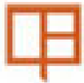

Dialect and Convention: Harriet A. Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl
Author(s): Andrew Levy
Source: *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (Sep., 1990), pp. 206-219
Published by: University of California Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3045124
Accessed: 13/04/2010 08:27

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ucal.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Nineteenth-Century Literature.*

http://www.jstor.org

Dialect and Convention: Harriet A. Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

ANDREW LEVY

HARRIET A. Jacobs (Linda Brent) begins *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by assuring her reader both that "this narrative is no fiction," and that her "descriptions fall far short of the facts."[1] This contradictory claim attests to the problem of the African-American slave narrator in confronting an overwhelmingly white, potentially hostile antebellum readership. Claims of authenticity are, if anything, validated by assurances of selective inauthenticity.[2] Jacobs verifies the objectivity of her narrative not by "telling the truth," but rather by manipulating the literary conventions most familiar to her readers in a manner that validates their conception of authenticity. That this conception of authenticity was frequently antagonistic to her own race, however, forced Jacobs into the anomalous authorial position of simultaneously honoring and repudiating a set of social and literary conventions. She resolved this situation by identifying and employing a set of am-

© 1990 by The Regents of the University of California

[1]Harriet A. Jacobs (Linda Brent), *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. L. Maria Child (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), p. xiii. All quotes are from this edition. (Note: Jacobs is called both Jacobs and Brent within this paper; Jacobs as an author, Brent as a character within the text.)

[2]See William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (Urbana and Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1986), pp. 9–10.

biguous, often oppositional rhetorical strategies that allowed her both to invoke and to renegotiate the terms of those conventions. Jacobs's manipulation of the conventions of Slave Dialect, in particular, provides an illustration of how she executed this cultural work.

While dialect—Slave Dialect in particular—was common in all forms of mainstream American literature prior to the Civil War (see, for instance, J. L. Dillard's sources in *Black English*[3]), the conscious exaltation of dialect as a literary tool was most notable during the rise of "local color" movements during the post-war period. The appeal of dialect traditionally has been grounded in claims of realism. The use of dialect, in any form, was presented as an antidote to the proliferation of sentimental Victorian dialogue, and its concomitant lack of expressiveness. Dialect was believed to vividly re-create the particular creolizations of English that had proliferated regionally across the American continent; these creolizations were presented as unaffected, "artless" versions of an overconventionalized Standard English. In most narrative texts dialect was presented as dialogue interspersed within a Standard English narration. Poetry was often presented wholly in dialect, however, as was the case with many of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poems. Occasionally a magazine would attempt to present a short story wholly in dialect: *The Atlantic*, its pages laden with pro-realist criticism, published a story in 1862 entirely composed in a Newfoundland patois.[4]

In any literary venue, however (i.e., as spoken by one character among Standard English-speaking characters in a Standard English text, or as one dialect text within a Standard English magazine), dialect existed in textual relation to Standard English: in effect, as a partner within a multivocal discourse. Within that discourse, from the time of Chaucer, dialect has invariably played the role of the lower caste. Accordingly, it has been exalted and delimited utilizing the same class ideology that Pierre Bourdieu describes in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the*

[3]*Black English: Its History and Usage in the United States* (New York: Random House, 1972). For a discussion of Dillard's reservations concerning his sources see pp. 17–19, 91.

[4]See F. L. Pattee, *The Development of the American Short Story: An Historical Survey* (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1975), pp., 268–87.

Judgement of Taste. The dialect speaker receives privileged access to claims of authenticity based upon body-associated qualities ("expressiveness"), in exchange for inferiority in mind-associated qualities ("articulation"), as well as a scale of value that exalts mind over body.[5] This hierarchy between Standard English and dialect is then reinforced on the written page, where dialect often appears as a degraded, "careless" form of English, replete with clipped syllables, indifferent syntax, and limited (and often misused) vocabulary. Thus, F. L. Pattee writes that the Newfoundland story is "uncouth, but it rings true" (p. 170). More tellingly, William Dean Howells praises the "ironical perception of the negro's limitations"[6] in Dunbar's dialect poems, an indication of the degree to which claims of dialect-as-realism become entangled with ideological judgments about its speakers.

As most linguists suggest, however, the Slave Dialect was not so much a degenerate form of Standard English as a para-language with overlapping vocabulary, different syntactical rules, and double meanings designed to clarify ambiguity through context and tone to speakers while withholding information from nonspeakers.[7] Nor was it a consistent, inflexible language. Linguists such as William Stewart and Paul Brandes have noted that significant regional differences in the Dialect existed throughout the South both before and after the Civil War.[8] Stewart and Lorenzo Dow Turner also have observed that Dialect speakers capable of speaking in Standard often conversed in mixtures of the two, depending upon audience and context.[9] And, as Dillard's collection of nineteenth-century sources suggests, no monolithic version of the Slave Dialect existed even in

[5]See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 372–96.

[6]Introduction to *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, by Paul Laurence Dunbar (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1899), p. xviii.

[7]See Dillard, *Black English*, pp. 39–70.

[8]See Paul D. Brandes and Jeutonne Brewer, *Dialect Clash in America: Issues and Answers* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1977), pp. 316–29; William A. Stewart, "Sociolinguistic Factors in the History of American Negro Dialects," in *Perspectives on Black English*, ed. J. Dillard (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton and Co., 1975), pp. 222–32.

[9]See Stewart, "Observations (1966) on the Problems of Defining Negro Dialect," in Dillard, *Perspectives*, pp. 62–63; Lorenzo Dow Turner, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1969), p. 12.

mainstream literature. He disparages the proliferation of eye dialect, for instance, where an author misspells a word (i.e., "wurse" for "worse") in a manner that does not affect pronunciation but reinforces the impression of illiteracy or inarticulateness (*Black English*, p. 16). It is clear that under such circumstances claims of dialect-as-realism are difficult to support. The version of dialect found in any source appears, rather, to be largely dependent upon the ideological bearings of the transcriber, and the context of its presentation.

Even a cursory reading of Jacobs's *Incidents* suggests the problem associated with claims of dialect-as-realism. The vast majority of dialogue is spoken in a form of "literary" Standard English most familiar to readers of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction:

> I tried to comfort him, by saying, "Take courage, Willie; brighter days will come by and by."
>
> "You don't know any thing about it, Linda," he replied. "We shall have to stay here all our days; we shall never be free." (p. 8)

On those occasions when dialect is spoken, however, it is rarely internally consistent (a single character, for instance, will say both "going" and "gwine," or "it was" and " 'twas"), nor consistent with the patterns described by nineteenth-century observers such as J. A. Harrison, or contemporary reporters such as Turner, Dillard, Stewart, or Eugene Genovese in *Roll, Jordan, Roll.*[10] Frequently a single word or phrase will be "transcribed" in dialect, seemingly to embellish what is otherwise an ordinary Standard English sentence: "He tol*e* her he was going away on business, but he wanted her to go ahead about buying you and *de chillern*, and he would help her all he could." (p. 98, emphasis added). In other cases characters will shift gradually from dialect to Standard English in the same brief monologue:

> I reckon he'll never git their mammy back agin. I expect she's made tracks for the north. Good by, old boy. Remember, I have done you a good turn. (p. 109)

[10]See Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Random House, 1976), pp. 431–41; J. A. Harrison, "Negro English," in Dillard, *Perspectives*, pp. 143–95.

In sum, the dialect presented in *Incidents* appears less like a "realistic" alternative to romantic conventions than another romantic convention itself, one that operates with peculiar privileges in relation to claims of expressiveness and authenticity.

This analysis strongly suggests that Jacobs did not include dialect in *Incidents* as a consequence of a holistic aesthetics of verisimilitude. Rather, since dialect generally appears in the text in the form of rhetorical "set pieces"—short monologues, "punchlines," or informing signifiers in otherwise ambiguous situations—it seems more likely that Jacobs's "dialect" must be read as a rhetorical strategy designed to manipulate set responses from her reader. Thus, her particular version of the Slave Dialect is not so much an attempted transcription of a genuine African-American para-language, but rather a manipulation of a malleable *conventional* dialect understood by both audience and author to invoke certain expressive ideological judgments.

Jacobs's response to the convention is complex and, by our standards, often contradictory; it is insufficient to say merely that she uses the convention, or is used by it. I would suggest instead the following patterns to describe her manipulation of the conventional dialect, patterns that mediate each other and are not exclusive of other, unmentioned patterns.

The first is the use of the conventional dialect for conventional purposes. James Weldon Johnson, in his "more or less canonical" repudiation of the traditional conventions of Black Dialect in the preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1931), stated that conventional dialect had "only two main stops, humor and pathos."[11] Johnson believed that this convention contained within itself the inscription of condescending literary and social value systems, ones that emphasized, as Howells noted in a different context, the "perception of the negro's limitations."

At times Jacobs appears to invoke dialect precisely for these effects. The first two occasions of dialect both occur within single

[11]James Weldon Johnson, "Preface to Revised Edition," *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, 2d ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1931), pp. 3–4.

sentences spoken by slaves pleading plaintively with white masters. In each instance the sentence is spoken in Standard English; only the word "master" is uttered in dialect, suggesting a link between the expressive appeal conventionally ascribed to dialect and the power of deference as a rhetorical strategy designed to ameliorate suffering:

> . . . he [the "good" slave master] is surrounded by a crowd, begging, "Please, massa, hire me this year. I will work *very* hard, massa." (p. 13)

> His piteous groans, and his "O, pray don't massa," rang in my ear for months afterwards." (p. 11)

Inversely, the dialect of Betty, the cook who hides Linda, appears to be designed to add "expressiveness" to her "humorously robust" worldview. Even Brent patronizes her—in Standard English, of course: "'When I get you into missis' safe place, I will bring some nice hot supper. I specs you need it after all dis skeering.' Betty's vocation led her to think eating the most important thing in life . . ." (p. 102).

The second pattern is the use of the conventional dialect to accentuate a tropological relationship between Jacobs's text and another text, or an otherwise understood convention. In chapter 13 Linda educates an older slave in reading and writing; this scene appears to be a reenactment of a sequence between Tom and Eva in chapters 22–26 of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.[12] The dialect spoken by the older slave in *Incidents* ("Honey, it 'pears when I can read dis good book I shall be nearer to God" [p. 75]) calls attention to his illiteracy and, in a vaguer sense, his "Uncle Tomness" (although, interestingly, the dialect spoken by this slave is far thicker than that spoken by Uncle Tom; the impression given is that Jacobs is ironically exaggerating the Uncle Tom trope). More significantly, the fact that the older slave speaks in dialect while Linda speaks in Standard English reproduces the dialogue between Dialect and Standard inscribed in the discourse between Tom and Eva; the crucial difference is that, in Jacobs's text, the white mediator between the illiterate

[12] *Uncle Tom's Cabin; Or, Life among the Lowly*, ed. Ann Douglas (New York: Penguin, 1981). See especially pp. 348–50.

black slave and education (and the opportunities provided by education) is transformed into a black mediator-educator, Brent herself.

Throughout *Incidents* Jacobs uses dialect to both invoke and displace its status as a language of deference. This displacement is often accomplished by reserving the "expressive" rhetorical power of dialect for occasions of rebellion, thereby "shocking" the reader away from making an association between dialect and deference. An understood convention in nineteenth-century American fiction, for instance, is that "Aunts"—older, maternal female slaves, like Betty the cook—talk in a rich dialect that befits their relation to motherhood, food, and the other nurturing functions that populate and support the slave economy; Aunt Chloe in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (who was "much revered in the kitchen" [p. 110]) speaks in a thick dialect that seems designed to add emotional force to her exclamations of resignation and limited defiance: "I's done *my* tears! . . . I does not feel to cry 'fore dat ar old limb, no how!" (p. 168).

In *Incidents* Jacobs invokes this conventional connection between the Aunt-figure and dialect, but utilizes the Aunt's verbal power as a force of dissent. In chapter 26 Linda's grandmother, speaking in Standard English, openly regrets that her grandson abandoned her by escaping to the North:

> O Aggie . . . it seems as if I shouldn't have any of my children or grandchildren left to hand me a drink when I'm dying, and lay my old body in the ground.

Aunt Aggie, unsurprisingly, responds in dialect. In this instance, however, that dialect is not invoked to add pathos to an expected outpouring of shared maternal grief and helplessness. Rather, Aggie delivers a chiding and radical statement of rebellion, in which Jacobs instead uses dialect to lend force to the Aunt's anger: "*Is dat* what you's crying fur? . . . He's in free parts; and dat's the right place" (p. 137).

Similarly, Linda's grandmother, whose dialogue is consistently presented in Standard English, slips toward dialect *exclusively* during moments of rage. At the beginning of an increasingly angry exchange with Mr. Flint, the slaveholder, she is portrayed as speaking in grammatically correct English: "Go

home, and take care of your wife and children." As she grows "more and more excited," however, she begins to clip words, and use colloquialisms: "'I tell you what, Dr. Flint,' said she, 'you ain't got many more years to live, and you'd better be saying your prayers. It will take 'em all . . .'" (p. 84). An almost identical exchange occurs in Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855). In the well-known fight scene with Mr. Covey, the slave-tamer, both Douglass and Covey argue in Standard English. A second slave, Bill, also speaks in Standard English, as he cautiously refuses Covey's demands to "take hold" of Douglass: "My master hired me here, to work, and *not* to help you whip Frederick." When Douglass tells Bill "don't put your hands on me," however, Bill suddenly slips toward dialect, as his excitement and anger rise: "MY GOD! Frederick, I aint goin' to tech ye. . . ."[13] In this manner both Jacobs and Douglass remodel the convention of dialect, portraying it not as a language of deference, or even a private language of defiance, but as a rhetorical weapon to be utilized for its expressive power.

Another pattern is the use of the conventional dialect to invoke associated ideological assumptions, which are then displaced in a manner that undermines their usage in proslavery rhetoric. The first extended use of dialect in *Incidents* occurs in chapter 12, "Fear of Insurrection"; the reader's impression of this appearance of dialect is latently ideological. It effectively disrupts the controlled prose of Linda Brent, and is placed in the mouths of a group that is described by her as a "rabble, staggering under intoxication" (p. 68), and that is effectively disrupting the controlled domesticity of her grandmother's house. That this "rabble" is white and poor, however, represents a significant displacement of the "fears of insurrection" that would normally be focused upon the slaves. The dialect of this "rabble," in fact, is so deviant from that of the "better class" (p. 68) to which Brent addresses herself that on one occasion she must translate it. Ironically, the unreadable word comes within a sentence that states white fears of black insurrection in such a manner that those sentiments are, by inference, as corrupt as the dialect in

[13]Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, ed. William L. Andrews (Urbana and Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 150.

which they are spoken: "'Don't wonder de niggers want to kill all de white folks, when dey live on 'sarves' (meaning preserves)" (p. 67).

What makes Jacobs's use of dialect especially effective in this instance is that she invokes class fears, but severs the connection between race and class: her appeal to the fear of a lower caste insurrection is as conservative as her displacement of race from that fear is radical. Throughout *Incidents* Jacobs utilizes dialect as a signification that the speaker is somehow morally inferior to the better class to which Jacobs and her readers both presumably belong: the Irish cab driver who refuses to allow Linda and her traveling companion in his cab (and who, like the white rabble, speaks in a form of dialect far more deviant that that of the slaves); the escaped slave who, with a tellingly (and double-edged) "low, chuckling laugh" (p. 198) explains how he financed his escape with funds stolen from his dead master's pants; the maid Jenny, who twice threatens Linda with discovery; or the slave trader, whose dialect softens as his scruples rise, in the act of announcing his retirement from the slave trade. This particular form of signification is by no means programmatic; there are occasions where dialect is not connected with moral or class inferiority. But what is noteworthy is that Jacobs's "class" of inferior people is a-racial, displacing race as a sign of inferiority, while preserving other signs likely to appeal to a middle-class, Northern, Evangelical Protestant audience: low caste, immorality, and even Irishness.

The fourth pattern is the use of dialect *per se*. By most contemporary linguists' standards Jacobs would be considered a "bad reporter" of Slave Dialect. She utilizes "eye dialect" frequently—"thro'" for "through," "staid" for "stayed," "thar" for "their." She avoids, for the most part, the undifferentiated gender pronouns, indifferent verb forms, and desired ambiguities that Genovese claims "drove" Standard English speakers "wild" (p. 434). In fact, when she does alter verb forms, she does so by occasionally adding an *s*, which Dillard labels "hypercorrection" and asserts was neither an accurate portrayal of Slave Dialect, nor a benign vision of the slaves' confidence in their own language (*Black English*, p. 42): "You nebber gibs me a lesson dat I don't pray to God to help to understan' what I spells and what

I reads" (p. 75). Other observers, such as Harrison, would accept Jacobs's use of hypercorrection, but would not condone the random patterns in which the *s* suffix appears in her text.[14] Otherwise, the most substantial alteration of Standard English that appears in the slave dialect of *Incidents* is the substitution of *b* for *v*, *v* for *w*, and *t* or *d* for *th* in certain pronunciation sequences. For the most part Jacobs's version of Slave Dialect is a cosmetically altered, inferior, profoundly deferential and nonthreatening version of Standard English.

But Jacobs's "failure" to fulfill modern linguists' standards is not, in itself, significant. Many works do not, and it would be inconsistent to suggest that any modern interpretation of Slave Dialect is definitive, or ideologically "pure." What is significant here is the relationship of Jacobs's dialect to those found in mainstream sources from the same period. It is difficult to claim that the timidity of Jacobs's dialect was dictated by the limitations of an imposed convention, when even a cursory glance at the dialogue of characters such as Aunt Chloe in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* suggests that Northern readers were already inured to far more radical presentations of Slave Dialect. In an early but relevant example, Hugh Henry Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* (1792), the dialect of the slave Cuff is transcribed with substantial respellings, and consistent use of the present tense in past and future tense contexts: "You be a filasafa . . . Getta ready, and go dis city, and make grate peech for shentima filasafa."[15] Less consistent dialect transcriptions also provide a telling contrast to *Incidents*; the "dod drot my soul if he *eint*" uttered by an "old coon" in Augustus Longstreet's well-read *Georgia Scenes* (1835) contains as unreliable a mixture of dialect and Standard English as those found in Jacobs's text, but nevertheless employs the kind of substantial pronunciation changes that would temporarily confuse Standard readers.[16] Even a comparatively small grammatical shift, such as the use of the zero copula of temporary state found

[14]See Harrison, p. 162.

[15]Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Modern Chivalry: Containing the Adventures of Captain John Farrago and Teague O'Regan, His Servant*, ed. Lewis Leary (New Haven, Conn.: College & University Press, 1965), pp. 130–31.

[16]Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, "The Horse Swap," in *Georgia Scenes* (Atlanta: Cherokee Publishing, 1971), pp. 24, 31.

in Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* ("Two days, and me no die"), is a larger structural alteration of the syntax of Standard English than any to be found in Jacobs's text. And yet such shifts were virtually standard within mainstream versions of the Slave Dialect, throughout both the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[17]

There are many possible explanations why Jacobs presented such a superficially conservative version of the Slave Dialect, when the convention itself clearly allowed her greater liberty. One might claim that Jacobs stood in a different relation to her audience from that of white authors such as Poe, Stowe, Brackenridge, et al.; that her ideological interest lay mainly in convincing her Northern readers that blacks were just a deferential and nonthreatening version of Standard English-men. This argument does not begin to take into account the complexities of the racial pressures that were exerted on Jacobs's authorship, however, or how those pressures limited her narrative choices.

Nor does it take into account the possibility that even linguistically authoritative versions of the Slave Dialect were often presented in denigrating exchanges with Standard English. While it is difficult—and perhaps unnecessary—to make comprehensive claims about the whole of antebellum literature, it is comparatively easy to find suggestive examples of texts that presented the Slave Dialect as a genuinely distinct, even disruptive alternative to Standard English, but did so in contexts that undercut its oppositional power. Brackenridge's Cuff, for instance, is quoted presenting his views on the development of man to the Philosophical Society, the highest intellectual body in the country. *Modern Chivalry* was, however, a scathing attack on the possibility that America's young democracy was installing undeserving people in positions of authority; in that circumstance, the degree of Cuff's deviancy from Standard English only seems to represent the depth of Brackenridge's belief that America's aristocracy of merit was turned upside down.[18]

[17]Dillard, *Black English*, p. 104. The quote is from J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *"Letters from an American Farmer" and "Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America,"* ed. Albert E. Stone (New York: Penguin, 1981), p. 178.

[18]See Brackenridge, pp. 129–31. The central theme of *Modern Chivalry* is mentioned in virtually any discussion of the text; see, for instance, Leary's introduction, pp. 15–19; or Daniel Marder, *Hugh Henry Brackenridge* (New York: Twayne, 1967), p. 86.

A more resonant example is Edgar Allen Poe's "The Gold-Bug" (1843), in which the servant Jupiter speaks in a thick dialect that Dillard cites as an example of good reporting: "Yes, massa, needn't hollo at poor nigger dat style."[19] Jupiter's dialect is occasionally so indecipherable it contains a kind of disruptive force absent from Jacobs's version. He thoroughly exasperates his master William Legrand, who refers to Jupiter as an "infernal black villain" or "infernal scoundrel" after moments of miscommunication (pp. 576, 573). Similarly, Poe's protagonist is often distracted from his search for the gold bug by his inability to understand Jupiter, and the narration itself must pause for translations:

> ". . . Ise sich a fool dat I hadn't de heart arter all—he look so berry poorly."
>
> "Eh?—What?—ah yes!—upon the whole I think you had better not be too severe with the poor fellow. . . ." (p. 565)

While modern linguists would claim that the slave was difficult to understand because he was concealing information from Standard English speakers, Poe's story emphasizes that Jupiter is difficult to understand because he cannot comprehend Standard English:

> "And den he keep a syphon all de time—"
> "Keeps a what, Jupiter?"
> "Keeps a syphon wid de figgurs on de slate. . . ." (p. 565)

Thus, Jupiter's stubbornly un-Standard language is played for comic value. Poe's story acknowledges the notion that the slave's dialect—and the slave's personal power—could agitate the lives of Standard speakers, but ascribes that potential to incompetence, not defiance.

In this light, it becomes possible to at least conjecture why Jacobs's version of the slave dialect seems so timid. For Jacobs to present an authentically radical version of the Slave Dialect would potentially have provoked hostility among her white readership; to adopt a strategy akin to that of "The Gold-Bug" would have meant openly condescending to her own race. She appears, instead, to have chosen a third option. While many mainstream

[19]"The Gold-Bug," in *Poetry and Tales* (New York: Library of America, 1984), p. 573. See Dillard, *Black English*, pp. 94–95.

authors mediated the radical force of deviant versions of dialect by placing them in deferential exchanges with Standard English, Jacobs presented a less deviant form of dialect, but mediated its superficial timidity through displacement into ambiguous, even oppositional exchanges.

Such an analysis of Jacobs's narrative strategies ultimately implies deeper links between her manipulation of the convention of slave dialect and the Dialect itself. Jacobs's prose reproduces a pattern of superficial guilelessness, suggestive double meanings, and contextual definition similar to that present in what linguists have defined as the authentic Slave Dialect. Like a dialect, the vocabulary of literary conventions used within *Incidents* overlaps that of antebellum mainstream American fiction; it is the grammar and syntax of that language of conventions that Jacobs has teased, however erratically, into new shapes. If, like Poe, she presents dialect-speaking characters who are so disruptively imbecilic that the narrator must pause to translate for them, she makes sure that it is "white trash"—not coincidentally, the white group with which her readership would be least likely to sympathize—who speak and act so corruptly. Similarly, if her Aunt Aggie is, like Stowe's Aunt Chloe, motherly, "much revered in the kitchen," and dialect-speaking, she also seems aware that the fight for freedom requires an abnegation, or a transformation, of the slave's maternal power and affection—a sentiment from which humor or pathos, the two traditional "stops" of dialect usage and Auntly conduct, are totally absent.

The best explanation, perhaps, for the version of Dialect in *Incidents* and its usage might be found by considering that the Slave Dialect was one of Jacobs's languages, and then examining her text according to the syntactical and rhetorical rules of that language, rather than Standard English. While Jacobs's language in *Incidents* and the Slave Dialect appear cosmetically (and ideologically) dissimilar, I would suggest that both were generated in similar contexts. African-Americans needed to develop a language that appeared superficially guileless and deferential to nonspeakers, but clarified ambiguity and double meaning through context and tone to speakers. Jacobs, similarly, needed to produce a text that mediated between deference and self-assertion, with this mediation restricted by the same ideological

bounds that restricted her race. By using performative and contextual standards of analysis—as this paper has attempted—and by downplaying more cosmetic methods of evaluation, it can thus be claimed that Jacobs's manipulation of Standard literary conventions owes a great deal more to the rhetorical strategies of the Slave Dialect than to Standard English; or, at least, that her *Incidents* was a textual "site" of intercourse where Dialect exerted a more powerful relation to the Standard.

University of Pennsylvania