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**“both nourished at my grandmother’s breast”:
Eating, Feeding, and the Subverted Female Ideal in Jacobs’
*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl***

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A Thesis

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In

The Department of English

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Approved by:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mary M. Balkun", written above a horizontal line.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Wargacki", written above a horizontal line.

Dr. John Wargacki, Second Reader

In the very first chapter of her slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs writes:

Such were the unusually fortunate circumstances of my early childhood. When I was six years old, my mother died; and then, for the first time, I learned, by the talk around me, that I was a slave. My mother's mistress was the daughter of my grandmother's mistress. She was the foster sister of my mother; they were both nourished at my grandmother's breast. In fact, my mother had been weaned at three months old, that the babe of the mistress might obtain sufficient food. (9)

Jacobs begins her narrative with a chapter on her childhood, a time before she understood her unfortunate position in society—her status as a slave. She describes the role of her mother's death in this revelation, and recounts her mother's experience in a slaveholding household as a slave woman. Thus, very early in her narrative, Jacobs introduces one significant duty of the household slave woman—the expectation and responsibility to nourish her mistress' child over her own. This description not only depicts one aspect of the female slave role but also exemplifies the connection between the domestic expectations for women, particularly slave women, and instances of eating and feeding (or lack thereof) in the narrative. It is, essentially, through the act of nourishing the child that is not her own, with food made available through the maternal functions of her body, that “Linda's” grandmother represents a subversion of the nineteenth-century domestic ideal with its inherent relationship to food and its preparation and consumption.

Published in 1861 under the pseudonym Linda Brent, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents* was initially embraced by abolitionists in order to further the efforts of the anti-slavery movement. The authenticity of Jacobs' narrative, however, was doubted by its readers soon after publication,

and this unofficially established the work as a fiction rather than an autobiography. American abolitionist, woman's right activist, and author Lydia Maria Child provided a preface to the novel, vouching for the authenticity of the work and of "Brent's" experiences, whose acquaintance and honesty she asserted, writing "The author of the following autobiography is personally known to me...I have not added anything to the incidents, or changed the import of her very pertinent remarks" (4). Jacobs' work remained overlooked until scholar Jean Yellin, in the early 1980s, delved deeper into the evidence concerning Jacobs' life and established the link between Linda Brent's slave narrative and Jacobs' experiences, also confirming Jacobs' authorship of the work.

Following Yellin's research, numerous scholars have further critically explored the text. Joanne Braxton and Frances Smith Foster shed light on the depiction of strong women characters and the unique, female characteristics of Linda Brent's experiences, which they argue make her narrative more compelling than others (Bomarito and Whitaker 135). Furthermore, Jacobs' work is often compared to and discussed alongside Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* due to the distinctions between the male and female slave experience. In recent years, discussions regarding the dual identity of the author and the protagonist as well as the relationship between Jacobs and the narrative's intended readership have burgeoned (Bomarito and Whitaker 135). One of the elements that distinguishes Jacobs' narrative from other slave narratives is the fact that it is relayed through the female voice. Undoubtedly, the female slave experience itself and Jacobs' gender affected the overall narrative and made it distinct in terms of which aspects of slavery are emphasized. The expectations of women during the time in which the narrative was published were inherently intertwined with the Cult of Domesticity and various critics have analyzed the ways in which the narrative portrays this

concept. For example, Venetria Patton, after studying Jacobs' narrative alongside Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*, emphasizes the warped idea of purity under the institution of slavery, since black female slaves were unable to exert control over their own bodies. Several critics have noted the way in Jacobs' narrative incorporates the nineteenth-century ideal of True Womanhood and its inaccessibility to the black female slave. However, the elements of True Womanhood as they relate to Mrs. Flint and Aunt Martha have not been focused on to the extent that critics have analyzed Linda Brent's character and her representation of womanhood. Moreover, although often overlooked, the acts of feeding and eating in the text, and the instances in which these acts of food consumption are distorted play a major role in the overall perversion of both the True Womanhood paradigm and the Cult of Domesticity, and render the concepts themselves paradoxical.

In *Incidents*, Jacobs provides a compelling account of the female slave experience. Her narrative serves as a significant text within the slave narrative genre because it sheds light on the unique trials faced by female slaves. In their analysis of Jacobs' life and work, Jessica Bomarito and Russel Whitaker write, "The book provides a harrowing description of Jacobs's life of bondage, from her birth into slavery in North Carolina to her escape and liberation in New York City" (134). Linda Brent's experiences as a slave consist of countless instances of sexual harassment by her slave-master, which threaten her sense of morality and her sexual purity. In addition, she also recounts the tribulations of motherhood, particularly within the structures of slavery.

Though her experiences can be seen as demonstrating her efforts to conform to the nineteenth-century ideals of womanhood, Jacobs is unable to do so. The true embodiment of these ideals was inaccessible to Jacobs, as a black female slave, and the recounting of her

experiences as a slave through the character of Brent ultimately subverts the ideals of True Womanhood. The narrative also exemplifies a perversion of the ideals of womanhood and the connotations of motherhood due to the way the institution of slavery forced the separation of Linda's family and fueled her desire to use her body and sexuality as a means of defiance. Her narrative emphasizes both the objectification of the black female body and the demonization of the white, idealized female figure. The significant female characters within the narrative, Brent, Aunt Martha (Linda's grandmother), and Mrs. Flint, illustrate the destabilization of the ideals of True Womanhood, particularly through the ideal of domesticity, which refers primarily to the woman's role as nurturer and nourisher of her family.

This idea of food as a means of nurturing and caring is subverted in Jacobs' narrative through the grotesque or skewed representations and descriptions of food and eating in the narrative. The act of feeding and eating is inherently intertwined with the Cult of Domesticity, in that the ideal woman's role is to provide nourishment and care through food. The kitchen in the household becomes a direct representation of this expected "virtue," and the ideas of affection and warmth often associated with the household's kitchen in nineteenth-century society are directly related to the fact that it is the space in which the production of sustenance takes place. In *From Communism to Cannibalism*, Maggie Kilgour describes the significance of food consumption and the way in which this relates to individual and cultural identity. She writes, "'Man' is fed 'at the world's expense'; the relation between the two terms is not one of reciprocity but one of total opposition, as the eater is not himself in turn eaten but secures his own identity by absorbing the world outside himself" (6). As Kilgour stresses, the act of consuming food is a way in which one incorporates an outside object or concept within their own bodies, thus forming a connection between one's inner self and the external world. Kilgour's

ideas can be applied to Jacobs' narrative, due to the emphasis placed on the uses of the mouth throughout the text, specifically through the instances of feeding and eating. The instances of food, feeding, eating, and starving demonstrate the extent to which the characters in the narrative use food to either exert or deny power. Food becomes a tool that goes beyond a mere biological necessity—it becomes a means used for leveraging and manipulation. Striving to maintain an efficient household or to attempt to uphold ideals of womanhood as food preparer and provider is skewed under the slave condition, due to the way in which food is treated, utilized, and perceived in slave culture. The very absence of food in slave life further demonstrates the distorted relationship between the embodiment of domestic ideals and slave culture.

The representation of True Womanhood is not only inaccessible to the black woman in the narrative, particularly the enslaved woman, but its true representation and its *actual* embodiment are inaccessible to the white woman in a culture of slavery as well. She cannot truly embody what it means to be the ideal woman, because her “maintenance” of the household is essentially dependent on the slave women to actually carry out the duties tied to the Cult of True Womanhood. Jacobs' representations of the significant female characters in the narrative comment on the intrinsic paradox that is the Cult of Domesticity in the context of slavery—that the enslaved woman, even if she embodies the ideals of womanhood, does not have access to the domestic ideal, while the white mistress can only appear to uphold these virtues, which turns out to be only a façade.

The Subversive Domestic Ideal

The Cult of Domesticity or Cult of True Womanhood burgeoned in nineteenth-century Great Britain and the United States and essentially established the rules by which a woman should live. It served as a code of ethics, specifically affecting white women who were expected

to epitomize particular ideals in order to be deemed as “true” women. In “The Cult of True Womanhood,” Barbara Welter writes, “The attribute of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman” (152). These four “cardinal virtues” had to be assumed by women who sought to be perceived as efficient and ideal members of their households and of society. The piety in a woman would guarantee religious training of her offspring and reinforce her position in society, in particular her fitness to raise children. Her purity was essential for her feminine integrity. Her virginity essentially validated whether she was worthy to be taken as a wife. Moreover, submissiveness, the third element of the Cult of True Womanhood, reinforced her “inferiority” to those who were considered superior in the nineteenth century—namely, men. Lastly, a woman was expected to exemplify domesticity in terms of her roles as wife, mother, and housekeeper, which constricted her to her private sphere, and placed her in opposition to the male’s public sphere. In this respect, she would serve as caregiver, and nurturer to her children and husband.

In “Converting Passive Womanhood to Active Sisterhood,” Jennifer Larson further develops the prevalence and significance of domestic virtues in this nineteenth-century ideal:

The influence of the cult is indeed unmistakable. It represented one of the most oppressive power structures in literature and culture...when examining the cult of True Womanhood, we should ‘consider two aspects of its cultural effects: it was dominant, in the sense of being the most subscribed-to convention governing female behavior, but it was also clearly recognizable as a dominating image, describing the parameters with which women were measured and declared to be, or not to be, women.’ (739)

The ideals of true womanhood undoubtedly affected the characters in Jacobs' narrative, in that they were engrained in the fabric of society. The concept was pervasive throughout American culture in the nineteenth century and had a significant impact on all members, including men, because of the way it defined the perception and expectations of women by their counterparts. Welter notes, "If anyone, male or female, dared to tamper with the complex of virtues which made up True Womanhood, he was damned immediately as an enemy of God, of civilization and of the Republic. It was a fearful obligation, a solemn responsibility, which the nineteenth century American woman had—to uphold the pillars of the temple with her frail white hand" (152). Welter stresses just how embedded this concept was and the ways in which the cult of True Womanhood was intertwined with the threads of every-day American social life. The idea permeated all aspects of civilization, including religion, education, and societal roles in relation to gender. However, the society influenced by these ideals had clear boundaries. For example, Welter points out the whiteness of the woman's hand—the whiteness that had granted her access to these ideals and positions within society. The colored, coarse hands of the black female slave, who carried out constant labor within the domestic sphere and occasionally on the plantations, contrasted with the "frail white hand" referred to by Welter. As Welter points out with this description, the accessibility of the ideals of True Womanhood was not based solely upon gender, but more significantly upon social status and perception.

One of the most significant female characters in Jacobs' narrative is Mrs. Flint, Linda's mistress, who illustrates the subversion of the concept of True Womanhood in terms of the white woman within a slave culture. As a white, slave-master's wife, Mrs. Flint is expected to exemplify the essential virtues of womanhood, and she appears to do so on the surface. However, Mrs. Flint's representations of the model's said characteristics exemplifies the impossibility of

the ideals of True Womanhood within the structures of slavery. According to social expectations and the standards of domesticity, Mrs. Flint should have been angelic, gracious, and amiable. However, Jacob fundamentally demonizes Mrs. Flint, highlighting the gap between how she should be according to the female ideal and how she truly is as a result of slavery.

For example, Mrs. Flint, on the surface, demonstrates piety through her involvement with the church. One of the most significant rituals of the Christian Mass consists of feeding and eating the Eucharist, and thus, piety becomes inherently connected to the white woman's ability to consume the religion and the body of Christ. The consumption of the Eucharist and the carrying out of this ritual is intended to rejuvenate the relationship between the individual and his/her Christian faith. However, Mrs. Flint does not effectively embody this Christian rejuvenation, even after partaking in this consumption. Jacobs writes, "She was a member of the church; but partaking of the Lord's Supper did not seem to put her in a Christian frame of mind. If dinner was not served at the exact time on that particular Sunday, she would station herself in the kitchen, and wait till it was dished, and then spit in all the kettles and pans that had been used for cooking" (14). Although she remains a member of the Church, primarily for appearances, Mrs. Flint's demonic behavior moves her further away from the pious ideals of True Womanhood. She not only fails to demonstrate the "Christian frame of mind" that is expected after communion, but she also goes even as far as to embody malevolence after the sacred ritual. In this section of the narrative, her skewed portrayal of the ideal of piety is directly related to her inability to nurture as well, particularly in terms of food. Mrs. Flint "station[s] herself in the kitchen"—the epitome of the woman's domain, the space in which food is fed and eaten, and the ultimate representation of the inherent relationship between domesticity and food. However, rather than feed the food to her family and leave the remainders for the slaves, Mrs. Flint spits

into the tools used for cooking, purposely spoiling any food left in the pots and pans, in order to avoid having the slaves consume any food at all.

The house slaves often depended upon the unwanted leftovers of the household meals in order to supplement the very small portions of sustenance they received each day, if any sustenance at all. Jacobs writes “Little attention was paid to the slaves’ meals in Dr. Flint’s house. If they could catch a bit of food while it was going, well and good” (13). Linda points out the meagerness of the slaves’ meals in the household, demonstrating that it was not only common for the slaves to be tortured through intentional starvation, but also for their appetites to be simply ignored. Moreover, Jacobs explains Mrs. Flint’s act of spitting in the pots and pans: “She did this to prevent the cook and her children from eking out their meagre fare with the remains of the gravy and other scrapings. The slaves could get nothing to eat except what she chose to give them” (14). Thus, Mrs. Flint does not only demonstrate her ill-intentions and malevolence when she engages in her “spitting” ritual, but she actually denies the slaves the very food—these meager leftovers—that they so often depended on to actually survive. Here, Mrs. Flint denies the slaves’ consumption, and thus, literally takes food from their mouths. Instead of sustaining the slaves—who are, in fact, members of the household—she starves them. In doing so, she does the exact opposite of what is expected of her, and thus rejects her role as nurturer in the household.

This act of defiling food or tools used for cooking, especially in the space of the kitchen, essentially undermines the role Mrs. Flint is supposed to embody. Her portrayal (or lack thereof) of domestic ideals directly relates to her association with slavery (as a mistress in a slaveholding household), and thus, she highlights the way in which the institution of slavery itself subverts what it means to embody “True Womanhood.” Ironically, under the laws of coverture, Mrs. Flint

herself (like the slaves of the household) is “owned” by her husband. In this way, she is unable to actually have any property of her own, particularly, slaves, and thus, also becomes property. Mrs. Flint’s position as property and her inability to properly uphold the domestic ideal reveal not only the inherent issues with domesticity under the context of slavery, but also the problematic nature of the True Womanhood ideal for all women.

Later in the narrative, in another illusion to her lack of true Christian piety, Jacobs describes Mrs. Flint’s reaction to the news of William’s desertion of Mr. Sands as her “usual manifestations” of Christian sensitivity. Mrs. Flint comments, "I'm glad of it. I hope he'll never get him again. I like to see people paid back in their own coin. I reckon Linda's children will have to pay for it. I should be glad to see them in the speculator's hands again, for I'm tired of seeing those little niggers march about the streets” (113). Jacobs points out Mrs. Flint’s hypocrisy. Although she masks her sentiments under the veil of “justice,” Mrs. Flint is actually demonstrating her ill-intentions towards William. Her statement is not in the vein of Christianity at all, and this highlights the malevolence underlying her expressions of “Christian” feeling.

In addition to her hypocritical demonstration of piety, Mrs. Flint’s lack of genuine submissiveness is also demonstrated throughout the text. Although Mrs. Flint exemplifies apparent submissiveness in that she does not confront or approach her husband regarding his behavior towards Linda, she releases that aggression against Linda and attempts to manipulate the situation through her as well. Jacobs writes, “I had entered my sixteenth year, and every day it became more apparent that my presence was intolerable to Mrs. Flint... [Dr. Flint] would not allow any body else to punish me. In that respect, she was never satisfied; but, in her angry moods, no terms were too vile for her to bestow upon me” (30). Here, Jacobs highlights Mrs. Flint’s treatment of Linda as a result of her jealousy and rage. Due to her inability to confront her

husband about his behavior, Mrs. Flint forces Linda to provide information for her regarding their potential relationship; she says to Linda, "If you have deceived me, beware! Now take this stool, sit down, look me directly in the face, and tell me all that has passed between your master and you" (31). In the many instances where Mrs. Flint manipulates or acts upon her anger towards Linda, she behaves in a way that directly opposes the grace and cool temperament inherently tied to the ideal woman. Even more so, in releasing her aggression regarding her husband, as opposed to internalizing or accepting her circumstances, she inadvertently undermines his complete control. Due to her efforts to manipulate the circumstances in which her husband has placed each of them, Mrs. Flint, in a passive-aggressive manner, misrepresents her supposed submission to her husband's will. Her aggression further suggests the perversion of female submissiveness due to the way in which she manipulates her circumstances and finds another way to obtain the information that is withheld by her husband. Interestingly, Dr. Flint's superiority over Mrs. Flint is a direct result of the Cult of True Womanhood; thus, the ideal itself simultaneously confirms her submissiveness and forces her to subvert it. Moreover, Mrs. Flint is able to defy the ideal of submissiveness primarily because of her husband's sexual relations with their household slaves. It is the very ownership of these slaves that causes a disruption (Dr. Flint's affairs) in the marriage of the Flints, and it is this interference in their marriage that gives Mrs. Flint the license to act against the ideal model of womanhood.

Mrs. Flint's attempts to manipulate Dr. Flint, in her effort to extract a confession regarding his behavior, further develops the distorted submissiveness she exemplifies. Jacobs writes that Mrs. Flint "grew weary of her vigils; they did not prove satisfactory. She changed her tactics. She now tried the trick of accusing my master of crime, in my presence, and gave my name as the author of the accusation" (31). Jacobs' representation of Mrs. Flint as an evil woman

further establishes the contradiction between the assumed loveliness and grace of the traditional white woman who epitomizes the ideals of True Womanhood, and the actual behaviors and malevolence of a malicious slave owner. In “The Images of White Womanhood,” Shahila Zafar asserts, “Jacobs draws a nearly satanic figure in her description of a mistress who instead of comforting her poor slave, impregnated by her lusty husband, is blinded by jealousy and anger” (3). Here, Zafar comments on the demonic representation of a mistress in the narrative who rejoices in the death of her slave’s mixed child. Zafar points out the way in which the mistress’ jealousy fuels her viciousness towards her slave. Zafar’s description of this demonic mistress can also be applied to Mrs. Flint. Similarly, Mrs. Flint’s suppressed anger regarding her husband’s desire for Linda produces her demon-like qualities. Zafar emphasizes the opposite “route” that a mistress—in this case, Mrs. Flint—not only could have taken under the circumstances, but the route that she should have taken because of the structures set in place regarding a woman’s expected behavior. Jacobs’ portrayal of Mrs. Flint serves as the ultimate perversion of the ideals of True Womanhood.

Mrs. Flint also represents the perversion of domesticity, more specifically, in her failure to serve as nurturer and care-giver within her private sphere. Mrs. Flint’s dereliction of her household duties is depicted through Jacobs’ assertions regarding Mrs. Flint’s shortage of energy. Jacob emphasizes this deficiency alongside her malevolence, writing “Mrs. Flint... was totally deficient in energy. She had not strength to superintend her household affairs; but her nerves were so strong, that she could sit in her easy chair and see a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash” (14). Mrs. Flint, in rejecting her domestic duties, even orders Aunt Nancy to be taken from jail “because Mrs. Flint could not spare her any longer. She was tired of being her own housekeeper. It was quite too fatiguing to order her dinner and

eat it too” (86). Mrs. Flint is consistently nervous and physically unable to keep at any productive task for a significant amount of time. Here, Jacobs emphasizes the way in which it is not merely Mrs. Flint’s vindictive personality that sets her in opposition to the ideal woman, but her physical state as well. She, in all senses of the word, cannot embody what it means to be an ideal woman, as she is not able to keep up with any of her household tasks. In fact, Mrs. Flint represents the paradox of the Cult of Domesticity within the context of slavery. It is, essentially, her slaves who uphold the household and provide nourishment and an efficient domestic space. Mrs. Flint, although expected to uphold the virtues of domesticity, only seemingly does so, since it is actually her female slaves who do the household work.

As established by the ideals of True Womanhood, Mrs. Flint should serve as a nurturing force within her household. One of the most significant tropes related to nurturing from mother to child (as well as from wife to husband) is the preparation and serving of food. As a mother and wife, a woman is expected to prepare meals and feed those in the household, ensuring the healthy well-being of its members. As noted earlier, Mrs. Flint spits in the pots and pans after dinner is served and thereby destabilizes the intimate relationship between care-giving, nurturing, and feeding. In “‘Take, Eat:’ Food Imagery, the Nurturing Ethic, and the Christian Identity,” Linda Naranjo-Huebl discusses this perversion of nurturance by the Flints, stating, “Jacobs similarly focuses on such perverse behavior to show how slavery contradicts the Christian ethos of nurturing. The church-going Flints are known for dietary abuse of their slaves: ‘Mrs. Flint,’ regularly withholds food from household slaves, and ‘Dr. Flint’ brutally punishes his cook when the food does not satisfy his fastidious palate” (598). Naranjo-Huebl notes that one of the most significant types of abuse exhibited by the Flints is that involving the use of food. She points out Mrs. Flint’s tendency to deny food to her slaves, or in other words, to enable their starvation.

Additionally, Naranjo-Huebl also points out the way in which Dr. Flint also punishes if his own food is not prepared to his liking. For example, Jacob describes Dr. Flint's role within the domestic sphere. She writes,

Dr. Flint was an epicure. The cook never sent a dinner to his table without fear and trembling; for if there happened to be a dish not to his liking, he would either order her to be whipped, or compel her to eat every mouthful of it in his presence. The poor, hungry creature might not have objected to eating it; but she did object to having her master cram it down her throat till she choked. (14)

Here, Jacobs' description of Dr. Flint as an "epicure" immediately establishes his relationship to the act of feeding and consuming food in the narrative. In fact, this relationship is so significant that the cook, preparer of food in the household, trembles with fear at the very thought of providing his food. His punishment of the slave does not merely involve a whipping, but includes force-feeding the slave the very dish he refuses to consume himself. The fact that the cook suffers more anxiety regarding Dr. Flint's opinion (as opposed to Mrs. Flint's) of the household food and the way in which Dr. Flint participates in this perverse act of feeding places him within the domestic realm—a private sphere that clearly does not belong to him. Dr. Flint's participation in the giving and withholding of food—duties strictly belonging to Mrs. Flint—highlights perversion of his role as a husband and the extent to which the household has become corrupted in terms of the domestic ideal due to slavery. Dr. Flint's abuse of the slaves through food, whether that be the lack of feeding or forcing a slave to eat an assigned food item (or non-edible item in particular circumstances), highlights the subversion of the nurturing ideal through Mrs. Flint, particularly because of the way it stresses her abdication of the domestic role she is supposed to inhabit. Moreover, the Flints' use of food to exert power over their slaves further

demonstrates her inability to embody her expected roles within the domestic sphere, as well as her distorted representation of nurturance.

Of course, the demonized white woman represented by Mrs. Flint is only one aspect of the entire female white community. There were white women whose husbands did not hold slaves, and this very distinction seems to make a significant impact on the character of the white woman.¹ However, as a slaveholding mistress, Mrs. Flint becomes almost “demonic” in her manipulation and malevolence, and the presence of slaves in her household, namely Linda, aggravates this ferocity and fuels her wickedness. Jacobs explains the effects of slavery on whites, writing that, “Slavery is a curse to the whites as well as to the blacks. It makes the white fathers cruel and sensual; the sons violent and licentious; it contaminates the daughters, and makes the wives wretched” (46). Here, Jacobs’ specifically points to the effect of slavery on all members of a white, slaveholding household. The representation of Mrs. Flint in the narrative clearly falls under the wretched wives Jacobs’ describes. Although Jacobs does not convey any sense of compassion in her portrayal of Mrs. Flint, and although readers do not get a “before picture” of Mrs. Flint, it is still clear that the institution of slavery itself ultimately compromises Mrs. Flint’s ability to embody True Womanhood.

Unlike Mrs. Flint, Aunt Martha, Linda’s grandmother, represents a kind of domestic ideal for black women. Moreover, she upholds the ideals of True Womanhood due to her nurturing personality and her ability to “feed” the town with her baked goods. Jacob explains that, “She was much praised for her cooking; and her nice crackers became so famous in the neighborhood that many people were desirous of obtaining them” (9). Thus, Aunt Martha becomes the ideal representation for the domestic woman who is able to nurture, not just her grandchildren but an entire town, through food. Moreover, the most significant element of True Womanhood that

Aunt Martha exemplifies, however, is piety, and in the text she is the ultimate representation of a “good” Christian woman, even more so than all other characters in the narrative. Jacob explains Aunt Martha’s role in her own well-being, and thus, she becomes a counteractive force to the Flints: “On my various errands I passed my grandmother's house, where there was always something to spare for me... I was indebted to *her* for all my comforts, spiritual or temporal” (13). Linda’s grandmother prepares food for her, and waits for her to pass so as to not have Linda waste too much time before getting back to the Flints’ household. Linda also notes the most significant role Aunt Martha has played in her life, namely, her role in establishing and reinforcing Linda’s spirituality. Aunt Martha represents true generosity and “Christian feeling”—a female role model significantly different from the “Christian feeling” Mrs. Flint.

Aunt Martha’s ultimate representation of Christianity is inherently tied with her expressions of domesticity, another major element of True Womanhood. She is not merely a godly woman because of the validity and genuineness underlying her Christian sentiments, but also and more significantly because she “gives” wholeheartedly and often, and what she is most generous with is food. Naranjo-Huebl comments on the relationship between Christianity, generosity, and Aunt Martha, noting, “Godly women in these sentimental narratives feed everyone, and no one goes hungry who can approach their tables. The food and feeding imagery stresses the dominant themes of motherly nurturing and service as they relate to the psychological concepts of empathy and mutual recognition exemplified in the Christian sacrament of communion” (598). Naranjo-Huebl points out the association between domesticity in terms of feeding and the nurturing element of Christianity. Through Aunt Martha, these two elements of True Womanhood—piety and domesticity—are intrinsically intertwined.

Although she seems to uphold the model of True Womanhood and thus seems also to serve as the representation of the black female ideal, Aunt Martha is not able to actually embody the Cult of Domesticity fully. First, the Cult of Domesticity was inherently limited to the white female community; yet in Jacobs' narrative, it initially appears that Aunt Martha is the only character that comes close enough to truly symbolizing these ideals. However, her association with the ideals of Womanhood is quickly destabilized through a closer analysis of each element.

Aunt Martha is clearly the most positive image of Christianity in the narrative, but there is a distinct division between the Christianity of the black community and the Christianity of the slave-holding whites. Linda describes this division, using the terms "Christianity" and "religion;" she implies that the major difference lies in the significance behind these terms. She asserts that "There is a great difference between Christianity and religion at the south... If a pastor has offspring by a woman not his wife, the church dismisses him, if she is a white woman; but if she is colored, it does not hinder his continuing to be their good shepherd" (64). Here, Linda points to the hypocrisy that is Christianity under the context of slavery. In other words, the institution of slavery enables two very distinct, and even oppositional, forms of Christianity—the true representation and embodiment of Christian ideals (benevolence, generosity, and goodwill) and the façade of Christian ideals with an underlying malevolence. The Christianity of the white slaveholders, then, is perverted and even becomes a justification for the evils of slavery. The paradox here is that the very institution of slavery (and all that it entails) could not possibly be associated with, much less justified by, the true form of Christianity. Nevertheless, the white community, and specifically white slave-holding women, are in this text associated with the hypocritical version of spirituality. This then leads to the distinction between Aunt Martha's form of Christianity and Mrs. Flint's. Since they are based on different standards of what

constitutes Christian behavior, Aunt Martha therefore could not possibly embody the Christianity associated with white womanhood, the female ideal, and the Cult of Domesticity, while Mrs. Flint supposedly does. Ironically, however, Aunt Martha, a prior slave without access to the ideal of True Womanhood, is the ultimate representation of Christianity and is, in fact, the perfect example of true Christian feeling in the narrative.

Aunt Martha also occupies an unusual space in terms of the ideal of female submissiveness. Although she is free, she is still oppressed by the overall system of slavery; her grandchildren and family members (her “lineage” and thus extensions of herself) are unable to relish this freedom (at least not until later in their lives). Moreover, the reality of her position and her lack of true freedom is most accurately represented in the scene in the narrative in which she is almost sold at auction. Her mistress had ensured Aunt Martha’s freedom in her will, and when she passes away, Aunt Martha, and the rest of the townspeople, expect her freedom. Yet, her well-deserved “freedom” is immediately called into question when Dr. Flint threatens her new social status. Linda explains, “My grandmother's mistress had always promised her that, at her death, she should be free; and it was said that in her will she made good the promise. But when the estate was settled, Dr. Flint told the faithful old servant that, under existing circumstances, it was necessary she should be sold” (13). Dr. Flint completely disregards her mistress’ will, and forces her to be “sold” despite the legal document that states otherwise. Aunt Martha, recognizing that the townspeople would not agree with Dr. Flint’s disregard of the will, chooses to be auctioned off in public. Although she is only sold to a woman who buys her in order to guarantee her freedom, the fact that this situation even occurs under the circumstances of presumed “freedom” emphasize how even the concept of freedom is fluid and unstable as long as the institution of slavery exists. The reality of the lack of true freedom maintains her forced

submissiveness, not to a master per se, but to the overarching system of slavery. Nevertheless, the fact that she is not enslaved during the entirety of the narrative does place her in a seemingly awkward position within this society—she cannot inhabit either of the two “usual” roles: white womanhood or the black female enslaved community.

The most significant aspect of Aunt Martha that denies her access to True Womanhood, however, is her age. Purity is absolutely essential to the embodiment of these ideals because True Womanhood revolves most significantly around the woman’s role as mother and producer of children. This then introduces the importance of sexuality and the way that sexuality, fertility, and the ability to remain pure (ironically, a woman must be associated with sexuality in order to be associated with any level of purity) are related to the overall concept of what it means to be a woman. Aunt Martha, as an older woman, is desexualized due to her older age and her inability to bear and produce children. Her lack of fertility at this point in her life essentially strips her of one of the most important elements of womanhood—procreation. The concept of purity, then, can only be associated with the female form and body in relation to presumed sexuality.

Additionally, in relation to her distorted representation of “motherhood,” Aunt Martha lives in a house. Yet it is not a representation of the ideal domestic home because she has no young children to care for and no husband to submit to due to her age and her circumstances. She is not only infertile, but she also keeps a home for no one but herself. In this way, her domestic site is not a true representation of what the domestic sphere should be. Although Aunt Martha initially seems to be set up in the narrative as the ideal representation of the black woman—free, godly, and generous—she is unable to actually be an example of True Womanhood because her circumstances place her in a position to subvert those ideals.

The Cult of True Womanhood is also destabilized in the text through the character of Linda Brent. In the text, Linda makes significant efforts to embody purity. However, due to her position within the structures of slavery, she is forced to pervert this ideal in order to maintain her well-being and the well-being of her children. The most prominent example of this perversion is Linda's sexual relationship with Mr. Sands, which she pursues in order to defy Dr. Flint, and in the hopes that this manipulation would lead to her eventual distancing from him and a brighter future for her imminent children. In "Renovating Domesticity in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," Jennifer Larson writes:

Linda takes Sands as a lover to assert her sexual autonomy. In so doing, she defies the deviant intentions of Dr. Flint, who seeks to create an aberrant domestic space in which she would serve as his concubine. She also sees in the relationship with Sands liberating potential for any children she might bear and thus the potential to keep a least part of the domestic model—motherhood—safe from slavery. (548)

In establishing her sexual autonomy through her relationship with Sands, Linda essentially violates her assumed purity, but does so in order to escape the trials of slavery. In using pregnancy as a tool to attack or deny Dr. Flint's control over her, Linda essentially perverts the ideal connotations associated with motherhood. It becomes a situation with no escape—she either withstands Dr. Flint's sexual advances (and very likely, inevitable rape) or chooses to give up her sexual purity to another man. The option she chooses is the only one that involves choice, and thus it becomes the only "appropriate" solution to her predicament. In consideration of her circumstances, Linda subverts this aspect of the Cult of True Womanhood, although the label itself is inaccessible to her as a result of her enslaved condition.

Linda also exemplifies a subversive depiction of submissiveness. As a slave, especially a female slave, Linda is oppressed by the institution of slavery, and physically oppressed by her slave master. In this sense, she is submissive and demonstrates this quality through her obedience to his orders. However, Linda, through the use of her words, or lack thereof, perverts this ideal of submission to her master by refusing to provide him with the verbal consent he needs in order to engage in sexual acts with her. In "Re-embody the Self: Representations of Rape," Mary Vermillion notes, "Jacobs also uses dialogue to challenge the hegemonic culture's perception of her as mere body. Flint tries to control Brent by whispering foul words into her ear" (132). Jacobs' portrayal of dialogue throughout the text seeks to establish where and in whom power lies. As Dr. Flint attempts to establish his power over Linda through his words, rather than through any actual physical abuse, Linda likewise asserts a sense of her own power by choosing to answer his questions and demands strategically, in a way that ensures his dissatisfaction. Jacobs demonstrates this passive disobedience when she writes: "Then followed talk such as would have made the most shameless blush. He ordered me to stand up before him. I obeyed. 'I command you,' said he, 'to tell me whether the father of your child is white or black.' I hesitated. 'Answer me this instant!' ... 'Do you love him?' said he, in a hissing tone. 'I am thankful that I do not despise him,' I replied" (52). Linda uses both silence and indirect answers to inadvertently undermine Dr. Flint's authority throughout their conversation. Although she obeys his command, and thus remains subservient in this regard, her calculated replies, or lack of replies, to Dr. Flint throughout the text emphasize the manner in which she destabilizes the notion of subservience.

Linda also subverts the aspect of domesticity concerning nurturing and household duties. Due to her slave status, Linda's role is to act as care-taker and nurturer of Emily Flint, her

master's daughter. In preparing food, maintaining the household, and nurturing the child, Linda serves as a representation of the ideal domestic woman. However, the situation is dramatically perverted when taking into consideration the force, bondage, and repressive structure maintaining her position within this household, as well as the fact that the ideals of True Womanhood are technically unavailable to her. Essentially, the concept of True Womanhood serves as a neat set of rules and regulations, almost a formula, to which a woman must adhere in order to be deemed worthy. The Cult of Domesticity, then, seeks to intertwine the morality, worth, and value of a woman to the idea of order. However, the condition of a slave completely denies and rejects this kind of "order," due to the way in which morals, values, and beliefs are consistently encroached upon.

In "Moral Experience in Jacobs' *Incidents*," Sarah Way Sherman highlights the paradoxical situation in which Linda Brent is placed. She writes,

The pseudonymous narrator, Linda Brent, is caught between the brutal, exploitative bonds of slavery and the idealized, altruistic bonds of true womanhood. The first she resists with great spirit and no ambivalence, the other she resists only with great pain and guilt, after deep disillusionment. Both systems denied her a selfhood, neither had words to authorize her choices. (167)

The distinction between the ideal, virtuous figure Linda wishes to epitomize and the character which she is forced to be is evident through Jacobs' constant attempts to reassure the reader. Jacobs' often includes "reminders" for the reader to ensure that they remain aware of the extremities of her situation. These serve as a kind of justification for her actions and demonstrate that she had no better choice at the time. For example, Jacobs' writes, "For years, my master had done his utmost to pollute my mind with foul images, and to destroy the pure principles

inculcated by my grandmother...The influences of slavery...had made me prematurely knowing, concerning the evil ways of the world. I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation” (47). Here, Jacobs’ emphasizes the “pure principles” that have been instilled in her since childhood. Moreover, she points out her “premature” understanding of evil as a result of her captivity under her master’s authority. Her description and choice of words seems to reassert her innocence in all the acts and behaviors carried out through her ordeal. She not only reassures the reader that she understands the depravity associated with some of her decisions but she also points out the “deliberate calculation” with which she carried out these very acts. Through her assertion that her actions were intentionally planned—primarily as a tool or a means to evade a more despicable conditions—Jacobs removes all potential doubts that her actions could have been a result of a lack of morality. Both Jacobs’ rejection of Dr. Flint’s advances through her words as well as her explanations to the reader regarding her situation emphasize the significance of speech (or silence) in relation to power and both depend primarily on the use of the mouth. Interestingly, it is this same orifice that plays the most significant role in the ultimate subversion of the Cult of Domesticity and ideal of True Womanhood in the narrative, primarily through representations of food preparation and consumption.

Food and the Enslaved Condition within the Domestic Sphere

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin analyzes the relationship between the carnivalesque and the grotesque. Bahktin points primarily to the human body to exemplify this connection, and focuses primarily on the apertures of the body, the spaces through which the internal connects to the external world. In the introduction to his work, Bakhtin writes,

The grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is

laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or mouth... The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth, which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, defecation... This is the ever finished, ever creating body, the link in the chain of genetic development, or more correctly speaking, two links shown at the point where they enter into each other.

(16)

The ultimate representation of the grotesque body in Jacobs' narrative is the black body, and even more specifically, the black, female slave body. Here, Bakhtin introduces the grotesque body and its relation to the outside world primarily through this very body's grotesque "openings." In Jacobs' narrative, these bodies (those of the slaves) maintain their state of grotesqueness through their interactions with one particular opening in the body: the mouth. Through the various forms of feeding and eating in the narrative, the liminal status of the slaves, primarily that of the female slaves, is consistently reinforced. Jacobs presents a connection between the exertion or denial of power and the treatment of food. Food as a tool is essential to the overall system of slavery, in that it becomes the element through which positions of authority are consistently reaffirmed. It is also the primary way in which the Cult of Domesticity and True Womanhood are undermined in Jacobs' narrative.

The important relationship between food, cookery, and domesticity is best exemplified through the popularization of cookbooks in nineteenth-century America. In *"Just a Housewife": The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America*, Glenna Matthews explores the burgeoning of cookbooks in this period and the role they played in the domestic sphere. She writes, "Available

evidence indicates that a greater number of women outside the elite class participated in producing more elaborate concoctions—whether in the kitchen or with a needle—than ever before. Not surprisingly, given the technological changes, the economic growth and the increasing urbanization, there was a proliferation of cookbooks in this period” (13). The “elaborate concoctions” described by Matthews were either new, interesting food dishes, or intricate pieces of clothing that resulted from experience in needlework. In “The Science of Cookery in Nineteenth-Century Britain,” Caroline Lieffers discusses the popularization of cookbooks in Britain and connects this to the rising popularity of science. She writes, “Whether women relied on these books or not, their popularity proclaims British society’s conviction in their usefulness and a changing approach to household work. A cookbook, a printed reference guide, implies order, rationalization, and demystification” (938). Although she analyzes British society in particular, the very same can be said of American society during this period. Not only does the rise in cookbooks point to the “changing approach” mentioned by Lieffers, but it also establishes a kind of order through specific cooking rules. The cookbook, then, became more than a guide to recipes and tips for baking; it became the ultimate representation of the orderly “marriage” between food and domesticity, and their rising popularity in the nineteenth century only further emphasizes the significance of the relationship between the two.

Simultaneously, the kitchen became more than a site of production for the “basics,” it became a place of experimentation, where the woman was able to take her work and improve it—to increase her expertise primarily in the preparation of dishes—so that she might eventually pass this knowledge down to her daughters, and so on and so forth. In *Cradle of the Middle Class*, Mary Ryan discusses the various spheres of the middle class and describes the expectations and day-to-day work of the domestic woman. She examines the shift in the

significance of cookery, explaining that by the 1850s, “the universal function of cooking... had become something more than simply preparing food for human consumption. Even publications...contained increasingly elaborate recipes...all recommended as symbols of domesticity” (198). Here, Ryan expresses the “seriousness” that infused cookery in the nineteenth-century. Inevitably, as cookbooks became popularized and more integral to the concept of food production within the home, feeding and eating took on an even deeper level of importance, particularly because of their strong association to the ideals of womanhood.

Kilgour’s ideas regarding the relationship between consumption and identity in *From Communion to Cannibalism* relate to Jacobs’ descriptions of slave culture in a variety of ways. What is particularly interesting about the way Jacobs’ narrative treats food is that it shows the distinct ways in which food played a role in the overall institution of slavery. Although these representations all demonstrate the role of food in society, they differ in terms of how they subvert, undermine, or pervert the ideal of domesticity. In the introduction to *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century*, Kyla Wazana Tompkins explores the connection between race, the slave body, and the apertures of the body, particularly, the mouth. She writes, “I do not...offer a single model through which to understand the mouth in nineteenth-century U.S. literature and culture. At times the mouth reveals vulnerability; at other times it is a sign of aggression. Some mouths...are forced open; other mouths speak, eat...” (5). Tompkins’ various descriptions of the roles played by the mouth can also be applied to the way in which Jacobs’ presents feeding and eating. Tompkins’ description of the mouth as a site of a slave’s vulnerability can be connected to the way in which the slaves’ mouths in Jacobs’ narrative are often devoid of food or force-fed inedible substances. At other moments, the “mouth” of the white slave-holding community and the “mouth” of the overall system of slavery seems to feed

upon the black, slave body, engorging itself off of the labor and black bodies, and thus, these “mouths” reaffirm the institution of slavery repeatedly throughout the narrative.

The most expected or obvious of these representations of food, due to its inherent association with slavery, is the concept of starvation. Jacobs describes the predicament of young female slaves as well as the use of starvation as a tool for manipulation: “When she is fourteen or fifteen, her owner, or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents. If these fail to accomplish their purpose, she is whipped or starved into submission to their will” (45). Here, she highlights not only the way in which masters deny their slaves food consumption in the text, but also how starvation served as a punishment for a young female slave when she refused to compromise her purity. Ironically, the denial of food for the female slave reinforced her master’s “consumptive urges” to sexually consume her (Woodward 129). Clearly, starvation is used by masters in the narrative not only to manipulate or punish his slaves, but also to reinforce their despicable state in society. Mrs. Flint also enforces a sort of starvation over her household slaves when she spits into the pots and pans in the kitchen, after the meal has been set for the white family. In stripping the slaves of the meager left-overs that were, essentially, designated to them, she literally takes this food out of their mouths, and thus starves them in this way.

Furthermore, Jacobs describes the slave experience of being force-fed by the master, highlighting the incident in which Dr. Flint forces a slave to eat dog vomit. She writes “[The dog] refused to eat... the froth flowed from his mouth into the basin... When Dr. Flint came in, he said the mush had not been well cooked, and that was the reason the animal would not eat it. He sent for the cook, and compelled her to eat it. He thought that the woman's stomach was stronger than the dog's; but her sufferings afterwards proved that he was mistaken” (14). Here,

Dr. Flint forces the cook to consume food produced for the dog of the household; when the dog vomits into the basin, she is forced to consume both the inedible food and the dog's waste. This instance of force-feeding is the ultimate perversion of food as sustenance; here, food becomes a symbol and a means of torture. In this way and in the context of slavery, food becomes exactly what it is not supposed to be—a representation of cruelty. Through force-feeding, Dr. Flint takes complete control over what the slave is allowed to consume as well as how much of it the slave must consume. In asserting their power over what the slaves can, must, or cannot eat, the white slaveholders establish their control over the bodily consumption of their slaves, and thus emphasize their exertion of power over them.

Food is also utilized in Jacobs' narrative as a means to taunt or manipulate the slaves, as well as a tool to reinforce differences. It not only matters the amount that one eats when considering his/her position in society, but also what is eaten. For example, the slaves consumed only certain kinds of food, and were mostly limited to leftovers. Nevertheless, the most significant way that food is subverted in Jacobs' narrative is through the representation of the black enslaved body as a source of food in and of itself. In the context of slavery, the enslaved body literally and metaphorically becomes food—food on which the white slaveholding community and the overall system of slavery consistently feeds upon.² Vincent Woodward, in *The Delectable Negro*, writes that “the slave himself [becomes] “slabs of meat” and he points out “the consumptive urges of whites upon the slaves” (7). The physical, emotional, mental toll that slavery itself places upon the slave body is the means by which the system is consistently “fed” (7). In this way, then, the inversion of feeding in Jacobs' narrative—that is, the swapping of the “feeder” and the “fed upon”—becomes apparent and further demonstrates the perversion of food overall under the institution of slavery and in relation to domesticity. In addition to Woodward's

discussion of the whites' "consumptive urges" upon the black body, the system of slavery itself literally consumes slaves, in that the institution itself causes their deaths, torture, illnesses, and utter misery.

The slave body not only becomes food metaphorically in Jacobs' narrative, but also literally, as a result of the female slave experience. In addition to her actual labor (household duties and field work), many female slaves were expected to act as wet-nurses for the white children they looked after. This expectation went so far as to deteriorate the bonds between black slave mother and her black child. In the very first example in the narrative, Jacobs' comments "that my mother had been weaned at three months old, that the babe of the mistress might obtain sufficient food" (9). The black female, slave body becomes, then, the substantial form of food in the context of slavery—she upholds the most basic facet of domesticity by feeding both metaphorically (through labor) and literally (through the transfer of her own bodily substance). The transfer of milk from the black slaved woman's breast into the body of the white child blurs the boundaries of physical/social differences. Naranjo-Huebl points out how, "gradually, the incorporation of food facilitates the emerging comprehension of bodily boundaries, and so the feeding experience constitutes the child's first connection and relationship with an other" (599). The other, in this situation, is represented by the female slave body, and thus, the sustenance produced by this very body is then consumed by the white child, muddying the social distinctions between these two bodies. Breastfeeding is the ultimate representation of the unity between womanhood and feeding. The way that the act in and of itself perverts the social boundaries in place (because of the literal consumption of the slave body) emphasizes the way in which it also undermines the overall concept of domesticity in connection with True Womanhood. Moreover, the fact that the white woman does not partake in this act with her own

child strips her of the ultimate connection between mother and child, and thus undermines her as a representation of ideal motherhood.

Jacobs' demonic representation of Mrs. Flint, virtuous portrayal of Aunt Martha, and subversive depiction of Linda Brent all highlight the distorted nature of womanhood within the context of slavery. Each element of the ideal of True Womanhood—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity—is, at first glance, seemingly upheld by these female characters, but a closer analysis of their actions and circumstances reveals the inherent problems in their attempts to either embody or exhibit True Womanhood. Moreover, the clash between the reality of their circumstances and the domestic ideal is most evident through the trope of food. The various methods of food incorporation and consumption throughout the narrative also point to the paradoxical nature and inherent instability of the Cult of Domesticity under the institution of slavery. It is ultimately through the very act of producing food, being fed, and feeding others that the black, female slaved body breaks down boundaries between her own body and that of her mistress. Although the social perceptions of these distinctions remained very much in place, it is the very “porosity” caused by skewed depictions of food consumption that deconstruct and unveil the contradictions inherent in the system of slavery when it is considered in light of the Cult of Domesticity and the ideal of True Womanhood.

¹ Through the character of Mrs. Auld, Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* provides the perfect example of the ideal white woman corrupted by the institution of slavery. After Mrs. Auld becomes a slaveholding mistress, she loses her “heavenly qualities” and becomes a woman with a “tiger-like” disposition. (Douglass 49)

² In his *Narrative*, Douglass personifies the institution of slavery itself, explaining that the system “feast[ed] itself greedily upon [the slaves'] own flesh” (87). In the same way Jacobs' describes the female enslaved body and the way it is literally fed upon, he establishes the way in which slavery feeds upon the male body through labor and exploitation.

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