

Tearing the Envelope: Harriet Jacobs's "Epistolary Activism"

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Abstract

In her debut as an author in June 1853, Harriet Jacobs published a letter in the *New-York Tribune* in which she responded to a transatlantic epistolary exchange that took place between female antislavery supporters in Britain and former First Lady Julia Gardiner Tyler. In this letter and via this transatlantic exchange, I argue, Jacobs was able to inscribe her racial and gendered position as an African American woman into the American body politic. Broadly construed, this essay wants to de-emphasize the dominance of the genre of the slave narrative in African American life writing, and to draw attention to the form and function of letter writing in American antislavery literature. In the context of Jacobs's work, I argue, letter writing was not only a form of verification and authentication, but also a means of participating in a particular mode of communication that deliberately blurred the lines of the private and public, the amateur and professional, and the national and transnational. While Jacobs very much adhered to the protocols of sentimental literature in her 1861 slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, we witness in this first published letter how she experiments with and realizes additional literary personae, complementing the figure of the fugitive slave with that of the political commentator and the female activist.

Introduction: Gender, Antislavery Activism, and Epistolary Writing

In the context of antislavery literature, letter writing was often employed as a means of providing supposedly authentic first-hand information on slavery, and it thus aimed at correcting the image of slavery as a benevolent institution. Reprinting letters in newspapers was a common practice in nineteenth-century American print culture and was particularly prevalent in antislavery periodicals such as *The Liberator*, *The North Star*, and *The National Anti-Slavery Standard*. What is particularly interesting about this reprinting is that it blurs the boundaries between private and public communication (Korb 241): letters in newspapers are private correspondence made public or written for a public audience.

While the most prominent genre of African American autobiographical writing in the nineteenth century is certainly the slave narrative, African American Studies at the end of the twentieth and in the early twenty-first centuries began to draw more attention to other forms of autobiographical writing. David F. Dorr's remarkable travel narra-

tive *A Colored Man round the World* (1858), for example, was rediscovered and published as an annotated edition in the late 1990s. The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers series, edited by Henry Louis Gates in the 1980s and 1990s, made available many autobiographical works by African American women, including the spiritual narratives of Maria W. Stewart, Jarena Lee, and the journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké. However, despite the fact that, as Judy Nolte-Tempe observes, letter writers in the nineteenth century “demonstrate [...] a self-consciousness of correspondence as potential autobiographical document” (903), little attention has been given to letters in African American life writing, and in African American women’s life writing in particular.

In June 1853, Harriet Jacobs published a letter to the editor of the *New-York Tribune*. This letter marks the first incident of Jacobs’s public writing and her debut as an author. Jacobs’s first public letter responds to an international debate between two women: the White British abolitionist Harriet Elizabeth Georgiana Sutherland-Leveson-Gower (1806–1868) and former First Lady Julia Gardiner Tyler (1820–1889). Sutherland-Leveson-Gower, the Duchess of Sutherland, circulated the so-called “Stafford House Address,” which appealed to the women of the American South to participate in the abolition of slavery. Tyler was a White Southerner and accused the Duchess of Sutherland of interfering in American domestic politics. Jacobs’s contribution to this discussion, then, represents a female African American position, a voice that had thus far been excluded from the discourse. This public exchange on the subject of American slavery is a rare antebellum example of women conducting a public transatlantic debate on a decidedly national issue. The series of letters does not only represent exchanges between women across the Atlantic; because they were reprinted in different newspapers in the United States and Great Britain, the letters also traveled through various spheres of the Republic of Letters. Rather than perpetuating the image of Jacobs as a former slave and victim of female exploitation during slavery, Harriet Jacobs’s first public letter testifies to her contribution to a transatlantic epistolary debate on slavery and thus helps to re-establish her as a nineteenth-century Black female “international activist” (Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs* 136). In this letter, I argue, Jacobs skillfully takes up various transnational debates to articulate her critique of the peculiar institution and, in consequence, of the nation’s unfinished endeavor of granting life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to all Americans.

Following the publication of *The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers (HJFP)*, edited by preeminent Jacobs scholar and biographer Jean Fagan Yellin in 2008, scholars became interested in what Fionnghuala Sweeney labeled Jacobs’s “epistolary activism” (399). Sweeney argues that the “confessional” and very private narrative style of Jacobs’s slave narrative had changed into a much more sovereign and self-assured public voice in her “Life among the Contrabands,” which appeared in William Lloyd

Garrison's *The Liberator* in June 1862 and reports on Jacobs's work with Civil War refugees in Washington, D.C. (395). Sweeney treats the narrative transformation of the slave Linda Brent into the public letter writer Harriet Jacobs as if it were an instantaneous event, pinpointing the publication of her 1862 letter as the moment of transformation. While I agree with Sweeney that Jacobs's epistolary voice profoundly differs from that of her slave narrative, I disagree that there is a linear development from the enslaved Linda Brent in *Incidents* to the mature activist Harriet Jacobs. Rather, I argue that by analyzing Jacobs's first public letter from 1853 vis-à-vis her slave narrative, published eight years later, we can see how Jacobs carefully designed her public appearance, and we notice that the genre of letter writing was pivotal to her public self-fashioning as a political writer and activist from the very beginning of her public writing career. Furthermore, my analysis shows that Jacobs's response to the transnational epistolary exchange between the British Duchess and the former First Lady of the United States enabled her to inscribe her racial and gendered position as an African American woman into the American body politic. It enabled her to participate in a public debate on abolition that the genre of the slave narrative and the sentimental conventions of women's literature were not able to provide for her.

Jacobs's participation in this transnational public debate represents a dialogic and discursive space in her writing that not only allowed her a voice in transnational discourses of abolition, but which also enabled her to demand African American participation in national debates on slavery. My argument responds to Günter Lenz's claim that

American studies should provide [...]—and this I consider vitally important—a forum and force field for explicitly addressing the workings of American public culture as a dialogue of competing discourses under conditions of unequal power and for studying the interrelations between the various, politically authorized minority discourses [...] that are engaged in, as well as transcend, U.S. national culture(s). (477)

Lenz asserts that scholars should devote more attention to the interchange between different "players" in public culture, the ways in which they interact with one another, and the discursive frameworks within which they are able to do so. Building on Lenz, I will examine the rhetoric of an exchange of public letters: the "Stafford House Address," Julia Tyler's response, and Harriet Jacobs's response to Julia Tyler. My analysis of the rhetoric in this exchange brings the intricate "dialogics" of transnational antislavery agendas and their intersections with issues of national politics, African American life writing, and negotiations of competing notions of womanhood in antebellum America to the fore.

This article is divided into two sections. In the first section, I explore the epistolary discourses in Jacobs's 1861 slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in order to illustrate the significance of letter writing—in both literal and abstract terms—in her autobiographical writings. In the second and main section, I examine Jacobs's 1853 letter to the editor of

the *New-York Tribune*. I discuss this letter as a response to the epistolary exchange between female antislavery supporters in Britain and former First Lady Tyler and analyze the narrative strategies with which Jacobs inscribes the voice of the (former) female slave in this transatlantic debate.

Letter Writing and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

In his classic analysis of the genre of the slave narrative, John Sekora argues that “the black message [is] sealed within a white envelope” (502). While he emphasizes the discursive power of the White abolitionists who provided the prefaces that served to authenticate the veracity of the Black lives presented to the reader, it seems striking that he employs the imagery of the letter to make this point. This analogy is compelling because it represents a nuanced analysis of the structural inequality inherent in the genre of the slave narrative. Sekora’s use of the imagery of the letter suggests that although a slave narrative is written by a Black person, its form and means of distribution are both regulated by White Americans; the dissemination, that is, when and where the text travels, is dependent on White patriarchal society and White institutions (such as the postal system). Although the slave narrative documented a first-hand experience of slavery, its form and distribution were framed by and dependent on White benefactors. Because a Black author’s verification that his/her narrative is a true account of his/her experience of slavery would not have been considered sufficient, White abolitionists, who wanted to convince the public of what they believed to be the “truth” about slavery, had to further verify the credibility of the Black author. As a result, as Elizabeth Hewitt observes, abolitionists “frequently make recourse to the epistolary mode as a way to engage issues of authenticity and credibility” (118). Personal letters by people who participated in or experienced slavery themselves were therefore important documents that aimed to provide authentic first-hand information. Slave narratives thus made use of the genre of letter writing in order to engage its form and content as a means of performing verification and authentication.

In typical fashion of a slave narrative, Jacobs’s *Incidents* thus includes both the subtitle “Written by Herself” and an “Introduction by the Editor,” in which Lydia Maria Child testifies that Jacobs is “personally known to [her]” and that she is a “highly esteemed” character. Child concludes by arguing that she does “believe those who know her will not be disposed to doubt her veracity” (3). In addition to the editor’s preface, *Incidents* reprints two more letters verifying the author’s credibility in an appendix. One is written by a former free Black neighbor of Jacobs, George W. Lowther, who testifies that he is “a living witness to the truth of this interesting narrative” (264). The other testimonial, written by Jacobs’s friend Amy Post, is similar to Child’s “Introduction” and narrates the painful process of Jacobs’s disclosure of her story to Post. Like Child, Post assures the reader that this is “a truthful record of an

eventful life" (262). Interestingly, Post's testimony fastidiously follows the guidelines Jacobs had given her in a letter sent in June 1857. In this letter, Jacobs instructs Post as follows:

I think it would be best for you to begin with our acquaintance and the length of time that I was in your family mention that I lived at service all the while that I was striving to get the Book out but do not say with whom I lived as I would not use the Willis name neither would I like to have people think that I was living an Idle life—and had got this book out merely to make money. (*Incidents* 330)

Here, Jacobs gives precise orders regarding what she wants Post to report about her relationship to Jacobs and about Jacobs's motivation for writing *Incidents*. The lack of punctuation indicates the hurry with which Jacobs composed these lines. A comparison of Jacobs's letter to Post and Post's testimony in the appendix of *Incidents* reveals that Post meticulously followed Jacobs's instructions and even reprinted some of the exact wording Jacobs used in this letter (Hewitt 139). It also indicates how much Jacobs fought for control over her narrative and the way it was presented to the public. She also provided her own preface, which is structured very much like a letter and which precedes Child's "Introduction." Here, Jacobs directly addresses her audience: "READER, be assured this narrative is no fiction." Although Jacobs had decided to publish *Incidents* under the pseudonym Linda Brent and had changed the original names of the people she wrote about, here she promises her readers that all of the events presented in her narrative are "strictly true" (*Incidents* 1), and her name appears at the bottom of the text, as in a letter, which is usually signed by the sender. While the genre conventions of the slave narrative depended on the authentication of a White abolitionist to verify the former slave's account, Jacobs's inclusion of an additional epistolary message in *Incidents* can be interpreted as an attempt to claim as much agency in her life writing as possible. In other words, with her own quasi-epistolary message, Jacobs attempted to counterbalance the power that the White envelope had over its Black content.

In the course of Jacobs's narrative there are numerous incidents in which letters are given to her, she is forced to read or to listen to letters, and she sends (feigned) letters to her former master. Elizabeth Hewitt even uses the term "epistolary war" to describe the various ways in which Jacobs uses letter writing as means of countering the physical and verbal attacks of her master, Dr. Flint, and of gaining control of her writing (130). Most importantly, Jacobs firmly associates her letter writing with the possibility of escaping from molestation at the hands of Dr. Flint and from slavery. Hewitt explains that Jacobs's "logic is that by convincing Dr. Flint that she has already escaped North, he will become more lax in his attempts to find her, and therefore, there will be a better chance of her actually escaping" (130). As Hewitt outlines, this "metonymic connection" between Jacobs's own freedom and the travels of her letters is not far-fetched. From Henry Box Brown, who famously

mailed himself into freedom, to the work of the Underground Railroad, antislavery activities have often been compared to the delivery of mail. As Hewitt points out, “[t]o escape, then, is to gain access to a matrix of communication, to insert oneself (literally) into a network of communication in which one can participate in a national conversation that includes sending letters and delivering letters” (130–31). In other words, in *Incidents*, Jacobs’s struggle over freedom is inextricably entwined with epistolary discourse: Jacobs equates self-determination and agency with the ability to address her reader in an epistolary manner and to write (and actually send) letters to her former persecutor, Dr. Flint, to her grandmother, and to the father of her children, Mr. Sands.

Beyond these more than metaphorical connections between freedom of movement and the circuits of written correspondence, the “epistolary wars” Jacobs writes about in *Incidents* are also preceded by another form of epistolary exchange, which likely led her to write this first letter to the *New-York Tribune*. As Jean Fagan Yellin recounts in her biography of Jacobs, in 1853 Jacobs was looking for a writer to tell her story and asked her friend Amy Post to approach Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe had recently announced that she would be traveling to England in the near future, and Jacobs also asked her whether she would be willing to take Jacobs’s daughter Louisa with her. “Travel abroad, she was sure,” Yellin writes, “would be wonderful for Lulu [Louisa]. It would give her a chance at the experience of living, as Jacobs had a few years earlier, free of American racism” (*Harriet Jacobs* 120).¹ Stowe, however, not only refused to take Louisa with her (Stowe implied in her response that Louisa, still a slave, would be too much trouble for her), but also wrote to Jacobs’s employer, Mrs. Willis. Revealing Jacobs’s story to Willis, Stowe asked for verification, as she wanted to include the story in her forthcoming *Keys to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs* 119–21). As a direct consequence of Stowe’s response, which evoked feelings of offense and neglect, Jacobs “honed her writing skills in an anonymous letter” (Yellin, *HJFP* 189). Jacobs’s first letter thus becomes a testing ground, a space of experimentation, which is again linked to an epistolary battle about the control over veracity, agency, and self-determination. Jacobs had originally intended to “give” her story to Stowe. But because Stowe did not correspond with Jacobs directly but instead contacted other people, i. e., her White employer, to seek verification of Jacobs’s story, Jacobs changed her mind. She refused to have her story re-told in Stowe’s *Key* and instead decided to write it herself: “Mrs Stowe never answered any of my letters after I refused to have my history in her key perhaps it is for the best at least I will try [...] for I must write just what I have lived and witnessed myself” (Jacobs, *Incidents* 322). In maintaining both the metaphorical and literal connection to letter writing and the circulation of correspondence, Hewitt argues that “[i]nstead of allowing Stowe to serve as postmaster to her story and letters, [...] Jacobs emerges as her own postmaster” (139). Both Jacobs’s first public letter to the *Tribune* and

¹ In 1845, Harriet Jacobs accompanied her employer Nathaniel Parker Willis to England to look after his daughter Imogen after his wife had died earlier that year.

her autobiography are the result of an epistolary battle over *who* is allowed to tell whose story and about *how* this story will be communicated and circulated.

In her essay on Jacobs's "Life among the Contrabands," Sweeney speculates about the "de-sentimentalizing effects that Jacobs's presence as a public persona might have had on nineteenth-century understandings of domestic womanhood" (392). More precisely, Sweeney argues that

[a]t a time when neither subterfuge nor apology was any longer required, Jacobs retained an earlier literary identity in this epistle, but transformed its iterative voice, practically overnight, from the confessional tenor of a slave girl to the commanding tones of the emancipatory female activist, projecting a newly confident public persona invulnerable to public censure and refusing any attempt at commodification. (395)

Sweeney's analysis contrasts the narrative voice of the slave Linda Brent with Harriet Jacobs's activist voice in her public correspondence during the Civil War. While Sweeney explains these multiple literary personae as parts of a biographical narrative of chronological personal development from slave to activist, we can see how carefully Jacobs constructed her public appearance from the very beginning of her writing when we compare her first public letter of 1853 with her letter of 1862. The conventions of the slave narrative genre and the protocols of sentimentalism that informed women's writing in the antebellum period limited Jacobs's possibilities for telling the story of her life to a White Northern audience, but the form of the letter gave her more leeway in presenting her autobiographical voice. Rather than thinking in terms of a linear development from slave to activist, I am interested in showing how Jacobs mastered these different protocols simultaneously and how she used the format of each autobiographical genre for different purposes. The slave narrative provided Jacobs with a very personal literary space in which to address the impossibility of the demand that female slaves adhere to the norms of womanhood. In her 1853 letter to the *Tribune*, Jacobs had already addressed the sexual exploitation of female slaves, but she had also employed the voice of a public intellectual whose personal experiences had become part and parcel of an assessment of slavery, gender, and (inter)national politics.

A Women's Transatlantic Epistolary Debate on Slavery

Jacobs traveled to Great Britain on three occasions. She acted as a wet-nurse for her employer's daughter during her first stay in England in 1845 (which she recounts in *Incidents* in chapter 38, "A Visit to England"). The second time, she traveled as an abolitionist activist and was in search of a publisher for her narrative (Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs* 136-39). During her third trip, in 1868, Jacobs raised funds for the Savannah freedmen (Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs* 211-17). The period between her first visit to England in 1845 and the publication of her narrative in 1861 includes

another significant episode in which Jacobs participated in an “international debate on American slavery” (Yellin, *HJFP* 196): on June 21, 1853, only one year after Jacobs had been purchased and subsequently freed by the second wife of Nathaniel Parker Willis, the anonymous letter in which she responds to the exchange between the British women who had signed the “Stafford House Address” and former First Lady Tyler appeared in the *New-York Tribune*.

To fully comprehend the stakes of Jacobs’s personal response to this public debate, it is necessary to first elaborate on the sociopolitical context of the “Stafford House Address” and on Tyler’s response to it. This debate, like Jacobs’s motivation to write her own life story, is again linked to Harriet Beecher Stowe. As historian Sarah Pugh observes, “[the] Stafford House Address was one of the most spectacular manifestations of English admiration for Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” (186). The document purportedly represents a female voice speaking to other women about slavery, but it was first circulated by the Earl of Shaftsbury, a philanthropist and reformer, before it was adopted and further distributed by the Duchess of Sutherland, who aimed for it to be presented to Harriet Beecher Stowe during her visit to Great Britain in 1853. The original title of the document was “The Affectionate and Christian Address of many Thousands of Women of England to their Sisters, the Women of the United States of America.” It is a memorial, based on Shaftsbury’s document, and signed by 35 noblewomen who assembled at Stafford House in November 1852, when the Duchess of Sutherland presented Shaftsbury’s text (Pugh 188–90). By the time Stowe held the document in her hands, it included the signatures of more than half a million English women (Meer 166). After this impressive number of signatures had been collected, the document was elegantly bound and shipped across the Atlantic to Stowe in March 1853. The “Address” was subsequently exhibited in Boston during the annual fair of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society (Pugh 197).

This document addresses the women of the United States as “sisters” and thus creates a sense of female solidarity, which is further emphasized when the women begin their statement by exclaiming: “[a] common origin, a common faith, and we sincerely believe, a common cause urge us at the precise moment to address you on the subject of that system of negro slavery” (“The Women of Great Britain” 210). By evoking a sense of cultural and religious—and, probably, also ethnic—commonality as White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, the British women exclusively address their White Christian sisters in America. African Americans are the subjects of this debate; they are talked *about*, but not invited to speak. Adhering to the conventions of nineteenth-century womanhood, the British women drew attention to aspects of slavery that were particularly distressing to Christian women, namely, the denial of “the sanctity of marriage” and “education in the truth of the Gospel” (“The Women of Great Britain” 210). The “Address” then further enhances the sense of a

common cause by articulating the supposed moral superiority of women and appealing to American women "as sisters, as wives, and as mothers to raise [their] voices to [their] fellow citizens" (210). Although American women had not yet gained suffrage and could not make use of all the rights of citizenship, the British women were nevertheless emphatic that it is a woman's duty to exert her moral influence over her fellow citizens; that is, over her husband, sons, and father. The "Address" then states:

There are many reasons why this address should be presented rather by the women than by the men of England. We shall not be suspected of any political motives; all will readily admit that the state of things to which we allude is one peculiarly distressing to our sex; and thus our friendly and earnest interposition will be ascribed altogether to domestic, and in no respect to national feelings. (210)

Evoking the traditional virtues of "the cult of true womanhood," the women emphasize their domestic role and argue that their womanhood enables them to articulate their antislavery sentiment most convincingly, because, as wives and mothers, women are not supposed to participate in the sphere of national political debate.

The "Address" calls forth a sisterly connection with the women of America. But this profession of gender solidarity also has a strategic, political dimension: because the British female abolitionists address the women, rather than the men, of America, it seems as if they were adopting a woman-to-woman perspective to further the cause of antislavery. The politics of solidarity rely on the assumption that, rather than enabling the slave to speak for herself, both groups should claim agency on behalf of the slave due to the presumed moral superiority of the British and White American women. However, neither their call on sisterly solidarity nor their belief in the moral obligations of womanhood could shield them from criticism for interfering in international politics. As one critic from the London *Spectator* put it:

The ladies had no authority to assemble in any corporate capacity. They had no power to act [...]. They were proposing to meddle with the internal institutions of a foreign country; a doubtful step even for men, much more so for women unversed in public affairs. ("The Lady Abolitionists" 3)²

The critic denied the women the right of assembly and accused them of dilettantism and of nosing into the business of a foreign country. The public debate about the "Stafford House Address" immediately shifted from the actual subject of that "Address," slavery in the United States, to the unwomanly behavior of the "ladies." The critic feels the need to reassert that the women do not possess any political agency and deems both their gathering and their petition campaign inappropriate behavior for women. As historian Susan Zaeske observes, although women did not have "the right of suffrage, petitioning provided a conduit for women to assert a modified form of citizenship" (2). The British women came close to forming an organized movement for women's rights, given that they

² Sarah Pugh gives a detailed overview of the Stafford House Address, Julia Tyler's response and the public debate this exchange stirred. However, she neither reflects on Harriet Jacobs's nor any other African American responses to this debate. See Pugh.

collected more than 500,000 signatures, that several dozen of them convened for the purpose of drafting the “Address,” and that their explicit objective “as sisters, as wives, and as mothers [was] to raise [their] voices to [their] fellow citizens” (210).

However, rather than petitioning their own government, the women of Great Britain collected signatures and spoke out on behalf of enslaved African Americans on the other side of the Atlantic. While the women justified this endeavor with their Christian and superior feminine morality, their decision not to meddle with British politics was well-calculated. The “Address” was a collective appeal from the women of Great Britain to their fellow sisters in America and, at first sight, it does not touch upon national politics. The women do not attempt to interfere in or compete with men in national politics, but by evoking a sisterly connection to the women in America, they lobby for the “common cause” of the abolition of slavery instead. By addressing the women of America rather than the men, by speaking as British women to (White) American women, they give the impression that they are not meddling with male politics but that they are rather attending to women’s issues, woman to woman. In other words, the British women use the transnational debate on American slavery as a strategic detour to gain access to the national political sphere.

In her response to the British women, Julia Tyler refuses to confirm this implied female solidarity. In her letter, which was first published on January 28, 1853, in the *Richmond Enquirer* and subsequently reprinted by the Southern Literary Messenger Press and republished in *The New York Times* and other newspapers, Tyler, like the critic from the *Spectator*, accuses the women of Great Britain of “doing politics” and of behaving in an unfeminine way. By doing so, Tyler, of course, also confirms her own femininity and relative moral superiority, endorsing the ideology of separate spheres: “[w]oman, in the United States with but few exceptions, confines herself within that sphere for which the God that created her seems to have designed for her. Her circle is, literally and emphatically, that of her family and such she is content it shall be” (Tyler 3). Because women in America remain within the confines of their socially ascribed private spheres, Tyler continues, it is “utterly impossible [...] to expect the women of the United States to assemble in convention, either in person or by proxy, in order to frame an answer to your address” (Tyler 3). Here, Tyler deliberately omits the fact that since the first women’s rights convention was held in Seneca Falls in 1848, three National Woman’s Rights Conventions as well as numerous other state and local conventions had already taken place. By asserting that she “know[s] nothing of political conventions, or conventions of any other sort,” Tyler distracts from the fact that by publishing her response in the *Richmond Enquirer* she herself is not adhering to the protocols of womanhood (Tyler 3). Furthermore, although she claims at the beginning of her letter that these protocols prevent her from framing an answer to the “Address,”

her response nonetheless comprises more than 5,000 words, which is half of a newspaper page.

The "Stafford House Address" was signed by more than thirty-five women who were present at the meeting at the home of the Duchess of Sutherland. In addition, another thirty women who could not attend the meeting signed the document as well, and, after a very successful petitioning campaign, the "Address" was mailed across the Atlantic with more than half a million signatures. In contrast, Tyler strategically emphasizes the personal, that is, private, character of her letter, even as she presents it as a reply to the "Address." Her response is addressed "to the Duchess of Sutherland and others," and is signed only by herself. Whereas the British women self-confidently presented their correspondence as a mass movement and exhibited the (wo)manpower of their public address, in its form and content, Tyler's response attempts to channel the conversation back into the private sphere of personal letter writing, ignoring the fact that her letter is also a public statement published, re-published, and discussed in dozens of newspapers, and that it thus participates in both national politics and in a transnational debate on slavery and labor exploitation. As Sarah Pugh observes, the American press—"more than fifty newspapers both North and South"—commented on Tyler's letter and "for a time Julia Tyler became 'a national figure and a Southern heroine'" (194). Rhetorically, both Sutherland and Tyler first confirm their White womanhood and pretend to safely locate their debate within the innocuous sphere of women's domesticity, which then enables them to address political issues. And, in both cases, it is the transnational discourse on slavery that allows them access to this political sphere.

Tyler does not respond to (male or female) American critics of slavery, but instead defends the peculiar institution against international attacks (by women). When Tyler advises the Duchess of Sutherland to "[m]anage [her] own affairs as best as [she] may, and leave us to manage ours as we may think proper" (6), she asks the Duchess to mind her own business and repeats the common argument of defenders of slavery that slavery is first and foremost a domestic issue. Given the fact that Tyler's response was hailed in the American press and that she was celebrated as a "national heroine," Tyler successfully performed what Amy Kaplan refers to as "manifest domesticity." While Kaplan primarily employs the term to describe how notions of the home and (imperial) expansionism strangely coalesce in narratives of domesticity, her observation that the "mobile" use of discourses of domesticity in diverse contexts also effects the supposedly strict separation of spheres is fitting in the context of Tyler's reply:

When we contrast the domestic sphere with the market or political realm, men and women inhabit a divided social terrain, but when we oppose the domestic to the foreign, men and women become national allies against the alien [...]. Thus, another part of the cultural work of domesticity might be

to unite men and women into a national domain and to generate notions of the foreign against which the nation can be imagined as home. (582)

When domesticity is not opposed to the public sphere but instead linked to the discourse of home and national belonging, women become experts in domestic, that is, national, affairs. Because Tyler defends the nation and attacks foreign critics, her disregard of proper womanly behavior is not only tolerated but hailed as a patriotic act. Paradoxically, then, by defending the national institution of slavery, she herself decidedly participates in this transnational debate. In her response, she participates in the transfer of the debate she had first confined to a domestic affair into the realm of international politics by comparing the plight of the slave with the English working class, former slaves in the British West Indies, the poor in Ireland, and the serfs of Russia. She addresses the British women as follows:

To the serfs of Russia you will not go. That is an European affair—the affair of a high and *imperial monarch*, and of a *rich and powerful aristocracy*. The poor serf may toil and labor, and stretch his heart strings until they crack in agony, and yet the *noble ladies of England* will express no sympathy for him, and present no address to their sisters of Russia upon the subject of serfdom. (Tyler 6; emphasis added)

Tyler cleverly redirects the issue of slavery from American soil back to European terrain, and eloquently turns it into a problem of the European monarchs and the aristocracy. She thus not only shifts the discussion to a location that is geographically distant from the United States, but also turns it into a problem of Old Europe, which is then stylized as being diametrically opposed to a (supposedly) classless American society with unlimited upward mobility for its citizens.

Both parties silence the subject of their debate: enslaved African Americans. As David Roediger reminds us, it is important “to recall what and whom solidarity leaves out [...] [and] to consider how solidarity works across differences in kinds and degrees of oppression” (224). Both the British women, who lobbied on behalf of the American slaves, and Julia Tyler, who aimed at justifying and downplaying the horrors of slavery, appropriated the cause of abolition to improve or defend their own sociopolitical status as women. It seems consequential that when Jacobs was angered by Stowe’s ignorance towards her and her daughter, it is this transnational debate amongst women into which she decides to intervene with her first published letter. In support of “the Ladies of England” (“Letter” 198), Jacobs, in turn, brings in a voice that has thus far been absent from the debate: the voice of the (former) slave. Jacobs’s letter thus expands Tyler’s and Sutherland’s debate on White womanhood and women’s interference into male politics by speaking as a Black woman about women’s sufferings in slavery. Jacobs begins her letter to the editor as follows:

SIR: Having carefully read your paper for some months I became very much interested in [...] Mrs. Tyler’s Reply to the Ladies of England. Being a slave myself [...] I never enjoyed the advantages of an education, therefore I could

not study the arts of reading and writing, yet as poor as it may be, I had rather give it from my own hand, than have it said that I employed others to do it for me. The truth can never be told so well through the second and third person as from yourself. ("Letter" 198)

Jacobs's first published letter coincides with her decision to tell the story of her life herself and thus constitutes a declaration of independence. What she had previously only confided to her friend Amy Post—"for I must write just what I have lived and witnessed myself"—is now stated in public (*Incidents* 322).

With her letter to the *New-York Tribune*, Jacobs inscribes her subject position as an African American woman in a White women's transnational discourse on slavery. Jacobs emphasizes the need to counter Tyler's description of slavery with the first-hand account of someone who experienced slavery herself and to make audible the voice of the slave woman who has thus far been silenced. Jacobs also employs this modus operandi in *Incidents* in a brief chapter about her stay abroad entitled "A Visit to England." In this chapter, Jacobs recounts her stay in England in 1845, which sharpened her critique of slavery by providing a comparative frame of reference. But Jacobs also used her account of her experience abroad to present herself as a participant in a transatlantic public debate: in her observations concerning the British working class, she includes her refutation of what British travelers reported about American slavery. Jacobs counters the observations that the British traveler and Maid of Honor to Queen Victoria, Miss Amelia M. Murray, made in her travel narrative *Letters from the United States, Cuba, and Canada* (1856), an autobiographical account of her fifteen-month transatlantic journey. In *Letters*, Murray employs a common trope of antebellum pro-slavery discourse, the comparison between the English and Irish working class and American slaves. While Murray describes the living and working conditions of slaves as being better than those of the English working class, Jacobs, in *Incidents*, recounts her impression of England's "poorest poor" and explicitly disagrees with Murray: "I do not deny that the poor are oppressed in Europe. I am not disposed to paint their condition so rose-colored as the Hon. Miss Murray paints the condition of the slaves in the United States. A small portion of my experience would enable her to read her own pages with anointed eyes" (236; emphasis in original). Whereas, in a fashion typical of travel accounts, Murray's text represents a supposedly "authoritative observation of the people and customs" of a foreign country (Pettinger 81), Jacobs's account appears to be the more reliable, because she speaks from both personal experience (having experienced slavery first-hand) and as a traveler in a foreign country. Jacobs's presentation of herself is inextricably linked to the recollection of her travel abroad; she presents herself as an informed participant in a transatlantic discourse of (anti)slavery. She describes herself as a formerly enslaved person turned Black traveler, who saw the working poor in England and who read Murray's travel account; it is due to her own

3 Although there is no record that Jacobs had a sister, in her letter to the *Tribune* she tells the devastating story of her sister Emily, who had been forced into sexual relations with her master. The story rehearses many facets of what Jacobs will later present as her own experiences in *Incidents*: in the letter, Jacobs combines the story of her own sexual exploitation by Dr. Norcom / Flint with her relationship to Samuel Sawyer, the father of her two children, who later became a congressman, and states that her (fictional) sister had been harassed by this character (Hewitt 124). In a private letter to her friend Amy Post, Jacobs tries to explain why she invented a fictitious sister. During her full-time job in the Willis household, Jacobs began writing at night after everybody had gone to bed. She assures Post that "every word was true accept [sic] my Mother and sisters it was one whom I dearly loved it was my first attempt and when morning found me I had no time to correct it or copy it" ("Harriet Jacobs to Amy Kirby Post" 201). This statement would also explain why Jacobs shifts between identifying the woman in her letter to the *Tribune* explicitly as her sister (who she also addresses in one instance directly as "Emily") and presenting her story in a more anonymous manner, for example, when she writes her public letter: "I tell you that mother and her children were sold to make room for another sister, who was now the age of the mother when she entered the family" ("Letter" 199). Here, mother and sister are presented as depersonalized examples of the common fate of the slave woman rather than next of kin. As Hewitt points out, "[t]he point here is not to accuse Jacobs of lying, but rather to recognize her capacity as artful counterfeiter of letters" (124).

experience and travel that Jacobs is able to counter Murray's authoritative voice.

In her letter to the *New-York Tribune*, Jacobs also insists on the need to give a truthful account of the perspective of the slave, but she mentions things in her letter that cannot be strictly true (Hewitt 123). For example, Jacobs signs the letter to the *Tribune* "A FUGITIVE SLAVE" ("Letter" 200). However, when Jacobs wrote this letter, she had already been purchased and manumitted by Mrs. Willis; this took place the year before (Yellin, *HJFP* lvi). Comparable to Jacobs's motivation to use fictional names in her autobiography, she probably did not want to present the stories of exploitation that she recounts in her letter as parts of her own biography. While the things she reports in her letter may have been actual occurrences, Jacobs takes some liberties in the ways she presents these "truths" in order to protect herself and to present her arguments more effectively.³ To sign her letter as "A FUGITIVE SLAVE," for example, may have been to claim something that was not strictly true, but it indicates Jacobs's sensitivity concerning how to use language most efficiently and illustrates how she strategically stretches the dispositions of truthfulness. The testimony of a 'fugitive slave' certainly gives the letter a much more dramatic tone and conveys a stronger sense of the precariousness of the author's situation than that of a "former slave." As Johannes Voelz poignantly observes, "for Jacobs, 'fugitive' constituted an important political identity with which she publicly identified even after having been freed" (91). This political identity is invariably a result of the peculiar institution. Fugitivity, for Jacobs, then, functions as a means of epitomizing how parts of the American people are excluded from the promise of liberty enshrined in the founding documents of the nation.

In this letter Jacobs's perspective on slavery is firmly grounded in the domestic sphere, much like the perspective she adopts in *Incidents*. Like the British women and Julia Tyler, Jacobs writes from a decidedly female perspective. Not only are the protagonists of her letter mostly women, she also appeals to women and takes up the idea of sisterly solidarity that the British women evoked in their "Address": "[a]nd oh, Christian mothers! you that have daughters of your own, can you think of your sable sisters without offering a prayer to that God who created all in their behalf!" ("Letter" 198). This direct appeal to motherly compassion is very much reminiscent of the ways in which Stowe addresses her female readers directly in order to seek empathy for Eliza in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (e.g., 75). Thus, in both her autobiography and in her first public letter, Jacobs resolutely employs the conventions of sentimental fiction in order to most forcefully express her antislavery critique. However, while the White women's rhetoric of domesticity aims at affirming their performance of White womanhood, Jacobs uses this rhetoric to debunk idealized notions of Southern womanhood. Jacobs explains that "[Tyler] is nothing more than a woman. For if her domestic hearth is surrounded

with slaves, ere long before this she has opened her eyes to the evils of slavery, and that the mistress as well as the slave must submit to the indignities and vices imposed on them by their lords and soul" ("Letter" 199). For Jacobs, no woman Black or White can live up to the virtues of womanhood in a slave owner's house.

Comparable to Tyler's rhetorical *modus operandi*, it is only after Jacobs assesses the domestic sphere from the perspective of a first-hand female witness of slavery that she is able to position herself as an informed commentator on international politics. Having outlined the evils of American slavery with special regard to the fates of African American women, Jacobs offers a critique of America's involvement in international politics which culminates in a powerful image at the end of the letter:

And oh, ye Christians, while your arms are extended to receive the oppressed of all nations, while you exert every power of your soul to assist them to raise funds, put weapons in their hands [...] while Americans do all this, they forget the millions of slaves they have at home [...]. Would that I had one spark from her [Stowe's] store house of genius and talent I would tell you of my own sufferings—I would tell you of wrongs that Hungary has never inflicted, nor England ever dreamed of in this free country where all nations fly for liberty, equal rights and protection under your stripes and stars. It should be stripes and scars, for they go along with Mrs. Tyler's peculiar circumstances, of which I have told you only one. A FUGITIVE SLAVE ("Letter" 200)

In this last paragraph of the letter, Jacobs counters Tyler's criticism of the British women for interfering into domestic politics in two ways: as a former slave, she explicitly contradicts Tyler's downplaying of slavery with the authority of a firsthand account, and she devalues Tyler's critique of the British women with an elaborate critique of American foreign politics. While democratic freedom movements are eagerly supported in other parts of the world, enslaved African Americans are denied their freedom at home as the institution of slavery remains state sanctioned.⁴ While Julia Tyler referred to international politics in order to downplay the peculiar institution and to distract from her supposedly unwomanly behavior of speaking about politics in public, Jacobs employs foreign policy as a means of redirecting attention back to American domestic affairs, that is, to American slavery and its incongruence with the founding principles of the American nation.

As Elizabeth Hewitt observes, in her letter, "Jacobs positions herself as both literary novice and experienced reporter" (121). Jacobs begins her letter to the *Tribune* by admitting her lack of education and writing skills and assures her readers that this "is the first time that I ever took my pen in hand to make such an attempt" ("Letter" 198). At the end of her letter, which culminates in her sharp critique of America's most sacred national symbol, the flag, the first-time letter writer emerges as an elaborate commentator on U.S. (inter)national

⁴ For a detailed overview and analysis of American foreign policy and interference in East Central European affairs in the mid-nineteenth century, see, for example, Kelly.

politics. As her poetic play with the image of the flag as a wounded nation illustrates, Jacobs emerges at the end of her letter not only as a political commentator but also as a well-versed writer. The stars of the flag are turned into scars; slavery is injuring the nation's lineaments. In his recent monograph *Race, Transnationalism, and Nineteenth-Century American Literary Studies* (2017), Robert Levine observes that "nineteenth-century writers themselves bring various national and transnational perspectives to their work. Attending to their perspectives allows us to see more clearly the complexity of their approaches to race and nation, for their vision was invariably *not* hermetically national" (8; emphasis in original). He emphasizes the relevance of re-examining transnational entanglements in works of nineteenth-century literature to attend to the ways in which writers grappled with their nation's inability "to live up to its egalitarian revolutionary ideals" (10). In her debut as an author, Harriet Jacobs does exactly that; she skillfully uses the transnational to articulate her critique of the peculiar institution and, in consequence, the nation's unfinished endeavor of granting liberty and equal rights to all Americans.

In her first public letter, Jacobs thus inscribed herself into what Günter Lenz would have referred to as the dialogic discursive field of an international debate among women about the abolition of slavery. Jacobs used this cultural "contact zone" (Pratt) of a woman's transnational epistolary debate on sisterly bonds, international politics, and America's peculiar institution to establish a Black subject position from which she urged Americans to come to terms with the injuries their nation was inflicting upon its enslaved inhabitants and thus upon itself. An examination of Jacobs's first public letter therefore helps us to reconsider the transnational intricacies inherent in American anti-slavery literature.

This essay reveals the pivotal role epistolary practices occupied in antislavery discourse in general and in the work of Harriet Jacobs specifically. My analysis of Jacobs's first public letter de-emphasizes the genre of the slave narrative in African American life writing and draws attention to the form and function of letter writing in American antislavery literature. In the context of Jacobs's work, letter writing functioned as an expression of antislavery activism and as a form of verification and authentication. But more importantly, it also provided a means of participating in a particular mode of communication that deliberately blurred the lines between the private and the public, the amateur and the professional, and the national and the transnational. Rather than perceiving Jacobs's life writing as evidence of her chronological development from slave to activist, this essay demonstrated that Jacobs was employing the protocols of sentimental literature while also presenting herself as a political commentator on (inter)national political events as early as her very first public letter of 1853. Epistolary writing, much more so than the genre of the slave narrative, provided

her with a public space in which to realize and experiment with multiple literary personae. In addition to Harriet Jacobs, the former slave and the author of *Incidents*, we can now also see Harriet Jacobs, the political commentator and female activist.

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