Enslaved Women in America: From Colonial Times to Emancipation

Review Number: 2155

Publish date: Thursday, 17 August, 2017

Author: Emily West

ISBN: 978-1-4422-0871-1

Date of Publication: 2014

Price: £21.95

Pages: 160pp.

Publisher: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers

Publisher url: <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442208735/Enslaved-Women-in-America-From-Colonial-Times-to-Emancipation>

Place of Publication: Lanham, MD

Reviewer: Kristen Brill

In *Enslaved Women in America: From Colonial Times to Emancipation*, Emily West masterfully presents the narrative of women's lived experiences in slavery through the prism of gender. Highlighting the ways in which women's bodies were exploited for both physical and reproductive labor, West condenses an expansive and sophisticated body of historiography into a concise and digestible volume. Its impressive breadth makes the work an invaluable resource for not only a popular audience, but also for undergraduate students. This is a well-written and thoroughly researched synthetic text that is easily adaptable to undergraduate syllabi; it provides a thoughtful introduction to not only the history of American slavery, but more widely, to the core theoretical underpinnings of gender history.

The text is divided chronologically: it begins with enslavement practices in West Africa and the Middle Passage, and then progresses to the colonial, revolutionary, antebellum and Civil War eras. In presenting this chronology, West provides a number of significant analytical frameworks to interrogate notions of power, agency and gender within the institution of slavery. First, considering African-American women's experiences of slavery within the context of Atlantic history fosters not only comparative history approaches, but explores the emerging economic connections between West Africa, the Caribbean and North America using the lens of women's bodies. This nexus between Atlantic history and gender is a growing field; West's focus on the ways in which enslaved women's social and economic exploitation was shaped by these Atlantic-wide systems is a major contribution to the discipline. Second, in chronicling the progression from colonial to antebellum slavery, West weds the quantitative with the qualitative to capture both 'history from above' and 'history from below' readings of women's relationship to slavery. The collective narrative of demographic, legal and political change is spliced with first-person narratives, illustrating how these macro level processes shaped lived experiences. Third, the work consistently engages with the ways in which the lives of enslaved women changed according to time and place; there was not a uniform definition of an 'enslaved woman': 'Diversity characterized enslaved women's lives ... But women's sex always affected their everyday work and community lives' (p. 39). In consistently drawing out this distinction between the biologically determined sexed body and the social construction of gender, the text is particularly strong in differentiating how slave labor systems (i.e. task vs gang) shaped women's time, resources and relationships

outside of their working hours. Finally, each chapter highlights American slavery's dependence on 'natural increase': the crucial role of enslaved women to reproduce the next generation of enslaved bodies to support the plantation aristocracy and the southern economy. In defining enslaved women as responsible for both physical and reproductive labor, early Americans formed 'a long-term dilemma about whether enslaved women's status derived primarily from their status as workers or reproducers' (p. 25). This issue would shape both pro- and anti-slavery debates through 1865, positioning the 'dilemma' of enslaved women as paramount in the formation (and the eventual fracture) of the American body politic on the long road to the outbreak of the Civil War.

While this work is effectively executed as a succinct synthetic text, a more extended discussion of select punctuations on the timeline of women's slavery in North America would have offered greater context and extended the thematic scope of the existing chronological structure. Namely, a more developed introduction to the transition from indentured servitude to racialized slavery in the colonial period would have better situated the succeeding analysis in the Atlantic history framework. Furthermore, a more detailed consideration of Sherman's March to the Sea and the rape of southern women would have allowed for an analysis of the politics of sexual exploitation across racial lines in the war-torn Confederacy. While the text certainly broaches these issues, a greater engagement with these points would have drawn more connections to a broader body of secondary literature addressing the history of labor and sex.

Its diverse collection of primary documents makes it an especially valuable resource to undergraduate students. While a number of collections examine American slavery and include some discussions of gender, such as Rick Halpern and Enrico Dal Lago's *Slavery and Emancipation* (2002) and Thomas C. Holt and Elsa Barkley Brown's *Major Problems in African-American History: From Freedom to Emancipation 1607-1865* (2000) [\(1\)](#), West's volume asserts gender as central to the study of slavery. In particular, West's focus on first-person narratives to portray the social history of the macro level institution from a 'history from below' perspective will be of interest to students of history as well as to gender studies. Interweaving well-known figures (Harriet Jacobs and Mary Prince) with lesser known voices from the WPA interviews (Marie E. Hervey and Anna Wright), this collection of texts explores a number of key themes in the social and cultural lives of enslaved women. Given the scarcity of women's accounts detailing the course and consequences of rape culture within slavery, these discussions of pregnancy and sexual assault are a necessary addition to published primary sources available on gender and slavery. In addition, the accompanying bibliographic essay provides an updated overview of the relevant secondary literature, from the pioneering scholarship of Angela Y. Davis in the early 1970s to the present day.

In sum, *Enslaved Women in America: From Colonial Times to Emancipation* is a sharp and significant contribution to the current literature on American slavery. This volume will be of interest to popular and undergraduate audiences with interests in not only in 17th, 18th and 19th-century American history, but also in the history of women and gender.

Notes

1. Rick Halpern and Enrico Dal Lago, *Slavery and Emancipation* (Oxford, 2002); Thomas C. Holt and Elsa Barkley Brown, *Major Problems in African-American History: From Freedom to Emancipation 1607-1865* (Boston, MA, 2000). [Back to \(1\)](#)

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2155>

Links

[\[1\] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/138427](https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/138427)