Double-Voiced Ethos and Motivation: Signifyin(g) in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents*

Given the controversy that surrounded the authentication of Harriet Jacobs’s narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*—Did the events described actually take place? Did Jacobs, and not her editor Lydia Maria Child, actually write it?—it seems unremarkable to discuss the importance of ethos to the text itself. After all, Jacobs was a black woman, writing around the time of the American Civil War about the experiences of black women in slavery, whose narrative follows many of the conventions of a sentimental novel. Of course establishing good ethos was of central importance to her work! However, one aspect that has been largely unremarked upon in critical readings of Jacobs and *Incidents* that discuss ethos, is that Jacobs uses Signification to establish and maintain good ethos throughout her narrative with both white and black readers. Furthermore, she uses the same tropes of Signification to motivate these audiences to different actions. In this essay, I will demonstrate that Jacobs Signifies strategically throughout *Incidents* to accomplish three goals: first, to establish ethos; second, to maintain her own identity and integrity in the face of having to take pains to accommodate a white readership; and third, to effect change and motivate her readers (both white and black) to action.

*Signifyin(g) in the African-American Tradition*

In his seminal work on African-American literary theory *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes that much of the African-American literary tradition “can be read as successive attempts to create a new narrative space for representing the recurring referent of Afro-American literature, the so-called Black Experience” (111). One means by which this new narrative space is created, Gates argues, is through Signifyin(g), which cunningly subverts the traditional narratives of the dominant culture. Gates explains that Signifyin(g) “is black double-
voicedness; because it always entails formal revision and an intertextual relation … Repetition, with a signal difference, is fundamental to the nature of Signifyin(g)” (51). Thus, Signification makes use of the dominant discourse in order to revise it to take the experience of African-Americans into account. For this reason, African-American texts are by nature double-voiced: they arise from Western culture, but incorporate Black lived experience so as to alter the standard narrative that relegates people of color to the margins.

Gates uses the titular Signifying Monkey as the symbol for Signifyin(g) and textual revision in the African-American tradition. The Signifying Monkey is a trickster figure that originates in oral fable-poetry. The poems always involve a monkey who deceives a lion and an elephant to demonstrate his superior cleverness. Gates writes that the Monkey’s Signification in these tales “functions to address an imbalance of power, to clear a space, rhetorically. To achieve occupancy in this desired space, the Monkey rewrites the received order by exploiting the Lion’s hubris and his inability to read the figurative other than as the literal” (124). The same is true of Signifyin(g) in African-American literature, where the Lion and Elephant are stand-ins for the dominant modes of narrative discourse. Thus, by successfully Signifyin(g), African-American writers work to correct an imbalance of power and to clear a rhetorical space for themselves. I will now discuss how Harriet Jacobs in particular uses Signification in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* to address both white and black readers simultaneously.

**Signifyin(g) Ethos**

In “Black Women Writers and the Trouble with Ethos,” Coretta Pittman notes that “in the history of race relations in America, black Americans’ ethos ranks low among other racial and ethnic groups in the United States … Consequently, assigning black women characteristics
associated with good ethos in a slave and post-slavery society has been problematic” (43).

Pittman argues that the traditional Aristotelian model of ethos breaks down when we attempt to apply it to persons relegated to the margins of society. For example, because slaves did not have the legal right to make deliberate choices about most of their actions, we therefore cannot judge enslaved people by the same standard of ethos that we would a free (white) man.

Pittman argues that Harriet Jacobs formulates an alternative ethos for herself in *Incidents*, born from the inability to maintain a ‘pure’ and virginal state as a slave: “Using good sense and practical wisdom to assert a respectable ethos, Jacobs revealed that sexual impropriety and physical enslavement were dishonorable practices imposed on black women and that their responses to the oppressive conditions precipitated by enslavement reveal moral rather than immoral character” (52). Jacobs’s narrator Linda does not possess even a basic freedom over her own body, a fact of which Dr. Flint constantly reminds her: “He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things” (Jacobs 34). Because of this, the choice that Linda makes to have an affair with Mr. Sands is not a true choice. Her direct address to the reader on this matter serves to maintain the alternative ethos she has formed: “Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom…Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others” (65-66).

Virtuousness was a value that Jacobs’s audience of Northern white women surely held. At points like this in the narrative, where Linda makes a choice that would be judged harshly by the standards of society at that time, Sally Gomaa argues that Jacobs guides the reader’s opinion by establishing grounds for identification with the reader that emphasize both her otherness and sameness. In the above-quoted passage, the reader is encouraged to pity Linda because she has
tried to maintain her virtuousness, but the reader must also pardon her because Linda’s 
experience of the world is so different from that of a free white woman, who would have the 
ability to exert much more control over her own person (Gomaa 374).

In the case of Linda and Mr. Sands, Jacobs Signifies ethos by revising the existing 
standard for it to reflect more accurately the experiences of enslaved African-American women. 
Typically, a black woman would not have been able to have a sexual relationship with a white 
man that resulted in two children and still considered virtuous. But because Jacobs repeats and 
revises the trope of virtue, she is able to demonstrate successfully the necessity of an alternative 
standard of virtue for enslaved women (and one that readers would likely have a hard time 
finding fault with).

Linda also Signifies with Dr. Flint regarding virtue, which further maintains her 
credibility with readers. When Flint confronts her about her desire to marry a free black man 
with whom she has fallen in love, he comments that he thought she was “above the insults of 
such puppies” (Jacobs 47). To this, Linda repeats and revises her master’s own words, 
Signifyin(g) so that the reader may better understand her experience: “If he is a puppy I am a 
puppy, for we are both of the negro race. It is right and honorable for us to love each other. The 
man you call a puppy never insulted me, sir; and he would not love me if he did not believe me 
to be a virtuous woman” (47). Particular emphasis is placed on Linda’s virtuousness here 
because, again, this is a value that female readers will identify with. Furthermore, her mention of 
virtuousness highlights Flint’s most dishonorable actions toward her, heightening Linda’s 
credibility as someone willing to remain strong in the face of adversity.

*Signifyin(g) Identity*
Jacobs states in the preface to *Incidents* that she has not written about her experiences in order to attract attention to herself or to generate sympathy. The primary motivating factor behind her narrative, she writes, is “to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two million women [in] the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse” (5). In order to elicit the reaction she desires from people who possess the power to advance the abolitionist cause, Jacobs must make certain rhetorical choices to accommodate a white readership. I will discuss two of the ways in which Jacobs uses Signification to do this—first, by sometimes feigning sympathy for undeserving white people, and second, by revising the larger genre of the sentimental novel to suit her purpose.

Mrs. Flint occupies a somewhat villainous role in Jacobs’s narrative. To be sure, she is not at the same level of villainy as Dr. Flint, but she is also neither friend nor help to Linda, and makes life harder for Jacobs’s protagonist because she is jealous of her. Jacobs writes that Mrs. Flint “pitied herself as a martyr; but she was incapable of feeling for the condition of shame and misery in which her unfortunate, helpless slave was placed” (40-41). In spite of this condemnation of Mrs. Flint’s character, Linda goes on to say that she “could not blame her” (41) and even that she “pitied Mrs. Flint” (42). I would argue that this sympathy is a feigned one, and that Jacobs is actually Signifyin(g) here in order to appeal to white readers by identifying with a white woman who has mistreated her. Such an identification is likely to elicit sympathy in white readers for this enslaved black woman whose heart is big enough to pity this undeserving woman.

In similar fashion, Jacobs later writes that “slavery is a curse to the whites as well as to the blacks” (61). She continues, “It makes the white fathers cruel and sensual; the sons violent and licentious; it contaminates the daughters, and makes the wives wretched […] Yet few
slaveholders seem to be aware of the widespread moral ruin occasioned by this wicked system. Their talk is of blighted cotton crops—not of the blight on their children’s souls” (61-62). Like her supposed sympathy for Mrs. Flint, again, I would argue that Jacobs Signifies here by pointing to the moral ruin and religious hypocrisy that run rampant among slaveholders. These people are in no way deserving of anyone’s sympathy, least of all Jacobs. However, by showing sympathy for them rather than anger or a desire for revenge, Jacobs fortifies her ethos with white readers and women in particular, who are more likely to place value on morality and religion. Such readers will therefore probably think well of Jacobs for demonstrating concern for the souls of white people.

Jacobs also Signifies by revising the genre she has chosen to convey her narrative to readers. Farah Jasmine Griffin writes that Jacobs uses the conventions of the sentimental novel to provide readers “a familiar space for coming to understand the conditions of enslaved women” (Jacobs xxi). Indeed, Jacobs’s use of a genre that was familiar to readers was a deliberate rhetorical choice made in order to reach the widest possible audience. Jacobs, however, needed to revise and Signify the sentimental novel so that her narrative would accurately reflect her lived experiences as a slave and African-American woman even while remaining mostly within the conventions of a widely-known and well-received genre. Jacqueline Bacon argues that “the position of African-American rhetors [is] based on a fundamental irony—in order to persuade, they must use language that has been defined by their oppressors and which often does not adequately reflect their concerns” (Bacon 271-272). By Signifyin(g) the sentimental novel, Jacobs clears a space for herself and other African-American women. Not only does she revise the trope of virtuousness that is often found in sentimental novels, but she also revises notions of what it means to be a mother. A woman typically would not be able to (seemingly) abandon her
children and still be considered a caring mother, but Jacobs revises notions of love and motherhood so that the reader sympathizes with Linda when she is forced to shut herself away in a garret, separated from her children. When Linda acts in ways that would seem unbecoming of a mother by societal standards, the reader knows that she does this with a greater end-goal in mind: that of freedom for herself and her children. Similarly, Jacobs calls attention to her own revision of the genre when she writes, “Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way with marriage. I and my children are now free!” (219). Jacobs’s revisions and significations of the sentimental novel expand the genre to adequately reflect experiences that are atypical of it: struggles with virtuousness, maternal abandonment of children, and a de-emphasis on the necessity of marriage to happily end a story.

Signifyin(g) Change

Although Jacobs’s narrative is, by her own admission, written to move Northern white women to act on behalf of their enslaved black sisters in the South, at certain points in the text she seems to address black readers moreso than white readers. She frequently alludes to the fact that the northern ‘Free States’ are really not that much better than the South in terms of how black people are treated. For example, while in Philadelphia, Linda describes her Jim Crow experience on a train: “This was the first chill to my enthusiasm about the Free States. Colored people were allowed to ride in a filthy box, behind white people, at the south, but there they were not required to pay for the privilege. It made me sad to find how the north aped the customs of slavery” (180). Later, Linda recalls another affront to her dignity, this time regarding the difference between how white and colored servants are treated. She says that after she resolved to stand up for her rights, she was treated well, then issues a call to action: “Let every colored
man and woman do this, and eventually we shall cease to be trampled underfoot by our oppressors” (194).

These two examples are indicative of Jacobs’s address to black people as well as whites. Andrea Powell-Wolfe argues that in such instances “Jacobs’s double-voicedness enables her to encode her memoir with clear instruction for her black brethren in the North in such a way that white readers will not find her message obvious or offensive” (Powell-Wolfe 518). This is another way in which Jacobs uses Signifyin(g) in her narrative. Ostensibly her words are addressed to white people and meant to move them to abolitionism on behalf of enslaved African-Americans, but at certain points, Jacobs appears to be speaking to black readers as well, moving them to stand up for their rights, and this double-voiced nature of her text is a hallmark of Signifyin(g).

Conclusions

Gates writes in The Signifying Monkey that “black people have been Signifyin(g), without explicitly calling it that, since slavery, as we might expect” (68). Harriet Jacobs’s Signification in Incidents not only demonstrates the truth of Gates’s statement, but also that Jacobs herself made deliberate rhetorical choices in the writing of her text, and by doing so separated herself from the genres of either slave narrative or sentimental novel by creating something new and reflective of her own experiences. By Signifyin(g) ethos, identity, and change in her text, she helped to create space for both African-Americans and women, defying the dominant narrative of her time. Like the Signifying Monkey, Jacobs also dwelt “at the margins of discourse” (Gates 52), but through shrewdness and resolve managed to rise beyond the margins and open up discourse for countless
other writers, in the process demonstrating the necessity of conscious rhetorical strategies involved in authorship.

Works Cited


