

## My Brother Slaves: Friendship, Masculinity, and Resistance in the Antebellum South

**Review Number:** 2046

**Publish date:** Thursday, 12 January, 2017

**Author:** Sergio A. Lussana

**ISBN:** 9780813166940

**Date of Publication:** 2016

**Price:** £46.50

**Pages:** 240pp.

**Publisher:** University Press of Kentucky

**Publisher url:** [http://www.kentuckypress.com/live/title\\_detail.php?titleid=4689#.WHeTZ609QjY](http://www.kentuckypress.com/live/title_detail.php?titleid=4689#.WHeTZ609QjY)

**Place of Publication:** Lexington, KY

**Reviewer:** Craig Friend

In 1985, Deborah Gray White wrote *A'rn't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, arguably one of the most important works in American social history. White related a simple story – the routine of enslaved black women's lives, and the dangers and opportunities found in that mundanity.

Historiographically, *A'rn't I a Woman?* pushed back against scholars like Herbert Gutman and Eugene Genovese who, in seeking to prove the strength of the patriarchal black family, had uncritically assumed that black gender roles mirrored those of white gender society. In contrast, White argued that enslaved women did not rely on men for subsistence and protection but rather depended on their own ingenuity and the support of a network of enslaved women, and she concluded that, despite relatively egalitarian status, women and men experienced slavery very differently. White's study seems a bit quaint when compared to today's more dynamic and inventive interpretations of enslaved women. Make no mistake, however: none of today's scholarship on enslaved American women specifically or slavery in general is possible without the foundation laid by White.<sup>(1)</sup>

In *My Brother Slaves*, Sergio Lussana aspires to accomplish for enslaved men's historiography what White did for enslaved women's historiography. White had claimed that 'organization of female slave networks and social activities not only tended to separate women and men, but it also generated female cooperation and interdependence'. Lussana similarly posits that 'enslaved men engaged in recreational pursuits such as drinking, gambling, wrestling, and hunting ... [and] claimed these activities as masculine preserves. It was here, in an all-male world, they constructed markers of status, identity, and masculinity and forged lasting friendships. It was here, together, that they fought the humiliating, degrading, and emasculating features of their enslavement. In this homosocial world, they became men' (p. 7). *My Brother Slaves* is ambitious; a bit more than it should be. Still, like White's *A'rn't I a Woman?* it is a valuable chronicle of the everyday experiences that shaped enslaved lives, and Lussana offers useful ideas about assessing enslaved men's masculinity.<sup>(2)</sup>

To understand enslaved men's masculinity, Lussana examines three topics: their homosocial world and friendships, how those private relationships informed resistance to plantation power relationships, and how those relationships similarly contributed to larger events in American history like slave rebellions and the

operation of the Underground Railroad. Lussana locates male slaves' homosociality in three realms: work, leisure, and beyond the plantation. From fields to factories to crafts shops, enslaved men labored in homosocial spaces where they learned 'to operate and trust and depend on one another' (p. 20). On large plantations, gender-segregated gangs worked the fields. In industrial settings, including coal mines, railroad and canal construction, and lumbering, men often created comradery to compensate for separation from families. In craftsmanship, the passage of learned skills from fathers to sons strengthened manly bonds.

In leisure, Lussana identifies drinking, gambling, and fighting as the most important social markers of enslaved male comradery. Drinking allowed men to affirm masculinity, and most drinking occurred in hidden spaces ? woods, swamps, and other spaces where slave gatherings would have been considered illegal. In these spaces with alcohol, 'they created an autonomous masculine world' (pp. 50–1) where they also gambled and engaged in rough-and-tumble fights. Fighting was not just spontaneous and alcohol-induced, however. Through organized fights, often sanctioned by white authorities, enslaved men proved physical strength before white and black audiences.

Beyond the plantation, enslaved men challenged the geographical limitations placed upon them and 'forged a dissident homosocial masculine culture' (p. 71). Hunting provided opportunities to join other enslaved men in tracking and capturing animals, although seldom with guns. Avoiding patrollers became a marker of masculine cunning and stealth; confronting and surviving patrols enhanced an enslaved man's reputation. Some also had strong reason to fear the patrollers for they engaged in cross-plantation theft, often with the goal of stealing valuables that could then be sold to benefit families and communities. Lussana interprets such actions as generous and selfless, and success contributed to enslaved men's sense of manliness.

Having established patterns of masculine comradery in work, leisure, and beyond the plantation, Lussana then turns to how such patterns shaped resistance to enslavement. Runaways often planned their escapes with friends, although such friendships were often only as strong as the escape was successful. Captured runaways often betrayed their friends to save themselves. Lussana anchors this discussion of running away in the context of 19th-century ideas of friendships as intimate and deeply emotional homosociality. The intimacy of those relationships empowered men to survive and resist enslavement, and they sustained men who lost families either through slave sales or when leaving them behind as they fled to freedom.

The mobility of enslaved men, the relationships they forged, and their reliance on each other for information and security contributed to their participation in rebellions and large-scale resistance. Through both illicit activities like cross-plantation thefts and legal activities like running errands for masters, enslaved men engaged a larger communication network that enlightened them on the world beyond their small communities. Enslaved men had information, and the resulting 'slave grapevine' became 'a pivotal form of oppositional discourse' (p. 135). Through it, men conspired against slave-owners and the slave system, and they assisted fugitive slaves to escape. The grapevine, then, was an extension of the intimate homosocial worlds that enslaved men created for themselves, allowing them to connect with other enslaved men on different plantations or in distant towns: 'Everyday resistance and rebellion were interrelated: the covert, informal acts of enslaved men were deeply political and challenged the foundations of the slaveholding South' (p. 146).

At the analytical heart of *My Brother Slaves* is 'resistant masculinity', a theory that oppressed men forge masculinity in opposition to the more hegemonic masculinity that seeks to emasculate them. Even if unacknowledged, resistant masculinity courses through most studies that touch upon southern masculinity, from Bertram Wyatt-Brown's 'honor thesis' to Stephanie McCurry's 'mastery model' to Rebecca Fraser's 'provider thesis'. Given the Old South's dramatic racial and economic inequalities, scholars have found the paradigm difficult to ignore. How else might oppressed men have forged manhood if not in reaction to the white, slave-owning planters who dominated the region?(3)

Lussana employs resistant masculinity to describe enslaved men's violent resistance to enslavement. Could it not be argued, however, that, rather than performing a compensatory form of masculinity, enslaved men

reenacted the hegemonic model in their own small worlds? Nowhere in *My Brother Slaves* do enslaved men reject patterns of masculinity found among their oppressors. They act upon similar ideals of honor, violence, and assumptions about protecting and providing for women that were found among the whites with whom they interacted.(4)

I offer this not as a criticism of Lussana's decision to employ the concept of resistant masculinity but more a critique of his inclination to appropriate others' analytical theories without critically reimagining them for his own purposes. For example, in his discussion of enslaved men's drinking and gambling, Lussana employs Stephanie Camp's 'three bodies' theory: that enslaved women possessed three bodies: the site of domination, the colonized body, and the reclaimed body. Given the physiological differences between men and women, as well as the labor and social differences that much of the book is dedicated to delineating, is it not possible that the 'three bodies' theory is insufficient for the enslaved male body? Lussana may have found opportunity in reimagining Camp's theory because his conclusion in that section – that through alcohol, enslaved men reclaimed their bodies, exercising 'mastery over their bodies, temporarily alleviating feelings of humiliation, degradation, and emasculation' (p. 55) ? creates an unexplained contradiction between intoxication and exercising mastery over one's body. In appropriating a theory that works well for explaining enslaved women's experiences, Lussana draws no distinction between women and men, making resistance less a masculine pursuit than a reaction by all oppressed peoples.(5)

Similarly, might there have been opportunity to reimagine and expand the concept of resistant masculinity? Might not resistant masculinity be a rejection of the hegemonic model, much as Martin Luther King Jr. employed with his emphasis on nonviolent resistance, reframing stereotypes and assumptions about the character of mid-20th-century African-American masculinity?

When Lussana abandons others' analytical suggestions and works out his own analysis, as in the fifth chapter (in which other scholars' theories are nowhere to be seen), the analysis is bold and creative. His work on the slave grapevine is the jewel in this monograph. The earlier chapters serve to frame his conclusions in the final chapter about how enslaved men provided a driving force behind the Underground Railroad. Social historians like Genovese had sought to demonstrate slave agency. Lussana proves not only agency but a dedication to a grander purpose and the ability to see it through. Given the strong analysis about the slave grapevine and the Underground Railroad, it is frustrating that the rest of the monograph lacked the sort of imaginative analysis that the topic deserved.

Still, in some ways, Lussana's study has the potential to become as critical to future scholarship on enslaved men as *A'rn't I a Woman?* has been for enslaved women's studies. When compared to the rapidity with which American women's history blossomed in the 1980s and 1990s, the history of masculinity in America has unfolded slowly, and Lussana's study fills a historiographical gap in the description of enslaved men's lives and relationships. Like Deborah Gray White's survey, his attention to enslaved men's routines ? how they lived and worked, to whom they related threats to loved ones and themselves, and how they found ways to survive ? will be useful for scholars seeking to understand the experiences of slavery, and for their students who struggle to grasp slavery as systematic limitations on life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The historiographical opportunity afforded Lussana, however, is a weakness in this monograph as well. The problem is that White wrote at the crest of women's social history; her insights were new and fresh, and would pioneer the study of enslaved women's history. Lussana's study comes after decades of research on enslaved peoples and masculinity studies have already delineated how we study enslaved men, even if it has not been done very much. Scholars who have engaged the historiography of slave life, beginning with Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, will be familiar with most of the content and analysis in the book's first four chapters.(6)

Lussana also allowed White too much influence over his own work. White gave little attention to male-female relationships, arguing that she found them uncertain and always under threat of disruption. Her decision to emphasize female networks was a reaction to the historiographical trends of the era, empowering

enslaved women as historical actors with their own agency. Lussana similarly attends very little to male-female relationships, but there is no historiographical reason for doing so. Over the past decades, gender historians have too uncritically segregated masculinity studies and women's studies into 'separate spheres'. Lussana follows suit, arguing that 'male group cooperation and interdependence characterized everyday life for many enslaved men' (p. 8) and implying, by simple omission, that women played little role shaping men's everyday lives. Male-female relationships may not have meant as much for enslaved men working in nearly all-male environments like mines, but the large majority of men worked in proximity to women and certainly socialized with, were fed by, and made love to women. Only the very largest plantations could afford the strictly gender-segregated work gangs that Lussana describes. The consequence of this analytical decision is that Lussana's emphasis on the ways in which enslaved men labored, socialized, and resisted alongside other men implies that enslaved masculinity was performed for and validated by other men. Given men's efforts to protect and provide for their wives and families, however, there must have been some role for women in authenticating masculinity. In other words, Lussana takes too seriously John Tosh's assertion that 'gender is inherent in all aspects of social life, whether women are present or not' (p. 5).

This is not just some quibble on my part about the book that I think Lussana should have written. Male homosociality was and remains not only about male-male relationships. As other scholars have described and explained, women often play critical roles in defining and reinforcing masculine ideals that were forged in homosociality. Within 19th-century white fraternities, for example, discussions among brothers about women often framed how men then approached women, conceptualized courtship and sex, and admired other men who boasted about their successful relationships with women. For many enslaved men, possibly the majority, the comradery of homosocial spaces just was not available daily. Instead, they worked on small farms, crafts shops, and at urban jobs (such as carriage drivers) that kept them in constant relationships with women. Even on large plantations, homosocial work spaces were seasonal, and men worked alongside women regularly.[\(7\)](#)

The outcome is a monograph that touches upon very important themes about sociality and resistance but is incomplete in assessing masculinity within those contexts. Lussana's overemphasis on male-male relationships routinely positions women as beyond enslaved men's worlds, subjects requiring protection, distrusted with conversations about freedom, or as examples of effeminacy by which cowardly men might be compared.

Well-written, clear, and concise, *My Brother Slaves* is a useful primer on the development of enslaved manhood and homosocial relationships, but it is incomplete and under-analyzed, failing to meet the historiographical challenges of our time: to move beyond segregated gender studies, escape time-worn theories of honor and mastery, and imaginatively question the ideal of resistant masculinity.

## Notes

1. Deborah Gray White, *A'rn't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, NY, 1985). For White's contribution to the historiography, see Jacqueline Dowd Hall and Anne Firor Scott, 'Women in the South', in *Interpreting Southern History: Historiographical Essays in Honor of Sanford W. Higginbotham*, ed. John B. Boles and Evelyn Thomas Nolen (Baton Rouge, LA, 1987), pp. 471–73. For examples of recent scholarship made possible by White's foundational work, see Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (London, 2008); Emily West, *Family or Freedom: People of Color in the Antebellum South* (Lexington, KY, 2012); and Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. White, *A'rn't I a Woman?*, p. 124. For Lussana's sense of the analytical possibilities for masculinity studies, in particular a call for historians to employ masculinity in 'reinterpreting the driving forces behind major historical events' (p. 5), see Sergio Lussana and Lydia Plath, 'Masculinity as a category of analysis in Southern History', in *Black and White Masculinity in the American South, 1800-2000* (London, 2009), pp. 1–15.[Back to \(2\)](#)

3. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (Oxford, 1982); Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (Oxford, 1995); Rebecca Fraser, *Courtship and Love among the Enslaved in North Carolina* (Jackson, MS, 2007). For more theoretical discussions of resistant masculinity in relationship to other theorized masculinities, see R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge, 1995) and Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York, NY, 1996). For an overview of early masculinity theories, see Bruce Traister, 'Academic viagra: the rise of American masculinity studies', *American Quarterly*, 52 (2000), 274–304.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Will H. Courtenay, 'Constructions of masculinity and their influence on men's well-being: a theory of gender and health', *Social Science & Medicine*, 50 (2000), 1391. On resistant masculinity as violent opposition to power structures, see Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins, 'Black men's history: toward a gendered perspective', in *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Black Men's History and Masculinity*, Vol. I: 'Manhood Rights': The Construction of Black Male History and Manhood, 1750–1870 (Bloomington, IN, 1999), pp. 2–58; Steve Estes, *I Am a Man! Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2005), p. 4. For a critique of 'resistant masculinity', see Edward E. Baptist, 'The absent subject: African American masculinity and forced migration to the Antebellum plantation frontier', in *Southern Manhood: Perspectives on Masculinity in the Old South*, ed. Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover (Athens, GA, 2004), pp. 136–73.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Stephanie Camp, 'The pleasures of resistance: enslaved women and body politics in the Plantation South, 1830–1861', *Journal of Southern History*, 68 (2002), 543–4.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, NY, 1972).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Nicholas L. Syrett, *The Company He Keeps: A History of White College Fraternities* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009), pp. 70–8. For other examples of the role of women in shaping and defining 19th-century masculinity, see Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men & Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (London, 2002); John Gilbert McCurdy, *Citizen Bachelors: Manhood and the Creation of the United States* (London, 2009), pp. 52–8; Ani Pflugrad-Jackisch, *Brothers of a Vow: Secret Fraternal Orders and the Transformation of White Male Culture in Antebellum Virginia* (Athens, GA, 2010), pp. 93–7; Timothy J. Williams, *Intellectual Manhood: University, Self, and Society in the Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2015), pp. 148–50; Lorri Glover, *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation* (Baltimore, MD, 2007), pp. 118, 125, 138.[Back to \(7\)](#)

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