

**ENSLAVED WOMEN, RESISTANT MOTHERLOVE,  
AND THE PRICE OF BLACK MOTHERHOOD**

by

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## **DEDICATION**

*This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Maria Luisa Coronado-Caraballo, whose motherlove has sustained me and given me the opportunity to thrive in this life.*

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In this thesis, I examine Harriet Jacobs's representation of Black motherhood in her 1861 slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. I argue that we should read Jacobs's portrayal of hopeful Black motherly love as a deliberately political text before the Civil War that resists heteropatriarchal white supremacy. In addition to building on Black feminist scholarship about Black motherhood, Black motherlove, and hope as resistance, I discuss the ways in which white supremacy in the United States has historically punished and degraded Black mothers, thus, negatively impacting Black families. By reading Jacobs as a political text, I resist one-dimensional narratives about Black motherhood that perpetuate systemic oppression and erase Black mothers as loving, capable, nurturing, and hopeful. By exploring Jacobs's portrayal of hopeful Black motherlove in her narrative, we can learn pertinent lessons about resistance and justice in a post-*Roe* political landscape that continues to punish Black women.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Since the advent of the transatlantic slave trade, Black motherhood in the United States has been inextricably linked with degradation, loss, and grief. Such a linking serves negative narratives about Black motherhood that perpetuate systemic oppression and erase Black mothers as loving, capable, nurturing, and hopeful. In this thesis, I read Jacobs to resist this one-dimensional narrative and to argue that her text is extremely relevant in our current post-*Roe* United States. In her groundbreaking text, *Killing the Black Body*, Dorothy Roberts suggests we look to the legacy of US slavery for current, demeaning beliefs about Black motherhood and disparate health outcomes: “Black motherhood has borne the weight of centuries of disgrace,” following the abolition of slavery, and this disgrace has resulted in “a lurid mythology of Black mothers’ unfitness, along with a science devoted to proving Black biological inferiority” (21). These white supremacist ideas “cast Black childbearing as a dangerous activity,” and the result of this is US state reproductive control of Black people (21). The US Supreme Court’s 2022 overturning of *Roe vs. Wade* makes way for governments to bar Black people from access to abortion, a key requirement of reproductive justice. The repercussions of this legal setback have yet to be fully realized, but they deal a detrimental blow to the wellness of Black families, namely, Black mothers. Black motherhood in the United States, from beginning to end, has been and remains endangered, fraught, and fragile. For example, according to the Centers for Disease Control, Black women die from pregnancy-related causes at two to three times the rate that white women do (Peterson et. al). Shalon Irving, an epidemiologist for the Centers for Disease Control, became a symbol of this systemic racism after the new mother collapsed and died only three weeks after giving birth to her first child, Soleil (Martin and Montagne). Furthermore, this

historically-rooted oppression also impacts Black infants, who are more than twice as likely as white infants to die before their first birthday (T. Williams). It is important to note that similarly, the lives of Indigenous mothers in the United States are also under threat (Peterson et. al). Currently, the 2022 US Supreme Court is considering a challenge against the Indian Child Welfare Act, a federal law that prevents Indigenous children from being separated from their extended families and tribes. These healthcare disparities and legal challenges are part of the long history of the US violent colonial system impacting Indigenous and Black mothers. My focus is on Black women, however. Kerry Sinanan points out that these “grotesque racial disparities” in Black infant and maternal health in the United States are a result of a “system that replicates the racism inaugurated by slavery” (393). Sinanan’s scholarship emphasizes, too, the history of Black motherhood within the laws of chattel slavery, specifically the 1662 Virginia legal doctrine which codified that children born to enslaved mothers would inherit their mother’s status (Morgan 1). The force of white supremacy does not end with these complications, for after maternity and birth come the perils of rearing Black children in a white supremacist society that devalues Black lives. Systems of white supremacy in the United States cause Black motherhood to be a precarious experience. Perhaps no text indicates this predicament as powerfully as Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, published in 1861.

In *Incidents*, Jacobs conveys the risk of suffering and death for her children if her attempt to escape bondage fails; moreover, there is the plight they will surely experience if they remain enslaved (144-146). In the present-day white supremacist United States, we continue to view Black mothers through this lens of risk. Contemporary Black Feminist scholar Jennifer Nash contends that “there has been intensified scholarly and popular interest in representing black motherhood as both a site constituted by grief and expected loss and as a political position made

visible (only) because of its proximity to death” (“Political Life” 700). In other words, the nation--*the world*-- is used to associating Black mothers with grief and death, and only through their experience of these events do media pay attention to them as political figures. This is visible in the news media and popular interest paid to Black mothers who are simultaneously advocating and grieving for their wounded or deceased sons and daughters, victims of police brutality. North Americans endemically equate Black mothers with the prospect and reality of the loss of their children through murder or neglect. This expectation of loss was equally prevalent during the nineteenth century, in antebellum America(s).

However important it is to recognize and advocate for justice for victims of police brutality and other, more insidious forms of racism, imagining Black mothers as perpetually grieving risks a one-dimensional characterization that fails to capture the love, hope and complexity of Black motherhood. Jacobs captures this complexity by representing becoming a mother as a perilous yet comforting milestone in *Incidents* (94, 96). We must study Jacobs’s portrayal of hopeful Black motherly love as a deliberately political text before the Civil War. We can and must read it as a mode of resistance within a white supremacist heteropatriarchal world that seeks to stamp out Black familial bonds by disrupting the wholeness and integrity of the family, the resistance of a world outside precolonial Africa that has always degraded Black mothers. Otherwise, we deny ourselves crucial lessons in the US sociopolitical context that continues to punish Black women. While Jacobs’s privilege and status afford her the opportunity to advocate for enslaved women, her narrative is strikingly pertinent amid the 21<sup>st</sup>-century sociopolitical landscape that continues to chastise Black women.



## CHAPTER 2: DEFINING BLACK MOTHERHOOD AND MOTHERLOVE IN THE UNITED STATES

In a United States context, the institution of Black motherhood is as diverse as the experiences of those in African-American communities who mother. Patricia Hill Collins describes Black motherhood as a “series of constantly renegotiated relationships that African-American women experience with one another, with Black children, with the larger African-American community, and with self” (*passim*). That is, Black motherhood and motherlove are dynamic and change because the labor of Black women varies based on the economic and sociopolitical contexts in which they mother.

Black feminist scholarship provides a framework through which we can better understand the dynamic role of Black mothers in the United States. Writing before recent attention to the inclusivity of trans persons’ maternal experiences, Hill Collins explains that Black motherhood includes the biological relationship of a *bloodmother* (152), and Rosalie Riegle Troester expands Black motherhood to also include *othermothers*, or “other adult women who help guide and form” young Black children (13). Whether trans or otherwise, othermothers can be grandmothers, aunts, cousins, sisters, and even people who do not share kinship, who take on childcare responsibilities for periods of short- or long-term care. Their organized labor within their communities and relationships with Black children create resilience and are key to understanding Black motherhood (Hill Collins 153). In *Feminist Theory*, bell hooks explains that this form of revolutionary parenting happens “in small community settings where people know and trust another,” and cannot happen “if parents regard their children as their ‘property,’ their possession” (133). In a white supremacist world that historically regarded Black bodies as chattel and ignored their humanity and autonomy, othermothering revolutionizes parenting and resists

white supremacy by rejecting the idea that children are property and belong to one person. By sharing the responsibility of parenting with others, and recognizing the agency of children, othermothering puts into practice the African proverb that *it takes a village* by building networks of care and love between Black adults and children. Jacobs's family network practiced othermothering, as the responsibility of her care was split between her parents, grandmother, aunt and uncles, especially after the death of her mother.

It is essential to pause and acknowledge that under a heteropatriarchal white supremacist system, Black trans women suffer extremely. In addition to racism, Black trans women have been the target of the Trump administration's dismantling of numerous protections for LGBTQIA-identifying individuals, thus limiting their access to the basic human rights of healthcare, housing, and education. They are also victims of violence at a disproportionate rate (Shelton and Lester 108-109). This marginalization continues into conversations about pregnancy and parenting, where the voices of trans and gender nonconforming individuals are frequently left out. Equally important to note is that not all birthing people identify as women (Oparah and Bonaparte 27), and neither should biological sex be a determinant for motherhood. This leaves a need for more inclusive conceptualizations of motherhood in future scholarship. In my particular focus on Black motherhood, I am thinking specifically about the experiences of birthing people, such as Harriet Jacobs.

While the role of Black mothers is diverse and can extend to include community relationships, some Black women view Black motherhood as oppressive and burdensome, and as an institution that benefits white heteropatriarchal systems of class, race and gender (Hill Collins 152). This perspective is understandable, as Saidiya Hartman says that the intimate care of mothering "has been produced through violent structures of slavery, anti-black racism, virulent

sexism, and disposability” (“The Belly of the World” 171). Here, Hartman creates a paradox: while motherhood provides love and care, and sustains African-American communities, in the United States, it is traced back to the physical and sexual violence of slavery and a history of the gendered violence of forced reproduction. Utilizing motherhood as a way to oppress Black women is identifiable today through the use of the controlling images of the matriarch, the mammy, and the welfare queen—harmful stereotypes that have been used to disparage and dehumanize Black mothers (Hill Collins 152).

And yet, despite a history of heteropatriarchal white supremacist ideologies that seek to degrade Black women, other Black women view motherhood as a site of independence, self-empowerment, resistance, and where seeds of social change are sown (Hill Collins 152). Jacobs adopts this view in her representation of Black Motherhood in *Incidents*. Nash contends that while contemporary Black motherhood is “incessantly sutured to grief, to anticipated death, and to mourning” (*Black Maternal Aesthetics* 553), Black feminist theory reimagines Black motherhood as powerful, spiritually rooted, and life-affirming (Nash, “The Political Life” 703). hooks supports this view, describing motherhood for many Black women as “humanizing labor, work that affirms their identity as women, as human beings showing love and care” (133). Just as motherhood can be restrictive and burdensome, it can be personally fulfilling to provide others—one’s children—with tender love and care, and can create a sense of greater purpose for those who engage in the labor of mothering. This view of Black motherhood resists white supremacist ideologies that have historically dismissed Black mothers as incapable of expressing love and care (133).

While Black motherhood is defined by these dynamic relationships between African-American adults, their children, and within their communities, it frequently, but not always,

includes the practice of motherlove. Specifically, Black motherlove constitutes the experiences of Black mothers or othermothers in their labor of providing sustaining care and love to children. Black motherlove challenges the normative discourse of motherhood in multiple ways. First, it challenges the dominant culture's idea of motherhood as "simply and solely private and emotional" (O'Reilly 118). This causes motherhood in the dominant culture to be a site of patriarchal oppression, leaving women powerless over themselves and their children. Black motherlove, on the other hand, is a site of empowerment for Black mothers (O'Reilly 118) and a "basis for self-actualization" (Jenkins 206), as Black mothers teach their children "to defy and subvert racist discourses that naturalize racial inferiority and commodify blacks as other and object" in a world that views them as unworthy and unlovable (O'Reilly 11). Therefore, Black motherlove moves the act of mothering from the purely private to the public sphere as Black mothers teach their children a self-love and resistance that allows them to navigate the hostility and threat of anti-Black racist environments. Furthermore, Black motherlove challenges the normative discourse of motherhood as purely sensitive and focused on nurturance by making room for the inclusion of preservative love. The dominant culture, based on the experience of the white middle class, assumes physical safety and survival for children, but this is not a reality for many Black children. As a result, another defining characteristic of Black motherlove is the Black mothers' work of "securing food and shelter" and "struggling to build and sustain safe neighborhoods" (O'Reilly 119). This form of love, which preserves Black life by ensuring physical survival of children, has been criticized as an illegitimate form of mothering because it strays away from normative ideas of motherhood as completely focused on nurturing. This criticism is "problematic because only by way of preservative love can Black women keep alive their children in a world hostile to their well-being" (O'Reilly 120). Similarly, Hartman aligns

with O'Reilly's view of Black motherlove as preservative when she says that Black mothers "enable those 'who were never meant to survive' to sometimes do just that" ("The Belly of the World" 171). Black motherlove, then, is defined by its resistance to racism and preservative love, as African-American mothers work to provide the chance of survival to their children who are living in a hostile white supremacist world that views Black people as disposable. In *Incidents*, Jacobs's portrayal of Black motherhood includes the practice of motherlove through Linda Brent's resistance to slavery and her determined commitment to providing a safe life, free from bondage, for her enslaved children.

It is important to understand that conflicting experiences of Black motherhood can and do exist side by side within communities (Hill Collins 152), and that Black motherlove challenges the normative discourse about motherhood by considering the lived experiences of Black mothers within a racist, sexist world. Black Motherhood is dynamic, inclusive, and has the potential to be burdensome to themselves, yet radically powerful. In *Incidents*, Jacobs portrays this complexity of Black motherhood, though her characterization of it is largely positive. By understanding contemporary feminist scholarship about Black motherhood and motherlove, we can more accurately read Jacobs's text as politically resistant against white supremacy's hold.

### CHAPTER 3: ENDANGERED BLACK MOTHERHOOD DURING THE ANTEBELLUM ERA AND IN *INCIDENTS*

*“Slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women.”*

- *Harriet Jacobs*

It is impossible to understand Jacobs’s remarkable narrative about Black motherhood as a political text of resistance without closely studying the precarious, horrific position of mothers during slavery. During the Antebellum era, Black procreation sustained slavery by replenishing the enslaved labor force, and enslavers therefore wielded immense sexual and reproductive power over enslaved women (Hartman, “The Belly of the World” 169). Jacobs discusses these abuses of power over enslaved women in *Incidents*.

In my epigraph for this section, Jacobs’s words allude to the horrors that enslaved women experienced under a heteropatriarchal white supremacist institution of bondage. Hartman describes these horrors when she troubles the myth that enslaved women who performed domestic labor were privileged over those forced to work in fields, contending that “domestic laborers in white households experienced forms of violence and sexual exploitation” (“The Belly of the World” 170). Enslaved women who worked in the house were vulnerable to sexual assault because of their proximity to male enslavers who could easily violate them. Harriet Washington asserts that not only women, but “girls were forced or enticed into sexual relationships at an unhealthily early age by owners who cited the girls’ supposedly hot-blooded nature” (44). Out of white supremacist beliefs of the mythic African hypersexuality of enslaved women came the harmful image of the Jezebel, a lustful, immoral Black woman who corrupted white men. White society created this Jezebel figure and, or but, did not grant enslaved women the same humanity and dignity afforded to white women; therefore, it was impossible for Black women to live up to

the ideal of true womanhood, which expected chastity, domesticity, and submission to male authority (Welter 153-158). White supremacist logics caused the ideals of true womanhood to be out of reach for Black women, and enslavers' continued invocation of the Jezebel image to justify sexually assaulting and forcing them to reproduce.

In her slave narrative, Jacobs describes the degradation and horror at the hands of a predatory enslaver that disrupted her life as a young girl, and similar practices of nineteenth-century enslavers' sexual predation are well-documented in the archive. In Jacobs's autobiographical analogue, Linda Brent, asserts, "No pen can give an adequate description of the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery. The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear" (44). Here, Jacobs describes how enslaved girls are sexually exploited by their enslavers. Through her narrative, Jacobs depicts this exploitation as teenaged Linda fends off the persistent sexual advances of her enslaver, Dr. Flint, who is old enough to be her father. Brent explains that he filled her "young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred" (26). Because enslavers viewed enslaved girls and women as nothing more than a commodity, they felt free to abuse them sexually. Similarly, founding father Thomas Jefferson is infamous for fathering the children of one of the women he enslaved, Sally Hemings, who was the half-sister of his deceased wife, and at most, fifteen years old when he began sexually exploiting her (Pinto 68, 74). While debate exists about how to categorize the long-term interactions between Jefferson and Hemings, we should consider the dominating nature of slavery and the power imbalance between a white male enslaver and the enslaved woman he began exploiting as a girl (Spencer 510). Because Hemings, as an enslaved woman, was understood to be property of Jefferson, her bondage precluded her from entering into a consenting, romantic relationship with her enslaver.

Jefferson's exploitation of Hemings, as well as Jacobs's account of her sexual abuse, exemplify the sexual violence enslaved women were vulnerable to in the nineteenth century. Additionally, enslavers' commodification of enslaved women also led to practices of forced reproduction.

After the 1662 North American colonial law establishing that the children of enslaved women were the property of the enslaver, Black procreation sustained the institution of slavery globally. Enslaved women were both producers and reproducers, and their white enslavers were economically incentivized to force them to reproduce (Morgan 14, 17).

Enslavers degraded enslaved mothers and disrupted familial bonds by requiring enslaved people to engage in forced reproduction. This could mean requiring two of the enslaved people they subjugated to engage in forcible sexual intercourse, or even "renting" an enslaved man and forcing an enslaved woman to submit to him (Foster 46, 58). Jacobs condemns the subjugation of women under slavery in her narrative when she criticizes, "Women are considered of no value, unless they continually increase their owner's stock. They are put on a par with animals" (43). Here, Jacobs comments on how enslavers do not recognize the humanity of the enslaved women they dominate, and thus, forced them to engage in despicable practices like forced reproduction. To make matters worse, the bonds of marriage did not offer any protection to enslaved women. Marriages of enslaved people were not recognized by law and lack of legal protection left enslaved women vulnerable to rape and other forms of sexual abuse (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 79, 85). Jacobs laments this vulnerability as Brent reflects on Flint's sexual exploitation of her, "Where could I turn for protection...there is no shadow of law to protect her [an enslaved girl] from insult, from violence, or even from death" (26). Though Brent did not go on to bear Flint's children, she could not escape his predacious hold under slavery because neither the law nor her grandmother could adequately protect her. Enslavers like Flint could



profit economically from raping enslaved women and faced no legal recourse since the rape of an enslaved person was not recognized by law. This brutal sexual violence with no legal recourse instilled terror in enslaved women. Enslavers viewed Black women as subhuman and disposable, dismissed their pain, and exercised tyrannical power over them to fill them with fear and ensure that they would not resist their bondage.

The nightmare Black mothers experienced under slavery did not end with forced conception but continued into pregnancy. Pregnant enslaved women were frequently required to continue hard manual or field labor until the fifth month of pregnancy (Washington 46). Jacobs discusses this horrendous disregard of prenatal care to enslaved expectant mothers in *Incidents* when she explains how Linda's Aunt Nancy "was compelled to lie" at the door of her enslaver, Mrs. Flint, to serve her every need, "until one midnight she was forced to leave, to give premature birth to a child. In a fortnight she was required to resume her place on the entry floor, because Mrs. Flint's babe needed her attentions" (113). This overworking and sleep deprivation during Aunt Nancy's pregnancies resulted in the premature births and eventual deaths of her six children (113). In addition to this willful, imposed lack of prenatal care, enslaved pregnant women were not immune to cruel beatings as punishment, either. Enslavers punished enslaved women they deemed obstinate by forcing them to lie on the ground with their pregnant bellies placed in dug out holes so that they could beat them without harming the fetus (Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* 40). This barbaric practice ignored the fact that stress on a pregnant woman's body impacts the fetus as well and suggests that enslavers cared more about the power and punishment of enslaved women than the commodity of the enslaved child to come. The dehumanizing practice of cruelly beating a pregnant enslaved woman is supported by the nineteenth-century slave narrative, *The History of Mary Prince*. In the narrative, Prince describes

the vicious manner in which Hetty, a pregnant enslaved woman, presumably impregnated by her rapist enslaver, Mr. Ingham, is stripped naked, tied to a tree, and flogged repeatedly: “she was all over streaming with blood. He rested, and then beat her again and again. Her shrieks were terrible” (7). In this scene, Hetty’s enslavers violently murdered both her and her unborn child (7). Though Hetty appears in the narrative for only a short time, her existence is marked by violent sexual and physical violence, illustrating the brutality of an institution that shows no mercy even to women in the most vulnerable condition. Furthermore, as a result of the abuse, neglect and brutal conditions enslaved pregnant women faced, approximately fifty percent of enslaved infants were stillborn or died within their first year of life (Owens and Fett 1343).

Slavery dehumanized Black mothers and their children by perverting the mother-child relationship, thus further disrupting the integrity of the family. Enslaved women had no legal claim to their children, their enslavers did, and therefore, enslaved children were treated by white southern society as commodities. This could lead to a mother’s worst nightmare: separation from her children (H. Williams 23). Jacobs condemns this practice of forcible family separation in her narrative. By severing the bonds between a mother and child, slavery makes it impossible for families to be whole. Not only is the human relationship within families corrupted, but the human relationship between enslaver and enslaved person as well. Despite Linda’s grandmother Martha’s lifelong service to the family that enslaved her, including nursing their white children, “not one of her children escaped the auction block” (*Incidents*, 12). Jacobs’s recounting of her grandmother’s separation from her own children demonstrates the way slavery corrupts human relationships. Jacobs illustrates her grandmother’s desperation after her youngest son, Joseph (known as Benjamin in her narrative), is taken away by a slave trader, “Could you have heard her heart-rending groans, and seen her bloodshot eyes wander wildly from face to face, vainly

pleading for mercy...you would exclaim, *slavery is damnable!*" (23). There can be no loving relationships between enslavers and enslaved people, for the subjugation inherent in slavery makes that impossible. Although Jacobs's grandmother nursed the children of enslavers, children who were not hers, and devoted a life of "faithful" service to their family, this was not enough for them to recognize her humanity, or the humanity of her children.

Jacobs illustrates another instance of slavery's ability to stamp out Black familial bonds when she describes an enslaved woman who professed she "knew that *some* of them [her children] would be taken from her; but they took *all*" (17). Jacobs recounts the mother's grief and desperation as she begs the slave trader to tell her where her seven children will end up, unable to hide the agony from her "wild, haggard face" (17). Understanding the permanence of her situation, she "exclaimed 'Gone! All gone! Why dont God kill me?'" (17). Jacobs depicts scenes of family separation like these to prove that slavery knows no humanity. If enslavers commodify human bodies, they will continue to exploit and harm, and never see enslaved people as human beings entitled to dignity, connection, or love.

In any case, enslaved women faced unspeakable danger and humiliation as mothers in bondage. During the antebellum era, US enslavers treated enslaved women as chattel, sexually abused and forced them into pregnancy, and refused them the dignity of a safe and peaceful family life. Jacobs powerfully describes these abhorrent practices in *Incidents*, and the understanding we gain from her narrative of a heteropatriarchal white supremacist system that has historically oppressed Black women makes possible a contemporary sociopolitical context that continues to castigate Black mothers in the United States.

## CHAPTER 4: ENDANGERED BLACK MOTHERHOOD IN A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY US CONTEXTS

Though Jacobs exposed the plight of Black women under slavery in her 1861 text, white supremacy's punishment of Black mothers did not end with abolition of the institution more than one hundred fifty years ago; rather, degradation of Black women in the United States has continued into the contemporary era, presenting itself systemically. Slavery's oppressive legacy has continued to cast a cloud over Black women in the United States throughout the twentieth century and today. Punished by harmful contemporary public policy, stereotypes, and a healthcare system that fails them, Black mothers in the United States face white supremacist ideologies not unlike those of Jacobs's time that cast them as incapable and that seek to disrupt Black familial ties to maintain a racist heteropatriarchal social order.

Like the misogynist, anti-Black thought that Jacobs resisted in 1861, contemporary Black mothers in the United States have encountered degrading and punitive public policy making, like the 1965 report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, authored by Johnson administration official Daniel Patrick Moynihan. In his report, Moynihan pathologized the Black family structure, arguing that it was socially weak and "the principal source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or anti-social behavior" that "now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation" (30). Rather than focusing on how systemic racism impacted Black families, Moynihan's report blamed their social struggles on the abnormality of the Black family structure. Moynihan found the key abnormality to be that African American communities in the US had "been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole" (29). In other simpler terms, the *Moynihan Report* rejected white responsibility for the cause of this structure, and

instead claimed that Black mothers subverted the natural order of the family by taking on the domineering role within the family, thus, emasculating Black fathers. In the eyes of white sociologists like Moynihan who believed their judgment was morally upright, Black mothers were to blame for the “underachievement” of Black, working-class males, and Black men should reign in accordance with the dominant culture family hierarchical structure (Spillers 66).

Moynihan’s narrative of the Black family was rooted in a collective memory of slavery, and thus the dehumanization of Black mothers a repetition of slavery’s violence on the captive body (Spillers 69). Another problem with Moynihan’s report, is that by focusing on matriarchy, it incorrectly assumed the social power of the Black female within historical and contemporary social contexts. During slavery, Black women had no legal power to claim to their children as their own (Spillers 80), and similarly, contemporary government systems punish Black women and leave them powerless. And yet, Moynihan claimed that Black women had too much (Wallace 110). These false and critical views of Black mothers did not go away and have since influenced public policy and rhetoric that continues to punish Black women. Even in the twenty-first century, more than 150 years removed from the end of slavery, Black mothers in the United States continue to experience the burden of the degrading injustice of white supremacy.

White supremacy’s abject and punitive treatment of Black mothers from Jacobs’s time has continued into the contemporary era in the United States through systemic practices, like foster care and incarceration, that seek to control and punish Black mothers. Roberts analyzes how “the simultaneous buildup and operation of the prison and foster care systems rely on the punishment of black mothers, who suffer greatly from the systems’ intersection” (“Prison” 1476). For example, the prison and foster systems in the United States disproportionately impact Black families. About one third of female prisoners are Black, and most of them are the primary

caretakers in their family. Similarly, in foster care, about one third of foster children are Black, and most of them have been removed from a Black mother and/or primary caretaker (“Prison” 1477). These systems have become increasingly punitive following the dismantling of social services in communities of color. As a result, rather than providing resources to Black mothers, the United States government takes an extreme approach of punishing those who are most impacted by the intentional removal of the social safety net; in this way, in part, the country sustains its originary domination and subjugation of Black women’s lives.

Comparable to the degradation and control that a slavery-practicing US wielded over Black women before the Civil War, the contemporary US government punishes and degrades Black mothers who have been victims of multiple vulnerabilities like domestic violence, homelessness, and drug addiction (including self-medication to stave off the anguish of sociopolitical victimizations), by incarcerating them. Rather than treating drug addiction as a healthcare issue, US law enforcement treats it as a criminal offense. Similarly, accusations of welfare fraud result in felony charges rather than civil penalties. Roberts paints a devastating picture of incarcerated Black women in the most vulnerable positions: “Thousands of black women in prison today—mostly for nonviolent offenses— need treatment for a substance abuse problem, support for their children, or safety from an abusive relationship instead of criminal punishment” (“Prison” 1480). This criminalization of Black women because of failed social security systems illuminates the intentions of a white supremacist government. Bluntly stated, the state is not interested in providing resources that assist Black mothers, but more so in using punitive measures to continue the control and oppression of Black women that maintain a white supremacist social hierarchy.

In understanding the way Black women have faced degradation and punishment at the hands of a heteropatriarchal white supremacist system that harkens back to Jacobs's experience in slavery, the 1989 Interagency Policy on Cocaine Abuse in Pregnancy provides one example. This policy, instituted by the Medical University of South Carolina, non-consensually drug-tested pregnant patients, and reported positive test results to the police. Forty-two patients, all but one of whom were Black, were arrested for testing positive for illegal drugs during pregnancy, or for delivering babies who tested positive for illicit narcotics. These Black mothers were arrested shortly after birth, some still bleeding, and at least one gave birth handcuffed to her hospital bed (Roberts, "Unshackling Black Motherhood" 941-944). Roberts compares this 20<sup>th</sup>-century policy to slavery's appalling treatment of enslaved women, commenting, "The sight of a pregnant Black woman bound in shackles is a modern-day reincarnation of the horrors of slavemasters' degrading treatment of their female chattel" ("Unshackling Black Motherhood" 944). Indeed, the image of a bound Black mother is reminiscent of the dehumanizing, gendered descriptions of slavery that Jacobs depicts in *Incidents*, like the enslaved mother, who on New Year's Day, "sits on her cold cabin floor...degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood," or the enslaved mother whom Linda Brent saw "lead seven children to the auction block," only to lose them all to a slave trader (Jacobs 17). The US government's history of incarcerating drug-using Black mothers reflects a pervasive white supremacist ideology that survived slavery: Black women are a threat to the social order, and because they are dangerous, they must be locked up. This example illustrates state interest in demeaning and persecuting Black women, not helping them.

Additionally, our white supremacist US government's punitive mistreatment of Black mothers via incarceration leads to severe, disruptive impacts on Black family ties. Mass

incarceration deprives children of the economic support they would otherwise receive from their parent, placing a heavier burden on the remaining family members. Also, separation of a child and incarcerated parent can lead to emotional and psychological consequences for children, such as feelings of anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues. Furthermore, the incarceration of a Black mother tends to disrupt family ties more than an incarcerated father because imprisoned women of color tend to be the primary caregivers of their children. Because high incarceration rates in inner-city communities lead to a perceived shortage of men, women have less leverage in intimate relationships, and this can leave women vulnerable to exploitation (Roberts "Prison" 1481-1483). The negative impacts of a prison system that punishes Black mothers are clear. Families are torn apart, children suffer, stable intimate relationships are not encouraged, and communities' ties needed to create solidarity and activism are disrupted. Similar to Roberts's comparison of a handcuffed Black mother to antebellum slavery, the prison system's disruption of familial bonds is not unlike slavery's disruption of family ties during Jacobs's time. Unlike slavery, however, white supremacy's strategy of exerting control over Black families in the contemporary era is not as overt as the publicly visible auction block of the past. Instead, continuing slavery's legacy of subjugating and confining Black women, the US government's prison system uses a more covert method of anti-Black racism, punishing Black mothers and dealing devastating blows to the integrity of their families under the guise of maintaining law and order.

As well as a punitive prison system that degrades Black mothers and disrupts their families, the US government uses the foster care system to further control and castigate Black women, and this harms family ties. This disruption is apparent if we understand that Black children are overrepresented in the foster care system. Even though they comprise 15 percent of



children in the United States (Roberts, “Prison” 1484), Black children account for 23 percent of children in foster care (*AFCARS Report*). The foster care system punishes Black women as it resorts to mass removal of children from Black mothers rather than aiding communities that are impacted by poverty and racial injustice (Roberts, “Prison” 1484). Roberts contends that the function of this removal of children from Black mothers is the state’s “political choice to investigate and blame mothers for the cause of startling rates of child poverty rather than to tackle poverty’s societal roots” (“Prison” 1484). In other words, Black mothers are punished for being Black and poor rather than given access to civic resources that will help improve their socioeconomic situation. Like the prison system, US foster care operates stealthily and systemically in its punishment of Black mothers. For example, most child protective cases in urban areas occur in low-income African American neighborhoods, and most African American families live in neighborhoods where welfare agencies are more heavily involved in the external “supervision” of children. As a result, this policing leads to an environment where there is a realistic expectation (and sometimes, too, a reasonable fear) that the state will take custody of Black children. Also like the prison system, the US foster care system damages Black family and community ties by devaluing the relationships between mothers and their children as well as by harming the ability of communities to connect for social activism (Roberts, “Prison” 1487). Again, this practice of mass removal of children degrades Black mothers, damages familial relationships and evokes slavery's heinous practice of family separation. The foster care system is just one of multiple intersecting systems in the US that continue to perpetuate white supremacist ideologies the blame and shame Black women.

While we should rightly blame the US prison and foster care systems for their degradation of Black mothers, we must also consider how harmful recent and contemporary

rhetoric unjustly casts Black mothers as irresponsible and unfit for parenthood. Roberts paints a picture of the controlling image of the Welfare Queen, or “the lazy mother on public assistance who deliberately breeds children at the expense of taxpayers to fatten her monthly check” (*Killing the Black Body* 17). This modern-day racist ideology paints Black mothers as irresponsible and incapable of making good decisions. In line with this racist ideology, Black mothers continue to purposely have children they cannot afford so that they can receive more food stamps. This ideology is ridiculously flawed, of course, because it completely ignores the oppressive, systemic social factors that force Black mothers to depend on public assistance. Rather, it reduces all Black mothers to a caricature that it then uses to mock and demean all Black women. To make matters worse, harmful rhetoric that characterizes Black mothers as irresponsible and lazy perpetuates a white supremacist social order because of its very real consequences that affect Black women in daily life. Roberts explains that “these stereotypes do not simply percolate in some disembodied white psyche. They are reinforced and recreated by foster care and prison (“Prison” 1492). In other words, these controlling images cause lasting harm because they lead to public policy that among other things, punishes drug-addicted women, separates Black families, and continues a cycle that ensures that African Americans remain oppressed. It would be a mistake to believe the heteropatriarchal racism of Jacobs’s time that degraded Black mothers has disappeared; instead, it has evolved, and its current form pervades both the imaginations of Americans and the systems that govern.

In addition to punitive governing systems that disproportionately affect them, Black women in the United States forcibly bear the burden of a healthcare system that fails them miserably, thus disturbing the health, wellness, and wholeness of Black families. The US healthcare system’s negligence of Black women is outrageous. Specifically, Black mothers are

243 times more likely than their white counterparts to die from pregnancy or child-birth related causes. Furthermore, they are 49 percent more likely to deliver prematurely than white mothers. Equally atrocious is the Black infant mortality rate today—twice that of white infants (Martin and Montagne) -- matches the infant mortality rate of babies born to enslaved mothers in the nineteenth century (Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* 36). To emphasize, *the rate at which Black infants die in the United States is no better than it was during slavery*, despite dramatic medical advances. Education and income level do not make a difference in these health outcomes. This alarming disparity is present across all education and income levels of Black women, and due to the weathering effect of the stress of racism on Black bodies. This weathering effect results in susceptibility to chronic illness and maternal health complications. The impact of a heteropatriarchal white supremacist world is devastatingly clear: in the twenty-first century, racism literally kills Black women and children.

To read Jacobs's *Incidents* as a political pre-Civil War text that resists white supremacy, we must be astutely aware of the ways it continues to disparage and deny Black women in a contemporary US context. Through the coordinated and intentional systemic punishment of the foster care and prison systems, harmful controlling images that influence public opinion and policy, and a failed healthcare system, the US continues to punish Black women and disrupt familial integrity of people of African descent. This makes Jacobs's portrayal of Black motherhood as hopeful, loving, and resistant against slavery even more relevant. Through study of her narrative, we can resist contemporary white supremacist logics by acknowledging the complexity of Black motherhood and celebrating the empowering hope of motherlove.

## CHAPTER 5: JACOBS'S PRIVILEGED STATUS AND/AS RESISTANCE

Jacobs's ability to publish a political narrative resistant to white supremacist ideologies is due, at least partly, to her privileged status in comparison to other enslaved women of the antebellum era. William L. Andrews explains that enslaved people who occupied the upper echelons of the enslaved class accessed "opportunities and privileges while in bondage that gave them more leverage over their situations" ("Caste and Class" 59) Jacobs had access to these opportunities and privileges, and without them, she would not have been able to secure the freedom of herself and her children, nor would she have been successful in advocating for the rights of Black women. For example, Jacobs was literate and enjoyed the status and social and economic protection of her free grandmother, Molly Horniblow, known in *Incidents* as Aunt Martha. Additionally, her family maintained social connections with influential white people in their Edenton, North Carolina hometown, and Jacobs herself had access to medical care of a quality usually reserved for whites. These privileges provided Jacobs with a foundation to resist white supremacist practices and to stand up for other enslaved women.

Jacobs's elevated community status, which contributed to her ability to advocate for enslaved women with her text and after her manumission, was established by her resourceful extended family, especially Molly Horniblow. Andrews analyzes Horniblow's position: a "baker much in demand among white ladies" (*Slavery and Class* 13). Jacobs's grandmother was as respected as an enslaved woman could be, Andrews argues, and Horniblow fostered strategic social relationships with upper-class white people in Edenton. This elevated the status of Jacobs's family. She had access to an interracial network within her town and enjoyed privileges and freedoms within her class as an enslaved woman (*Slavery and Class* 13). Jacobs depicts this privilege in her narrative, expressing her gratitude to her grandmother, to whom "I [Jacobs] was

indebted for many comforts.” (10) Even into adulthood, Jacobs illustrates her grandmother’s standing in the community when she details an interaction between Aunt Martha and Dr. Flint, who has just hit Brent out of anger when Aunt Martha arrives. Jacobs’s grandmother’s “indignant feelings rose higher and higher, and finally boiled over in words. ‘Get out of my house!’ she exclaimed” (68). Aware of her grandmother’s position in the community, Flint does not raise his hand to her, nor does he retaliate against her in the moment. In fact, he obeys her and stays away from her grandmother’s cottage for the winter. He fears her position as a free Black woman who is well-connected with other influential white people, though he seeks revenge against her in other ways, such as by jailing Martha’s son in abject conditions and then selling him (21-25). This fear of a well-connected Black woman provided protection and influence to Jacobs, who would take advantage of this privilege to escape slavery and write extensively against the wicked, dehumanizing institution.

Additionally, Jacobs’s capability to author her rhetorically powerful text against the degradation of slavery was made possible by her own early access to literacy. The close connections fostered by her extended family allowed young Jacobs to enjoy “happy days...The slave child [i.e., Jacobs herself] had no thought for the morrow” (11). Her enslaver provided her with comfort after her mother’s death from illness, and while other enslaved children were generally working by the age of seven (Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* 37), Jacobs’s mistress instead kept her indoors and taught her how to read and write, a privilege that was not extended to most enslaved people. Jacobs recognizes the role of her mistress, saying, “for this privilege, which so rarely falls to the lot of a slave, bless her memory” (11). Andrews contends that relationships like the one between Jacobs and the enslaver of her early childhood allowed her to “access extraordinary and legally unsanctioned advantages outside the bonds of normal master–

slave relationships” (*Slavery and Class* 196). The privilege of literacy would be key to Jacobs, as she would use her ability to read and write in her strategy to secure freedom for her children and for herself, and ultimately, to write and publish her political narrative about her life in slavery.<sup>1</sup>

Also, Jacobs’s social relationships with upper-white class people afforded her privileges and protections that made her advocacy against slavery possible. In her autobiographical narrative, she credits her relationship with upper-class white people in Edenton for keeping her and her family safe in the violent aftermath of Nat Turner’s insurrection. Writing as Linda Brent, Jacobs explains that poor, white bullies searched, beat, and tortured Black people around the more remote parts of Edenton as a way to assert dominance over them. While the mob terrorizes Black women, men, and children by whipping them “till the blood stood in puddles at their feet,” Jacobs/Linda feels no fear of harm from these lower-class whites, writing, “we were in the midst of white families who would protect us” (54). The mob does not commit violence against Jacobs because of her connections with influential white people who will not allow it.

Finally, Jacobs was privileged in her access to medical care, which was not extended to all enslaved women. This privilege ensured her survival so that she could go on to become an advocate for enslaved women. Roberts explains that “slaveowners who overworked their slaves operated under general ignorance about prenatal health” (*Killing the Black Body* 25). In her text, Jacobs describes Linda's illness following the birth of her son. Although she vocally resisted care by Flint, her family ultimately sent for his care after feeling alarmed by her illness (52). Instead of succumbing to complications from childbirth, Jacobs describes that she endures her illness

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to utilizing her access to literacy to publish her narrative, Jacobs worked as a correspondent for the *Liberator* in the summer of 1862, reporting on her relief work with freedpeople in Alexandria, Virginia (Fagan Yellin 397).

when Linda notes that Flint “continued his visits, to look after my health” (52). This instance in the story reinforces her privilege. While many enslaved women fell victim to a lack of medical care because white supremacy viewed them as disposable, Jacobs survived because she had ready access to a physician in the moments when she most needed care. This access to medical care would lead to her survival of bondage, and placed her in a unique situation that allowed her to speak out against an institution that degraded Black mothers by denying them proper healthcare, to say the least of the medical atrocities perpetrated on their bodies. (Fortunately, enslaved women often took care of themselves during pregnancy by drawing on the residual African prenatal and childbirth traditions that survived the transatlantic slave trade.)

Jacobs’s unique placement within an elevated level of the social hierarchy of the enslaved, as well as her access to influential white people, literacy, and medical care afforded her opportunities from which to resist white supremacist ideologies that oppressed Black women. Without this background, which ultimately contributed to her access to a platform that spoke to the public, she would not have become the iconic Jacobs that we know today. To ignore the access she had during her formative years would risk misunderstanding how she came to be a public figure who fiercely condemned slavery and its heinous impact on enslaved women.

## CHAPTER 6: JACOBS AS A RHETORICIAN

To understand *Incidents* as a deliberately political Civil War text that condemns slavery's disgraceful treatment of Black mothers and families, we must understand the genre from which it emerged, as well as Jacobs's role as rhetorician. Though Jacobs's text narrated her very personal experiences and struggles during slavery, this text should not be regarded as a personal writing. Jacobs crafted *Incidents* so that others could read it and be convinced of the abolitionist cause. During Jacobs's time, the sentimental novel, which employed motifs of seduction to illustrate the vulnerability of women, as well as a heroine who experienced trials and tribulations, gained popularity among white female readers. Around the same time, the woman's slave narrative was emerging (Carlacio 317). The woman's slave narrative was unique in that it communicated to its readers the negotiation of being both Black and female in a society that devalued and dehumanized Black women through commodification and enslavement (Carlacio 317). Black women autobiographers had to find a way to communicate the impossibility of adhering to societal expectations of true womanhood and avoiding sexual exploitation under slavery, all while securing safety for their children. Therefore, the woman's slave narrative evolved into "a political broadside against both the institution of slavery itself and the inhumane treatment Black women faced" at the hands of white supremacy (Carlacio 317). Jacobs integrated traits of the popular sentimental novel genre into her slave narrative to create a unique political text that chastises slavery's degrading treatment of women.

In *Incidents*, Jacobs illustrates slavery's wicked violence against women deliberately to make a statement against this heinous institution, however, she does so very carefully. Joycelyn Moody explains that Jacobs writes during an "era in which literacy is the exception to the rule among black women" (Moody, "Veil" 634). As a result of this racism, white readers viewed



Black women under a lens of suspicion and resistance. Understanding this context in which she was writing, Jacobs carefully crafted *Incidents* in a way that would appeal to her audience of white-middle-class women. Jacobs wrote her autobiographical narrative as “an account of the wrongs suffered by collective black womanhood, and a plea for a collective response by her readership” (Moody, “Veil” 638). Jacobs writes to restore her honor, which was “damaged severely in adolescence by Norcom [Flint]” (Moody, “Veil” 638). By constructing her story to detail the relentless sexual exploitation of Dr. Flint, her “sin” of engaging in an unchaste sexual affair with Sands, Flint’s monstrous attempt to sell her children away, and distressing scenes of the separation of families, as Linda, Jacobs hopes to appeal to the pathos of her white middle-class female audience with the goal of transforming “the ways that free people thought about the institution and those suffering under it, in part such that they would feel motivated to agitate for its cessation” (Moody, “African American Women” 113). In other words, Jacobs wanted people to feel so disturbed and appalled by the perversion of slavery that they would put a stop to the practice. In line with this goal, Jacobs’s message to white women is clear: slavery corrupts men, ruins young women and tears families apart. Under an oppressive system of slavery, she illustrates, no one can grow healthily or naturally. The evil of slavery contaminates all people, enslavers and the enslaved, and creates a hellish world that perverts the natural order.

## CHAPTER 7: HOPE AS RESISTANCE

I define hope as a form of resistance that rejects domination of the mind. bell hooks describes hope as a necessity when she insists that we adopt a “vision of life where freedom and justice for all is no longer a dream but the reality to be embraced if we are to survive” (183). We see this hope in Jacobs’s narrative; her portrayal of motherlove, a subversion of white supremacist ideology, is successful because she consistently expresses hope as a motivating force for freedom. Hope is a form of resistance against slavery, which breaks and dehumanizes. For example, in his narrative, Frederick Douglass explains the dehumanizing, psychological effect of slavery when he describes that he was “broken in body, soul and spirit” under the power of his especially brutal enslaver, Mr. Covey, and mourns his state of hopelessness: “the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed upon me” (63). It is amazing then, that despite a lifetime of dehumanizing and demoralizing treatment, one can demonstrate hope for a better tomorrow. Hope is a powerful form of resistance for Black Americans.

Accordingly, hooks describes the necessity of a resistance like hope to defeat racism, citing that “racism and white supremacy cannot be effectively challenged and changed in our society until all of us learn to resist domination in all its forms” (182). Bearing this in mind, to imagine a better future is refusal to accept an ideology which dehumanizes and seeks to control the fate of Black people. Hope is not a vague, wishful and distant dream for the future, but a requirement for survival. By actively working for justice, “we see clearly that change can happen, that our lives can be transformed, that we can always renew our spirits and rekindle our hope” (183).

Hope is not passive by any means. It is transformative, requires active and continuing effort, and resists the demoralizing intent of oppression.

This definition of hope as resistant, transformative, and requiring active effort is reiterated in contemporary African-American narratives. Take, for example, the 1997 novel, *Push*, by Sapphire. In this narrative, hope drives sixteen-year-old Precious's transformation as she navigates the disturbingly oppressive circumstances of poverty, sexual abuse by both of her parents, and, as a result, life as a Black teenage mother to a child with a disability, and pregnancy with her second. It is important to acknowledge that Precious's mother in the novel, Mary, is both physically and sexually abusive. Her Black mother's violence should not be understood as motherlove. Instead, we should read Mary's character as a manifestation of the violence of systemic oppression that harms Black women. Furthermore, I do not suggest that we read all Black mothers in literature uncritically. Rather, even in literature that depicts overwhelmingly violent and bleak life, we can read ways in which radically resistant hope has the power to disrupt these prevalent cycles of abuse. After Precious is kicked out of ninth grade for being pregnant, she finds transformative hope in an alternative education program, where, with the support of her teacher, Ms. Rain, Precious learns to read and write her story while building community with her classmates. By the end of the novel, Precious learns that her sexually abusive father has died of AIDs and transmitted the disease to her, which effectively sentences her to death in the 1989 context of the novel. Amidst these harrowing events, however, the birth of her second child, Abdul, provides a glimmer of her hope for the future (Sarr 293). His Arabic name comes out of Precious's respect for Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan and his message of self-sufficiency as a way for Black people to escape the grasp of white supremacy. Her choice for her son's name represents "her claim to a kind of 'good' motherhood" that gives her the "strength to resist the social service agency's suggestion that she give up on her dreams of getting a GED and going to college" in favor of taking a low-wage job (David 50-51). In her

resistance to the welfare caseworker's suggestions that Precious get a low-paying job as a home attendant due to her perceived "obvious intellectual limitations" (Sapphire 119), Precious hopefully resists white supremacist notions of Black incapability. Becoming a mother with her first child, Mongo, at only twelve years old, Precious was not old enough to practice motherlove, as her grandmother took custody of her daughter soon after her birth, and Precious's own mother used Mongo's existence to receive more welfare benefits. After making progress in literacy and the birth of her son, Precious has gained some control over her life and is determined to continue her education. Her hope rejects a racist welfare system's low expectations and opinions of her as a Black, unwed teenage mother. Furthermore, because she has found strength and self-actualization through literacy, "Precious reads to Abdul, suggesting that he will be literate and that the cycle of dominance and abuse will now end" (Starr 293). Even though Precious cannot escape death in her future, she has hope that her son's life will be better. While she daydreams, admiring her son, she thinks, "In his beauty, I see my own" (Sapphire 140). This forms a final statement of resistance against a white supremacist system that tries to relegate her to inferiority and succeeds in killing her and thus rendering her son an orphan whose fate will parallel those of actual US Black children in the adoption and foster system who suffer from mental health issues and disruptions to family and community ties.

Former President Barack Obama's 2006 book, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, which contains autobiographical narrative as well as a discussion of the sociopolitical and religious views of the man who would become the country's first African-American president, also describes hope as active and resistant against domination. While there is much focus on Michelle Obama's figure as a Black mother and woman, Barack Obama's memoir uses the rhetoric of hope consistently throughout his narrative. Also, it is

important to recognize that discussion of Obama's legacy as the first African-American president is complex. On one hand, Obama was symbolically important as America's first Black president and a symbol of pride for Black Americans (Gillespie 3-5). On the other hand, Obama has faced criticism for his failure to make policy changes during his presidency that would have significantly addressed racial inequality (Gillespie 191). These critical discussions are necessary, and I argue that we can still read his memoir for his resistant descriptions of hope. Obama, like Jacobs, is a person of mixed race who wrote a narrative with the purpose of appealing to a white readership. For this reason, although Obama's narrative is written in a more formal and subdued style, we can still infer the themes of resistance and activism in situations he describes as hopeful or transformative in his religious and political formation. In one instance, he illustrates why he was so drawn to the African-American religious tradition as a young Black man working in Chicago:

I was able to see faith as more than just a comfort to the weary or a hedge against death; rather, it was an active, palpable agent in the world. In the day-to-day work of the men and women I met in church each day, in their ability to "make a way out of no way" and maintain hope and dignity in the direst of circumstances, I could see the Word made manifest. (123)

Although Obama does not explicitly use the words *resistance* or *oppression* in this vignette, he conveys hope for progress and resistance against oppressive forces using the language of faith. Obama uses the words "faith" and "hope" almost interchangeably, and we can see that in his view, hope is not passive, but intentionally practiced as a force of resistance in the daily life of African-American churchgoers. When he says that they maintain hope "in the direst of circumstances," he is likely alluding to the systemic injustices caused by white supremacy that

plague the lives of Chicagoans on the South side. Obama's language here evokes imagery of the collective action organized by Black churches and mosques during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. For Obama, Black churches "provided a spiritual literacy for him to interpret real-world problems and a spiritual language for him to communicate hope in the future" (Jarrett 189). Bearing this in mind, his observation of African-Americans who resist the oppression of systemic racism and despondency to work toward a better life through their roles in church communities, is, for him, a display of his religious teachings and values. He later again conveys hope as active and resistant in the closing of his narrative when he comments that the American spirit has the audacity to believe that we have "some control— and therefore responsibility— over our own fate" (209). Though he utilizes secular language here, and is not speaking specifically to Black people, but to a much wider American audience, he demonstrates an awareness of the United States' contradiction between its stated values and its oppressive history. Though the United States has expressed values of freedom and justice, its five-hundred-year history of white supremacy, slavery, and subjugation have devastated generations of people of color, specifically, African-Americans. Obama's language indicates his hope that despite this country's history, the people can take control of their circumstances for a better future. Obama's ideas of resistance against oppression, personal agency, and the ability to imagine a better tomorrow align with the Black hope expressed by *Precious*, hooks, and Jacobs.

## CHAPTER 8: MOTHERLOVE, HOPE, AND RESISTANCE IN *INCIDENTS*

We can study Jacobs's resistance to white supremacist heteropatriarchal ideas about Black motherhood in her portrayal of her own experience as an enslaved mother in *Incidents*. Through her expressions of hope and motherlove for her children in her narrative, Jacobs challenges harmful societal beliefs that degrade Black mothers, beliefs that continue to today. These flawed beliefs include the irresponsibility of Black mothers and an incapability to form caring, loving mother-child bonds. By close reading these scenes, we open ourselves up as scholars to a more complex understanding of Black motherhood marked by difficulty, resistance, as well as by moments of radical love and tender beauty.

First, we should read Jacobs's portrayal of Linda's impregnation by a man other than her enslaver as resistant to the degradation of sexual assault and forced reproduction that enslaved women were commonly subjected to. Roberts discusses this rebellious practice, explaining that "there is evidence that some female slaves refused to bear children by abstaining from sexual intercourse" (Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* 46). While Jacobs did not abstain completely from sexual activity, we see a similar form of resistance in *Incidents*, when Linda recounts how she refused to submit to Flint's sexual pursuit of her, declaring that she would not let him "succeed at last in trampling his victim under his feet." She promises, "I would do anything, everything, for the sake of defeating him" (Jacobs 46). In her situation, Linda's plan to defeat her enslaver consists of engaging in a sexual relationship with Sands, a wealthy white man, and becoming pregnant with his child. By choosing her reproductive partner, Brent, who is 15 years old, is resisting Flint's sexual advances in the only way she knows how with hopes that he will sell her and her child, and that her "freedom could be easily obtained from him [Sands]." Before further analysis, it is important to acknowledge how terribly problematic this situation is: a teenage girl

is forced to choose between a lifetime of sexual assault and bondage, or engaging in a sexual relationship with a man to have his child in hopes of freedom later in life. While it may be difficult to read Brent's choice as resistant, her control over her reproductive decisions is an act of defiance, and shows Flint that she does not belong to him to dominate or harass. For her, this decision to preserve her dignity in a way that she can control resists the degrading alternative of her enslaver's sexual violation, and thus, domination of her body. Through Brent's act of having a child with Sands, Jacobs sets up the possibility for her to practice hope and motherlove.

In her narrative, Jacobs conveys resistance to the family-ruining institution of slavery by describing the way Linda feels inspired by her children, even during her darkest hours when she is near death. After suffering from illness and Flint's abuses following the birth of her daughter, Ellen, Linda confesses, "I begged for my friends to let me die, rather than send for the doctor" (65). However, she recovers from this illness and expresses her gratitude for her children, writing, "I was glad for the sake of my little ones. Had it not been for these ties to life, I should have been glad to be released by death" (65). Here, Jacobs portrayal of a strong will resists slavery, an institution which ravages and kills Black people. By not succumbing to an institution which seeks to damage, because of her children, Jacobs depicts motherlove as life-giving and strong enough to endure even the worst brutality. Stephanie Li contends that Jacobs's motherhood "becomes the defining impetus behind both her life and her resistance to slavery" (23). Though it is wretched to bring children into a world where enslavers view them as chattel, Jacobs's love for her children in *Incidents* conveys an illuminating hope: with her "ties to life," whom she clearly loves and wants to provide the best life for, it is possible to come back from the precipice of death and aspire to a future of freedom.



Similarly, Jacobs resists slavery's bond-breaking oppression through Linda's hints at her plans for an improved future when Flint notifies her that he will send her to the plantation to separate her from her children. Linda reflects, "I had a woman's pride, and a mother's love for my children; and I resolved that out of the darkness of this hour a brighter dawn should rise for them. My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each" (70). In these lines, Linda feels powerfully driven by her love for her daughter and son, and with active and resistant hope, indicates that her children will achieve a future that includes freedom. Even though Linda's enslaver has a heinous, white supremacist legal system on his side, Jacobs suggests that Linda's radical motherlove, empowering, preservative and all-encompassing, has the capacity to rescue her children from the shackles of slavery.

Jacobs's portrayal of motherlove operates as a mode of resistance against white supremacist ideologies in Linda's unwillingness to leave her children in a state of bondage. While Linda expresses her meditations about escape, she confesses, "I could have made my escape alone; but it was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom" (73). She assures her reader that while freedom is precious, "above all price, I would not have taken it at the expense of leaving them in slavery" (73-74). Jacobs illustrates motherlove as sacrificial and protective. She explains that every hardship Linda endures is for her children, and this strengthens the bond between mother and child even more. Her children are the reason she has made it this far in a life that should be damned by the evils of slavery. Roberts argues that centuries-old harmful images of Black women have portrayed them as less deserving of motherhood ("Unshackling Black Motherhood" 950). Particularly, she explains that the image of a Mammy, while viewed by white society as the ideal enslaved woman because of her devotion to white children, "did not reflect any virtue in Black motherhood" because it did not consider

the value Black women hold as mothers of their own children or “the fate of Mammy’s own offspring” (13). Jacobs’s characterization of Linda as a mother who sacrifices the possibility of her own escape to freedom because she loves and puts her children first resists the ideology of the Mammy figure. She is not devoted to the white children of her enslaver; her devotion is to her own children, and this makes her virtuous. Leaving her children under Flint’s power is not an option. She instead waits, and driven by hope, she concocts a plan to secure freedom for herself and her children. Jacobs’s depiction of Linda’s motherlove and dedication to her children, as well as her hope that they will all secure freedom one day, challenges white supremacist beliefs that degrade Black mothers and paint them as irresponsible women who do not prioritize their own families.

Jacobs’s portrays Black motherhood as astonishingly sacrificial and resistant to white supremacist ideas that degrade Black mothers by depicting Linda’s pursuit of her family’s freedom through hiding in her grandmother’s garret for seven years. This space, which she describes as nine feet long, seven feet wide, and three feet high, is dark, cramped, and offers little shelter against bugs or extreme heat or cold (91-94). Linda does feel some comfort from her hiding space, however, when she asserts “I heard the voices of my children. There was joy and there was sadness in the sound. It made my tears flow. How I longed to speak to them! I was eager to look on their faces” (92). Though Linda is in a prison of her own while in hiding, she much prefers this to slavery. During this period, she watches her children grow, finding joy in her observation of them. She explains, “At last I heard the merry laugh of children, and presently two sweet little faces were looking up at me, as though they knew I was there, and were conscious of the joy they imparted. How I longed to *tell* them I was there!” (93). By juxtaposing Linda’s restrictive, uncomfortable environment in hiding against the joy she receives of watching

and listening to her sweet children, Jacobs makes one thing clear. Motherlove is so powerful that Linda is willing to be physically imprisoned, and even debilitated, if it means she can ensure the survival and safety of her children. Her children's laughs illuminate her dark experience in hiding, and this gives her hope to bear the extreme difficulty she experiences until she can ensure a safe escape for herself and her children from slavery. Through Jacobs's narration of Linda's voluntary hiding, she practices the resistance of domination that hooks outlines. Through fugitivity and hiding, she refuses slavery. Her hope is a resistant fire, kindled by her love for her children, and this hope drives her to make plans while she waits for the right moment to escape.

Furthermore, we see resistance to slavery through Jacobs's expression of motherlove as she narrates Linda's continued advocacy for Sands's coordinated purchase (85), and then emancipation, of her two children (100, 109), though he ultimately fails to free them. When Sands is elected to Congress, Linda makes a desperate final effort to advocate for the freedom of her children by secretly meeting and pleading with him to legally emancipate them. After their meeting, she cries to her grandmother, "*I couldn't have him go away without emancipating the children*" (109). As a fugitive, Linda risks being seen and caught in her personal meeting with Sands, but she is willing to risk it all for her children to have a chance of a free life. Physically crippled by her arduous period of hiding, she laments her physical impairment, but reassures the audience of her motivation to continue to for the goal of freedom because of the love of her children: "had it not been for the hope of serving my children, I should have been thankful to die; but, for their sakes, I was willing to bear on" (101). Jacobs depicts the motivation of motherlove as never-ending. For her children, Linda is willing to do anything, including risking her safety as a fugitive, and in spite of her physical limitations. This resists against white supremacist ideas that cast Black mothers as weak and incapable of caring for their children. Through Jacobs's

portrayal, Black mothers have a love, hope and motivation that is limitless and can take on the evil institution of slavery.

Another instance of Jacobs's fight against society's degrading characterization of Black mothers is her illustration of Linda's interactions with her children as a revitalizing force which allows her to strive for a better future away from the bonds of slavery. After Sands fails fulfill his promise to emancipate Ellen, he moves her to Brooklyn to be in the custody of his relatives. When Jacobs describes Linda's reunion with her daughter, it is bittersweet, as she exclaims, "There stood my Ellen! I pressed her to my heart" (130) and learns that she is neglected by the Hobbs family, who uses her as a servant. Linda feels sadness when her daughter asks, "Mother, when will you take me to live with you?" (130) because she does not have the means to financially support her. Though not the happiest of reunions, Jacobs's portrayal of Linda's maternal anxiety over Ellen's condition and her wishes to be united with her permanently acts as a catalyst in the story for her continued fight for the freedom and safety of her children. Jacobs writes that after this meeting, Linda was "was impatient to go to work and earn money, that I might change the uncertain position of my children" (131). Additionally, this incident causes Linda to write to Flint, requesting a sale price for her own liberty (131). Knowing enslaved children are not free until their liberty is legally recognized, Jacobs portrays motherlove as a continued pursuit driven a mother's love and desire for her children to have a safe, free life where they are reunited with their mother. Again, this portrayal proves Jacobs's methodical resistance of the institution that tears families apart and perverts the familial structure. Jacobs hopes to subvert the degrading expectations set by a heteropatriarchal white supremacist society about Black mothers by illustrating a mother who works toward having the autonomy and stability to care and provide for her children. Here, Black motherlove is invulnerable to white

supremacy.

We can and should read Jacobs's depiction of Linda's interactions with other babies in her narrative as proof that motherlove subverts racist ideas about Black mothers by illustrating a caring, maternal love that soothes and repairs. In the midst of the anxieties Linda expresses about not having secured freedom, safety or custody of her children, she cares for her employer, Mrs. Bruce's infant, and describes, "it made me think of the time when Benny and Ellen were babies, and my wounded heart was soothed" (133). Here, Jacobs describes tender, mothering care as regenerative. Linda's heart feels heavy as she navigates the insecurity of fugitivity, but through the act of tending to a baby, she is reminded of her love for her own children, and experiences healing. Through this scene, we are introduced to a side of motherlove that is not commonly associated with Black motherhood. While many of Linda's maternal acts focus on the sacrifice and her preservation of life, safety and freedom for her children, Jacobs's language evokes an intimacy through the affection she expresses for Mrs. Bruce's infant, and in turn, her own children. Through this illustration of Linda nurturing an infant, Jacobs expresses the radical maternal bond that she has with her children as motivating, and this drives Linda to continue her work of escaping slavery and securing a safe future for her family. We should read this scene as a political statement of resistance. If white supremacy seeks to dominate and dishearten Black women by painting them as incapable of maternal nurturance, Jacobs illustrates motherlove as intimate and having the power to heal deep wounds. This challenges a heinous institution which seeks to dominate by breaking the bonds of familial relationships.

Jacobs's political narrative against slavery's corruption of the Black family concludes with Linda's continued expression of resistance in her longing for a secure future for her family. She celebrates, "I and my children are now free! We are as free from the power of slaveholders

as are the white people of the north” (156) though she admits that her dream is not yet realized when she ends, “I do not sit with my children in a home of my own, I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble. I wish it for my children’s sake far more than for my own” (156). Jacobs does not romanticize Linda’s experience, though she does convey a resistant hope through her recognition that Linda has not yet achieved the level of freedom and security she wishes for her family. In her diction, the use of powerful words like “long” and “wish” convey not a passive dreaming, but a hope that requires active work. As demonstrated previously through her role as a devoted mother, the reader can understand that Jacobs’s characterization of Linda as strong-willed and resourceful ensures that she will continue to challenge racism, slavery, and their degrading treatment of Black mothers.

## CHAPTER 9: JACOBS'S HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP WITH HER CHILDREN

Though we can and should read *Incidents* as a masterfully constructed narrative published to advance the political goals of abolition and to expose the heinousness of white patriarchal supremacy, the text primarily documents Jacobs's experience through her depiction of Linda, a mother who deeply cares for the well-being of her children. This characterization is well-documented by the archive. Historical records document Jacobs's love for her children, even as adults. When her 20-year-old son, Joseph, returned from a three-year whaling expedition, "the usually controlled Jacobs could not contain her joy" (Fagan Yellin 156). Isaac Post, the husband of Jacobs's friend, Amy, writes to his wife that "H. Jacobs is in ↑an↓ exiticy that her son has again returned she recd. a letter today saying he was in Boston . . . she ran over to the Store to tell the good news . . . she said she could not eat" (I. Post, qtd. in Fagan Yellin 156). We read Jacobs's own excitement about being reunited with her son in her letter to her friend, Amy Post, when she writes, "I feel so happy daily expecting to see my Son" (Jacobs, qtd. in Fagan Yellin 158). After the long absence of her son due to an extended, perilous journey at sea, we can infer from these records the sentiments of relief and cheer that Jacobs must have felt to learn that her son would return safely. Her children's maturity to adulthood would not diminish the feelings of maternal love and longing that Jacobs experienced for Joseph and Louisa. In an 1852 letter to Post, Jacobs writes of her longing for a place of her own where both of her adult children can spend time with her: "I could do anything for the sake of a little shanty to call home and have my children to come around me don't know what a comfort it was to me to see my Joseph so often last summer" (Jacobs, qtd. in Fagan Yellin 178). Though her children are, by this time, 19 and 23 years old (Joseph is the elder), Jacobs still wishes to have a place of her own where she can welcome both of her children in comfort. Her life is made easier when

she visits with her son regularly and knows he is safe. Jacobs's expression in her personal correspondence proves that her maternal love and hopes for her children were not simply a rhetorical tool she utilized to advance her political goals against white supremacist ideology in *Incidents*, but an authentic part of her personality.

Furthermore, we see Jacobs's resistance to degrading, racist beliefs of Black mothers as irresponsible and incapable through her real-life devotion to her children's wellbeing and in her documented anxieties about their security and safety. She writes in a late 1852 letter to Amy Post, "Situated as I am my Brother and son away no home for Louisa to come to it makes me very unhappy for their sakes" (Jacobs, qtd. in Fagan Yellin 186). Here, she is referring to the absence of her son and daughter. Her son, Joseph, has joined her brother, John, in California, while Louisa resides in western New York (185-187). Later in the letter, Jacobs goes on to weigh whether or not she should send for Louisa, as she recognizes her daughter's desire to seek a livelihood that advances social justice (186). This characterizes Jacobs as aware of the complexities of motherhood: wanting one's children to be safe and near, while also understanding that their independent identities separate from their role as children may take them far away from one's embrace. She expresses her worry for her son to Post after he's joined her brother in Australia, "I have felt so anxious about my son and Brother not hearing anything from them it makes me feel that she [Louisa] is all that is left to me in this World" (Jacobs, qtd. in Fagan Yellin 223). Jacobs's devotion to her children is apparent, and we can see this when she receives temporary relief from her worry for her son later that year. She tells Post, "I will tell you some good news I have had a letter from my Brother and Son just as the spirits told me it would be . . . I was so happy to know that they were living" (Jacobs, qtd. in Fagan Yellin 226). Jacobs's concern for her son's wellbeing never dissipates, even after she stops hearing from him



during his time living in Australia. In fact, she cares about him so much that she entreats Lydia Maria Child, her editor, to reach out to her personal connections in Australia to spread the word about her missing son, Joseph. Child explains in an 1866 letter, “His mother is, of course, extremely anxious to know whether he is alive or dead. She has written again and again . . . but gets no reply” (Child, qtd. in Fagan Yellin 680). This letter paints Jacobs as a mother frantically worried about her son’s safety in a world that does not value Black life. Jacobs is aware of the danger her son faces, because in a white supremacist society, Black mothers must always worry about their sons. Tragically, Jacobs would never receive the reply she waited for from her son, as historians believe he died by suicide sometime in 1860 at the age of thirty-one (676). Child’s effort highlights Jacobs’s determination and resourcefulness to learn about her son’s fate, going so far as utilizing her professional connections with influential white people to try to locate him. Jacobs’s continued care, expressed by her personal writing, and even by the writing of others, illustrates her unending love for her children. Regardless of their age, Jacobs never stopped loving them, worrying about them, or hoping and working actively to improve their futures. We can read her unwavering, motherly duty to her children in her real life as inspiration for her political narrative about a Black mother who resists slavery. Her life serves as a testament against a white supremacist ideology that offers a controlling image of Black women as irresponsible and incapable.

There is no greater proof of Jacobs’s real-life devotion and motherlove than her historical relationship with her daughter, Louisa. We can understand the bond between Jacobs and Louisa by understanding their lives and work together for social justice after their escape from slavery. After Jacobs rescued Louisa from Sawyers’s family, who was using her as a maid to her cousins in Brooklyn, she took her to Boston (Fagan Yellin lxxii). Louisa’s support of her mother’s work

is apparent; she assisted Jacobs in her employment duties to the Willis family so that she could write *Incidents*. Later, during the Civil War, the mother and daughter established the Jacobs Free School, and then the Lincoln School for Black refugees from enslavement and/or the Civil War. Louisa and Harriet frequently lived together, as neither women ever married, and the two continued their work for equal rights. Their roles as mother and daughter who shared an unbreakable bond does not end with their work. In Jacobs's later years, Louisa served her as her full-time nurse. She tended and cared for her mother in her last days, just as Jacobs had spent a lifetime tending to and caring for her. After Louisa's death, she was buried next to her mother (Fagan Yellin lxxiii). We can understand Jacobs and her daughter's lifetime of work and devotion to each other as proof of adoration between mother and child that could not be diminished, even by the injustice of slavery. Jacobs's lifelong work of civil rights advocacy was driven by the love she felt for her daughter and son, a hopeful love that illuminated and made her believe that the world can and should be better for them.

## CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSION

This nation's history of subjugating and wielding violence over Black mothers for more than 500 years continues to harm Black women today. In addition to the systemic inequalities that African American mothers face, they also bear the burden of white supremacy's imprint on an American imagination that casts them as irresponsible and incapable. Though Americans like to believe that we have progressed socially, the anti-Black racism on which slavery was predicated continues to permeate our nation and punish Black mothers and their families. What should scholars of Black feminism make of *Incidents*, then, during an era where the nation's highest court has rescinded a woman's access to abortion? We know very well that this decision will disproportionately affect Black women. Research suggests "that maternal mortality rates will see an alarming rise as a result of abortion bans, with Black women again bearing the brunt and already shameful racial inequities becoming even wider" (Palacio 1274). Though it comes 157 years after slavery's putative end, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, and its potential for state governments to restrict Black women's access to other components of reproductive justice, like contraceptives and sex education, is reminiscent of slavery's violent reproductive control. Black abortion provider Bria Peacock agrees, commenting that "forced births and reproductive exploitation of Black bodies are historical facts, and history often repeats itself. When it does, marginalized people usually suffer the most" (e70). If anything, this current sociopolitical context signals that we must read *Incidents* as a text that strategically utilizes Black motherhood—devoted, powerfully hopeful, and loving—to resist historically-rooted ideologies that still insidiously whisper, "Black women are unworthy." In this paper, I have explored the dangers, both historical and contemporary, that Black mothers have faced, as well as the power of motherlove, resistant Black hope, and Jacobs's maternal rhetoric. Understanding Jacobs's

portrayal of motherlove to resist slavery's degradation begins to disrupt our warped national memory that reduces Black women to controlling images. After studying *Incidents*, we must continue to practice Jacobs's radical love and active opposition to ongoing attacks on Black women's reproductive rights. Only by understanding the connections between the past and present, and Jacobs's timeless lessons about resistance and justice, can we carry on her hopeful vision of demanding a better world for the generation to come.

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## **VITA**

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