**“This, and Much More, I Thought of””**

**Political Thought without a Future in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl***

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*“And now, reader I come to a period of my unhappy life , which I would gladly forget if I could.”* [[1]](#endnote-1)

Virtually all of Harriet Jacobs’s political thought is contained within one extraordinary book published in 1861, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. But while the location of her political thought is easily identified and delimited, its nature is indefinite and mysterious. *Incidents* tells a powerful story about Jacobs’s years of enslavement, her struggles to secure the freedom of her two children, and her own eventual escape to the North. Her story is marked by political thinking on virtually every page, and for the simple reason that as an enslaved person Jacobs experienced no clear distinction between being, or personhood, and politics. As soon as she learned at about age six that she was legally a slave, she realized that she was caught in a field of unjust power relations. At that early age, she found that life and political struggle were in effect co-extensive. Politics was not something she could opt out of, or stand aside from. She experienced virtually every moment of her existence as political, or politicized, because at any moment she might have to decide how to respond to her masters’ exercise of arbitrary and unjust power. Starting at age six, therefore, she was without doubt a political thinker, someone who had to “calculate” (her word) the political ramifications of her every word and action. And starting at about age thirteen, she became a political thinker in a complementary sense: she began setting political objectives for herself and devising strategies to attain them.

Not surprising, Jacobs’s political thinking has been richly and variously analyzed by several generations of critics, most of them working in the fields of literary and cultural studies. To the degree that is possible within the compass of this essay, I shall give an account of several of the major themes and turns in this body of work. However, my main focus here will be not on Jacobs’s political thinking as such, but on her political thought, which I take to a different – a far more indefinite and far less studied – matter. Of course, there is no hard and fast line separating political thinking from political thought (or its synonym, political theory), but if these latter terms are to have any meaning it depends, surely, on such a distinction, however difficult and imprecise it might be. After all, most of us engage in some degree of political thinking every day. Few of us, however, produce anything that might be justifiably called a political “theory” or a body of political “thought.” What these terms point to is the gaining of a perspective or view – the word “theory” is cognate with “theater” and derives from a Greek word *thea* for seeing, watching, and beholding – that is able to see beyond the particulars of concrete historical and political experience and arrive at generalizable insights and principles about politics and the nature of “the political.”

With these observations in mind, however, we instantly confront two great challenges in giving an account of Jacobs’s political thought. The first is that a great deal of African-American political thinking actually rejects the premise I have just enunciated: issuing from what George Yancy has called “the muck and mire of human existence,”[[2]](#endnote-2) it eschews the claim and at times even dismisses the possibility of a theoretical perspective that is anything but immanent to, or embedded in, the concrete particulars of historical political struggle. It points out that “theory,” as traditionally conceived, presupposes a disembodied intellectual identity standing outside of space and time; it notes that for much of modern history, black Americans and many blacks worldwide were ideologically and forcibly denied such an identity; and, it reveals not just the fact and the means of blacks’ exclusion from the Euro-American project of philosophy and theory, but as well the historical contingency and conceptual incoherence of the idea of theory itself. [[3]](#endnote-3)

Complicating this problem is a second: even if we decided to overlook the anti-theoretical disposition of much African American thought and searched for a political theory in Jacobs’s work, could we recognize it without distorting it? After all, as an enslaved person standing and thinking in a realm of radical unfreedom, wasn’t Jacobs likely to be producing thought that is incommensurable with thought produced by persons who take their freedom, or at least their right to freedom, for granted? Don’t we risk sanitizing, or fundamentally misconstruing Jacobs’s thought if we try to cast it in a conceptual framework and vocabulary that issues from conditions so profoundly different from hers? As Saidya V. Hartman warns: “The slave occupies the position of the unthought. So what does it mean to try to bring that position into view without making it a locus of positive value, or without trying to fill in the void?”[[4]](#endnote-4) In other words, is it possible to recognize Jacobs’s thinking *as* political thought without *mis*recognizing it by taking it to be “the same as” or “like” political theory as traditionally conceived?

In my view, these two difficulties do not render the search for Jacobs’s political thought futile or invalid, but they do demand our respect and attention. This is why, in what follows, I approach the question of Jacobs’s political thought cautiously and speculatively. Bearing in mind the anti-theoretical nature of much African-American political thinking, I try to find her theory not beyond but within the particulars of her concrete historical and political circumstances, seeking the broad view obtained by theory within the “muck and mire” of her lived experience. More concretely, I will search for her political thought not in a view of things held by someone who imagines herself standing above and outside her history, but in the view Jacobs obtained from within the cramped garret of her grandmother’s house. For as I hope to show, even after Jacobs secured her children’s liberty, escaped to the north and at last was emancipated herself -- indeed even in the moment of composing her book some years later -- she found herself psychologically unable to leave that tiny enclosure and the view of things it afforded her. Captivity, for her, was the space of theory. Inviting both her contemporaneous and her later readers to step into that space with her, she created a kind of temporal utopia or non-place where her political thought becomes plain even as it profoundly resists incorporation into theory as we know it.

2.

Ever since the recovery of Jacobs’s *Incidents* in the 1970s, scholars of the text have attributed special importance to its moments of second-person address to her readers, as when Jacobs writes (in the very first sentence of the book), “Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction,” (1) or “O, you happy free women, contrast your New Year’s day with that of the poor bondswoman!,” (16) or “And now, reader I come to a period of my unhappy life , which I would gladly forget if I could.” Comparing the different ways critics have understood these moments will give us both a brief account of the main themes and turns in scholarship on Jacobs and a promising – albeit circuitous -- path toward the elusive matter of her political theory.

Critics first noticed Jacobs’s strategy of direct appeal to the reader as they made a case for the literary merit of her work, finding a degree of sophistication in Jacobs’s narrative method that was not so obvious in other aspects of her book. The thrust of their arguments was that Jacob ingeniously deployed conventions of nineteenth-century narrative in order to make common cause with her contemporaneous readers (most of them white, northern, Christian, and middle-class) who would otherwise have found her story too unconventional to assimilate and be moved by.[[5]](#endnote-5) As Valerie Smith put it: “By pointing out the similarities between her own story and those plots with which her readers would have been familiar, Jacobs could thus expect her readers to identify with her suffering.” [[6]](#endnote-6) As Smith’s word “identify” indicates, some of these early critics also wished to forge bonds of feminist solidarity between Jacobs and her first female readers. Jean Fagan Yellin, notably, argued that Jacobs’s strategy of second-person address “represents an attempt to establish an American sisterhood and to activate that sisterhood in the public arena.” Frances Smith Foster likewise believed that the second-person address at the end of end of *Incidents* (“Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way with marriage”) “directly links her with her readers, and it conveys the subtext to Jacobs’s entire narrative: that Northern whites are not themselves finally free.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Thus, the main focus of these critics was on the politics of narration, or on the political strategy that Jacobs as a writer employed in order to win the sympathies of her readers and thereby reinforce the burgeoning anti-slavery movement. [[8]](#endnote-8) Their work was complemented by critics who focused on the agency and activities of Harriet Jacobs “the slave girl” (not just Jacobs the narrator), --her wily and courageous resistance to her master, her subversive strategies of survival, and her eventual, heroic success.[[9]](#endnote-9)

These ways of reading *Incidents* soon collided with two critical developments that cast doubt on their assumptions and aims: one was an emerging politics of difference that underscored precisely what was different and distinctive about black women’s experience[[10]](#endnote-10); critics working in this vein often emphasized the ways Jacobs subverts or manipulates the very tropes and narrative strategies of sentimental and domestic fiction through which she appealed to her white readers.[[11]](#endnote-11) The second was a new, post-structuralist sensitivity to the myriad ways individuals are formed and disciplined by society (or Foucauldian power) and a correlative skepticism toward the very possibility of an individual “subject” with agency.[[12]](#endnote-12)

These shifts are nicely epitomized by Robyn R. Warhol in "’Reader, Can You Imagine? No, You Cannot’: The Narratee as Other in Harriet Jacobs's Text.” Published in 1995, this article both built on and distinguished itself from Warhol’s earlier (1989) book, *Gendered Interventions*, a groundbreaking study of narrative technique in Victorian fiction. In the book, Warhol’s insight had been that moments of second-person address, which she calls “interventions,” are routinely gendered: male narrators adopt a tone that is “distancing,” while female narrators adopt one that is more “engaging”:

The engaging narrator addresses a narratee in a friendly, confiding, sympathetic mode, so as to encourage actual readers to identify with the narratee (whether or not actual readers did so is a subject for another kind of study). By contrast, the distancing narrator – more teasing, insulting, and humorous than the earnest, engaging narrator – introduces an ironic gap between the narratee, or the ‘reader’ addressed in the text, and the person who actually holds the book and reads, thus placing a distance between the actual reader and the narratee. That distance opens up a metacritical space in the textual transaction: the distancing narrator – who emphasizes the fictiveness, the textuality, of a text by drawing the reader’s attention to the way the novel is constructed – keeps literature at an aestheticized distance from the world of active politics.[[13]](#endnote-13)

In her article, published six years after the book, Warhol acknowledges that she now had to qualify this argument because her book had implicitly and unconsciously taken white-authored texts to be narrative norms that could be universally applied. In the years between 1989 and 1995, literary criticism’s discovery and embrace of a “politics of difference” had made plain the error of that assumption. In her article, therefore, Warhol proposed to use the “binary model” of a gendered distinction between male distancing and female engaging narrators not to “fix” it as a universal or absolute but quite the opposite – to show how a text like Jacobs’s *Incidents* both deployed, evaded, and improvised on it. Jacobs, she went on to show, uses *both* kinds of narrator in her text. Sometimes her narrator is engaging and seeks to make common cause with readers, but at other times the narrator states unequivocally that her readers will never really understand her – as when she writes, “Reader, can you imagine? No, you cannot.” Warhol put the case more precisely by referring to the relation between Jacobs’s *narrator* and her book’s *narratee* (implied reader): “Jacobs’s narrator draws a line which the narratee may not cross in identifying with the narrator/protagonist,” (64) Warhol observes. This strategy “marks Jacobs as a precursor to the twentieth-century politics of difference.” (67)

Along with the politics of difference, a second critical trend of the 1980s and ‘90s is at work in Warhol’s article. In her attention to the narrator and narrate, we see an emerging skepticism (generated mainly by French theorists, including Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida) toward the importance of a text’s author and toward the reality of the individual-as-subject. If the first phase of Jacobs criticism read second-person address in terms of identification/solidarity/sisterhood and the second in terms of identity/difference, this third critical disposition cast doubt on the very coherence of terms like “identity” and “the subject.” While continuing to read moments of second-person address as sensitive registers of the complexity of Jacob’s position as a writer and hence of the sophistication of the text itself, critics who shared this disposition were less sanguine than their predecessors about the possibilities of agency, resistance, solidarity and identity – all of which seemed rely on a notion of a freestanding “subject” that the scholarship of Foucault in particular had rendered dubious.

Thus, in Saidya V. Hartman’s powerful and influential (1997) reading of *Incidents*, both Jacobs-as-character and Jacobs-as-author practically disappear into “the text,” or “the narrative”; for it is through the powers of the narrative that Hartman recovers some of the agency she has argued that “the slave girl” and the author necessarily lack.[[14]](#endnote-14) Hartman occasionally allows a residuum of agency to “the narrator,” but we are made to understand that this word signifies little more than a personification of the operations of the narrative itself. [[15]](#endnote-15) In sum, deep critical skepticism toward the subject is the context in which Hartman reads the sentence, “And now, reader, I come to a period in my unhappily life which I would gladly forget if I could.” She argues that, in effect, this moment compels readers to identify with the narrator by bringing the moment of Jacobs’s “fall” into the “present”:

It signals an endangered moment of negotiation between the reader and narrator. It indicates not only the narrative location but also the self-reflexivity of the narrative about the crisis of its authority as it attempts to navigate the contemporaneous readership through the perilous passage. The revisited event of crisis flashes before the reader by way of this temporal eruption, which figures the fall as the imperiled present, thereby placing the reader in the moment of danger and enabling her to apprehend the enormity of the crisis and fatedness of the girl’s undoing. [[16]](#endnote-16)

Let us now build on this body of scholarship and look a little further into what happens during these moments of second-person address. The tendency of critical attention to them, clearly, has been to progressively depersonalize them: Jacobs the flesh-and-blood author gives way to a disembodied narrator who is understood increasingly to be entirely textual. This move toward abstraction, as we shall discover, offers us a path into Jacobs’s distinctive and elusive political thought, yet we will find it in the insistently particularized and specified facts of her lived historical experience.

Let us recall, first, Robin Warhol’s helpful reminder that the “I” who addresses the reader is neither the author Harriet Jacobs nor the slave girl she names Linda Brent; it is the narrator whom Jacobs-as-author fashioned, the created voice through which the narrative is recounted. Likewise, the person addressed by this voice is not the actual reader of the text, but a textual stand-in for the reader, or the implied reader of the text, called the “narratee.” Thus, while successive generations of readers have opened the book and read it, the narratee with whom they asked to identify remains unchanged, frozen (like the narrator) in the timeless time of a purely textual existence.

Recall, too, that the Jacobs’s narrator’s second-person addresses (or “interventions” as Warhol calls them) are both engaging *and* distancing, both immediate and “meta-critical.” Sometimes readers step into this space to identify with a narratee whom the narrator is drawing close to her; and sometimes they find a narrate whom the narrator is holding at arm’s length. In either case, however, readers step into a present-tense moment in a text that is otherwise narrated in the past, into the unchanging textual *now* of “And now reader.” Importantly, as readers today make this move, we inevitably bring our own “now” with us, just as Jacobs’s original readers did; ours, however, is rather different from theirs, just as the “now” of readers several decades hence will be very different from ours. Borrowing a term from David Scott, I am going to call our *now* a “problem-space,” which he defines as “more than a cognitively intelligible arrangement of concepts, ideas, images, meanings, and so on… It is a context of argument and, therefore, an *intervention*. A problem-space, in other words, is an ensemble of questions and answers around which an horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political) hangs.”[[17]](#endnote-17) At any moment of second-person address, therefore, whenever the narrator says *And now reader* to the narratee, the reader’s “intervention” is asked to share the same temporal location as Jacobs’s narrator’s “intervention.” (It is certainly convenient for my purpose that Scott and Warhol both use this word to describe movement – for Scott of the reader toward the text, for Warhol of the narrator toward the narrate and the reader.)

This puzzling space where the two interventions meet is a temporal utopia in the sense that it a “no-place” in time. It is an eternal present (“now”) that includes both the past (the moment of the text’s production) and as many futures as there are readers. Even Jacobs’s first readers would have understood themselves to be occupying a future that had come into being very soon after the after the lines they were reading had been written; familiar with the conventions of reading, none would have supposed that they were actually hearing the narrator’s words as the narratee does, in the frozen past of the book’s moment of composition. They took for granted the lapse of a thin sliver of time between that moment and the moment and their own reading of the text. As they read *Incidents*, then, they imaginatively traversed that gap to identify with the narratee and stand in the narrator’s temporal space with her – that is, in the past. But one could just as accurately say that Jacobs’s narrator, equally aware of this temporal gap, projects her voice across it to meet her readers in what is to them the present but to her is an indefinite series of unknown futures.[[18]](#endnote-18) In sum, the “now” of Jacobs’s second person address is to be found neither in the past alone nor in the future alone, but where both meet and converge in the text’s eternal present. This “now” is not a moment in a sequence of moments. It does not stand in either “linear time” or in “circular time.” It is a no-place in time.

We should be careful to note, however, that just because this temporal space stands outside time, it does not remain always the same. It is different for every reader who steps into it, for each brings his or her own now, or problem-space, or intervention to join the narrator’s intervention. Yet even though it changes in this way, this *now* also remains stubbornly tethered to the narrator’s *now*, which we understand it to be issuing from a specific past, the temporal space that begins after Jacobs’s emancipation and before the book’s publication (i.e., some time between 1857 and 1861): this is when Jacobs’s herself was writing her book and creating the narrator whose second-person addresses, or interventions, we are now reading.[[19]](#endnote-19) Thus, the *now* into which every generation of readers steps in order to identify (partially) with the narratee and associate with the narrator is both changing and fixed, indefinite and definite, ahistorical and historical, “meta” and grounded. Such a space, as we shall see, is where the political theory of *Incidents* comes into being and does its work.

3.

If a conflation of past and future in an unchanging *now* is implicitly operative in Jacobs’s second-person address, it is explicitly and insistently established

throughout her book whenever a seeming future is revealed to be merely a repetition of the past.[[20]](#endnote-20) Virtually every reader of the book becomes aware of the two largest or most sweeping instances of such conflation, which I will call “futural skepticism.” The first occurs when Jacobs attempts to escape to the North but winds up instead being confined to the garret in her grandmother’s house; indeed, this “loophole of retreat,” as Jacobs calls it, is one of a series of enclosed spaces that literally and figuratively represent her condition of enslavement.[[21]](#endnote-21) The second occurs when Jacobs does finally arrive in the North and finds that, far from being free at last, she is still subject to recapture and to pervasive white racism that denies her equal humanity.

These two striking instances are reinforced by numerous micro-incidents in which the future turns out to be merely a repetition or an extension of what has already been. Their aggregate weight is probably felt unconsciously by most readers, but it is felt nonetheless. Jacobs tells us that her grandmother was emancipated by her master, but then illegally kidnapped and sold back into slavery; we read also of the loan her grandmother’s master promised to repay her, but never did. When Linda’s mother’s mistress dies, Linda expects to be freed, but this promise too is broken and she remains enslaved. She writes of her dead parents that they might have “been kindly taken from the evil days to come,” – in other words, that it might have been kind of God to deprive them of futurity; she also breaks slightly from the temporal frame of *Incidents* and tells us that even later, in the future, she continued to think in this manner: “Years afterwards I often thought of this -- in other words, in the future nothing would change and she would continue to surmise that here parents were better off deprived of their futurity. When she tries to cheer her brother by saying that “’bright days will come by and by,’” he retorts – getting the last word that is surely authoritative -- “You don’t know anything about it. We shall have to stay here all our days.”Jacobs makes a point of telling us that the silver candelabra purchased by the money borrowed from her grandmother would be passed on “from generation to generation” within her master’s family – in other words, that the original crime would be repeated over and over again indefinitely. Jacobs reports a conversation in which an enslaved mother says to a trader, “’You promised to treat me well,’” to which he replies, “You have let your tongue run too far, damn you,” and breaks the promise. She tells us “I went to bed thinking the next day would find me such, perhaps dead. What was my grief on waking to find myself quite well” (19). When her master Dr. Flint breaks up her relationship with a free black man in the town, Jacobs reports that her lover left her “still hoping the day would come when I could be bought,” but “With me the lamp of hope had gone out.” Of her arrival in the harbor of Philadelphia she writes, “The next morning I was on deck as soon as the day dawned. I called Fanny to see the sun rise, for the first time in our lives, on free soil; for such I *then* believed it to be” (158). When she is sent to Flint’s son’s plantation, other enslaved persons there are looking forward to “better times” under a new mistress, but Jacobs tells us: “… I had no such hopes for them” (92); and when the mistress herself steps from the carriage, her face brightening, Jacobs surmises that visions of a better future are rising before her: “It made me sad,” she tells us, “for I knew how soon clouds would come over her sunshine” (92).

Sometimes, Jacobs casts this failed futurity in which nothing significant changes as the failure of God to answer her prayers. Indeed, as we have seen in the case of her parents, God may be implored to put an end to time, to simply deny a future to the enslaved, since that future would not be one in which anything changed. In this spirit, Jacobs tells us of a woman whose children have been taken from her, and who exclaims “I’ve got nothing to live for now. God make my time short” (70). In the chapters in which Jacobs describes her confinement in “the loophole of retreat,” she emphasizes that her captivity there is an enclosure within time not just space, for although the seasons wheel round, time does not in any meaningful sense move forward. In the chapter appropriately titled, “*Still* in Prison” (emphasis added), she tells us that she often asked the classic questions of theodicy: what kind of God would permit such unjust human suffering as she and other enslaved persons have experienced? “Dark thoughts passed through my mind as I lay there day after day. I tried to be thankful for my little cell, dismal as it was, and even to love it, as part of the price I had to pay for the redemption of my children. Sometimes I thought God was a compassionate Father, who would forgive my sins for the sake of my suffering.”

By this point, some readers of *Incidents* will subliminally anticipate the “but” or “however” that’s in the offing. For skepticism toward the future is written into the very syntax of this book; whether expressed or merely implied, “but” is the pivot on which time’s futurity turns back on itself and becomes, instead, the past repeated. So Jacobs continues: But (implied), “At other times, it seemed to me that there was no justice or divine mercy in the divine government. I asked why the curse of slavery was permitted to exist, and why I had been so persecuted and wronged from youth upward. These things took the shape of mystery, which is to this day not so clear to my soul as I trust it will be hereafter” (123).

We should note that here Jacobs’s narrator makes an implied second-person “intervention.” She breaks from the temporal frame of the incidents recounted in her book and brings her readers into a future “this day,” which we understand to be the moment of the book’s coming into being as the narrator tells it to the narratee. In this future, however, things remain essentially the same. Jacobs may be free and in the North with her free children, but she still has these “dark thoughts” that take “the shape of mystery.” It is true that she goes on to say, “as I trust it will be hereafter,” but such a hereafter is by definition inaccessible both to her and her readers. Moreover, by this point in the book many readers will feel that these words are burdened by irony because we have been told so often that grounds for such “trust” are almost always illusory.

What does Jacobs feel when she finally hears that her children have been emancipated, when she escapes to freedom in the north, and when she is emancipated by her mistress, Mrs. Bruce? Surely in these moments she must express a sense of prayer answered, of promises fulfilled, and of a future that breaks from the past instead of merely repeating it. The answer is, yes -- but no. After Jacobs has escaped to the North, she discovers that “Mr. Sands had not kept his promise to emancipate them [her children].” (166) Living with the kind Mrs. Bruce, she begins to become “more energetic and cheerful,” but, “The old feeling of insecurity, especially with regard to my children, often threw its dark shadow across my sunshine.” (Note that even the trope is repeated throughout the book.) Even when she learns that Dr. Flint has died, she doesn’t feel relieved, or freer, or in any meaningful sense *done* with him. For, “There are wrongs which even the grave does not bury. The man was odious to me while he lived, and his memory is odious now” (196).

The somber feeling that time has no meaningful future overtakes and almost extinguishes even the joy that flickers in the book’s final paragraphs. Jacobs and her children are “as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the north.” But although this is “a vast improvement in [her] condition, that “is not saying a great deal” because she is still so far from the future she has wished for: “The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own.” Jacobs’s narrator is certainly grateful for the kindness of her friend Mrs. Bruce, but the very words she uses to describe their relationship powerfully invoke the enforced bondage and servitude she has supposedly escaped: “Love, duty, gratitude also *bind* me to her side. It is a privilege to *serve* her…” This felt inescapability of the past comes forward again when the narrator tells us that she would “gladly forget” “the dreary years” she passed in bondage -- but she cannot. And while she derives some solace from the memory of her departed grandmother, these are merely “light, fleecy clouds floating over” “a dark and troubled sea.”

What might have caused Jacobs to hold such a view of time? One source, surely, was her own fraught, gender-specific relation to the futurity of her reproductive body. As a woman, Jacobs was compelled by her enslavement to consider that both forced and voluntary sexual relations would likely result in her birthing children into a condition of enslavement. In either case, the reproductive futurity of her body wouldbe put to use, against her will of course, for the reproduction of the slavery system itself. Thus, the futurity or natality (to use Arendt’s term) that is incarnated in a woman’s fertility, a woman’s pregnancy, and a woman’s giving birth, as well as in the children she bears, were all negated Jacobs’s enslavement. It is hardly surprising that a woman in these conditions would adopt a highly skeptical view of time’s futural possibilities and might even conclude that futurity itself is an illusion.

Such a view would only be deepened and affirmed by the effects that traumatic experience is thought have on time. There is much to say on this topic, but here I can only observe that, as Jenny Edkins writes, “trauma and traumatic memory alter the linearity of historical, narrativized time, time which has beginnings and ends;…” This is because “trauma is not experienced at the time” it occurs; “it is belated. It returns in the form of dreams or flashbacks.”[[22]](#endnote-22) This account of trauma’s effects surely helps us understand why *Incidents* is marked by so many disruptions of linear time, occasions when the future turns out to be the past, or when the future does not arrive at all. It also helps us think about the matter I will take up next: why *Incidents* is narrated in a way that suggests that even as Jacobs’s narrator composes the book and addresses her narratee, she feels that she has never entirely left the past she writes about; consequently, the *now* that she bids her readers to step into is always implicitly a “flashback” to her past enslavement, and to the foul, dark confines of the loophole of retreat.

4.

To review: we now have in hand two of the three threads that will lead us to Jacobs’s political thought (as distinct from her political thinking). One is our understanding of the narrator’s *now* as a temporal space into which readers are called and into which they bring their own problem-space with them. A second is our recognition of the numerous instances in which futurity is negated or denied in *Incidents*. A third thread, which we shall now pick up and follow, is the discovery that the past from which the narrator speaks is always both the moment of the text’s production and the “loophole of retreat” which she is psychologically and spiritually unable to escape. All three of these threads resemble each other, for in all of them the past calls peremptorily to the future, bringing it back into the past in a way that strongly qualifies and even negates futurity itself.

Let us return, then, to the loophole of retreat, where “The continued darkness was oppressive. It seemed horrible to sit or lie in a cramped position day after day, without one gleam of light. Yet I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave,....” (114) The ambivalence Jacobs voices in this passage has been noted by many readers. On the one hand, she feels that the “retreat” is a severe intensification of her condition; as such, this small, dark, cramped, fiercely cold and stiflingly hot space is, I suggest, Jacobs’s physical and dramatic representation of her own “problem-space” as an enslaved woman. At the same time, however, the garret is a space of relative freedom. It affords, in particular, the freedom to see without being seen herself: “But uncomfortable as my situation was, I had glimpses of things out of doors, which made me thankful for my wretched hiding-place” (121-22).

As such, the loophole of retreat affords a version of the special *view* of things claimed by theory itself. For Jacobs, it is a space where theory as *thea*, or privileged and insightful watching, can occur: “O, those long, gloomy days, with no object for my eye to rest upon, and no thoughts to occupy my mind, except the dreary past and the uncertain future! I was thankful when there came a day sufficiently mild for me to wrap myself up and sit at the loophole to watch the passersby. Southerners have the habit of stopping and talking in the streets, and I hear many conversations not intended to meet my ears.” (116-117) The garret is the site not merely of Jacobs’s ocular but of her intellectual speculation as she meditates upon the meaning of what she calls “the gloomy past and the uncertain future.” Here in the garret, the flow of time seems to have stopped as one moment or season lasts forever: “Countless were the nights that I sat late at the little loophole scarcely large enough to give me a glimpse of one twinkling star. … Sometimes it appeared to me as if ages had rolled away since I entered upon that gloomy, monotonous existence.”(148) Here she devises and executes the plan to fool Dr. Flint by having friends send letters written in her hand from the North, thereby tricking him into assuming that she had left Edenton. And here she reflects on the power of ideology, perhaps even foreseeing that her own work will be to tell “a different story” that contests it. Surmising that “Northern travellers” who witnessed her aunt Nancy’s funeral might have interpreted it as proof of the beneficence of the South’s patriarchal institution, she writes: “We could have told them a different story. We could have given them a chapter of wrongs and sufferings that would have touched their hearts, if they had any hearts to feel for the colored people….All this, and much more, I thought of, as I sat at my loophole, waiting for the family to return from the grave; sometimes weeping, sometimes, falling asleep, dreaming strange dreams of the dead and the living.” (147)

Although the space of the garret affords Jacobs the view that enables her political thought and leads to political action, it is the very opposite of a space above or beyond her circumstances of enslavement: indeed, it is a figure of the most powerful condensation and intensification of them. And this space is present in the space Jacobs’s readers step into when they respond to her appeals to enter the “now” of the book’s composition. For toward the end of her account of her seven years in the garret, Jacobs’s narrator underscores that “even now” as she writes her book, she is still deeply affected by the trauma of her seven-year incarceration in the “dismal hole. ” She writes, “I hardly expect that the reader will credit me, when I affirm that I lived in that little dismal hole, almost deprived of light and air, and with no space to move my limbs, for nearly seven years. But it is a fact; and to me a sad one, even now; for my body still suffers from the effects of that long imprisonment, to say nothing of my soul.” (148)[[23]](#endnote-23) Here, the haunting of the future by the past becomes explicit. The “even now” of second-person address is revealed to be so affected by this past that it is inseparable from it. Jacobs herself may be sitting in a room somewhere in Mrs. Willis’s house, composing *Incidents*, but her narrator tells us that she still feels the effects of that long confinement on her body and her soul. Recall also Jacobs’s “These things took the shape of mystery, which is to this day not so clear to my soul as I trust it will be hereafter. ” Jacobs’s “this day” is the present-tense “now” of her narration; composing her text, she feels that the theodicy of her enslavement remains as much a “mystery” as ever. Once again a seeming future is incorporated into an unyielding past.

Proposing as it does this radical skepticism toward the future, Jacobs’s political thought will inevitably appear bizarre – even illegible – to conventional political theorizing that seeks to make sense of it by translating it into its own terms. Jacobs herself foresaw this incommensurability. Consider one last example of second-person address in *Incidents*:

And now I will tell you something that happened to me; though you will, perhaps, think it illustrates the superstition of slaves…. A band of serenaders were under the window, playing “home, sweet home.” I listened till the sounds did not seem like music, but like the moaning of children. It seemed as if my heart would burst. I rose from my sitting posture and knelt. A streak of moonlight was on the floor before me, and in the midst f it appeared the forms of my two children. They vanished; but I had seen them distinctly. Some will call it a dream, others a vision. I know not how to account for it, but it made a strong impression on my mind, and I felt certain that something had happened to my little ones” (107-108).

In his perceptive reading of this passage, historian John Ernst calls our attention to what he calls its “unquestioning acceptance of mystifying experience.” He writes, “We miss an important dimension of [*Incidents*] when we pass by this lightly or try to account for it in ways that [Jacobs] herself cannot; for the motive power of a new mode of visioning lies in the … unquestioning acceptance of mystifying experience. The point is not to understand it but rather to acknowledge that which lies beyond understanding, and thereby to identify the limitations of culturally authorized ways of knowing.”[[24]](#endnote-24)[[25]](#endnote-25)

We have arrived, then, at the political thought of “the unthought.” It is a theory about time, and about the relation politics to time. It asserts first that time is not “linear” in the sense of one moment succeeding another, for in her account the past is never left behind, but rises to meet her (and us) at every moment of the purported “future.” It suggests, second, that such a view of time does not render political planning and political action impossible, but on the contrary promotes these. For while she is in the garret, Jacobs feigns that she has moved forward into a free state, and that she is writing to her master Dr. Flint from that location, when in fact she is still as much a captive as ever. Indeed, she takes advantage of Flint’s assumption that, because the letters appear to come from the Free States, she is actually there. But as Jacobs knows well, time does not fall into a “before” and an “after,” in this case, a time of bondage, and a time of freedom – for the past is never left behind. Had Flint himself shared this disbelief in linear, forward-moving time, he might have thought to look for Jacobs where she was – not in a place elsewhere, but where she has always been.

Third, this theory of time as being without a future may be the most radical difference in the “the different story” Jacobs writes in order to contest and displace the image of the slavery system that the South has foisted upon the citizens of the Free States. The manifest content of Jacobs’s story is, of course, that the condition of enslavement is much worse than anything the people of the North know or can even imagine. But accompanying these facts is a theory about the very medium in which facts come into being, suggesting that there is no future free of the past. To be sure, Jacobs does plan for her children’s future freedom, and she secures it. Neither her thinking nor her actions forego the future and its possibilities absolutely. But the great many instances in which *Incidents* reveals futurity to be illusory work very strongly to qualify and ultimately negate any *presumption* of futurity. That is, while her political thinking and acting are still residually futural, her political theory more radically invites our contemplation of a theory for which the future is simply not there and about which we should, for the moment anyway, say nothing.

This is a political theory that we today will have great difficulty coming to grips with, for it challenges the deep assumptions about progressive temporality that underlie so much work in the field, including the belief (or hope) that the political theory of today is an advance upon the political theory done in the past. Such words as “natality,” “innovation,” “renewal,” “transformation,” and “revolution” are all put under suspicion, or at least bracketed, by Jacobs’s thought.[[26]](#endnote-26) Her book chides us to suspect that any political theory that simply takes for granted its own futurity and the existence of the future is, however radical or resistant in its own eyes, a “culturally authorized way of knowing.” We applaud the chiasmic claim of Douglass’s famous line – “you have seen how a man became a slave, now you will see how a slave became a man” – because we want to believe that temporality can be reversed and crimes rectified without any residue.[[27]](#endnote-27) Jacobs demurs: “there are wrongs which even the grave does not bury.”

We might be tempted to call Jacobs’s *Incidents* a “tragedy” of remainders that individuals, cultures, or nations cannot assimilate or move beyond. But “tragedy” accurately describes the form, or mode, of *Incidents*. Tragedy is a form of emplotment with an arc of development and an ending. This isn’t true of Jacobs’s book, the very title of which seeks to preserve individual splinters of time in isolation, rather than fusing them in a narrative. Moreover, tragedy conventionally requires a “fatal flaw” of some kind and a come-uppance or reckoning that results from it; *Incidents* exhibits neither of these qualities.

It would be even more tempting, I think, to view Jacobs’s theory as a forerunner of “black pessimism,” but that would be a mistake. Black pessimism is an intellectual disposition that arises from a totalizing explanation (anti-black racism) for why things are as they are and why they will never meaningfully change.[[28]](#endnote-28) Jacobs refrains from such closure. Her theory’s relative openness is enabled by its sense that “a different story” requires a different temporality, and with it a radically different emplotment.[[29]](#endnote-29) It does not presume the hopelessness of the future, it simply refrains from presuming the future at all.

Might we now need such a different story more than ever? The problem-space of political theory today is one in which futurity is increasingly vexed. On the one hand, we are acutely aware of the “the collapse of hitherto existing horizons of possible futures” and we strive to imagine new ones, new “freedom dreams.”[[30]](#endnote-30) Yet we are also bitterly aware of how often imagined futures have been deployed to forestall political action in the present: democracy’s failures today are always to be compensated for by its fuller realization in a future that, predictably, never arrives.[[31]](#endnote-31) Caught in this squeeze play, we can’t help wondering: *Is the future really useful now*? Perhaps instead of reconstructing or constructing more imagined futures, we should learn to theorize without assuming the existence of *any* future. And yet, without such an assumption of futurity, what is the meaning of our own work? What is political thought without a future? Can we walk a fine line on which we continue to imagine and to act politically, but without taking for granted the arrival of a future? These are the kinds of questions Jacobs’s “unthought” political theory puts before us.

There may be a hint of an answer to them in an evocative trope for temporality Jacobs inscribes early in her book. She tells us that when her brother Benjamin escaped to Baltimore, he was discovered by a neighbor of his master who happened to be visiting the city. Surprisingly, this gentleman abstained from turning Benjamin over to the authorities; instead, he wished him well and they amicably parted ways. Pondering the meaning of this incident, Jacobs writes: “That man was a miracle. He possessed a goodly number of slaves, and yet was not quite deaf to that mystic clock, whose ticking is rarely heard in the slaveholder’s breast.” (24) The original of this “mystic clock,” lies in a poem called “The Life Clock,” which was published in *The Golden Gift: A Token for All Seasons* in 1847. Since there is a contribution by N.P. Willis in this volume, we can safely surmise that Jacobs read the poem while living in the Willis’s home, which is where she composed most of *Incidents.* The poem reads:

There is a little mystic clock

No human eye hath seen

That beateth on and beateth on

From morn until e’en.

And when the soul is wrapped in sleep

And heareth not a sound,

It ticks and ticks the livelong night

And never runneth down.

:

Clearly, Jacobs’s has taken this “mystic clock” to serve as a figure for something like the “heart” or conscience understood as one’s intuitive recognition of the force of higher law. The conscience is always awake because it is always attuned to the eternal legitimacy of such law. Yet this reading does not fully explain the force of this figure, which also seems to be one for time itself. It conveys that time just passes. It goes on and on and on. It “ticks and ticks the livelong night and never runneth down.” Does this imply that there is a future after all? Not if by “future” we mean that time is going *somewhere*, moving from a past through a present into a future that is significantly different, unspooling a narrative that has arc and purpose. Yet time in this poem is not circular, either. Although its temporal references are all to diurnal time -- morning, evening, and night –it never completes its cycle back to morning and thus leaves us instead in an unending, “livelong” night in which the clock goes on ticking forever. Neither linear nor circular, then, the time marked out by this clock is time that goes nowhere. It may be the dark reverse weave of what Douglass optimistically celebrated as “the ever-present now,” but it is nonetheless the time that, for Jacobs, most urgently prompts the mind to political theory and the conscience to political action.

1. Harriet A. Jacobs*, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, edited by Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 53. All further page references in the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Yancy et. al. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Likewise, African-American thinkers have made plain that “theory,” like “the human” or “the universal,” masks the particularity of certain standpoints and claims being made under its aegis. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Saidya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, III, “The Position of the Unthought.”

   *Qui Parle*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Spring/Summer 2003), pp. 184-185. See also, Nick Bromell, “’A Voice from the Enslaved’: TKA [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See, for example, the essays collected in John Sekora and Darwin T. Turner, eds., *The Art of Slave Narrative: Original Essays in Criticism and Theory* (Macomb, Ill: Western Illinois University Press, 1982). Foster on sentimental in Jacobs, pp. 58 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Valerie Smith, “Introduction,” *Incidents*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) xxxii. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Jean Fagan Yellin, “Introduction,” *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p. xxxiii; Frances Smith Foster, p. 104; See Sanchez-Eppler, pp. 93-104. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Other critics who focus on narration. Davie, Sharon. "'Reader, My Story Ends With Freedom': Harriet Jacobs's 'Incidents In The Life Of A Slave Girl'." *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure*. 86-109. Tanner, Laura E. "Self-Conscious Representation In The Slave Narrative." *Black American Literature Forum* 21.4 (1987): 415-424. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See, for example: Cutter, Martha J. "Dismantling 'The Master's House': Critical Literacy In Harriet Jacobs' Incidents In The Life Of A Slave Girl." *Callaloo* 19.1 (1996): 209-225.Doriani, Beth Maclay. "Black Womanhood In Nineteenth-Century America: Subversion And Self-Construction In Two Women's Autobiographies." *American Quarterly* 43.2 (1991): 199-222; Doherty, Thomas. "Harriet Jacobs' Narrative Strategies: Incidents In The Life Of A Slave Girl." *Southern Literary Journal* 19.1 (1986): 79-91;Humphreys, Debra. "Power And Resistance In Harriet Jacobs' Incidents In The Life Of A Slave Girl." *Anxious Power: Reading, Writing, and Ambivalence in Narrative by Women*. 143-155. Albany: State U of New York P, 1993; Moody, Joycelyn K. "Ripping Away The Veil Of Slavery: Literacy, Communal Love, And Self-Esteem In Three Slave Women's Narratives." *Black American Literature Forum* 24.4 (1990): 633-648; Mullen, Harryette. "Runaway Tongue: Resistant Orality In Uncle Tom's Cabin, Our Nig, Incidents In The Life Of A Slave Girl, And Beloved." *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*. 244-264. New York: Oxford UP, 1992; Smith, Sidonie. "Resisting The Gaze Of Embodiment: Women's Autobiography In The Nineteenth Century." *American Women's Autobiography: Fea(s)ts of Memory*. 75-110. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1992. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Morgan, Winifred. "Gender-Related Difference In The Slave Narratives Of Hortense Spillers, “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, (Summer, 1987), pp. 64-81; Frances Foster, “In Respect to Females…” Differences in Portrayals of Women by Male and Female Narrators, American Literature Forum, Vol 15, No. 2 (Summer, 1981), pp. 66-70; Valerie Smith argues that, in contrast to the masculine individualism assumed by Frederick Douglass, “Jacobs’s tale is not the classic story of the individual will; rather it is more of a story of the self-in-relation.” *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987) p. 38. Harriet Jacobs And Frederick Douglass." *American Studies* 35.2 (1994): 73-94. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Kaplan, Carla. "Narrative Contracts And Emancipatory Readers: Incidents In The Life Of A Slave Girl." *The Yale Journal Of Criticism: Interpretation In The Humanities* 6.1 (1993): 93-120. Levander, Caroline. "'Following The Condition Of The Mother': Subversions Of Domesticity In Harriet Jacobs's Incidents In The Life Of A Slave Girl." *Southern Mothers: Fact and Fictions in Southern Women's Writing*. 28-38. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State UP, 19Walter, Krista. "Surviving In The Garret: Harriet Jacobs And The Critique Of Sentiment." *American Transcendental Quarterly* 8.3 (1994): 189-210. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See, for example Burnham, Michelle. "Loopholes Of Resistance: Harriet Jacobs' Slave Narrative And The Critique Of Agency In Foucault." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal Of American Literature, Culture, And Theory* 49.2 (1993): 53-73.; [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Robyn R. Warhol, “Reader, Can You Imagine? No, You Cannot”: The Narratee as Other in Harriet Jacobs’s Text,” *Narrative*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Jan., 1995), pp. 57-72. (p. 79) [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. The text becomes the literal subject of Hartman’s sentences, as when she writes: “The feat of *Incidents* is … the effort to actualize something ‘akin to freedom’… The narrative’s reconsideration of … and attention to … expose….” (This set of moves is familiar to anyone who has attempted to write criticism after the death of the author and the eclipse of intentionality.) As a further consequence of this subjectless world, Hartman must resort often to the passive voice and other circumlocutions in which something happens without an agent anywhere specified. Thus: “The seduction enacted in ‘A Perilous Passage’ recounts… The enactment of seduction encompasses… The shamefaced appeals to the reader and the narrative’s confessional tone ultimately expose… This enactment of subjection exemplifies….The exercise of cunning ensnares…” and so on. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Compare with Frances Smith Foster’s (1979) understanding of the narrator of slave narratives as a real person “searching for his own meaning in his own experience.” *The Development of Ante-Bellum Slave Narratives* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), p. 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. In my view, as we shall see, Hartman misreads the effects of this sentence on the reader: it does *not* transport the reader to the moment of crisis, when Linda decided to “fall” by becoming Sands’s lover. Rather, it takes the reader first and foremost, perhaps exclusively, to what Hartman calls “the narrative location”: the temporal space in which the narrator is speaking her text to an implied narratee. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. None of this is specific to Jacobs; I am just distinguishing between the narratological insights Warhol brings to the narrative’s workings for contemporaneous readers and its workings for us. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Jacobs’s earliest published account of her enslavement appeared in the New York *Tribune,* June 21, 1853. *Incidents* was published in January, 1861. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Note on Lloyd Pratt and Thomas Allen. Literary historians Thomas Allen and Lloyd Pratt have already established that in the antebellum period time, not everyone imagined time to be uniform and linear, moving the nation progressively toward its manifest destiny. African-American life narratives in particular, according to Pratt, imagines alternative conceptions of futurity. “The African-American life narrative articulates several different orders of time…. the spirit time and revolutionary messianic time that these narratives made available encouraged African Americans to regard the future as open to revision instead of inevitably given.” Although such open-ended futurities certainly animate the particular texts he discusses, they do not figure so importantly in *Incidents*. Another time does, and it is For an account of the child as figure of natality in the antebellum US, see Marissa Carrere, *“As Child in Time”: Childhood, Temporality, and U.S. Literary Imaginings of Democracy*, Dissertation, etc. See also Mary Niall Mitchell’s history of the ways “the black child” of the 1850s and ‘60s “represented the possibility of a future dramatically different from the past, a future in which black Americans might have access to the same privileges as whites: landownership, equality, autonomy.” (5) *Raising Freedom’s Child: Black Children and Visions of the Future after Slavery* (New York: New York University Press, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. As Valerie Smith writes: “Repeatedly she escapes overwhelming persecution only by choosing her own space of confinement: the stigma of unwed motherhood over sexual submission to her master; concealment in one friend’s home, another’s closet; and her grandmother’s garret over her own and her children’s enslavement on a plantation; Jim Crowism and the threat of the Fugitive Slave Law in the North over institutionalized slavery at home. Yet each moment of apparent enclosure actually empowers Jacobs to redirect her own and her children’s destiny.” *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*, pp. 29-30. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Note here that reads this in relation to pragmatism’s (Dewey’s) critique of spectatorial conceptions of knowing. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. John Ernst, *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), p. 201. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. For a different but complementary reading of this same scene, see Russ Castronovo, *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. See, however, Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2004). Jacobs’s ambivalence about her own reproductive futurity resonates with Edelman’s critique of such futurity as “the logic within which the political must be thought.” (2) Jacob’s “unthought” in the “loophole of retreat” might find its contemporary analogue in Edelman’s “space that makes ‘politics’ unthinkable.” (3) [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Douglass “you have seen how a man…” [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.62. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Brandon Terry suggests [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Scott and Kelley [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Agamben et. al. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)