

Nineteenth-Century African American Women's Autobiography as Social Discourse: The Example of Harriet Ann Jacobs

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What happens when only one aspect of a language is allowed you—as woman—as Black? What happens when the language of ideas is completely removed and nothing is given to replace it?

—Philip 21–22

The power of black women's personal narratives emerging out of nineteenth-century America rested in their sociopolitical as well as in their literary contributions. These slave narratives and autobiographical texts, however, were either ignored, sentimentalized, or reduced in scope as addenda to the abolitionist-inspired texts produced by black male former slaves. More recent scholarship has recognized the value of nineteenth-century African American women's autobiography while not always acknowledging its uniqueness as an innovative approach to a genre that is specifically driven and shaped by black women's views of society, politics, and communication.

The typical nineteenth-century black woman's autobiography is much more than a personal narrative that merely remarks on her personal growth; it is a social discourse that applies a unique black woman's voice to the interpretation and recording of her life experiences within a historical context that saw black Americans attempting to establish their humanity and self-worth in the eyes of a dominant white American society that granted them neither. Harriet Ann Jacobs's 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, the black female slave narrative most often studied and anthologized, offers an excellent example of an African American woman's use of a revamped autobiographical genre as social discourse.

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Of the commonly cited literary genres, the autobiography is one that best presents itself as a vehicle for the establishment of self while at the same time allowing black women the capability of attacking the sociological, political, and literary systems that attempt to bury that self. The creative aspects of autobiography suggest the importance that place and time have on the development of the author and on the way in which that author then reinterprets the self for the reading of others. The self of the author is very much a part of the autobiography, so we as readers need to know out of what social, spatial, and temporal locations that self emerged. Autobiography, especially black women's autobiography, engages us because it is interdisciplinary, forcing the diligent scholar to reject attempts to categorize it merely as literature or merely as history, seeing it instead as literary writing that grew out of and reflects the sociopolitical characteristics that shaped both it and its writer.¹

When I refer to "black women autobiographers" in this particular context, I am noting those black women who wrote public texts representing their resistance to the oppressions of enslavement. My focus, then, is on nineteenth-century African American women who chose to share their personal and secular life experiences in a public arena and who used the written medium of the dominant society to do so. While a number of scholars have noted ways in which these seemingly silenced black women addressed and challenged American sociopolitical and literary institutions on a public platform, I assert that the power of their narratives goes further; it establishes a unique communicative style in the structure and in the content of nineteenth-century black women's autobiography. My aim is not only to identify the historical and sociopolitical constructs that hindered nineteenth-century African American women autobiographers like Jacobs, but to demonstrate the ways in which these women both covertly and overtly thwarted attempts to muffle their voices by reconfiguring the defining characteristics of autobiography.

Jacobs assumes the pseudonym of Linda Brent in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and through this "character" focuses on several specific evils of slavery that degraded the black female slave and tore apart the black family. Jacobs structures her text by successfully subverting existing literary genres, particularly the sentimental novel; she purposefully uses the sentimental approach as her primary narrative paradigm in order to enlist the sympathies and support of the Northern white women who were readers of such narratives and who represented for Jacobs a receptive audience for her story. To this select audience, Jacobs relates her story of sexual oppression, the dissociation of black families, and her fight for and flight to freedom, all in an attempt to build a bond of sisterhood between herself and these white women readers, a bond that she hoped would inspire Northern white women to take action against the supposedly "patriarchal" institution of Southern slavery. She uses sentimental terminology to cajole the members of her audience into reading and reacting to her story; at the same time, she maintains her own integrity by ex-

pressing within her text her dissatisfaction with the social, political, cultural, and economic injustices of America as they pertained to the lives of African Americans. Frances Smith Foster notes that because Jacobs "anticipated a hostile and incredulous reception to her narrative," the writer "created a transcultural text that begged, borrowed, stole, and devised the techniques that would allow her maximum freedom to tell her story in her own way and to her own ends" (72). By creating a sisterly bond, Jacobs is able to equalize the relationship between herself and her readership. She is further able to accomplish this feat by employing the narrative styles and recognizable techniques of nineteenth-century literary traditions.

In *Incidents*, Jacobs traces her life experiences as "Linda Brent" from Linda's early days of childhood innocence, when she did not realize what it was to be a slave, through years of brutality and sexual harassment at the hands of "Dr. Flint," to her eventual escape to the North where, as she tells her "reader," her "story ends with freedom" (201). Jacobs showcases the literary power of subversive communicative tools as she employs them to trace the various acts of resistance used by Linda and other slaves to nullify the oppressions of enslavement. Since Jacobs assumes the positions of author, narrator, and persona and establishes fictitious names for many of the people and places represented in her narrative, I simplify my analysis by using the appellations ascribed by the author when referring to specific circumstances and incidents within the context of the narrative. When discussing the linguistic or communicative style of the text itself, I refer to the author by her real name. Although at times these delineations will necessarily become blurred, the separation usually distinguishes between the voice of the character, "Linda," and that of the author, Jacobs. The latter voice is more representative of the author stepping outside of her assigned spaces, and peeping out from the gaps she has created within those spaces, to challenge the status quo of nineteenth-century America.

The nineteenth-century white male denial or minimization of black women's personal narratives was instrumental in perpetuating these women's marginalization and discounting their contributions to literature and to society. There has been much recent debate about the implications of using such loaded terms as "margin" and "center" in discussing oppositional relationships that exist between the oppressed and the oppressors. Is it possible to discuss the differences between margin and center without inadvertently privileging the primacy of the "center"? AnaLouise Keating addresses this question, noting that the very language used by theorists in contemporary U.S. literary and ethnic studies "reinforces a problematic binary structure, thus undermining the goals they seek to achieve" (23). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has stated that because the center in effect defines the margin, the dominant hegemony determines the margin's "privileged site of cultural critique" ("Ethnic" 298). One might reverse this statement, however, by suggesting that it is the margin that defines the center. Regardless, Gates concludes that so long as the "others" along

the margin continue to measure themselves by privileging the center (the white male) as the point of comparison, the power will remain with the center, while the various “others” continue “breeding new margins within margins” that will not only emphasize differences, but possibly lead to fragmentation (298).

While Keating concurs that such hegemonic privileging implies that the “marginal becomes a reified oppositional [. . .] position, defined (and thus controlled) by the invisible center,” she also asks a very important question: “[W]hat happens when the self-identified other neither dissolves nor maintains all inside/outside oppositions?” (24). This question raises two points. First, the term “self-identified other” suggests a willing, purposeful move on the part of the “other” to name and to embrace characteristics by which she/he has become identified. In other words, this “other,” this victim of oppression, is not only celebrating the characteristics that distinguish her/him from the oppressor, but she/he is also assuming a position of empowerment because of, rather than in spite of, these differences. Second, while Gates sees the possible fragmentation of “others” as a negative outcome, Keating notes the real possibility that these “others” will *not* “dissolve,” that is, disappear, and that the line between inside and outside is not impenetrable. As a matter of fact, not only will there be more “others” to attack the integrity of the center because of continuing fragmentation, but there will be a constant movement of “others” from margin to center, and back again, movements from different points along the margin and from different categories of “other.” Given these factors, the assaults upon the center must eventually become so numerous and inexorable as to confound, and possibly destroy, the definable hegemonic structure of “center.”

The literary rebellion that was nineteenth-century black women’s autobiography by its very nature functions also as sociopolitical rebellion. Jacqueline Jones Royster notes,

[t]he very act of writing, especially for people who do not occupy positions of status and privilege in the general society, is a bold and courageous enterprise rather than simply a demonstration of the ability to express oneself [. . .]. African American women have consistently included social, political, and economic problems and interests as focal points in their writing. (81, 104)

For black women autobiographers who did not fit the mold of the American literary figure, the battle for recognition and inclusion in the literary community was a monumental one. Members of the dominant white male culture did not have these members of society in mind when they evoked the term “American.” Gregory Jay points out that many who called themselves “Americans” did so to “reinforce the illusion that there is a transcendental core of values and experiences that are essentially ‘American,’” and he further notes that “the ‘American’ of conventional histories of American literature has usually been white, male, middle- or upper-class, heterosexual, and a spokesman for a definable set of political and social interests” (267). Women

of color who decided, for various reasons, to write personal narratives had to create their own literary vehicles, ones capable of sustaining their non-male, non-white voices.

The personal narratives that black women wrote after attaining their freedom rarely separated the “self” from the “community.” Oftentimes the “I” voice in the black woman’s personal narrative is not a single voice at all, but one representative of many, sometimes conflicting voices. Margaret Lindgren notes that “Harriet Jacobs [. . .] wrote in the context of a culture which demanded that [she] speak many ‘dialects,’ simply in order to survive” (21). This survival instinct supports Jacobs’s unaffected act of speaking from and speaking through many voices (including that of author and subject) in the textual and contextual representation of her autobiography. For instance, Jacobs steps outside of her narrative to “confess” Linda’s sexual transgressions in giving herself to Mr. Sands when she writes, “Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader!” (55). However, while confessing these transgressions, Jacobs at the same time points out that it was society (including you, O gentle reader) whose tolerance of slavery forced Linda to take such unorthodox self-evaluative steps: “You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom [. . .]. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others” (55–56).

The focus on community often distinguishes black women’s autobiography from that of black men, black men’s autobiography being more obviously individual-centered celebrations of heroism and freedom won. This is not to suggest that black male autobiographers were unconcerned with the struggles of the black community, for many—Frederick Douglass, for one—dedicated much of their free lives to elevating the position of blacks in American society. My point, however, is that the emphasis in their narratives was on the need for the black man to be strong, independent, and heroic, and his struggle was presented as being one neither supported nor hindered by ties to the slave community from which he was escaping. Enslaved black women, on the other hand, routinely demonstrate their ties to family and community in their autobiographies, which made their decisions to escape the bonds of slavery more difficult and complex. At one point Linda muses about escaping slavery: “I could have made my escape alone; but it was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom. Though the boon would have been precious to me, above all price, I would not have taken it at the expense of leaving them in slavery” (89).

More than anything else, the personal narratives that formerly enslaved black women wrote are products of their resistance to various oppressions, and each writer uses the language of the oppressor to express that resistance. From a theoretical point of view, Maggie Sale writes that the language is “a site of struggle between

differently empowered groups and is predicated on the notion that meaning cannot be divorced from the cultural and historical context in which these groups interact” (697). Therefore, the language that nineteenth-century African American women autobiographers use (and ultimately subvert) is necessarily the language of the dominant white culture, the only site of mutual interaction available to them. While I do not believe that the intricate blending of various literary traditions was necessarily a planned, deliberate effort on Jacobs’s part to create a new autobiographical paradigm, I do assert that the occurrence of this blending is a direct reflection of Jacobs’s resistance to the dominant society as she struggles to tell her own story, using bits and pieces of communicative tools that she consciously and subconsciously adopted. The blurring of language, genre, and style adds potency to black women’s autobiography as social discourse—as a statement challenging the social and political barriers placed in their way.

While various theorists, literary critics, and artists have established a division between the historical (supposedly factual) and the literary (supposedly fictional) aspects of the autobiography, I prefer the application of Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogic theories in evaluating the ways black women autobiographers used the malleability and changeability of language to enhance the power of their narratives. Michael Holquist, the editor of Bakhtin’s *Dialogic Imagination*, writes that Bakhtin blurs the hard line drawn between literary genres when he defines the “novel” as “whatever force is at work within a given literary system to reveal the limits, the artificial constraints of that system” (xxx). Such a thesis further suggests the need to approach the written text from a historical perspective when Bakhtin writes that “[t]he separation of style and language from the question of genre has been largely responsible for a situation in which only individual and period-bound overtones of a style are the privileged subjects of study, while its basic social tone is ignored” (259). His proposal, to which I subscribe, suggests that we not only view a text in light of the established stylistic criteria of the dominant culture in which it is situated, but also in light of the unique historical and social settings from which the text emerges. Using Bakhtin’s definition of the “novel” as a text reflective of forces at work which “reveal the limits” and the “artificial constraints” of a particular literary system, and then applying his theory to a subsequent blurring of literary genres, I submit that nineteenth-century African American women’s autobiography must be viewed as a novelistic work; subsequently, when the dust has settled, we will see that histories, autobiographies, and fictions are all, in effect, *just* narratives, a concept which emerges as genre-blending in Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.²

Bakhtin’s theory, as it applies to language, also introduces the now well-known concept of heteroglossia, “the base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance”; he expands on this definition by writing that “at any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions [. . .] that will insure that a word

uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions" (428). To that end, it would follow that these same heteroglossic criteria must be applied to the written as well as to the "uttered" text—and to other modes of communication as well. While there is a prevailing drive to do away with the practice of "historicizing" texts, we must recognize that in order to ascertain the various levels of textual relevance, with all of its heteroglossic meanings, we must give due respect to the impact that historical, political, and social considerations of its time had on a text, and vice versa. Did nineteenth-century African American women autobiographers use established white literary definitions and models? Yes. Did they employ traditional literary conventions? Yes and no. While formerly enslaved autobiographers may have based their narratives on the established literary models to which they were exposed, those models could not, as separately defined genres, sustain the power of the story or the unique voice of the storyteller. The way in which Jacobs's *Incidents* spills over the rim of the various literary genres she attempts to employ—sentimental narrative, slave narrative, adventure novel—and creates a new vessel serves as evidence.

When Bakhtin notes that heteroglossia is prominent in the "low genres" of street songs, folk sayings, fairs, and so forth, he paves the way for the inclusion of other areas of expression that had previously fallen outside of the dominant white culture's definition of a literary system. For instance, African American forms of expression such as black folktales, signifying, playing the dozens, and an infinite variety of subversive uses of language—sass, invective, impudence, backtalking, just to name a few—demonstrate Bakhtin's heteroglossic criteria, forming the base for what I call an African American "mother tongue."³ When I invoke the term mother "tongue," I am using it loosely to reflect communicative actions in general, verbal and linguistic as well as nonverbal and nonlinguistic. Examples of the latter communicative techniques are established by the autobiographer in her use of syntactical structures (such as dashes and ellipses to represent hesitations or silences); in a blurring of techniques, the autobiographer also uses verbal and linguistic descriptions to note specific nonverbal and nonlinguistic communicative actions—a particular look, movement, or attitude that carries characteristics of a mother-tongue resistive technique.

While male "others"—men who are not white—also had subversive communicative means for resisting oppression, their tongue was not a mother tongue; its users were not consistently subjected to the same types of gender-based oppressions that women in nineteenth-century America experienced, specifically the reduction of the woman to an object of sexual and/or domestic commodity. There was and is a special woman's way of approaching language and communication. This is not to suggest an essentialist quality to the ways of female speech, but proposes that there exists a unique and defining characteristic in the ways of woman's speech. The unique-

ness is not born in her as an essence of her biological makeup. It does not exist because she is “female”; rather, it exists because she is “woman,” a product of specific societal constructs and environmental acculturation. This uniqueness has developed over time, changing, shifting, and adjusting in accordance with woman’s need to find outlets for her voice in a man-dominated society. This is a mother tongue—a combination of words, rhythms, sounds, and silences that woman has encoded with veiled meanings. And it is more. It is also a look, a set of the lips, a positioning of the hand, hip, and head; it is an attitude of resistance that includes such communicative techniques as the use of secrets, misdirection, irony, song, humor, and lying, among others.

Used together in creative and startling combinations, the techniques of an African American mother tongue combine to reflect the text and context shaped by black women autobiographers. An African American vernacular has always been recognized as a black way of speaking, and like all vernaculars, it grew out of a need to speak subversively, to speak in a “language” that was shared by other members of one’s “community” but that confounded those outside of it. What these nineteenth-century African American women writers spoke was not really a new language, however, but a reshaping of the existing language of the dominant society.

African American women employed various communicative tools that characterized their mother tongue. Considered individually, most of these tools are neither specifically African American nor specifically “woman”; many are literary or linguistic techniques that writers and everyday people use regularly. However, viewed collectively and in recognition of black women’s need to appropriate and expand the channels of communication, the unified tools of an African American mother tongue take on sociopolitical significance and signify to the white man, to the white woman, and to the black man that the black woman’s tongue is unique. Following is a list of some of the tools I catalogue under the heading of an African American mother tongue (a list far from being complete as new techniques are constantly being added as need dictates): back talk, biblical allusion/allegory, concealment, deception, dissembling, guile, hesitations, humor, impertinence, impudence, innuendo, insolence, invective, irony, ironic humor, laughter, lying, masking, misdirection, mumbling, physical antics, rage, sarcasm, sass, satire, secrecy, shifts in point of view, signals, silence, song, understatement, whispering.

All of these tools were used in a variety of ways as nineteenth-century African American women applied them in their dealings with anyone who attempted to suppress or minimize them, whether the oppressors be white men, white women, black men, or, at times, other black women. Mother tongue tools misled, confused, tricked, or made a fool of the oppressor. Their ultimate purpose was to provide means by which black women could resist oppression by keeping the oppressor off balance, and I have loosely divided these mother tongue techniques into three categories.

The communicative techniques in the first category represent *tools of subtle resistance*, techniques that were especially effective when it was important for the oppressed to make a statement to the oppressor, but confound meaning at the same time: concealment, guile, hesitations, mumbling, secrecy, shifts in point of view, silence, and whispering. Often, nineteenth-century black women chose subtlety when they wanted their oppressor to note a certain amount of resistance on their part, but at the same time, they usually stopped short of arousing such ire in the person targeted as would elicit undue punishment. If there was punishment at all from the oppressor, it was generally a verbal chastisement, or there might be a moment of awkward silence, a nervous laugh, or an attempt to ignore the offense on the part of this dominant figure. As a result, black women's use of subtle communicative techniques gave them a certain amount of empowerment within the dominant society. Subtle communication can be delicate in meaning or intent; it can be difficult to perceive or understand; it can be cunning and crafty; or it can be skillful, clever, or ingenious. When nineteenth-century black women used subtle communication as a tool of resistance in the recording and shaping of their autobiographies, its use embodied all of these definitions.

Techniques that fall into the second category represent *masking—tools that say or suggest one thing while meaning something else*: biblical allusion/allegory, dissembling, innuendo, ironic humor, laughter, misdirection, physical antics, sarcasm, satire, signals, song, and understatement. Slaves were master storytellers, and the use of masking, or specialized concealment, allowed them to exert mastery over their masters. Not only were actual meanings hidden, but they were hidden behind other actions which suggested more benign meanings and intents. Of these techniques, biblical allusion proved to be an especially powerful masking tool in nineteenth-century black women's enslavement narratives for two reasons. First, the Bible was used by both the oppressor and the oppressed to justify the rightfulness of each position. Second, the Bible provided easily recognizable points of reference for both the writer using the tool and for the reader of the narrative. The Bible then was itself a link for black women autobiographers between the text and the context of their narratives, helping to shape its structure because of its recognizable references while acting as a cohesive element to develop the content of the autobiography.

I characterize the techniques in the final group as *tools of flagrant resistance*: back talk, impertinence, impudence, insolence, invective, irony, lying, rage, and sass. While subtle and masking techniques generally caught the attention of the oppressor, these tools were limited as to the degree of satisfaction they provided the oppressed. Sometimes the oppressed wanted more than momentary recognition from their oppressor, and these times called for more drastic measures, regardless of the consequences. At such times, nineteenth-century black women autobiographers used flagrant tools of resistance (especially sass and backtalk) to shape their texts and to demonstrate

how black women living under oppression fought back, deliberately letting the oppressor know that they retained a voice and that attempts to objectify them had not succeeded. In *Incidents*, we see Jacobs use subtle, masking, and flagrant mother tongue tools of resistance to shape her autobiography.

From the arsenal of subtle mother tongue tools of resistance, the most effective tools in *Incidents* are shifts in point of view, concealment, whispering, secrecy, and silence. Shifts in point of view within Jacobs's autobiography include the intrusion of the author's voice, the sprinkling of rhetorical questions, and the use of "side" comments in what is generally a third-person narrative. These characteristics strengthen the presence of oral tradition in Jacobs's work as this black woman autobiographer subtly attacks or is critical of either the members of her audience or of specific people and situations within her story. This act of stepping away from the narrative to insert a comment or criticism is a powerful mother tongue weapon for African American women writers, as they play with the performance aspect of the oral storytelling tradition to decrease the distance between themselves and their listeners. It also speaks to black women's insistence on saying what is on their minds in the face of society's efforts to silence them, and many times they speak what is on their minds as an "aside" either addressed to someone who is not the object of their criticism or just mumbled into the air. In this way, there is no feeling of a direct confrontation.

An interesting aspect of rhetorical questioning is that answers are neither expected nor wanted. Nineteenth-century African American women, and women in general for that matter, were encouraged through a number of methods to maintain a submissive silence in the presence of the European American man. As a result, many comments or questions that existed in the minds of women often went unspoken or were uttered indirectly in the presence of whoever the dominant party might be. A logical development, then, was the emergence of the habit of speaking aloud to oneself, even to the point of asking a "rhetorical" question that required no response but which implied the woman's position simply through its utterance; this technique became an outlet of resistance for black women whose voices were denied them.

The rhetorical questions with which Jacobs peppers *Incidents* are usually critical and chastising in tone. Jacobs wonders how her readers can sit idly by while slave women and slave girls continue to suffer under the Southern slave system: "[W]hy are ye silent, ye free men and women of the north? Why do your tongues falter in maintenance of the right?" (29–30). Later, she uses her author's voice to direct the reader's attention to the destruction of black families caused by the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, again simultaneously questioning and criticizing her passive audience: "Every where, in those humble homes, there was consternation and anguish. But what cared the legislators of the 'dominant race' for the blood they were crushing out of trampled hearts?" (191).

Much of Jacobs's use of stealth and concealment in *Incidents* demonstrates the real problem of slaves betraying other slaves in order to win favor or special material considerations from the master. Because of the fear of such betrayal, the habit of whispering was prevalent in slave communities. However, while whispering was a powerful tool of resistance for the oppressed, Jacobs shows that the oppressors also used it in their efforts to render the slaves weak and voiceless. In the mode of the seduction narrative, Dr. Flint uses whispering to try to weaken and wear down the resistant Linda. Jacobs, in the voice of Linda Brent, describes Dr. Flint's attempts at seduction: "[. . .] I now entered my fifteenth year—a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import. I tried to treat them with indifference or contempt" (27). Linda, as property, does not have the option of removing herself from this offending situation. However, because of Dr. Flint's fear of damage to his reputation in a community that holds Linda's grandmother in such high regard, Linda is able to resist his early whispered overtures merely by not responding to them. During the course of her narrative, Jacobs revisits this type of manipulative whispering a number of times. After escaping to New York, Linda regularly visited her daughter Ellen, who works for Mr. Sands's cousin Mrs. Hobbs. At one point, Linda mentions that Mrs. Hobbs's Southern brother, Mr. Thorne, is in town visiting his sister. What Linda does not know at that time, however, is that Mr. Thorne has attempted to seduce Ellen, whispering to her in the same manner of Dr. Flint's earlier attempted seduction of her: "Though he professed too much gratitude to my grandmother to injure any of her descendants, he [Mr. Thorne] had *poured foul language into the ears* of her innocent great-grandchild" (179; emphasis added). This discovery is particularly disturbing to Linda because it shows that for a young black girl, being "free" and living in the North do not protect her from attacks upon her virtue. It saddens and angers Linda that the same "ear" violation she had suffered as a slave should also plague her daughter. Jacobs purposely uses almost the same terminology to describe the two situations, subtly reinforcing her chastisement of those living in the North who would elevate themselves above the practices of the slave system that they continue to tolerate, even in their own midst.

At the same time that the oppressors in *Incidents* use whispering to torment the oppressed, these would-be victims reverse this communicative tool to find solace in their shared experiences. Because the controlling nature of slavery usually made honest, direct communications between slaves almost impossible, the clandestine whisperings of slaves represented the mother tongue's way of indirectly resisting oppression, making it a resistance that defied detection by the ruling white powers. Such whisperings offered comfort and counsel for Linda when she had no other way of expressing her thoughts and feelings.

After Linda has secluded herself in the small garret space over her grandmother's attic, Jacobs provides several instances where whispers pass between Linda and mem-

bers of her woman's community, whispers that reinforce an other-mother link and help her to maintain her strength. Linda had a special relationship with her Aunt Nancy, who worked in the Flint house. For as long as she lived, Aunt Nancy supported and encouraged Linda through her whisperings: "After I was shut up in my dark cell, she [Aunt Nancy] stole away, whenever she could, to bring me the news and say something cheering. How often did I kneel down to listen to her words of consolation, whispered through a crack!" (144). In this description, Jacobs suggests again the posture of a confession; however, unlike the double-edged confession Linda makes to her white sisters, this relationship is one of spiritual sharing and release.

The tongue in *Incidents* is synonymous with speech, which in turn is synonymous with empowerment; Jacobs stresses how this instrument can be a threat to those who strive to maintain their dominant place in society by suppressing the tongues of others. When suggesting that women should keep quiet, men often tell them to hold their tongues. In such cases, men fear the truth of the words that women might utter, a truth that might undermine man's position of power. In the early pages of her autobiography, Jacobs writes of an incident whereby the looseness of a slave woman's tongue presents such a threat for her master that it results in her being sold away from the plantation and away from her family. As was common on many plantations, this slave woman has given birth to a child fathered by her master, Dr. Flint: "When the mother was delivered into the trader's hands, she said, 'You *promised* to treat me well.' To which he [Dr. Flint] replied, 'You have let your tongue run too far; damn you!' She had forgotten that it was a crime for a slave to tell who was the father of her child" (13).

While oppressors like Dr. Flint use silencing to control the enslaved, Jacobs continues to show that these apparent victims also use silence as a mother tongue technique of subtle resistance; they use it to withhold information as well as to communicate among themselves when words are impossible or unnecessary. Silence allows them to be secretive and to conceal what they really feel, see, and hear from those who might harm them. Silence and concealment often join with secrecy in Jacobs's autobiography; she demonstrates the importance of these techniques by using variations of the terms of concealment, hiding, secrecy, shield, veil, and screen ninety-six times in the body of her text.

An often-cited example of the oppressed Linda using concealment to empower herself is found in her almost seven-year confinement in the "little cell" created in her grandmother's house, a place so obvious that it was the last place Dr. Flint would expect to find her: "I thanked the heavenly Father for this safe retreat. Opposite my window was a pile of feather beds. On top of these I could lie perfectly concealed, and command a view of the street through which Dr. Flint passed to his office" (100). Aside from Linda hiding in the swamp while awaiting the completion of the construction of her garret space and her actual concealment in the garret, Jacobs

notes other instances, some involving other members of her African American community, where hiding was an important tool for the enslaved black. A free black man married to a slave woman hides his children in the woods in an effort to prevent the mistress's new husband from claiming them as his slaves (50). Because marauding groups of poor whites seize the opportunity of the Nat Turner uprising to terrorize blacks, "[m]any women hid themselves in woods and swamps, to keep out of their way" (64).

Slaves were also secretive about their movements, and Jacobs emphasizes their need for stealth by using variations of the term "steal away." As children, Linda and her brother William "stole to [their] grandmother's house" after hearing that their Uncle Benjamin had fought with his master; after Dr. Flint sends Linda to his son's plantation, hoping to make her more vulnerable by separating her from the members of her family, Linda plans to visit them by night: "I was to go with a young man, who, I knew, often stole to town to see his mother" (87); when Linda determines to go into hiding, Jacobs writes that she "stole softly down stairs" to escape from the younger Flint's plantation (95); while Linda is in her seven-year confinement, her Aunt Nancy often "stole away" to visit her; and her grandmother frequently "stole up" the stairs to whisper words of encouragement to her (144, 151). Such stealth, secrecy, and silence had to become a way of life for the enslaved, and Jacobs captures this unique way of subtle communication and resistance in her text.

The second category of African American mother tongue resistance, masking, centers on Jacobs's use of sarcasm, biblical allegory/allusion, misdirection, song, signals, and laughter. In the chapter she calls "Prejudice against Color," Jacobs uses sarcasm to relate Linda's observations while traveling in the North under white protection as the nurse for Mrs. Bruce's baby: "Being in servitude to the Anglo-Saxon race, I was not put in the 'Jim Crow car,' on our way to Rockaway, neither was I invited to ride through the streets on top of trunks in a truck" (176). Later, upon returning to the United States from a visit to England, Linda notes of her time abroad: "During all that time, I never saw the slightest symptom of prejudice against color. Indeed, I entirely forgot it, till the time came for us to return to America" (185). Jacobs's use of sarcasm allows her to offer observations while masking her abhorrence of the Northern hypocrisy she encountered regarding race.

Jacobs's use of biblical allegory and allusions is particularly effective in that it allows her to combine an African American woman's storytelling tradition with the use of a text containing stories that are familiar to her readers and that will allow the readers to make contemporary comparisons. For example, she uses much snake imagery in *Incidents*, assuming that her readers would not only note the Garden of Eden allusion, but also know that the Northern abolitionists used the symbol of the serpent to represent the evils of slavery. Jacobs applies this biblical allusion when she writes, "O, the serpent of Slavery has many and poisonous fangs!" (62). Neither do

the owners of slaves escape Jacobs's scathing metaphorical depictions of them as reptiles. Jacobs explains how Mrs. Flint, convinced that Linda is having sex with her husband, tries to trick Linda into talking in her sleep: "If she startled me, on such occasions, she would *glide stealthily away*," reminiscent of the movement of a snake (34; emphasis added). Then, while describing Dr. Flint's anger that Linda has dared to declare her love for a free black man, Jacobs writes that the doctor speaks to the slave girl "in a hissing tone" (59). Jacobs also employs a biblical reference to Judas Iscariot, the alleged traitor to Jesus. Linda's would-be betrayer is Jenny, Dr. Flint's young house slave, who, it was feared, might have seen the fugitive Linda: "I afterwards believed that she did not see me; for nothing ever came of it, and she was one of those base characters that would have jumped to betray a suffering fellow being for the sake of *thirty pieces of silver*" (154; emphasis added).

Another masking technique, misdirection, was and is a common tool in the black community. Because Dr. Flint is so obsessed with reclaiming Linda, he is a perfect dupe for the use of misdirection. In order to throw Dr. Flint off her trail, Linda contrives to have letters sent to him that are mailed from various locations in New York and Boston while she remains hidden in her grandmother's house. Dr. Flint has already made three trips to New York in search of Linda's trail and, Linda notes, would probably have made a trip to Boston based on the postmark of one of her letters except for the fact that during this pre-Fugitive Slave Act time, Massachusetts was not "a comfortable place to go to in search of a runaway" (131). But Linda's ruse is successful, as it turns Dr. Flint's gaze away from the immediate area.

Another effective use of misdirection takes the form of disguise. After running away from the Flint plantation, Linda cannot be moved except in disguise or under cover of darkness because of the reward offered for her capture:

Betty brought me a suit of sailor's clothes,—jacket, trousers, and tarpaulin hat [. . .].
 "Put your hands in your pockets, and walk rickety, like de sailors."
 [. . .] I passed several people whom I knew, but they did not recognize me in my disguise. (111–12)

A few days later, her secret garret being ready, Linda is brought out of the swamp to be ensconced in her attic room: "We [Linda and Betty] were rowed ashore, and went boldly through the streets, to my grandmother's. I wore my sailor's clothes, and had blackened my face with charcoal [. . .]. The father of my children came so near that I brushed against his arm; but he had no idea who it was" (113). Even after arriving in the North, Linda, as a fugitive, knows that it will be necessary to assume disguises when under a public gaze. Upon landing in Philadelphia, she located a shop "and bought some double veils and gloves" (159). Jacobs's final reference to disguise near the end of her narrative celebrates the fact that one is no longer needed, as Linda's freedom has been purchased and given to her by Mrs. Bruce: "I had objected to

having my freedom bought, yet I must confess that when it was done I felt as if a heavy load had been lifted from my weary shoulders. When I rode home in the cars I was no longer afraid to unveil my face and look at people as they passed" (200).

The use of disguise requires no use of language, which is true of a number of other masking tools used in an African American mother tongue, such as song, signals, and laughter. I include "song" in this group of nonspeaking communicative techniques because the singer infuses the song with meaning that goes beyond and is often masked by the word; meaning is thus enhanced, even changed, by the rhythm of the music that guides the word, by the metaphorical meaning that shades it, and by the depth of emotion reflected by it. Thereby, song as resistance to oppression represents a newer, deeper meaning for society's oppressed who lift their voices in celebration, despair, defiance, or warning.

Jacobs recalls a number of incidents in her autobiography during which song represents both defiance and celebration. After Linda's Uncle Benjamin has been in jail for three months for attempting to run away, he is heard singing and laughing in his cell. His master recognizes this as a sign of defiance, "and the overseer was ordered to re-chain him" (23). But William refuses to be humbled and later sends his vermin-infested clothing to his master as a sign of his continuing defiance in the face of his master's inhumanity.

Spirituals are probably the quintessential site of joy, defiance, despair, and hope for the slave. Jacobs notes that on one particular evening, "the slaves [. . .] went to enjoy a Methodist shout. They never *seem* so happy as when shouting and singing at religious meetings" (69; emphasis added). Seeming, however, does not make it so. Jacobs does not fail to illustrate that the songs of the slaves represent more than the celebration of Christ and Heaven. She writes to her readers, "If you were to hear them at such times, you might think they were happy" (71). The appearance of happiness belies the defiance in the masked words of these spirituals:

"Ole Satan's church is here below.
Up to God's free church I hope to go.
Cry Amen, cry Amen, cry Amen to God!" (71)

By replacing "Satan" with "massa," one begins to see the masking power of the spirituals; the "church [. . .] here below" becomes the plantation of the South, and "God's free church" represents the promise of freedom in the North.

Slaves found many such indirect ways by which they could communicate and signal to each other. For instance, the sequestered Linda Brent describes how her grandmother communicated not only when she wanted to speak to her granddaughter, but the nature of the meeting: "She had four places to knock for me to come to the trap-door, and each place had a different meaning" (147). The sad occasion of Aunt Nancy's death offers another example of the power of nonverbal communica-

tion, as Linda describes her grandmother's vigil at the bedside of her last surviving daughter: "Before she lost the power of utterance, she told her mother not to grieve if she could not speak to her; that she would try to hold up her hand, to let her know that all was well with her" (145).

The last nonlinguistic tool I want to address is laughter. Those outside of the oppressed class assume that, like the singing of slaves, laughter from blacks is merely another indication of their happiness and contentment. Laughter within the African American collective, however, has always been a communicative tool of resistance. Used often to mask the real feelings of the enslaved, it is also a defiant sign that says that regardless of how wretched his or her life may be, regardless of how much pain and inhuman treatment he or she must suffer, the oppressed would not surrender by denying himself or herself as much joy as could be found in life.

Jacobs highlights a number of incidents of laughter within her autobiography; in some cases, her approach focuses on a laughter without real joy, on laughter that serves to veil some deep pain. Her citation of the following lines from Lord Byron's "The Lament of Tasso" sums up her perspective:

Where laughter is not mirth; nor thought the mind
Nor words a language; nor e'en men mankind.
Where cries reply to curses, shrieks to blows,
And each is tortured in his separate hell. (37)

An example of laughter that is pure and heartfelt usually follows the duping of the master, as Jacobs illustrates upon the successful sale of Linda's children to their father. For years, Dr. Flint has thwarted the efforts of Mr. Sands to negotiate this purchase. However, Betty, the cook for the Flints, cannot contain her glee as she reports to Linda that Dr. Flint has been tricked into selling Linda's brother and children to a slave-trader acting on behalf of Mr. Sands: "Brudder, chillen, all is bought by de daddy! I'se laugh more dan nuff, tinkin' 'bout ole massa Flint. Lor, how he *vill* swar! He's got ketched dis time" (108).

I move now to Jacobs's use of the more flagrant communicative tools of the African American mother tongue, specifically her use of irony, backtalk, insolence, and sass. In *Incidents*, Jacobs gives an ironic edge to her use of the term "Gentle Reader," as she subverts the genre of popular sentimental fiction to chastise the Northern white woman, the inactive "true woman," whose status as lady and mother, and "whose [home is] protected" by European American law and custom (54).⁴

Another indication of the irony that emerges in Jacobs's autobiography surfaces in her preface. Here, she gently suggests that those who have not experienced the Southern system of slavery cannot possibly have a full understanding of its cruelties: "[O]nly by experience can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations" (2). I find in this statement more than an indication that Jacobs feels

the knowledge of her white women readers to be insufficient to truly empathize with black slave women, although it certainly does make that point. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, in suggesting that Hans-Georg Gadamer's "dialectical model of conversation" may be just as relevant as Bakhtin's dialogics of discourse when applied to black women's writing, reaches the following conclusion regarding the relationship between the black woman writer and the white woman reader:

If the Bakhtinian model suggests the multiplicity of speech, [. . .] then Gadamer's model moves toward a unity of understanding [. . .]. It is the first as well as the second meaning which we privilege in speaking of black women writers: the first connoting polyphony, multivocality, and plurality of voices, and the second signifying intimate, private, inspired utterances. (19, 23)

Henderson's observation has particular relevance when considered alongside most black women autobiographers' use of humility (the Gadamerian model of "intimacy" and "privacy" that works to establish a bond with white women readers) and chastisement (the Bakhtinian model of "polyphony" that challenges white women readers' assumption of understanding or, in some cases, superiority).

Jacobs suggests to her white women readers that while she appreciates their sympathies, their ability to empathize with her situation is limited; she further suggests, however, that they be wary of writers (like Harriet Beecher Stowe) whose texts are based solely on hearsay or conjecture, texts (and writers) that cannot possibly present a complete or accurate representation of the horrors of slavery.

While Jacobs employs irony here, she also uses her text to challenge or "talk back" to Stowe. Most of the female images that Stowe presents in her novel—when they are not mulattos—are reminiscent of the characters found in white American minstrelsy, with its broad strokes of racial humor, stereotypes, distortions, and exaggerations. It was to these characteristics that Jacobs responded, not only by adding flesh and bone to the sketches of blacks that Stowe presented but also, according to Harryette Mullen, by stressing the power of the orality of the black female slave—her ability to communicate in ways unique to herself, introducing "the sass, spunk, and infuriating impudence of slaves who individually and collectively refused to know their place" (245).⁵ Mullen particularly notes the difference between the powerful "sass" of "'Aunt' Betty," a slave cook in Jacobs's *Incidents*, and the watered-down, mammy-like discourse of Stowe's cook, "Chloe." As Mullen notes, Chloe's "speech is not an example of a textual representation of resistant orality, but rather an instance of jocular acquiescence, owing more to the conventions of minstrelsy [. . .] than to African American women's traditional deployment of sass as verbal self-defense" (255).

Jacobs's depiction of Betty restores the power of the black woman's sass. Deborah Garfield asserts that "Betty realigns the kitchen's cozy associations with incendiary

resolve and underwrites many of those in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" (279). Jacobs writes that from her hiding place under Betty's kitchen floor, Linda Brent listens to the black cook's speech acts: "'If dey comes rummagin 'mong *my* tings, dey'll get one bressed sarssin from dis 'ere nigger' [. . .]'Dis nigger's too cute for 'em dis time'" (103). Such statements indicate that the sass of black women is serious business and is not for the amusement of the ruling hegemony. The slave kitchen for the black woman in Jacobs's narrative is not akin to the warm, homey, nonthreatening environs presented in Stowe's text—it is a site of battle, a site of oral resistance where the African American mother tongue asserts itself.

Again using the flagrant technique of irony, Jacobs writes about the disappointment Linda experiences after she reaches the free states: "The next morning I was on deck as soon as the day dawned. I called Fanny to see the sun rise, for the first time in our lives, on free soil; for such I *then* believed it to be" (158). Jacobs later writes about that first evening in the free states: "That night I sought my pillow with feelings I had never carried to it before. I verily *believed* myself to be a free woman" (161; emphasis added). Soon, a number of Northern racist incidents cause Jacobs's subtle irony to give way to bitterness as she, through Linda Brent, relates one of these incidents to the reader. Describing what she calls "the first chill to my enthusiasm about the Free States," Linda reports that regardless of the amount of money one had, a black person could not ride in the first-class compartment of Philadelphia's trains: "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. It made me sad to find how the north aped the customs of slavery" (162–63).

Because of the nature of enslavement and because of the scars left by particularly vicious acts of oppression, antebellum African American women autobiographers, like Jacobs, chose to make their stories public in an effort to effect changes for themselves and for their black brothers and sisters. By applying the unique communicative techniques that characterize an African American mother tongue to their narratives, these black women created new literary forms through which to express resistance to the oppressions they suffered, and they successfully carved enough room from within which to release the power of their social, political, and literary voices.

The autobiography became the African American woman's way of preserving cultural memory while at the same time challenging the sociopolitical, economic, and literary structures that minimized the contributions of that culture. As Joanne Braxton puts it, "autobiography, perhaps more than any other literary genre, is a form of symbolic memory, a confluence of culture and consciousness" (208). The oral, private voice found in the slave community was thus joined by a written, public voice as a way for African American women autobiographers to preserve past cultural traditions while at the same time taking possession of and claiming the cultural traditions of the dominant white society.

Braxton “places the black woman at the center of critical discourse and her own literary experience,” the current debate over centeredness and marginality notwithstanding; she suggests that “the autobiography of the black American woman [is] an attempt to define a life work retrospectively and [is] a form of symbolic memory that evokes the black woman’s deepest consciousness” (9–10). As a result, black women autobiographers reached beyond the oppressions of their most recent experiences and called upon ancestral links to their past in recording their life stories. Ultimately, the autobiographical text that nineteenth-century African American women wrote encompassed the storytelling traditions of Africa, of the African American slave community, and of various European and European American literary genres. The results were curious and creative blendings of linguistic styles, word choices, and redefinitions. This is the same type of creative blending—using limited resources—that we find in black women’s acts of quilting, cooking, gardening, and even in the art of sweeping patterns into the dirt of their front yards.

Reaching back to the storytelling traditions of West Africa, specifically those that help define the Yoruba culture, we can see the importance of the oral tradition and that of the female role in sustaining it. Even when African Americans mastered and subverted the English language for their own use, they continued the practice of orally transmitting information, myths, histories, and customs, a practice that would prove to be an important aspect of the African American woman autobiographer’s mother tongue techniques. Karla Holloway writes that the ties between West African sources and black writers in America allow for “an exploration of the intertextual, shared images and patterns among writers with a common cultural history to emerge in the midst of the acknowledged differences between them” (20–21). Similarities between the animal or beast tales coming out of the slave quarters and those that have been recorded in West Africa point to Africa as being at least one site of origin for these trickster tales. Even more important, the existence of such tales and myths in the New World points to the power and endurance of oral repetition in West African cultures, the sustained memory from one generation to another, even from one continent to another.

Holloway credits the perpetuation of the storytelling traditions of Africa and African America to the woman, writing that in many West African societies, “[storytellers] were women and their stories and songs were the oral archives of their culture” (24). This is not to suggest that men did not tell stories in the Yoruba culture, for they did; however, as Holloway implies and as Ifi Amadiume affirms, it was generally the women in Yoruba society who “transmitted cultural ideas and their own comments on them through stories as well as songs” (84). Amadiume further notes that the stories told by men tended to deal with “wars, travel, adventures with spirits” (85), while the stories women told sustained the importance of culture, beliefs, traditions, and heritage.

When nineteenth-century African American women autobiographers altered the English language to characterize their ways of speaking, they redefined the sociopolitical spaces that governed ways of communicating. The ability to claim the word gave them agency and fostered their literary creativity and freedom. Black women's texts that began to take shape are "double-voiced," not only because they were derived from both black and white novelistic predecessors, but also because they contain "modes of figuration lifted from the black vernacular" (Gates, *Signifying* xxiii). In other words, they embody the white linguistic stylings of texts written according to Germanic and Romantic language structures as well as those everyday linguistic stylings, the vernacularity, found in the black community. African American women autobiographers then merged and subverted the literary tools that were available to them (or stolen by them) and introduced a unique and distinctive voice into the American literary tradition. Gates briefly summarizes and simplifies the process: "To name our tradition is to rename each of its antecedents, no matter how pale they may seem. To rename is to revise, and to revise is to Signify" (xxiii).⁶ The resultant black woman autobiographer's discourse, in many cases, looks different and sounds different from the discourses of white men, white women, and black men. Even when black women's autobiography appears to mimic the European American form, when one reads beneath the surface of the narrative and the story that it appears to tell, the complex, multifaceted nature of black women's autobiography emerges.

Armed with this sense of linguistic freedom and writing a text within plain sight of white society, though apparently inchoate and in most cases indecipherable in the eyes of its members, nineteenth-century African American women autobiographers triumphantly claimed agency for themselves and confounded the attempts of their oppressors to make them powerless. Through their autobiographical texts, they displayed the many ways in which the black woman, the person thought to have the least voice, managed to put forth powerful statements in the name of an African American mother tongue, giving her, at times, the greatest voice. When Harriet Ann Jacobs employed the many communicative techniques she found at her disposal, she realized a freedom of form—and voice—that allowed her to resist and deflate the sociopolitical obstacles that nineteenth-century white America had placed in her path. This path eventually led to a new way of looking at the genre of American autobiography, thanks to black women's use of their mother tongue in shaping a nineteenth-century African American autobiography as social discourse.

NOTES

1. It is difficult to discuss commonalities in black women's positions in society and in their approaches to communicative techniques without appearing to reify monolithic notions of black identity. However, at the risk of being so interpreted, I feel that I must establish the existence of these differences in the black woman's position and view from those of everyone else, differences that emerged as a result of society's attempts to codify black women in its own way. Therefore, my reference to "the black woman" and to "the black woman autobiographer" should be viewed as an acknowledgment of commonalities, not as a blindness to black women's individuality.

2. Bakhtin writes: "The internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day [. . .]—this internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence is the indispensable prerequisite for the novel as genre. The novel orchestrates all of its themes [. . .] by means of the social diversity of speech types [*raznorechie*] and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions" (262–63). The existence of "differing individual voices" is evident in the manner of presentation and in the level of acceptance that accompanied the attempts of African American women autobiographers to write their personal stories in mid- to late-nineteenth-century America.

3. Joanne M. Braxton, Carole Boyce Davies, and Marlene Nourbese Philip, among others, effectively use the term "mother tongue" in referring to a woman's approach to communication, especially the approach of the Africa-descended woman. An earlier reference to a "mother tongue" appears in Henry David Thoreau's 1854 autobiographical account, *Walden, or Life in the Woods*. Thoreau's reference, however, is not complimentary, elevating the written discourse (which he sees as male) over the spoken discourse (which he sees as female): "[T]here is a memorable interval between the spoken and the written language, the language heard and the language read. The one is commonly transitory, a sound, a tongue, a dialect merely, almost brutish, and we learn it unconsciously, like the brutes, of our mothers. The other is the maturity and experience of that; if that is our mother tongue, this is our father tongue" (108–09).

4. Barbara Welter offers the following criteria for admittance into the "cult of true womanhood": "The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—*woman*" (21; emphasis added). I emphasize "woman" because we must note that the woman being described here is the white woman, the black female's inhumanity making her ineligible for inclusion in this cult.

5. The following definitions from the *Random House Dictionary of the English Language* shed light on the minimizing and sexually demeaning nature of these terms: *Sass* (1) (a) stewed fruit; fruit sauce; (b) fresh vegetables [1765–75, New England, Midland, South]. *Sass* (2) (a) impudent or disrespectful backtalk; (b) to answer back in an impudent manner [1855–60 American from "sassy," uncertain origin]. *Saucy* (a) impertinent; insolent; (b) pert, boldly smart. *Impudent* (a) of, pertaining to, or characterized by impertinence or effrontery; (b) [obsolete] shameless or brazenly immodest [from Latin "*impudens*" (shameless) from the base "*pudere*" (to be ashamed)]. *Pudendum* [usually plural *pudenda*]—(anatomy) the external genital organs, esp. those of the female; vulva [from Latin "*pudendus*," gerundive of "*pudere*" (to be ashamed)].

6. Gates normally writes the term "signifyin(g)" with the following explanation: "The bracketed g enables me to connote the fact that this word is, more often than not, spoken by black people without the final g as 'signifyin'." This arbitrary and idiosyncratic convention also enables me to recall the fact that whatever historical community of Afro-Americans coined this usage did so in the vernacular as spoken, in contradistinction to the literate written usages of the standard English 'shadowed' term. The bracketed or aurally erased g, like the discourse of black English and dialect poetry generally, stands as the trace of black difference in a remarkably sophisticated and fascinating (re)naming ritual graphically in evidence here [. . .]" (*Signifying* 46).

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