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# ‘I prayed to the Lord to go with each seal’: Circulating Texts in Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life

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## Abstract

Published in 1861, Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon differs from most antebellum slave narratives in that it partly takes the form of an interview between Louisa Picquet, a former slave, and the white man who questions her and describes himself as the true “writer” of the book, Hiram Mattison. Most discussions of the narrative have focused on Picquet’s empowerment through oral resistance. DoVeanna S. Fulton, in particular, has explained how “a non literate freedwoman uses orality to regulate the representation of her life in order to express her strength, perseverance, and humanity.” While acknowledging that Picquet employs verbal communication to exert authorial control, I argue that Picquet’s realization of her main objective—purchasing her mother’s freedom—mainly relies on her ability to use script and print to her own advantage. Unlike more famous slave narrators such as Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, Louisa Picquet does not mention if and how she learned to read and write; the fact that she published an “oral” slave narrative led literary critics to assume that she never did. Yet internal evidence suggests that Picquet might actually have been literate. In the process of raising the money for her mother’s freedom, Picquet exchanges dozens of letters with her mother and her mother’s owner, some of which are reproduced within the narrative. She repeatedly makes use of other handwritten and printed materials such as letters of recommendation, telegrams, private messages, clippings, and a subscription-book in which donators are asked to sign their names. That she eventually published her narrative in pamphlet form is proof that she believed in the power of print. Louisa Picquet’s story, I contend, should be understood not only in the light of orality but also through its emphasis on the circulation of texts written by herself and others.

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