
‘Pure, unadulterated freedom’: Public and Private Belonging in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

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Abstract

In her 1861 slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs juxtaposes her experience of being a formerly enslaved woman living and working in the Northeast U.S. against her experiences traveling in Britain while working for an American family. In the Northeast, she is constantly reminded that her race makes her a second-class citizen in the eyes of most white Americans. From her struggles to find work, to being forced to ride in segregated railway cars, to her interactions with people on the street, Jacobs tells her readers that she is constantly subject to racism, something she naively thought she had escaped when she fled the South. In contrast, during her months abroad, she reveals that she knows “for the first time . . . pure, unadulterated freedom.” She further tells her readers that “I never saw the slightest symptom of prejudice against color. Indeed, I entirely forgot it, till the time came for [me] to return to America.” With this statement, Jacobs implicitly argues that she felt more accepted and, indeed, more welcomed abroad than in the country of her birth. In this paper, I explore the sense of acceptance and belonging Jacobs seems to have experienced while in Britain, arguing that she never experienced anything similar in the U.S., which was ostensibly her home country. By recounting her time in Britain as well as describing the sense of belonging she felt while there, Jacobs defines belonging in both a personal and a public sense, asserting that she felt she belonged with her friends and family but she felt the country of her birth—and the one she was working to improve—denied her any sense of national belonging. She, thus, considers how a person such as herself can resolve this conflict, asking whether one can belong to a family without also belonging to the country in which that family resides. This paper, then, considers how Jacobs defines belonging in both a personal and a public sense, contending that for Jacobs, and by extension many African American women of this time period, the two senses cannot be reconciled.

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