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Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers, Volume 33, Number 1, 2016, pp. 19-21 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

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Harriet Jacobs and the Lessons of Rogue Reading

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My contribution to this forum explores how we might apply some of the insights and priorities of scholars working in early African American literary studies to the study of early American print cultures. Literary historians such as Carla L. Peterson, Elizabeth McHenry, and Joycelyn Moody remind us not only that communities of black writers, orators, editors, and readers produced books, newspapers, and pamphlets, but also that members of these communities understood and engaged with print culture in highly sophisticated ways. Moreover, these scholars’ recovery and analysis of black women’s production and consumption of print has inspired me to consider how placing black women at the center of print culture studies offers a method for the broader study of early American newspapers (a focus of my own research).

In one of the numerous scenes of newspaper reading in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs (writing as Linda Brent) relates how newspapers’ disposable nature enables her to read a newspaper in a subversive way that would have infuriated its editor. Unwilling to abandon her children in her quest for freedom, Jacobs famously hid for months in the attic of her grandmother’s house, not far from the home of her master, Dr. Norcom (whom in the text she calls Dr. Flint). In seclusion there, Jacobs devised a scheme to mislead Norcom into thinking she had already fled north to divert his attention while she reclaimed her children and made a genuine escape with them. “In order to make him believe that I was in New York,” she writes, “I resolved to write him a letter dated from that place.” Jacobs arranged to have a “trustworthy seafaring person” carry her letter to New York City and “put it in the post office there.” But Jacobs’s plan required some knowledge of New York’s geography so she could include specific street names in her letter. Knowing Norcom’s cunning nature, she worried that anything less than precision and detail might provoke his suspicion and undermine her ruse. Jacobs had no knowledge of New York City and its street names—but Norcom might have—so she asked an accomplice for “a New York paper, to ascertain the names of some of the streets. He run his hand into his pocket,” Jacobs writes, “and said, ‘Here is half a one, that was round a cap I bought of a pedler yesterday.’ I told him the letter would be ready the next evening” (142).
Jacobs thus obtained half a copy of the *New York Herald*. This was all she needed. A paper like the *Herald* would include numerous advertisements with full addresses of actual buildings listed. Wrapped around a hat, this newspaper fragment traveled from New York to North Carolina, finally reaching a slave hoping to escape her master. The newspaper’s very disposability made such a journey possible as not only a tool of community formation but also wonderful wrapping paper. Having obtained a piece of the *Herald*, Jacobs used this new possession to further her plan for escape. As she writes in her narrative, the newspaper’s editor would have been horrified at having his journal used in such a manner. Although not exactly proslavery, the *Herald* expressed little love for African Americans and regularly ran editorials attacking black New Yorkers. “For once,” she exclaims, “the paper that systematically abuses colored people, was made to render them a service” (194). By using an issue of that paper, or even half an issue, as a tool for black liberation, Jacobs read the *Herald* against its intentions.

This episode provides us with a glimpse of how black Americans in general, and black American women in particular, understood and used printed matter in the decades before the Civil War. In her recollection, for example, Jacobs makes use of multiple networks to distribute her own writing and obtain printed materials. Given her coastal location in the North Carolina port city of Edenton and the central role black sailors played in distributing texts like David Walker’s *Appeal*, Jacobs’s turn to the sea as a conduit for her letter may come as little surprise. But I would like to look more closely at the presence of the peddler. If we follow Benedict Anderson, part of what defines the newspaper is the timeliness of its content, the fact that the information in one issue becomes (with the advent of daily papers like the *Herald*) obsolete the next morning (Anderson 33–36). This theory holds especially true if we focus on the newspaper’s connection to the market, for instance, as a source for stock prices and shipping tables. Such timeliness makes the newspaper disposable and thus ideal for a different kind of connection to a market: as wrapping paper for a peddler’s cap. The *Herald’s* very obsolescence transforms it from a carrier of information into a scrap of paper, which is how it first appears when it reaches an attic in North Carolina, where it again becomes valuable for the information contained on its (now torn) pages. For Jacobs, the *Herald* has value precisely because some of its content is timeless rather than timely. Street names will not change overnight, so it makes no difference whether the *Herald* she acquires was printed last week or last year. At the same time, Jacobs can obtain the paper because its *news* is no longer new and therefore useless to its intended audience. For most of its journey south from New York, the paper was a protective covering—until it reached Jacobs, who used its content to help her stage an
escape. Jacobs’s reading of the *Herald* underscores the nature of newspapers as both timely and timeless, at once trash and treasure. This duality, I want to suggest, is something we need to grapple with when performing our own readings of early American newspapers.

This *New York Herald* incident reveals how Jacobs’s entire engagement with print and print networks is in the service of a lie. Every element—the sailors, the peddler, and the newspaper itself—was part of a grand deception, an attempt to fool Norcom into believing that she had run so that she actually could. Jacobs here exemplifies a figure I describe as a *rogue reader*, someone who lives outside of the communities imagined by most early American newspapers, has limited if any access to the networks and systems (public roads and post offices, for example) we normally associate with print cultures, but who nevertheless understands print and its pathways as necessarily open and available to revision and manipulation. Such readers often go unnoticed, but they do leave traces. Scenes of newspaper reading appear in numerous narratives of former slaves, dramatizing again and again how an enslaved woman or man used a proslavery paper to gather forbidden information, or how a formerly enslaved author used a runaway slave advertisement to expose the brutality of southern slaveholders. Such representations can enable us to develop a theory and practice of reorienting our readings of early print cultures around the presence, however illusory, of the very people such cultures tried to make invisible.

**Works Cited**


