

National and Gender Power Negotiations in Harriett Low's Lights and Shadows of a Macao Life

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Abstract

Dictated by the cult of domesticity, American women's status in the mid-19th century remains largely the same from previous centuries: they are powerless politically and socio-economically. Harriett Low, one of the first two American women who lived in Macao in the mid-19th century, is expected to abide by the ideals of the True Womanhood in America. Colonialism, America's emerging power and her privileged role as a white woman among the racial and cultural Other in Macao have enabled her to test the boundaries of the cult of domesticity. Low establishes an authoritative self whose vestiges can be traced in her multi-volume journals that document her life as a travel companion to her uncle and aunt in Macao. As the only unmarried young white woman in the Portuguese colony, Low is invited to many fancy social functions for the rich and powerful. Though she is still governed by the rules of her gender, she is temporarily rewarded with the opportunity to align herself with both American and European colonial power in Macao. Utilizing theories of the Self and the Other from Edward Said and Chandra Mohanty, I examine how Low's Other is the antithesis of her Self and therefore serves an accentual purpose in the conceptualization of the self. I also explore how Low's gaze of the Other is conditioned by her gender, national allegiance, social class, and how she negotiates her power as a woman in a male-dominated world in colonial Macao.

Keywords: Macau, female subjectivity, travel literature, colonialism, Orientalism.

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The advent of the Industrial Revolution in America, despite its numerous accompanying social and economic problems, has brought unprecedented prosperity to the American society, and has led to the growth and expansion of the middle class in the 19th century. The once unattainable economic and social privileges of the upper class are now well within the reach of the American middle class. With increased socio-economic status and political power, the burgeoning middle class has now joined the company of America's moral and conduct gatekeepers. In accordance with prevalent Victorian values and to mimicry the decorum of the upper class, the newly minted American middle class places significant importance on personal as well as social behaviors and manners. The publishing industry, both European and American, continue to churn out numerous conduct books instructing both men and women on how to act at home, in public, at the dinner table, and in various social functions. Particular emphasis is placed on female propriety; women who have the best manners are regarded as ideal marriage partners. In "Letters from a Father to His Daughter," dated November 17, 1830, the unnamed father writes:

Little things are everything with females. As you have no opportunity to display an extraordinary intellect in public, provided heaven has endowed you with one, as sphere of action is limited to domestic fireside, and an estimate is formed of your character from the commonest appearances. Elegance and grace and polite conversation among friends as well as in front of strangers....If it were in my power to endow my daughter with only one of two faculties, taste or genius, I would for a female select good taste. (as cited in Fortin, 2013, p. 5)

Thus, it is easy to note that despite the upward social mobility the American middle class has acquired, American women are still held hostage to the demands of the Cult of Domesticity and other female conduct manuals. Their status in the mid-19th century remains largely the same—they are still deemed inferior compared to their male counterparts.

The status and functionality of women in the 19th century are best summarized by the king in Alfred Tennyson's poem "The Princess." Tennyson (2000) writes: "Man for the field, woman for the hearth, man for the sword and for the needle she; man with the head and woman with the heart, man to command and woman to obey; all else confusion" (p.150). The mid-19th century American women are expected to be religious and pious angels of the house and moral guardians of the society. Female conduct manuals relentlessly advise women on how to transform their homes into domestic sanctuaries for the comfort of their husbands and children. Women are expected to fulfill the roles of a calm and nurturing mother, a loving and faithful wife, and a passive, delicate and virtuous silent creature. While lower class women work either in harsh industrial settings or as domestic servants, upper middle class women are treated more as prized possessions than human beings. They are expected to engage in social endeavors tied to their husbands' employment and continued social mobility. Regardless of their social statuses, the American women in the mid-19th century are still relegated to an inferior status; they remain largely voiceless and deprived of individual agency.

Caught in a quandary of Victorian ideals of womanhood and individual desires, Harriett Low captures her negotiations of national, racial, and gender identities in a

male-dominated commercial world in her nine-volume journal *Lights and Shadows of a Macao Life: Journals of a Travelling Spinster*. Born in 1809 in Salem Massachusetts, Harriett Low is one of the first two American women who lived in Macao in the mid-19th century. Her father is a well-to-do merchant and owner of a successful shipping business. As the second of twelve children, and one of four daughters in a large family, Low, like most women in the era, is expected to engage in many household chores. In 1829 her uncle William Low and his ailing wife Abigail Knapp Low are sent by Russell & Co. to China for a five-year stay. According to Chinese business laws, while her uncle William is managing the business affairs for Russell & Co. in Canton, which is off-limits to women, his wife must stay in Macau. Concerns over her aunt's poor health prompt Low's uncle to ask Low to accompany them to China, and to provide companionship for her aunt in his absence. Through a long sea voyage, they arrive in Macau, a Portuguese colony, on September 29, 1829. Through her uncle's connections, Low soon becomes acquainted with many of the well-known residents of Macau, all the employees of the British East India Company, and other prosperous British and American merchants in Macao.

Though at home in America, Low would be expected to follow the ideals of the Cult of Domesticity and remain in the domestic sphere. As the only unmarried young white woman in the Portuguese colony, Low is thrust into the public arena in order to cultivate business relationships for her uncle's company. She is invited to attend many fancy social functions for the rich and powerful, and is allowed to mingle somewhat freely among both genders. It is important to note that while Western women in Macao, such as Low, enjoy more freedom of movement than their Chinese counterparts, their freedom remains nonetheless limited. In addition to the Chinese ban on foreign women entering Canton, Ford points out in *Troubling American Women: Narratives of Gender and Nation in Hong Kong* (2001) that many Western male counterparts also regard them as "spoilors" (p. 27).

Low's relative freedom as a white American woman living in Macao has led to her reconfigurations of national, racial, and gender identities. Her complex sense of self, national, gender, and to a great extent, racial identities are reflected in her lengthy journals and through her often self-appointed role as a representative of the American nation. Damian Shaw suggests in "Harriett Low: An American Spinster at the Cape" (2010) that Low's identities have been "fractured" by her experience of living among people of different racial and cultural backgrounds in Macao. Her multi-faceted life experience and her simultaneously marginalized and privileged position as a white woman in Macao have shaped what Shaw(2010) refers to as her "dual or divided consciousness" (p. 300). Low's "dual or divided consciousness" often sparks conflicting views in her intertwined narratives of nation, race, and gender.

Though torn between her desire for adventure and her conscious need to conform to the Cult of Domesticity, Low's new role has empowered her to act on her own wishes, and to place herself above the Victorian code of female conduct. Dressed in the latest European fashion, Harriett Low, the once small town girl burdened with household chores and family financial strains, is now representing not only the Lows, but also Russell and Co. and even America. In Macao, Low exercises her personal liberty and becomes secretly engaged to William Wood, a young naturalist from Philadelphia. Though Low's transgressive adventure in Macao is futile in the end, nonetheless, it reflects her individuality, and her desire to defy the status quo.

Ironically, Low does not extend the freedom she awards herself to the American women back home and is quite unforgiving of their “improper” female conduct. In response to her sister’s letter about the limited freedom some Salem girls are exercising, she takes upon herself to act as the self-righteous moral gatekeeper. Steeped in the Victorian tradition of womanhood, in one of her journal entries, Low (2002) writes in a reprimanding tone:

This is the error of allowing girls and boys to be tramping about the streets evenings. They have a great deal too much liberty in Salem. I shall begin to be an advocate for French Seclusion almost. If girls have no respect for themselves, no power of controlling their evil propensities or if they will not use that power, they had much better be kept to themselves” (p. 610).

Low’s critical stance towards female impropriety back home in America is not only a reflection of her deep conviction of the Victorian Cult of Domesticity; it is also a microcosm of what Shaw referred to as her “dual and divided consciousness” (p. 300) due to her cross-cultural experience.

Throughout Low’s nine-volume journal, she continuously demonstrates her loyalty to the American nation. Her frequent displays of national and cultural allegiance to her homeland are reflections of her sense of national, cultural, and racial superiority and pride. In multiple journal entries, Low (2002) writes: “Everything we see here makes us value our own country and its privileges (p. 23).” “Then after dinner [I] read the North America Review, drank to our country’s health and prosperity” (p.167). “Not that I wished to stay in Canton any longer. Three weeks answered my purpose very well, but I could not bear to let the Chinese know they could do anything with the Americans” (195-96). Damian Shaw (2010) states that Low’s “cultural blindness demonstrates her conflation of several powerful discourses in order to justify American/European ‘stewardship’ or colonialism” (p. 296). Her self-righteous and negative pronouncements about the Chinese, the Portuguese, and to a certain degree, the British are, according to Stacilee Ford (2001), “expressions of frustration with those who make similarly negative pronouncements about America and Americans” (p. 23).

In the lengthy journals, Low (2002) expresses her determination to “fight for our country and our refinement,” and “our religious principles (p. 21).” In her defense of America, she launches a literary battle against what she believes to be British arrogance against America and Americans. She writes, “I will not pretend to say, nor do I believe, that there is as much refinement in America as in England, but I know there is decency and civility and elegance and luxury, if not to the same extent as in England” (p. 36).

Though thousands of miles away from America, Low is passionate about every aspect of American life, and discusses American national affairs openly with her circle of friends. Low (2002) writes sympathetically in her journal:

This morning we were talking of postages in America, revenue, etc. We all come to the conclusion they do not pay the government officers enough. Here our president to begin with has not so much as the Chief of the British Factory, not half the sum. ..Then the Navy officers, poor creatures. How do they ever support a family—and if they die no provision of widows. (p. 467)

Ironically, while it is admirable for Low to express her national allegiance and defend her nation in her journals, her “dual or divided consciousness” (Shaw, 2010, p. 300) prevents her from realizing that female silence is still considered golden in mid-19th century America.

Low’s frequent display of her national loyalty and pride is closely tied to America’s increasing importance in the commercial world, and her privileged exclusive membership in the powerful colonial circles. According to Foster Stockwell (2003), since the maiden voyage of *The Empress of China* in 1790, in a period of five years between 1804-1809, 154 American vessels set sail to China. Trade between China and the United States constituted “one seventh of all American imports, and provided the greatest profits of any branch of foreign trade” (p. 90). Yen-Ping Hao (1986) believes that within a short period, “American merchants assumed second place in the commercial world of Canton” (p. 27). Fully aware of America’s increasing political might in the world, Low appoints herself as a guardian and spokesperson of American national and commercial interests. As an insider to the Sino-U.S. trade circle, though Low is privy to legal and illegal trade transactions between the two nations, she makes no mention of her uncle’s involvement in the opium trade in her lengthy nine-volume journal. Damian Shaw (2010) believes that Low’s “identity as an American frequently sets her in opposition to what she views as British arrogance when it suits her, yet she often sides with so-called British values when they coincide with her own” (289). Jacques Downs (1997) echoes Shaw’s view by suggesting that though Low is at times critical of British aggression against the Chinese; her Republican-era American values were quickly jettisoned in the name of national interest and loyalty (p. 49).

Low’s conscious alignment of herself with European and American powers affirms her condescending attitude towards the Chinese and Portuguese, and her sense of racial and moral superiority as an American. Etsuko Taketani (2003) believes that Low’s “Anglophile positioning defined and delimited her relationship with the Chinese” (p. 100). Her admiration for the colonial elite circle and their lavish lifestyle, and her disdain for the Chinese and the Portuguese permeate many of her journal entries. Her objectification of the Chinese and the Portuguese as the racial and moral Other represents many of the superior attitudes of the colonial powers she identifies herself with. Low’s status as a single white woman in Macao is what Ford (2001) referred to as “an anomaly” (p. 20). The novelty of being one of the few Western women in the Macao mercantile community is a privilege for Low. Anne McClintock (1995) asserts that “the rationed privileges of race all too often put white women in positions of decide—if borrowed—power, not only over colonized women but also over colonized men” (p. 120).

Upon her first arrival in Macao which has long been regarded as a favored exotic vacation resort for Europeans, Low (2002) writes in her journal: “The streets here are intolerably hilly, irregular, and horribly paved. We met no one but Portuguese and Chinamen, who annoyed us very much with their intent gaze” (p. 69). Low refuses to view the Chinese and the Portuguese as fellow human beings capable of complex human emotions. Her appallingly racist attitudes towards the Chinese are succinctly captured in many of her journal entries. In two instances, she writes that the Chinese “certainly do not possess the sensibilities and feelings of other nations (p. 29),” and “they are a stupid set of people” (p.115). In another journal entry, she writes,

We have no sympathy with them, they appear to me to be a connecting link between man and beast, certainly not equal to civilized man. You see different grades and links in all the rest of Nature’s works, is it not reasonable to suppose that there are higher and lower orders of men?”(p. 175-76).

Aided with the Bible and canons, Western colonial powers preached to the Chinese the benevolent spirit of Christianity while ruthlessly exploit the Chinese natives and the Chinese nation. In “Colonial Violence via Opium Addiction: Harriet Low’s Macao,” Taketani (2003) succinctly dissects Low’s ambivalent attitude towards the Chinese. He states that:

Low veers between two extremes in her attitude towards the Chinese. On one hand, Low finds an unyielding belief in American Christianity and deems the elevation of the Chinese as her mission; on the other hand, she... deliberately connives at, or simply by silence sanctions, the mercantile violence of drugging the indigenous population. Drug and Christ—a destructive force and an impending millennium as much apparent in Low’s journal—coexist without warring and vying for supremacy. (p. 117)

In a typical Orientalist fashion, Low sees the Chinese Other as the antithesis of her Self. She is convinced that the Chinese need to be civilized and uplifted by the West.

It is important to note that Low’s concept of the Self and the Other is conditioned by her national allegiance, racial and gender politics, social class, and how she negotiates her power as a woman in a male-dominated world in colonial Macao. Low expresses her indignation towards the very people her uncle’s opium trading enterprise drugs and reaps maximum profits from, and those who have spared her from the household responsibilities she was shackled with before coming to Macao. The factory Low visited in Canton is where colonial powers traded opium and other much sought after merchandise with the Chinese. It is ironic and hypocritical that while Low is boasting the superiority of her lofty religious beliefs and ethics, she remains complicit in constructing and perpetuating Orientalist tropes about the Chinese. Low’s condescending attitudes towards the Chinese and complete disregard for Chinese laws are reflective of her “dual or divided consciousness,” her sense of self-righteousness, racial and national pride and superiority.

According to Qing government laws, women are strictly forbidden from entering Canton, the only foreign trading enclave permitted in China in the mid-19th century. Without seeking permission from any male authority figures, Low grants herself the freedom to move beyond cultural, legal and geographical boundaries. Defying Chinese laws and claiming what she believes to be her “right” to be in China, Low and her aunt disguise themselves as boys, and sneaked into the American factory in

Canton. When their true identities are discovered, Low and her aunt are forced to leave. Though she is the one who has broken the Chinese law, Low lashes out at the Chinese in her own defense. She writes:

I long to know what you think of our trip to Canton. I daresay you will think we were wrong to attempt it, thereby breaking the laws of even the Chinese, but I assure you there is no comparison to be drawn between the Chinese and any other nation in the world... These despicable Chinese, who are not worth our notice, have the power to disturb us all.... You have no idea of the knavery of these fellows (Low, 2002, p. 193).

Low's adventure into Canton—a male haven, can be interpreted in two conflicting ways. On the one hand, this daring move is a manifestation of her desire for active participation in the affairs of the colonial enterprise. Low's disguise as a man to enter the restricted area of Canton, an area that is reserved exclusively for male merchants, launches her into a masculine role of activity, adventure and individual agency. Acting on her own wishes, Low's venture into Canton is symbolically a way for her to force her entry into a male-dominated world, and an assertion of her individual will. Rejecting the Victorian code of female decorum, she complains that she is merely “a girl who is expected to walk in the steps of a chaperone, and because she does not happen to be married has no right to give her opinion, and indeed, is of no consequence” (Low, 2002, p. 27). On the other hand, Low's transgression into Canton demonstrates not only her attempt to change the course of Chinese commercial practices, but also her ultimate disregard for the Chinese and their legal system. She places herself on a higher moral plateau, and believes that she should be above the Chinese and the restrictions of Chinese laws.

Though Low's *Lights and Shadows of a Macao Life: The Journal of Harriett Low, a Travelling Spinster* appears to be private letters to her sister in Salem, MA, her narratives address many aspects of the encounters between the East and the West, the trading communities and the colonial powers in China. What is latent in her private accounts is her unwavering loyalty to her nation, her “dual or divided consciousness” towards American and Chinese gender and racial dynamics, and her inner conflict between individual desires and conformity.

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