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Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household

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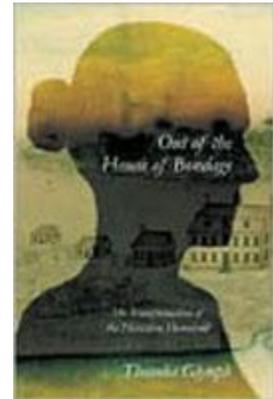
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Book Review

Thavolia Glymph. *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 296 pp., \$70.00 (cloth) ISBN 9780521879019, \$24.99 (paper) ISBN-13: 9780521879019.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Jeffrey Lanier Jones, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Paine College



Thavolia Glymph's new study of the power relations between black and white women in the Old South breaks significant new ground on the roles these women played in the plantation household. Glymph praises and builds upon the work of Elizabeth Fox Genovese's pioneering work, *Within the Plantation Household* and Drew Gilpin Faust's *Mothers of Invention*, but significantly departs from their depictions in order to portray the home as a political space and not just a private one. Further, she recounts how both black and white women were transformed by the social and cultural constructions and interactions within the household. Glymph notes, "It is a story of freedom and unfreedom, race and gender, and nation and citizenship in the world of the nineteenth century American South. That big, abstract story is composed of equally big personal stories, from a woman's right to choose the dress she will wear to her right to live" (p 1). It is this blending of these stories that recount the key transformations within nineteenth century culture and how these women were affected by such transformations. Thus, this book begins prior to the advent of the Civil War, and Glymph covers this transformation during the war and postbellum periods. One important point that she clearly makes is that the plantation household was rife with legitimized violence, and the plantation mistress was the perpetrator of that violence. She notes that the prevalent image of the mistress during the period was one who was ladylike and a "fragile flower"; however, she depicts the mistress as a person who wielded her power over the enslaved black woman and used various acts of violence in order to accomplish this feat.

As Glymph points out, this is a significant departure from what other historians have pointed out as the role of the plantation mistress. Glymph notes: "Obviously the very idea of a violent white womanhood was antithetical to the reigning ideology and to gender ideals that equated power over slaves with white men" (p. 26). She also adds that since there are records of mistresses's violence to their slaves, then the assumption that these mistresses did not have access to and exhibit social power is a fallacy. She continues, "But since, 'in fact', mistresses 'slapped, hit, and even brutally whipped their slaves,' it is plain that their power was neither invisible nor insignificant" (p. 26). As a result, Glymph clearly displays the usage of power by the plantation mistress against the slave, and this provides a needed clarification in the scholarship on the role of the plantation mistress in the household and challenges, as well as expands, our narrow conceptions of the relationship between mistress and slave. By weaving feminist analysis and women's history, Glymph shows how these acts of violence affected the daily operations of the plantation household and how they mirror

the social and cultural tumult of the period. In fact, she notes that the "plantation mistresses were slaveholders. They were slaveholders whether they held slaves in their own names or not, and this status gave them virtually unrestricted power over the slaves who labored in their homes" (p. 227). Thus, Glymph provides an interesting and complex analysis of the role of the mistress.

In subsequent chapters, she unravels the ways in which mistresses wielded this power and debunks the myth of solidarity among black and white women. She finds a rich treasure trove in the WPA's slave narratives. In many ways, these narratives concur with the antebellum slave narratives and also extend discussions of the brutality of the system of human enslavement. Chapter two discusses the ways in which mistresses "coupled physical violence with psychological violence" (p. 35). She records the tenuous battles between the mistress and the slave, and she also shows how the myth and legend of the mistress becomes lessened when placed in context of the enslaved woman's resistance. As Glymph explains, "Mistresses's use of violence against slaves, often not the least bit shyly, underscored the fragility of the ideals even as southern patriarchy and the proslavery ideology ironically backed their right to do so. In fact, physical conflict seems to have occurred much more frequently between mistresses and slaves than between masters and slaves" (p. 36). Thus, as a result, this resistance pointedly shows the embattled relationships and interactions within the plantation household between mistress and slave.

Glymph then shows that the mistress provided order and efficiency as they guided the activities of enslaved woman. They sought to "civilize" the household as well and make the enslaved women "better girls". However, as Glymph points out, this is one of the reasons why enslaved women resisted "the plantation household as an ideological construction and a site of labor as they found themselves at the nexus of two interrelated but incongruous projects. The first was the maintenance of slavery; the second, the projection of the South along the path of western civilization" (p. 64). The interesting point here is that the relations of labor are refuted by enslaved women, and its connection to the creation of a southern womanhood is seen as inadequate.

Households were transformed as the enslaved were freed, and the mistresses had to undertake household work and maintenance on their own. Many mistresses could not accept the formerly enslaved women's freedom and tried to continue to exert power. However, this was generally unsuccessful as there was no common gender experience among them, and the strategies that were used to confine these enslaved women tended to actually propel them to redefine freedom, citizenship, and womanhood. Thus, Glymph shows the intimate ways in which the plantation household was truly transformed.

Glymph states, "At emancipation black women took center stage, alongside black men, as claimants to power and privilege. But to white Americans, their freedom was the most unearned and their interpretation of it, the most misguided" (p. 213). Even after Emancipation, there was hostility among whites about this newly found freedom of blacks. Glymph particularly notes this when she mentions that they accused black men and women as "parading" as white ladies and gentleman. However, Glymph notes that such acts were a form of resistance against perceived notions of southern manhood and womanhood.

Further, the redefinition of the home for black women means access to "small rights," such as education and participation in political and civic affairs. While Emancipation proved to be a struggle for black women, they acquired free homes and attempted to make better lives for themselves.

This book will be welcomed by students and scholars of women's history and slavery because Glymph provides an intriguing analysis of the power struggles between black and white women and how they are both transformed within the plantation household. This new study will enhance the future scholarship on enslaved woman and white women in the nineteenth century and the turn of the twentieth century. More importantly, this study will enlighten on the resistance of the enslaved woman to acquire a better life for herself.