

Contents

p.7	ACHIEVING AGENCY THROUGH OWNERSHIP by Aliyah Blattner	<i>How Antebellum Mistresses Derived Power from the Sexual Exploitation of Enslaved Women</i>
<hr/>		
p.21	A PROBLEM OF PEOPLE by Xiaoyu Huang	<i>Displaced Chinese in Hong Kong and the Ambiguities of International Law, 1947-56</i>
<hr/>		
p.34	CONTINUITIES AMIDST CHANGE by Karis Ryu	<i>Deforestation and Land Control in Late Choson and Colonial Korea</i>
<hr/>		
p.47	THERE ARE JUST TWO THINGS by Michael Flynn	<i>Ríos Montt, Justice, and the Meaning of the Law During and After the Guatemalan Civil War</i>
<hr/>		
p.72	CALCULATED IDEOLOGICAL PUBLISHING by Zoe Magley	<i>How the Business Interests of American Revolutionary Printers Transformed the Role of Newspapers</i>
<hr/>		
p.85	ACCORDING TO THE FASHION by Emma George	<i>Elite Cultural Tensions and the Eighteenth-Century Russian Lubok</i>

ACHIEVING AGENCY THROUGH OWNERSHIP

How Antebellum Mistresses Derived Power from the Sexual Exploitation of Enslaved Women

by Aliyah Blattner

Abstract

Drawing from the slave narratives of Harriet Jacobs and Louisa Picquet, this project reimagines the archival conception of the Antebellum mistress in relation to economic incentives, cultures of sexual violence, and the ideal of southern, white womanhood. The perception of white women as non-violent participants in slavery both negates the agency of white women during this period and erases the sufferings of enslaved peoples at the hands of their abusive mistresses. Additionally, the economy of slavery as it related to capital, labor, and ownership was equally as relevant to white women as it was to white men and it ensured mistress' economic independence. White women were not motivated by their shared sufferings at the hands of patriarchy to defend enslaved women from the pursuits of rapists; instead, mistresses perceived the rape of enslaved women as a threat to their own power within the home and an invalidator of their marriages and their ability to fulfill a standard of idealized white womanhood. Mistresses acted in ways to protect their own agency and reputation, not to protect black women from rape. Finally, the efforts of mistresses to fulfill the expectations of an idealized white womanhood ultimately resulted in paternalism and performative abolitionism, reinforcing a dynamic of ownership and possession of enslaved women.

“This bad institution deadens the moral sense, even in white women,” remarked Harriett Jacobs in her self-authored narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself* (1861).¹ After detailing her mistress’ extensive cruelty in response to her master’s repeated attempts at rape, Jacobs identified how the treatment of enslaved women by white mistresses, while motivated in some ways by shared suffering at the hands of the patriarchy, functioned primarily as a mechanism through which white women aimed to achieve greater power and agency within the home.² Instances of similar violations appear throughout the archives—white women exploited enslaved women to gain social and economic power during the Antebellum Era. The plantation home existed as a microcosm of society, where the white mistress ruled with complete authority over enslaved women in the same way that the master ruled over enslaved laborers in the plantation fields. The abuses committed against slaves in the domestic sphere, though, constituted a more intimate violation, as it compromised the sanctity of the home and prevented enslaved women from accessing a space where they could exist in privacy or with dignity.³

Within the historiography of slavery, white women are frequently portrayed as passive enforcers of hierarchy within plantation life. This false narrative is predicated by an assumed or constructed belief that white women were either incapable of committing the acts of violence so heavily detailed in the archives, or that instances of cruelty were an effect of broader gendered oppression experienced by all women, black and white, under slavery.⁴ But white women were masters in their own right.⁵ Additionally, by operating exclusively within the landscape of the home, the veil of privacy offered by closed doors led to an absence of accountability for the violent behaviors of white mistresses. The suffering of white women under slavery emboldened mistresses to mistreat their slaves as a source of economic and social independence.⁶

Exploring the accounts of Harriet Jacobs and Louisa Picquet, this project aims to reveal how sexual violence functioned within the lives of enslaved women during the Antebellum Era. Writing under the pseudonym of Linda Brent, Jacobs reluctantly published her narrative in 1861 at the behest of abolitionist editor Lydia Maria Child, twenty years after initially recording her story privately.⁷ Specifically, Jacobs’ writings identified the complex relationships between enslaved women and their white mistresses, exploring the influence of the peculiar institution on the ways women supported, and sabotaged, one another in navigating the intersecting systems of oppression that ruled the plantation home. Jacobs disclosed within her narrative the unique horrors that women faced as both mothers and victims of sexual violence under slavery, and she appealed to white women to advocate for abolition at the outbreak of the Civil War.⁸ Conversely, Picquet’s illiteracy barred her from penning her own narrative; instead, northern reverend and abolitionist Hiram Mattison transcribed

her account, focusing on her experiences as a white-passing slave and her relationship to Christianity as a mechanism of personal liberation.⁹ Both Jacobs and Picquet are unique in their perspectives as the archives are bereft of sources documenting relationships between white and enslaved women from the perspective of the slave. The emphasis that both Jacobs and Picquet place upon white women as key players in the incitement and treatment of rape in the domestic sphere necessitate further investigation of the ways that white women derived power from the sexual exploitation of their slaves.

Drawing from the work of Thavolia Glymph and Stephanie Jones-Rogers, historians whose research investigates the economic, social, and political positioning of white and enslaved women within the plantation home, this project aspires to build upon their arguments as articulated in their works *Out of the House of Bondage*¹⁰ and *They Were Her Property* respectively.¹¹ While Glymph’s scholarship focuses on disrupting the gendered narrative of violence by reimagining white women as capable and documented insitigators of physical and psychological torture,¹² Jones-Rogers focuses on assessing how the economics of slavery as a capitalist institution motivated slave mistresses to possess and exploit their slaves.¹³ Based on their research, my project hopes to intervene in the portrayal of white women as protective agents against the threat of rape. White women benefitted economically and socially from the spoils of slavery, and while abolitionist sentiments in the South did exist in certain isolated cases, the vast majority of white women relied upon the labors and sufferings of black women to gain power in their communities. Relying upon Glymph’s assertion of white women as enactors of violence in the plantation home and Jones-Rogers’ articulation of the motives of white women to support slavery as an avenue through which to derive systemic power, my project applies this scholarship to the context of sexual violence experienced by enslaved women.

My project will aim to define the relationship between Antebellum mistresses, enslaved women, and white masters as a system of triangulation. To achieve power within the constraints of the patriarchal plantation model, white women violated the agency of enslaved women by physically, sexually, and psychologically abusing their slaves. Relationships between white women and enslaved women functioned on an economic and social level as a practice of ownership. The labor, bodies, spirituality, and sexuality of black women were possessed and exploited to serve the needs of white mistresses. Much of the physical violence that mistresses performed emerged from the same motivations that drove white masters to sexually violate their slaves—a reinforcement of complete and total ownership over the life and agency of another person. With reference to Jacobs’ and Picquet’s experiences, this project will reimagine how economic incentives, sexual violence, and the ideal of southern, white womanhood all

1 Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself* (Boston, 1861), 57.

2 Thavolia Glymph, in *Out of the House of Bondage* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 20.

3 Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 3.

4 Glymph, 26.

5 Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019), xv.

6 Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*, xvii.

7 Jacobs, *Incidents...*, 5-8.

8 Jacobs.

9 Louisa Picquet, *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: or Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life* (New York, 1861), 5-53.

10 Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 1-17.

11 Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*, ix-xx.

12 Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 1-31.

13 Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*, ix-xx.

contributed to the evolution of a complex, abusive relationship between white and enslaved women during the Antebellum Era.

Slavery existed first and foremost as a system of ownership. Economic incentives drove white women to occupy and exploit the labors and bodies of black women for capital gain.¹⁴ An example of this dynamic existed in Jacobs' depiction of her grandmother's relationship with her mistress. The daughter of a South Carolina planter, Jacobs' maternal grandmother was highly valued by her mistress for her intelligence and overall proficiency at domestic tasks.¹⁵ Jacobs describes a deal struck between her grandmother and her grandmother's mistress early on within her narrative, where, after completing the labors of the household during the day, Jacobs' grandmother was granted permission to bake crackers for sale at night.¹⁶ The profits earned through these midnight baking sessions were saved over time with the intent of later purchasing her children's freedom.¹⁷ However, when Jacobs' grandmother's mistress requested a loan for three hundred dollars to purchase a silver candelabra from the grandmother's cracker baking profits, "trusted solely to her honor" that she would be repaid, the agreement was violated when her mistress died without repaying her debts.¹⁸ Jacobs asserted that the mistresses' descendant, Dr. Flint, "retained[ed] the silver candelabra, which had been purchased with that money...[to] be handed down in the family, from generation to generation."¹⁹ This anecdote exemplified one of the many ways that white mistresses relied upon the labor of enslaved women to bolster their own influence and power within the home.

While an argument can be made that the mistress' desperation to purchase the candelabra, as implied by Jacobs' word choice of "begged," resulted from the expectations of white women to run impeccable and materially substantiated households, Jacobs identified that, regardless of motive, white mistresses exploited enslaved women as avenues through which to accrue wealth. Additionally, by addressing the generational benefits of this exploitation, Jacobs reveals how the labors of enslaved women served to provide mistresses with increased economic independence. The ownership and treatment of enslaved women by mistresses paralleled the same systemic and multi-generational benefits observed in masters' exploitation of slave labor on the plantation. The monetary gain derived from farming labor that allowed white southern families to live off generational wealth mimicked the longevity of the candelabra in Jacobs' narrative. Furthermore, this example illustrated how white mistresses took advantage of their slaves' labor, as similarly exploited by white masters, to economically profit from slavery.

Mistresses derived other economic powers from the ownership of slaves outside of the direct exchange of money. Specifically, white women

wielded the ownership of property as an influencing factor in attracting potential husbands and achieving economic independence within existing marriages. Throughout the Jacobs narrative, Dr. Flint hid behind the excuse that Jacobs did not truly belong to him, but rather, to his daughter Emily as a way to justify his unwillingness to free or sell her.²⁰ However, when Emily came of age and married Mr. Dodge, she wrote to Jacobs and appealed to her to return from the North as her slave. At this point, Jacobs has been living in New York as a fugitive slave for many years. Emily states in her letter, "I have always been attached to you, and would not like to see you the slave of another, or have unkind treatment," evoking a false emotional tie to convince Jacobs to return to a life of bondage.²¹ Additionally, she concluded her letter by reemphasizing, "I remain your friend and mistress," coloring dynamics of ownership with the nostalgia of family and sentimentalism.²² Within nineteenth-century marital relations, the wife's property was transferred to the husband, creating incentives for white men to marry women who owned slaves or land.²³ Emily's letter reveals the ways white women were economically dependent on the labor and ownership of black women. Her insistence that Jacobs return home early on within her marriage to Mr. Dodge indicates a recognition of the risk of her own ephemeral power without the ownership of slaves.

This idea is further illuminated by Mr. Dodge's travels in New York. Mr. Dodge inquired, "Where's that negro girl, that *belongs* to my wife," communicating how that which belonged to his wife, by default, belonged to him.²⁴ In this capacity, Mr. Dodge was inquiring after his own property. This example reflects an important distinguishing factor of relationships between white and black women under slavery. Jones-Rogers specifically reflects that white mistresses' "fundamental relationship to slavery [was] a relation of property, a relation that was, above all, economic at its foundation."²⁵ When applying her understanding of the economic motives that guided the actions of white mistresses to the fictitious depiction of emotional attachment in Emily's letter, it is revealed that Emily employed sentimental rhetoric to mask the deeper and far more insidious hierarchy of power within the plantation home. Jacobs existed as property to be owned, a source of capital and power that protected Emily from the whims of her husband. By identifying this motive, the archive shifts to reflect white female ownership of black women as a perceived protective factor against the indomitable power of the husband. However, this example also illustrates how the arbitrary line erected between masters and mistresses remained obsolete in regards to their economic motives and benefits from slavery. White men and women alike relied on the ownership of slaves to increase and fortify their personal power, which existed as an economic commodity, both in terms of labor as well as in terms of property ownership.

¹⁴ Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*, xviii.

¹⁵ Jacobs, *Incidents...*, 11-13.

¹⁶ Jacobs, 12-20.

¹⁷ Jacobs, 12-13.

¹⁸ Jacobs, 13-20.

¹⁹ Jacobs, 20.

²⁰ Jacobs, 55.

²¹ Jacobs 280.

²² Jacobs, 280.

²³ Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*, xiii-xiv.

²⁴ Jacobs, *Incidents...*, 297. Emphasis added.

²⁵ Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*, xii-xiii.

Sexual violence disrupted the ways that enslaved women existed as a source of power for white mistresses; their presence within the home threatened the sanctity of marriage between the master and the mistress and provided white women with incentives to intervene in the advances of their husbands on their slaves.²⁶ With respect to rape culture, both white and enslaved women suffered as a result of the violent appetites of white masters; however, white mistresses took out their frustrations over their husbands' sexual promiscuity on enslaved women through acts of cruelty and violence to reestablish a sense of control and security within the home. Jacobs detailed her interactions with Mrs. Flint within her narrative, focusing on how her mistress' "jealousy" influenced both the protections she received and the suffering she experienced under slavery.

Throughout the narrative, Dr. Flint's fixation on Jacobs as a sexual conquest encouraged Mrs. Flint's resentment of Jacobs as she symbolized a threat to both her marriage as well as her control within the home.²⁷ Jacobs described Mrs. Flint in terms of her emotional range, stating, "She was not a very refined woman, and had not much control over her passions. I was an object of her jealousy, and, consequently, of her hatred; and I knew I could not expect kindness or confidence from her."²⁸ By specifically calling herself "an object" of jealousy and hatred, Jacobs acknowledged how Mrs. Flint never truly viewed Jacobs as an equal in womanhood; rather, Mrs. Flint reduced Jacobs' worth to that of a sexual object, stripping Jacobs of her sexual agency and ownership over her body, reasserting a hierarchy of power.

Rape and sexual violence functioned as a reminder of the limitations of the mistress' influence within the plantation household. Complete ownership over the bodies and sexualities of enslaved women became the master's jurisdiction, and the mistress was left with the shambles of a desecrated marriage and a deep-seated insecurity that she had failed to achieve the sexual standards outlined in the ideal of southern white womanhood.²⁹ Consequently, white women chose to abuse and degrade enslaved women, as opposed to protecting them from their husbands, in order to establish that, even if the master could override the voice of the mistress within the home, the mistress still existed as superior to her slaves.

Jacobs specifically identified within her narrative the frustration of Mrs. Flint in her husband's refusal to punish Jacobs.³⁰ Jacobs commented, "[Dr. Flint] had never punished me himself, and he would not allow any body else to punish me. In that respect [Mrs. Flint] was never satisfied."³¹ This communicates the relationship between physical violence and possession of the body as a tool wielded by white mistresses in the home. When Dr. Flint forbade his wife from punishing Jacobs, he asserted his own claim to Jacobs' body as being above that of Mrs. Flint. Jacobs later returned to this idea, commenting that Mrs. Flint "would gladly have me

flogged," which demonstrates Mrs. Flint's eagerness in resorting to violence to regain power over her slaves and her life.³² Furthermore, this example illustrates that white women not only explicitly sought to violently punish their slaves, oftentimes with less restraint than their husbands, but that they also directly drew power from the physical act of abusing the bodies of enslaved women.

Jacobs later documented a conversation with Dr. Flint, where in the midst of an argument, Dr. Flint proclaimed, "I have never allowed you to be punished, not even to please your mistress," as an appeal to Jacobs to have gratitude for his treatment of her.³³ When disrupting the narrative of white women as passive or non-violent participants in plantation life, it is important to acknowledge that even masters understood how crucial the physical punishment of slaves was to ensuring the power and agency of white women within the home. By explicitly forbidding Mrs. Flint from abusing Jacobs, Dr. Flint was asserting his own power over his wife, declaring that he alone could choose to exploit the bodies of enslaved people. Dr. Flint portrayed his wife as a sadist, communicating that the act of punishing Jacobs with violence would have "please[d] your mistress."³⁴ In this respect, black women existed as pawns to be manipulated in a game of power between the master and the mistress. Jacobs' autonomy, physically and sexually, was negated in the machinations of Dr. Flint as well as Mrs. Flint's desire to achieve ownership over Jacobs. Furthermore, the actions of white women in either diverting the attempts of masters to rape female slaves or in the physical punishment of female slaves for being victims of sexual violence reveals how white women were solely focused on protecting their own power and agency within the home, regardless of the sufferings of their female slaves.

When Mrs. Flint asked Jacobs to reveal the attempts of her husband to rape her, Jacobs documented Mrs. Flint's reactions, stating,

As I went on with my account her color changed frequently, she wept, and sometimes groaned. She spoke in tones so sad, that I was touched by her grief... her emotions arose from anger and wounded pride. She felt her marriage vows were desecrated, her dignity insulted, but she had no compassion for the victim of her husband's perfidy.³⁵

This moment of reflection is crucial. It provides a direct window into Jacobs' understanding of Mrs. Flint's struggle to reconcile how her own power and freedom could exist, both within her marriage and within the plantation home as a whole, if her husband had sought to claim ownership of the body of her slave.³⁶ The adoption of a "martyred" perspective indicates that white women were so completely concerned with their own sufferings and struggles at the hands of the patriarchy that they were not even aware of the feelings and sorrows of the violated slave.³⁷ Mrs. Flint

26 Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 26-27.

27 Jacobs, *Incidents...*, 49-57.

28 Jacobs, 53.

29 Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 21.

30 Jacobs, *Incidents...*, 49-57

31 Jacobs, 51.

32 Jacobs, 55.

33 Jacobs, 56.

34 Jacobs, 56.

35 Jacobs, 53.

36 Jacobs, 49-57.

37 Jacobs, 53.

treated Jacobs as a passive participant, an objectified player in the unraveling of her carefully cultivated position within plantation life.

The empathy that Jacobs expressed for Mrs. Flint is shocking when compared to the cruelty that her mistress afforded her even at the best of times when striving to circumvent sexual violence at the hands of her mistress' husband. However, in her sympathies, Jacobs conveyed an underlying frustration with Mrs. Flint's self-centered attitude, acknowledging that while her mistress played the helpless victim, in actuality, she retained a unique capacity to protect her slaves from the sexual advances of the master.³⁸ It was Mrs. Flint's need to physically claim ownership of the bodies of her slaves through violence that exposed the ultimate parallel between the actions and desires of masters and mistresses. Both Dr. Flint and Mrs. Flint found power in the exploitation and occupation of enslaved women's bodies; the only distinguishable difference was that Dr. Flint had the capacity to prevent his wife from actualizing her desires, ultimately reinforcing a gendered power dynamic that shaped the ways that enslaved women experienced sexual violence during the Antebellum Era.

However, when turning to the narrative of Louisa Picquet, a very different perspective emerges that details a contrasting relationship between white women and enslaved women within the context of sexual violence. At this point in Picquet's adolescence, she was laboring for David R. Cook, her master, in a boarding house in Mobile, Alabama owned by the Bachelor family. While there, Picquet described her master's continued attempts to lure her into rooms where she would be alone with Mr. Cook with the intent of raping her.³⁹ When Picquet confided in Mrs. Bachelor and Mrs. Bachelor's sister, Mrs. Simpson, about Mr. Cook's requests, they intervened and implemented protective measures to ensure that Picquet would not be put at risk by continuing to serve Mr. Cook alone.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, when Mr. Cook learned of these protections, he spoke harshly to Picquet. She recounted the experience, stating, "he said he wanted me to understand that I belong to him, and not to Mrs. Bachelor—that when he called, or wanted me, I was not to consult with Mrs. Bachelor, or any person else."⁴¹ By reasserting his ownership over Picquet, a parallel emerges from the archives, connecting the actions of Dr. Flint with the actions of Mr. Cook. Both masters perceived the interventions of white women as disruptions of their own power and their ownership of their slaves. To rectify that lapse of power, they both acted to silence the voices of white women as a means by which to protect their own power within the domestic hierarchy.⁴² This reveals that white women gained greater power and agency when protecting enslaved women from sexual violence. Furthermore, this understanding clouds the purity of the intentions of white women in their attempts to protect enslaved women from rape. White women's actions were not exclusively performed out of a shared

hatred of gender-based violence; they were often executed to selfishly bolster their own power.

Picquet reflected on her relationship with Mrs. Bachelor with appreciation and gratitude, going as far to say that Mrs. Bachelor "was the best friend [she] had,"⁴³ however, Mrs. Bachelor's kindness may not have been a mere extension of good will but rather a means by which to protect her own power within her home. When Picquet depicted an instance where Mrs. Bachelor criticized Mr. Cook, she stated, "[Mrs. Bachelor] had no patience with [Mr. Cook]—he was the meanest man she ever saw. She abused him then a great deal, before her sister and before me."⁴⁴ Picquet's choice of "abused" to describe Mrs. Bachelor's insulting of Mr. Cook evokes a parallel between the ways Jacobs portrayed Mrs. Flint in her own narrative. By characterizing both women as abusers, a qualifier that implies violence, Jacobs and Picquet communicated how white women sought to assert their own agency within the home through acts of violence.⁴⁵ Mrs. Bachelor defended Picquet from Mr. Cook's advances to protect the sanctity of her boarding house and to protect the power of herself and her sister within that space. As victims to the culture of sexual violence normalized under slavery, either directly as survivors of rape or otherwise, acting on Picquet's behalf, in actuality, was an action on the behalf of herself.

Mrs. Flint and Mrs. Bachelor were both acting in their own self-interest, treating enslaved women according to what ensured the protection of their own power within domestic environments. While Picquet perceived Mrs. Bachelor's aid as a positive action, it remains likely that Mrs. Bachelor's motivations emerged, even on a subconscious level, from a desire to protect her home and her role within that home from the insidious actions of Mr. Cook.⁴⁶ Mrs. Flint was more blatant in her desire to violently possess Jacobs through physical punishment. Neither Mrs. Bachelor nor Mrs. Flint adopted a subservient or passive attitude in response to the assertion of superiority by Mr. Cook and Dr. Flint respectively.⁴⁷ White women held more power than often acknowledged within the historiography of slavery. Both Jacobs and Picquet confirm that, in terms of sexual violence, white mistresses had the capacity to intervene on the behalf of enslaved women. Unfortunately, the motives for these interventions often emerged from desires for power and ownership of enslaved women's bodies and sexualities.

- 43 Picquet, 11.
- 44 Picquet, 14.
- 45 Jacobs, *Incidents...*, 14, 49-55.
- 46 Picquet, *Louisa Picquet, the Octaroon...*, 10-14.
- 47 Picquet, 12-14; Jacobs, *Incidents...*, 49-55.
- 48 Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 21.

The Ideal of White Womanhood

White mistresses relied upon the labors and exploitation of enslaved women to fulfill the prescribed archetype of southern white womanhood. In order to embody this role, white mistresses were responsible for upholding the moral sanctity of the home, managing the household duties performed by slaves, and supporting the integrity of the family structure.⁴⁸

38 Jacobs, 52-57.

39 Picquet, *Louisa Picquet, the Octaroon...*, 10-15.

40 Picquet, 10-11.

41 Picquet, 11.

42 Jacobs, *Incidents...*, 49-57; Picquet, *Louisa Picquet, the Octaroon...*, 10-15.

49 Glymph, 6.

50 The Picquet narrative was a transcribed interview conducted by Hiram Mattison, a northern reverend and abolitionist. As Picquet was not literate enough to pen her own narrative, it must be acknowledged that the questions and framing of Picquet's narrative was in service of abolitionism on the basis of reconstructing the relationship between race and freedom. Specifically, Mattison focused on colorism and how the enslavement of white-passing individuals provided justification for the abolition of slaves. Picquet's narrative was included within the scope of this investigation because it specifically shed light on the relationships between white and enslaved women during the Antebellum Era. The communication of those relationships was through Mattison's voice, but because the archives are limited in terms of narratives told from the perspectives of enslaved women, the Picquet interview exists as an important resource for reconstructing the image of the white mistress.

White women often resorted to extremes when they failed to meet the standards that slavery made impossible. This gap between aspiration and actuality fueled the violence and abuse with which mistresses tortured their female slaves.⁴⁹ An example of this dynamic existed in the Picquet narrative, where Picquet detailed an interaction between herself and her childhood mistress, Mrs. Cook, that exemplified the efforts of white women to fulfill their idealized role through the psychological torture of female slaves. When her interviewer,⁵⁰ Hiram Mattison, inquired if Picquet felt that she was “doing right in living,” which connoted an implicit judgment of her perceived moral character,⁵¹ Picquet responded by documenting her first exposure to scripture, stating, “Mrs. Cook, used to read the Bible, and explain it to us. One night she read the commandments about... commitin’ adultery. They made a great impression on my mind.”⁵² Mrs. Cook referenced the lives of other female slaves to define adultery to Picquet, explaining, “You see Lucy, how many children she’s got?... [S]he did not know the father of any of them children,” concluding by emphasizing that “when folks had children they must be married.”⁵³ This anecdote revealed the ways that white mistresses psychologically and spiritually abused their slaves to uphold notions of purity essential to the fulfillment of an idealized white womanhood. To protect her ability to exist as a perfect wife, Mrs. Cook taught the concept of biblical adultery to her female slaves as a protective measure intended to dissuade them from engaging sexually with her husband. Mrs. Cook adopted a paternalistic attitude, teaching Picquet the Bible in order to strengthen her own role within the home as a pillar of morality. This practice failed to acknowledge how rape performed by white masters onto enslaved women was never the choice of the slave. Additionally, by constructing a false narrative where the victim of sexual violence was responsible for its moral consequences, Mrs. Cook sought to ensure that her marriage and the power she derived from it remained intact.

Mrs. Cook's teaching of biblical adultery also motivated Picquet to fear the consequences of Mr. Cook's sexual advances and violence on her spiritual identity throughout the narrative.⁵⁴ In her efforts to protect her own marriage, Mrs. Cook laid an impossible framework for enslaved women to achieve religious fulfillment. Both because of the complications surrounding slave marriages throughout the Antebellum Era, as well as the prevalence of rape and sexual violence, enslaved women were denied access to a source of hope and private power through religion. Moreover, this violation illustrates how the corruption of the home as a place of privacy and dignity served the warped anxieties of the plantation wife to achieve an impossible and iniquitous standard. To exist as the perfect mistress, white women were expected to be the moral backbone of the home, ensuring that their marriage to their husband remained pure within a Christian context.⁵⁵ Sexual violence and infidelity threatened the ability of

white women to fulfill this expectation and provided possible motives for the cruel and violent ways they abused their female slaves in relation to rape culture in the home.

Outside the context of sexual violence, the efforts of white mistresses to succeed in their performance of womanhood also manifested in similarly paternalistic methods, as observed in the Picquet example. Within the Jacobs narrative, the relationship between Jacobs and her first childhood mistress may have represented the potential of white mistresses to develop genuine, familial relationships with their female slaves. However, when evaluating this dynamic through the lens of fulfilling an idealized role, it became apparent that Jacobs' mistress' actions were not performed in Jacobs' best interests; rather, they were done to protect the mistress' own power and reputation within the home.⁵⁶ After the death of her mother, Jacobs was owned by a new mistress, a woman raised and nursed by Jacobs' own grandmother. As the “foster sister” of Jacobs' mother, Jacobs reflected on her mistress fondly, stating, “I loved her, for she had been almost like a mother to me.”⁵⁷ Unfortunately, even when taught to read by her mistress, Jacobs acknowledged an insidious irony to her mistress' behaviors and attitudes.

When Jacobs' mistress taught her the Bible, Jacobs reflected, “My mistress had taught me the precepts of God's Word: ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself’... But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor,” to identify that even in her mistress' teaching of religion and morality, Jacobs, and by extension other enslaved people, had no place as equals in the moral world of the mistress.⁵⁸ This was because white womanhood was dependent upon the labor of black women. For Jacobs to exist as her mistress' neighbor, her mistress could no longer own her or other human beings. The nature of possession and ownership that was critical to the fulfillment of this archetype barred mistresses from cultivating equal or familial relationships with their slaves. In this respect, Glymph articulates how “failure threatened their status as ladies,” inspiring white mistresses to behave in ways that defended their authority, as masters of labor and gate keepers of Christian morality, within the plantation home.⁵⁹ Jacobs' reflections on her first mistress identified that while certain expectations of white women led to positive outcomes for enslaved people, specifically providing Jacobs with literacy, the motivations of mistresses to engage with their slaves always stemmed from a need to protect their own power through performative womanhood.

Abolition efforts made by white women also echoed this need to fulfill a prescribed standard of white womanhood that transcended geographies of north and south. Jacobs' relationship with Mrs. Bruce, her employer and eventual owner, illustrated how seemingly positive actions oftentimes emerged from selfish beginnings in service of the power of the white woman. When Mr. Dodge, the husband of Emily Flint, travelled

51 Picquet, *Louisa Picquet, the Octaroon...*, 20.

52 Picquet, 20.

53 Picquet, 20-21.

54 Picquet, 20-22.

55 Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 6.

56 Jacobs, *Incidents...*, 14-16.

57 Jacobs, 14.

58 Jacobs, 15-16.

59 Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 6.

to New York to purchase Jacobs, Mrs. Bruce “intended to put an end to [Jacobs’] persecutions by buying [her] freedom.”⁶⁰ But Jacobs staunchly opposed this false kindness, writing to Mrs. Bruce and “thanking her, but saying that being sold from one owner to another seemed too much like slavery,” emphasizing that she “preferred to go to [her] brother in California.”⁶¹ Mrs. Bruce’s choice to purchase Jacobs’ freedom against her explicit wishes encapsulates how performative abolitionism aided the desires of white women to succeed in achieving a higher standard of womanhood. Furthermore, this example identifies how the ownership and economic possession of enslaved women was essential in this effort.

While a true ally would have supported Jacobs in escaping to California, as was her desire, Mrs. Bruce chose to claim control of Jacobs’ path to agency, permanently stripping her of her own right to claim her freedom on her terms alone. The relationship between labor and ownership should also be scrutinized, as Mrs. Bruce was not merely a friend of Jacobs but rather her employer.⁶² Jacobs’ work as a nurse for Mrs. Bruce’s child paralleled the roles that enslaved women held in plantation homes in the south. This interaction drew into question if freedom was truly possible for enslaved women when they were owned and in service to the domestic responsibilities of white women. Because the success of the plantation home was a validator of the extent to which a mistress achieved the ideal of white womanhood, when applied to the abolitionist context of Mrs. Bruce, her household and economic ownership of black female labor continued to function in service of this ideal. Her home, the care of her child, and her “morally-grounded activism” were all reflections of Mrs. Bruce’s worth in broader society as a woman.⁶³ Her paternalistic attitude and actions stemmed from an unconscious desperation to fulfill these expectations, even when they compromised the freedom and agency of Jacobs.

Conclusion

As historians strive to reconstruct a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the role that white women played in the exploitation and oppression of enslaved women, it is essential to acknowledge that in both their desires and their behaviors, mistresses functioned very similarly to their male counterparts. The only true difference between the master and the mistress was the capacity of the master to intervene and influence the actions of white women. The narratives of Jacobs and Picquet both portray mistresses as cruel and violent, behaving in ways that maximized their own ephemeral power within the domestic sphere. While certain protective actions may have been performed, they ultimately served the interests of the mistress and not the interests of the slave.

To assess the validity of the methodologies employed to complete this project, the slave narratives included should be examined for their limitations. This paper only draws from two perspectives, that of Jacobs and that

of Picquet, because the archives more broadly lack extensive documentation of relationships between white and enslaved women as told from the perspective of enslaved and formerly enslaved women. While Jacobs’ narrative remains one of the most foundational texts written by a formerly enslaved woman during the Antebellum Era, her experiences as a mother and a literate person distinguish her from the experiences of other enslaved people during this time. Picquet’s words, as accessed through her interviewer, also portray a singular experience, one that challenges by its very nature the ability for enslaved women to be referred to and understood in the archives as a monolith. It was important to the focus of this project that the relationships explored were told from the perspectives of those most impacted by the cruelties and skewed power dynamics enforced by white women. However, a lack of diversity of opinion should be acknowledged as a methodological downfall of this investigation.

When evaluating the effectiveness of this project in understanding the relationships between white women and enslaved women during the Antebellum Era, four crucial takeaways emerge. Firstly, mistresses existed as the masters of the domestic sphere. The gendered assumptions that white women were non-violent participators in slavery both negates the agency of white women during this period and erases the sufferings of enslaved peoples at the hands of abusive mistresses. Additionally, the economy of slavery as it related to capital, labor, and ownership was not only equally as relevant to white women as to white men during slavery but in actuality was also crucial to ensuring the economic independence of white women within their communities and marriages. Thirdly, within the context of sexual violence, white women were not motivated by a shared resistance of patriarchy to defend enslaved women from the pursuits of rapists. Instead, white women perceived the rape of enslaved women as a threat to their own power within the home and an invalidator of their marriages and their ability to fulfill a standard of idealized white womanhood. Mistresses acted in ways to protect their own agency and reputation, not to uplift or protect black women from rape. Finally, the efforts of mistresses to fulfill the expectations of an idealized white womanhood ultimately resulted in paternalism and performative abolitionism, reinforcing a dynamic of ownership and possession of enslaved women.

With reference to these interventions, the function of the white mistress within slavery archives emerges anew. The romanticized image of the kind mistress suffering beneath the weight of southern societal expectations and indifferent husbands fails to encompass the reality of the culture of abuse and violence that protected white women’s power within the home. This project’s findings remain crucial to our understanding of how power functioned in the American South during the Antebellum Era and its implications extend to transhistorical contexts. By assuming that women were incapable of violence or that sexism mandated a shared

⁶⁰ Jacobs, *Incidents...*, 299.

⁶¹ Jacobs, 299-300.

⁶² Jacobs, 254-255.

⁶³ Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 6.

resistance effort against male oppressors, the archival narrative erased the experiences of those women who did not benefit from the white supremacist, colonial, and capitalist heteropatriarchy. Women are not impervious to the allure of power and access that often comes from the subjugation of more vulnerable communities, and Jacobs' and Piquet's narratives confirm this. It is the responsibility of historians to lift up and shine light upon the lives and records of these marginalized women, as our collective understanding of slavery's influence on the modern socio-political climate will remain incomplete otherwise. Only when the mistress' true identity as one who enforces and benefits from the horrors of slavery persists as the predominant narrative can historians proceed to fully comprehend and honor the sufferings of enslaved women within the plantation home.

About the author

Aliyah Blattner (she/her/hers) is a first-year student concentrating in Literary Arts and Gender and Sexuality Studies. In her writing, she aspires to reveal the ways that language and literacy empower women to seek agency in their lives. Specifically, Aliyah is interested in exploring how literature functions as a tool of resistance, reclamation, and revolution.

Bibliography

- Glymph, Thavolia. *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Jacobs, Harriet A. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself*. Boston, MA, 1861.
- Jones-Rogers, Stephanie E. *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020.
- Piquet, Louisa. *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: or Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life*. By Hiram Mattison. New York, 1861.

A PROBLEM OF PEOPLE*Displaced Chinese in Hong Kong and the Ambiguities of International Law, 1947-56**by Xiaoyu Huang**Abstract*

Between 1947 and 1956, and for some years thereafter, over one million Mainland Chinese migrated over the Hong Kong-Canton border into the former British colony. The situation aroused a confused response from the international community, which was marked by the ambiguous post-war codification of customary international law and emerging multinational alliances to confront the onset of the Cold War. Against this backdrop, the existence and subsistence of displaced Mainlanders in Hong Kong was legally ambiguous and elicited conflicting responses from state actors, the People's Republic of China, and the Nationalist Republic of China government-in-exile. The scant literature of the period is problematized by the lack of reliable data, and conflicting government and scholarly sources. This article outlines what is known about this understudied period and surveys two prevalent strategies for understanding it: one which studies the displaced Chinese through the lens of international law, and the other which elevates the importance of *realpolitik* and necessities on the ground to explain the phenomenon. The article concludes with an evaluation of the response of the United Nations and an exhortation for future studies of displaced populations on other premises than "a problem of people."