

Whispers of Cruel Wrongs: The Correspondence of Louisa Jacobs and her Circle 1879-1911, ed. Mary Maillard (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2017), 240 pp.

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In 1848, Harriet Ann Jacobs chose a strange way to prepare her only child, Louisa Matilda Jacobs, for going away to boarding school: she revealed to her the identity of her father. Harriet's nearly seven-year confinement in her grandmother's garret had separated her from her daughter and left her body in chronic pain, making her far more susceptible to illness, and she worried that if she died before seeing Louisa again that her daughter would be in for a rude surprise. The story Harriet then began telling—about how her “early sufferings in slavery . . . had driven [her] into a great sin”—represents the earliest known version of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). That's where we learn about it, and it comprises one of the autobiography's eponymous “incidents” by epitomizing how slavery continues to cast its shadow on the mother-daughter relationship after Harriet and Louisa escape north.

Most tantalizingly, the incident asks readers to imagine what *Incidents* looked like before Lydia Maria Child asserted total editorial control over the final text. Today, Child is notorious for replacing a final chapter on John Brown with one that revolves around the death scene of the good grandmother, Martha (Molly Horniblow). A primary reason that Child's invisible white hand is so vexing to scholars of African American literary history is that her edits almost certainly erased distinctive aspects of Jacobs's sentimentalism. Remaining signs of a defiantly black sentimentalism only frustrate all the more by hinting at what might have been. Consider Harriet's author's preface, which emphasizes that in choosing to break her silence and publish her story, she is seeking neither fame nor sympathy. Instead, she wishes to “arouse” northern women to “a realizing sense” of the condition of enslaved black women. Compare this with the language of Child's preface, which draws straight from the white humanitarian playbook in calling the autobiography an example of “wrongs so foul, that our ears are too delicate to listen to them.”

Whispers of Cruel Wrongs takes its title from a paraphrased remark that Harriet made in an 1857 letter to the Rochester Quaker, Amy Kirby Post: “woman can whisper her cruel wrongs into the ear of a dear friend—much easier than she can record them for the world to read.” It is the kind of confession of black suffering that white abolitionists like Post, who reused the remark in her 1859 testimonial of Jacobs's character, and the publishers of the British edition (retitled *The Deeper Wrong*) endorsed and instrumentalized for the antislavery cause. The volume is built around 78 recently uncovered letters, all addressed to Eugenie “Genie” Webb, niece of Frank J. Webb, the author of *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857). Louisa Jacobs wrote 58 of these letters, and another 13 are by Harriet Ann

“Annie” Purvis, daughter of poet Sarah Forten Purvis. The majority of them date from late 1879 to early 1886 (57 in all, 47 by Louisa). Mary Maillard has done extensive, meticulous research on the friends’ respective families, and her volume includes four family trees, 15 brief biographies of family and friends, and endnotes that supply a wealth of useful genealogical and sociohistorical information.

Yet as other reviewers have noted, the framing of the book is misleading. The title creates the false expectation that these letters will provide inside information on Louisa and Harriet’s past. They do not. Even when she visits her childhood home of Edenton, North Carolina, after more than 50 years, Louisa is characteristically laconic: “[t]he South never did anything for me” (155). She is similarly unconcerned with postbellum black literary authors. Plus, she is outraged and ashamed by the scandalous muckraking of black papers and says that “a paper should make its tone high and elevating . . . with a spirit of self respect that will make his readers reach out and struggle for something better than the old life” (104). Well researched as it is, the introduction misses an opportunity to explain the wider contextual and scholarly significance of these letters, as Hollis Robbins writes: “surely there are larger issues at stake here, including situating canonical figures such as Jacobs generationally, and pondering how later generations fit into the scholarship on the survivors and chroniclers of the great national trauma of slavery” (243).

The framing is problematic precisely because it draws attention away from the fact that Louisa Jacobs appears to have refused to take part in the Jacobs family’s resistance to slavery and racial discrimination. This resistance spanned at least four generations, from the 1790s, when Louisa’s great-great-grandparents escaped with their five children to New Bedford—only to be recaptured after the passage of the first fugitive slave law—through 1869, when Harriet sued the Transatlantic Steamship Navigation Company for discrimination for denying her and her daughter berths in their first-class cabin. What is consequently most interesting about the letters are the genres that Louisa inhabits as part of this refusal. For Louisa does not follow in the tradition of humanitarian sentimentalism, black, white, or otherwise. She is above all unsentimental.

Gruff, blunt, off-putting, and silent about her family past and the pains of history, Louisa is no whisperer. Rather, she is a master caretaker: nurse, governess, pharmacist, canned preserves entrepreneur, boardinghouse proprietor, and, later, matron at Howard University. She complains about the toll that work takes on her and her mother, about the burden of caring for Harriet. In turn, she offers words of consolation for Genie and tends to Genie’s growing list of physical complaints. She dispenses advice on self-care and is evidently well-versed in treating people. Maillard does a great job at identifying the pragmatic tone in Louisa’s writing and at organizing the letters into chronologically

arranged segments named after lines from the poem "One by One," which refer to the therapeutic and spiritual exercises Louisa prescribes for Genie as their friendship grows more intimate after the death of a mutual friend.

The volume as a whole provides valuable information about the history of African American families, unmarried female friendship, and women's labor, among many other topics. Furthermore, it expands our knowledge of the Jacobses, making them almost certainly the most extensively documented enslaved family on record. We learn valuable information about their career as boardinghouse proprietors in Washington, DC, as the dates and changing addresses of the letters seem to respond to the rhythms of legislative sessions. We learn of Louisa's efforts to make extra money on the side by opening a canned preserves business in the hopes of buying time off from the grind of the work season. And far from being immobilized by the strictures of domestic occupations or the limits of their bodies, Harriet and Louisa prove to be hypermobile, constantly on the move between upstate New York, Boston, and Washington. Some of this mobility is voluntary, as we learn that Louisa has maintained her relationship with the family of the Quaker antislavery newspaperman Zenas Brockett and considers their upstate New York house to be almost a second home. Other moves are less so, as we read of Louisa's resentment that 30 years after purchasing her and her mother's freedom, the Grinnell Willis family still expect Harriet and Louisa to drop anything at their beck and call.

In short, what is important about this volume is the specific texture of Louisa's friendship with Genie Webb. Louisa is, in fact, not wholly unsentimental; rather, she is unsentimental about the pains of her past and is focused instead on the pains of the present, burdened as she is by the demands of supporting herself and her mother, whose injured body is a major burden in its own right. The 1848 anecdote with which this review begins is so telling because it demonstrates that the Louisa of 1879-1911 is much as Harriet described her. After Harriet launches into the story of her "deeper wrong," Louisa cuts her mother off, saying,

"Please don't tell me anymore." It's not that the retelling is traumatic, she says, but that she already knows. "I knew all the time [in Washington, D.C. in 1838] he was my father, for Fanny's nurse told me so; but she said I must never tell any body, and I never did . . . now I never think any thing about my father. All my love is for you. (210)

The child who never told anyone where her mother was hiding, we now learn, made a life of being careful only to say things that would heal others.