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**Book Review - Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019)**

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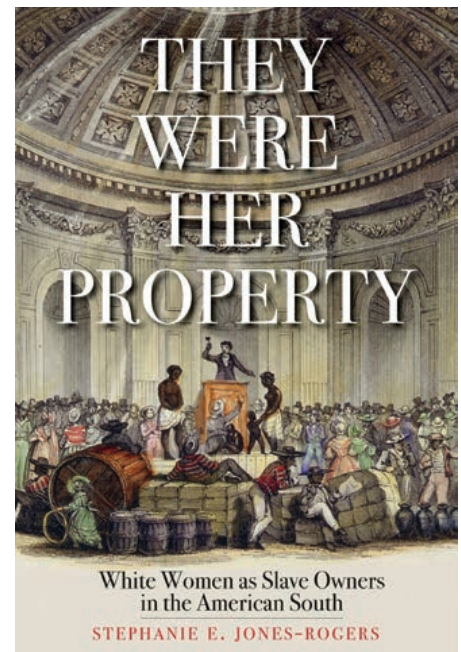
Margaret Lowe

Though it had been a long day, and though April was still proving to be the “cruellest month,” when I emerged from the Harvard Square MBTA stop, I was determined not to let fatigue lead me astray. On my calendar for the past month, I was eager to hear Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers talk about her new book, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South*. With such a provocative title and having read a few blurbs, I expected to attend a good forum; one where I would pick up a few choice tidbits about African American history that I could share with my classes and fold into my research. I have been researching, teaching and thinking about gender, race, and African American history for many years, my whole career really. And yes, as a white woman, I had thought long and hard about my location, about white privilege, about how systemic racism pervades all aspects of American life, of my life. And so, as I opened the heavy Unitarian Church doors where the forum was held, I did so with what I hoped was both a learned and humble mind.

Entering the room with a quiet but commanding presence, Professor Jones-Rogers took the podium and began her story: “Narrative sources, legal and financial documents, and military and government correspondence make clear that white southern women knew the ‘most obnoxious features’ of slavery all too well. Slave-owning women not only witnessed the most brutal features of slavery, they took part in them, profited from them and defended them” (Jones-Rogers, ix). “Wait. What?” Just as Jones-Rogers points out in her book, I, like most historians, have long understood that white women actively

participated and benefited from slavery, and in fact often ruled the domestic sphere with brutal cruelty. We had long given up the notion that any sort of cross-racial “sisterhood” existed.

But what we did not know (or perhaps care to know), is what Jones-Rogers argues so brilliantly and persuasively, that “when we focus specifically on women who owned enslaved people in their own right, [particularly] the experiences of married slave-owning women, [we find that] ... the product of these women’s *economic investments* in slavery – the people they owned – including the wages



enslaved people earned when hired out to others, the cash crops they cultivated, picked and packed for shipment and the babies they nursed, were fundamental to the nation’s economic growth and to American capitalism” (xiii. Emphasis added).

My heart started to pound. I felt myself take a sharp in-breath, whatever post-commute fatigue I had left, flew from my bones. Listen to those words: “women” ... “owned” ... “in their own right” ... “fundamental” ... “American capitalism.” As Jones-Rogers argues, if we take this in, if we fully comprehend the fact that white women’s actions “helped make the nineteenth-century scale of cotton cultivation possible, [then] the narrative of slavery, nineteenth-century markets, and capitalism as the *domain of men* becomes untenable” (Emphasis added). And if that narrative is untenable, then white women could also no longer stand just a bit to the side, just a bit removed from the ongoing historical legacy of slavery in contrast to white men, even when, particularly when it came to what is in fact the most horrible violence of slavery -- economic violence – the treating human beings as property.

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Still, my heart pounded for another reason. Awe. The awe of one historian sitting before an inspired practitioner of the craft. Jones-Rogers is a “historian’s historian.” Just as the best historians do, like a detective on a chase, she located and then combed through every conceivable extant primary source relevant to her case. First, she examined and asked new questions of the “usual suspects”: legal documents (wills, estate sales, divorce, marriage and birth records, plantation inventories), personal accounts (diaries, letters, photographs, clothing), print media (newspapers, runaway advertisements), and government documents (congressional testimony, elections, legislation). Second, and most importantly, she mined the accounts of formerly enslaved peoples gathered by Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviewers during the Great Depression and then matched that testimony against her other evidence. Thus, page after page, Jones-Rogers illustrates that when “we listen to what enslaved people had to say about white women and slave mastery, we find that . . . no group spoke about [white] women’s investments in slavery more often or more powerfully than the enslaved people subject to their ownership and control. . . . They were the people whose lives were forever changed,” for example, “when a mistress sold someone just so she could buy a new dress” (xx).

Jones-Rogers marshals this evidence in a parallel history of American slavery (through its ending and then the rise of Jim Crow) and a white southern woman’s trajectory as a slave owner. Beginning with the acculturation of white girls into their roles as “Mistresses in the Making,” she then traces their emergence into adulthood in her chapters evocatively titled with the words of formerly enslaved peoples: “A Missus who Done her Own Bossing,” “Wet Nurse for Sale or Hire,” and “That ‘Oman took Delight in Sellin’ Slaves.” Devastated by “the loss of their primary source of personal wealth” (56),

white southern women in all stages of adulthood perceived the Civil War as an “Unprecedented Robbery.” In turn, they were only too happy to lead the charge in mythologizing the Civil War as Jones-Rogers lays out in her Epilogue: “Lost Kindred, Lost Cause.”

While each chapter deserves a close reading, scholars of women’s and gender history will find especially useful those sections in which Jones-Rogers demonstrates that contrary to most historical interpretations, the legal principle of “coverture” did not restrict married women’s legal rights to the extent we thought. With meticulous research,

evidence, she documents that “white women in the South understood the darkest dimensions of the market in people firsthand” and that indeed “they were far more than begrudgingly complicit bystanders on the margin of the peculiar institution” . . . “they were co-conspirators” (205).

I finished the book with my heart still pounding -- in both awe and trepidation. Awe, for the power and beauty of inspired scholarship and just what the humanities can do. And trepidation. Am I, are we, as a nation willing to grapple with the profound and on-going implications of what

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Jones-Rogers reveals that white women used myriad legal strategies and took advantage of even the smallest loophole to get around such laws in order to accumulate, preserve and enhance their own and their family’s economic standing by trading in human property. In fact, this role was so commonplace that observers rarely commented upon it, not even when “delicate” white women bargained for the best “deal” at public slave auctions. In just one of the hundreds of such accounts Jones-Rogers includes, “Tom Hawkins” explained that “she [Annie Poore, his owner] ‘was all the time sellin’ her slaves for big prices after she done train ‘em for to be cooks, housegals . . . and wash ‘omans’” (205). Here, as throughout her book, Jones-Rogers lets us see this harsh reality for ourselves. With unassailable

Jones-Rogers has rendered? As the historian, Edmund Morgan, so eloquently argued, the “central paradox of American history” is that slavery and liberty grew up side-by-side. Now with Jones-Rogers as our guide, we know the full extent to which white women were/are part of that paradox.



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