Creole Family Politics in Uncle Tom's Cabin and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

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Domestic ideology in American fiction is a slippery thing, possibly because it is so closely linked to the debates over American slavery. Take, for example, Uncle Tom's Cabin, a novel that George Sand proclaimed to be admirably "domestic and of the family" (Review 4). In recent years, scholars have (re)discovered that Stowe's brand of sentimentalism was a radical revision of family ideology of the patriarchal sort, and they have praised it for subverting the "domestic institution" of American slavery. Yet Sand's review ought to remind us that Uncle Tom's Cabin was no work of avant-garde subversion, but rather, a successful bid for national (and even international) prominence. Uncle Tom's Cabin represents a crucial moment in the United States, when debates over slavery in the expanding territories came to redefine the American family and the American nation. In order to repudiate slavery and render it foreign to the sentimental core of her imagined community, Stowe worked hard to disassociate it from another "domestic" institution that the break-away colonists had inherited from their colonial forefathers: that of the colonial family. In the process, as I will argue, Uncle Tom's Cabin fundamentally restructured the American family by separating settlers from slaves in American households, assimilating French colonial others, and effacing the colonial family's origins as a settler-and-slave formation.

To understand just how Stowe restructures the American national home in Uncle Tom's Cabin, it is crucial to decipher her use of Louisiana Creole characters and settings. This is a challenge that even our most celebrated thinkers have failed to meet. In his survey of the black characters in the novel, for example, James Baldwin simply discards those blacks who pass as French or Spanish, "since we have only the author's word that they are Negro and they are, in all

1 "Mothers of families [housewives], young girls, little children, servants even, can read and understand" the book’s “long discussions, its minute details, its carefully studied portraits,” Sand explained, and “men themselves, even the most superior, cannot disdain them” (“Review” 460). Demonstrating how abolitionist and domestic discourses built on one another, the works of Lydia Maria Child and Harriet Beecher Stowe include such titles as The American Frugal Housewife, The Mother’s Book, The Anti-Slavery Catechism, An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans called Africans, Slavery’s Pleasant Homes,” House and Home Papers and The American Woman’s Home.

2 Jane Tompkins, for example, dubs the "new matriarchy" in Uncle Tom's Cabin "the most politically subversive dimension of Stowe's novel, more disruptive and far-reaching in its potential consequences than even the starting of a war or the freeing of slaves" (142). While disagreeing about the relative insignificance of the latter accomplishments, Philip Fisher agrees that by depicting "the corrosive institution of slavery" as a threat to the sentimental family, Stowe's fiction prompted "a restructuring of the national home" (101, 87).
other respects, as white as she can make them” (16). Stowe’s all too explicit racial labels—Cassy is a “quadroon,” Tom a “full glossy black” (68), Eva a “Saxon” despite her gallic blood—only add to the bewilderment. 3

This confusion culminates in the case of the “maddened quadroon” whom Tom discovers in the final stage of his journey. The French-speaking slave-and-mistress Cassy, the most “unquiet” slave in the novel, has become a centerpiece of feminist readings that stress her “outraged domesticity” (Brown 35) and her “female retribution” (Gilbert and Gubar 533); she further provides “the novel’s most dramatic example of a radical black agency tamed and disciplined by the power of the maternal” (Burnham 139). Yet the history of Uncle Tom’s reception belies Cassy’s power. As Leslie Fiedler commented, the story of Cassy’s “protected Creole upbringing, in which she is scarcely aware that she is a Negro,” is “fictional material of real interest,” and yet “it fades from the mind even just after we have read Uncle Tom” (265). Whereas Uncle Tom, Little Eva, and Topsy became household words, we cannot say the same for Cassy. Testifying to her ability to “fade” from readers’ minds, Cassy goes unmentioned in the reviews of both Sand and Baldwin.

Without Cassy and the other blurry figures in French and Spanish, however, Uncle Tom’s Cabin could not so effectively dismantle the “patriarchal institution” or imagine an American nation free of slavery. Stowe’s manichean version of America depends crucially upon its Americans who are not American, blacks who are not black and their counterparts, the whites who are not white, in Louisiana. In making this case, I will argue that Stowe’s Creole characterization is a representation of colonial others similar to Charlotte Brontë’s famous Creole madwoman in Jane Eyre. 4 In order to understand the historical equivalence between these two representations, we must recall that the term Creole in English, like its counterparts in French and Spanish (créole and criollo), designated colonial subjects (crucially, both settlers and slaves) raised in the settler-slave colonies. By the nineteenth century, Anglo-Americans, even in the slave states, no longer called themselves Creoles because they were no longer colonials. But the residents of the Louisiana territories continued to call themselves créoles long after Louisiana had become part of the United States, suggesting that the Louisiana Purchase had not so much liberated them from a colonial relationship as replaced their distant overlords with a new set closer to home. This helps to explain why the term Creole in American English came to refer to persons of

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3 Two of the three “important Negroes” in the novel “may be dismissed immediately” in Baldwin’s phrase, since one escapes from slavery “disguised as a Spanish gentleman” and the other turns out to have “connection with French gentility” (16-17). Hortense Spillers evinces a similar perplexity about a white man who is not exactly white in Stowe’s novel. Spillers points out that “the descriptive apparatus that surrounds [Augustine St. Clare] in the New Orleans scene is loaded with hints of ‘gorgeousness’” and that St. Clare is thereby linked textually to “[t]he Negro” whom Stowe considers “an exotic of the most gorgeous and superb countries of the world” (Uncle Tom 253), “[e]ven though Augustine St. Clare is, as far as his status goes, a ‘white’ man—and we are also explicitly told this by the narrator” (Spillers 27, emphasis added).

4 See my “Undomesticating the Domestic Novel.”
French and Spanish descent, even as it continued to designate British colonials in British English.\textsuperscript{5}

For Anglo-Americans as for the British, Creoles occupied a moral and geographical frontier, at once within and beyond their respective nations. Tainted by their close relationship to slavery, the Créoles were also peculiarly “domestic” subjects by the etymology of the term.\textsuperscript{6} My reading of Stowe’s attack on pro-slavery domestic ideology thus highlights the importance of the Louisiana Purchase and the interstate slave trade, French slave revolutions, and French and Spanish colonial family practices in Uncle Tom’s Cabin. It is precisely by canvassing and then rejecting French colonial mores, in my view, that Stowe places slavery and slaves outside the moral confines of the Anglo-American community and reshapes the colonial family in the service of an expanding nation.

Stowe’s Creole family politics are cast in stark relief when read against the account of domestic slavery in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, the autobiography of a woman whom Stowe did not imagine as a member of her reading public (or the nation for which it stands).\textsuperscript{7} Harriet Jacobs, a fugitive slave living in New York, contacted Stowe in 1853 for assistance in publishing her life story. Jacobs’s letters reveal her outrage at Stowe’s reply, which proposed using the history in Stowe’s own Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin (Yellin 234-35). When Jacobs set out to write her autobiography after this encounter, she was obviously familiar with Stowe’s novel. We may reasonably read this version of her own life as—in part—a literary response to Stowe. Yet it is also possible that Stowe based her story of the slave Cassy’s flight on the legend of Jacobs’s own escape from slavery.\textsuperscript{8} The similarities between the stories of Stowe’s fictional Cassy and Jacobs’s pseudonymous heroine Linda Brent are, in any event, striking. Both women endure forced sexual intimacy with their white masters. Both escape from the slave system by feigning flight, then returning to hide in a place so close to home that it is not suspected. Secreted in an attic, both control their would-be masters by sending uncanny messages, and both observe their masters through a “loophole.” For both women, this secret hiding-place proves to be the “loophole” allowing them to escape slavery and flee to the precariously free North. Unlike

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\item \textsuperscript{5} Louisiana was a French colony until 1763, and it reverted from Spain to France just before the Purchase; it “never became Spanish in a cultural sense, and it would still be a colonial French city when the United States took over in 1803” (Johnson 45).
\item \textsuperscript{6} The OED traces the word creole to a Spanish word meaning “bred, brought up, reared, domestic,” although there is evidence suggesting that the term derived from an Old Portuguese word with similar meanings. See Arrom and Berman (2000).
\item \textsuperscript{7} In Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson argues that the novel played a key role in the emergence of the modern concept of nationhood and that Creoles—settlers in the Americas—pioneered what might be called “print-nationalism.” Unfortunately, Anderson, like Stowe, mistakenly identifies “Creoles” only as those of “pure” European descent and consequently omits the Haitian revolution from his history of revolutionary nationalism.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Burnham hints at this alternate line of influence when she suggests that Stowe was familiar with Jacobs’s story “well before its publication in 1861” (139). The letters collected by Jean Fagan Yellin show that Jacobs contacted Stowe about publishing her narrative in 1853, after Uncle Tom’s Cabin was written, but Jacobs’s story was being described in anti-slavery circles as early as 1842, and it may have been shared with Stowe then (Jacobs 227, 234).
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so many of their imprisoned and sexually abused sisters of fictional lore, moreover, neither one dies in confinement.

I will conclude this essay by highlighting the difference between Jacobs’s and Stowe’s efforts to dismantle pro-slavery family ideology and to imagine an American nation free of slavery. Incidents does not, by any stretch of the imagination, feature a “Creole” woman in the Anglo-American sense: its heroine is not a woman raised in the formerly French and Spanish colonies of Louisiana. But, as I will argue, Jacobs lays claim to American citizenship precisely as a “Creole” slave in the broader, etymological sense—one who has been brought up “domestically” in a settler colony. Critical discussions of Jacobs’s autobiography tend to presume that the literary conventions of domestic fiction existed in a separate sphere from arguments over slavery. I will emphasize instead the importance of domestic ideology in arguments over slavery and the importance of slavery in arguments about domestic life. By embracing the conventions of domestic fiction, in my view, Jacobs dramatically revises the domestic norms at the heart of the Creole nation formed by the break-away colonies of the United States.

1. Dark Places

In order to grasp the role played by the Creoles in Stowe’s novel, we must first recall the importance of the Louisiana Purchase to the American struggle over slavery. Uncle Tom’s Cabin identifies the New Orleans slave market as the crux of an interstate slave trade no less horrifying than the international slave trade which Congress had banned in 1807. Although “[t]he slave-trade is now, by American law, considered as piracy,” the narrator declares, “a slave-trade, as systematic as ever was carried on on the coast of Africa, is an inevitable attendant and result of American slavery” (622). That the interstate slave-trade took place in New Orleans was no accident. When the United States bought the vast expanse of territories on its western frontier from France in 1803, the U.S. Senate initially voted to ban the importation of slaves to Lower Louisiana from other American states. By failing to back this ban, however, President Jefferson allowed Louisiana to draw slaves from other states and exploit its potential for sugar and cotton cultivation (Blackburn 284). This decision resulted in the establishment of the New Orleans slave market as it is depicted in Uncle Tom’s Cabin: a market in “the souls and bodies of men” (and women and children) designed to supply laborers for the western frontier (624). With this vote, according to histo-

9 The term “crioulo,” in Old Portuguese, referred to a domestic animal “raised” at home rather than purchased at the market. By extension, slaves bred in the colonial “home” rather than imported from the international slave market—as well as settlers “bred” by colonial families—came to be called “Creole” (or “domestic”) as well. See Arrom and Berman (2000).

10 See, for example, Niemtzow and Smith. Due in part to its novelistic style, historians long classified Jacobs’s book as a work of domestic fiction. John Blassingame, for example, argued that “the story is too melodramatic” to be representative of slave experience (373). When Jean Fagan Yellin succeeded in authenticating both the events and the former slave authorship of the pseudonymous narrative in 1981, therefore, she stressed how the narrator is not, as it would first appear, “trapped within traditional language and literary conventions” (Yellin xxxiv). See also Carby 45-46.
rian Robin Blackburn, the Louisiana Purchase "confirmed that the United States was an empire as well as a republic and it confirmed that slaveholders would have their own reserved space within that empire" (284-85). Paradoxically, the Congressional ban on an international slave trade in 1807 only hastened the formation of a vast domestic market for slaves in New Orleans.

The moral geography of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* tracks the progress of this interstate slave traffic. Following the fortunes of a Christian man sold out of state and away from his friends and relations, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* exposes the interstate trade as the moral equivalent of the African slave trade. Tom first travels from purgatory in Kentucky to a shimmering devil's paradise in New Orleans, and then moves on to a Louisiana plantation in the middle of Hell. Like souls caught in purgatory, the slaves in Kentucky suffer not so much from present torments as from the prospect of being sent South: "Perhaps the mildest form of the system of slavery is to be seen in the State of Kentucky," Stowe suggests (50). "Whoever visits some estates there, and witnesses the good-humored indulgence of some masters and mistresses, and the affectionate loyalty of some slaves, might be tempted to dream the oft-fabled poetic legend of a patriarchal institution" (50-51). But "over and above the scene there broods a portentous shadow," since "the failure, or misfortune, or imprudence, or death of the kindest owner, may cause [the slaves] any day to exchange a life of kind protection and indulgence for one of hopeless misery and toil" (51). Likening Tom's river voyage to the African slaves' journeys by ship to the New World, Stowe titles her chapter on Tom's journey from New Orleans into the Louisiana wilderness "The Middle Passage." By situating her grimmest tales of woe in Louisiana, Stowe implicitly links the terror of a trade in human beings to the threat that territorial expansion posed to the domestic integrity of the Anglo-American nation.

Depicting the "patriarchal institution" in its most benign light in Kentucky, Stowe nonetheless unoons the sentimental claims of slaveholders about the "moral influences flowing from the relation of master and slave, and the moral feelings engendered and cultivated by it."11 The idealized Kentucky slaveowner Mrs. Shelby, for instance, considers her slaves to be like children, but her attempts to teach these slaves the Christian virtues of family ties are thwarted by her husband's sale of Eliza's child Henry to settle his debts. Stowe thus frames the problem of American slavery as one of parental hypocrisy: "I have taught them the duties of the family, of parent and child, and husband and wife," Mrs. Shelby complains to her husband; "and how can I bear to have this open acknowledgment that we care for no tie, no duty, no relation, however sacred, compared with money?" (83). Stowe further theorizes the difference between slaves and children at the occasion of Augustine St. Clare's death, rejecting pro-slavery claims that the distress of slaves upon their master's death proves that the "sentiments in the breast of the negro and his master ... belong to the class of feelings 'by which the heart is made better'" ("Slavery" 338):

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11 The description is quoted from "Slavery" (338). Joan Dayan follows Bernard Rosenthal in arguing that Edgar Allan Poe authored this anonymous review of two pro-slavery works, which I will use throughout this essay as exemplary of pro-slavery domestic ideology.
We hear often of the distress of the negro servants, on the loss of a kind master; and with good reason, for no creature on God’s earth is left more utterly unprotected and desolate than the slave in these circumstances.

The child who has lost a father has still the protection of friends, and of the law ... the slave has none. The law regards him, in every respect, as devoid of rights as a bale of merchandise. (Stowe, Uncle Tom 457)

For Stowe, the interstate slave trade illustrates that “Domestic Slavery (the basis of all our institutions)” (“Slavery” 337) is no family structure, but rather, a family-rupturing traffic in human merchandise.

Sold south by his imprudent Anglo-American master, Tom at first evades the fate of “hopeless misery and toil” on the frontier by begging an “angel,” little Eva, on the boat to New Orleans. When he arrives at the mansion of Augustine St. Clare, he finds an exotic paradise: an “ancient mansion, built in that odd mixture of Spanish and French style, of which there are specimens in some parts of New Orleans,” with a courtyard “built in the Moorish fashion” that “carried the mind back, as in a dream, to the reign of oriental romance in Spain” (252). As Hortense Spillers has commented, Tom’s response to the New Orleans estate is mediated by his own supposedly African exoticism (27). With the “negro[s] ... passion for all that is splendid, rich, and fanciful,” Tom first “looked about with an air of calm, still enjoyment.” The enticing scene appears to be fashioned for him, with its “pomegranate trees, with their glossy leaves and flame-colored flowers, dark-leaved Arabian jessamines, with their silvery stars, geraniums ... golden jessamines, lemon-scented verbena, all unit[ing] their bloom and fragrance” (Stowe, Uncle Tom 253). But this gorgeous estate is later exposed as a heathenish illusion by Tom’s sale up the Red River to the true precincts of desperate labor. As Karen Halttunen points out, “just as the oriental sensuality of the Ward of Pleasure points the way to the Ward of Death” in Stowe’s brother’s sermon on prostitutes, “St. Clare’s gorgeous home serves in Stowe’s narrative as a kind of way station to the ruined mansion of Simon Legree” (119).

The seductive New Orleans mansion thus finds not its inverse, but its complement in Legree’s awful estate up the Red River, with its “steep red-clay banks” stained the color of blood (487). Legree’s property “formerly belonged to a gentleman of opulence and taste,” but it now has a “ragged, forlorn appearance,” with a “mildewed jessamine” and a garden “grown over with weeds, through which, here and there, some solitary exotic reared its forsaken head” (491). Out in the swamps, Augustine’s mode of tolerating slave indolence gives way to Legree’s method of working of his slaves to death: “I don’t go for savin’ niggers. Use up, and buy more, ‘s my way;—makes you less trouble, and I’m quite sure it comes cheaper in the end” (485). Legree’s household sponsors systematic torture, as explained by its resident mistress, Cassy: “Here you are, on a lone plantation ... not a white person here, who could testify, if you were burned alive,—if you were scalded, cut into inch-pieces, set up for the dogs to tear, or hung up and whipped to death.... I could make any one’s hair rise, and their teeth chatter, if I should only tell what I’ve seen” (512). Confirming the alieness of these procedures, Cassy explains that Legree “learned his trade well, among
the pirates of the West Indies” (534). On a “wild, forsaken road” where “doleful trees rising out of the slimy, spongy ground, hung with long wreaths of funeral black moss,” Legree’s plantation in the Louisiana wilderness is nothing less than an earthly prison for the damned (488).\(^\text{12}\)

Upon closer inspection, Legree’s estate succinctly symbolizes the domestic degradation wrought by the Louisiana Purchase. Like Louisiana itself, the forlorn estate had “been purchased, at a bargain, by Legree, who used it, as he did everything else, merely as an implement for money-making” (491). For all his French colonial alienness, the soulless Legree was himself brought up in New England. But the New England Legree has taken over his Louisiana property without respecting its aristocratic traditions. Instead, he allows his sitting room to become a kind of counting-house: its “wall-paper was defaced, in spots, by slops of beer and wine; or garnished with chalk memoranda, and long sums footed up, as if somebody had been practising arithmetic there” (524). Giving the lie to the pro-slavery argument that slave ownership fosters “patriarchal” feelings of “parental attachment” as the slaveowner comes to “love” his slave “because he is his” (“Slavery” 338), Legree muses as he kills Tom, “I hate him! And isn’t he MINE? Can’t I do what I like with him?” (Uncle Tom 578). The bond of patriarchal possession finds its dystopian reply in Legree’s passionate engagement with Tom: “There was one hesitating pause,—one irresolute, relenting thrill,—and the spirit of evil came back, with seven-fold vehemence; and Legree, foaming with rage, smote his victim to the ground” (583). Drawing upon the interstate slave trade for an endless renewal of disposable human capital even as he conducts private tortures and inquisitions, Legree represents for Stowe the worst possible combination of New England and New France.

2. The San Domingo Hour

Louisiana was significant in the early decades of the nineteenth century not only as the site of American slavery’s expansion, however, but also as a port of entry for French-speaking colonials from the West Indies. This relationship to the former French colonies of the Caribbean is crucial to Stowe’s attack on the “patriarchal institution” of slavery. In order to understand just how French colonial immigrants challenge the Anglo-American institution of “domestic slavery” in Stowe’s novel, we must now turn to the story of Cassy, the French-speaking woman whose voice cries out to Tom in the darkness of Legree’s god-forsaken plantation.

\(^\text{12}\) As Spillers puts it succinctly, “‘Simon Legree’ is ‘really’ ‘Augustine St. Clare’ with his drawers down” (32). See also Halltunen 109, 118. Harriet Martineau’s account of the “French creole” community in Louisiana anticipates Stowe’s novel in emphasizing how outward civility merely masks the worst of brutalities, as in Delphine Lalaurie’s house, where a “hospitalable table” concealed a houseful of slave skeletons and a cook chained to the fire (Martineau 139-40).
Appearing first as a “dark, wild face” at the window, Cassy dominates the chapter titles during Tom’s residence in hell (494, 501). Like Legree himself, Cassy makes a mockery of the assertion that “moral feelings” are “engendered and cultivated” by the “relation of master and slave” (“Slavery” 338). As she relates it to Tom, Cassy’s story begins ironically with a privileged childhood in New Orleans, where, she remembers, she was “dressed up like a doll” and sent to convent school until the age of fourteen. Although her mother was a slave, Cassy expected her father and master to free her; but when he died suddenly, she found herself set down instead in the list of his property. Her father’s family then gave her in pseudo-marriage to a young man, who “had paid two thousand dollars for me, and I was his property.” Considering him “the handsomest I had ever seen,” she “became his willingly,” for, she concedes to Tom, “I loved him” (516). Cassy reminisces that with this “husband,” who “called me his good angel,” she had had “two beautiful children.” This facsimile of marriage reproduces the devastating disappointments of her childhood, when, like her white father, Cassy’s white “husband” makes vague and ultimately empty promises to set her and her children free (516-17). By the time she recounts her history to Tom, subsequent events have remolded the loving mother and wife of Cassy’s memory into a “she-devil” (517-18). First, she reports, the young man, encumbered with debt, “sold us” to his evil cousin (518). Worse still, Cassy continues, the cousin then sold her children away from her, prompting Cassy to fly upon him with a “great sharp bowie-knife”; after this, Cassy tells Tom, “all grew dark, and I didn’t know any more—not for days and days” (520). Finally, she confesses, she killed her newborn baby by giving him laudanum, after which she held him “close to my bosom, while he slept to death” (521). Cassy’s story demonstrates just how un-domesticated an excessively domesticated slave can become. In her final days as Legree’s mistress, she has lost both her moral compass and her mind: “partial insanity had given a strange, weird, unsettled cast to all her words and language” (567).

As Ann Douglas has written, in an apt phrase, Cassy offers a “kind of voodoo version” of the influence a domestic woman was supposed to have over her husband (“Introduction” 18). Once “her irritability ... broke out into a raving insanity,” Cassy gains a “strange and singular” influence over Legree (526, 567). This force only increases when Cassy escapes to freedom by hiding in Legree’s attic, where once a “negro woman, who had incurred Legree’s displeasure, was confined for ... several weeks” and brought out dead (564). Before feigning her own flight, Cassy revives the legend of an attic ghost, so that a “superstitious creeping horror seemed to fill the house; and though no one dared to breathe it to Legree, he found himself encompassed by it, as by an atmosphere” (566-67).

As Douglas’s reference to voodoo suggests without exactly saying so, there is something about Cassy’s extraordinary power in Uncle Tom’s Cabin that is not derived just from her “hardened womanhood,” but is specific to the former colonies of the French. The language of her influence is manifestly French: “She fixed her black eyes steadily on him, her lips moved slightly, and she said something

13 These chapters include “Cassy,” “The Quadroon’s Story,” “Emmeline and Cassy,” “The Stratagem” (for their escape), and “An Authentic Ghost Story.”
in French. What it was, no one knew; but Legree’s face became perfectly demoniacal in its expression, as she spoke; he half raised his hand, as if to strike,—a gesture which she regarded with fierce disdain, as she turned and walked away” (506-07). To call this local effectivity “superstition” or “voodoo” and leave it at that, however, would be to miss the point. What is fascinating and challenging about Cassy—and Louisiana Creoles generally in Uncle Tom’s Cabin—is not just the local religious practices, but also the French Creole challenge to Anglo-American racial norms. In Louisiana, as Stowe depicts it, blacks are not always docile, and slaveowners are not always white.

Stowe probably knew that it was not so much a moral distaste for the trade in humans as a fear of Caribbean slaves that prompted Congress to outlaw the international slave trade in 1807, as refugees from the French colony of Saint Domingue poured into Louisiana after being expelled from British Jamaica and Cuba. Slaves and free people of color in Saint-Domingue had joined to fight off Napoleon’s reinstitution of slavery in the 1790s, successfully gaining independence in the name of a new nation called Haiti. Slaveholders in the U.S. responded to this event by isolating American slaves from their foreign counterparts, making American slaves exclusively home-grown, or American Creole. “The revolution in St Domingue redoubled [the] conviction of the need for a prudential ban on the importation of African or foreign slaves,” and thus by 1798 every Southern state had voted to ban “slave imports” (Blackburn 275). Even as the Anglo-American slaveholding states were taking these steps to ban foreign slaves from their communities, however, French-speaking refugees from the former Saint-Domingue and their slaves arrived in Louisiana in growing numbers.14

Stowe addresses the widespread fear among American slaveowners that black revolution might spread from the Caribbean to the U.S. by staging an argument between two French Creole men over the future of American slavery. In the course of this discussion, Augustine St. Clare warns his brother that “the masses are [apt] to rise” like “[t]he people of Hayti” (392). Like other writers of this period, Stowe aligns this prospect of slave revolution with the recent French revolution of 1848, which resulted in the emancipation of slaves in the French colonies. In her “Concluding Remarks,” Stowe magnifies Augustine St. Clare’s warning: “This is an age of the world when nations are trembling and convulsed. A mighty influence is abroad, surging and heaving the world, as with an earthquake. And is America safe? Every nation that carries in its bosom great and unredressed injustice has in it the elements of this last convulsion” (629).

As in the case of Charlotte Brontë’s Creole madwoman, Cassy’s French Creole background and “partial insanity” thus function to harness the rebellious image of successful West Indian slave revolts to a wife’s desire for flight and vengeance. It is precisely as a French-speaking Creole woman that Cassy is equipped to attack with a stiletto knife the man who took custody of her children; to smother

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14 Most exiles from Saint Domingue arrived in Louisiana between the 1790s and 1810, when France lost the last of its Caribbean colonies. In the influx of 1809, for example, 2,731 whites, 3,102 free persons of color, and 3,226 slaves from Saint Domingue emigrated to Louisiana. See Lachance 105-06 and Blackburn 275, 280.
her infant with laudanum; and to incite Tom himself to violence, bringing him an axe to kill Legree. Although Tom dissuades her from this revenge, on the grounds that she would be damned for eternity, Cassy eventually finds a way to punish Legree for Tom’s own martyrdom. Impersonating the “granite conscientiousness” of Legree’s dead Yankee mother, Cassy demonstrates that “a human soul is an awful ghostly, unquiet possession, for a bad man to have” by standing in a white sheet next to his bed, “a stern, white, inexorable figure, saying, ‘Come! come! come!’” until Legree drinks himself to death (595, 597). Like the rebellious nations abroad, Cassy herself sobs “with a convulsive violence” (514).

As St. Clare’s prophecy of a “San Domingo hour” makes clear, however, what Stowe found dangerous and fascinating in Louisiana was not only the legendary rebelliousness of its French-speaking slaves, but just as importantly, the acknowledged European inheritance of its gens de couleur. Unlike the fugitive slave George Harris’s Anglo-American father, “one of your Kentucky gentlemen—who didn’t think enough of me to keep me from being sold with his dogs and horses” (185-86), the French (and Spanish) colonials of Louisiana tended more often to assume that “blood” relationships, or “consanguinity,” implied a “sharing of the spoils.” This is why the refugees from Saint-Domingue arrived as equal numbers of free whites, enslaved blacks, and free persons of color. As the former Kentucky slave Henry Bibb noted matter-of-factly in his 1849 narrative, concerning his own time on the New Orleans slave market:

Many of the old French inhabitants have taken slaves for their wives, in this city, and their own children for their servants. Such commonly are called Creoles. They are better treated than other slaves, and I resembled this class in appearance so much that the French did not want me. Many of them set their mulatto children free, and make slaveholders of them. (116)

By all accounts, mulatto children born to slave women were not unique to the French colonies. But as this description suggests, French fathers were more likely than their English counterparts to treat their slave mistresses as wives and their mulatto children as their children by freeing them and giving them an inheritance. Cassy was not entirely unrealistic to expect freedom from her first pseudo-marriage.

The tendency to acknowledge such familial relationships produced a tertiary rather than binary system of racial classification in Louisiana and other French possessions. What Bibb experienced in New Orleans was thus the reinscription of his mulatto appearance in the gap between two colonial cultures: the Anglo-American culture, in which mulatto skin signified a slave mother and slave status; and the Franco-American culture, in which the same mulatto skin signified a free father as well as a slave mother, and therefore anything from slavery

Virginia Dominguez’s history of social classification in Creole Louisiana emphasizes the conflicts between this assumption and government attempts to “ensure that relationship by ‘blood’ did not entail equality of status or ... equal access to property” (57).
to freedom and property-holding status. Dressed in a suit in New Orleans, Bibb received divergent responses to his query, "Sir, I understand you are desirous of purchasing slaves?" (118). One promising candidate, "supposing me to be a slave trader," said, "What kind of slaves have you, sir?" whereas another answered just as politely, "Yes, I do want to buy some, are you for sale?" (117-18). It was not that Bibb magically became lighter-skinned in New Orleans, but that in New Orleans, light-skinned men of some African descent did own slaves. An alternative model of colonial family relations disrupted Anglo-American racial identification in Louisiana.

For Stowe, this French colonial tendency to enfranchise mixed-race slaves went hand-in-hand with the history of French slave rebellion. Mulatto slaves challenged the domestic ideology of the "patriarchal institution" when they claimed a birthright not as figurative but as biological children of their father/slaveowners. Stowe thus contests pro-slavery assumptions about the eternal subjugation of American blacks by taking a French-colonial view of the question, even as she accepts the pro-slavery notion of the "negro's" "peculiar nature," characterized by a high "degree of loyal devotion" ("Slavery" 338). In response to Augustine's allusion to the masses in Haiti, his brother Alfred proclaims that "The Haytiens were not Anglo Saxons ... The Anglo Saxon is the dominant race of the world, and is to be so" (Stowe, Uncle Tom 392). Ignoring the fact that neither Augustine nor Alfred are Anglo-Saxon, since their ancestors were French (239), Stowe goes on pander to the vanity of the "Anglo Saxon race" in a remarkable passage:

"Well, there is a pretty fair infusion of Anglo Saxon blood among our slaves, now," said Augustine. "There are plenty among them who have only enough of the African to give a sort of tropical warmth and fervor to our [sic] calculating firmness and foresight. If ever the San Domingo hour comes, Anglo Saxon blood will lead on the day. Sons of white fathers, with all our haughty feelings burning in their veins, will not always be bought and sold and traded. They will rise, and raise with them their mother's race." (392)

Reading Anglo-American slavery through a French colonial prism, Stowe undermines the patriarchal institution not by questioning racial differences between Anglo-Americans and Africans, but by enumerating the biological family ties between masters and slaves. As "Domestic Slavery" replaced the importation of African slaves, Stowe suggests, the "Africans" were fast becoming a minority among slaves. Calling upon "white fathers" to acknowledge not their metaphorical "paternal attachment" to slaves but their biological paternity, Stowe's Haitian allusion makes the "rising" of these "sons of white fathers" in Anglo-America, regardless of their mother's "tropical" race, a point of national pride.

16 Unlike his Anglo-American counterparts, Louisiana's first presiding cleric, appointed in 1704, promoted intermarriage with Indians, writing to Paris that "the blood of the savages does no harm to the blood of the French" (qtd. in Johnson 35). Slaves of African and Indian descent in Louisiana married one another as well.
The Louisiana portions of Bibb’s narrative thus provide a source not only for Stowe’s description of the frontier plantation but also for her depiction of the class and race opacity of mixed-race persons in Louisiana. Again and again in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, mixed-race slaves pass as something other than slaves not by passing as white Anglo-Americans, but by passing as Spanish or French. The fugitive George Harris appears in a tavern as a newcomer “with a dark, Spanish complexion, fine, expressive black eyes, and close-curling hair, also of a glossy blackness,” “impress[ing] the whole company instantly with the idea of something uncommon” (180). Driving up with a “one-horse buggy,” a “genteel appearance,” and “a colored servant driving,” the seemingly “Spanish” George looks like a “well-dressed, gentlemanly man,” making the landlord “all obsequious” as he calmly reads his own advertisement for capture (180-81). Confounding the advertiser’s prediction that the runaway “mulatto boy” would “try to pass for a white man” (178), George has in fact disguised himself by adding black: “A little walnut bark has made my yellow skin a genteel brown, and I’ve dyed my hair black; so you see I don’t answer to the advertisement at all” (182).18

George’s long-lost sister Emily similarly resurfaces as “a French lady, named De Thoux” at the end of the novel (599). The French aristocratic name of Madame de Thoux disguises Emily’s origins as a Kentucky slave, so that when she claims George Harris as her brother, her interlocutors react “with a strong accent of surprise” (600). Together, George and Emily demonstrate the consequences of the French and Spanish Creole tendency to take children as servants and slaves as wives. The name de Thoux signifies Emily’s emancipation by sexual liaison in Louisiana. Having been “sold to the South,” she “was bought by a good and generous man. He took me with him to the West Indies, set me free, and married me,” she explains (600). Our heroine Cassy, finally, recapitulates both disguises when she walks away with Legree’s next intended mistress from Legree’s house. “[S]ome of the negroes had seen two white figures gliding down the avenue,” the narrator suggests, but paradoxically, Cassy is, like George, dressed in black: she is “dressed after the manner of the Creole Spanish ladies,—wholly in black. A small black bonnet on her head, covered by a veil thick with embroidery, concealed her face. It had been agreed that, in their escape, she was to personate the character of a Creole lady, and Emmeline that of her servant” (597, emphasis added). It is crucial that all of these mobile former slaves pass neither as whites nor as blacks but as Louisiana Creole aliens. As concerned as Uncle Tom’s Cabin is to establish fixed racial oppositions, it challenges the “patriarchal institution” by cataloguing the racial destabilization in these Creole lines of flight.

3. Creole Impersonation

If Cassy personifies a Creole challenge to the patriarchal institution of slavery in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, however, she does so without full authorial sanction. It is now

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17 Stowe’s letter to Frederick Douglass in July 1852 references Bibb, indicating her familiarity with his narrative (Stepto 137).

18 Julia Stern makes this point in “Spanish Masquerade.”
time to consider why Stowe undermines Cassy’s status as a (French) Creole woman by reducing her to an act of Spanish Creole “personation.” Stowe never describes Cassy as a Creole, except in this single scene of escape. This is because Stowe’s matriarchal cure for the nation ultimately shares pro-slavery assumptions about racial identity. Having employed the figure of an “unquiet” Creole woman to challenge the patriarchal institution of slavery and to illustrate its wild effects, Uncle Tom’s Cabin works awkwardly to reinscribe the un-domesticated Creole within the very racial and social categories she broke apart. In so doing, the novel dispenses with the category of the Creole itself, along with its joint settler-and-slave claim to local identity. It is neither the charm nor the authority of this re-domestication but its very clumsiness and haste that reduce Cassy to a chastened invisibility within the much-remembered text.

Cassy tends to fade from readers’ minds because Stowe allows her to survive only at the cost of a transformation that robs her of her Creole identity. Her conversion to a properly Christian (Protestant) maternity begins in Tom’s presence, when she gives up plans for “an hour of retribution, when her hand should avenge on her oppressor all the injustice and cruelty to which she had been witness, or which she had in her own person suffered” (560). Stowe links Cassy’s violent resolve to Catholic dogma: the “sisters in the convent” had told Cassy about a “day of judgment, when everything is coming to light;—won’t there be vengeance, then!” (522). But Tom counters this by counseling Cassy to follow in the footsteps of the Lord, who “never shed no blood but his own” (561), and upon hearing Tom’s resolve to love his enemies, a “softness gather[s] over the lurid fires of her eye” (562). Following Tom’s advice, Cassy chooses flight over violence, earning the unconditional love of a daughter from Emmeline (580). Her next reward is the rediscovery of her biological child Eliza, who escaped to Montreal after being raised in Kentucky by the slavemistress Mrs. Shelby. In a scene of impossibly perfect familial restoration, Cassy meets up again not only with her grown daughter but with a miniature of her, also named Eliza, who appears “every outline and curl, just as her daughter was when she saw her last” (605). The very exactitude of this reincarnation cannot help but underline how everything has changed: the two Elizas are Anglicized and Protestant. With the help of Eliza’s “steady, consistent piety, regulated by the constant reading of the sacred word,” Cassy “seemed to sink, at once, into the bosom of the family,” and by the end of the chapter, “such a change has passed over Cassy, that our readers would scarcely know her” (607).

This triumph of maternal sentiment not only converts Cassy to pacifism in the “bosom” of an Anglo-American Protestant family culture, but also convinces her extended mixed-race family to make their home in Africa. “I might mingle in the circles of the whites, in this country, my shade of color is so slight, and that of my wife and family scarce perceptible,” Cassy’s son-in-law George declares, but “I have no wish to pass for an American, or to identify myself with them” (608). As Michelle Burnham has commented, “the very need to ‘pass for an American’” in this passage “implies that George is not an American any more than he is white” (134). Here as elsewhere, Stowe conflates racial belonging with nationhood, eliding the Creole component of national identity: the importance of being raised
locally, regardless of genealogical descent. But George justifies his repudiation of "American" identity and his embrace of Africa as a way of valuing maternal sentiment over family ties to a well-known and detested father. As George explains, "My sympathies are not for my father's race, but for my mother's. To him I was no more than a fine dog or horse: to my poor heart-broken mother I was a child; and, though I never saw her, after the cruel sale ... yet I know she always loved me dearly" (608).

By contrasting a mother's love to a father's repudiation of family ties under slavery, Stowe insinuates that fathers in general do not deserve custody of their children and that the colored sons of white fathers belong more genuinely to (black mother) Africa than to (white father) America. The greatest travesty of the patriarchal institution thus proves to be its patriarchal bias: it is not natural mothers but a set of unnatural fathers who have the power to dispose of slave children. Small wonder, then, that Stowe's implicit solution to the problem of slavery should be maternal rather than paternal custody for children.19 Rejecting the French Creole history of slave revolts as part and parcel of a dangerous practice of mixed racial inheritance, Stowe returns in the end to the racial imaginary of slavery advocates. Her critique of patriarchy undermines the practice of slavery while also undoing the family ties between white fathers and their mixed-race children and thus between American blacks and whites. Reestablishing a racial and national binary between whites and blacks, Stowe's Creole fugitives ultimately become what Stowe called in her Preface "the African race, as they exist among us" (xiii).

In order to enact this African solution, however, Stowe must dispel the counter-example of Creole nationhood in Haiti. She accordingly takes a moment to discredit Haiti as a dead end, by putting an improbable slur against the French in George's mouth:

*The desire and yearning of my soul is for an African nationality. I want a people that shall have a tangible, separate existence of its own; and where am I to look for it? Not in Hayti; for in Hayti they had nothing to start with. A stream cannot rise above its fountain. The race that formed the character of the Haytiens was a worn-out, effeminate one; and, of course, the subject race will be centuries in rising to anything.* (608-09)

This gratuitous insult about the "effeminate" French makes little sense coming from George. The son-in-law of French Creole Cassy, the brother of Madame de Thoux, and the product of "four years at a French university," where, "applying himself with an unintermitted zeal, [he] obtained a very thorough education" (608), George seems an unlikely source for Francophobic sentiment. But this dismissal of Haiti as a model of national belonging paves the way for George's choice of Liberia as the land where he will "find myself a people" (609). Prophecying a proud future for Liberia, George takes on the mantle of re-colonizing

19 Fleischner points out that for Stowe, "matrilineage is a way to preserve racial segregation" (59). For discussions of the custodial politics in nineteenth-century British and American narratives, see Berry and Palwick.
Africa as a properly (Protestant) Christian mission: “Our nation shall roll the tide of civilization and Christianity along its shores, and plant there mighty republics, that, growing with the rapidity of tropical vegetation, shall be for all coming ages” (609).

Maternal custody can only perform this repatriation for mixed-race children born to mothers of African descent, however. What about mixed-race children born to white American mothers? This possibility, in my view, lends a heightened charge to the powerfully lachrymose death of little Eva. Given Eva’s remarkable intimacy with the slaves around her, and her attachment to Tom in particular, we might well read her premature death as the author’s effort to preserve her purity (and the Creole-American nation’s racial homogeneity) by preventing her from bearing any mixed-race children. Both the mixed-race Creole Cassy and her white Creole counterpart Eva, after all, move about with a freedom that proves dangerous to the novel’s equilibrium. Once hidden in Legree’s attic, Cassy “promenaded,” or walked in the French style, “with a freedom that was alarming” (594). Despite shut and locked doors, “a tall figure in a white sheet did walk, at the most approved ghostly hours, around the Legree premises,—pass out the doors, glide about the house,—disappear at intervals, and, reappearing, pass up the silent stair-way, into that fatal garret” (595). This ghostly white wandering notably resembles Eva’s first appearance on the riverboat: “Always dressed in white, she seemed to move like a shadow through all sorts of places, without contracting spot or stain; and there was not a corner or nook, above or below, where those fairy footsteps had not glided, and that visionary golden head, with its deep blue eyes, fleeted along” (231). Even before Tom’s approach, Eva demonstrates her reckless freedom and familiarity with racial opposites: “when she tripped fearlessly over dangerous places, rough, sooty hands were stretched involuntarily out to save her, and smooth her path” (231).

It is possible that Eva’s death trumps Cassy’s survival in the American cultural imagination because Eva actually represents a more dangerous Creole threat for Stowe and requires a more pressing solution. Nancy Armstrong has proposed that Eva’s prepubescent death expresses a theory of national social reproduction in the English colonies, where English identity had to be “reproduced outside of England” (12). In this theory, “the English family is virtually the same thing as English culture in that both depend on the descendants of an English family marrying with their kind. Such a culture abhors a mixture. It prefers a dead daughter to an ethnically impure one” (12). By dying like the faithful daughters in English captivity narratives, Eva proves that she “cannot exist outside her original household” and helps to “distinguish those within the diasporic community from those whose inclusion would cancel out its English identity” (Armstrong 14, 2). Viewed from this perspective, the alternative model of social reproduction smothered by Eva’s premature death becomes clear. At stake is the stifled possibility of another sort of Creole nation, a French colonial version in

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20 As Burnham comments, Stowe thus “obviates violence by redefining domestic racial borders as imperial umbilical cords” (124).
which children of settlers and children of slaves might become members of the same family.

If this is the case, then George Sand did well to ignore Cassy's story, focussing instead on the "affection that unites" the "little child" Eva and the "negro slave" Tom as "the only love-story, the only passion of the drama," and adding that "I know not what other genius but that of sanctity itself could shed over this affection and this situation a charm so powerful and so sustained" (Review 5). Despite Sand's claims about sanctity, as Spillers has pointed out, Uncle Tom bears the classic features of a dirty old man, with seductive guiles and toys in his pockets, and Eva appears at times a dangerously sexual little angel. If marriage looks like slavery in Cassy's case, slavery looks like marriage when Eva requests that her father buy her the man named Tom. "I want him," she tells her father, adding a reason he finds "original": "I want to make him happy" (236). In this encounter as elsewhere, Stowe considers (and then rejects) alternative concepts of national social reproduction by making Eva and her father not English Creoles, but French. Sanctified or not, the ill-fated and disguised romance between the blackest Christian Tom and the "transparent" Creole Eva finds in Creole Cassy's potentially defiant survival an (im)possible dénouement (236).

4. Domestication

Like Cassy in Uncle Tom's Cabin, Harriet Jacobs's pseudonymous heroine Linda Brent hides in a garret in order to escape from slavery and finds that from a hidden "loophole in the garret," she is able to expose the family secrets of the "patriarchal institution." But Jacobs makes even more of Brent's "loophole of retreat," which she uses to describe not just the spy-hole but the garret itself, a kind of hole within the house which becomes her escape clause from slavery. Confined for seven years within a crawl-space, Brent/Jacobs gains a perspective on slavery by watching and listening as her master, her children, and other members of the community pass within and outside her freed grandmother's house. In the "cognitive maneuver of the modern subject" typical of a European exhibition, the subject "separates himself from an object-world and observes it from a position that is invisible and set apart" (Mitchell 308). Brent/Jacobs becomes through her confinement just such an ideal witness. This allows her to challenge the claims of apparently impartial observers, like an English lady who had "paint[ed] the condition of the slaves in the United States" in a "rose-colored" fashion:

_A small portion of my experience would enable her to read her own pages with anointed eyes. If she were to lay aside her title, and, instead of visiting among the fashionable, become domesticated, as a poor governess, on some plantation in Louisiana or Alabama, she would see and hear things that would make her tell quite a different story._ (Jacobs 185)
By "becoming domesticated" herself, Jacobs invites us to join her in an act of literary eavesdropping. 21 Hidden in the walls of her grandmother's house, Brent/Jacobs attains the invisible sanctuary of authorial privilege from her own uncannily "domesticated" situation.

Jacobs removes her readers' "rose-coloured glasses" by parodying the domestic sentiments of slaveholders. A letter supposedly written by the descendants of Dr. Flint to entice the fugitive Brent back into slavery, for example, adopts the pose of a sentimental family willing to forgive and forget the behavior of a wayward child:

Come home.... We would receive you with open arms and tears of joy.... You know my sister was always attached to you.... [Y]ou were taken into the house, and treated as one of us, and almost as free.... The family will be rejoiced to see you; and your poor old grandmother expressed a great desire to have you come.... Doubtless you have heard of the death of your aunt [Nancy].... Could you have seen us round her death bed, with her mother, all mingling our tears in one common stream, you would have thought the same heartfelt tie existed between a master and his servant, as between a mother and her child. (171-72)

This letter, faithful as it is to pro-slavery sentimentalism, cannot be read at face value. Buried within the letter-writer's analogy of "master and servant, mother and child" is the toll of six dead babies borne by the servant-mother Nancy, who was forced to spend her nights cramped on the threshold of her mistress's bedroom door. Even in the text of this slaveholder's letter, Jacobs does not go so far as to state baldly that "the same heartfelt tie existed" between master and servant as between mother and child. Instead, she writes that "you would have thought" such a tie existed, highlighting by that locution what Linda Brent would not have thought, had she witnessed the sentimental scene.

If Incidents requires us to read pro-slavery sentimentalism against the grain, it also does surprising things with anti-slavery sentiment. In a passage about a semi-literate black Christian named "uncle Fred," Jacobs begins to sound like Stowe—so much like Stowe that we ought to become suspicious. "I knew an old black man," writes Jacobs à la Stowe, "whose piety and childlike trust in God were beautiful to witness" (72). Jacobs describes uncle Fred's determination to learn to read his Bible, in spite of the laws against slave literacy, in the dialect-specific speech typical of Stowe: "Lord bress you, chile," says uncle Fred, "You neber gib me a lesson dat I don't pray to God to help me to understan' what I spells and what I reads" (73). With this story, Jacobs appears to pave the way for the sort of Christian mission dear to Stowe, who hoped that northern Christian mothers could save the nation by adopting former slaves, teaching them how to form their own Christian families (and nations), "receiv[ing] them to the educat[ing] advantages of Christian republican society and schools, until they have attained to somewhat of a moral and intellectual maturity, and then assist[ing]...  

21 Wexler argues that the impact of domestic ideology must be measured not only by its intended effects on middle-class white girls and women, but also by its effect on unintended readers who respond with acts of "literary eavesdropping."
them in their passage to those shores [of Liberia], where they may put in practice the lessons they have learned in America” (Uncle Tom 626). But Jacobs comes to a startling conclusion in her commentary about uncle Fred:

There are thousands, who, like good uncle Fred, are thirsting for the water of life; but the law forbids it, and the churches withhold it. They send the Bible to heathen abroad, and neglect the heathen at home. I am glad that missionaries go out to the dark corners of the earth; but I ask them not to overlook the dark corners at home. Talk to American slaveholders as you talk to savages in Africa. Tell them it is wrong to traffic in men. Tell them it is sinful to sell their own children, and atrocious to violate their own daughters. (73)

The substitution of “slaveholders” for “heathen” in this passage is stunning. The indeterminacy of “heathen” and “dark corners” “at home” has allowed the reader to picture “dark heathens” as black men like uncle Fred and uncle Tom, longing for instruction in the Biblical “water of life.” The injunction to “[t]alk to American slaveholders as you talk to savages in Africa,” however, displaces this commonplace, suggesting that it is not American blacks but American slaveholders who require instruction in family values.

This rhetorical move is indicative of the distinction between Jacobs’s and Stowe’s Creole family politics. Jacobs focusses not on the rupturing of slave families in the interstate slave trade, but on the everyday life of “domestic slavery” at its most domestic: the breeding of humans for consumption. In so doing, Jacobs unravels pro-slavery ideology not by rejecting the vaunted family ties between patriarchs and slave children, but by demonstrating just what it means to be a Creole (bred, reared, brought up, domestic) slave in this regime. Jacobs employs the figure of the wet-nurse, which served slavery advocates as proof that the slaveholding relationship was familial in nature. The unsigned reviewer of James Kirk Paulding’s Slavery in the United States, for example, argued that the master’s feelings of “parental attachment” to the slave derived from childhood: “They have their rise in the relation between the infant and the nurse. They are cultivated between him and his foster brother. They are cherished by the parents of both. They are fostered by the habit of affording protection and favors to the younger offspring of the same nurse” (“Slavery” 338). Jacobs describes the familial correspondences of the foster system in terms that appear to confirm this tender theory: “My mother’s mistress was the daughter of my grandmother’s mistress. She was the foster sister of my mother; they were both nourished at my grandmother’s breast” (6-7). But she immediately points out that rather than affording protection to the slave children, this system appropriates the children’s biological mother for another’s consumption: “In fact, my mother had been weaned at three months old, that the babe of the mistress might obtain sufficient food” (7). Jacobs thus stresses that the slave children’s “favors” derive from the same source as their meager ration of milk: from the generous slave mother/nurse. Slaves are not dependents but neglected foster parents in Jacobs’s account. While the

22 “To this good grandmother ... I was indebted for all my comforts, spiritual and temporal. It was her labor that supplied my scanty wardrobe” (6, 11, original emphasis).
slaveowners act like wayward children and die insolvent in her story, Brent’s slave relatives run profitable businesses and support their extended families.

Jacobs thus exposes the slaveholding “family” as a cannibalistic household in which ungrateful children consume those who have raised them. The “American slaveholders” treat their supposed family members as food, not so much feeding their slaves as feeding on them. Her master’s sexual harassment itself appears in the form of a tortuous consumption: “my master, whose restless, craving, vicious nature roved about day and night, seeking whom to devour, had just left me, with stinging, scorching words; words that scathed ear and brain like fire” (18, emphasis added). Like torture, rape is not what happens when slaves fall into the hands of bad men in Incidents (as it is in Uncle Tom’s Cabin) but rather, part and parcel of the slave-breeding system. It is a form of consumption endemic to “domestic slavery,” consonant with what the slavery advocates called the “promotion of families” among the slaves. In a story about a “neighboring slaveholder,” Jacobs presents the slaveholder’s rape of his new wife’s slaves as no more and no less than an act of “claim[ing] this family as his property” (50). This practice complements that of the overseer who “entered every cabin, to see that men and their wives had gone to bed together,” since “[w]omen are considered of no value, unless they continually increase their owner’s stock” (49). Led astray by the “unclean influences” of such household practices, in Jacobs’s carefully ironic language, a white daughter “selected one of the meanest slaves on [her father’s] plantation to be the father of his first grandchild”: “In such cases the infant is smothered, or sent where it is never seen by any who know its history. But if the white parent is the father, instead of the mother,” Jacobs adds, “the offspring are unblushingly reared for the market” (52).

These insights into the system of “domestic slavery” require us to read between the lines of any offers of “a home and freedom” to a slave. Incidents is notorious for its use of sentimental language to describe the slaveowner Dr. Flint’s harassment, as in the following proposal to his slave:

I will procure a cottage, where you and the children can live together. Your labor shall be light, such as sewing for my family. Think what is offered you, Linda—a home and freedom! Let the past be forgotten. If I have been harsh with you at times, your willfulness drove me to it. You know I exact obedience from my own children, and I consider you as yet a child. (83)

Although this passage might be lifted straight out of Samuel Richardson’s Pamela, Incidents requires us to parse it carefully, noting that there are three distinct families in Dr. Flint’s offer. First, there is the family unit of “you and the children,” a unit which, like the freedom papers that Flint might prepare, has no

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23 Anne Bradford Warner identifies the importance of the “absolute inversion of cooking, the use of food as a device for torture” in Jacobs’s account (25). In a particularly gruesome “favorite” torture for “thefts” of food, a neighboring slaveholder would “tie a rope round a man’s body, and suspend him from the ground. A fire was kindled over him, from which was suspended a piece of fat pork. As this cooked, the scalding drops of fat continually fell on the bare flesh” (Jacobs 46).
legal value (84). Second, there is “my [Dr. Flint’s] family,” a legally protected unit of social reproduction feeding on the labor of slaves. The third “family” unit consists of master and slave: “I consider you as yet a child.” This extended “familial” relation undergirds the relative positions of the first two families: since the slave mother is a “child” to her master, her family is supposed to be dependent upon and obedient to the master’s heirs. Understanding all too well the way in which the first family (you and the children) will be sacrificed to the second under the mask of the third, Brent considers her master’s offer “a snare”: “I shuddered; but I was constrained to listen, while he talked of his intention to give me a home of my own, and to make a lady of me. Hitherto, I had escaped my dreaded fate, by being in the midst of people” (53).

Despite her understanding of the pitfalls of domestication, however, Jacobs’s Brent never gives up her claims to freedom or to a home for her family. Incidents ends in a manner unusual for a slave narrative, with a reference to the traditions of domestic fiction and a longing for domestic space:

Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! We are as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the north; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in my condition. The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. (201)

This statement has proved perplexing to critics like Annette Niemtzow, who suggests that the “images of the domestic novel seem to mesmerize [sic] Brent so that she seems unable to grasp the miracle—at the end of the text—of her own escape from slavery to freedom” (107). Yet Jacobs explicitly derides this “miracle,” suggesting instead that the freedom of white northerners from the power of slaveholders “is not saying a great deal.” In order to understand what might be at stake in Jacobs’s longing for a home of her own, we must read Incidents as a narrative of domestic emancipation and as a response to Uncle Tom’s Cabin in particular. In this context, the national dimensions of a longing for freedom and a home in America become clear. As in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Incidents’ descriptions of the family always involve a double political move, since the family must be distinguished from the “patriarchal institution” of slavery, while also determining membership in the Creole nation. Not to be confused with a trivial longing for a husband, Jacobs’s yearning for a home for her family in America implicitly demands a legitimate place in the American nation for Creoles of all kinds.

24 In response, critics have argued that Jacobs “discovers the limits of her own proposal for a domestic liberty” (Sanchez-Eppler 91), or that she “comes to understand that her failure to find that place happens not because she has somehow failed but because the patriarchal, racist society has failed her” (Becker 412).

25 With the words, “Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage,” after all, Jacobs situates her tale not within the tradition of male slave narratives, which usually ended with freedom, but within the genre of women’s fiction. Her pronouncement echoes, even as it repudiates, the final “Reader, I married him” of such popular novels as Jane Eyre.
Unlike Stowe, who accepts that slaves are children but rejects the masters as bad "fathers" in order to deny the Creole family relationships established by shared blood, Jacobs instead confirms the Creole family relationship of masters, mistresses, and slaves, only to suggest that the slaves are not so much their masters' children as they are their unacknowledged foster parents. However "lightly" slaveholders (like her children's own father, a member of Congress) hold their "parental relations," Jacobs refuses to renounce these family ties or their implicit claims, and instead repeatedly calls upon the slaveholding American nation to acknowledge its much-abused relations. Jacobs provides an implicit response to Stowe's repatriation of "the Africans amongst us," when she asks, "And then who are Africans? Who can measure the amount of Anglo-Saxon blood coursing in the veins of American slaves?" (44). With this phrase, Jacobs calls to mind Stowe's own Creole challenge. By appealing to the "Anglo-Saxon blood" coursing through the veins of slaves, Jacobs appears to confirm Stowe's idea that only the "sons of white fathers" pose a challenge to the American nation by their biological-familial claims. Yet by announcing that this blood cannot be measured, Jacobs suggests that no Creole American slaves can rightly be termed "African." To call them Africans, as Stowe does, conceals their biological and cultural relationships to the white Creoles whom Stowe dubs "Americans."

Jacobs thus takes up Stowe's own Creole challenge when she dares to envision a future American home for the "family" consisting of her mulatto children and herself. Unlike Stowe's Cassy, Jacobs's Brent refuses to be domesticated by the "miracle" of her freedom and instead challenges an evolutionary narrative that would negate her earlier attic stance. Defying psychological distance from her slave "self," Jacobs keeps Brent in a threshold position between slavery and freedom throughout her account, just as her title turns its object (a "slave girl") into the subject of her own story ("written by herself"). It is from this precarious position that Jacobs/Brent triumphs over the Flint family values, which she declares bankrupt in a joke at the end: "The doctor had died in embarrassed circumstances, and had little to will to his heirs, except such property as he was unable to grasp" (196). This sentence indicates, first, that the doctor died in debt. His tendency to devour got the best of him; he wasted money chasing after Brent and paid the price. But the particular phrase Jacobs selects to describe his fate also evokes a well-known euphemism for pregnancy. The doctor died "in embarrassed circumstances" like a woman bearing an illegitimate child. Because she refused to observe the laws of property that would have enabled the reproduction of his family, in fact, the "property he was unable to grasp" ensured the slaveholding family's dissolution. In narrative terms, Jacobs declares the slaveholder's household insolvent and illegitimate; what remains is the fugitive property ensconced in her own authorial voice. Authorizing a new domestic ideal, the freed mother and her two (fatherless, mulatto) children end by anticipating the prospect of their own domestic inheritance, in a legitimate home of their own.

Jacobs's domestic orientation is thus more than a holdover from a feminine genre or an attempt to court white women as readers. Despite her claims to the contrary, Jacobs's story ends not with "freedom," since she remains bound by
duty and gratitude to her employer, but with the writing of her book. The production of the book itself lays claim, in writing, to the Jacobses’ “own” past and in so doing, serves as an heirloom chronicling the genealogy of her family. Yet *Incident in the Life of a Slave Girl* represents an important family legacy in more than one sense. By addressing the imagined community of print-readers proper to domestic fiction, Jacobs, like Stowe, took up the task of re-defining domestic norms for the American family and nation. In laying claim to this kind of domestic utterance as a Creole slave, however, Jacobs disclosed what Stowe wished to efface: the Creole contours of the nation formed by the break-away colonies of the United States. Revealed in the rhetorical maneuvers of this momentous book is the claim to an extraordinary inheritance, the legitimating and power-producing figure of the family itself and the home-grown Creole nation for which it stands.

**Works Cited**


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26 The production of the book as family heirloom is documented in the papers collected by Yellin. That Jacobs was able to control the circulation of her story and book stands in significant contrast to her inability to circulate herself within the bonds of slavery. When her printer went bankrupt, she bought the plates herself; the title page reads “Published for the Author.” A letter from her editor, Lydia Maria Child, indicates just how the book would become Jacobs’s first inheritable property: “I want you to sign the following paper, and send it back to me.... [i]n case of my death, [it] will prove that the book is your property, not mine” (246).


