



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Uncommon Women

Laffrado, Laura

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Laffrado, Laura.

Uncommon Women: Gender and Representation in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Women's Writing.

The Ohio State University Press, 2009.

Project MUSE.[muse.jhu.edu/book/27816](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27816).



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27816>

## CONCLUSION

# “I Found It Hard to Preserve My Self-Control”

Race, Women, Representation

*The author is a quick-witted, intelligent woman, with great refinement and propriety of manner. Her daughter, now a young woman grown, is a stylish-looking, attractive young person, white as an Italian lady.*

—Lydia Maria Child to John Greenleaf Whittier (4 April 1861)

THIS STUDY ENDS with a discussion of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Harriet Jacobs's account of her life in and after enslavement. In a scene from *Incidents*, “Linda Brent,” Jacobs's thinly veiled autobiographic persona, describes a raced encounter that occurs when she is traveling by steamboat in the North with her white female employer, Mrs. Bruce, in the capacity of nursemaid to Mrs. Bruce's child:

We went to Albany in the steamboat Knickerbocker. When the gong sounded for tea, Mrs. Bruce said, “Linda, it is late, and you and baby had better come to the table with me.” I replied, “I know it is time baby had her supper, but I had rather not go with you, if you please. I am afraid of being insulted.” “O no, not if you are with *me*,” she said. I saw several white nurses go with their ladies and I ventured to do the same. We were at the extreme end of the table. I was no sooner seated, than a gruff voice said, “Get up! You know you are not allowed to sit here.” I looked up, and, to my astonishment and indignation, saw that the speaker was a colored man. If his office required him to enforce the by-laws of the boat, he might, at least, have done it politely. I replied, “I shall not get up, unless the captain comes and takes me up.” (136)<sup>1</sup>

In this scene Jacobs's construction of Linda Brent largely privileges genteel female behavior. Brent would rather go hungry than be insulted;

she expresses herself respectfully ("if you please"); and she expects others to be equally courteous ("he might, at least, have done it politely"). Jacobs's self-consciously normative representation of Brent's female gentility reflects her awareness of values and assumptions of her middle-class white Northern female readers.<sup>2</sup>

Harriet Jacobs wrote *Incidents* at night between 1853 and 1858 while she worked as a nursemaid for and lived with Nathaniel Parker Willis; his second wife, Cornelia Grinnell Willis; and their child (the family was fictively named the Bruce family in *Incidents*).<sup>3</sup> Jacobs's identity during this time was rich with contradictions of what W. E. B. Du Bois would later famously and influentially detail as the "peculiar sensation" of "double-consciousness," "the two-ness" of being "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (35). Jacobs was a Southern woman living in the North; a mother living away from her children, serving as nursemaid to another woman's child; a fugitive slave working for a white man who edited a proslavery journal;<sup>4</sup> and a Black woman living with and among whites.<sup>5</sup> As Sidonie Smith has argued regarding Jacobs's double consciousness, "[f]rom her position on the margins, however, Jacobs can 'see' both inside and outside white culture, inside and outside 'true womanhood' and its supporting ideology" ("Resisting the Gaze" 99). It was from this vexed, disenfranchised position that Jacobs attempted to write an autobiographical text for publication.

In *Incidents* Jacobs uses the persona of Linda Brent to align herself and her text with white middle-class female Northern readers. For this association to succeed, Jacobs must complicate the condemnation that she anticipates will be directed toward her by her female audience when they read Brent's confession regarding sex with a white man. The text primarily responds to Brent's perceived disruptive sexual acts by foregrounding the cherished nineteenth-century middle-class construction of devoted motherhood. Throughout the text Brent's singular sacrifices—particularly her seven-year concealment in order to remain near and protect her children—are depicted as innate to any loving, dedicated mother. Further, the introduction to and editing of *Incidents* by well-known white abolitionist Lydia Maria Child serves to authorize a reading of Brent as a respectable, compliant, and contrite Black woman.

Critical readings of *Incidents* have centered on scenes of Brent in the South, typically the tenth chapter in which Brent confesses her sexual transgressions, and chapters detailing her seven-year concealment.<sup>6</sup> In the text Brent admits that she had sex with Mr. Sands, "a white unmar-

ried gentleman" (46), in an attempt to protect herself from continued sexual persecution by her owner, Dr. Flint. Brent's sexual "headlong plunge" (47) is described as the result of her "shudder[ing] to think of being the mother of children that should be owned by my old tyrant" and her belief that Mr. Sands would arrange for her children's freedom (47). Brent's confession is located at an intersection of motherhood and a female gentility defeated by raced oppression. Her shamed plea for forgiveness, "Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader!" (47), both informs white middle-class female readers that Brent respects and has endeavored to attain their moral standards and laments her failure to do so. That failure, however, is carefully positioned in the context of devoted motherhood. As Hazel Carby writes, Brent is "a demonstration of the consequences for motherhood of the social and economic relations of the institution of slavery" (54).

Jacobs's text directs critics and readers to considerations of motherhood primarily with the account of Brent's seven-year concealment, which foregrounds her maternal sacrifices. Jacobs lived for seven years in a hidden garret of coffin-like dimensions, giving up her health and all but minimal physical movement in order to remain near but never touch or speak to her children ("Season after season, year after year, I peeped at my children's faces, and heard their sweet voices, with a heart yearning all the while to say, 'Your mother is here'" [117]). Jacobs's extended narration of Brent's acute physical pain and emotional despair is embedded in the script of the sacrificing mother revered by the larger culture:

I could have made my escape alone; but it was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom. Though the boon would have been precious to me, above all price, I would not have taken it at the expense of leaving them in slavery. Every trial I endured, every sacrifice I made for their sakes, drew them closer to my heart, and gave me fresh courage to beat back the dark waves that rolled and rolled over me in a seemingly endless night of storms. (73-74)

Brent's sacrifices for her children do not result in resentment or in a lessening of her affection for them over time. Rather, Jacobs constructs Brent as a mother granted the priceless opportunity to forfeit her life for her children and in so doing to love them even more devotedly. With each ennobling sacrifice, Brent's love for her children is strengthened and her selfless courage is renewed.

My reading of *Incidents* foregrounds Jacobs's (self-) constructions of female gentility. This critical approach constitutes a fresh rereading of Jacobs's text. Jacobs's treatment of female gentility has received little scrutiny, which is understandable given the text's rich locations of, for instance, motherhood and captivity, both of which have garnered major critical attention. I turn to considerations of gentility in *Incidents* in order to test the unstable ground of the work's correspondence with white women's texts discussed in my study. Reading *Incidents* through a lens of gentility underscores Jacobs's violations of the normative while—as with the white women discussed in this study—also drawing attention to her alignment of herself with conventional gendered assumptions. This critical approach additionally reveals complexities of women's self-writing and agency, as well as inadequacies of heterosexual constructions. Through my use of gentility, I attempt to make transparent ways in which *Incidents* contests constraints of the feminine, puts pressure on categories of race and class, and works to forestall reactions against its uncommon discourses. These aspects of Jacobs's writing point to greater degrees of difficulty in writing the autobiographic encountered by women like Jacobs whose race, class, or sexuality identified them as outside the normative. Reading Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* through the lens of gentility complicates generalizations in previous chapters of this study across ethnic/racial lines and extends the discussion that occurs in the rest of the book.

Thus the quotation with which I begin this concluding chapter references not Linda Brent's motherhood but her gentility. In this scene Brent is in the North, a fugitive slave traveling on a steamboat as nursemaid to the child of her white female middle-class employer. Brent is represented as a conventional woman in this scene, still motherly, though paid to be so as she cares for another woman's child. She is also represented as a Black woman who recognizes the potential for negative responses to her public appearance among whites. When confronted, as she had accurately feared she might be, with violating "the by-laws of the boat," she responds with unconventional female self-assertion ("I shall not get up, unless the captain comes and takes me up" [136]).<sup>7</sup> However, even her unconventional authoritative response when challenged with a breach of rules is situated somewhat genteelly.<sup>8</sup> That is, her response is based on prevailing race and class assumptions. The "astonishment and indignation" which prompt her self-assertion are provoked by her realization "that the speaker was a colored man." She is affronted because a man in this office is impolite to her, but particu-

larly so because it is a Black man who behaves rudely to her. Brent's further commentary makes this plain: "If his office required him to enforce the by-laws of the boat, he might, at least, have done it politely." The scene encourages readers to recognize Brent as a conventional woman offended by speech that is rude in both language and tone, just as the impertinent assumptions of the Black speaker are rude. Brent's response and its grounding in gentility accord with Amy Richter's argument in her examination of nineteenth-century U.S. public women's travel that "many black women believed that their polite behavior could provide them with protection during travel" (46).

As with a representational strategy adopted by Sarah Kemble Knight in her *Journal*, Jacobs represents herself/Brent adhering to culturally sanctioned female codes even when, as in the scene above, her behavior transgresses those codes. Knight's correlation of speech—which she perceives as less genteel—with eating—which she views as vulgar—reappears in *Incidents* in a more complex intersection of speaking, writing, and eating. In the scene which begins this chapter, Brent anticipates that her presence at the supper table may be perceived as disruptive. She then explains to white readers in writing (not speaking) that she was barred from eating by the (c)rude speech of a Black worker, who, unlike Brent, we may infer did not know how to read or to write. Jacobs orally at the time and then later through Brent in *Incidents* responds with dignified gentility to the man's "gruff voice." In presenting this scene as she does, Jacobs indicates divisions between speaking and writing as well as speaking and eating. In Knight's *Journal* such distinctions are distinctions of class—that is, in Knight's text, the vulgar speaking of white people corresponds with their uncouth eating. Jacobs's distinctions are likewise class-inflected but are further complicated by Blackness. A Black man's crude denial of Brent's genteel attempt to dine exposes such eating, despite its trappings, as no more than coarse consumption segregated by race. Had the Black servant "done it politely"—used courteous speech that acknowledged Brent's propriety—his civil delivery would have still resulted in Brent's exile from the table, but it also would have left intact the possibility of polite dining.

This scene, however, is only one disruptive incident, as it were, though not an insignificant one, in a larger portrait of Brent's traveling. Brent's journeys differ fundamentally from the travel of white women authors discussed in this study's earlier chapters. Primarily, Brent's trips belong to a specific subset of the larger category of travel: they are not voluntary journeys so much as they are flights. Unlike white women

discussed earlier, Brent travels not because she chooses to; she travels because she must. In almost every instance of her traveling, Brent is not going *to* a place so much as she is escaping *from* another place. Also, in a nineteenth-century, raced déjà-vu pattern, Brent continues to travel to places she does not wish to go.

Brent's traveling is markedly different from the white women authors' depictions of and rationales for traveling. For example, Jacobs's/Brent's presence while traveling is significantly more disruptive than Knight's unsettling presence. Knight is challenged and mistaken for a prostitute, but she is nonetheless always allowed to sit down and eat. Unlike Alcott's Tribulation Periwinkle in *Hospital Sketches*, Jacobs/Brent cannot travel alone without fearful expectations that she may be insulted, turned away, kidnapped, or raped.<sup>9</sup> Like that of Willis/Fern and Edmonds, Jacobs's/Brent's identity is at various times anonymous, concealed, or not fully known; but, unlike them, her life and liberty are always in danger if her identity is revealed. Indeed, on all her travels, Brent must appear in various degrees of disguise—that is, she must, at all costs, not be read as the fugitive slave she is.

In order to demonstrate these differences, I detail below a passage from *Incidents* regarding female travel. I follow this analysis by readings of similar passages from Knight's *Journal*; from Fern's "Dark Days," an early literary periodical piece; from Alcott's *Hospital Sketches*; and from Edmonds's *Nurse and Spy*. I do not wish to place undue emphasis on implications of the textual passages I have selected. However, as I discuss below, these passages offer provocative instruction regarding race and women's autobiographic uses of gentility as well as cross-dressing and travel.

To begin, toward the end of the twentieth chapter of *Incidents*, readers are presented with what initially seems to be the start of Brent's escape to the North and freedom. In this scene Brent, disguised as a Black male sailor, leaves her hiding place in the house of an unnamed white woman, a friend of her grandmother, who is married to a man who owns slaves. Brent's gentility, despite her cross-dressing, is signaled in her placid acquiescence to her complete lack of information regarding her destination. Peter, the young Black man helping her, then tells her (also informing Jacobs's readers) that her uncle is preparing a hiding place for her in the garret of her grandmother's house. To allow him time to do so, Brent is told that she and Peter will spend the night concealed in the ominously named Snaky Swamp.<sup>10</sup> Brent anxiously "dread[s] to enter this hiding-place" for fear of snakes, but accurately

understands that she is “in no situation to choose” (90). Previously, at the beginning of the eighteenth chapter, Brent, eluding agents of Dr. Flint, had hidden “in a thicket of bushes” when

a reptile of some kind seized my leg. In my fright, I struck a blow which loosened its hold, but I could not tell whether I had killed it; it was so dark, I could not see what it was; I only knew it was something cold and slimy. The pain I soon felt indicated that the bite was poisonous. . . . The dread of being disabled was greater than the physical pain I endured. (80)

Thus, two chapters earlier, Brent’s temporarily hiding outside at night had mixed terror of capture, fear of reptiles, physical pain, and anxieties of permanent bodily impairment. Now, two chapters later, as Brent and Peter enter Snaky Swamp, the circumstances of this next concealment outside are even more difficult for Brent to endure:

We were covered with hundreds of mosquitos. In an hour’s time they had so poisoned my flesh that I was a pitiful sight to behold. As the light increased, I saw snake after snake crawling round us. I had been accustomed to the sight of snakes all my life, but these were larger than any I had ever seen. . . . [T]he number of snakes increased so much that we were continually obliged to thrash them with sticks to keep them from crawling over us. (90–91)

In this feral nighttime Eden, Brent’s body is besieged by a variety of rabid life forms that desire to possess/consume Black female flesh. The mosquitoes are numerous, poisonous, and relentless. The too-phallic snakes are equally plentiful, large beyond custom, and multiplying in number throughout the night. In this situation, circumstances render Peter, Brent’s male companion in hiding, effectively demasculinized; he does (can do) nothing beyond what Brent herself—not male, though disguised as a male sailor—can do in attempting to keep the snakes away. The attacking mosquitoes and snakes within the confines of Snaky Swamp substitute for the slavocracy and its predatory representatives, particularly Dr. Flint, in the larger world outside the swamp.<sup>11</sup> As with poisonous vermin within the swamp, poisonous human vermin outside the swamp are also driven to possess and consume the Black female body.

Traumatic as Brent’s situation is as she hides in the swamp from whites who pursue her, she nonetheless crucially maintains the gentility



of the middle-class woman in her text despite her male clothing, telling readers that "even those large, venomous snakes were less dreadful to my imagination than the white men in that community called civilized" (91). Brent discreetly implies the fearful reality that she would be raped by the white men should they succeed in their pursuit of her. Brent's qualifying of the term "white men" as "white men in that community called civilized" is carefully constructed for white female readers to include not all white men, but only an evil subset of Southern white men.

Brent does not want to travel to hide in the unnamed white woman's house, in the thicket of bushes, or in Snaky Swamp. She does not wish to travel to hide in the garret of her grandmother's house. But, as Jacobs knows, any Black female slave would be fortunate to have such destinations, indeed, to have any destination that would allow her to remain successfully concealed from her zealous pursuers. Brent simultaneously inhabits multiple disenfranchised personae of cross-dressed Black woman, fugitive slave, male sailor, threatened mother, and slave as she flees in terror from the close confinement and dangers of one Southern hiding place to another. If for a moment we interrupt this discussion and our reading of *Incidents* to view Brent fearfully suspended in mid-flight, we see a compelling autobiographic representation of antebellum Black female travel in the nineteenth-century U.S. South.

Readers who turned to Knight's *Journal* in 1865—or at any time after its initial 1825 publication and its reprintings throughout the nineteenth century, including 1865—would have encountered a somewhat similar scene involving a woman's unconventional nighttime travel. Knight recounts her journey with her guide John, a white man she had met and hired that day:

When we had Ridd about an how'r, wee come into a thick swamp, wch. by Reason of a great fogg, very much startled mee, it being now very Dark. But nothing dismay'd John: Hee had encountered a thousand and a thousand such Swamps, having a Universall Knowledge in the woods; and readily Answered all my inquiries wch. were not a few. (90)

Knight's swamp, of course, differs from Jacobs's by climate and region. Also, Knight reaches this Northern swamp in conditions of early autumn while Brent hides in a Southern swamp in conditions of early summer. However, without diminishing these distinctions, Knight's New England swamp compared to Jacobs's depiction of Snaky Swamp appears plain and uninhabited. Where Brent's swamp experience was rife with

multiple images of the erect phallus—long proboscises of mosquitoes, enormous snakes, thrashing sticks, and sexually violent white men—Knight's swamp experience is virtually bereft of all images “by Reason of fogg.” The strongest reaction that her swamp experience evokes from Knight is that it “very much startled” her, and only then because the fog obscures the sight of the swamp as Knight and John approach it.

Unlike Brent's, Knight's agency is such that she does not have to hide or even stop in the swamp. That agency extends to Knight's selective observations of the swamp itself. While the swamp through which Knight traveled surely teemed with insects and reptiles, Knight has the privilege of disregarding them. She is on horseback and in transit. She is not the object of a hunt and indeed has voluntarily and without duress chosen to travel. Each of these aspects helps exempt Knight from concerns of insects and reptiles. Additionally, all of Knight's unknowns—everything she does notice about the swamp—are “readily answered” by her practiced white male travel guide. Her “inquiries wch. were not a few” are satisfied by John's “Universall Knowledge in the woods.” Knight's satirical remarks concerning the self-important nature of John's knowledge (“Hee had encountered a thousand and a thousand such Swamps”) should not obscure the representation of John as a white man with information and Knight as an inexperienced (read: genteel) white woman.<sup>12</sup>

In Fanny Fern's “Dark Days” (4 Dec. 1852, *Olive Branch*), recently widowed Jane Grey cannot afford the care that would save the life of Charley, her sick son. After Charley's death, on the way to “the ‘poor man's lot,’” Jane Grey rides next to the sexton who drives the wagon holding Charley's coffin. The funeral is attended only by Jane Grey and the sexton. The following occurs after the burial:

When the sexton touched her arm, and pointed to the wagon, she followed him mechanically, and made no objection, when he said “he guessed he'd drive a little faster, now that the lad was out.” He looked at her once or twice, and thought it very odd that she didn't cry; but he didn't profess to understand women folks.

Like Brent's journey to Snaky Swamp, Jane Grey's nighttime travel also entails a traumatic destination, in this case her son's burial, which is the object of the trip. However, Jane Grey travels in a wagon, not, like Brent, on foot. Though she must remain outside for a time, she is not pursued, and she does not need to hide. The natural surroundings that Fern describes in “Dark Days” are as free of predators as Knight's

swamp. Tragic as the representation of Jane Grey is, Fern can nonetheless accurately and without activating readers' skeptical attention portray her as having the genteel privilege of taking no notice of such matters. Indeed, in this scene Fern depicts no living things at all aside from the sexton and Jane Grey herself.

As with John, Knight's male guide, the sexton represents local self-centered masculine authority. He performs his tasks adequately—driving the wagon, burying the coffin—but does no more than that. The sexton's passing interest in Jane Grey, such as it is, registers her divergence from gendered expectations (he "thought it very odd that she didn't cry"). But that observation is immediately followed by his untroubled and unexamined dismissal of her and of women in general ("he didn't profess to understand women folks"). Linda Brent needs her male friend Peter to help plan her next concealment, accompany her to the swamp and back, and offer what protection he can in those fraught circumstances. However, Knight and Fern's Jane Grey are less dependent in such situations, requiring men only to guide or to drive them and to perform these duties correctly. In their travels Knight and Jane Grey are represented as having more autonomy and less trepidation than Linda Brent. As they travel, their lack of worry regarding male violence, for instance, is reflected in the absence of multiple images of the phallus like those employed by Jacobs. Shielded by readily perceived identity markers of white female gentility, Knight and Jane Grey do not need additional protection from men, and they do not need to cross-dress or present themselves androgynously.

This contrast may have seemed less absolute in the lives Fern and Jacobs lived outside their texts, particularly so because the two women knew each other.<sup>13</sup> Joyce Warren interestingly aligns Fern's and Jacobs's situations, noting that "in desperation, Fanny Fern left her husband, just as Harriet Jacobs fled rather than submit sexually to the master whom she despised" (*Fanny Fern* 303).<sup>14</sup> Warren extends this association to argue that

a comparison of the two writers provides a significant comment on the position of women in nineteenth-century America: slave or free, women were dependent upon and answerable to men; without autonomy in society or in the home, their bodies and their children were not their own. (303)

I agree with Warren's argument, up to a point. Certainly an understanding of women's lives in the nineteenth-century United States must

foreground oppressive cultural forms and practices of patriarchy. Further, it is likely that Willis herself would have been in agreement with Warren's analysis. Regarding the relationship between Fern and Jacobs, Warren quotes Thomas Butler Gunn, a frequent guest in the Fern/Par-ton household, who wrote that "Fern had told him that she felt a special obligation to Harriet Jacobs, who, she said, was one of the few people who stuck by her when others did not" (223).

However, I diverge from Warren's conclusions in what I see as her less convincing grouping of all nineteenth-century U.S. women in the broad category of "slave or free." As much as Warren is correct regarding female dependence, autonomy, and disenfranchisement, it is, I would argue, an oversimplification to speak even momentarily in terms of "slave or free." Put another way, to privilege gender over race places an undue emphasis on gender that necessarily diminishes the crucial role of race. Willis's sustained honoring of Jacobs's loyalty to her at a very vulnerable time when she had few supporters indeed speaks well of both Willis and Jacobs, and of their beliefs, practices, and values.<sup>15</sup> Without at all trivializing those admirable connections between Willis and Jacobs, however, I maintain that Fern's representation of Jane Grey in "Dark Days" (to cite just one example) interrogates discourses of power regarding gender while at the same time unexaminedly upholding assumptions concerning constructions of race.

Such partial scrutiny regarding gender but not race is also displayed by Alcott in *Hospital Sketches*. Alcott's unimpeachable abolitionist credentials should not be read as guaranteeing the presence of a consciousness regarding race and its constructions. In *Hospital Sketches*, Tribulation Periwinkle, on her way to nurse in the Civil War hospital, records the last stage of her journey from New England:

Washington.—It was dark when we arrived; and, but for the presence of another friendly gentleman, I should have yielded myself a helpless prey to the first overpowering hackman, who insisted that I wanted to go just where I didn't. Putting me into the conveyance I belonged in, my escort added to the obligation by pointing out the objects of interest which we passed in our long drive. Though I'd often been told that Washington was a spacious place, its visible magnitude quite took my breath away. (17)

While Alcott constructs Trib's travel by train and steamboat as vexing, she also represents the difficulties and frustrations of a woman traveling alone as fairly easy to negotiate. Because Trib's travel is not desperate

or life-threatening, Alcott can employ humor and have its usage correspond with the nature of Trib's travel experiences. When Trib arrives at her intermediate destination, she then comically exaggerates her status as a woman traveling alone, referring to herself as "helpless prey." By representing Trib to her readers as "prey," Alcott allows them to perceive Trib as a genteel white woman unable to politely contradict a domineering, working-class man. The worst thing that such an "overpowering man" could do to Trib in this scene as it is constructed is to drive her to an incorrect, but by implication still entirely safe, destination. Like Jacobs's Linda Brent, Trib also has an intermediate destination in her journey; unlike Brent, however, the most serious danger that awaits Trib when she arrives at that destination is an imagined officious white man.

With "helpless prey," Alcott employs vocabulary and definitions that culturally and experientially diverge sharply from those in Jacobs's lexicon. The "overpowering" men whom Trib fears and their potential "insist[ing] that I wanted to go just where I didn't" also derive from this linguistic/cultural location. Such language is only lightly freighted for Alcott and, by implication, for readers. If we were to transfer these exact phrases from Alcott's *Hospital Sketches* into Jacobs's *Incidents*, their meanings would be transformed from humorous to life-threatening and dire.

Trib's male companion, "another friendly gentleman," is as knowledgeable as Knight's guide John. He conducts Trib to the proper vehicle and then instructs and entertains her on their extended nighttime trip. Not only does Trib not have to hide on her journey, but the natural world that she experiences on this part of her travels is "spacious," not enclosed or rife with dangers. Indeed, it is in the language of sightseeing that Trib comments on the "visible magnitude [which] quite took my breath away." The nature she experiences is so broad as to dazzle her—it is impressive and not in the least alarming.

It is in Edmonds's *Nurse and Spy* that a white woman's nighttime travel bears more resemblance to Linda Brent's fraught journey. In the scene quoted below, Edmonds has been passing to her Union Army employers as a man, "Frank Thompson." As Frank Thompson, she plans to next adopt the disguise of "an Irish female peddler" (147) in order to infiltrate a Confederate Army camp. Like Brent in the scene above, Edmonds is a woman on foot, cross-dressing as a man in order to travel with her identity concealed.

Edmonds's intended disguise as an Irish woman invites critical speculation regarding gender and ethnicity. As David Roediger and others

have discussed, mainstream nineteenth-century U.S. culture regularly conjectured about what was then commonly classified as the Catholic Irish “race,” making frequent raced Black/Irish comparisons and in general “call[ing] the whiteness of the Irish into question” (133).<sup>16</sup> Edmonds thus portrays herself entering the swamp in a disguise in which she has been perceived as a white man, intending to emerge from the swamp the next morning in a disguise in which, if successful, she will be perceived as a non-white woman.

Edmonds sets out to “spend the night in the swamp, as the only safe retreat,” planning in the morning to “ask admission [at the Confederate camp] as one of the fugitives . . . flying from the approach of the Yankees” (148). On her way to Chickahominy Swamp, Edmonds crosses the river and then “fear[s] the consequences of spending the night in wet clothing, especially in that malaria-infested region” (149). She subsequently becomes “delirious” as she endures a feverish night in the swamp:

The remembrance of the sufferings of that night seem to be written upon my memory “as with a pen of iron.” There I was, all alone, surrounded by worse, yes, infinitely worse, than wild beasts—by blood-thirsty savages—who considered death far too good for those who were in the employment of the U.S. Government. That night I was attacked by severe chills—chills beyond description, or even conception, except by those who have experienced the freezing sensation of a genuine ague chill. During the latter part of the night the other extreme presented itself, and it seemed as if I should roast alive. . . . My mind began to wander, and I became quite delirious. There seemed to be the horrors of a thousand deaths concentrated around me; I was tortured by fiends of every conceivable shape and magnitude. Oh, how it makes me shudder to recall the scenes which my imagination conjured up during those dark weary hours! Morning at last came, and I was aroused from the horrible night-mare which had paralyzed my senses through the night, by the roar of cannon and the screaming of shell through the forest. (149–50)

Recording her harrowing “remembrance of the sufferings of that night” that “seem to be written upon my memory ‘as with a pen of iron’” causes Edmonds still to “shudder.” Such heightened emotional language as well as her physically delicate response to her recollections underscores Edmonds’s female gentility. Despite her long-term cross-dressing and autonomous, solo female journey, Edmonds represents herself as a genteel woman extensively traumatized by nighttime travel.

Edmonds's experience in this scene aligns provocatively with Brent's night in the swamp. Both women are dressed as men, in hiding, and surrounded by white male enemies. Neither sleeps or feels safe; both wake to sounds of danger. Further, both Snaky Swamp and Chickahominy Swamp are feral, natural locations rife with elements (mosquitoes, snakes, ague, and fever) that cause physical agony.

Linda Brent has a male companion with her (as do, for that matter, Sarah Kemble Knight with John, her guide; Fanny Fern's Jane Grey with the sexton; and Louisa May Alcott's *Tribulation Periwinkle* with the "friendly gentleman"), and Edmonds technically does not. Yet I would argue that the text provides material for a reading of "Frank Thompson"—Edmonds's male persona—as her male companion in this scene. Edmonds first inhabited the persona of Frank Thompson when, at age seventeen, she ran away from home disguised as a boy in order to avoid marriage. Later, having continued to live as Frank Thompson, she enlisted as a private in the Union Army under the name Franklin Thompson. Successfully disguised as a man, she fought in the war for two years. The access to masculine agency gained by Frank Thompson allowed him potentially to serve Edmonds as effectively as Brent's companion, Peter, was able to aid Brent. That is to say, just as Peter was of very limited help to Brent in Snaky Swamp, so Frank Thompson is equally unsuccessful in helping Edmonds in Chickahominy Swamp.

Edmonds's night in Chickahominy Swamp concludes very differently than did Brent's night in Snaky Swamp. Brent's experience was so traumatic that she and Peter left earlier than they had planned for Brent's new hiding place in her grandmother's garret. Edmonds, however, in Chickahominy Swamp the next morning, catches sight of her "Irish costume," thinks about her preparations for that disguise, and as "the perfect absurdity of my position rushed over my mind . . . it made me for the moment forget my lamentable condition, and with one uncontrollable burst of laughter I made that swamp resound in a manner which would have done credit to a person under happier circumstances, and in a better state of health" (150). Edmonds's spontaneous, ringing laughter effectively recasts what she had described as her "sufferings" of the previous night. What prompts this laughter is her recognition of the "perfect absurdity of [her] position"—that is, ostensibly that she, a white woman, had been planning to pass as Irish. Disturbing as her night in the swamp had been, Edmonds rebounds with an implicit identification with her whiteness (i.e., her non-Irishness) which leads to her quick turn to humor. Like Knight and Alcott, Edmonds successfully uses humor to mediate stated difficulties of white women's nighttime travel.

It is here that the correspondence between Brent's travel and Edmonds's travel breaks apart. In *Incidents*, Jacobs cannot use humor to mediate Brent's night in Snaky Swamp primarily because nothing about it is comical. When Brent leaves the swamp, her life is in danger: she is a fugitive female slave, cross-dressed as a man, walking disguised among people she knows, on her way to an unimaginable seven-year confinement. Where Edmonds erupts into an "uncontrollable burst of laughter," Brent will have little to laugh about indeed over the next seven years.

Yet the reasons for and implications of similarities between the female travels of Brent and Edmonds need not be dismissed. Edmonds is like and yet unlike Brent. Cross-dressed as a white man, Frank Thompson, Edmonds for years lived in constant peril. Had her female identity been exposed, Edmonds would have been in immediate danger. Edmonds's daily life of anxious vulnerability thus shares aspects of Brent's daily life. I do not wish to overstate this general correspondence. Edmonds's position—a white woman passing as a white man—was largely her own choice and of her own making. Brent's position—a Black female slave subject to arbitrary domination of Southern white men and women—was forced upon her. Yet we can nonetheless see the nature of Brent's and Edmonds's different, vexed identities mirrored in their nighttime travel experiences.

Sarah Kemble Knight, Fanny Fern's Jane Grey, and Louisa May Alcott's Tribulation Periwinkle are all genteel white women readily perceived as such by strangers they encounter in their travels. The nighttime travel experiences of each of them, as discussed above, are uncommon yet still fundamentally safe. In their nighttime travel scenes, Edmonds and Brent are, respectively, a white woman perceived as a white man and a Black woman perceived as a Black man. Unlike Knight, Jane Grey, and Tribulation Periwinkle, Brent and Edmonds travel on foot. Edmonds's nighttime travel experience is uncommon and harrowing; Brent's nighttime travel experience is uncommon and significantly traumatic. While not at all equating Edmonds with Brent, I wish to underscore that in these similar passages of women's nighttime travel, it is only when a white woman is secretly cross-dressed as a man that moments of her life are even marginally close to the dangers of a Black woman's life.

In the autobiographic representations of the self that appear in these passages from the texts under discussion, only Linda Brent and S. Emma E. Edmonds, both cross-dressed as men, must conceal themselves in the dangerous wild. Beyond that, however, only Brent is com-



pelled by circumstances to travel to an outside location that, reflective of the nature of the dangers her experience has taught her to anticipate, is overwhelmingly phallic. And only Brent's travel leads her to further disabling concealment and danger. Taken separately and together, these passages demonstrate that a Black woman's (self-) representations borrow from, but also necessarily and fundamentally revise, white female authors' treatment of topics such as gentility, cross-dressing, and travel.

Discussing Black women's autobiographical writings, Lauren Berlant argues:

It is always the autobiographer's task to negotiate her specificity into a spectacular interiority worthy of public notice. But the minority subject who circulates in a majoritarian public sphere occupies a specific contradiction: insofar as she is exemplary, she has distinguished herself from the collective stereotype; and, at the same time, she is also read as a kind of foreign national, an exotic representative of her alien "people" who reports to the dominant culture about collective life in the crevices of national existence. This warp in the circulation of identity is central to the public history of African American women, for whom coerced sexualization has been a constitutive relay between national experience and particular bodies. ("The Queen of America" 100)

In well-known parts of *Incidents* that are prominent in the critical record, Jacobs is correctly read as very much "negotiat[ing] her specificity into a spectacular interiority worthy of public notice." Her text's record of her extraordinary seven-year concealment along with her fairly open discussion of sex with a white man has indeed made her "an exotic representation" of nineteenth-century African American women. However, in an attempt to diminish middle-class white female readers' identification of her as non-normative, Jacobs portrays Brent's behavior once she has escaped from the Southern slavocracy as typically genteel. When Brent is in the North as a fugitive slave, she is constructed as circumstantially better able to adhere to standards of (white) middle-class female behavior because she is physically away from the slavocracy. Once out of the South and more removed from the sexual violence of slavery, Brent is depicted as genteelly normative. This is not to suggest that Jacobs aligns Brent with whiteness but that, significantly, she portrays Brent as genteel after and despite her transgressive sexual experiences in the slavocracy. As Stephen Matterson argues, "for her contemporary readers Jacobs's destabilization of the womanly virtues

would be less striking than her appropriation of them, her assumption that they are ideals equally available to her and equally relevant to her" (86). In *Incidents*, slavery leads to violation of a Black woman's body and forces the woman temporarily to modify her behavior, but it cannot permanently alter her gentility.

Jacobs's text reflects the even more extensive obstacles to autobiographical writing confronted by women whose race, class, and/or sexuality mark them as multiply transgressive. I turn to Jacobs's text in my final chapter because of its status as the primary canonical text by a nineteenth-century African American woman, a work accurately described by Carby as "the most sophisticated, sustained narrative dissection of the conventions of true womanhood by a black author before emancipation" (47).<sup>17</sup> Indeed, *Incidents* is by all measures the object of more critical consideration than any of the other texts in this study. Placing the primary Black female autobiographical text of the U.S. nineteenth century in relation to other, lesser-known white women's autobiographical texts provides a fundamental display of what whiteness enables. As Carby valuably observes, "Jacobs used the material circumstances of her life to critique conventional standards of female behavior and to question their relevance and applicability to the experience of black women" (47).

Such a display is important to this book because it uncovers privileges accorded to and unrecognized by U.S. nineteenth-century middle-class white women. Critical whiteness studies have labeled this "white skin privilege." Birgit Bander Rasmussen et al. define the term as "the many ways in which whiteness signifies and underwrites various kinds of social, political, and economic advantages" (2–3).<sup>18</sup> Whiteness, of course, did not necessarily allow white middle-class women to live with any degree of autonomy given the location of whiteness "within a larger system of oppressive and normalizing structures" (Stokes 13).<sup>19</sup> But whiteness did make it very unlikely that, for instance, a white middle-class woman would be publicly whipped or that her children would be born into slavery. When Jacobs's text is positioned next to other texts in this study, the whiteness that was previously less visible comes strongly and swiftly into focus. With Jacobs's text at hand, whiteness emerges conspicuously as the default race in Knight's, Fern's, Alcott's, and Edmonds's texts. Indeed, it is in texts such as these that whiteness is "so ubiquitous and entrenched as to appear natural and normative" (Rasmussen et al. 10). Correspondingly, the fraught attempts by women under discussion in this study to write the self appear—suddenly and obviously—as white women's attempts.

With the privilege to be unmindful of one's race, women whose skin color allows them to be perceived as members of the dominant race identify themselves as female and their behavior and assumptions as middle-class, but they are very rarely concerned in their texts with identifying themselves as white.<sup>20</sup> Such women presumptively and unconsciously understand that their whiteness is the ultimate cultural identity indication. Rasmussen et al. compellingly argue that whiteness "operates as the unmarked norm against which other identities are marked and racialized, the seemingly un-raced center of a racialized world" (10). Knight, Fern, Alcott, Edmonds, Livermore, and Wittenmyer are correspondingly unaware that their middle-class whiteness at all times supplies them with cultural advantage. Instead, they are alert to what does/does not happen to them because they are perceived as female. Introducing Jacobs's *Incidents* into this group of texts illuminates privileges of whiteness because Jacobs clearly understands that whether she is in the North or South, she is always perceived first as Black. As she well knows, everything that happens to her during her lifetime occurs because she is Black.<sup>21</sup>

At the same moment that other texts in this study were being published (or, in the case of Knight's *Journal*, republished), Jacobs's text was struggling its way into existence. The slow progress of the writing and the delayed publication of *Incidents* resulted from obstacles linked directly to race. Given *Incidents's* canonical presence, it is ironic that, much more so than other texts in this study, the idea of Jacobs's text and the text itself emerged slowly. At first, Jacobs planned to dictate her experiences to Harriet Beecher Stowe. She initiated contact with Stowe through Cornelia Grinnell Willis and also asked if Stowe would "permit Jacobs' daughter Louisa to accompany her [on a planned trip] to England as a 'representative southern slave'" (Yellin, "Written by Herself" 482). Jacobs "had saved enough from her wages to pay her daughter's expenses" (Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs* 120). Stowe's raced response was negative on all counts. She refused to take Louisa with her, fearing that, as Jacobs wrote to white abolitionist Amy Post, "it would be much care to her to take Louisa . . . and she was afraid that if her situation as a Slave should be known it would subject her to much petting and patronizing . . . and [Mrs. Stowe] was very much opposed to it with this class of people" (qtd. in Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs* 121). Additionally, Stowe questioned the veracity of Jacobs's experiences and then suggested that if they were true, she would use them in *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which she was then writing. When Jacobs resisted this idea, her subsequent letters as well as Willis's to Stowe went unanswered. Jacobs "later

expressed her racial outrage” in another letter to Post, criticizing Stowe’s response and writing, “Well, what a pity we poor blacks can’t have the firmness and stability of character that you white people have!” (Yellin, “Written by Herself” 483).

After Stowe and Jacobs failed to agree on a collaboration, Jacobs, though fearing that she would relive the painful past as she wrote, decided to write the narrative herself.<sup>22</sup> Once she completed the book in 1858, Jacobs “spent several years trying to find a publisher” (Foster 59) in England and in the United States. “Jacobs’s account was so original and striking that they [publishers] required more than the usual endorsements by others” (59), such as “an endorsement from [her employer, Nathaniel Parker] Willis or Stowe” (Yellin, “Written by Herself” 483). Jacobs wrote to Amy Post “that Stowe’s devastating rejections made her ‘tremble at the thought of approaching another satellite of so great magnitude’” (Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs* 140). Lydia Maria Child’s agreement to write a preface to the manuscript resulted in *Incidents*’s finally being published in the United States in 1861 and in England in 1862.<sup>23</sup> The last-minute bankruptcy of Jacobs’s publishers, Thayer and Eldridge, so threatened the book’s publication that “apparently using what was left of her savings, Jacobs paid half the price outright and bought the [previously cast stereotype] plates. Somehow—doubtless with Child’s help, perhaps with the aid of Cornelia Willis’s publisher friend James T. Fields—she arranged to have her book printed and bound” (143). The eight years that bridge Jacobs’s decision to write her story and the publication of *Incidents* began with Stowe’s raced response and ended only once a preface had been successfully solicited from a well-known white female abolitionist and once the Black female writer working as a nursemaid had emptied her life savings.

The slow progress of *Incidents*—the writing and publication of which extends a year beyond the time of Jacobs’s seven-year concealment—marks the pivotal role of whiteness in the writing and publication histories of other texts in this study. For instance, though Knight’s *Journal* remained unpublished in her lifetime, Knight was able to write it in a timely fashion and circulate it privately. Once economic desperation had forced Sara Willis to turn to publication, she wrote prolifically, and her writing began to be published regularly. Within the space of a year, Alcott nursed in the Civil War hospital, kept a journal, contracted typhoid, nearly died, used the journal to write *Hospital Sketches*, and successfully arranged for the book’s publication. Edmonds wrote and arranged for prompt publication of *Nurse and Spy* despite having to conceal her wartime cross-dressing in the text. Though the writing and publication of all these texts involved various modifications and

concealments, none of them reflect the extensive raced delays seen in Jacobs's writing and publication of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

I do not at all suggest that white women discussed in this study experienced an effortless entrance into the nineteenth-century U.S. print market as a result of their whiteness. As I have argued throughout this study, virtually all women encountered a range of arbitrary barriers in their attempts to write and publish their work. Such gender-specific, culturally sanctioned impediments were indeed characteristic of the nineteenth-century U.S. literary marketplace. Whiteness offered no assurance of or easy access to publication for the woman writer. However, the female author perceived as nonwhite confronted and contended with an even more formidable and heightened mix of obstacles regarding writing and publication of her work.

Jacobs's recognition of the agency located in whiteness and female middle-class gentility is signaled in her representation of the first and second Mrs. Bruce and their relationships with Brent, which enact Jacobs's desired constellation of gender, class, and race. As Carby notes, "Jacobs's position as a domestic servant contrasted with the lives of the white women who surrounded and befriended her" (48). At various points in the text, the first and second Mrs. Bruce compassionately provide Brent with clothing, respect, and sympathy. Though Brent is a Black nursemaid and they are genteel white women, the beliefs and actions of both women are repeatedly correspondent with Brent's beliefs and actions. The text's constructions of each Mrs. Bruce are representations of what Brent can be (female, kind, conventional, maternal) and what she cannot be (white, privileged, relatively ignorant of social injustices). Brent's alignment with each Mrs. Bruce allows Jacobs to repeatedly represent her self as a normative, genteel woman.

This association is significantly enacted when Brent learns that Dr. Flint has once again discovered her whereabouts and sent his agents after her. Brent "immediately informed Mrs. Bruce of my danger, and she took prompt measures for my safety" (150).<sup>24</sup> In an attempt to safeguard Brent from being abducted and forcibly returned to slavery, Mrs. Bruce sends Brent away from home, and "this generous, sympathizing lady proposed that I should carry her baby away" (150). According to Brent, Mrs. Bruce explains, "It is better for you to have baby with you, Linda; for if they get on your track, they will be obliged to bring the child to me; and then, if there is a possibility of saving you, you shall be saved" (150).

Mrs. Bruce appears to be at her most maternally sacrificing in this passage. She provides Brent with, as Caroline Levander points out, "a surrogate motherhood" (37) by giving her child to a fugitive from the

law, a woman who is in very real danger of being apprehended by Dr. Flint's agents. Jacobs emphasizes the maternal nature of Mrs. Bruce's sacrifice as Brent exclaims that "few mothers would have consented to have one of their own babes become a fugitive, for the sake of the poor, hunted nurse, on whom the legislators of the country had let loose the bloodhounds!" (150). Viewing Mrs. Bruce's action through the lens of motherhood is accurate, up to a point. However, a racially contextualized reading brings this scene more clearly into focus.

When Mrs. Bruce hands her baby to Brent, she participates in a long-standing tradition of white women turning to Black women to care for their children. Additionally, it is implicitly clear that in lending her child to Brent, Mrs. Bruce is correctly confident of at least two cultural arrangements: that a Black woman is always potentially in danger while in public and that the white child of a middle-class mother will very rarely be. My intention here is not to diminish Mrs. Bruce's acts as much as it is to clarify them. In my reading of this scene, Mrs. Bruce's most significant "generosity and sympathy" (150) emerge from her (white) recognition of Brent as a hunted Black woman ("for if they get on your track" [150])—that is, her ability to at least partially comprehend Brent's dire raced situation despite her very limited resources for understanding that situation.

Further, the abstract cultural value given to Mrs. Bruce's white baby contrasts starkly with the crude, monetary price assigned to Brent's mixed-race children. Social and cultural arrangements that protect Mrs. Bruce's child are recognized by Brent/Jacobs and Mrs. Bruce. The raced differences between these women are harshly apparent in the irony that Brent, of course, cannot legally keep her own children, much less lend them to others. Though Brent is the mother of her children by standards (biological and otherwise) on which the culture relies, her children are nonetheless not hers to keep or give. However, by recognizing and responding to Brent as a woman in need (and so lending Brent her child and thus her motherhood status), Mrs. Bruce reinforces the alignment upon which Brent and she implicitly concur: that Brent is a normative, genteel woman who is Black.

This identity is put to the test in yet another travel scene in *Incidents*. During the same steamboat journey with Mrs. Bruce referenced earlier, Brent goes to supper in a room with other nurses ("thirty or forty nurses were there, of a great variety of nations. . . . I was the only nurse tinged with the blood of Africa") and their child charges. A seating problem regarding Brent immediately occurs:

A young man, who had the ordering of things, took the circuit of the table two or three times, and finally pointed me to a seat at the lower end of it. As there was but one chair, I sat down and took the child in my lap. Whereupon the young man came to me and said, in the blandest manner possible, "Will you please to seat the little girl in the chair, and stand behind it and feed her? After they have done, you will be shown to the kitchen, where you will have a good supper." This was the climax! I found it hard to preserve my self-control, when I looked round, and saw women who were nurses, as I was, and only one shade lighter in complexion, eyeing me with a defiant look, as if my presence were a contamination. However, I said nothing. I quietly took the child in my arms, went to our room, and refused to go to the table again. (137)

In this scene Brent's class status is carefully aligned with that of others in this large ("thirty or forty nurses") group. They are all women, nursemaids, and employees. Brent's African blood is characterized as just one example of the "great variety of nations" represented. The rejection of these commonalities by the young man and the other women puts pressure on Brent's self-definition. Brent's self-perceived membership in this assembly of women and their individual and group rejection of her ("eyeing me with a defiant look, as if my presence were a contamination") paradoxically imply Brent's conventional female identity: she is a woman behaving according to female cultural scripts traveling among women who are not.

But more is at issue here in terms of identity. It is Brent's similarity to these other female nursemaids—separated by "only one shade lighter in complexion"—and their rejection of that similarity that threatens her self-control. That same similarity threatens the other women's self-definitions. For each woman in this scene, her perception of a coherent self rests uneasily on that one shade of color. When Brent, seeing the group's rejection of her, finds "it hard to preserve my self-control," she precariously retains her ability to claim a self. To lose self-control is to release the momentarily coherent self, that is, to lose self-coherence. That potential loss of discipline would, it is implied, take the form of unruly, unregulated speech. Rejecting such unmodified speech ("However, I said nothing") and its attendant self-disruption, Brent preserves the self by leaving the scene and refusing to go back. To return would be to yield her self-definition to others or to again risk losing self-control, devastating to her perception of her self as genteel.

Being read as other than white disrupts Jacobs and *Incidents*. The ways that Jacobs's text was written, published, and read all differ from those of the other texts under discussion in this study. Whatever the circumstance, Jacobs's/Brent's complexion and its scrutiny by others always proclaimed her as Black and complicated her self-representation. As Berlant has written, "[f]or Jacobs, writing before Emancipation, the nation as a category of experience is an archive of painful anecdotes, bitter feelings, and precise measurements of civic failure" ("The Queen of America" 107). As this study documents, Sarah Kemble Knight, Fanny Fern, Louisa May Alcott, S. Emma. E. Edmonds, Mary Livermore, and Annie Turner Wittenmyer struggled—painfully, contradictorily, compellingly—with their autobiographic identities and with gender representation. Yet of all these women and in all their texts, only Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent—genteelly dressed and just one shade darker in complexion—must walk out of a room full of women, her lips pressed tightly together, in order to retain her self.