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Harriet Jacobs and the Transatlantic Movement

Jean Fagan Yellin

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1 Several years ago, I discussed the international aspects of the nineteenth-century feminist abolitionist movement, looking at the transformation of Wedgwood's kneeling slave 2 from male to female, and at the ways in which female antislavery activists used this image to explore -- and to protest -- their condition as women within patriarchal structures. In *Women and Sisters*, I included only a brief chapter on Harriet Jacobs.¹ 3 In the years since then, I have studied her life, and this afternoon I want to talk about the involvement in the transatlantic reform movements of Harriet Jacobs--fugitive slave, antislavery activist, and author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.² Jacobs's life personalizes the theme of this conference: the international character of the antislavery movement and the extraordinary role of those women--and especially of those African-American women--who, like Jacobs, participated in the international movement. This afternoon, after a few words about Jacobs's home town of Edenton, North Carolina, about her first trip abroad, and about her life and work within the internationalist abolitionist context, I want to talk about both (I) the internationalist character of her public writings; and (II) about the international character of her relief work during the Civil War and Reconstruction. I will close with a few comments on Jacobs within today's context.

Let me begin by sketching a little background:

Jacobs, you will recall, was born into slavery in North Carolina and, after almost seven years in hiding, fled the South in 1842. She lived and worked in New York and in Massachusetts for ten years before she was freed by purchase and began writing her slave narrative, finally published early in 1861. In the months after the attack on Fort Sumter,

she went south to minister to the "contraband" (fugitive slaves behind the Union lines) and to the Freed People--first in Washington, D. C., then in Union-occupied Alexandria, Virginia, and later in Savannah, Georgia. Following the appearance of her book, Jacobs became a public figure, known among the reformers as an antislavery activist and as "Linda," the pseudonymous author and first-person narrator of *Incidents*.

At the beginning of my work on Jacobs's biography, 4 I had no sense of the complexities of the slave society of Edenton, North Carolina into which she was born in 1813. I have since learned that she grew up at the Horniblow's tavern, the stage coach stop next to the Court House and near the public wharf. 5 The tall ships crowding Edenton's harbor, which were manned by sailors of all nations and colors, both free and slave, sailed not only up the coast to New York, but to the West Indies and even across the Atlantic. Nervously aware of the potential threat the sailors posed to Edenton's tight hierarchical society, the *Gazette* periodically warned against the dram shops on the wharf where white and black men, both slave and free, gathered. And just as the nearby Collins plantation, where slaves had been imported directly from Guinea, made Africa seem not so distant, and as Edenton's broad harbor opened the young slave girl's imagination to free lands across the water (revolutionary Haiti was not very far away), the presence of the Cabarrus Pocosin (the "snaky swamp" just southwest of town) invited her awareness of maroons of fugitives living freely just beyond Edenton's boundaries. Jacobs's Edenton was not the isolated upcountry southern town I had initially imagined, but a community actively participating in the conglomerate culture of the Atlantic rim.³

Three years after her escape from Edenton, Jacobs traveled abroad, sailing to

England as a nursemaid in the employ of the writer Nathaniel Parker Willis, whose English-born wife had died and who wanted to take his little daughter Imogen to visit his grieving in-laws. **6** After a few days in London, Jacobs and Imogen were sent out to Steventon, in Berkshire, where they stayed at the Vicarage, home of Willis's sister-in-law and her husband. None of Jacobs's letters from this period survive, but she later wrote that during her months at the Vicarage, she experienced spiritual renewal. Edenton's St. Paul's had disgusted her. She had been repelled by the "contemptuous manner" in which African-Americans were offered communion, revolted by Dr. Norcom's church membership, and sickened at seeing ministers of the gospel buying and selling slaves. But at Steventon, she saw that everything was different. In contrast to Edenton's slave-trading clerics, she found her host "a true disciple of Jesus," and--impressed by the "beauty" of his life-- she felt inspired with faith. For Jacobs, this visit to England signified not only freedom from slavecatchers and racists, but also a spiritual rebirth. Nevertheless--unlike Frederick Douglass, who would find his years abroad transformative-- she returned to America a fugitive.

The international character of Jacobs's antislavery movement.

Although when she got back home, she continued to distance herself from the abolitionist activists with whom her brother John S. was increasingly involved, **7** there is no way that she was unaware of the Boston abolitionists, or of the international character of the celebrations organized around West Indian Emancipation. (The August 1, 1834 event, marked every year by the international antislavery movement, was commemorated by this medal, struck in Birmingham, England.) It is likely that on a hot August day in

1847, Jacobs and her daughter Louisa joined the crowds celebrating West Indian Emancipation. If they did, they watched 150 black Bostonians proudly parading on horseback. Their appearance, the *Liberator* reported, "was good, and they demeaned themselves with great propriety as they passed through State Street (with their mounted white band) which was filled with spectators."⁴

Two years later, Jacobs followed her activist brother John S. west to Rochester where--as an intermittent member of the household of the Quaker Amy Post, and as clerk in her brother's Anti-Slavery Reading Room (housed downtown above Douglass' newspaper *The North Star*)--she joined Rochester's abolitionist circle. The earliest piece of Jacobs's writing that has been found is a note to Post, away visiting her family, in which Jacobs signals the international dimensions of the movement in Rochester as she writes, "I suppose we shall have Frederick and the Miss Griffiths here on Sunday to draw a full house."⁵ **8** "Frederick" is of course Frederick Douglass; "the Miss Griffiths" she mentions are the English sisters Julia and Eliza Griffiths, come to Rochester to help Douglass in his work. Julia, who stayed on to become the permanent secretary of the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society and the editor of two volumes of *Autographs for Freedom* [which you see here], brought home to Jacobs--and to the other Rochester feminist-abolitionist activists-- the international character of women's involvement in the movement every single day.⁶

(I) The internationalist character of Jacobs's writings

In 1852, after her freedom was bought, Jacobs wrote to Amy Post that "since I

have no fear of my name coming before those whom I have lived in dread of I cannot be happy without trying to be useful in some way.⁷ When her friend suggested that she could make a contribution to the movement by writing her life, Jacobs began by sending letters to newspaper editors. Her very first appearance in print, expresses her internationalist perspective.⁹ This letter-- signed "Fugitive"-- was published in June, 1853 in the New York *Tribune*. Jacobs composed it in rebuttal to the public response of Julia G. Tyler, wife of the ex-President of the United States, to "An Affectionate and Christian Address of Many Thousands of the Women of England to their Sisters, the Women of the United States of America." Usually known as the Stafford House address, in this major international political statement a half-million British women joined the Dutchess of Sutherland to condemn chattel slavery and to appeal to American women, "as sisters, as wives, and as mothers, to raise your voices to your fellow-citizens, and your prayers to God, for the removal of this affliction from the Christian world." In response, Tyler defended the institution of chattel slavery and indicted the British women for ignoring their native poor, asserting that "the negro of the South lives sumptuously in comparison with the 100,000 of the white population of London."⁸

Reading Tyler, Harriet Jacobs impetuously decided to insert herself into this international public dialogue. Presenting as her credentials for participation in the debate her status as a fugitive slave, writing in the first person, and addressing her audience as "Christians," in her *Tribune* letter Jacobs challenges Tyler's assertion that slaves are sold "only under very peculiar circumstances" by describing the sale of a slave woman who was discarded by her master after being used as a sexual object. Here she charges that the institution of chattel slavery degrades all women--both slaves and slave holders.⁹

Here Jacobs did not mention her experiences abroad. Only later, after she graduated from letter-writing to writing *Incidents*, she recalled her visit to England. It was memorable, she then wrote, because "for the first time in my life I was in a place where I was treated according to my deportment, without reference to my complexion. I felt as if a great millstone had been lifted from my breast." [ILSG p. 183] **10** Although slavery had been ended in Great Britain, however, it was not uncommon to find its defenders in the English press, where [as in this cartoon], the easy life of an American slave was contrasted with the miserable life of a member of the British working class. Writing *Incidents*, Jacobs countered this view. "The people I saw around me [in England] were, many of them, among the poorest poor. But when I visited them in their little thatched cottages, I felt that the condition of even the meanest and most ignorant among them was vastly superior to the condition of the most favored slaves in America." [ILSG p. 184]

In the spring of 1857, fifteen years out of slavery and an activist for almost a decade, she was finishing her book manuscript. **11** Jacobs was no longer a novice in the antislavery camp, and she again demonstrated her internationalist perspective when she asked activist William C. Nell to arrange a meeting **12** with Maria Weston Chapman, leader of the Garrisonian Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, who had recently returned to America after years abroad. Jacobs prevailed upon Chapman to read her manuscript and to give her letters of introduction to prominent abolitionists in England, Scotland, and Ireland. Armed with this endorsement, in 1858 she set sail on a second trip to England,

this time traveling not as a fugitive slave tending her employer's child,13 but as an African-American woman with the credentials to participate in the international antislavery arena--like Ellen Craft, 14and Sarah Parker Remond.

Her endorsements by Boston abolitionists, coupled with the British contacts made by her brother John S., now working as a seaman out of London, enabled Jacobs to meet MP George Thompson's journalist son and daughter-in-law Amelia Thompson Chesson, activists in the London Emancipation Committee. Although the prominent Irish Garrisonian editor Richard Davis Webb judged her "one of the truest heroines we have ever met with," however, ultimately Jacobs's British colleagues counseled her to first get out publish her narrative in America. She returned home, as she had left, an unpublished author.¹⁰

Jacobs finally got out *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* in Boston early in 1861, and only weeks later, Jacobs's brother John S.'s brief narrative, "A True Tale of Slavery" appeared in the London periodical *The Leisure Hour*.¹¹ 15 Having published her narrative at home, as advised by her English colleagues, now Jacobs sent the plates of her book to the Chessons in London. They arranged for its publication, retitled *The Deeper Wrong: Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*.¹² They also arranged for the book to be noticed--not only in the reform journals, but also in the mainstream press. Judging from its lengthy British reviews, Jacobs's book made an important contribution to the abolitionists' efforts to win public support in their effort to stop Great Britain from recognizing the Confederacy: The (London) *Morning Star and Dial* wrote, "We would have every English matron exposed to the insidious influence of

high-bred visitors from the Southern Confederacy, be armed beforehand with an insight into the precise nature of the wrongs which are inseparable from slavery in its outwardly most inoffensive and harmless guise. We can imagine nothing better calculated to affect such a result than this thrilling history of a slave girl's experiences."¹³

(II) The internationalist character of Jacobs's relief work during the Civil War and Reconstruction

Although both the American and the English editions of Jacobs's book were published pseudonymously, from the beginning her name was connected with it. (It was only in the twentieth century that this knowledge was lost.) In Great Britain, as in America, the appearance of her slave narrative made her something of a personage among antislavery activists--and especially among abolitionist women on both sides of the Atlantic. **16** Following the fall of Fort Sumter, Jacobs used this prominence to support the work she was undertaking among the refugees. Union Army authorities were not prepared for the "contraband," later the "emancipated," who were appearing in large numbers behind the Union lines [as you see in this 1862 photograph]. At times they sent them back into slavery, at times they granted them asylum, and at times they put them to work. But no army commander wanted civilians--certainly not women and children--in his camp. Nor were the refugees welcomed by civil authorities in cities where they sought asylum, cities like Washington, D. C., Alexandria, Virginia, and Savannah, Georgia, where Jacobs chose to work.

Throughout the Civil War and the first years of Reconstruction, Jacobs and her daughter Louisa worked with the black refugees and wrote about their work,--not only

formal reports to the organizations supporting them, but reaching out to a broader international audience through the columns of the African-American press 17 and of liberal and movement newspapers in the United States and in Great Britain. [As you see from this graphic from the *Illustrated London News*, the British public and press were interested in the black war refugees.] The form adopted by Jacobs and her daughter--and by other women writing in the papers--was a gendered public correspondence presenting a woman's voice that challenged gender norms by inserting itself into the public debates on public issues. Jacobs's Civil War letters are not distinct from other on-the-spot reports because of their form. They are, however, distinctive because of their message. Jacobs writes that despite their heritage of enslavement, the refugees will make excellent American citizens. And her letters are also unique because of their narrative voice -- the voice of an activist black woman who had been held in slavery.

18 For example, this is Jacobs's April, 1863 letter to Rev. J. Sella Martin, published in the organ of the newly-formed [London] Freedman's Aid Society, which was concentrating on raising funds to help the fugitives fleeing the southern plantations.¹⁴ (Like Jacobs born a North Carolina slave, by 1863 Martin, who had been Jacobs's pastor in Boston, was preaching and organizing aid for the "contraband" at the Free Christian Church in Bromley-by-Bow in London's East End.) What I would like to discuss is the presentation of this letter. Its heading, "Letter from Mrs. Jacobs," suggests that the editor is confident that his London Freedmen's Aid Society readers are familiar with her name; its headnote identifying Jacobs as "the 'Linda' of the 'Deeper Wrong'" testifies to the impact of Jacobs's book among this British readership; and the decision to publish Jacobs's report on her refugee work suggests the interest of these readers in her work, and

hence holds the promise of her continuing relationship with the British antislavery public.

19 Another example, closer to home, testifies not to Jacobs's international celebrity, but to her ongoing internationalist perspective. On August 1, 1864, Jacobs dramatized her internationalist worldview for the Union soldiers in Alexandria, Virginia. After weeks of her careful planning, that day marked Alexandria's first commemoration of British West Indian Emancipation. The center of the event was the presentation of a flag to the Colored Hospital, renamed L'Ouverture in honor of the Haitian patriot. [What you see is the masthead of the New York *Anglo-African*, which reported the event.] Organizing the celebration, Jacobs and her daughter had collected \$60.00 from the sick and wounded, arranged for Philadelphia friends to donate the flag, and worked with local women on dinner and an entertainment. On schedule at 1:00 in the afternoon, the band marched onto the piazza and began to play, and at 2:00 the convalescent soldiers marched out with four sergeants at their head. After a prayer by a local black minister and a stirring rendition of "Hail, Columbia," Harriet Jacobs spoke. Formally addressing her audience of "Physicians, Soldiers, and Friends," she began by noting that West Indian Emancipation had taken place thirty-one years earlier. Now, however, she proclaimed, "we are passing through times that will secure for us a higher and nobler celebration. . . . Soldiers, what we have got came through the strength and valor of your right arms. . . . you have made . . . [this flag] the symbol of freedom for the slave. . . ." ¹⁵

While the L'Ouverture flag presentation crowned Jacobs's work in Alexandria,

over the next few years, dozens of letters from Jacobs and her daughter appeared in black newspapers and in the reform press in the United States. In the spring of 1866, excerpts from three of these letters--all written from Savannah, Georgia, and all initially published in the (New York) *Freedman*, **20** appeared in the (London) *Freed-Man*, an organ of the Freedman's Aid Society. These writings brought to its English audience Jacobs's first-hand accounts of the betrayal of Reconstruction as she witnessed it, day by day, in rural Georgia. In the first, she writes:

"On the plantations on either side [of the river] . . . are the plantations given . . . [to the people] by Gen. Sherman, to work for themselves three years, paying a certain percentage to the Government. . . . Now these people are found fault with for believing the government would help them."

And two weeks later,

"They are turning most of the people from the plantations. It is a pitiful sight to go down to the Bluff where the poor creatures are landed. You will see crowds of them huddled around a few burning sticks, so ragged and filthy they scarce look like human beings Some of the river plantations that I visit are sending off all that will not make yearly contracts Some of the conditions of these are very unjust. They are not allowed to have a boat or musket. They are not allowed to own a horse, cow, or pig. . . ."

And a few weeks after that,

"I must tell you about my island poor: they have increased in numbers, mostly women and children. They are not allowed to plant, and are expecting every day to be driven off." ¹⁶

Jacobs's final international publication is very different. After years of work among the black refugees in the South, in 1868 she returned to England at the behest of the Savannah African-American community, who hoped to build an orphan asylum and a home for destitute aged freed people. 21 Jacobs's appeal for funds for her project ran in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*.¹⁷ It speaks to the importance of our topic today to point out that Jacobs took her mission not to Boston or to Paris, but to London, where she assumed that she would find support. And here again, the apparatus surrounding Jacobs's text testifies to the significance of Jacobs's presence on the international reform scene. The editor's headnote makes clear that she is well known and respected by British reformers: "We have much pleasure in publishing the following Appeal. It is made by a well-known victim of Slavery, Linda Brent, now Harriet Jacob, whose narrative, entitled "Linda," every one should read. We hope her appeal will be met with a generous response."

The endmatter makes the point even more clearly. It notifies potential contributors that they can send their money to Stafford Allen (a prosperous Quaker producer of pharmaceuticals who for a half century worked with the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society), to Robert Alsop (Quaker Minister at Stoke Newington and active Secretary to a Committee for the management of the Yearly Meeting's Negro and Aborigines Fund), and to Clementia Doughty Taylor (wife of the radical politician and unitarian Peter Taylor, MP for Leicester, who during America's Civil War was the first member of parliament to associate himself with the federal party, and who had served as treasurer of the London Emancipation Society).¹⁸ It testifies, that is, that in support of her

relief mission, Jacobs had gained the public endorsements of leaders of what was left, in 1868, of England's abolitionist establishment.

In her appeal, Jacobs --who, to make her identity perfectly clear to British readers of her narrative, signs herself "Linda Jacobs"-- again writes out of her own experience:

"I know the degradation of Slavery--the blight it leaves; and, thus knowing, feel how strong the necessity is of throwing around the young, who, through God's mercy, have come out of it, the most salutary influences."

Petitioning on behalf of "the aged freedmen," who "infirm, penniless, homeless . . . wander about dependent on charity for bread and shelter," and explaining the goal of the Savannah society--to raise funds to buy fifteen acres of land and to build a self-sustaining institution," Jacobs addresses her audience directly, as British supporters of an important international cause:

"I am deeply sensible of the interest taken and the aid rendered by the friends of Great Britain since the emancipation of Slavery. It is a noble evidence of their joy at the downfall of American Slavery and the advancement of human rights."

22 Her appeal was successful. The National Freedmen's Aid Union of Great Britain and Ireland voted to send the New York Quakers, her sponsors, one hundred pounds sterling "for use in the benevolent objects of Harriet Jacobs, and especially in the erection of a proposed asylum in Savannah, Georgia, for destitute colored widows and orphans." This, however, did not signal the success of the proposed project. In Georgia that year, the Klan was riding and burning. The papers of the New York Quakers further record that, in addition to receiving the money to support Jacobs's "benevolent objects," they also received a letter from Jacobs herself, commenting that, "on account of the

unsettled state of affairs at the South, she did not deem it advisable to commence building the asylum at present."¹⁹ When in 1868 Jacobs left England for the last time, she knew that although Reconstruction was still the official agenda. the dream of a free, non-racist America was finished. With the death of that dream, her career as an international activist was over.

Some Concluding Thoughts

Jacobs's childhood in Edenton, North Carolina provided her with the international context characteristic of the cultures of the Atlantic rim, and after her escape, in Boston and Rochester her world view deepened through her involvement with internationalist Garrisonian abolitionists. From her earliest anonymous public writings, Harriet Jacobs expressed an international awareness, raising her voice anonymously in the transatlantic debate over Slavery, and then openly, as an African-American woman creating a public career in the international movement for freedom. Again and again in her letters, in her speech, in her narrative, and in her organization work, Jacobs makes clear that the scope of her concerns is not local or regional or even national, but international. Her presence on the international scene, like her deeply feminist narrative, speaks to her ongoing concerns with the condition of women. Today, as we explore the complex interactions of abolitionism and feminism on an international scale, it is fitting that Harriet Jacobs has again become an international figure, 23 and that her book is in print in Brazil, 24 in Germany, and -- most recently--25 in Japan.

