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The Construct of Freedom: Comparing Baldwin and Jacobs

America is often colloquially referred to as the “land of the free”. However, what said freedom actually looks like differs depending on one’s perspective. In “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl” by Harriet Jacobs, because the events take place before the American civil war, there was a very basic standard of “freedom” for Black Americans, which was not to be enslaved or owned by another person. In “Going to Meet the Man” by James Baldwin, however, the main character desires the freedom to oppress Black Americans and enact racism upon them. Not only is freedom a social construct, the idea of “absolute freedom” is neither realistic nor achievable, because one idea of freedom may infringe on another’s idea of freedom, as occurs in these texts. In comparing the two, it is made clear that the freedom of Black Americans directly clashes with the freedom of White American oppressors.

In order to understand why freedom is not achievable, it is imperative to first pinpoint what exactly freedom entails in these two texts. In “Going to Meet the Man”, the main character Jesse is a racist White deputy sheriff who wishes to commit anti-Black hate crimes and oppress Black citizens. He wishes to be free to sexually assault Black women, to attack and incarcerate Black people, and to maintain the racist systems of power that benefit him. Early on in the text, Jesse relays to his wife Grace what he said to a young Black protestor: “you are going to stop coming down to the courthouse and disrupting traffic and molesting the people and keeping us from our duties and keeping doctors from getting to sick white women” (Baldwin 1334). As demonstrated in this passage, Jesse’s priorities are in

maintaining the ability for White citizens of his town to live in a way that he perceives as peaceable, meaning without having to encounter the Civil Rights movement. Harriet Jacobs, on the other hand, had a very different idea of freedom. Jacobs wanted to be free to marry, to live her life how she wished, and to be safe from threats of harm. She states in her memoir the effects of slavery on her freedom: “[i]f slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate; but all my prospects had been blighted by slavery” (Jacobs 887) The basic freedom of personhood is what Jacobs wants, as opposed to a privileged idea of freedom to be unaffected by those fighting for said freedom.

An important detail to note is within what Jesse says in the previous quote from Baldwin. The “you” that he refers to in said quote refers to the Black Civil Rights leader who he was speaking to, but this idea of “you” is kept separate from “the people” and “us”. Jesse’s ideas of freedom are limited to who he considers as people, and explicitly excludes Black citizens. This is further supported by his claim that Black people “were animals, they were no better than animals” (Baldwin 1333). These ideas of freedom are by nature opposed to Jacobs’s, who even at a young age understood she was a slave, and desired freedom as long as she was old enough to understand it. “I was now old enough to begin to think of the future; and again and again I asked myself what they would do with me...I could not help having some hopes that she had left me free” (Jacobs 881). Additionally, she asserts to her slave master during an altercation with him: “you have no right to do as you like with me” (884). She is aware of her own personhood and that slavery is a wrongful institution, but she is also aware that as long as slavery exists and is upheld, that she does not have the power to change her circumstances. Jacobs’s idea of freedom includes all people, but Jesse’s idea of freedom is

only for White citizens, and actively excludes Black citizens, who he does not see as human and deserving of rights.

This disparity in ideas of freedom can be further broken down. White supremacists such as Jesse may express the idea of racism as benevolence. Both Jesse and Jacobs's slave owner share these ideas in the two texts. After Jacobs's slave master assaults her, he gives her a letter addressing the incident which "expressed regret for the blow he had given [Jacobs], and reminded [Jacobs] that [she herself] was wholly to blame for it. He hoped [she] had become convinced of the injury [she] was doing [herself] by incurring his displeasure" (885). In this quotation, Jacobs's slave owner is regretful, but not apologetic for his abuse and blames Jacobs, going on to attempt to convince her that he is acting in her best interests, which she knows not to be true; her slave owner is acting simply in his own interests. This is paralleled when Jesse states that "[h]e tried to be a good person and treat everybody right: it wasn't his fault if the niggers had taken it into their heads to fight against God and go against the rules laid down in the Bible...He was only doing his duty: protecting white people from the niggers and the niggers from themselves" (Baldwin 1335). Jesse, like Jacobs's slave master, blames Black people for the oppression that he is enacting upon them, and shares this idea that he is taking on a benevolent role, a role of protection. Just as Jacobs's slave master claims that Jacobs was harming herself by rebelling against him, Jesse believes that he is doing important work in "protecting" the Civil Rights protestors by oppressing and incarcerating them.

Jesse also uses his power as a deputy sheriff to enact sexual violence and sexual power over Black women. He sees Black women not as people, but as a sexual commodity. This is evidenced by the way he becomes aroused when thinking about anti-Black violence, such as when he attacked the Civil Rights leader in prison, and at the end of the story when he recalls a lynching he viewed as a child. When he is unable to be aroused with his White

wife, he recalls times in which he has affairs by going out and assaulting Black women:

“[s]ometimes, sure, like any other man, he knew that he wanted a little more spice than Grace could give him and he would drive over yonder and pick up a black piece or arrest her, it came to the same thing” (Baldwin 1332). On the contrary, Jacobs is on the receiving end of racially charged sexual assault. In Jacobs’s case, at the hands of a White oppressor, her slave master. She was not in a position of power to protect herself from assault, and her sexual freedom was taken from her by force. In this respect, even sexual freedom can look different. Jacobs, being Christian, had the desire to maintain her chastity and wished to marry and pursue romantic relationships with men she found interest in. However, by exercising his power over her, Dr. Flint forbids her from having consensual romantic relationships. Jesse, like Flint, sees Black women as objects and servants. While Jesse and Flint are on the opposing end towards Jacobs regarding sexual freedom, they are aligned in their perspectives as White oppressors.

Therein lies the crux of the issue: those in power are the ones who have the ability to define freedom. It may be seen as a constitutional right, but will always be biased in favour of those in power to write said constitution. Black liberation is granted by White cooperation. For example, Jacobs would not have been able to find freedom and safety had “Mrs. Bruce”, her White ally and employer, sheltered her, helped her escape when she was being pursued by her slave owners, and eventually bought her and set her free. (Jacobs 898-899) From the other side of this issue, Jesse laments that it is not as easy to be openly racist anymore:

Men much older than he, who had been responsible for law and order much longer than he, were now much quieter than they had been, and the tone of their jokes...had changed. These men were his models...He looked to them for courage now. It wasn’t that he didn’t know that what he was doing was right...it was only that he missed the ease of former years. (Baldwin 1336)

Even in this example, it is the empowered White people who are “responsible for law and order” (1336) who are behaving differently, which causes Jesse to change his actions.

Because his White role models are stepping away from racist actions, Jesse feels that he must follow suit, which results in him missing “the ease of former years” (1336) where it was more acceptable for him to act as he wished. Jesse and Mrs. Bruce obviously have completely different perspectives towards Black liberation; Jesse wants Black people to be free only in a capacity that he finds acceptable, as in beneath White people. Mrs. Bruce, however, feels compassionately towards Black people and expresses desire for Black people to be free unconditionally (Jacobs 899). However, what they have in common is they are both people who have the power to shape the future of Black liberation. A freedom that requires someone else to grant it is not true freedom, as Americans would like to think.

The construct of law and the construct of freedom go hand in hand. Freedom can be defined as a legal construct. Often cited is the constitutional idea of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”. In an abstract sense, liberty can be seen as anarchy, but how liberty is commonly understood is within specific confines of the law. A person having freedom to kill infringes on a person’s freedom to live. Both “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl” and “Going to Meet the Man” demonstrate how subjective ideas of freedom are upheld by the law of the oppressor. In “Incidents”, the slavery that Jacobs suffers under is completely legally sanctioned. She is legally owned by Flint’s daughter, and especially being a Black woman in the time of slavery, she has very few legal rights, and as stated, she is eventually freed legally as well, by being bought and freed in a state where Black people have more secured rights. “Going to Meet the Man” takes a closer look at the law enforcement itself. As Jesse is a deputy sheriff, the reader is able to see the ways in which his ideas of freedom, influenced by his racist beliefs, are demonstrated through his misuse of the law. His cruel behaviour towards the Civil Rights activists, such as when he beats the Civil Rights leader in a cell, is

justified and supported by his colleagues who also represent the law. Jesse makes reference to a character he refers to as “Big Jim C.” (Baldwin 1333), which is very likely a reference to the oppressive Jim Crow laws that were in force at the time. While Jesse and his peers uphold the laws that restrict freedom for Black people, Dr. Flint benefits from and uses these laws. They are two parts that maintain the racist systems of law that prevent or limit the freedom of Black people.

The theme of incarceration and the prison industrial complex in America may be seen as a post-abolishment evolution of slavery. Both are rooted in racist systems of violence and oppression against Black people, and both are used as tools to strip Black Americans of their rights and control them. There are similarities that can be drawn by the ways in which Jacobs was imprisoned in her slave owner’s home and subjected to violence from him to the ways in which Jesse incarcerates Civil Rights activists unjustly and enacts violence upon them. Jesse is acting as a barrier between their freedom to vote and build better lives for themselves, just as Dr. Flint acts as a barrier between Jacobs’s freedom to build a better life for herself. Of note is her inability to freely exist where she desires; she must obey Dr. Flint and go where he tells her to, such as when he expresses his plans to send her away: “[y]ou shall go, if you are carried by force; and you shall remain there” (Jacobs 888). He has power over her to force her to send her where he pleases, and she does not have the freedom to stop him. Police officers and other law enforcement officers such as Jesse have the power to send people to prison, where they cannot act freely. Like Dr. Flint, because White people hold power in America, Jesse can wrongfully arrest as many people as he wishes, preventing them from making progress in their activism, and neither of them will be stopped because other racist White people are upholding these systems of power together.

The subjectivity of freedom is further demonstrated in two ways among these two texts. The first is that there can even be degrees of freedom. In “Incidents”, there are

characters who represent various degrees of freedom in their views. Dr. Flint is on one end of the extreme in his beliefs that he can have ownership over other people, and that he can freely abuse them as he pleases. Mrs. Bruce can be seen as the opposite of this, because she believes in unconditional freedom for all. However, there are characters who fall in between these two perspectives, such as Jacobs's kindly childhood mistress, who treated her gently, but still saw her as a servant and as property. When Jesse was young, his parents appear to demonstrate similarly different degrees of attitudes towards Black people. His father appears to be overtly racist, while his mother is less harsh, but does not interfere or speak against racism heavily. Additionally, while it appears that Jesse only surrounds himself with White peers in his adult life, as a child, he had a friend named Otis who was Black. This calls to attention the second point: that racism, and the oppression of Black liberation that follows, is not a natural idea. There are heavy implications in flashbacks to Jesse's childhood that he did not always hold the racist ideas that he does in the present of the story. He defends his friend, stating that he did not do anything wrong (1338), but is influenced by his surroundings, such as his father's openly racist opinions and events such as being brought to a public lynching. Unfortunately, "Incidents" does not touch upon the phenomenon of racism being a socially constructed idea, but it is interesting that Dr. Flint's daughter Emily Flint, who is Jacobs's legal 'owner', does pursue Jacobs in an attempt to force her back into slavery, possibly influenced by her father.

It is possible that the Flint family saw Jacobs's slavery as a part of their freedom to live their lives as they wished. Of course, this idea places limitations on Jacobs's freedom. Therefore, it appears that even the limitations of "freedom" differ depending on perspective. Jacobs has the most clear limitations to her freedom, the literal limitation of basic freedoms such as safety, personhood and marriage. This freedom is reflected in the struggles that the Black people depicted in "Going to Meet the Man" experience, such as incarceration and violence. However, Jesse and Dr. Flint also have limited freedom in one sense. The barrier

that Flint encounters is the inability to control Jacobs's mind, which is not loyal to him, and only desires those she truly loves and his inability to control himself from obsessing sexually over Jacobs, despite already being married. Jesse is in the same situation. He is unable to derive sexual fulfilment from his White wife, and it appears that he cannot maintain a sexual relationship with his wife at all without relying on his sexual obsession with anti-Black violence. This sexual obsession is evident throughout "Going to Meet the Man", as Jesse fixates sexually on Black bodies and the violence he witnesses or wishes to enact upon them at various points in his life. In this respect, it is possible to interpret this as Jacobs being free of the mind, but not of the body, and Flint and Jesse being trapped not in a physical, but in a mental prison.

Additionally, freedom cannot be strictly defined because the goalposts for freedom, even similarly aligned freedoms, are always shifting depending on contemporary events. This can be seen from both sides of racial conflict. In the case of Black abolitionists such as Jacobs and Civil Rights activists as depicted by Baldwin, Jacobs was concerned only with her very basic rights, as that was what was being oppressed. However, the Civil Rights activists in "Going to Meet the Man" are mentioned by Jesse to be protesting to be able to vote and make political changes. From before and after the Civil War, the goalposts have changed for Black freedom, from basic rights to more social acceptance and political involvement; the scope of that freedom has expanded. On the other hand, while Flint and Jesse have similar desires towards Black oppression, in that they think that Black men need to be disempowered (Flint's attitude towards Jacobs's Black suitor and Jesse's attitude towards the lynching he witnessed) and Black women should be used as sexual objects, Jesse has less overtly harmful interests. It is unclear whether or not Flint holds the belief that there are "good" Black people as Jesse does, but Jesse's violent and hateful tendencies are not constant the way that Flint's are.

Ultimately, there is and cannot be one true definition of freedom, as freedom is a constructed idea that is constantly shifting and changing with time. Traditionally, American ideas of freedom have heavily been influenced by oppressive ideas, which are constantly being challenged. As many other aspects of American culture seem mutable and always moving towards new developments, so too is freedom. Unfortunately, the full scope of such a discussion cannot be thoroughly conducted in one single paper. Baldwin expressed radical ideas of freedom that, while relevant and present in “Going to Meet the Man”, could not be explored within the scope of this essay. His ideas that the White man is the true oppressed and that the Black man is free, while briefly touched upon, could not be fully explained at this time and may provide more valuable insight towards this topic. However, his ideas of freedom were heavily debated and criticised, which may even show further that the idea of the “true American value of freedom” will always be unclear from an objective standpoint.

Works Cited

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