

# True Women as Sacred Friends: Harriet Jacobs's Model of Consent-Based White Allyship in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

**Kristine Koyama**—*University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee*

## About the Author:

Kristine is a PhD candidate in English at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where they teach literary and writing studies. They research nineteenth-century literature and social justice movements, particularly texts that rely on depictions of children and animals to catalyze civic engagement and social movement. Kristine also received an MA in English at the University of Minnesota Duluth, where their research focused on the role of nineteenth-century Euro-American children's literature in the development of turn-of-the-century social reform movements.

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*When liberal whites fail to understand how they can and/or do embody white supremacist values and beliefs even though they may not embrace racism as prejudice or domination (especially domination that involves coercive control), they cannot recognize the ways their actions support and affirm the very structure of racist domination and oppression that they wish to see eradicated.*

– bell hooks

*Coalition: The union, combination, or merging of different groups, peoples, interests, etc., into one; the formation of an alliance.*

– Oxford English Dictionary

In her fictionalized autobiographical work *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*<sup>1</sup> (1861), nineteenth-century abolitionist and novelist Harriet Jacobs expresses her intention to “excite sympathy,” not for her “own sufferings,” but as to instill a “realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse” (xix). Jacobs directs her appeal to white Northern women, fictionalizing her account by using the pseudonym “Linda Brent” to represent herself, a strategy to protect her identity while sharing personal and difficult experiences. In *Incidents*, Jacobs details the real and horrific situations she endured while enslaved, including forced separation from her entire family, seven years of hiding in a tiny attic, and sexual abuse. Through her determination and resourcefulness, Jacobs triumphs over adversity, securing freedom for herself and her children. Her story sheds light on the brutalities of slavery, particularly for Black women, who regularly faced physical and sexual violence. Her memoir is a powerful account of resilience and the indomitable human spirit, one that highlights Black individuals as agents of their own freedom and leaders within the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement.

In the context of nineteenth-century abolitionist literature, both Harriet Jacobs and white abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe employ different strategies to appeal to white readers and encourage action against slavery. At the end of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Stowe insists that “one thing any individual can do” in the cause against slavery is to “feel right” and “see to it that your sympathy matters” (404). In contrast to scholarly readings of this call as highly passive, I understand Stowe’s call as an action-based response to slavery. Her message comes at the end of a long appeal for action rooted in fellow-feeling between white and Black women; she does this through scenes like those shared between a Black woman who recently escaped slavery, Eliza, and a Northern white woman, Mrs. Bird, whose shared maternal love for their children motivates the

Bird family to aid Eliza in her escape despite the recently passed Fugitive Slave Act. For Stowe, sharing a sense of sameness toward enslaved people leads to effective performances of allyship like this. The problem with her call arises not in the idea that sympathy can inform active, purposeful work, but in her failure to acknowledge the power dynamics involved in her positionality as a white woman by suggesting that fellow-feeling with the enslaved will be enough to make “your sympathy matter” (Stowe, 1852, 404). Her lack of acknowledgment reflects the attitudes of white liberals who believe that their good intentions as an ally will guide them to take ethical actions, absolving them from needing to examine how their behaviors reproduce racist power structures, especially those related to consent.

Harriet Jacobs knew first-hand that even prominent white abolitionists with the best intentions reify racist structures, crossing boundaries that delegitimize Black voices. Drawing directly from letters Jacobs wrote, scholar Jean Fagan Yellin reports that when Jacobs sought Stowe’s assistance in penning her emancipation story, sharing some details of the sexual and intimate violence she endured, instead of responding directly to Jacobs, Stowe wrote Jacobs’s northern employer for confirmation of the details, thereby revealing private and sensitive aspects of Jacobs’s life without her consent and placing Jacobs in a precarious and harmful situation (1981, 482). Discussing this breach of consent, Winifred Morgan finds that “Jacobs’s dealings with Stowe convinced her that Stowe would co-opt her story and ‘use’ her but never allow her to tell her own story” (1994, 88). Aware of the need for a model of white allyship that demonstrates how to dismantle racist power structures rather than uphold them, Jacobs began writing *Incidents*, presenting her experiences through Linda Brent, and employing the sentimental style favored by the abolitionist movement for its capacity to elicit powerful emotions that transformed hearts and minds.

Through the story of Linda, Jacobs relays the importance of her deeply personal relationships, including her parents, grandparents, and children—who all in different ways help Linda gain freedom. Indeed, Morgan argues that Jacobs makes use of relationships as a key resource in her acquisition of freedom (1994, 85). Jacobs’s mission to “excite [Northern white women’s] sympathy” for enslaved women also imagines the coalition of women who draw on their varying positionalities of power, knowledge, and experience to secure equity for all Black women (Jacobs 1861, xix). My analysis demonstrates how Jacobs uses two middle-class white female characters—the first and second Mrs. Bruce who helped Jacobs access freedom—to prevent

harmful interventions like Stowe's misuse of Jacobs's private information. I demonstrate how Jacobs's depiction of the first and second Mrs. Bruce draws on nineteenth-century rhetoric of true womanhood, a common feature in sentimental novels, to signal trustworthy, white women who work in coalition with Jacobs. By examining the trustworthiness Jacobs ascribes to these women due to their performance as allies, I argue that Jacobs leverages the conventions of true womanhood to figure both Bruce women as models of *true allyship*, characterized by a consent-based approach to sympathetic feelings. This model is one that white women could understand as morally essential and replicate in their relationships with Black women. Jacobs's model of allyship builds on the moral authority abolitionists in the North ascribed sympathetic feelings and its aesthetic capacity to expose the conditions of slavery without further exploiting the boundaries or bodies of Black women. Jacobs's use of the sentimental style to "excite sympathy" speaks to the power of emotionally charged narratives to facilitate safe intimacy where everyone's boundaries are respected and valued (1861, xix).

In line with the *Journal of Consent-Based Performance*, I draw on Diana Taylor's definition of performance as an "episteme" and "a means of intervening in the world" (2016, 202) to read consent-based performance in the context of Jacobs's antislavery efforts. When Jacobs writes that she seeks to "excite sympathy" on behalf of the "millions of women at the South, still in bondage," she specifically roots this sympathy in a "desire to arouse the women of the North to a *realizing sense* of the *condition*" that these women live (Jacobs 1861, xix, my emphasis). Jacobs's purpose of exciting sympathy through a realizing sense roots emotional engagement with epistemology—a way of both feeling and knowing the world. As a formerly enslaved Black woman, Jacobs knows that enslaved women have a very different set of conditions under which they live. She hopes her emotional appeal exposes white women to what they cannot ever know about being enslaved or living under slavery so that they are equitable in their efforts—and intentions—toward abolition.

Stowe's goal wasn't to work with Jacobs as Jacobs had requested. When Stowe wrote Jacobs's employer, she intended to authenticate what she viewed as a sensational story that, if confirmed as true, Stowe planned to include in *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Yellin, 1981, 482). Such a mindset neglects to understand the grueling conditions under which enslaved people, especially Black women, lived. Compounded by the fact that Stowe then planned to use this information differently than what Jacobs requested, her act of disclosing such private information

to Jacobs's employer without permission (especially considering the content being related to sexual abuse) is an act of intimate, sexual violence. In her study of the ways intimacy is impacted by racism and ableism, Stefanie A. Jones argues that in fact, "Racism and ableism are forms of sexual violence, affecting how people experience intimacy" (143). Intimacy, according to Jones, refers to "personal closeness, and thus may be imagined as being about any number of depictions" (2019, 146). Fact-checking Jacobs's story of sexual abuse, especially when seeking help from a prominent anti-slavery advocate like Stowe, further characterizes how easily liberal allies operate as if their support exempts their actions from perpetuating racist power dynamics that cause intimate violence. Stowe non-consensually used highly sensitive information about Jacobs's personal identity, part of what Jones recognizes as a person's holistic sexuality (2019, 147) to control her and her narrative. This constitutes a form of sexual violence, thereby replicating the power structures and systems of oppression that produce the conditions under which Jacobs and millions of enslaved women lived.

Consent regarding the telling of a story or narrative is especially important considering the ongoing history of adapting *Incidents* for the stage. Expanding on Jones, Amanda Rose Villarreal asserts, "The way that elements of a holistic sexuality—including personal and cultural identity—can be used either consensually or non-consensually, to manipulate" an effective "theoretical framework" for identifying how "actors' lived identities have historically been manipulated in narrative, in performance, and in broader U.S. society" (18). Beyond staging adaptations of Jacobs's play and choreographing the narrative surrounding the sexual exploitation of enslaved women, an aspect I discuss in the conclusion of my essay, Jacobs's model of allyship also has important implications for white allies today because her narrative demonstrates how and why consent is an essential element within intimate relationships between white and Black women. This approach combines critical knowledge and action, contributing to an intersectional understanding of white women's sense of shared oppression with Black women that acknowledges the uneven power relations and need for consent when acting in their relationships with Black women.

Jacobs weaves her perspective as a Black woman into a tapestry of popular literary conventions significant specifically to white women. Along with Morgan and Tate, domestic fiction scholars like Fanny Nudelman, DoVeanna S. Fulton, Hazel Carby, María Carla Sánchez, and Jennifer Larson examine how conventions of sentimentality and domestic fiction in *Incidents*

generate middle ground between Black and white women's experiences. The overlapping of slave narrative conventions highlights the failure of true womanhood to account for the lives of Black women. Larson finds that, while sentimentality and true womanhood can communicate commonality between women, more importantly, "the divergences" in experience replete through Jacobs's work "point to the increasing importance of black identity and black community among black women" (2009, 539). Nudelman reads the difference in the abolitionist discourse as a tool for exposing the hypocrisies of white culture by illustrating how female suffering based on difference in Jacobs's narrative bridges the irreconcilable distance between the white and slave women's experiences (1992, 951). Nudelman's analysis, however, conflates all abolitionists (Black and white), leading to a confusing conclusion about how Jacobs, as a Black woman speaking to white, middle-class women, leverages sentimentalism and sympathy differently than white abolitionists. Pittman contends that in redefining the public ethos surrounding slave women's sexual conditions, Jacobs "[rewrites] the rules of domesticity to include their experiences in slave and post-slave society" (2007, 50). The main takeaway from this scholarly discourse on Jacobs's use of sentimentality and true womanhood is that Jacobs drastically reconfigured how white, middle-class women were able to conceive of an enslaved woman's experiences.

Neither sympathy nor empathy is easy to discuss, especially in the context of reading nineteenth-century literature. An entire paper could focus solely on the historical and scholarly conversation of these two words in relation to literature's power to enact emotional change tied to action. For this essay, I keep in my purview Gay Gibson Cima's critical assertion that "sympathy cannot simply be collapsed into empathy in scholarly investigations of abolitionism" (2014, 57). Cima explains, "although early nineteenth-century female abolitionists regarded each other as engaged in disparate types of performances of sympathy, [scholars] routinely collapses or erases these contradictory experiences and viewpoints [especially when reading] black women's performances of sympathy with the slave" (2014, 40). My analysis connects Nudelman's important research on Jacobs's use of sentimental strategies in portraying female suffering to Cima's distinction between Black abolitionist expressions of sympathy and empathy. This helps me interpret Jacobs's use of sentimental sympathy as a deliberate approach to foster empathetic connections between white women and the experiences of enslaved women to engender consent-based models of allyship in nineteenth-century abolitionist discourse.

When reading how Jacobs “employs suffering to assert the irreducible distance between white women and slave women, Nudelman reads the ““O, ye happy women”” passage as a moment when “Jacobs uses the specificity of her suffering to deny the possibility of any empathetic response from her readers” (1992, 957-958). While I agree that the difference in this passage reveals white readers’ incapacity to understand a Black slave woman’s experiences, Nudelman concludes that by denying her readers the capacity to feel as she does, Jacobs prevents them from responding with the “right feelings” seen as grounds for motivated action. In other words, Nudelman sees Jacobs’s emphasis on racial differences as a potential hindrance to fostering understanding or action among white readers, seemingly slipping into what Cima sees as a conflation of sympathy and empathy. Empathy, according to Suzanne Keen in the introduction to her monograph on the subject, explains that individuals “may respond with greater empathy to an unreal situation” because through “protective fictionality” they are able to “internalize the experience of empathy in a way that promotes later real-world responsiveness to others’ needs” (2007, xiv). Jacobs engages in the production of empathy via this concept of “protective fictionality” by including traumatic and horrific experiences of enslavement in a sentimental style that relies on emotional connections rather than grotesque descriptions, effectively conveying the inhumane conditions under which Black women live without representing Black bodies in a harmful or exploitative way.

When locating the function of sympathy in Jacobs’s narrative, my analysis examines her emphasis on difference as the grounds for informed, motivated action that results in genuine allyship. The importance of difference in generating equitable actions can be understood using Chandra Mohanty’s concept of “coalition.” Mohanty analyzes principles that delineate Western feminism which prevents coalitions between women of all races, nations, classes, and religions, seeking to alter these discourses and find ways to build coalition among feminist scholars. Mohanty argues that ascribing to “in-house” (or insularly defined) definitions of womanhood confuse unified coalition (1995, 467). Rather than basing alliances on universal experience, strategic coalitions bring together people from diverse backgrounds and positionalities to hegemonic power to perform social justice. Taken in the context of *Incidents*, Jacobs fashions trustworthy allies in two white women who acknowledge the non-universality of womanhood. Much like Mohanty’s definition of coalition, the allyship demonstrated by the two Mrs. Bruces characterizes the consensual, collaborative effort of individuals whose interactions challenge

established notions of womanhood, ultimately fostering social justice. Neither Mrs. Bruce forces Linda to disclose information about herself before she is ready, and both give her time and space to work. This builds a natural bond in their relationships founded on listening, using their positions of power to amplify Linda's voice and providing opportunities for her to make choices about her life and family.

Throughout *Incidents*, systemic prejudice against Black women prohibits Jacobs (Linda Brent) from adhering to the strict and stifling expectations of true womanhood. Nudelman, Fulton, Larson, and Daniels-Rauterkus each focus on Jacobs's use of sentimental and domestic novels to expose the inequalities of true womanhood while simultaneously authorizing herself to speak about nonconsensual sexual encounters to an audience of white, middle-class women whose understanding of consent was highly controlled by Western patriarchal views of women's autonomy. For instance, the term "fallen woman" was a concept disseminated through nineteenth-century ideologies of true womanhood, which pronounced a woman's innocence—and value as a person—was lost if she had any sexual encounters outside of marriage, be they consensual or not (Sánchez 2008). The notion of true womanhood as conceived of and disseminated by the white, middle class left no room for considering the conditions of forced sexual contact, assault, and rape under which millions of enslaved women lived.

Regarding sentimental genre techniques, Fulton argues that the combination of slave narratives and domestic fiction in *Incidents* subverts the standard of true womanhood that excludes women from the public sphere by "[exemplifying] the black feminist standpoint through Jacobs's critical analysis of southern slavery, labor conditions, human rights, and racial discrimination" (2014, 252). In disclosing her constant need to stave off sexual advances, the threat of losing her children, and the need to work just to secure basic needs, Jacobs implicitly implores white women to reflect. Daniels-Rauterkus maintains that Jacobs "[rejects] the fiction of True Womanhood" and through her requests for pity invites female readers to "reexamine their attachment to a discourse whose preoccupation with chastity and domesticity harms both black and white women by exclusively defining them in relation to their roles as wives and mothers" (2019, 502). Through reflection, white women might recognize that, despite their own oppression, they have privileged access to social resources that can support the causes of Black women. Together they make a powerful coalition that can address the inequalities of womanhood.



Jacobs's white female readership would know from personal experience the difficulties of acting in perfect accordance with the unholy standards of true womanhood. In exposing the disparities Black women face in enacting the standards of true womanhood, Jacobs reminds her white female audience that they too experience oppression from a male-dominated hegemonic system. In her analysis of power dynamics between white and Black transatlantic women, Seda Pekşen adapts Foucault's theories of power to examine how *Incidents* uses similar conditions of oppression to differentiate the systemic violence experienced by Black women. She finds that while "both white women and slaves were treated as property" and "both experienced conditions of subjection," Jacobs pinpoints the unique challenges and power imbalances Black women encountered while navigating or resisting these oppressive systems (2013, 121). The contrasts in these similarities make visible the vast differences in the access to social power between Black and white women. Mrs. Flint who, for example, has all the resources and privileges of white, middle-class life was, as Tate describes, "incapable of reproducing the compassionate generosity routinely ascribed to women" (1992, 31). Although her cruelty manifests out of a sense of powerlessness in her marriage, Mrs. Flint's lack of compassion extends from her total inability to comprehend that Linda must endure must worse situations and conditions. Refusing to acknowledge that Linda's conditions were more oppressive than her own, Mrs. Flint does not reflect or act in compassion, or in coalition as an ally. On the other hand, both Mrs. Bruces represent a different kind of white woman whose ability to see the similarities in her oppression can, critically, also acknowledge the differences between her and Linda's situations, responding with an intention to eliminate that inequality (not appropriate or be in control of Linda's situation).

Jacobs's narrative does not only communicate emotional motivation to act rightly (feel right/act right). It extends this conversation providing a concrete model of allyship to an audience who had no or little exposure to what Black women need from Black women's perspectives. Carby argues, "Any feminist history that seeks to establish the sisterhood of white and black women as allies in the struggle against the oppression of all women must also reveal the complexity of the social and economic differences between women" (2007, 103). There can be no understanding of how allyship functions if we remove the complex power dynamics between Black and white women from the formula. Jacobs clearly knew this by the way she differentiates the attitudes and behaviors of both Mrs. Bruces as agents of true womanly sympathy. This kind of sympathy, as Jacobs shows, depends on more than the emotional desire to save Black women. Jacobs's use of

sympathy is more complex, as it represents a standard for behavior that counters white saviorist mentalities implicit in white sentimental literature. With these women, she models how white, middle-class women can effectively support Black women.

As a narrative device that models allyship, Jacobs introduces the first Mrs. Bruce as a model of the behaviors and attitudes emblematic of “true womanly sympathy” (1861, 191). Her “kind and gentle” demeanor, proximity to children, and lack of first name (associating her identity entirely with her wifehood) invoke many of the standard features of purity, submissiveness, and domesticity of true womanhood (Jacobs 1861, 190). Her all-encompassing identity as a wife and mother, and her home characterized by both work and leisure, full of “intelligent conversation, and the opportunities for reading” (Jacobs 1861, 191) invokes the totality and plenitude of motherhood that Marianne Noble associates with sentimentality (2000, 66-70). Hence, Mrs. Bruce’s ability to embody these ideals of true womanhood (as defined by white culture) should signal to readers that her character enjoys a level of social power not available to Black women. These qualities set her apart from the Mrs. Flints of the world who, despite social standing, appear as “an unnatural woman, by Victorian standards” (Carby 2007, 31). The dichotomy between this unnaturalness juxtaposed with Mrs. Bruce’s kindness invokes the connotation of authenticity in the word “true,” and signals that Mrs. Bruce is the real deal, a model ally. Jacobs does not leave it up to the reader to interpret the behaviors of true womanhood, and in the context of my reading, true allyship.

A key feature of allyship for Jacobs is that, unlike the breaking of a bond, it takes time to establish the power dynamic and build trust. Jacobs makes a point to say that Mrs. Bruce “proved a true and sympathizing friend” (1861, 214). The word “prove” points to a friendship that develops over time, through the cultivation of a relationship based on actions tied to loyalty and trustworthiness. Indeed, this aligns with Mohanty’s vision of coalition which does not operate on a misguided assumption of shared “natural/psychological commonality,” but rather represents “something that has to be worked for, struggled towards” (1996, 465). Jacobs regrets waiting so long to disclose her story because—by that point in their relationship—she knew it would have “excited sympathy in her [Mrs. Bruce’s] kind heart” (1861, 190). In the context of their relationship at that point, Linda learned to associate specific, reliable behaviors with Mrs. Bruce through the empathy they shared.

The first Mrs. Bruce illustrates that allies establish a line of trust without meddling or intrusive lines of questioning. She emphasizes that Mrs. Bruce approaches her with “her kind

inquiries” that do not make her feel vulnerable or sensationalize her experience (Jacobs 1861, 203). Instead, she listens to what Jacobs describes as “true womanly sympathy” and afterward, reassures Linda that she “would do all she could to protect [her]” (203). Jacobs defines Mrs. Bruce’s sympathy by its association with her willingness to use her resources to act in support of Jacobs (Linda). According to this model of allyship, true womanly sympathy does not pry unnecessarily, victimize, or speak on behalf of the oppressed. Instead, Mrs. Bruce’s friendship, or allyship, empowers Jacobs by building trust over time and using her resources to open opportunities in which Jacobs herself can also act.

Jacobs admits that she enters the Bruce family with “distrustful feelings” because of a lifetime of being “so deceived by white people” (1861, 190). She longs to confide in Mrs. Bruce because of her kindly disposition, but Jacobs (Linda) fears losing her favor because of the way white people, and most recently the cruel Mrs. Hobbs, have responded when learning about her children’s father. The more time she spends, however, in the “gentle deportment of Mrs. Bruce and the smiles of her lovely babe,” Jacobs (Linda) begins to feel a closeness to Mrs. Bruce that parallels her desire to confide in her grandmother. When enduring Flint’s constant sexual advances, she “[longs] for someone to confide in” but fears both Flint’s retaliation if he found out and the shame of “telling her [grandmother] such impure things” (Jacobs 1861, 28). Linda fears losing Mrs. Bruce’s good opinion much like she fears losing her grandmother’s respect (Jacobs 1861, 28). In outlining the gendered aspects of bondage in Frederick Douglass’s and Jacobs’s narratives, Morgan points out that in placing her familial relationships in high regard, Jacobs “contrasts the unreliability of relationships with white people with the warmth and steadfastness of those with her own family” (1994, 86). The familial trust Jacobs places in Mrs. Bruce manifests because Mrs. Bruce, like Jacobs’s grandmother, does not need to know the painful details of Jacobs’s (Linda’s) past before offering her kindness. She uses the resources granted to a white woman of her status to provide time and space for Jacobs to work, learn, and experience leisure time. It is important to note that Mrs. Bruce’s employment and her acts of kindness make her a unique character whom Jacobs repeatedly praises even as she takes care not to suggest that, without the Bruce family, she would have been without choice. No matter the situation, Jacobs never positions herself as a helpless victim. The Bruce family, rather than appear as saviors or heroes, function in the narrative as an extension of the familial network Jacobs has designed as part of her strategy toward securing freedom for herself and her children.

Jacobs's developing sense of belonging within the Bruce family secures situations for her to speak on her own behalf and position herself as a community leader. We see this happening repeatedly in the chapter "Prejudice Against Color" as Jacobs provides her perspective on several incidences wherein she encounters discrimination. Rather than speaking for her, Mrs. Bruce's quiet presence creates a climate in which Jacobs (Linda) can speak and make choices for herself. On the steamboat to Albany, Jacobs tells the Black man who rudely asks her to move that she "shall not get up, unless the captain comes and takes me up" (1861, 197). Later when the landlord at Troy asks if Jacobs (Linda) will take her breakfast with his family, he directs the question to Mrs. Bruce whose response Jacobs does not include. She takes this moment to offer her perspective on the ethics of the situation, noting that she "did not mind it" because "he spoke courteously" (Jacobs 1861, 198). Jacobs uses this interaction as a strategy to provide insight into the kinds of regular exchanges that Black women experience *from* a Black woman's perspective—a perspective that Northern white women had little access to.

Nudelman finds that white abolitionist women used sentimentality as a strategy for communicating the common suffering of women by speaking on behalf of the enslaved so that authors like Stowe give voice "to the mute, tormented slave, while depicting herself as a medium" (1992, 943). Jacobs places Mrs. Bruce in the background without diminishing her importance to the conditions under which Jacobs speaks. This reconfigures the popular convention of sentimental abolitionists by centering Linda's voice in the discourse against Northern prejudice. Jacobs activates the political agency slave narratives created for Black women to speak for their own issues and, according to Fulton, "situate themselves and the women around them at the center of active resistance to slavery" (2014, 248). This rhetorical move brings into focus the roles white women have in the mediation of Black experience—Mrs. Bruce runs support.

Amplified aware of the differential treatment Linda receives, Mrs. Bruce leverages her social position as a true woman to provide what society does not naturally make available to Linda. We see this most saliently when Mrs. Bruce quietly offers Linda her tea and reorders some for herself because the waiters refuse to serve Linda (Jacobs 1861, 198). Supportive and willing to use her privileges, Mrs. Bruce does not attempt to speak for Jacobs when the man asks her to move. Jacobs voices her opinions directly, knowing that Mrs. Bruce's presence makes space for her to speak without negative consequences. Their relationship models how women navigate the power dynamics of their differing social positions to enable equitable, systemic change—what Mohanty

calls coalition. With such narrative authority, Jacobs takes care to represent the array of voices speaking against slavery, both illustrative of “her own subterfuge and courage” but also “the considerable courage her escape demanded of her grandmother, her uncle, and in time, her children as well as the white friends of her family” (Morgan 1994, 88). In the case of her white allies, the Bruce family, they do not appropriate, or attempt to mediate, her voice or “save” her from discrimination. The intimate support of Mrs. Bruce and her family dismantles systemic barriers that block Black women from public discourse by creating an atmosphere of security wherein Jacobs can speak and actively perform as a community leader.

While at the Pavilion hotel in Rockaway, Jacobs (Linda) is once again asked to eat elsewhere because her complexion is darker than that of any of the other nursemaids. Disregarding the suggestion that she eat with the servants, Jacobs chooses to feed Mrs. Bruce’s child, Mary, in their room, “refus[ing] to go to the table again” (199). Her *refusal* to rejoin the table underscores both her choice and agency within the situation, allowing her to establish boundaries for what she will and will not do. When the landlord requests that Mr. Bruce send Jacobs down to take her meals, she responds by calling for the elevation and dignity of Black people in America:

My answer was that the colored servants ought to be dissatisfied with themselves, for not having too much self-respect to submit to such treatment; that there was no difference in the price of board for colored and white servants, and there was no justification for difference of treatment. I staid [sic] a month after this, and finding I was resolved to stand up for my rights, they concluded to treat me well. Let every colored man and woman do this, and eventually we shall cease to be trampled under foot by our oppressors. (Jacobs 1861, 199)

The words “my answer” in response to his request creates a direct dialogue, not a mediation, of Jacobs’s response to the landlord’s request. Mr. Bruce’s reaction is irrelevant; it is his presence that produces the conditions under which Jacobs can refuse. She uses this moment to speak to the political conditions that degrade Black people in a Martin Delany-style call for dignity and self-respect. The support of the Bruce family, though not directly credited, appears implicitly as a standard that makes it possible for Jacobs to choose for herself and speak about the condition of her community.

It is following these events that Jacobs finally confides in the first Mrs. Bruce, who listens and responds in “true womanly sympathy” (Jacobs 1861, 191). The wording of this phrase can be

read as both the *true womanhood* and *true sympathy* Jacobs associates with Mrs. Bruce's friendship. Their unity did not emerge as a given based on their shared womanhood—Jacobs's entire premise for writing makes it clear that shared womanhood alone does not necessitate action. This aligns with Mohanty's concern with the challenge of a unity unbound by "the logic of appropriation and incorporation and, just as significantly, a denial of agency" (465). Mrs. Bruce neither appropriates Linda's voice nor denies her agency, thereby showing white women that *true* women (or true allies) respond to feelings of sympathy by listening and acting in a way that positively affects change in the lives and situations of the Black women based on an informed model of consent. Her oath to protect Linda simply verbalizes something she had always been doing, the very protective (not-saviorist) behaviors that earn—prove—her trustworthiness to Linda. To review what the first Mrs. Bruce teaches about the character of sympathetic allyship: she does not investigate past cruelties or assume the voice of a Black woman, but she does leverage her privilege to dismantle the systemic barriers that disproportionately oppress Black women.

Taking these qualities as a basis for allyship that leads to coalition, Jacobs introduces the second Mrs. Bruce as "a true and sympathizing friend" with "excellent principles and a noble heart" (Jacobs 1861, 214). The account of the first Mrs. Bruce prepares readers with a basic understanding of what to expect from a true and sympathizing friend. Therefore, readers know that, for Jacobs, the role of a sympathizing friend must be earned through listening and enacted after receiving the consent of those for whom the actions are meant to serve. The first Mrs. Bruce's true womanly sympathy invokes Black feminist values by using her privilege as a white woman to open space for Jacobs (Linda) to make choices and speak for herself. The first Mrs. Bruce's status as an English woman, however, complicates her capacity to exemplify or account for American women's values and ideological environments. It seems pertinent to Jacobs that the first Mrs. Bruce's lack of prejudice is tied to her Englishness.

Before introducing her, Jacobs mentions that she heard the English "had less prejudice against color than Americans entertained" (1861, 190). In general, she also reflects that in all her time visiting England she "never saw the slightest symptom of prejudice against color" (Jacobs 1861, 208). Black abolitionist writers often point to the reduced expressions of prejudice in the English. An extended analysis of the differences between the two Mrs. Bruces could offer many insights into the models of allyship performed by these two women based on their national origins. For my analysis, it is essential that Jacobs highlights the Americanness of the *second* Mrs. Bruce

because it divorces models of listening and consent-based approaches to allyship from being tied to a national attitude or value. Instead, Jacobs roots such models of allyship in the intimate relationships cultivated between women. In other words, American readers couldn't dismiss the actions of the first Mrs. Bruce as something unique to her being English, because the second Mrs. Bruce, who was American, played a crucial role in helping Jacobs gain her freedom by actively listening to her needs and taking appropriate actions.

Almost as if to directly counter claims that the first Mrs. Bruce's Englishness makes her more capable of allyship, Jacobs defines the second Mrs. Bruce's Americanness by her opposition to slavery *and* prejudiced beliefs as an American woman. Her "hearty dislike" and recognition of slavery's "enormity" sets her apart from the "aristocratic influences" that permit blind acceptance of slavery and teach "prejudice against color" (Jacobs 1861, 214). Describing her character with phrases like "excellent principles" and "noble heart" further establishes that her upbringing in a prejudiced American environment has not stunted her ability to think and act independently from the ideologies that blind other people to the enormous oppression of slavery. Using the framework for sympathetic allyship as exemplified in the first Mrs. Bruce, Jacobs extends the definition in the second Mrs. Bruce to model how white women can act radically without reinforcing or redirecting the male-dominated power of slavery back onto Black women.

Scholarly treatment of the second Mrs. Bruce aligns her actions with the blind and destructive advocacy reflected in bell hooks's criticism of white liberal allyship. In discussing the very act that leads to Linda's freedom, Morgan asserts that the second Mrs. Bruce reinforces chattel slavery and reduces their relationship to "at best . . . patron and client" (1994, 89). Morgan reads Mrs. Bruce as incapable of recognizing that her actions affirm the racist system she wishes to dismantle, but Morgan does not include how Jacobs herself interprets Mrs. Bruce's act. Carby and Smith draw similar conclusions, describing Linda's condition at the end of the narrative as "still bound to a white mistress" (Carby 2007, 98) and "indebted to her white friend" (Smith 2012, 343). Not only do these readings diminish Linda's clear pronouncement of freedom at the end, but they also remove the context of Mrs. Bruce's and Linda's relationship that Jacobs carefully lays out in the preceding chapters.

The problem for scholars arises because the second Mrs. Bruce purchases Linda's freedom without her knowledge and in direct contradiction to (Linda's) wishes. This seems like an egregious act of denying Linda's consent until contextualized in what the second Mrs. Bruce

knows after listening to Jacobs and her family. At first, Linda feels slighted, saying her “brain reeled” because she “*had* objected to having my freedom bought” (Jacobs 1861, 226 my emphasis). Including her initial reaction is important because it emphasizes that the trust she established in her intimacy with the first Mrs. Bruce did not magically transfer to the second. At this time, Linda was still learning to trust the second Mrs. Bruce’s intentions. Finding out that Mrs. Bruce did not expect service from her, and that she would have “done just the same, if you [Linda] had been going to sail for California to-morrow” drastically alters how Jacobs responds to the act going forward (Jacobs 1861, 226). She contemplates feeling “deeply grateful to the generous friend who procured it, but [despising] the miscreant who demanded payment for what never rightfully belonged to him” (Jacobs 1861, 226). Jacobs explains how individuals can strategically use the tools within an oppressive system to break it down and undermine its power. By juxtaposing her feelings of gratefulness with her despise for Flint, she reveals the complex ways in which that system grants women like Mrs. Bruce the agency/authority to counter its oppressive barriers, and thus function in coalition with Black women.

Once she makes this larger claim about the agency of Mrs. Bruce to leverage her systemic privilege in contradiction to the system itself, Jacobs compares Mrs. Bruce’s act of purchasing her freedom to her (Linda) father’s and grandmother’s attempts to do the same thing:

I remembered how my poor father had tried to buy me, when I was a small child, and how he had been disappointed . . . I remembered how my good old grandmother had laid up her earnings to purchase me in later years, and how often her plans had been frustrated [...] My relatives had been foiled in all their efforts, but God had raised me up a friend among strangers, who had bestowed on me the precious, long-desired boon. Friend! It is a common word, often lightly used. Like other good and beautiful things, it may be tarnished by careless handling; but when I speak of Mrs. Bruce as my friend, the word is sacred. (1861, 227-228)

In this passage, Jacobs shifts the negative perception of her association with Mrs. Bruce’s purchase by connecting it to her grandmother’s intentions. The implication is that by this point in their relationship, the second Mrs. Bruce knew Linda with a similar intimacy as her grandmother and knew that she wanted and needed her freedom. Moreover, Mrs. Bruce understood that Linda’s reluctance to let a white woman purchase her freedom stemmed from Linda’s fear of being obligated to serve the person who liberated her, and Mrs. Bruce had no plans or inclination to impose such an obligation. Morgan reminds us of the importance of familial bonds in Jacobs’s path to freedom and sense of self-assurance, locating her impetus to “take a role in the larger



world” in “the support she receives from family and friends” (1994, 85). Seeing the second Mrs. Bruce’s act as familial support unifies these women in a bond Jacobs calls sacred. It is hard, in this context, not to read this reference to Mrs. Bruce’s sacred friendship in connection with their life-long union secured at the end of Jacobs’s narrative.

Jacobs tells her readers that, even though her narrative does not end “in the usual way, with marriage,” but rather, a freedom that does result in a union (1861, 227). Tate reads the juxtaposition of marriage in her declaration of freedom as a move to have “Brent marry freedom” (1992, 32). By having her novelized self “marry freedom” and remain with Mrs. Bruce, she counters the condition of marriage as a system of bondage for middle-class white women that grants them male-centered power over Black women. According to Carl Degler, it was through marriage that “white women acquired equality with men with regard to their power over the minority groups through the very institution [marriage] that subjugated them” (qtd. in Pekşen 2013, 121). In declaring herself a freewoman, Jacobs divorces her actions from forced bondages but emphasizes love, duty, and gratitude for keeping them together (1861, 227). Each attribute showcases Linda’s desire and choice to continue working in coalition with Mrs. Bruce, which echoes “narratives of slavery and freedom” wherein “black women demonstrate how their labors can be interpreted as agentive acts that affirm their value” (Fulton 2014, 254). Her choice to remain in the service of Mrs. Bruce does not contradict or diminish her freedom. Rather, Jacobs chooses to remain in this intimate relationship to secure long-term economic sovereignty. By reworking the sentimental novel’s conventional ending, Jacobs points to the significance of her intimate relationship with Mrs. Bruce, suggesting their bond is equivalent to that of a marriage. Bearing Jacobs’s description of her and Mrs. Bruce’s friendship, their ending might not be the usual one, but it is a sacred union.

Both Bruce women occupy the position of white, middle-class women whose status as wives within a male-dominated hegemonic system makes them aware of their shared oppression with Black women, but more critically, their immense privilege. They use this privilege to work in coalition with Jacobs to dismantle the barriers keeping her and her children from freedom. Neither the first nor second Mrs. Bruce tries to “save” Jacobs. Rather, their conscious use of privilege alters the conditions of Jacobs’s environment and opens up opportunities for more equitable choices. At times, the second Mrs. Bruce even seems to be actively in danger and certainly places her own child in danger. Even in these cases, they do not act as all-powerful authorities, but rather, model what steps women in their same social position can take to replicate

this model of allyship in their own interactions with Black women. Frances Smith Foster speculates that “had the manuscript been published in 1858 when it was finished, its author might have been granted an audience with President Lincoln” just like Harriet Beecher Stowe had been (qtd. in Fulton 2014, 250). It is frustrating to think that, had this book been published in conjunction with Stowe’s, we could have had a more dynamic representation of what effective allyship looks like in the dominant public imagination. Even so, it is a powerful message of resilience, the enduring message behind Jacobs’s words, and their ability to resonate with readers over a hundred years later. *Incidents* remain a popular choice for required reading in both high school and college curricula. Such popularity means that Jacobs will continue to shape knowledge about allyship. In the ongoing struggle for racial equality, white individuals can learn from *Incidents* as a guide on how to shift their support from surface-level and appropriative approaches to a model of allyship based on listening and informed, consensual actions.

Villarreal calls for contributions to the field of consent-based performance that “document the as-of-yet unpublished history of consent-based practices used in performance and those who created them” (2022, 7). Jacobs’s narrative contributes to the literature on consent-based performance by recording the many ways in which Black women have always been advocates of consent and leaders in coalitions toward abolitionist futures. Jacobs’s use of sentimentality in her nineteenth-century context was a way to depict nonconsensual sexual encounters and race-based intimate violence without circulating harmful images of Black bodies. This use of sentimentality also mitigates crossing boundaries with white readers whose own experiences with nonconsensual sexual encounters were informed by repressive Western ideologies. Jacobs exemplifies the nonviolent storytelling techniques valued by the field of consent-based performance. Furthermore, Jacobs’s model of consent-based white allyship promotes a “a realizing sense” rooted in an intersectional lens that respects boundaries (1861, xix). Her methods present a framework for choreographing intimate connections, sexual or nonsexual, that avoids reproducing the violences either implicitly or explicitly played out in a script.

Issues of race, gender, and Black women’s agency in a pre-Civil War context are crucial when considering intimacy choreography in script adaptations of Jacobs’s narrative, like Wynn Handman’s 2006 script starring Cherita Armstrong or Lydia Diamond’s 2008 production *Harriet Jacobs: A Play*. A realizing sense of the complexities that arise as performers embody the historical violences necessary to portray Linda Brent’s character can help intimacy choreographers prioritize

consent and respect individual boundaries by listening and responding based on the situation, as Jacobs shows the Mrs. Bruces doing. Jones argues that “to understand the relationship between racism and sexual violence, intimacy choreographers must consider how theatre and performance have been part of the United States’ legacy of racial violence” (2019, 148). Indeed, Linda’s relationship with these white women in the shadow of Jacobs’s and Stowe’s brief interaction reminds us of the imperative for intimacy choreographers to address the staging of not only the sexual violence depicted in *Incidents* but also how the power dynamics of white women’s relationships with Black women can embody and perpetuate intimate violence. In her narrative portrayal of intimate relationships with the two Mrs. Bruces, Jacobs demonstrates that possessing and acting on an intersectional realizing sense can foster deeply emotional connections between individuals of different positionalities in a manner that promotes justice without causing harm. Staging stories like Jacobs’s in a way that respects the well-being of Black performers and audience members, while also highlighting the contributions of Black abolitionist leaders like Jacobs, carries her legacy forward onto the stage of the twenty-first century and beyond.

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, *Incidents*

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