constantly exposed to it.

The antebellum period, the time in which Jacobs was writing her narrative, had a preeminent literary star: Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe’s novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin,* was hugely influential in abolitionist circles, and Jacobs was certainly exposed to the book. The inventory of the library of her northern employer, Nathaniel Parker Willis, includes a copy of Stowe’s book. And Jacobs referred to one of Stowe’s characters in another letter to Amy Post: “I sometimes wish that I could fall into a Rip Van Winkle sleep and awake with the blest belief of that little Witch Topsy that I never was born” (Yellin, *Papers* 213).

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s use of African American English in her novel is typical of most white-authored abolitionist fiction of the antebellum period. To many of these writers, the tragedy of slavery was not that the “Negro” was enslaved, but that “innocent whites were sometimes abducted into slavery, or that mulattos, quadroons, and octoroons” were enslaved (Levy 265). Stowe imbued her title character with racist characteristics that were prevalent in abolitionist writings. Uncle Tom had “the soft impressible nature of his kindly race, ever yearning toward the simple and child-like” (Stowe 231). Stowe’s “full-blooded” black characters are ignorant, lazy, childish, content with slavery, and comedic. Their speech is often depicted as humorous. Stowe rendered African American English inaccurately as a means of being humorous. For instance, her character Black Sam (who was named such because he was “about three shades blacker than any other son of ebony on the place” [Stowe 95]) speaks on the subject of

persistence to his fellow slaves. He says: "Now, yer see, when a feller stands up for a thing one day and night, de contrar do next, folks says he an't persistent . . . But let's look inter it. . . . Here! I'm a trying to get top o' der hay. Wal, I puts up my larder dis yer side; 'tan't no go; —den, cause I don't try dere no more, but puts my larder right do contrar side, an't I persistent? I'm persistent in wantin' to get up which ary side my larder is; don't you see, all on yer?" (Stowe 139). As in Child's depiction of AAE, Stowe's is rife with inaccuracies. *Yer* is not AAE or EBE for the GAE *you;* there is no formal AAE feature for deleting the final [i] sound as in *contrar* for *contrary; der* is AAE for *there,* not *the; yer* is not an accurate AAE rendition of *here;* etc. Stowe was accurate in her depiction of *de* for *the, den* for *then,* and *dere* for *there* (although others spell this word as *der*).

Sam's speech typifies the white-authored sentimental novel's attitude toward the language of African Americans. As in the infamous minstrel shows, these novels depicted a tongue that reinforced "demeaning stereotypes of African Americans—as comical, childlike, lazy, and in the words of Nathan Huggins, 'unrestrained in enthusiasm for music—for athletic and rhythmical dance' and 'insatiable in . . . bodily appetite'" (Rickford and Rickford 30). The black novelist James Weldon Johnson complained "of the artificiality of conventionalized Negro dialect; . . . [of] its exaggerated geniality, childish optimism, forced comicality, and mawkish sentiment; of its limitation as an instrument of expression to but two emotions, pathos and humor . . ." (31). Uncle Tom's dying speech to his old master, George, is typical of the "childish optimism [and] mawkish sentiment" Johnson writes about: "Ye mustn't, now, tell Chloe . . . how ye

found me;—'t would be so drefful to her . . . tell her the Lord's stood by me everywhere and al'ays . . . the poor chil'en, and the baby;—my old heart's been most broke for 'em, time and agin! Tell 'em all to follow me—follow me! Give my love to Mas'r, and dear good Missis, and everybody in the place! Ye don't know! 'Pears like I loves 'em all! I loves every creatur', everywhar!—it's nothing *but* love! O, Mas'r George!" (Stowe 590, emphasis Stowe's).

Sam and Uncle Tom's language is typical for all of Stowe's dark black characters, but her mulatto or quadroon characters never speak African American English. The women possess "beauty of the most dazzling kind" and have a "peculiar air of refinement [and] softness of voice and manner" (54). Stowe's male mulattoes are "handsome person[s]" that have "pleasing manners" (55). George, whose master is also his father, is "intelligent" and "talked so fluently, held himself so erect, looked so handsome and manly" that his master feels him a threat (55). Compare this "intelligent," nearly white slave, with Stowe's description of Tom as a "poor, ignorant black soul" who is "not naturally daring and enterprising." The intelligent George escapes slavery, but the lack of daring and enterprise in a "full-blooded Negro" keeps him in chains until his death.

In contrast, specific racial background of Jacobs' characters that speak in dialect is never revealed. And Jacobs' AAE is never belittling. It is in fact quite the opposite. In each case, the speech acts transmitted in AAE are both empowering to the slaves and subversive toward the slaveholding society. Subversiveness lurks in the shadow throughout all of Jacobs' narrative. The very act of learning to read and write was against the law in the South during slavery. She not only thwarted that law, but then turned her

writing toward abolishing the statute, as well as the very institution of slavery. And although using AAE in sentimental novels (Jacobs' narrative is closely patterned after this genre) was standard, her motivation for including it in her story served different goals than those of sentimental fiction.

Every time a African American described as dark-skinned spoke in either Child or Stowe's novels, it was in dialect, with no perceived undercurrent of meaning beyond the dictionary definitions of the words. But Jacobs was very careful in her narrative about who spoke in dialect and why. None of her family members spoke in dialect. She pointedly wrote of their literacy and this may be one reason her family's speech was carefully rendered in GAE. But except for the mischievous Jenny, all of Jacobs' dialect speakers are portrayed as upstanding and sympathetic characters. In each of their utterances, with the possible exception of Jenny, there is a discernable objective to undermine the stereotype of the ignorant, humorous, or satisfied slave. Jacobs was *signifying* on the usage of AAE in sentimental novels such as *Romance of the Republic* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

The term *signifying* has multiple meanings and is one of the terms used for particular types of verbal play in African American society. Claudia Mitchell-Kernan describes signifying in the African American community as both "verbal dueling" and "a way of encoding messages or meanings which involves, in most cases, an element of indirection" (Mitchell-Kernan 311). She outlines the various verbal games that constitute signifying and gives the various names they go by in different parts of the country: playing the dozens, sounding, and joning. But she also shows that signifying can be the

“attribution of some implicit content or function . . . [that] is potentially obscured by the surface content or function” (312). She says that the “black concept of signifying incorporates essentially a folk notion that dictionary entries for words are not always sufficient for interpreting meanings or messages, or that meaning goes beyond such interpretations” (314).

For Mitchell-Kernan and other African American scholars such as Grace Sims Holt, signifying is indirection. Indirection, according to Mitchell-Kernan “means . . . that the correct semantic . . . signification of the utterance cannot be arrived at by a consideration of the dictionary meaning of the lexical items involved . . . [and that the] apparent significance of the message differs from its real significance. . . . Meaning conveyed is not apparent meaning” (325). Holt agrees and goes on to say that with signifying the function of words and phrases changes. But whites, who are “denied the access to the semantic extensions” of black speakers and writers—extensions such as “duality, connotations, and denotations”—can “only interpret” the speech act or written word “according to its original singular meaning” (Holt 154).

In his essay “The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique on the Sign and the Signifying Monkey,” Henry Louis Gates, Jr. says that signifying requires one to “dwell at [a] place between two linguistic domains” (Gates 245). To successfully maneuver between those domains safely, Jacobs required linguistic skill and a significant knowledge of both the explicit and implicit dangers inherent in representing both the language of authority and the language of the powerless.

Johnnie Stover argues that Jacobs' narrative is a unique social discourse that uses some of the traits of the speech of black women as a "subversive communication tool" (Stover 135). Jacobs wrote as a "product" of her "resistance to various oppressions" and used "the language of the oppressor to express that resistance" (137). She goes further to state that Jacobs "structure[d] her text by successfully subverting existing literary genres, particularly the sentimental novel" (134). And sentimental novels, in the case of white abolitionist authors, included AAE. Stover believes that Jacobs used "bits and pieces of communicative tools that she consciously and unconsciously adopted" (138) from her "mother tongue"(139)—a tongue which "grew out of a need to speak subversively" (140)—to construct her remarkable work of resistance. This adaptation, to Stover, is African American women's ability to "[merge] and [subvert] the literary tools that were available to them . . . and [to introduce] a unique and distinctive voice" (152) which renames its antecedents. She equates this renaming with Henry Louis Gates' notion of renaming as revising and revising as signifying (152).

Stover describes in detail the "communicative tools" and techniques African American women use to deal with oppressors. The first category of techniques includes "concealment, guile, hesitations, mumbling, secrecy, shifts in point of view, silence, and whispering" as tools of subtle resistance (141). The second category—masking—consists of "biblical allusion/allegory, dissembling, innuendo, ironic humor, laughter, misdirection, physical antics, sarcasm, satire, signals, song, and understatement" (141). Stover's third category—tools of flagrant resistance—includes back talk, impertinence, impudence, insolence, invective, irony, lying, rage, and sass (141). A close reading of

Jacobs' text shows how her speakers of AAE employ these tools of subversive communication and signify on both the use of AAE and the social standards found in sentimental novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Romance of the Republic*.

The first example of extended use of AAE in *Incidents* occurs when an "old black man" asks Jacobs to teach him to read (Jacobs 72). She "asked him if he didn't know it was contrary to the law" to teach a slave to read; although he was aware of the law, he still wanted to learn because he wanted to read the Bible. He says "it 'pears when I can read dis good book I shall be nearer to God. . . . I only wants to read dis book, dat I may know how to live; den I hab no fear 'bout dying" (73). Jacobs used dialect here to distract her reader from the shock of a woman flaunting the law. She was also clever to use the Northern white feelings toward religiosity. Her white readers might have quickly forgotten about the law-breaking when they focused in on the old man's desire for righteousness. Another subversive message rendered here in AAE is that literacy (explicitly, the ability to read the Bible) brings spiritual redemption. But implicit in this message is that literacy can also bring physical redemption, i.e., from slavery. Jacobs was masking her real intent by using biblical illusions and misdirection—the second category Stover outlines above.

Betty is one of Jacobs' most delightful characters and she speaks in AAE. Betty was the slave of a woman who despises Jacobs' owner, Dr. Flint (in real life his name was Norcom). His lasciviousness disgusted Betty's owner, and so she agreed to hide Jacobs after she ran away. Betty was responsible for caring for the runaway. Jacobs had a scare when she found out that Flint spoke to her grandmother and insinuated that he knew

where the runaway was hiding. Turning to Betty for more information, the runaway was told: “stay dar . . . till I sees if day know ’bout you. Dey say dey vil put thar hans on you afore twelve o’clock. . . . Dey’ll be disapinted dis time. Dat’s all I got to say. If dey comes rummaging ’mong my tings, de’ll get one bressed sarssin from dis ’ere nigger” (103). Here, Jacobs signified using flagrant resistance, even explicitly using the word “sass” (*sarssin*) in her text. Using a form of back talk, Betty hinted at the possibility of impertinence, impudence, and insolence on her part.

Another important speech Jacobs rendered in AAE comes from her grandmother’s friend Aggie. Jacobs’ grandmother was despondent because her son had run away from his master while traveling with him up North. She knew she would never see him again. But old Aggie scolded grandmother. She said,

> Is dat what you’s crying fur? . . . Git down on your knees and bress de Lord! I don’t know whar my poor chillern is, and I nebber ’spect to know. You don’t know whar poor Linda’s gone to; but you do know whar her brudder is. He’s in free parts; and dat’s de right place. Don’t murmur at de Lord’s doings, but git down on your knees and tank him for his goodness (135).

Not only was Aggie reprimanding grandmother for wanting what all women want (especially in the conventional sentimental novel)—their children surrounding the hearth with them—but she was celebrating the fact that he has broken the law and run away. This is flagrant resistance in the form of invective and, if not rage, then abundant anger.

A final example from Jacobs’ text has to do with the escaped slave Luke. Once in the North, Jacobs ran into Luke. They commiserated about the Fugitive Slave Law recently enacted, whereby northerners were legally bound to help slave owners in capturing and returning runaway slaves. Luke decided that the United States is just too

dangerous for him and resolved to go to Canada. Jacobs wondered if he had enough money to get him there. He replied:

> "Pend upon it, I hab . . . I tuk car fur dat. I'd bin workin all my days fur dem cussed whites, and got no pay but kicks and cuffs. So I tought dis nigger had a right to money nuff to bring him to de Free States. Massa Henry he lib till ebery body vish him dead; and ven he did die, I knowed de debbil would hab him, and vouldn't vant him to bring his money 'long too. So I tuk some of his bills, and put 'em in de pocket of his ole trousers. An ven he was buried, dis nigger ask fur dem ole trousers, and dey gub 'em to me." With a low, chuckling laugh, he added, "You see I didn't steal it; dey gub it to me" (193).

Jacobs said that she, even though more "enlightened," must agree "that poor, ignorant, much-abused Luke . . . had a *right* to that money, as a portion of his unpaid wages" (193, emphasis Jacobs'). Her enlightenment was that stealing is wrong, but she subverted (signified on) that notion by showing that Luke did not steal at all. Her rendering of the story in AAE tempered any aversion white readers might have had regarding Luke's adventure, for in white-authored literature AAE was a marker of ignorance. Although Jacobs seemed to play into the stereotype of the ignorant slave by calling him that explicitly, the clever way Luke obtained the money for his escape turns that view on its head and showed him, although illiterate, anything but ignorant.

If white authors used AAE to devalue, dehumanize, or at the least infantilize African Americans, Jacobs signified on this usage to empower her black speakers to resist white rule, white stereotypes, and especially white values. The white values that Jacobs signified on were epitomized in the sentimental novels of her day. These novels were written by white women not only to entertain also to instruct. Whereas novels by men celebrated the individual and the self-made man, women's sentimental novels

celebrated human connections (see Stover 137–38). In sentimental novels, human ties and loving relationships were necessary to meaningful existence, especially family ties. The hearth and home reigned supreme in this genre. The main themes were usually a desire for bonding with others (most often in a quest for a suitable marriage and home), and tensions occur when there was a violation of these loving bonds. The greatest tragedy was a severing of human ties. Linguistically, the language in sentimental novels was transparent; the goal was to communicate without impediment. And always, *woman* was humble, virtuous, self-effacing, with the author always invisible.

Jacobs used these values and characteristics of the white woman's sentimental novel and completely turned them on their head. Instead of the invisible, self-effacing writer, Jacobs wrote in first person and used asides to put herself directly into her text. Lines such as "reader, if you have never been a slave, you cannot imagine the acute sensation of suffering at my heart" (196) bring Jacobs to the forefront of the text. As illustrated in her depiction of AAE, instead of using language that is transparent or devoid of multiple meanings that may fail to communicate their full significance, Jacobs' writing is filled with implicit and often dissident meaning apparent only to a very close reader.

Jacobs initially tried to establish a bond with her white woman readers by espousing their values. She wrote of the slave mother's agony over losing a child to death: "In her agony she cried out, 'O Lord, come and take me!'" (13). White women could relate to such an agonizing loss, but Jacobs later signified on this loss by describing a mental torture more brutal than the physical whippings she also detailed, one which the

white woman would never have to suffer. With another aside to her white reader, Jacobs also signified on celebratory holidays in white society:

> O, you happy free women, contrast your New Year's day with that of the poor bond-woman! With you it is a pleasant season, and the light of the day is blessed. . . . Children bring their little offerings, and raise their rosy lips for a caress. They are your own, and no hand but that of death can take them from you. . . . But to the slave mother New Year's day comes laden with peculiar sorrows. She sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; . . . she has a mother's instincts, and is capable of feeling a mother's agonies. . . . On one of these sale days, I saw a mother lead seven children to the auction-block. She knew that *some* of them would be taken from her; but they took *all*. . . . I met that mother in the street, and her wild, haggard face lives to-day in my mind. She wrung her hands in anguish, and exclaimed, "Gone! All gone! Why *don't* God kill me?" I had no words wherewith to comfort her. (16, emphasis Jacobs').

This passage beautifully illustrates Jacobs' brilliant borrowing of all the characteristics of the sentimental novel and subverting them to point out the inhumanity—not of the African Americans—but of slavery. There is no reason to celebrate human connections in slavery, because they cannot be counted on to last. Although loving relationships were necessary for a meaningful existence in the white world, they only brought pain and agony in the slave's world because that greatest sentimental tragedy of all, severed human ties, was an everyday fact of life. Yes, some white women readers, like slave women, were sexually harassed and abused, raped, forced into unhappy marriages, and saw their children die. But the laws protected them and their families; no one would snatch a white mother's children from her and sell them or ship them to another state. But most white readers would only experience the violation of family bonds and the severing of loving human ties in the plot of novels. In a slave woman's world, these were frequent occurrences.

The basic unit of human bonds, the one that was depicted in sentimental novels as bringing the delight of home and hearth to the white woman—marriage—was also subverted in slavery. Jacobs dutifully recorded this additional affront to white women's values. In her youth, she and a free black man fell in love. The young man proposed to her, but she realized that it was hopeless because she "was a slave, and that the laws gave no sanction to the marriage of such" (37). Jacobs once heard her mistress

> abuse a young slave girl, who told her that a colored man wanted to make her his wife. "I will have you peeled and pickled, my lady," said she, "if I ever hear you mention that subject again. Do you suppose that I will have you tending *my* children with the children of that nigger?" (38, emphasis Jacobs').

Jacobs nodded explicitly to sentimental fiction as she ends her autobiography: "Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage" (201).

A virtuous woman's worth is far above rubies not only in the Old Testament, but in sentimental fiction as well. A white woman, in these novels, must retain her virtue or die, and Jacobs showed how this is impossible for the slave. Slave women had to not only submit to the licentious advances of their masters, but also faced the wrath of their mistresses as the "other woman." Jacobs' master harassed her sexually, but for his own unexplained reasons did not rape her. He wanted her to "willingly" submit to him. She refused and taunted him, saying that the man who wanted to marry her "would not love me if he did not believe me to be a virtuous woman" (39). But she knew that her refusals would only last so long, and signified on the trope of "virtue or death" by willingly taking a white lover.

Jacobs' master was infuriated when he discovered her "betrayal," after becoming pregnant. But it was this taking of a lover, and the subsequent two children, that would lead—not to death—but to freedom. The father of her children eventually bought them from Flint, and it was the desire to build a life with them that sent Jacobs into hiding and eventual escape. The desire for these familial bonds, so prevalent in the fiction of the likes of Child and Stowe, also played a central role in Jacobs' narrative. But she quickly pointed out that her eventual escape and the achievement of her goals were rare in slavery. Instead of providing an instructional manual for white women's values, Jacobs' writing asked them to refrain from judging women in slavery by standards completely foreign to that wretched institution.

Jacobs' signifying brilliantly illustrates what Karl Reisman says is a "reshaping of symbols and their ambiguation so that they can mediate at least two sets of cultural meaning" (Reisman 6). This "creative process" allowed Jacobs to "mediate between the symbols [she has] and those among which [she] finds [herself]" (6). Harriet Jacobs took on the "form from the immediate [literary] environment" she had to work in as a kind of "mask behind which, or through which, alternate meanings are conveyed" (7). *Incidents'* signifying masks and, at the same time (to close readers), illuminates "the maintenance of [a] dual cultural [system]" (9)—in Jacobs' case, the values and expectations of "womanhood" that are not permitted in the culture of slavery. Her signifying is, in Reisman's term, a "disguise . . . which permit[s] one to 'pass remarks' in front of somebody's face" (22).

Finally, Jacobs' signifying on the sentimental novel can also be viewed through the prism of the hidden polemic, a type of double-voiced discourse. Mikhail Bakhtin says that the hidden polemic "radically changes the semantics of [a] discourse . . . alongside its referential meaning there appears a second meaning—an intentional orientation toward someone else's words" (Bakhtin 107). It is the ability of an author to take someone else's discourse and impart her own intentions on it. This type of double-voicing allows an author to interact with discourse (for Jacobs, the dominant white genre of the sentimental novel) in a "hostile" way and force it to serve goals different from, or completely opposite of, the original intention. In the hidden polemic, an "other's discourse is not itself reproduced, it is merely implied, but the entire structure of speech would be completely different if there were not this reaction to another person's implied words" (107).

Double-voicedness brings us back to Jacobs' use of AAE in her narrative. Even though she had to be aware of her white audience's perception of the dialect as not just "non-standard," but "inferior," and equally aware of the racist theories that included AAE as a reason to categorize African Americans as "inferior" beings, Jacobs did use the dialect. But its use serves an entirely different goal than its original use in sentimental fiction. Instead of using AAE as a vehicle for humor or a marker of ignorance, Jacobs used it as an instrument for defiance, acumen, and resistance. By speaking in their "mother" tongue, characters display their knowledge of what is desirable and honorable in white society, how those desires are also their desires, and how the honor of achieving those desires is denied them. Thus, contrary to the beliefs of some critics, Jacobs makes

intentional and accurate use of AAE in order to serve her larger purposes in telling her story.

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