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Written By Herself: *Harriet Jacobs' Slave Narrative*

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I

Your proposal to me has been thought over and over again, but not without some most painful remembrance. Dear Amy, if it was the life of a heroine with no degradation associated with it! Far better to have been one of the starving poor of Ireland whose bones had to bleach on the highways than to have been a slave with the curse of slavery stamped upon yourself and children. . . . I have tried for the last two years to conquer . . . [my stubborn pride] and I feel that God has helped me, or I never would consent to give my past life to anyone, for I would not do it without giving the whole truth. If it could help save another from my fate, it would be selfish and unChristian in me to keep it back.¹

WITH THESE WORDS, more than a century ago the newly emancipated fugitive slave Harriet Jacobs expressed conflicting responses to a friend's suggestion that she make her life story public. Although she finally succeeded in writing and publishing her sensational tale, its authenticity—long questioned—has recently been denied. Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written By Herself* has just been transformed from a questionable slave narrative into a well-documented pseudonymous autobiography, however, by the discovery of a cache of her letters.²

¹ This passage comes from one of thirty letters from Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post in the Post Family Papers recently acquired by the University of Rochester Library. Labeled n.d. #84, it was probably written at the end of 1852 or the beginning of 1853. All of the letters cited from Jacobs to Post are in this collection. Most note only day and month; my attempts to supply missing dates may be in error. Editing Jacobs' letters, I have regularized paragraphing, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling, but not otherwise tampered with text.

I hasten to record my considerable debt to Dorothy Sterling who includes some of Jacobs' letters in *A Woman and Black* (Norton, in press) and with whom I am writing a book on Jacobs; to Karl Kabelac of the University of Rochester Library; and to Patricia G. Holland, co-editor of *The Collected Correspondence of Lydia Maria Child, 1817-1880* (Millwood, N.Y.: K.T.O. Microform, 1979).

² [Harriet Jacobs], *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself*. Ed. *American Literature*, Volume 53, Number 3, November 1981. Copyright © 1981 by Duke University Press.

This correspondence establishes Jacobs' authorship and clarifies the role of her editor. In doing so, it provides us with a new perspective on an unlikely grouping of nineteenth-century writers—Nathaniel P. Willis, Harriet Beecher Stowe, William C. Nell, and L. Maria Child—and enriches our literary history by presenting us with a unique chronicle of the efforts of an underclass black woman to write and publish her autobiography in antebellum America.

II

The appearance of Jacobs' letters has made it possible to trace her life. She was born near Edenton, North Carolina, about 1815. In *Incidents*, she writes that her parents died while she was a child, and that at the death of her beloved mistress (who had taught her to read and spell) she was sent to a licentious master. He subjected her to unrelenting sexual harassment. In her teens she bore two children to another white man. When her jealous master threatened her with concubinage, Jacobs ran away. Aided by sympathetic black and white neighbors, she was sheltered by her family and for years remained hidden in the home of her grandmother, a freed slave. During this time the father of her children, who had bought them from her master, allowed them to live with her grandmother. Although later he took their little girl to a free state, he failed to keep his promise to emancipate the children.

About 1842, Harriet Jacobs finally escaped North, contacted her daughter, was joined by her son, and found work in New York City. Because the baby she was hired to tend was the daughter of litterateur N. P. Willis, it has been possible to use Willis' materials to piece out—and to corroborate—Jacobs' story.³ In 1849 she moved to Rochester, New York, where the Women's Rights Convention had recently met and where Frederick Douglass' *North Star* was being published

L. Maria Child (Boston: For the Author, 1861). An English edition appeared the following year: [Harriet Jacobs], *The Deeper Wrong: Or, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself*. Ed. L. Maria Child. (London: W. Tweedie, 1862).

Examining *Incidents* in a discussion of "fictional accounts . . . in which the major character may have been a real fugitive, but the narrative of his life is probably false," John Blassingame recently judged that "the work is not credible." See *The Slave Community* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 233-34.

³ Willis referred to Jacobs directly—though not by name—in a *House and Home* column reprinted in *Outdoors at Idlewild* (New York: Scribner's, 1855), pp. 275-76.

each week. With her brother, a fugitive active in the abolitionist movement, she ran an antislavery reading room and met other reformers. Jacobs made the Rochester Quaker Amy Post, a feminist and abolitionist, her confidante; her letters to Post date from this period. In September 1850 Jacobs returned to New York and resumed work in the Willis household. When she was again hounded by her owner, she and her children were purchased and manumitted by Willis.

It was following this—between 1853 and 1858—that Jacobs acquiesced to Post's urgings; after a brush with Harriet Beecher Stowe, she wrote out the story of her life by herself. With the help of black abolitionist writer William C. Nell and white abolitionist woman of letters L. Maria Child (whose correspondence, too, corroborates Jacobs'), her narrative was finally published early in 1861.⁴ As the national crisis deepened, Jacobs attempted to swell sentiment for Emancipation by publicizing and circulating her book. During the Civil War she went to Washington, D.C., to nurse black troops; she later returned South to help the freedmen. Jacobs remained actively engaged for the next thirty years. She died at Washington, D.C., in 1897.

III

The primary literary importance of Harriet Jacobs' letters to Amy Post is that they establish her authorship of *Incidents* and define the role of her editor, L. Maria Child. They also yield a fascinating account of the experiences of this underclass black female autobiographer with several antebellum writers.

Jacobs' letters express her conviction that, unlike both his first and his second wife, Nathaniel P. Willis was "pro-slavery," and writings like his picturesque 1859 account of slave life entitled "Negro Happiness in Virginia" must have confirmed her judgment.⁵ Because of

⁴ Nell reviewed *Incidents* in *The Liberator*, 25 Jan. 1861. Other reviews include *The National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 23 Feb. 1861, and *The Weekly Anglo-African*, 13 April 1861. Relevant passages from Child's correspondence are cited below.

⁵ For Jacobs on Willis, see Jacobs to Post, Cornwall, Orange County (late 1852–early 1853?) n.d. #84. Child commented on Jacobs' relationship with Willis in a letter to John G. Whittier dated 4 April 1861, now in the Child Papers, Manuscript Division, the Library of Congress. Willis' article was anthologized in *The Convalescent* (New York: Scribner's, 1859), pp. 410–16.

this—although she repeatedly sought help to win the time and privacy to write, and even requested introductions to public figures in hope that they would effect the publication of her book—Jacobs consistently refused to ask for Willis' aid. She did not even want him to know that she was writing. For years, while living under his roof, she worked on her book secretly and at night.

Her brief involvement with Harriet Beecher Stowe was decisive in the genesis of *Incidents*. When Jacobs first agreed to a public account of her life, she did not plan to write it herself, but to enlist Stowe's aid in helping her produce a dictated narrative. To this end, Jacobs asked Post to approach Uncle Tom's creator with the suggestion that Jacobs be invited to Stowe's home so they could become acquainted. Then, reading in the papers of the author's plan to travel abroad, Jacobs persuaded Mrs. Willis to write suggesting that Stowe permit Jacobs' daughter Louisa to accompany her to England as a "representative southern slave."

Harriet Beecher Stowe evidently responded by writing to Mrs. Willis that she would not take Jacobs' daughter with her, by forwarding to Mrs. Willis Post's sketch of Jacobs' sensational life for verification, and by proposing that if it was true, she herself use Jacobs' story in *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which she was rushing to complete. Reporting all of this to Post, Jacobs suggests that she felt denigrated as a mother, betrayed as a woman, and threatened as a writer by Stowe's action.

[Mrs. Stowe] said it would be much care to her to take Louisa. As she went by invitation, it would not be right, and she was afraid that if . . . [Louisa's] situation as a slave should be known, it would subject her to much petting and patronizing, which would be more pleasing to a young girl than useful; and the English were very apt to do it, and . . . [Mrs. Stowe] was very much opposed to it with this class of people. . . .

I had never opened my life to Mrs. Willis concerning my children. . . . It embarrassed me at first, but I told her the truth; but we both thought it wrong in Mrs. Stowe to have sent your letter. She might have written to inquire if she liked.

Mrs. Willis wrote her a very kind letter begging that she would not use any of the facts in her *Key*, saying that I wished it to be a history of my life entirely by itself, which would do more good, and it needed no romance; but if she wanted some facts for her book, that I would be most

happy to give her some. She never answered the letter. She [Mrs. Willis] wrote again, and I wrote twice, with no better success. . . .

I think she did not like my objection. I can't help it.⁶

Jacobs later expressed her racial outrage: "Think, dear Amy, that a visit to Stafford House would spoil me, as Mrs. Stowe thinks petting is more than my race can bear? Well, what a pity we poor blacks can't have the firmness and stability of character that you white people have!"⁷

Jacobs' distrust of Willis and disillusionment with Stowe contrast with her confidence in William C. Nell and L. Maria Child. After the Stowe episode, Jacobs decided to write her story herself. She spent years on the manuscript and, when it was finished, more years trying to get it published in England and America. Finally, in a letter spelling out the cost of her lack of an endorsement from Willis or Stowe, she reported to Post that Nell and Child were helping arrange for the publication of her autobiography.

Difficulties seemed to thicken, and I became discouraged. . . . My manuscript was read at Phillips and Sampson. They agreed to take it if I could get Mrs. Stowe or Mr. Willis to write a preface for it. The former I had the second clinch [?] from, and the latter I would not ask, and before anything was done, this establishment failed. So I gave up the effort until this autumn [when] I sent it to Thayer and Eldridge of Boston. They were willing to publish it if I could obtain a preface from Mrs. Child. . . .

I had never seen Mrs. Child. Past experience made me tremble at the thought of approaching another satellite of so great magnitude . . . [but] through W. C. Nell's ready kindness, I met Mrs. Child at the antislavery office. Mrs. C. is like yourself, a whole-souled woman. We soon found the way to each other's heart. I will send you some of her letters. . . .⁸

⁶ My discussion of Jacobs and Stowe is based on five letters from Jacobs to Post: Cornwall, Orange County (late 1852–early 1853?) n.d. #84; 14 Feb. (1853?); 4 April (1853?); New Bedford, Mass. (Spring, 1853?) n.d. #80; 31 July (1854?) n.d. #88. The lengthy quotation is from Jacobs to Post, 4 April (1853?). I have been unable to locate any letters to Stowe from Post, Cornelia Willis, or Jacobs, or from Stowe to Cornelia Willis.

⁷ Jacobs to Post, New Bedford, Mass. (Spring, 1853?) n.d. #80.

⁸ Jacobs to Post, 8 Oct. (1860?). I have not been able to document a second attempt to gain Stowe's backing. Jacobs discusses her efforts to publish her book abroad in letters to Post dated 21 June (1857?) n.d. #90; New Bedford, 9 August (1857?); 1 March (1858?); and Cambridge, 3 May (1858?) n.d. #87.

Accompanying this correspondence are two letters from L. Maria Child to Harriet Jacobs. These, I believe, resolve the questions historians have repeatedly raised concerning the editing of Jacobs' manuscript. Child begins the first by describing her editorial procedures in much the same way she later discussed them in her Introduction to *Incidents*.

I have been busy with your M.S. ever since I saw you; and have only done one-third of it. I have very little occasion to alter the language, which is wonderfully good, for one whose opportunities for education have been so limited. The events are interesting, and well told; the remarks are also good, and to the purpose. But I am copying a great deal of it, for the purpose of transposing sentences and pages, so as to bring the story into continuous *order*, and the remarks into *appropriate* places. I think you will see that this renders the story much more clear and entertaining.

Child's second letter is a detailed explanation of the publisher's contract.⁹

Jacobs' letters are also of value in providing a unique running account of the efforts of this newly emancipated Afro-American woman to produce her autobiography. After deciding to write the manuscript herself, she followed the long-standing practice of sending apprentice pieces to the newspapers. In style and in subject, her first public letter reflects her private correspondence and prefigures her book by using the language of polite letters to discuss the sexual exploitation of women in slavery. Jacobs begins with an announcement of her newly found determination to tell her tale by herself. Then—as in the letters and the book—she expresses the pain she feels as she recalls and writes about her life.

Poor as it may be, I had rather give . . . [my story] from my own hand, than have it said that I employed others to do it for me. . . .

⁹ Child to Jacobs, Wayland, 13 August 1860; and Wayland, 27 Sept. 1860. Any remaining doubts concerning Child's role must, I think, rest on an undated plea for secrecy from Jacobs to Post: "Please let no one see these letters. I am pledged to Mrs. Child that I will tell no one what she has done, as she is beset by so many people, and it would affect the book. It must be the slave's own story—which it truly is." To my mind, this reflects an effort to shield Child from interruption while she edits the manuscript, not an attempt to hide editorial improprieties. Also see Child to Lucy [Searle], 4 Feb. 1861 in the Lydia Maria Child Papers, Anti-Slavery Collection of Cornell University Libraries.

I was born a slave, raised in the Southern hot-bed until I was the mother of two children, sold at the early age of two and four years old. I have been hunted through all of the Northern States—but no, I will not tell you of my own suffering—no, it would harrow up my soul. . . .¹⁰

Encouraged by the publication of this letter, Jacobs secretly composed others. Her correspondence during this period reveals that she was at once determined to write, apprehensive about her ability to do so, and fearful of being discovered: “No one here ever suspected me [of writing to the *Tribune*]. I would not have Mrs. W. to know it before I had undertaken my history, for I must write just what I have lived and witnessed myself. Don’t expect much of me, dear Amy. You shall have truth, but not talent.”¹¹

The letters record other pressures. During the years Jacobs composed her extraordinary memoirs, Mr. and Mrs. Willis moved into an eighteen-room estate and added two more children to their family; Jacobs’ work load increased accordingly. Writing to Post, she voiced the frustrations of a would-be writer who earned her living as a nursemaid: “Poor Hatty’s name is so much in demand that I cannot accomplish much; if I could steal away and have two quiet months to myself, I would work night and day though it should all fall to the ground.” She went on, however, to say that she preferred the endless interruptions to revealing her project to her employers: “To get this time I should have to explain myself, and no one here except Louisa knows that I have ever written anything to be put in print. I have not the courage to meet the criticism and ridicule of educated people.”¹²

Her distress about the content of her book was even worse than her embarrassment about its formal flaws. As her manuscript neared completion, Jacobs asked Post to identify herself with the book in a letter expressing her concern about its sensational aspects and her need for the acceptance of another woman: “I have thought that I wanted some female friend to write a preface or some introductory remarks . . . yet believe me, dear friend, there are many painful

¹⁰ “Letter From a Fugitive Slave,” *New York Tribune*, 21 June 1853. Jacobs’ second letter appeared on 25 July 1853.

¹¹ Jacobs to Post, 9 Oct. (1853?) n.d. #85. Also see Jacobs to Post, Cornwall, 25 June (1853?).

¹² Jacobs to Post, Cornwall, 11 Jan. (1854?).

things in . . . [my book] that make me shrink from asking the sacrifice from one so good and pure as yourself."¹³

IV

While *Incidents* embodies the general characteristics of the slave narrative, it has long been judged a peculiar example of this American genre. It is not, like most, the story of a life but, as its title announces, of incidents in a life. Like other narrators, Jacobs asserted her authorship in her subtitle, wrote in the first person, and addressed the subject of the oppression of chattel slavery and the struggle for freedom from the perspective of one who had been enslaved. But in her title she identified herself by gender, and in her text addressed a specific aspect of this subject. *Incidents* is an account by a woman of her struggle against her oppression in slavery as a sexual object and as a mother. Thus it presents a double critique of our nineteenth-century ideas and institutions. It inevitably challenges not only the institution of chattel slavery and its supporting ideology of white racism; it also challenges traditional patriarchal institutions and ideas.

Publication of this book marked, I think, a unique moment in our literary history. *Incidents* defied the taboos prohibiting women from discussing their sexuality—much less their sexual exploitation—in print. Within its pages, a well-known woman writer presented to the public the writing of a pseudonymous “impure woman” on a “forbidden subject.” Here a black American woman, defying barriers of caste and class, defying rules of sexual propriety, was joined by a white American woman to make her history known in an attempt to effect social change. It is ironic that this narrative, which was painfully written in an effort to give “the whole truth,” has been branded false. Now that the discovery of Harriet Jacobs’ letters has established that her book was indeed *Written By Herself*, we can reexamine its place within women’s writings, Afro-American literature, and the body of our national letters.

¹³ Jacobs to Post, 18 May and 8 June (1857?). Post’s signed statement in the Appendix to *Incidents* was written in response to this request.