Chapter 3

“I Have Sinned against God and Myself”
Bearing Witness to Enslaved Women’s Agency
in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

As every reader of sentimental literature knows, deathbed scenes are crucial to the form, as they provide narrative circumstances for enacting the mode’s affective purposes. As a novel’s characters gather around the deathbed of a beloved mother, friend, sister, or child, they form a tableau vivant that emblematizes the sympathetic relations binding born and created families together. In woman’s fiction, the deathbed scene is also a crucial indicator of a novel’s theological positioning; it provides a central character with a final opportunity to engage in an act of doctrinal agency. When The Wide, Wide World’s Calvinist Alice Humphreys declares herself “‘perfectly happy’” before surrendering the “will and the power that had sustained [her]” and succumbing to death, she makes a final gesture of renunciation that crowns a lifetime spent suppressing self-will and acting in accordance with her divine election.¹ When Beulah’s skeptical Cornelia Graham insists in her final moments that she “‘do[esn’t] want to believe’” in Christ’s resurrection (or her own), she is exercising the Arminian option to “chuse or to refuse” salvation.²

Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, like these and other sentimental novels, includes a number of deathbed scenes. In one that appears early in the text, two adult women hover by the bedside of a dying girl to hear her final words. The girl is not surrounded by loving friends; nor is she dying peacefully of consumption. Instead she is in agony and, like the protagonist
of many a seduction novel, is dying from the effects of childbirth. Because she has mothered “a child nearly white,” her mistress stands over her, cursing her for the supposed seduction of her husband. “‘You suffer, do you?’” the mistress demands sadistically. “‘I am glad of it. You deserve it all, and more too.’” When the girl’s mother predicts that the fading girl will soon follow her dead child to heaven, the mistress pronounces that “‘there is no such place for the like of her and her bastard’” (16).3

This scene sets up in five paragraphs the legal and moral impasse at the heart of *Incidents*, which thematizes the contradictory standards to which enslaved women were held: a Christian moral law that judged women according to their sexual purity—their ability to resist seduction—and the slave laws that defined any act of resistance as insubordination or crime.4 Mangled in the gears of these interlocking systems, the dying girl, like her white “sisters” in sentimental fiction, makes a final assertion of religious faith: she appeals directly to a higher power. “‘Don’t grieve so, mother,’” she says to the weeping woman at her side; “‘God knows all about it; and HE will have mercy upon me’” (16). In the presence of the white mistress who condemns her, and in the absence of the white master who raped her, the girl does not plead innocence or beg forgiveness; to do so would be to accept the mistress’s—or the law’s—right to pass judgment. Instead, the unnamed girl rhetorically circumvents both of these standards—legal and moral—by insisting that her innocence or guilt can be adjudicated by no one but God himself.

While the girl’s final words betray no particular doctrinal commitment—Jacobs does not even name her, much less reveal a denominational affiliation—her statement is a very clear declaration of theodicy: an assertion about the nature of divine justice and the meaning of evil and human suffering. Indeed, the scene stages a contest of interpretation in which, in Jacobs’s telling, the dying black girl has the final word. For the white mistress, the girl’s suffering is evidence of God’s righteous anger: she suffers because this is the deserved punishment for the sin of “seducing” her master. In contrast to this cruel and punishing deity, the girl invokes a God who sees and knows and who judges with compassion rather than condemnation. Aware that she suffers not as the result of her own sin but of her master’s, the girl declares that she is known to God and that he will treat her mercifully. The unnamed girl’s last agentive act on earth is not to proclaim her innocence but to invite divine judgment for her deeds.5

This scene appears early in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and it introduces the book’s primary motifs: the ubiquity and sadistic variety of sexual crimes against enslaved women and the hypocris of a “benevolent” and “Christian” slave system designed to shield the perpetrators of those crimes
while punishing and shaming their victims. But the scene also presents the primary theological argument of *Incidents*: that the “sins” of enslaved women cannot be judged by their corrupt enslavers or those enslavers’ “virtuous” wives and instead can and will be judged by no one but God himself. Inserted into the story at a point where the narrating Linda Brent is still a child, the scene foreshadows the fate that Linda herself will narrowly avoid by entering into a relationship with a white man who is unmarried (and thus has no wife to accuse her) and not her master. The confession of this crime—the sin of allowing herself to be “seduced” by Mr. Sands—provides both the narrative impetus for the writing of *Incidents* and the spiritual warrant for Jacobs’s antislavery appeal. Like the dying girl’s final words, “God knows all about it,” *Incidents* is a confession that doubles as a claim to cosmic recognition. But unlike the ill-fated and unnamed girl, whose confession is also her last testimonial act on earth, the death of Jacobs’s sexual virtue enables the resurrection of her narrative voice. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* takes the form of a spiritual autobiography in which Jacobs’s confession of her sexual sin is not the end of her religious authority but the necessary precondition for it.

Much of the critical literature devoted to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* has explored its generic hybridity and traced its narrative relations. The text’s most obvious frame is the escaped-slave narrative, which by 1861 was a firmly established but male-dominated genre. As critics have noted, *Incidents* is formally distinct from most male slave narratives, as Linda’s escape is long and protracted, more a string of varied imprisonments than a clean break with slavery. Even at the end of the story, after her legal manumission, Linda declares herself not completely free but only more free: “as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the north,” which, because of the Federal Fugitive Slave Law, is “not saying a great deal” (225). Like William Wells Brown’s *Clotel*, *Incidents* also follows a pattern similar to woman’s fiction: it traces Linda’s development from a sheltered child to a mature woman as she encounters trials and difficulties, experiences physical and spiritual growth, and is shuffled from one “home” to another. That Linda self-consciously ends her story “with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage” suggests that Jacobs intentionally invoked this popular genre and deliberately deviated from its narrative line (224). With its appeals to readers’ pity and compassion, *Incidents* is also clearly in conversation with the larger sentimental mode to which woman’s fiction belongs. But that conversation is often staged as argument or ironic commentary: as narrator, Linda Brent frequently denies the sympathetic identification on which sentimentality depends, admonishing her readers, for instance, that “if you have never been a slave, you cannot imagine the acute sensation of suffering” occasioned by the potential loss of her children (219).
Finally, as Saidiya Hartman has thoroughly demonstrated, *Incidents* must also be read in the tradition of the seduction novel, a genre that policed women’s potential emergence as liberal individuals by reinforcing their status as sexual property.

Surprisingly, however, critics have rarely situated *Incidents* in relation to what would seem the obvious generic tradition of the spiritual autobiography. As William Andrews and others have shown, the earliest examples of black autobiography took the form of spiritual narratives, closely following the existing conventions of conversion and captivity tales; when James Gronniosaw (1770), John Marrant (1785), and George White (1810) published their life stories, they adopted these familiar popular genres, and the escaped-slave narratives of the antebellum period, even when less explicitly devout, maintained the “pervasive use of journey or quest motifs that symbolize[d] multiple layers of spiritual evolution.”8 Despite this well-established history, studies of Jacobs’s slave narrative have tended either to downplay the text’s spiritual elements or to divorce them from its political aspirations as a work of antislavery writing.9 Margaret Lindgren, following Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, has suggested that when writing their autobiographies, the “political/cultural realities which dominated the lives of Black women denied them the ‘luxury’ of confessional or spiritual motives.”10 In these readings, “politics” is essential and “spirituality” is a luxury, a secularized framing that anachronistically puts asunder what, for many nineteenth-century African Americans, God had joined together. Studies of *Incidents* that do examine the text’s religious rhetoric have often focused on the disciplinary force imposed by nineteenth-century Protestantism’s cult of female sexual purity. Nell Irvin Painter laments the effect that Molly Horniblow’s “attachment to the feminine ideal of chastity” had on Jacobs’s “emotional life,” and Ann Taves, noting Jacobs’s adherence to a Christian standard that equated “sexual purity and spirituality,” asserts that in the conflict with Dr. Flint, Jacobs’s “ideas about purity allowed [Linda] to fight, but they did not allow her to win.”11 These readings apprehend Jacobs’s (and Linda’s) attachment to Christian moral standards primarily as oppression—as another form of enslavement, one that Jacobs apparently never managed to escape.

Many readings of *Incidents*, in other words, frame Linda Brent’s religious and moral commitments as constraints on her agency because they seem to prevent her from achieving full autonomy. But as Saidiya Hartman has definitively demonstrated, the agency of enslaved persons cannot be discussed in terms of autonomy and self-determination—the concepts with which agency is usually conflated. “The notion of the autonomous self endowed with free will is inadequate and, more important, inappropriate to thinking through the
issue of slave agency,” Hartman asserts, since “the self-possessed subject with his inalienable attributes is quite unthinkable or unimaginable in this case.” Because slave agency could exist only under conditions of coercion and legal nonpersonhood, historians and critics seeking evidence of slave agency must “endeavor to scrutinize and investigate the forms, dispositions, and constraints of action and the disfigured and liminal status of the agents of such acts.”

Acknowledging the agency of the enslaved in no way mitigates the guilt of the slaveowner or the evil of slavery, but it can assist us in recognizing the humanity of the enslaved. Reading *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as a spiritual autobiography reveals the disfigured, liminal, but no less real ways Jacobs envisioned and enacted her own agency and that of her protagonist, Linda Brent.

This agency took shape according to the terms offered by a black Christian autobiographical tradition that Jacobs inherited, adapted, and integrated with the white sentimental mode to which her northern readers were accustomed. Adopting a form that undergirded spiritual autobiographies by the nineteenth-century black women preachers Jarena Lee and Sojourner Truth but also the black revolutionary Nat Turner, Jacobs relates the “incidents” of Linda’s life according to a Christian narrative pattern of sin, confession, and redemption that positions Linda’s sin as the necessary precursor to both her spiritual salvation and Jacobs’s own literary authority. By presenting her narrative as a spiritual autobiography, Jacobs is able to confess her sexual sin to her audience while maintaining her singular narrative voice and developing a unique hortatory style—something impossible for the sentimental heroines to whom Linda Brent has most often been compared. In a political, legal, and moral system in which enslaved women’s agency was assumed to be nonexistent or was acknowledged only when it appeared in the form of sexual “crime,” Harriet Jacobs found a small but no less real space for religious agency and literary authority—a loophole—by confessing her sexual sin and making a direct appeal to divine judgment. That appeal, in turn, became the ground on which the redeemed Linda Brent could stand and exhort the women of the United States, black and white, to work for the abolition of slavery.

**Confronting “the Demon Slavery”: *Incidents* as Spiritual Autobiography**

When Linda Brent decides, after months of persecution by her lecherous master, Dr. Flint, to engage in an affair with another white man in her North Carolina town, she frames this decision as a suicide. Learning that Dr. Flint is building “a small house . . . in a secluded place, four miles away from the
town,” in which he plans to “make a lady of” her, Linda vows to “do any thing, every thing, for the sake of defeating him” (59). Imagining her existence as Flint’s concubine as a kind of “living death,” Linda chooses a different kind of death instead: like Clotel Jefferson throwing herself from the Long Bridge in Washington, DC, Linda becomes “reckless in [her] despair” and makes “a plunge into the abyss” (60, 59). Detailing the impossible choice offered to her—be raped by Dr. Flint or “give [her]self” to Mr. Sands—Linda reiterates the figure of flight through suicide: “Seeing no other way of escaping the doom I so much dreaded, I made a headlong plunge” (61). She describes this decision in terms of the sense of temporal—and temporary—power that it afforded her: “It seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment” (61).

Jean Fagan Yellin has suggested that by engaging in an affair with a white man who was not her master, Jacobs “abandoned her attempt to avoid sexual involvements in an effort to assert her autonomy as a human being.” “Autonomy,” as Geoff Hamilton discusses, is best translated as “self-law” (and not simply as “individualism”): the ability to rule oneself rather than be ruled by others. But complete autonomy was not possible for Jacobs, or indeed for almost any nineteenth-century woman, and Linda quickly learns that she cannot achieve “self-law” by transgressing the legal codes that define her entirely by her reproductive value to Dr. Flint. In the event, Linda’s sexual transgression defines more precisely her lack of power under slave law; it “intensifies the constraints of slavery and reinscribes her status as property . . . at the very moment in which she tries to undo and transform her status.” Learning of Linda’s pregnancy, Dr. Flint, rather than selling her or her (yet unborn) child to her lover as she had hoped, reiterates his claim to her: “‘You are my slave, and shall always be my slave. I will never sell you, that you may depend upon’” (67). What Linda finds in her affair with Mr. Sands is “something akin to freedom” but not freedom itself.

What Linda’s sexual transgression does allow her to do is define her actions according to a different moral code than that set forth by Dr. Flint. Though Flint continues to claim legal ownership of Linda’s body and of her future children, he cannot lay claim to her soul. When Flint accuses Linda of being “criminal towards” him, Linda’s rejoinder is that “I have sinned against God and myself . . . but not against you” (65). For Linda, submitting to a Christian sexual standard rather than to slave law allows her to choose whom she will sin against, if not whom she will serve. If, as Saidiya Hartman has shown, any display of independent will on the part of the slave represented transgression under slave codes that defined slaves as entirely subject to masters, then
choosing the authority against whom one would transgress was itself an act of agency. Antebellum slave codes insisted that enslaved persons “[could] not be governed by the same common system of laws” as free persons, “so different [were] their positions, rights, and duties.” Linda insists on being judged by a Christian moral standard rather than the standards set by slave law because only under God’s law can she be understood to have any moral agency at all.

In writing and publishing *Incidents*, Jacobs grounded Linda Brent’s right to speak on the fact of this sexual fall—and of her resurrection from it. This seemingly paradoxical agentive configuration accords with both the convoluted legal, social, and moral restrictions surrounding chattel slavery and the correspondingly complex formal and narrative conventions of Jacobs’s text, in which the most obvious place (Aunt Marthy’s house) is the most hidden and the most public place (the town of Edenton) is the most protected. The shape of Linda’s story becomes more legible when we read *Incidents* in the light of another generic tradition of which Jacobs would likely have been aware: black women’s spiritual autobiographies. Reading *Incidents* as a spiritual autobiography helps to clarify how Linda’s sexual sin, rather than robbing her of agency, becomes the ground on which she bases her right to speak.

In the spiritual autobiography tradition to which *Incidents* rightly belongs, conviction and confession of sin are the first steps in a spiritual journey toward redemption, conversion, testimony, and, in some cases, exhortation. The spiritual autobiography was a ubiquitous form in America from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, and its roots can be traced to the writings of St. Augustine and, even further, to the apostle Paul, whose conversion on the road to Damascus set the pattern for the spiritual narrative’s tale of conviction, conversion, and public witness. Whether narrated by a colonial Congregationalist, an eighteenth-century Quaker, or an antebellum Methodist, the spiritual narrative was likely to follow a conventional pattern: the speaker would describe a childhood full of “thoughtlessness, frivolity, or willfullness” meant to “signify an early state of spiritual lostness and hopelessness” but also marked by “profound religious impressions.” After encountering some form of Christian preaching or proselytizing, the speaker would become convinced of his or her sinful nature and experience “distress, guilt, and anxiety about their spiritual welfare.” This “sense of guilt and occasionally paralyzing anxiety trouble[d] the prospective Christian” until he or she experienced, usually as a teenager or young adult, a realizing sense of God’s grace: the certainty that his or her sins had been forgiven through Christ’s atoning death on the cross. For the Protestant Christian, this event marked the moment of conversion, though
not necessarily the end of doubt or striving. Many speakers recounted experiencing “period[s] when delight and assurance yielded to doubt, as converts discovered that some of the old ‘corruption’ persisted in their hearts”; these times of doubt would often alternate with “period[s] of renewed consecration, accompanied by a return of peace and joy.” Spiritual narratives often concluded by offering justifications for their own existence: the convert, having reached a place of spiritual assurance, felt called to share his or her experience with others and to give “an account of the ‘fruits’ of the experience—usually zealous conduct of evangelical activity.” More even than conversion itself, this call to share with others a common experience of spiritual change and growth provided a warrant for the work of self-definition and self-expression enacted in the spiritual autobiography.

This narrative pattern can be found in the spiritual autobiographies of Jarena Lee and Sojourner Truth, antebellum African American women exhorters whose narratives Jacobs may have encountered during the year when she attended to the daily operations of the Rochester Anti-Slavery Office and Reading Room. Lee’s *Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee* (1836) describes the author’s early conversion to Christianity, her experience of sanctification, and her call to become a Christian exhorter. Despite being born to parents who were “wholly ignorant of the knowledge of God,” in early life “the spirit of God moved in power through [her] conscience, and told [her she] was a wretched sinner” (27). Lee received further conviction of sin while listening to the preaching of a Presbyterian missionary. After four years of anxiety about the state of her soul, Lee was “gloriously converted to God” during a Methodist service led by the African American preacher Richard Allen, the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (29). Crying to God for forgiveness, Lee felt “as if a garment, which had entirely enveloped my whole person, even to my fingers ends, split at the crown of my head, and was stripped away from me, passing like a shadow, from my sight—when the glory of God seemed to cover me in its stead” (29). Released from the “shadow” of her sins, Lee went on to achieve sanctification, an experience described by John Wesley in which the believer “gradually dies to sin, and grows in grace.” In her narrative, Lee’s experience of sanctification secures her place in a Christian history stretching all the way back to the early apostles: “So great was the joy, that it is past description. There is no language that can describe it, except that which was heard by St. Paul, when he was caught up to the third heaven, and heard words which it was not lawful to utter” (34). After receiving assurance of her salvation and sanctification, Lee found herself called to preach the gospel and spent much of her life as a traveling exhorter.
The Narrative of Sojourner Truth, though longer than Lee’s narrative and containing more personal details, conforms to a similar pattern. It is difficult to know how much of the shape of Truth’s narrative originated with Sojourner herself and how much was imposed by her amanuensis and editor Olive Gilbert, but Truth, too, depicts herself as a rebellious young person given to early religious impressions and an increasing awareness of her own sinfulness. As a child the young Isabella Baumfree’s mother tells her of “a god, who hears and sees you” and who “lives in the sky” (17). With only this rudimentary religious education, Isabella “go[es] to God in all her trials, and every affliction,” speaking her prayers aloud and asking for whatever she desires (27). After successfully suing for the return of her youngest child, Peter, who was illegally sold into slavery in the South, Isabella receives a vision of God “revealed . . . to her, with all the suddenness of a flash of lightning” and, subsequently, a vision of Jesus (65–67). Convinced of her own “vileness” and shamed by the contrast between her sin and “God’s holiness and all-pervading presence” (69), Isabella begs for intercession from Jesus and finally receives assurance of her reconciliation to God. Years later, living in New York City, Isabella feels “called in spirit to leave it, and to travel east and lecture” and takes the name of Sojourner, embarking on a career as a traveling exhorter and activist (99).

Jacobs’s narrative of sin, redemption, and witness follows this narrative structure, but the fact of slavery subverts her spiritual autobiography’s form. Whereas Jarena Lee describes a childhood fraught with “distress, guilt, and anxiety about [her] spiritual welfare,” Jacobs recalls a bucolic childhood in which she was not yet aware of her slave status and the consequences it would have for her life. I was “born a slave,” the narrating Linda asserts as she begins her narrative, but “never knew it until six years of happy childhood had passed away” (7). Like Lee and Truth, Linda receives some rudimentary religious training, in her case by a kind mistress who teaches her to “read and spell” (10), but she also absorbs the “blasphemous doctrine” that, though a slave, she is also a human being (12). Whereas Lee was “converted . . . in rather spectacular fashion” in adolescence, Jacobs’s teen years bring her to a realizing sense of Dr. Flint’s disgusting desires, and it is to thwart his unholy power over her that she engages in an affair with Sands. Jacobs’s narrative reaches its spiritual crisis point in a scene in which Aunt Marthy orders Linda out of her house after hearing the confession of her affair, and it is only after she relents, placing her hand upon Linda’s head and murmuring, “‘Poor child! Poor child!’” that Linda is able to continue her story (64). To complete her journey to salvation, Linda must flee not only her own sin but Dr. Flint’s—she must escape the slaveholding South altogether. After surviving “alternating patterns of
spiritual light and darkness” during her years in hiding, Linda achieves true spiritual peace during a trip to England with her first northern employer. There, beyond the reach of slavery, she “receive[s] strong religious impressions” as grace “enter[s] [her] heart,” and she kneels “at the communion table . . . in true humility of soul” (206).

To do justice to the purpose of *Incidents* as both spiritual autobiography and antislavery polemic, Jacobs must be explicit about the nature of her sin. In most spiritual autobiographies, the exact nature of the convert’s sin is unclear; to describe one’s sins in too much detail would corrupt listeners and surrender narrative space to the works of Satan. Jarena Lee describes her transgressions in conventional terms, without dwelling on their particularities: she told a lie as a child; she was tempted to destroy herself; she was, in the words of a hymn she quotes, generally “vile, conceived in sin / Born unholy and unclean” (27). The details of her sin are irrelevant because the telos of her narrative is her conversion and calling to an itinerant ministry; the only fact readers need to know about her sins is that they have been washed clean. Jacobs, because she is writing a spiritual autobiography that is also an exposé of slavery, indicates the precise nature of her sin: driven to despair by the persecutions of her master, she had sexual relations and bore children with a man who was not her husband. “I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery,” Jacobs writes, couching her battle with Flint in the language of cosmic struggle, “and the monster proved too strong for me. I felt as if I was forsaken by God and man; as if all my efforts must be frustrated; and I became reckless in my despair” (60). Because the conviction and confession of sin is always the first event in a spiritual testimony, Jacobs’s confession lays the groundwork for the remainder of her story, in which she will assume a hortatory voice similar to that of Jarena Lee and other itinerant preachers. But because she will exhort her readers to join the abolitionist cause, she must first expose the enabling and perpetuating condition of slavery: the sexual exploitation of female slaves.

The presence of “the demon Slavery” also marks the relationship between *Incidents* as spiritual narrative and as antislavery text. The devil was a primary and very real character in the black spiritual autobiography tradition, whose practitioners were apt to employ “biblical tropes . . . literally rather than metaphorically.” Lee describes hearing the devil’s voice in her ear and even seeing him crouched in her room “in the form of a monstrous dog” (30). When she is called to preach the gospel, the devil attempts to undermine her vocation by convincing her that she is too bad to be saved—so sinful that even God’s grace cannot redeem her. Even after her conversion, Satan continues to torment her: when she prays for sanctification, the devil’s voice audibly replies,
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“No, it is too great a work to be done” (34). In Lee’s and other black spiritual autobiographies, Satan is the cosmic antagonist who uses spiritual, psychological, and sometimes material means to prevent the would-be Christian from fulfilling his or her spiritual and temporal mission.

Dr. Flint’s machinations against Linda and her family mark him as the devil’s earthly avatar, determined to prevent Linda from maintaining her virtue and, later, from escaping his domain. He seems omnipresent, meeting Linda “at every turn” and seeming to appear out of nowhere (31). He invades her thoughts, “whispering foul words in [her] ear” in an effort to “corrupt the pure principles [her] grandmother had instilled” (30). When she refuses to accept his notes, he insists on reading them aloud, requiring Linda “to stand and listen to such language” (35). His “dark shadow . . . follows her to even her most private of moments” and “achieves a kind of omnipresence by invading [her] psychological world”; he seems to “multiply his presence exponentially, even when he might be physically absent.”30 Flint’s diabolical actions drive Linda into the arms of Mr. Sands, an event that affirms his infernal character since the devil’s role in the cosmic play is to tempt human beings to sin and then curse them with despair at the thought that their sins are unforgivable.31 After confessing her affair with Mr. Sands to her grandmother, Linda, like Jarena Lee, contemplates her fallen nature and considers destroying herself: she “pray[s] to die; but the prayer [is] not answered” (63). “Truly,” Linda assures her readers, “Satan had no difficulty in distinguishing the color of [Dr. Flint’s] soul!” (38).

It is tempting to read Dr. Flint’s diabolical nature as metaphorical, especially given his infernal pseudonym; James Norcom was, of course, a historical person with total legal power over Harriet Jacobs and her children. But as historians have detailed, slavery itself functioned as not only a legal system but also a theological one, insofar as slaveholders could claim complete temporal and spiritual authority over their chattel. In the early centuries of the slave trade, the Christianization of “heathen” races by means of their enslavement was seen by many religious leaders as the providential purpose of colonization, and the laws that detached slave status from baptism in early Virginia protected slaveholders’ right to own human chattel while promoting the “propagation of Christianity by permitting children, though slaves, . . . to be admitted to that sacrament.”32 Because he controlled both the daily lives of his slaves and their access to spiritual goods, the slaveholder’s total and unquestionable power approached that of an omnipotent deity.33

Given slaveholders’ aspirations to godlike status, a crucial part of Linda’s personal and theological challenge to Dr. Flint is her refusal to address him as the god he claims to be. “‘If you deceive me,’” Flint threatens, “‘you shall feel
the fires of hell” (65). But while describing him as practically omnipresent, Linda attributes Flint’s powers not to his divine nature but to his diabolical one: his “restless, craving, vicious nature rove[s] about day and night, seeking whom to devour” (20). Just as a personal devil was a very real source of torment and temptation to Jarena Lee and Sojourner Truth, Linda Brent is stalked by a demonic presence whose danger to her is only heightened by the temporal authority he also wields.

To defy the theological and temporal power of the slaveholder-god, abolitionists invoked the doctrine of Christian universalism, a staple of Christian theology from the earliest years of the church. Christian universalism asserts that all human beings, regardless of nation or race, are children of God and eligible for salvation. It is grounded in three crucial verses from the New Testament and linked to the great commission, Christ’s instruction to his disciples in Matthew 28:19: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” From the earliest centuries of Christianity, Christian missionary and conversion activities were grounded in “the doctrine that the Crucifixion offered grace to all willing to receive it and made all Christian believers equal before God.”

The book of Acts recounts the working out of the great commission among Christ’s apostles as they went forth in the wake of the resurrection to “teach all nations”; early Christians “celebrated the conversion of Africans as evidence for their faith in the spiritual equality of all human beings”; and medieval Christian missionaries “honored black converts as living evidence of the universality of their faith.” While the late classical and medieval periods were rife with prejudice and violence directed at various ethnic and religious groups—particularly Jews—the official doctrinal position of the Catholic church remained that all people were eligible for salvation and that sincere conversion was always possible.

The two major theological systems of the Protestant Reformation, despite their deep divisions regarding matters of soteriology, retained the doctrine of Christian universalism. From a Calvinist point of view, the doctrine of predestination is perfectly compatible with Christian universalism; though only a small number of the human family might be among the elect, there is nothing in the New Testament to suggest that election entails a racial component. Indeed, Paul’s assertion in his letter to the churches in Galatia that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” suggests that the elect will be found among all nations. While in practice the elect of New England were most likely to be middle class and of English descent, in theory “neither slave nor free” were excluded from salvation. Arminian free-grace theology is even
more amenable to Christian universalism, since according to its proponents, Christ’s atonement has been accomplished for all humankind and salvation is offered freely to everyone rather than reserved for a select few. Early Methodist missionaries to North America often preached indiscriminately to racially mixed congregations made up of young and old, male and female, rich and poor, slave and free, and their emphasis on the universal availability of salvation contributed to the denomination’s explosive growth during and after the Second Great Awakening.

According to historians of race and racism, the invention of racial categories that began in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was necessitated in part by the persistence of Christian universalism. To justify slavery and colonialism and to obviate the theological imperative to convert the indigenous peoples they encountered, slaveholders, colonial legislatures, and church leaders took a multipronged approach to defusing the doctrine. Theologically, they pointed to the curse of Ham as biblical justification for the enslavement of African peoples. This curse ostensibly exempted the “children of Canaan” (Ham’s son) from the promise of Christian salvation because they had been condemned to be the “servants of servants.” Juridically, defenders of chattel slavery passed slave codes that made slave status dependent on “heathen ancestry” as transmitted through the mother. Later, the scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would give rise to another set of tools for defining Africans and other non-Europeans as fundamentally inferior to white Christians: proponents of race science used dubiously compiled evidence of physical differences to construct a theory of polygenesis that could undermine the biblical assertion of monogenesis. Only after the ostensible inferiority of blacks had been theologically, juridically, and scientifically established and baptism’s threat to the legality of slavery had been dismantled were serious Christian missionary efforts directed to the enslaved peoples of North America.

Even as these racial discourses were being formulated, however, the doctrine of Christian universalism—with its assertion that all human beings are children of God and therefore eligible to experience salvation—remained a powerful theological and political force. The earliest abolitionists, white and black, seized on the doctrine as justification for their antislavery efforts and emphasized again and again the primal heresies of slavery: that it denied enslaved people’s status as children of God, that it withheld from them the means of salvation, and that its hierarchies replaced an immortal God with a mortal man as the source of highest authority. David Walker challenged southern slaveholders to refute the assertion “that God made man to serve Him alone, and that man should have no other Lord or Lords but Himself—that God
Almighty is the sole proprietor or master of the WHOLE human family.”  Henry “Box” Brown described the confusing theology of slave life: while his mother taught him not to steal or lie, the young Brown “really believed my old master was Almighty God, and that his son, my young master, was Jesus Christ.” William Wells Brown played this confusion for comedy in Clotel: when a northern visitor asks an enslaved woman if she serves the Lord, she replies, “‘No, sir, I don’t serve anybody but Mr. Jones; I neber belong to anybody else.’” Another man, when asked if he has ever heard of John the Baptist, replies, “‘Oh yes, marser, John de Baptist... [H]e libs in Old Kentuck, where I come from.’” And in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Topsy famously answers Miss Ophelia’s question as to whether the Lord made her with the speculation that “‘I spect I grow’d. Don’t think nobody never made me.” According to antislavery authors and speakers, slavery’s original sin was that it denied slaves’ status as God’s children and mandated idolatry. The catechism’s most basic tenets, that “God created man, male and female, after his own image” and that God’s creatures owed “total obedience” only to their Creator, was undermined by the legal stipulation that slaves owed total obedience not to God but to their earthly masters.

In the context of Jacobs’s spiritual autobiography, the doctrine of Christian universalism is the warrant for Jacobs’s confession of her sexual sin and her insistence that she be judged by the same Christian higher law that her readers are held to. Christopher Z. Hobson has described how the shared conviction of sin became a crux of black Christians’ claims to equality with whites: “If ‘great and small, bond and free,’ are all prisoners of sin, then differences between them must be derivative and trivial; the governing classes and the whites cannot differ in kind from Africans and laborers.” In confessing her sexual sin to her readers, Linda acknowledges their right to offer or withhold compassion—“Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader!” she exclaims—but also emphasizes their fundamental inability to comprehend her actions (61). Since her white readers have been “shielded by the laws” from the ravages of slavery, they cannot know “what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel” (60, 62). If her readers have not seemed to be “prisoners of sin,” it is happenstance rather than innate virtue that has shielded them from the knowledge of their own unworthiness, since “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” Given these differential circumstances, Jacobs’s readers “ought not” to judge her “by the same standard as others”; indeed, only God can justly weigh Linda’s sins and her repentance (62).

Adopting the conventions of the spiritual autobiography enabled Jacobs to present the undeniable fact of slavery’s sexual abuses as, in her case, the pre-
cursor to agency rather than the occasion for its destruction, as abolitionist rhetoric and the seduction and sentimental novel traditions would have it. Acting as a spiritual warrior engaged in a battle for her soul gives Linda Brent space for agency even under the terrible conditions of enslavement to Dr. Flint. It is a role that does not reduce her to one of the “helpless victims or whores” who populated both proslavery and antislavery writing—the very position to which Dr. Flint wishes to reduce her. Though Jacobs invests “the demon Slavery” (62) with a diabolical will, forever fearing that it will “succeed in snatch[ing] [her] children from [her]” (168), her response is to pit her own divinely vested agency against the will of the slave system and its demonic representative, Dr. Flint. Even after her affair with Mr. Sands, Linda continues to assert that she is superior in Christian virtue to her lecherous master. When he renewed his harassment on the day after his confirmation in the church, she rebuffs his advances with the rejoinder that “‘if I could be allowed to live like a Christian, I should be glad’” (83). Flint takes it upon himself to instruct Linda in the ways of Christian virtue: “‘You can do what I require; and if you are faithful to me, you will be as virtuous as my wife’” (83). When Linda replies that “the Bible [doesn’t] say so,” Flint’s angry reaction reveals how unprecedented her accession of scriptural authority is: “‘How dare you preach to me about your infernal Bible!’” he exclaims. “‘What right have you, who are my negro, to talk to me about what you would like, and what you wouldn’t like? I am your master, and you shall obey me’” (83). Linda’s independent act of interpretation challenges Flint’s reading of the Bible and, in doing so, forces him to once again reveal his diabolical nature when in his fit of temper he curses the name of the holy scriptures (“your infernal Bible”).

By answering Dr. Flint’s definition of virtue with a biblical one—Flint explicitly calls it “preaching”—Linda declares herself the servant of another master, one whose commands she is perfectly capable of reading and interpreting on her own. Linda’s insubordination is an act of biblical exegesis couched as revelation: Linda knows the real truth about the Bible—“the Bible doesn’t say so”—just as she knows the real truth about the children that the “respectable” Dr. Flint has fathered. And she is willing to share this knowledge with other enslaved people, even at the risk of whipping and imprisonment. When an older enslaved man, Uncle Fred, asks Linda to teach him to read, she finds “a quiet nook, where no intruder was likely to penetrate,” and teaches him to read through the New Testament in a few months (81). Learning to read the Bible on his own—a task that must be performed in secret because of proscriptions against educating slaves—will enable Uncle Fred to see through the disguises and concealments of proslavery doctrine just as Linda can: the way it silences, for instance, the story of the Israelites’ escape from slavery in Egypt
while proclaiming the curse of Ham. Since “slave narratives are almost always founded upon a fundamental lack of knowledge,” to know the truth—and to know the truth about God, the most powerful being in the universe—is among the most seditious acts of revelation possible to a slave.  

Harriet Jacobs as Christian Exhorter, or The Confessions of Linda Brent

In her spiritual autobiography, Jarena Lee presented her experiences of conversion and sanctification as first steps in a journey toward Christian vocation that culminated in her divine call to become a traveling exhorter. This calling provided the warrant for every act of apparent insubordination, every deviation from race and gender norms. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century spiritual autobiographies written by women, including Lee and Truth, the experience of conversion and salvation prompts a change in behavior: “ Converts feel obligated by the very fact of this momentous experience to tell their stories and persuade others,” but to do so they must “overcome their shyness and timidity enough to exhort relatives, enter strange homes, address groups of strangers, inspire and organize other women, and, of course, publish their stories.”  Here, too, Incidents follows the pattern of spiritual autobiography, as Linda increasingly adopts a hortatory style that condemns both southern slaveholders and their northern collaborators.

Incidents offers some of the most scathing critique to be found in antebellum abolitionist writing, a fact sometimes overlooked by scholars preoccupied with the more sentimental aspects of Linda’s narration. In a thundering dismissal of white Protestant churches’ evangelizing efforts on behalf of faraway “savages,” for instance, Linda calls for Christian missions to white enslavers: “Talk to American slaveholders as you talk to savages in Africa. Tell them it is wrong to traffic in men. Tell them it is sinful to sell their own children, and atrocious to violate their own daughters. Tell them that all men are brethren, and that man has no right to shut out the light of knowledge from his brother. . . . Are doctors of divinity blind, or are they hypocrites?” (82) Jacobs contrasts her firsthand knowledge of slavery’s horrors with the blindness of the “doctor of divinity” who applauds slavery as a “beautiful ‘patriarchal institution’” because he has seen it only through the slaveholder’s eyes (83). Claiming the moral authority of one who has read the Bible and taught others to do so as well, Linda adopts the position of Christian exhorter, admonishing her readers to acknowledge slavery as a demonic institution and to join the fight against it—a fight full of both earthly and cosmic importance.
The role of exhorter was a specific position of religious authority that was occupied in the nineteenth century by Jarena Lee, Sojourner Truth, William Apess, and Nat Turner, among many others. Though “the terms preacher, minister, and exhorter” were sometimes “used interchangeably for black religious leaders” in the nineteenth century, the term *exhorter* had a somewhat different meaning than *minister* or *preacher.* While a minister or preacher was usually officially ordained by a denomination, the title *exhorter* could be an honorary one bestowed by one’s community or an official one granted by an established religious body. Nat Turner was an unofficial exhorter, one who was not regularly ordained but who, “being admired and respected by his fellow slaves, . . . often spoke to them on the Sabbath get-togethers.” Jarena Lee, by contrast, was a licensed exhorter; she preached with the official sanction of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, the first independent black Protestant denomination in the United States. The license to exhort (which was not exclusive to the AME Church but was offered by other Methodist denominations and some Baptist congregations) was one of the few official clerical designations available to women of any denomination in the nineteenth-century United States. While it carried the official imprimatur of church leaders—Lee received her license directly from Richard Allen, the founder and first bishop of the AME Church—it was “the lowest position in the church’s preaching hierarchy,” and even licensed exhorters “had to have permission before addressing individual congregations.” Exhorters could give testimony, witness to their own conversion experiences, and hold prayer meetings in homes, but they could not choose texts from which to speak—only an ordained minister could do so—or preach from the pulpit.

The position of exhorter, while subordinate to that of a mere congregant, was subordinate to the position of preacher and often served as a consolation prize for those deemed unsuitable for full ordained ministry. The Pequot convert William Apess, who joined a Methodist community in 1818, spent ten years seeking an official exhorter’s license from the majority-white Methodist Episcopal Church; while he did finally obtain his license, he was forced to change denominations—to the less rigid and more racially diverse Methodist Society—before he was allowed to preach independently. Such exclusions frequently characterized black churches as well as white: Lee, though she convinced the African Methodist Episcopal Church to grant her an exhorter’s license in 1819, never received official permission to preach despite decades of advocacy for her own and other women’s vocation as ministers. And even as a licensed exhorter, Lee encountered “repeated instances over many years of male ministers resisting her right to [exhort] or congregations challenging a woman’s ability.” Nevertheless, for licensed exhorters like Lee and Apess, who fought
race and gender prejudice to reach even this lowest rung of the ecclesiastical ladder, the position could become a space for critique and even for prophecy.

Harriet Jacobs grants to her protagonist-narrator Linda Brent the authoritative voice of the Christian exhorter. Adopting the rhetorical position of the convert called to witness to others, Linda speaks as one who has experienced both the terrors of slavery and the depths of sin to which it drove her, and who has emerged from the experience with a vision and a voice both unique and representative. Linda’s status as redeemed sinner enables her to critique the Christians and Christianities she encounters both north and south. She contrasts the quotidian kindness of her first mistress with that mistress’s decision to bequeath Aunt Marthy’s children, including Linda, to relatives rather than leaving them all free. Though grateful that her mistress at least taught her to read and write, Linda notes the contradiction between the content of these lessons and the import of her teacher’s actions: “My mistress had taught me the precepts of God’s Word: ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’ ‘Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them.’ But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor” (10).

Like the Episcopal priest Reverend Pike, who defines the slave’s duty to God as identical to his submission to the master, Linda’s “kind” mistress preaches a golden rule that binds only Linda and not herself. Linda recognizes this as “blasphemous doctrine,” even when it is preached by her own grandmother. When Aunt Marthy “strive[s]” to convince her children and grandchildren that their enslavement is “the will of God: that He had seen fit to place us under such circumstances,” Linda and Benjamin “condem[n] it,” reasoning that “it was more the will of God that we should be situated as she was,” free and with homes of their own (19). Painter asserts that Molly Horniblow’s “grandchildren admired, but could not share, her heartfelt Christian piety.” But while Linda and Benjamin “condemn” Aunt Marthy’s particular interpretation of her faith—that morality consists in remaining patient even under unjust authority—they do not reject Christian piety altogether. Instead, they weigh the faith Aunt Marthy recommends against other religious positions, applying reason to experience to craft an adaptation of Christianity that honors both Aunt Marthy’s living example and their own understanding of the “will of God.”

To see how Linda Brent’s religious identification offers a route to agency and an outlet for her hortatory voice, we need only compare her text with the framing of women’s religion that appears in the most widely read escaped-slave narrative of the nineteenth century, Frederick Douglass’s Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself (1845). In a famous passage in the Narrative, Douglass deconstructs the biblical curse against Ham that was used to justify slavery: “A very different-looking class of people
are springing up at the south, and are now held in slavery, from those originally brought to this country from Africa. . . . If the linear descendants of Ham are alone to be scripturally enslaved, it is certain that slavery at the south must soon become unscriptural; for thousands are ushered into the world, annually, who, like myself, owe their existence to white fathers, and those fathers most frequently their own masters.”61 In this passage, Douglass associates slavery with scripture and scripture, implicitly, with black mothers. To be “scripturally enslaved” is to be descended from Ham, but these mixed-race slaves, including Douglass himself, are descended from Ham only on their mothers’ sides. Even as they are invoked, however, these black mothers are deftly removed from the procreative process as mixed-race slaves are spontaneously generated by white slaveholders, “springing up at the south” and being “ushered into the world” while owing “their existence to white fathers,” with mothers nowhere to be found. In this crucial passage, scripture—particularly the curse of Ham—is associated with black mothers, and then both are made to disappear, rendering both black women and their religious agency invisible or impossible.

When religious women do appear in Douglass’s Narrative it is only in the aggregate and as the victims of religious white men. The women who appear in Douglass’s Narrative are not the myriad women, white and black, who participated in Christian antislavery societies—not the Angelina Grimkés and Sarah Louisa Fortens—but oppressed women whose abused state serves as a signifier of evil slaveholding practices. “We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members,” Douglass avers. “He who sells my sister, for purposes of prostitution, stands forth as the pious advocate of purity.”62 Like Jacobs, Douglass points to the hypocrisy of a slave system perpetuated by white men’s sexual crimes and excused by a white Christianity that blesses such actions. But for the male author, the bound and whipped woman is not an agent in her own right but an emblem of essentialized victimhood.63 Even Sophia Auld, the kind white woman who is chastised by her husband for teaching young Frederick to read, is initially presented in terms that echo Christ’s commendation to the “good and faithful servant” in Matthew 25:35–36 but is robbed of her religious agency by the power of slavery: “Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness.”64 Slavery, not Sophia Auld, is granted all of the agency in this passage; for her, Christianity is little more than a dangerous trap she fails to avoid, leading her in the “simplicity of her soul . . . to treat [Douglass] as she supposed one human being ought to treat another” until she is disabused of this notion.65 The Narrative’s
semantic framing of women as the victims of religion rather than its practitioners suggests Douglass’s doubtful opinion of the possibilities for black or white women’s religious agency. As John Ernest has noted, over the last forty years Jacobs’s *Incidents* has joined Douglass’s *Narrative* as the most anthologized escaped-slave narrative, with the two texts frequently paired by literary historians and classroom instructors in a kind of “his and hers” representation of slavery. Yet despite the fact that by 1861 Douglass’s was the most widely read escaped-slave narrative and Douglass himself the most well-known black American, *Incidents* makes no mention of Jacobs’s famous contemporary or his work, even as it offers oblique or explicit allusions to other abolitionists and public figures, including Harriet Beecher Stowe, Amy Post, and Jeremiah Durham. The black political and religious figure whom Jacobs does explicitly invoke is Nat Turner, whose 1831 rebellion shook the South, including Jacobs’s native town of Edenton, North Carolina. By referring more than once to Turner’s revolt, *Incidents* implicitly aligns Linda Brent’s act of sexual insubordination with the revolutionary events of the Northampton rebellion and, more specifically, with the resurrected narrative voice that circulated in the *Confessions of Nat Turner*.

In *Incidents*, the details of Nat Turner’s rebellion and its aftermath are sandwiched between the chapters that announce the births of Linda’s two children. The arrangement of these chapters, while chronologically accurate (Joseph Jacobs was born in 1829 and Louisa Jacobs in 1833), also places Linda’s affair and her new maternal identity in implicit dialogue with Turner’s particular brand of insurgent religious agency. Turner, like Jacobs, learned to read and write at an early age, and like Jacobs he attributed his strong religious impressions to the influence of his grandmother. His *Confessions*, like Jacobs’s *Incidents*, can be read as a spiritual autobiography in which Christian conviction prompts radical antislavery action. Dictated to Thomas Gray on the eve of his execution, Turner’s *Confessions* devotes five pages (of an eleven-page document) to describing the series of signs and wonders that convinced Turner that he was a prophet called to do a great work that would hasten the arrival of the judgment day. While Gray sought to frame Turner’s religious convictions and his prophetic visions as perversions of Christianity—the word “fanatic” appears three times in Gray’s introductory material and once in the court’s pronouncement sentencing Turner to death—Turner describes his religious history as a combination of intellectual engagement (reading the Bible and preaching), ritual participation (fasting, baptism), and direct revelation (he hears the voice of “the Spirit that spoke to the prophets in former days”). Though Turner’s experiences were more mystical than those of typical white converts, they closely followed the pattern of the black spiritual autobiography.
The focus on Turner in *Incidents* may in some respects be attributable to the influence of Jacobs’s editor, Lydia Maria Child, who while working with the manuscript requested further details about the aftermath of the insurrection. “You say the reader would not believe what you saw ‘inflicted on men, women, and children, without the slightest ground of suspicion against them,’” Child wrote to Jacobs. “What were those inflictions? Were any tortured to make them confess? . . . Please write down some of the most striking particulars, and let me have them to insert.” 70 *Incidents* accordingly includes accounts of the invasive searches to which Jacobs and her neighbors were subjected after the revolt was put down, as well as descriptions of innocent black residents “whipped till the blood stood in puddles at their feet,” “tortured with a bucking paddle,” and “cruelly scourged” (71). But while Child had requested—and Jacobs apparently provided—more information about the physical violence visited on Edenton’s black population after Turner’s revolt, Linda as narrator dwells at even greater length on the destruction of the slaves’ religious communities and on the agentive possibilities those communities represented.

As the social historian Walter Johnson has noted, “neither African nor African-American cultural forms,” including African American Christianity, “were inherently resistant to the system of slavery. And yet it was through employing shared cultural forms . . . that enslaved people flourished even in their slavery, and set about forming the alliances through which they helped one another resist it.” 71 Recognizing the opportunities for collusion that black Christian connection could enable, in the wake of Turner’s rebellion Edenton’s white authorities begin by demolishing the black believers’ “little church in the woods, with their burying ground around it,” which was “built by the colored people,” and where “they had no higher happiness than to meet . . . and sing hymns together, and pour out their hearts in spontaneous prayer” (75). In place of this independent religious practice, the slaveholders substitute supervised worship: Edenton’s black population is “permitted to attend the white churches” on Sunday mornings, where they are relegated to seats in the gallery and served communion only after the service is over (75). The white community also institutes separate evening services in which they determine to “give the slaves enough of religious instruction to keep them from murdering their masters” (57). At the first of these segregated services, the minister, Reverend Pike, takes as his text Ephesians 6:5: “Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ.”

Having seen in Turner’s rebellion how unsupervised biblical interpretation could lead to violent collective action among slaves, Pike and the slaveholders who employ him decide that the best way to head off the most revolutionary
results of religious agency is to control which parts of the Bible are made available to slaves. But his strategies backfire as the slaves make their exclusion the ground of their critique, interpellating themselves as observers rather than objects of proslavery preaching and treating Pike’s sermons as performances staged for their entertainment. “Highly amused” with Pike’s preaching, his audience returns a few more times to hear “pretty much a repetition of the last discourse” and then, tiring of these harangues, opts to attend a “Methodist shout” instead (58). At the “shout” and at Methodist class meetings (small group gatherings led by whites), the slaves note the hypocrisy of the white Christians (one white class leader snickers at a bereaved black woman whose last child has been sold) even as they recognize the liberatory potential of Christian teaching and their own capacity to practice a piety superior to that of white Christians. Linda reflects on the sincerity of the enslaved and asserts that “many of them [are] nearer to the gate of heaven than sanctimonious Mr. Pike, and other long-faced Christians, who see wounded Samaritans, and pass by on the other side” (78). Jacobs’s free and enslaved blacks voice their awareness of white Christian hypocrisy through slyly coded songs: “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!” (79). In these and other scenes, Linda and her fellow black believers appropriate the white teachings intended to pacify them and adapt them instead to their own liberatory purposes, just as Nat Turner and his fellow insurgents had done.

By enfolding the history of Turner’s revolt and its consequences into the story of her sexual rebellion, Jacobs implies that Linda’s moral suicide—her “plunge into the abyss”—has set free a resurrected narrative voice that is akin to the prophetic voice that circulated in The Confessions of Nat Turner. From its first publication, the Confessions seemed to defy the purposes for which its white editor intended it, raising as much sympathy for the slaves’ cause as it did condemnation. In the pages of the Liberator, William Lloyd Garrison satirically suggested that “a large reward” be offered “for the arrest of Gray and his printers,” since the Confessions was as likely to foment antislavery sentiment as to quash it. If abolitionism was the Lord’s work, as black and white abolitionists so frequently claimed, the voice of Nat Turner, as it circulated in the Confessions, had become the voice of God.

In Incidents, Linda reminds readers of Turner’s rebellion not only in the chapters between the birth of her children but again when she begins her long escape from Dr. Flint. Just before fleeing the Flint plantation to seek shelter in the attic room of a white friend, Linda passes by “the wreck of the old meeting house, where, before Nat Turner’s time, the slaves had been allowed to meet for worship.” There she seems to hear her father’s voice emanating from
it, “bidding me not to tarry till I reached freedom or the grave” (101). When
describing each of her desperate plunges—into sin and into hiding—Linda in-
vokes the name of Nat Turner. And just as Turner’s story rose from the ashes of
his revolt, the Linda Brent who emerges from the “living grave” of her
grandmother’s attic claims a hortatory voice that rages against slavery and its
abuses (164).

Mastering the authoritative voice of the Christian exhorter enables Linda
to unleash thundering condemnations of both southern slaveholders and their
complacent northern enablers. After praising abolitionists, Linda wonders why
more do not join their ranks: “Why are ye silent, ye free men and women of
the north?” she apostrophizes (33). Living in New York City after the passage
of the Fugitive Slave Act, Linda calls it the “City of Iniquity,” lamenting that
“while fashionables were listening to the thrilling voice of Jenny Lind in Met-
ropolitan Hall, the thrilling voices of poor hunted colored people went up, in
an agony of supplication, to the Lord, from Zion’s church” (213). The refer-
ence to “Zion’s church” ties a specific northern black congregation—Zion
Church in New York City, which had split from the white-dominated Method-
odist Episcopal Church in 1821 to become the founding church of the AME
Zion denomination—to the “sincere” southern black worshippers who had
prayed to be taken “up to God’s free church” (79), and also to the Old Testa-
ment Israelites set free by the hand of God and led to their Promised Land.
Just as adopting the conventions of the spiritual autobiography enabled Jacobs
to narrate her sin and redemption as a story with cosmic importance, assum-
ing the voice of Christian exhortation allows Linda to condemn corrupt white
Christians while celebrating the faith of black believers.

Eavesdropping on Incidents

The formulaic nature of the spiritual autobiography—its tendency to draw
on a well of generic images and phrases to describe a process of personal
transformation—has sometimes led critics to overlook or undervalue the pro-
cesses of self-making and self-expression it both describes and enables. For
the black spiritual autobiographer in particular, however, the genre enables the
accession of selfhood so strenuously denied by the slave system. The narra-
tor of the spiritual autobiography describes “a spiritual journey through the
trials of life, growing in strength and wisdom as he or she grapples with these
trials, gradually becoming worthy of his or her ultimate destination of ever-
lasting life with God.” To be known by God—not the false slaveholder-
god but the all-powerful deity embraced by Christian believers—was to be
recognized as worthy of divine notice and consideration, even in the worst of circumstances. As Saidiya Hartman has asserted in her study of slave humanity and agency, “serving God was a crucial site of struggle” because “the exchange of blacks as commodities and their violent domination were often described in terms of being treated as if one did not have a soul.”

When Linda, at sixteen years old, repudiates Dr. Flint’s “clai[m] . . . to rule me, body and soul,” she is engaging in the most fundamental act of agency available to a slave, and one that forms the basis for all of her later actions (43).

Recognizing how the established genre of the spiritual autobiography structures *Incidents* helps to reveal how Linda Brent’s agency operates through her religious and moral commitments—including the shame engendered by her sexual sin—and not solely or primarily in spite of them. Decoupling Jacobs’s agency from a secularized notion of total autonomy helps us as readers and critics to see the full range of Jacobs’s agency and, thus, of her humanity. As I have demonstrated in earlier chapters of this book, conflating agency with autonomy obfuscates our understanding of the religious experiences of free white women. But when applied to enslaved women, this practice results in much more serious and damaging forms of misapprehension that are tantamount to epistemic violence. Acts of epistemic violence “violat[e] the most fundamental way that a person or people know themselves” by denying, destroying, or erasing their experience, cosmology, or world view.

Harriet Jacobs knew herself as a Christian woman, and she apprehended her agentive options in the light of that knowledge.

As Carla Kaplan has discussed in her reading of *Incidents*, critics of the text have often appointed themselves the judges of Linda Brent and of her author, Harriet Jacobs. Seeking to recuperate Jacobs’s agency, critics have identified her acts of literacy and literary production as subversive by definition, holding up *Incidents* itself as evidence of her “triumph” over James Norcom and the slave system. Kaplan, like Hartman, exposes how such readings do violence to slaves’ stories and obscure the workings of slavery by imposing ideals of autonomy onto their subjects. While such recuperative criticism “restores important texts, helps us to reshape the canon, [and] maps the lines of ideological struggle along which canons have been laid out,” Kaplan writes, by “substitut[ing] the critic’s own agency for the textual agency supposedly being restored,” the recuperative critic also “places him- or herself in a juridical position,” claiming the right to pass judgment on a text and its author.

Beyond the single case of Harriet Jacobs, judging enslaved people by their capacity for rebellion or subversion reinscribes the very terms that justified their enslavement, since liberal notions of autonomous agency, Walter Johnson reminds us, “were themselves worked out in self-conscious philosophical op-
position to the condition of slavery.” Lauding Jacobs for achieving autonomy through publication not only elides the many forms of oppression she continued to endure after her manumission but also erases “a[ny] consideration of human-ness lived outside the conventions of liberal agency, a consideration, that is, of the condition of enslaved humanity.”

Though *Incidents* is explicitly directed to white women—the epigraphs on the book’s title page, the prefaces by Jacobs and Child, and the many apostrophized variations on “you happy free women” make this direction clear (18)—these readers are exhorted not to pass judgment but to listen: to bear witness to Linda Brent’s testimony of sin and redemption. The first of the text’s epigraphs decries northerners’ continued ignorance of slavery: despite a tradition of escaped-slave narratives that was by then decades old, northern readers continue to naively believe that slavery is “perpetual bondage only.” To repair these faulty northern beliefs, Jacobs’s second epigraph counsels attention and rapt listening: “Rise up, ye women that are at ease! Hear my voice, ye careless daughters! Give ear unto my speech!” (1). The epigraphs, taken together, imply that Jacobs, as author of the text and expert on the horrors of slavery, is not the subject of judgment but the practitioner of it. In ignoring “the depth of degradation involved in that word, slavery,” and allowing the slave system to remain in place for hundreds of years, Jacobs’s northern readers have given ample evidence of their own sinful natures. The extract from Isaiah, read in context, offers both an admonishment (“Hear my voice”) and an accusation:

For the vile person will speak villany, and his heart will work iniquity, to practise hypocrisy, and to utter error against the Lord . . .

Rise up, ye women that are at ease; hear my voice, ye careless daughters; give ear unto my speech.

Many days and years shall ye be troubled, ye careless women: for the vintage shall fail, the gathering shall not come.

Tremble, ye women that are at ease; be troubled, ye careless ones: strip you, and make you bare, and gird sackcloth upon your loins . . .

Upon the land of my people shall come up thorns and briers; yea, upon all the houses of joy in the joyous city.

Writing from the City of Iniquity to her northern white neighbors and speaking in the passionate voice of the Christian exhorter who invokes an ancient prophet, the Jacobs of the epigraph pronounces judgment not on the “slave girl” of the narrative’s title but on the northern readers, “careless” and “at ease,” who have allowed “villany” and “hypocrisy” to run rampant in the land. It is the “careless daughters” of the North who should cower before the Lord’s righteousness, not the pitiable victims of slavery’s degradations.
Those among Jacobs’s readers who would usurp the right to pass judgment on her occupy the place of the sadistic mistress in the deathbed scene with which I began this chapter. In the scene, the dying girl never speaks to or even acknowledges the white mistress hovering over her; instead, all of her words are addressed to God and to her mourning mother. “‘Oh Lord, come and take me!’” the girl begs. She then commands her mother not to grieve and expresses faith in God’s righteous judgment. Though the white mistress obtrudes herself on the scene, the dying girl takes no notice. Her statement of theodicy—“God knows all about it”—is directed to her mother and not to the white woman who has appropriated to herself the right to accuse (16).

If Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl is a spiritual autobiography akin to the narratives of Jarena Lee, Sojourner Truth, and even Nat Turner, we as readers and critics are called less to pass judgment than to bear witness. Caleb Smith has argued that Jacobs’s narrative is best read as testimony, the mode through which Garrisonian abolitionism sought to bring about its antislavery ends by constructing the abolitionist press as “an arena of justice that was both more democratic and more capable of honoring the higher truths of divine law” than were the earthly courts that merely exacerbated brutality against enslaved people.79 Incidents makes a direct appeal to the higher law by enacting the ritual of personal confession that begins the spiritual autobiography, in which conversion requires first the conviction of sin. But whereas court testimony is offered to facilitate earthly judgment, the testimony offered in the spiritual narrative asserts that judgment has already been rendered. God “knows all about” the convicted sinner, and we as readers are summoned to hear a confession and a testimony whose primary audience is God. Just as Jarena Lee testified before Bethel Church while Richard Allen remained silent, and just as Nat Turner spoke past Thomas Gray and offered his testimony before the congregation of enslaved people, Jacobs offered a confession that we, as readers, are called to witness but not to adjudicate.