

Mothering in Slavery

A Revision of African Feminist Principles

Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861) and Harriet E. Wilson's Our Nig (1859) were published within two years of each other, at the end of the American Renaissance and before the start of the Civil War. There are many coincidences and several commonalities in their stories, but the fabric of Jacobs's and Wilson's lives is remarkably different, not due to the accident of their positions as northerner and southerner, but due to the varying degrees to which each can utilize and extend the tenets of cooperation, self-reliance, adaptability, gender complementarity, and liberation, tenets that are used in our time to describe African feminist principles. Both women ultimately face heartbreaking obstacles and stark choices as mothers, and both do their best by their children. On the surface it may seem that Jacobs, the author who has a clearer connection through her upbringing to African feminist principles, is best able to mother; ultimately, though, both women must abandon their children and eventually lose their sons due to class-related issues, while both find extraordinary success for themselves. In other words, while the ability to follow the tenets of African feminism do lead to more success, the parallels in the outcomes of Jacobs's and Wilson's very different lives seem to show that their ability to follow African feminist principles alone cannot account for their failures and successes.

Measures of success, whether in career, parenting, or contentment, are far from universal. Cultural contexts and definitions of success vary widely, and often, a Western feminist/academic orientation simply cannot appropriately read texts that rely on other values. Western feminism often favours individualism, often gained through competition and opposition, as a measure of success (Steady, 1996: 7). By these measures, the authors of the autobiographical texts in this study, Harriet Jacobs and Harriet E. Wilson, often appear to have failed—not only as career women and authors, but also as mothers. Instead, and has not

yet been directly attempted, we should look at these women's lives through the lens of African feminism, a framework which values "parallel autonomy, communalism, and cooperation for the preservation of life" over Western values (Steady, 1996: 7). Through this lens, we will see that Jacobs and Wilson do meet measured success, particularly in light of their most difficult life circumstances.

African feminism as a philosophy stems from the positive features of precolonial African tribal life, in which women worked cooperatively with men, were valued in parallel ways with men, and gained status throughout their lifetimes (Steady, 1996: 5-6). African tribal structures of polygamy, shared market responsibilities, and communal parenting allowed women to experience "a more limited, rather than absolute, form of patriarchy," (Steady, 1996: 6), and these traditional values enhanced female slaves' abilities to survive, and sometimes thrive, even amid the most inhumane of circumstances. According to Rosalyn Terborg-Penn (1996), "the two most dominant values in the African feminist theory, which can be traced through a time perspective into the New World, are developing survival strategies and encouraging self-reliance through female networks" (25). Due to differences in their communities and development, it will be shown that Jacobs is better able to utilize these principles, and thus meets with an expanded success over Wilson, particularly in the area of parenting. However, both women adapt survival strategies and self-reliance measures to fit their own needs, and these strategies empower them to make the best choices for themselves and their children, even when these choices might seem (to their contemporaries and to this later audience) like the wrong steps. African feminism empowers Jacobs and Wilson to not only survive, but to thrive, to varying degrees, as mothers and as women. They will not be able to overcome all of the hardships of slavery and poverty, but by their own definitions, they succeed.

One writes a slave narrative, and one a pseudo-slave narrative. One story takes place within a southern community, and the other on an isolated farm in the North. Both are mothers, and both must abandon their children, at least for a time. One text is factual with names changed to protect the innocent; the other is fictionalized with characters made into conglomerates to suit her narrative's purposes. Both authors have difficulties in getting their stories published, and both need authenticators to help their audiences believe in the miracle of their literacy. One succeeds in securing her freedom in the North, only to end her text in the disappointment of being without a home to call her own; the other is able to leave her oppressors at the predetermined age of 18, only to fail at making enough money to support herself and her son. Eventually though, and after the texts have finished, each of these women do find success, on their own terms and within their communities—one among freed slaves in Washington, D.C., and the other among (white) Spiritualists in Boston.¹

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end of the American Renaissance and before the start of the Civil War. There are many coincidences and several commonalities in their stories, but the fabric of Jacobs's and Wilson's lives is remarkably different, not due to the accident of their positions as northerner and southerner, but due to the varying degrees to which each can utilize and extend the tenets of cooperation, self-reliance, adaptability, gender complementarity, and liberation, tenets that are used in our time to describe African feminist principles. Both women ultimately face heartbreaking obstacles and stark choices as mothers, and both do their best by their children. On the surface it may seem that Jacobs, the author who has a clearer connection through her upbringing to African feminist principles, is best able to mother; ultimately, though, both women must abandon their children and eventually lose their sons due to class-related issues, while both find extraordinary success for themselves. In other words, while the ability to follow the tenets of African feminism do lead to more success, the parallels in the outcomes of Jacobs's and Wilson's very different lives seem to show that their ability to follow African feminist principles alone cannot account for their failures and successes.

Mothering is difficult work in the best of circumstances, but mothering within slavery or under the threats of racism and poverty can prove to be heartbreaking and almost impossible. Wilson, for all intents and purposes, is in a position of indentured servitude that amounts to slavery from the time she is a young girl until she is "released" at 18. During her period of servitude and after, Wilson is often isolated and forced to rely only upon herself for survival. While Jacobs does not have her freedom "given" to her at any age (it is finally bought by her new boss around the age of 35²), she grows up within the love and care of her immediate and extended family, a family who has become prominent through their hard work in the small community that keeps some of slavery's worst excesses in check. What I am interested in examining here are the differences of experience as they occur between two mothers in the similar circumstance of being oppressed for their gender and race, and who are, therefore, extremely limited in their material means because of their oppressions. These differences, though, still render roughly similar outcomes in terms of mothering and overall success, a fact which shows the necessity of reworking and extending the practical applications of current African feminist theory.

Studies of Wilson and Jacobs have not yet made the connection between their roles as mothers and African feminism. This connection is vital in the attempt to understand more fully their strengths and limitations as mothers. Diedre Badejo (1998) suggests that it is a worthwhile task to "revisit African Women's histories on the continent and in the diaspora" through the lens of African feminism (96). While Badejo's task, to redefine African American womanhood through an African feminist lens from slavery to the present, is much broader in scope than my own argument, her model makes clear that this revisiting is as essential to writers like Jacobs and Wilson, as was the revisiting of writers like Susan Warner (1987 [1850]) and Fanny Fern (1986 [1855]) through

a (white) feminist lens in previous decades. In order to understand Wilson and Jacobs's ability to survive and nurture through such traumatic conditions, we must first understand the source of their strength, which lies in their "collective ancestral knowledge" and philosophies (Badejo, 1998: 100). Andrea Benton Rushing (1996) notes the strength of African American women should be appreciated despite slavery, not because of it, due to their African heritage: "our mothers were strong: families sold apart; men unable to discipline their children or protect their wives from brutal beatings and routine rape; women working cotton, rice, and sugar cane" (122). She continues, "Perhaps our people survived because our ancestors came to the Americas from West African cultures that did not share the bourgeois European ideal of women as delicate dependents whose 'place' was in the home" (122). These extremely inhuman circumstances called for a philosophy of life and reserves of strength that came from a foreign soil, and gender ideals that did not replicate the European notions of women who fared best within the comforts of home.

Filomina Chioma Steady's (1996) definition of African feminism as a "humanistic" feminism is descriptive and useful for our purposes:

To summarize, one can say that because of the need for male-female complementarily [sic] in ensuring the totality of human existence within a balanced ecosystem, and because of the negative and destructive effects of historical processes and racism on Africa and its people, values stressing human totality, parallel autonomy, cooperation, self-reliance, adaptation, survival, and liberation have developed as important aspects of African feminism. These are important concepts in developing a framework for the study of women in Africa and in the diaspora. (18)

If we follow Steady's (1996) definition, it would seem that the author who is best able to model complementarity between men and women and cooperation with others, while relying on herself through adaptation for survival and liberation would be the author who is able to find the most success in her personal and public life. While my argument will show that this is not necessarily true, it is important to apply this lens to these slave narratives, for as Gwendolyn Mikell (1997) notes, African feminists and Western feminists (and thus, African and Western women) have often been at odds because their "reference points. . . have been totally different. . . . Western women were emphasizing individual female autonomy, while African women have been emphasizing culturally linked forms of public participation" (4). Therefore, we must first understand that definitions of success in personal and public life will be different from the typical Westernized view of success through agency and individual voice.³ Instead, I wish to read these authors in terms of their success with "their culturally linked forms of public participation," namely through their mothering and their public lives following their narratives.

It is important to re-read Wilson and Jacobs through the perspective of their foremothers and contemporaries, all of whom would have shared ideals about womanhood that starkly opposed many ideals of Western womanhood. We can assume that Jacobs, in particular, would have had at her disposal a “collective ancestral knowledge” that would have given her the means by which to appreciate and adapt African feminist principles to her day-to-day life. Badejo (1998) explains that through naming ceremonies, oral literature, and iconography, “[p]roverbial wisdom and practical application of the [African-feminist] philosophy” was trained into all Africans “from infancy” (100). Therefore, these early-instilled beliefs would have been carried through the Middle Passage into the new world: “Despite the trauma of the Middle Passage, and the terror of enslavement, the women and men who arrived in the West did so with our cultural and self-identities shaken but well-established” (Badejo, 1998: 101). The extent to which African feminist principles were carried through the generations and utilized can help us now understand the motivations for African American women’s actions, and can also help us better understand their heroic successes, especially when viewed in the light of their extreme hardships. However, these principles are not the whole story. It is true that Wilson is more removed from African feminist principles due to her upbringing and isolation, but she still attains amazing successes, personal and public, despite her circumstances, relying primarily upon the principles of self-reliance and adaptation for survival, and she extends the call for cooperation and community to include her sympathizers and friends, almost all of whom are white. Jacobs also meets much success in the arena of motherhood and public life, relying more firmly upon all of the central tenets of African feminism; however, the limits of African feminist principles under the harsh circumstances of slavery, racism, and poverty are aptly demonstrated, especially when so closely followed by Jacobs.

A bedrock notion in African feminism is the belief in parallel autonomy between men and women, or the ideal of mutual respect and cooperation between the sexes. It is not necessarily that men and women should have the same responsibilities, but that each should respect the other’s role, abilities, and contributions to the community and/or family unit. Wilson’s Frado not only never had a matrilineal line through which to learn the African keys to her own survival in America, but she never had a model of complementarity between her parents. The conditions of her birth and upbringing deprived her of not only examples of strong men and women working side-by-side and parenting, but also of a community that is the extension of cooperation within the home.

Critics largely assume that the conditions of Frado’s life, if not the names and exact specifics, match those of her creator. Thanks to the work of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1983), followed by Barbara A. White (1993), and recently by P. Gabrielle Foreman and Reginald Pitts (2005), the outline of Wilson’s life is known.⁴ For the purposes of this article, I will refer to events from the

text as happening to Frado, and events that happen after the text ends as happening to Wilson. Frado was born to a white mother, Mag, a “ruined” white woman who married Jim, a black man who was willing to take care of her. Their relationship was doomed from the beginning, because both Mag and Jim assumed that he was inferior due to his race. She married him only to keep from starving (Wilson, 1983: 13), and he married her because he was kind, but also because he thought she was “as much of a prize to me as she’d fall short of coming up to the mark with white folks” (11). Two children followed quickly, and to care for his family, Jim basically worked himself to death (15). Jim is characterized by kindness, thoughtfulness, and generosity to the point of self-sacrifice. While Frado’s memories of her father seem positive through Wilson’s depiction, they are vague and short-lived. Her mother’s disgust for her father and his color carried through to her feelings for her children; she calls them “black devils” and sees them only as a burden (16). Mag seems to have been incapable of affection or nurturing, probably due in part to her extreme poverty, but also to her position of outcast within her community. Mag and her children were never accepted; children chanted “Black, white and yellor!” as Mag, her new (black) lover, and children walked down the street (21). Not only does the community reject Frado, but Mag does too when she abandons her to a woman she knows to be a “she-devil,” Mrs. Bellmont.

Being raised by a self-loathing white woman as an outcast does not give Frado basic nurturing, let alone training in what we now refer to as African feminist principles. In contrast, the earliest memories of Linda, Jacobs’s protagonist, are so positive that she does not even realize she is a slave “till six years of happy childhood had passed away” (Jacobs, 2002: 445). Linda’s life is very close to Jacobs’s own memoir. Jean Fagan Yellin (2002) has corroborated (through the letters and papers of Lydia Maria Child, Amy Post, Nathaniel Willis, James Norcom, John S. Jacobs [her brother], and Jacobs herself) that Jacobs, did, indeed, write her own story (vii–viii). It is, of course, always true that we cannot take for granted that all information in an autobiography is “accurate” in any exact sense, but it is clear that Jacobs experienced first-hand what she describes Linda going through. Again, I will refer to Linda to discuss events specifically described in the book, and Jacobs when discussing events outside of the text.

Unlike Frado, Linda’s early childhood is filled with positive examples of parallel autonomy and cooperation between her parents, and these traits extend into her larger community, a community which is peopled by her grandmother and her uncles, but also by black and white people who are sympathetic to her and her family, and who protect, directly and indirectly, whenever possible, all slaves within the town from the unmitigated violence that occurred so frequently on larger plantations in the country. Linda’s mother was a favored slave, the “foster sister” of her mistress (447), and so Linda herself was a favorite of the mistress as well, and even thought of the mistress as “almost a mother” (448). Linda was never asked to do any difficult tasks,

but rather enjoyed her childhood relatively worry-free: she says, “those were happy days—too happy to last” (448). Her mother was treated well, and her father was somewhat independent, hiring his own labour as a carpenter. The parents worked together to raise their family, the mother having somewhat light duties from her sister/mistress, and the father being “allowed” to handle his own affairs and hire his labour out for the price of \$200 a year (445). Both are referenced throughout the text as positive role models throughout Linda’s life; their graves are a place of solace, and thoughts of them keep her strong. In particular, she credits her father with “teaching [his children] to feel that they were human beings” (451).

Their cooperation with each other extended into their place within the community; they were well thought of, and therefore so were their children. Linda’s mother had a good role model herself, in the form of Linda’s grandmother, who was a pillar of the community. Both black and white patrons relied upon her for baked goods and advice (446). Eventually, when the idyll of Linda’s childhood ends due to her mistress’ death and her transfer to Dr. Flint, a sexually-abusive master, it is her grandmother’s networking that steps in to protect her from his worst schemes.

Frado does not have the benefit of a community who will protect her. When she is abandoned to the Bellmont’s farm, she leaves any protection a city-setting *might* have afforded. She must become, at approximately six years old, almost entirely self-reliant. Food in the form of bread is provided, along with scant clothing (not even shoes most of the year), and an extremely small and uncomfortable bed chamber (27), but she must become a maid of all work for the house and do what she can to avoid the jealousies of Mary and the beatings of Mrs. B. Between the physical abuse, exposure, and malnutrition, Frado’s health is severely compromised, making self-reliance later in life, after her period of indentured servitude, almost impossible. Still she finds ways to network within the small outlets she does have, at least for a time: school, church, and the Bellmont farm. At school she quickly, unlike her “foster sister” Mary, becomes a favorite: “no one could do more to enliven [the children’s] favourite pastimes than Frado” (33). At church she impresses the minister and congregation with her seriousness, so of course Mrs. Bellmont disallows any more church activities, probably in part because she fears her abuse will be found out (103). Since school and church are both taken away, Frado must network in the only place left, the farm. She gains the sympathy of the farm workers, only to be disciplined later by Mrs. B for befriending them: “The men employed on the farm were always glad to hear her prattle.... [Mrs. B.] did not fear but she should have ample opportunity of subduing her when they were away” (37). Finally, she is left in a position where she has only the less toxic members of the Bellmont family to somewhat rely upon. Unfortunately, though Mr. B. seems kind, he is unable or unwilling to protect Frado on a regular basis. He decides she should go to school, but does not reinstate her education when her duties are needed at home, refusing to “live in hell”

for “rul[ing] his own house” (44). His two sons, James and Jack, take a deep interest in Frado as well, and seem to befriend her and protect her, but as Ronna C. Johnson (1997) has pointed out, their motives may have been less than innocent, and may have actually been motivated by keeping their sexual abuse of Frado silent. Still, both Jack and James prevent Frado from getting beaten on several occasions; however, neither one of them is ultimately able to help her escape Mrs. B.’s home and tyranny.

Neither Frado nor Linda are free, economically or legally, and therefore both are called upon at a young age to practice self-reliance. While Linda has the benefit of a loving upbringing, and one that modelled and passed down the tenets of parallel autonomy and cooperation within families and communities, Frado does not have either of these benefits. Still, both show skills with self-reliance and adaptation, skills they both need just to survive (for Frado, physically, for Linda, with her virtue intact), and skills that will help them both mother and, eventually, find success on their own terms. Linda relies on herself to prevent her rape at the hands of Flint, and adapts the meaning of virtuous womanhood for herself and other slaves. Frado finds sympathizers and friends in sometimes unlikely places; she also adapts herself to whatever type of work might best provide for herself, and eventually, for her son as well.

Linda grew up surrounded by her parents, and after their deaths, by her grandmother, brother, and uncles, all of whom took an active interest in her protection and growth. In fact, it is this protection, the opposite of Frado’s exploitation—physical and possibly sexual as well—that convinces Linda she is better than Dr. Flint’s lewd suggestions for her to become his concubine. But as is often the case with good daughters, daughters who want to please morally righteous parents, Linda is unsure how to protect herself from his advances, other than to make herself unattractive to him by receiving the attentions of another man. She has a strong community and the benefits of its protection, but she too must learn how to rely on herself. When she chooses Sands as a lover and becomes pregnant, her grandmother threatens to exile her from her community: ““Go away!” she exclaimed, “and never come to my house again” (504). Ultimately though, the grandmother realizes that she cannot forsake Linda, and Jacobs makes one of the hallmark adaptations of true womanhood for slave women: “I know I did wrong.... 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 standards as others” (502). While Linda was taught to be and would have liked to remain pure, the one inviolable dictate for true women, she could not, and not only adapted her life and her children’s life to this reality, but also managed to “lift the veil” from this invisible and terrifying aspect of slavery in the antebellum North.

Linda’s experiences seeing the parallel autonomy of men and women through her parents, the cooperation of a community, and the self-reliance and adaptation necessary to own her sexuality, prepared her well for the task of mothering her son and daughter. While the birth of her son was not an

entirely joyous occasion for her, as she felt shame for her position of not being able to give her lover's surname to her child (528), she found fulfillment in her role as Benny's mother. She named him after her uncle, a man strong enough to escape the evils of slavery, making clear her desire from the beginning of his life that her son should be free. When her daughter Ellen came along, she knew special pains were in store for her as a slave girl, for "*they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own" (526), but loved and protected her daughter fiercely, not even allowing a gift of a gold necklace to be put around her daughter's neck, for "I wanted no chain to be fastened on my daughter, not even if its links were of gold" (528). Many instances of her loving care of her children are catalogued throughout the text. As children, she provided for their comfort and safety, with the help of her grandmother. She petitioned frequently, despite the risk to her person, for their freedom from Dr. Flint, through purchase by their father. And finally, when she realized that her children would be used as pawns in the game to keep her under Dr. Flint's vindictive rule, she made plans for her own escape (545).

Frado must also strike out on her own. Linda's adaptations have to do with changing definitions of true womanhood to satisfy her position as a slave. Frado's adaptations have to do with finding work that will allow her to survive. Frado is released at the age of 18, with a 50-cent piece from Mrs. B. (117), but because of her lack of education, good nutrition, and general guidance and nurturing, Frado is ill-equipped to deal with the demands of the world on her own. She does not, as Mrs. B. predicts, miss the (in)stability, not to mention, abuse, of her life with the Bellmont's, but it is true that making a living proves exceedingly difficult for her. With the help of white people within her community, some who care for her and others who take her in for the money the county pays them for their services, Frado tries becoming a nanny (118), making garments (117), creating straw bonnets (124), and selling hair dye (130).⁵ Each career option is met with more sickness, because she is forced to "keep up her reputation for efficiency, and often pressed far beyond prudence" (118). In other words, she could never make enough to support herself in an amount of time or with a level of effort that would still enable her own health.

Frado, like Linda, becomes a mother after a period of self-reliance and adaptability to new and trying circumstances. In the midst of trying to take care of herself through her own labor, Frado meets her husband-to-be, and the father of her child. Samuel is a fugitive slave giving lectures on the abolitionist circuit, and "as people of color were rare [in Frado's new home], was it strange she should attract her dark brother" (126)? Without a community of family and friends, and certainly without any connection to an African American community, Frado is led astray by Samuel. Abandoned often by her husband, left pregnant, and finally told he was never a slave,⁶ Frado must make the most of her situation (128). He does rescue her and their son "from charity" on one return, but he dies young of yellow fever (129).⁷

For different reasons, extreme poverty in Frado's case, and the desire for freedom in Linda's, both women now embark on a path in their mothering that is perhaps the most dreaded and misunderstood act for a mother to commit, abandonment. And yet, while both circumstances are difficult, neither is surprising. Frado cannot adequately provide for her son, which is understandable because she is so alone; she was abandoned herself, left without a community or family to care for her, and was never connected in a real way to the principles of African feminism. Linda, cherished and protected, one who has all of her children's basic needs met regularly, must abandon her children for her freedom, and her hope for their freedom. Poverty and isolation have the same effects as that peculiar institution, slavery. Community, parallel autonomy, cooperation, none of these can save Linda from the need for liberation. And poverty that is borne out of lack of opportunity coupled with racism is not easily, if ever, solved. Both women make the ultimate sacrifice for their children—they give them up so that they may (all) be saved.

Unlike Mag abandoning Frado to the Bellmont's, Linda's "abandonment" of her children was well thought out; like Mag's abandonment of Frado, it was done out of desperation, not for the problem of poverty, but for the crisis of survival through escape. Linda, of course, made sure that her children would be cared for by her grandmother and Uncle Phil, and her brother William. And then there is the reality that Linda was actually within the same household as her children for seven long years; she never left them at all, until she had to for fear of being discovered. She took great pleasure in watching her children play through a hole she drilled with an auger (569). She could hear her children's voices and laughter, and longed to be with them. When her children had chances to go North themselves, she sent them, despite her personal sadness, and trusted that they would all be together again.

Conversely, Wilson's son is barely mentioned in the story itself. She is not able to experience the stereotypical idylls of motherhood because she spends too much of her time trying to find food and shelter for both of them. Finally, leaving her son in the care of Mrs. Capon, she can concentrate more fully on getting her health back and making money (129). She, like Mag, leaves her child for work, but with a caring family, thus redefining motherhood (and Mag's transgressions). Beth Doriani writes, "...Wilson suggests a new definition of motherhood: loyalty and self-sacrificial love to the point of separating oneself from one's children so that they may benefit" (217). Claudia Tate in "Allegories of Black Female Desire" (1989) also discusses Wilson's redefinition of motherhood as "Frado's resolve to preserve the bond between herself and her child, and...affirm her own autonomy as a black person who was a motherless child who became a woman who became a mother who was compelled to be a writer" (112). Motherhood is her lot and her concern, but she never idealizes it. Instead, she demonstrates its difficulties for a single, poor, black woman. Wilson (and Frado) worked hard to keep her son out of the "poor farm," a place full of mentally ill and sometimes violent people (White 25).

We know from Allida that “[a] kind gentleman and lady took her little boy into their own family, and provided everything necessary for his good; and all this without the hope of renumeration” (136).

Wilson ends her narrative with Frado still struggling for survival, but never giving up. In fact, the writing and publication of *Our Nig* is yet another attempt at self-reliance, and a new adaptation, to a career as an author. Asking for “patronage,” it is clear that she needs to sell her book in order to survive. Cynthia Davis (1997) writes, “...with her own and her son’s health failing, Wilson decided to write *Our Nig* in hopes of once and for all easing their lot” (486). Unfortunately, George dies less than six months after the publication of the book (Gates, 1983: xii). Without a firm upbringing and separate from a true community, Wilson’s son pays the ultimate price, while both suffer the ill effects of poverty and lack of choice, even as “free” people, in the antebellum North.

Linda, also, loses a son and is left at the end of Jacobs’s text without a home of her own. Eventually, mother and children are reunited in the North, and they even reconnect with Linda’s brother as well. Unfortunately, while the North provides freedom, it does not provide freedom from racism, or freedom from the possibility of being recaptured. Furthermore, work is hard to find and inconsistent, and at times members of the family are flung to far places just to make ends meet. It is not that Linda would prefer to be back in the South, as that would mean she and her children would be under the control of Dr. Flint; however, it is clear that without her grandmother and her community, it is somewhat harder for Linda to make ends meet, and it is definitely more difficult to keep her family together.

There are happy moments of reunion, especially “the winter [that] passed pleasantly, while [Linda] was busy with [her] needle, and [her] children with their books,” after Linda had rescued her daughter from the Hobbes’ household (643). Unfortunately, the need for work led Linda to return to her former employers, the Bruce’s, after she “put Benny to a trade, and left Ellen ... [to] go to school” (643). Later, Ellen is put in boarding school by her Uncle William, and Benny goes to California with the same uncle to find work (650-651). We never hear from him again. At the end of the book, Linda is still working for the Bruce family, caring for children and a house that are not her own, but also sending money to her daughter and finding time to write and eventually share her story with others, in the hopes of speeding the end to slavery.

Both Wilson and Jacobs led difficult lives: both had children in difficult circumstances, both were forced to abandon their children (in the children’s best interests), and both lost a son. It would seem, then, that in the end, Jacobs’s ties to African feminist principles and her own community did not and could not protect her from the horrors of slavery and its aftermath;⁸ it would also seem that Wilson’s distance from African feminist principles and community did hinder her, but did not ultimately lead to far different outcomes than Jacobs’s. As I began this paper I assumed that Jacobs’s life’s outcomes, and

the fruits of her mothering, would indeed be more positive than Wilson's. I quickly realized though that the forces facing these women were stronger than any of these admirable values. And yet, these women proved to be stronger than their oppressors. Through different life courses, they both found public success later in life.

Without her community, Linda must once again rely upon herself to see to her own and her children's welfare. Unfortunately she is not able to keep her son near her, but eventually, through the sacrifices and love she bestowed upon her daughter, she is able to work side by side with her daughter in aiding the freedmen in the South after the Emancipation Proclamation, specifically by opening the Jacobs Free School in Alexandria, Virginia, with the help of her daughter (McKay and Foster, 2001: 387). They are close throughout the rest of her life, and Jacobs's articles, published in the *Freedmen's Record* (Jacobs, 2001b) and *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (Jacobs, 2001a) continue to motivate people in the North to help the cause of her community, in broader terms, the southern African American community. At her death in 1897, she is eulogized by the noted Reverend Francis J. Grimke (2001).

Wilson too is able to find success in her later life, perhaps spurred on by the untimely death of her son. She, like many others suffering grief from high infant/child mortality rates in the nineteenth century (Foreman and Pitts, 2005: xli), becomes attracted to Spiritualism, eventually finding a husband, a community, and a career. At *Our Nig's* publication, Wilson could not have foreseen that she would marry again, that she would become, for a period of little more than a decade (about 1867-1880 [Foreman and Pitts xii-xiii]), a sought-after lecturer and spirit mediator, that she would have material comforts for a time. Wilson lives to a riper age than her readers would likely guess; when she dies in 1900 she is 75 years old (Foreman and Pitts, 2005: xliii). Unfortunately, even with this success, and the possible reconnection she may have felt with her son, or "spirit father" (Foreman and Pitts, 2005: xlii), the facts of Wilson's early poverty circumscribed her potential to mother in very real ways. While she is clearly an excellent example of a woman who was self-reliant and adaptable, in the effort to survive and find her own liberation, her mothering was curtailed by the lacks in her life and situation.

Both Wilson and Jacobs live to relatively ripe old ages, having both met with personal and public success. But if there is one way in which Jacobs *clearly* succeeds more than Wilson due to her exposure to and use of the tenets of African feminism, it is in the type of work that Jacobs eventually settles on, a work that is arguably a "culturally-linked for[m] of public participation," to quote, again, from Mikell (1997: 4). Her schools helped innumerable freed men and women. However, I have no doubt that Wilson found her work as the "coloured medium" satisfying and meaningful as well, regardless of how we might read that work today. African feminist principles helped both women, but in the end, their roles as mothers were challenged by their race and class status in ways these principles could not completely overcome. Motherhood

had to be adapted to the point of self-sacrifice, and even then, these women could not save their boys. Still, the principles of African feminism, when seen in their adaptations, allowed these women far greater success than relying on Western principles alone would have.

¹Harriet E. Wilson becomes known as “the coloured medium” in Spiritualist papers, such as the *Banner of Light*, which frequently listed her services and addresses; according to P. Gabrielle Foreman and Reginald Pitts (2005), she gave lectures throughout Massachusetts, but her home became affiliated with Boston starting in 1868 (x).

²Jean Fagan Yellin (2000) notes that she was born “about 1815” and that sometime around 1850 her freedom, and that of her children, was purchased by the Willis family (204).

³A brief summary of genre concerns related to Wilson’s text will here be followed by concerns about voice related to Jacobs’s text. Here are just a couple examples of the discussion about *Our Nig*’s hybrid genre: Stephanie Smith (1994) demonstrates that a woman in Wilson’s position would be unable to completely identify with the conventional identities offered in male slave narratives or women’s sentimental novels (138). Beth Maclay Doriani (1991) notes that women’s conventions are too far from Wilson’s reality to be represented without changes (204). She notes that Wilson further changes the rules of slave narratives by creating a fictional account of her slavery (207). P. Gabrielle Foreman (1990) connects both Wilson and Harriet Jacobs with an African American woman’s tradition of writing that “blur[s]” slave narrative and sentimental fiction (313). Further than just revising the slave narrative, Phyllis Cole (1990) notes that Wilson distinguishes herself from the abolitionist fiction by telling her own story more radically than Stowe or Douglass (26-27). Hazel Carby (1987) calls the text “an allegory of a slave narrative” (43). Harryette Mullen (1992) provides an excellent summation of Wilson’s use of and problems with these two genres: Wilson and Jacobs “...place the slave narrative and the sentimental genre in dialogue, and often in conflict, in order to suggest the ideological limits of ‘true womanhood’ or bourgeois femininity, while they also call into question Frederick Douglass’s paradigmatic equation of literacy, freedom, and manhood in his 1845 *Narrative*” (245). Mullen (1992) also adds to the generic discussion the idea of an oral literacy that resists and informs *Our Nig*. Finally, Thomas Lovell (1996) is appropriate to end our generic discussion about Wilson because he asks us to move away from it. He sees Wilson’s text as critiquing both sentimentalism and the economy. In fact, he sees this work as trying to modify the market by enhancing it with sentimental values (though not the ones proposed by the Bellmonts) (27). While it is clear that *Incidents*’ genre is less complicated as a slave narrative (with sentimental conventions), voice is a major discussion in work on this book. Jacobs makes use of two voices, the mature cataloguer of

life's events, and the young girl going through various "incidents." This narrative duality is similar to *Ruth Hall's* two voices, and serves similar purposes of creating action, garnering sympathy, and justifying behaviour. In fact, Daniel W. Schmidt (1992) notes this similarity between the two texts in his article "Writing a Self in *The Coquette*, *Ruth Hall*, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." His argument shows that these women writers created a public self (the personae of Linda Brent) to protect the private self (Harriet Jacobs) (13). The two voices as I see them are not completely analogous to the two voices Sharon Davie (1993) notes, the "discourse of shame" and the "discourse of defiance" that she traces throughout *Incidents*, but her work shows that Jacobs is clearly both pandering to and rebelling against her white, middle-class audience (88). Margaret Lindgren (1993) also discusses the duality of voice in the text by showing the ways in which she both "entices and confronts her audience" (33). In a related argument, Mark Boren (2001) traces the movements between first and third person throughout *Incidents* to show that Jacobs moves to the more distant third person voice in "moments of violation" as self-protection (41).

⁴Wilson's life story was first reclaimed for today's audience by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s Introduction and Notes in the 1983 edition of *Our Nig*. Barbara A. White revised his findings in an article from 1993, followed by a much more in-depth study, particularly of Wilson's later life, by Gabrielle P. Foreman and Reginald H. Pitts in the 2005 edition of *Our Nig*.

⁵New information shows that her hair dye business was actually successful for a time, as bottles of "Mrs. H. E. Wilson's Hair Dressing" still exist (Foreman and Pitts, 2005: ix). However, even though this business is reported as successful in Allida's letter, it is still clear that her failing health will not allow her to continue these labors, so she finds herself in need of money for her son when she publishes the book.

⁶Joyce Warren (2000) writes, "How angry she must have been to realize that the abolitionists not only did not help her in New Hampshire as a child but were 'hungry' to hear her husband's story (though rambling, illiterate, and false), whereas they did not want to hear her story about racism in the North, although it was well-crafted, literate, and true" ("Performativity" 16).

⁷Elizabeth Breau (1993) makes an interesting case for the poetic justice of his dying in the Deep South of "yellow" fever, or cowardice (458). The fact that Breau views the appended letters as "parody" may allow her to see the humor here, without also noting the seriousness of Wilson's situation.

⁸Of course, it has never been assumed that practicing the principles of African feminism *could* protect one from the horrors of slavery, racism, and poverty, only that these principles could indeed help and lead to survival and, possibly, to liberation.

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