

2019

In-Between Spheres: Black Women's Exploitation of Small Spaces in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Rhayna V. Kramer
Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kramer, Rhayna V. (2019) "In-Between Spheres: Black Women's Exploitation of Small Spaces in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *Articulāte*: Vol. 24, Article 5.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol24/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articulāte by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

*In-Between Spheres: Black Women's
Exploitation of Small Spaces in Incidents in
the Life of a Slave Girl and Uncle Tom's
Cabin*

Rhayna V. Kramer '19



Nineteenth-century women's literature is almost invariably connected to the home and its associations with domestic behaviors. Though the concept of public and private spaces has existed in some form for most of human history, it seems that no period obsesses over this distinction, or at least publicizes it, more than this period. This general observation is consistent with the reality that, as production shifted away from the household economy to an increasingly industrialized one, the lines between the public and private sphere—and thus between men and women—became more rigidly defined. Conduct books and women's magazines reinforced these gendered ideals. In the United States, *The Godey's Lady's Book*, for example, featured domestic science articles entitled "How to Cook Potatoes," "House and Home: The Baby" (1887), and "Spring Cleaning with Godey Lady's Book," reminding women of their responsibilities toward creating peaceful, sacred domestic sanctuaries. In their now clearly-defined roles, women would impart to their husbands and children the moral strength that would arm them against the increasingly individualistic, hostile, and competitive world

of commerce (Clinton 37). Women's roles thus solidified, the private sphere became an established truth.

What, then, are we to make of an enslaved black woman, whose unique existence, both as a human performer of conventional household duties and as an object to be bought and sold in the slave market, positions her as an inhabitant of both the private *and* public spaces? (Green-Bartteet 67). What of the reality that the home, the most indisputable marker of safety and virtue in a hostile world, is the least safe for an enslaved woman, whose fears of sexual advances and physical abuses from slaveholders are a daily reality? The domestic contradictions of slavery--that a woman cannot be safe in her own home due to sexual exploitation and that, because of this, she cannot enjoy coveted feminine virtues, like chastity and homemaking--reveal that the celebrated "cult of womanhood" was never intended for black women. Black female characters in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* are particularly aware of these contradictions. Faced with the unmet conditions of domestic sanctuary, some women respond defiantly by closing themselves off in small garrets, neglecting their masters, their household duties, and even their own children. It is often within these spaces--otherwise confining and restrictive—where black women find, ironically, freedom from their imperfect domestic situations and the ability to determine the outcomes of their lives.

In this essay, I agree with and attempt to build upon Miranda A. Green-Bartteet's characterization of the garret in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as an "interstitial space," a space that, unlike a home, is built incomplete and without intention. Subsequently, its construction places no domestic expectations on a woman, allowing her to use the

space however she sees fit. Though a garret obviously imposes physical restrictions on her movements, Linda Brent's defiant choice to stay there--instead of tending to her children and housework--indicates some rejection of domestic virtues--virtues not evenly applied to black women in the first place. This framework of empowering small spaces in *Incidents*, as I will separately argue, can also be further applied to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In both works, black women appropriate garret spaces to achieve bodily autonomy and control their own destinies, despite their enslaved conditions.

To appreciate in full the concept of an "interstitial space," we turn now to Green-Barteet's analysis, which outlines the space's demonstrated purpose and its relevance to Jacobs' *Incidents*. Put simply, an interstitial space is a "fully accessible walk-through space above a ceiling and beneath a floor" (54). A common feature of medical facilities since the mid-twentieth century, interstitial spaces "serve to house mechanical services that do not need to be accessed regularly" (54-55). Typically, the contents of these spaces are meant to be concealed completely. Taken together, the interstitial space's architectural "in-betweenness," concealed nature, and limited access can help us make sense of the garret in Jacobs' powerful narrative.

The garret where Linda Brent spends seven years of her life possesses similar features to those outlined above. First, like the modern interstitial space, the garret is a space "in between 'boards and the roof'" (Jacobs 127). Second, it is not meant to be accessed regularly, if at all. Linda says that the dimensions of the garret are only "nine feet long and seven feet wide... the highest part was three feet high" (Jacobs 127). In addition to its small size, it is a place where the "air is stifling; the darkness total," and is "never

occupied by any thing but rats and mice” (Jacobs 127). Clearly, this garret is not fit for human occupation. Finally, it is a place of complete concealment. Since few would know about or willingly occupy a space of suboptimal conditions, it is the perfect hiding place--no one would think to look there. Linda concludes,

Had the suspicion rested on my grandmother’s house, it would have been burned to the ground. But it was the last place they thought of. Yet there was no place, where slavery existed, that could have afforded me so good a place of concealment. (130)

Beyond these descriptive characteristics, this particular garret profoundly lacks definition and demonstrated purpose. Unlike the modern interstitial space, which is built with the specified intent of storing items, Linda’s space is a “hastily built and impermanent structure.” It is “not supposed to exist” (Green-Barteet 53). Moreover, it serves multiple purposes. As Green-Barteet explains,

[Linda Brent] goes on to call the garret the “loophole of retreat,” her “place of concealment,” and “my den” throughout her narrative... [she] consciously positions the garret as a borderspace, one that exists betwixt and between other more clearly defined spaces. As [Brent] explains, the garret is essentially a makeshift space, which was built by simply laying boards “across the [ceiling joists]” of a storeroom. Further, “the board floor” is “loose,” suggesting that no nails have been used in the garret’s construction, a fact that is emphasized when [Brent] later writes that the boards shift as easily as she moves. (53)

The garret as somehow unintentional, incomplete, and multipurpose implies a space which lacks conformity to

prescribed physical and social norms. Its construction is a suggestion, not a rule. Unlike a home, which engenders clear domestic associations, this garret engenders no “singular or absolute spaces,” “spaces of reason or unreason [...] freedom or domination,”--no rigid binaries between public and private spaces (Green-Barteet 56). Having no absolutes, the garret is an *in-between* space, a space where one can be between identities or take on no identity at all. A woman, for example, does not carry the brand of housewife or a whore in this space--she can be whatever she wants. In this way, the interstitial space becomes a microcosm of an interstitial life.

When we consider a black woman who is also a slave, the garret is also a border space between freedom and slavery, where one can exercise some rights of a free person under the limitations of legal enslavement. Despite these limitations, the garret affords Linda Brent more autonomy over her life than she has ever experienced so far. As Green-Barteet explains,

[Jacobs] is neither one thing nor another--she is neither free nor enslaved, neither able to mother her children nor removed from their lives, neither subject to her master's tyranny nor completely safe from his threats. Jacobs is, however, more in control of her body and her life while in the garret than she has been at any other time of her life. (54)

These newfound lack of absolutes in Linda's life allow her to manipulate the garret space to however she sees fit in the moment. She describes the garret as at once a “small den” and a “loophole of retreat” by day and night (Jacobs 127-128). Whatever the space serves as, Linda's new living arrangement allows her to defiantly neglect the household duties she was expected to fulfill while at the Flints' house. As a “den,” the garret allows Linda to read,

sew, and write about her experiences on her own terms. The discomfort she experiences--“in a certain position near the aperture”--only adds to her defiance of traditional domestic spaces; her newfound hobbies, like her position, are somehow “unnatural” for a woman (Jacobs 129). Linda, herself, admits that this extreme discomfort is, nevertheless, “a great relief to the tedious monotony of my life” in the traditional domestic space (129). In addition to its function as a den, the garret also serves as Linda’s “loophole of retreat,” where Linda can assume the role of a wartime spy, keeping watch over her children from afar and tricking Dr. Flint through false communications of her whereabouts. In this way, she is able to control the events that will eventually lead to her--and her children’s--freedom from slavery

In controlling her own life, Linda does worry that, as a woman and a mother, her actions might be “selfish,” since, in hiding in her grandmother’s garret, she is deliberately separating herself from her children (Jacobs 147). Even her grandmother seems to imply that she is both selfish and a bad mother for leaving her children vulnerable to further exploitation on the plantation.

Mr. Sands called on my grandmother, and told her he wanted her to take the children to his house... [he] told her they were motherless; and she wanted to see them.

When he had gone, my grandmother came and asked what I would do. The question seemed a mockery. What *could* I do? They were Mr. Sands’s slaves, and their mother was a slave, whom he had represented to be dead. (151)

Yet, Linda justifies her actions by pointing out the hypocrisies of parenting under slavery, an institution which

affords no dignity to the sanctity of motherhood in the first place. This confounding realization is especially apparent when Linda considers giving up her daughter Ellen to a Northern white woman, who can arguably provide her with more opportunities than Linda, herself, could:

True, the prospect *seemed* fair; but I knew too well how lightly slaveholders held such ‘parental relations.’ If pecuniary troubles should come... my children might be thought of as a convenient means of raising funds... Never should I know peace till my children were emancipated with all due formalities of law. (Jacobs 74)

Overall, Linda’s time spent in the garret illuminates how slavery complicates celebrated tenets of traditional domesticity, such as housekeeping and virginity. Where housekeeping is concerned, not even the respectability of Brent’s grandmother’s house prevents the white lay officers in the story from breaching the sacred divide between the public and private sphere. They simmer and sneer at, rather than appreciate and admire, the elegant, quaint delicacy with which Linda’s grandmother has arranged her home:

An exclamation of surprise from some of the company put a stop to our conversation.

Some silver spoons which ornamented an old-fashioned buffet had just been discovered. My grandmother was in the habit of preserving fruit for many ladies in the town, and of preparing suppers for parties; consequently she had many jars of preserves... “Wal done! Don’t wonder de niggers want to kill all de white folks, when dey live on ‘sarves” [meaning preserves]. (Jacobs 77)

Slavery also complicates virginity. An unmarried woman should uphold her virginity at all costs--unless she can produce children whose sole purpose is to enrich the

livelihoods of the slave owners. Recognizing hypocrisy of her condition as woman and slave, Linda establishes her own dignity, not in the preservation of her virginity, but in the embrace of Mr. Sands. In this relationship, as Green-Barteet contends, she is “neither a wife nor a whore,” since her relationship is monogamous, but common law forbids slaves and free white men from marrying. In this sense, she is in between roles of wed and unwed.

In our discussion of *Incidents* thus far, it is important to keep in mind that Linda Brent does not defy conventional norms of domesticity because she particularly wants to, but because the constraints of her condition force her to do so. In actuality, Linda wants nothing more than to be a proper, married mother to her children “in a home of her own” (Jacobs 219). At the same time, given the plethora of examples above, even Linda might admit to the fact that her proto-interstitial space and her position in between spheres empowers her in ways that the traditional domestic space might never have offered her.

In-between spaces are also heavily applicable for a discussion of Cassy’s own autonomous attempts to control the outcome of her life in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In this discussion, we must make an important distinction between the garret in this novel and the one in *Incidents*. The garret in the Legree home in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* functions more as a fully-functioning attic than as the “makeshift space” the garret in *Incidents* appears to be. An examination into the detailed description of the Legree garret quickly reveals the intentionality of the structure:

The garret of the house that Legree occupied, like most other garrets, was a great, desolate space, dusty, hung with cobwebs, and littered with cast-off lumber. The opulent family that had inhabited the house in the days of its

splendor had imported a great deal of splendid furniture, some of which they had taken away with them, while some remained standing desolate in mouldering, unoccupied rooms, or stored away in this place. One or two immense packing-boxes, in which this furniture was brought, stood against the sides of the garret. There was a small window there, which let in, through its dingy, dusty panes, a scanty, uncertain light on the tall, high-backed chairs and dusty tables, that had once seen better days. (Stowe 408)

If we understand this garret as a fully-functioning attic used for a specified purpose, rather than as a makeshift space, then this complicates our conception of the garret as an interstitial space. Unlike Linda Brent's garret but like the modern interstitial space, an attic has the express, definite purpose of storage. Attics also tend to be larger in size, and thus easier to access than the makeshift garret of Jacobs' imagining. To this end, one might designate the attic to be someone's bedroom, and it would not be difficult to breach this space in the event that slave catchers are looking for a runaway. There *are* no overt domestic expectations of women associated with an attic, as it *can* serve as a multipurpose space. Nevertheless, the attic is a feature of the overall domestic space, and can entail the domestic expectations of women, depending on its designated purpose.

Despite these complications, this discussion has demonstrated how interstitiality does not necessarily have to be so much about the spaces themselves, but about the people who occupy them. Cassy, for whom the garret becomes a central component of her role in the plot of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is another example of the slave's interstitial life.

Born into a life of as much luxury and privilege she can muster while still being enslaved, Cassy, like Linda Brent, resides in a world of in-betweens. Her identity as a quadroon--being three-quarters white and one-quarter black--allows her to reap the some of the benefits of whiteness. As a child, Cassy is “kept dressed up like a doll, and company and visitors used to praise” her. She also learns the fine, decorous arts of music and French embroidery (Stowe 375). She later secures the love of a wealthy lawyer who gives her “a beautiful house, with servants, horses, and carriages, and furniture, and dresses” (376). By all accounts, Cassy has obtained the rightful status as wife and mistress of the domestic space.

Despite these advantages, her enslaved condition prevents her from legal recognition and dignity of interracial relationships. Like Linda, Cassy must navigate a complex status somewhere between a wife and a “whore.” Cassy chooses the former in the context of “common law”-or, not officially recognized, practices:

“I only wanted one thing--I did want him to *marry* me. I thought, if he loved me as he said he did, and if I was what he seemed to think I was, he would be willing to marry me and set me free. But he convinced me that it would be impossible; and he told me that, if we were only faithful to each other, it was marriage before God. If that is true, wasn't I that man's wife? Wasn't I faithful?” (376)

Yet, once again, slavery upholds no regard for the sanctity of marriage and family, and the financial self-interest of the slaveholder always takes precedence. Cassy is quickly sold off when her lover accrues gambling debts and falls in love with another woman.

Disheartened by slavery's harsh realities for the quadroon who does not quite assimilate into one world or

another, Cassy must utilize her in-between status as both dignified and denigrated to her own advantage. If she is to escape slavery, she must do so through trickery. One way she accomplishes this is through capitalizing on the Legrees' fear of superstition: "It had suddenly occurred to Cassy to make use of the superstitious excitability, which was so great in Legree, for the purpose of her liberation, and that of her fellow sufferer" (Stowe 408). Here, the garret will become an important aspect of Cassy's mischief.

In addition to its physical characteristics described above, the garret also contains an element of the supernatural, even gothic:

Altogether, it was a weird and ghostly place; but ghostly as it was, it wanted not in legends among the superstitious negroes, to increase its terrors. Some few years before, a negro woman, who had incurred Legree's displeasure, was confined there for several weeks. What passed there, we do not say; the negroes used to whisper darkly to each other; but it was known that the body of the unfortunate creature was one day taken down from there, and buried; and, after that, it was said that oaths and cursings, and the sound of violent blows, used to ring through the old garret, and mingled with wailings and groans of despair. Once, when Legree chanced to overhear something of this kind, he flew into a violent passion, and swore that the next one that told stories about that garret should have an opportunity of knowing what was there, for he would chain them up there for a week. (407-408)

Cassy knows that Legree, who is described as a godless yet overwhelmingly superstitious man, is easily frightened by sounds and legends of the garret: "The Christian is composed by the belief of a wise, all-ruling Father, whose

presence fills the void unknown with light and order, but to the main who has dethroned God, the spirit-land is, indeed... 'a land of darkness and the shadow of death'" (409).

To this end, Cassy must position herself as some intermediary between the perceived spiritual realms, between the religious and non-religious, to spook and distract Legree so she can plan her escape. She employs servants to move furniture in her room, located directly under the garret, to create a "running and bustling" sound "with great zeal and confusion" to emulate ghostly sounds of the assumedly haunted garret (408). Cassy's efforts are successful, and she is successfully able to spook Legree and exert her power over him.

Cassy's actions are an incredible display of a woman's autonomy in the face of an institution designed to prevent slave women from the effects of domestic submission. Legree once believed to have found for himself "a woman delicately bred" when he bought her, a woman he could "crush... without scruple, beneath the foot of his brutality." However, as the text goes on to say, "as time, and debasing influences, and despair, hardened womanhood within her, and waked the fires of fiercer passions, she had become in a measure his mistress, and he alternately tyrannized over and dreaded her" (409-410). Clearly, slavery provides a unique opportunity for a woman to exert control over her oppressor, even in the midst of institutional subjugation.

The garret also plays an important role in Cassy's "stragem" to escape slavery. Her master plan is described as "the final *coup d'etat*," and the garret is the ultimate site of resistance (412). Cassy confers with Emmeline her plan to leave the house and make Sambo and Quimbo, some of Legrees most loyal slaves, to chase the two women into the

swamp, a place that is incredibly difficult to navigate. This is the site of delay as the two women run back to the house: “Every one will run out of the house to look after us, and then we’ll whip in at the back door, and up into the garret, where I’ve got a nice bed made up in one of the great boxes. We must stay in that garret a good while, for I tell you, he will raise heaven and earth after us... So let him hunt at his leisure” (413).

The fact that everyone, men and women included, dashes out of the private sphere and into the public sphere to catch these two women, while Cassy and Emmeline stay inside the domestic space is a very powerful image for a slave woman to challenge the ideals of the home. In this scenario, the home is the place of safety, but not a safety associated with conventional norms of domesticity in a woman. Cassy’s decision to inhabit both the public and private spheres, but ultimately reside in a private space that she utilizes for her own benefit highlights her interstitial life, and the interstitial lives of other slave women who have had to make tough decisions to secure their own life outcomes. Cassy and Linda are two of those women.

Works Cited

- Clinton, Catherine, and Christine Lunardini. *The Columbia Guide to American Women in the Nineteenth Century*. Columbia UP, 2000.
- Green-Barteet, Miranda A. “‘The Loophole of Retreat’: Interstitial Spaces in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.” *South Central Review*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2013, pp. 53–72.
- Jacobs, Harriet, and Farah Jasmine. Griffin. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005.
- “The Complete Godey's Lady's Book - 1830-1896.” *Accessible Archives Inc.*, Accessible Archives, Inc.

Stowe, Harriet Beecher, and Stephen Railton. *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or, Life among the Lowly*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2008.