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INVISIBLE WOMAN: FEMALE SLAVERY IN THE NEW WORLD

Slave women in Caribbean society, 1650-1838, by BARBARA BUSH. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990. xiii + 190 pp. (Cloth US\$ 29.95, Paper US\$ 12.50) [Published simultaneously by: James Curry, London, & Heinemann Publishers (Caribbean), Kingston.]

Within the plantation household: Black and White women of the Old South, by ELIZABETH FOX-GENOVESE. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988. xvii + 544 pp. (Cloth US\$ 34.95, Paper US\$ 12.95)

Slave women in the New World: gender stratification in the Caribbean, by MARIETTA MORRISSEY. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989. xiv + 202 pp. (Cloth US\$ 29.95)

In a letter to his son in 1760, Chesapeake slaveowner Charles Carrol employed a curious euphemism for woman: "fair sex." Obviously, he wasn't thinking of his slaves. An attempt to remedy his negligence by considering this popular definition of eighteenth-century womanhood in relation to the females he forgot reveals this highly restrictive code to be exclusionary as well, for the difficulty of figuring out how brown or black skin can be "fair" suggests that a bondwoman in the New World was not, according to dominant ideology, a woman. Slavery made nonsense of female gender in the case of those whose labor allowed white society its definition. A contemporary observer reveals just how thorough was the distinction between white womanly passivity and whatever unnamed oblivion was left to black females: "The labor of the slave thus becomes the substitute for that of the woman" (Smith 1980:70; Dew 1970 [1832]:36).

Between Carrol's perceptual catastrophe and the end of the last decade,

not much was done to rectify the incomprehensibility of slave womanhood to outsiders. Slavery scholars mostly assumed the male experience of slavery to be paradigmatic of the female, ignoring the difficulties unique to slave women's double oppression (Bush 1990:1; Morrissey 1989:1). That three works should finally breach this silence seems close to miraculous, and they can't have been much easier than miracles to create. Not only do feminist scholars of slavery have few footsteps to follow in, but the endeavor requires theoretical wrangling of the highest order, outfitted with only the most rudimentary conceptual apparatus through which to filter whatever they may find. The results of these early academic forays into female slaves' experience are more successful in leaping the first hurdle than the second. Fox-Genovese, Bush, and Morrissey have provided a wealth of detail we can now use to break down and expand upon our limited capacities for speaking about slavery and gender in the same breath.

Within the plantation household is at its most sensitive to the fragility of Eurocentered gender in the presence of class and race in its critique of past over-confidence in the redeeming power of the former. Taking the Southern United States as her focus, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese lambasts the sentimental feminist's wishful thought that slave and white women's common oppression by the father to "his family, white and black" turned them into allies (Genovese 1974:73; Fox-Genovese 1988:43). The only thing black and white women had in common – their mutual accountability to the white master – drove them further apart, she claims, as white women used their institutional superiority over their female slaves to make up for their subservience to their husbands and to reaffirm class distinctions that were being lost in the Jacksonian political realm. Hemmed in by a developing "cult of domesticity" that united womanhood, home, and passivity to deny the significance of the Southern woman's household contribution to a market economy, the plantation mistress became a bitter, bored petty tyrant who directed much of her anger to the slaves with whom she was in intimate daily contact. Fox-Genovese concludes:

Southern women's history should force us to think seriously about the relationship between the experiences that unite women as members of gender and those that divide them as members of specific communities, classes, and races. (p. 39)

Fox-Genovese cannot be accused of romanticizing history. But her impressively sober study houses an unexamined figure at its center: the all-important husband. Her analysis reveals an assumption of male centrality that persists from her object of study to her method, and leaves women at the margins of male culture. She internalizes the patriarchal family order she

describes to the extent that she evaluates women largely in terms of their dealings with men: slave women are said to have “loved their men and children,” for instance, while whether they loved each other too is not mentioned (p. 49). More disturbing, she posits a norm of male dominance whose loss in the slave family she laments:

From the perspective of Afro-Americans as a people, should the independence of women be interpreted as collective gain, or merely as confirmation of slave men’s weakness relative to white men? ... How do we evaluate a female strength that may have derived less from African traditions than from an enslavement that stripped men of all the normal attributes of male power: legal and social fatherhood, the control of property, the ability to dominate households? (p. 49, emphasis added)

Given that Fox-Genovese considers white women’s cruelty the result of their own victimization at the hands of those who retained these signs of “normalcy,” i.e. white men, her finding that black men are “weak” by those same standards indicates a more conservative spirit than she might wish to let onto. Nevertheless, she sheds a cold light on the delusion that sisterhood erases class boundaries, and on the suffering this superstition had politely obscured.

If Fox-Genovese dispels unwarranted cheer loitering around United States slavery studies, Barbara Bush, in *Slave women in Caribbean society*, means to celebrate her subject, slave women’s contributions to resistance in the West Indies. Their feats range from participation in rebellions and escapes, to more subtle stratagems like poisoning and refusing to work, to the most seemingly innocuous but to Bush crucial one of all, creating a home in which to shelter African-based patterns of behavior and belief. She sees Caribbean slave women as *the* preservers of West African culture in households they maintained as oases of autonomy:

In her private domestic sphere, as a wife and mother, the woman slave was performing the only labour of the slave community, with perhaps the exception of the cultivation of provision grounds, which could not be claimed directly by the master. (p. 98)

It’s harder to be convinced by Bush’s argument than it is to be inspired. Among the questions that nag is the possibility of preserving something that possibly never existed: a uniform West African culture. In an earlier review in this journal, Richard Price calls attention to a passage from a mid-eighteenth-century German missionary tract, C.G.A. Oldendorp’s *History of the mission of the Evangelical Brethren on the Caribbean islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John*, which suggests the diversity, and perhaps mutual incomprehensibility, of language and status among Africans kidnapped to the West Indies:

Based on the examples cited to this point regarding the manner in which free Negroes [in Africa] have fallen into the condition of slavery, it can be concluded that the West Indian slaves constitute a mixed society, composed of the wealthy as well as the poor and the higher as well as the lower classes, despite the marked change in their outward status that is experienced by all of them. The state of slavery here has accomplished something similar to what is achieved by death in the destinies of all men, namely the removal of all external distinctions among them. (Oldendorp, cited in Price 1987: 178)

Among a few other unexamined assumptions which are drafted into the service of this tribute, including frequent favorable comparison to a “peasantry” which remains vague enough to support Sidney Mintz’s observation that “the application of the concept of the peasantry to the Caribbean region has so far been rather limited in character” (Mintz 1983:1-2), only one more sits as close to the ground as the faith in West African cohesiveness – but facing the opposite direction, away from Africa to Christian Europe and its vocabulary of sexual condemnation. Bush has two choices in response to the accusations she hears regarding black female slaves’ promiscuity: disprove the accusation, thereby granting it legitimacy, or change the terms of the question to reflect local circumstance rather than imposed definitions of worth. Unfortunately, she chooses option A, insisting that “slave women ... in general, did *not* succumb to promiscuity and immorality” (p. 118), and thereby granting her seal of approval to the view that promiscuity is immoral. It would seem more worthwhile to cast off the imposition altogether, and with it the Eurocentric standards of sexual propriety and racial superiority by which whites cast black sexuality in a negative light in the first place. Like Fox-Genovese, Bush betrays a lingering allegiance to the mores she ostensibly condemns, the former in her lamentation of black male emasculation, the latter in her celebration of black female purity. This does not diminish either’s attention to the way slave women participated in resistance to slavery through their everyday domestic lives.

In *Slave women in the New World*, Marietta Morrissey displays the reticence of the materialist, for whom ideas are the excuses we offer ourselves to make sense of situations we can’t get out of. Sidestepping Fox-Genovese’s and Bush’s concern with mood altogether, she considers “without basis” those who “interpret slaves’ emotions and political intentions” (p. 15). “Ideological expressions,” of which “promiscuity” might be a good example, are to her not cause but a result of social conditions. Since these consist, in the case of the Caribbean, of a “peculiar mix of agrarian and industrial, capitalist and noncapitalist elements” (p. 145) quite unlike those in which a Christian-based notion of immoral promiscuity was nourished, such a concept has no business in her book. Instead,

she searches for analytic categories more conducive to the territory, with the result that she accords slave women a wider range of acceptable behavior and emphasizes their capacity to act within imposed limitations. Morrissey counters Fox-Genovese's lamentation regarding the absence of normal fatherhood in slave families, for instance, by concentrating on the "unique" nature of the "mother-child bond" (p. 14). And she gives brown and black women who formed liaisons with white men less pity and more respect than is customary, noting that women benefitted by alliance with members of the master class, both economically and in freedom from punishment, and that if they sometimes sought white partners this made sense. Gone is any trust in European codes as the last word on New World slavery's family, gender and sexual dynamics, while a sense of the limited meaning of choice in class society remains (p. 148). Morrissey anticipated the kind of scholarship that I hope will develop from what these scholars have already accomplished, in which changes occur in the how, as well as what, of thought.

While Morrissey avoids received categories of race analysis which have led others to conclude "without basis," she does not avoid "political intention" altogether in the case of gender. Like the biologist who adds an extra leg to the male "Y" chromosome to create the female "X", she considers femaleness a marked or positive state, kind of like the 1 on a computer chip, with maleness being neutral or 0. She writes:

Women's position is further removed from global disputes than men's because of their subordinate position within a community of slaves and by gender itself. (p. 7)

The irony here is that even "0" is a marker, which Morrissey must keep in place to secure her construction of the feminine. To varying degrees, each author's quest to define slave womanhood thus implies that we already know who men are, and that we can understand women by the ways they differ therefrom. By making the subject what women did, we end up describing men again.

The above works make an indispensable contribution to the realm of feminist study in which one views women as agents. The female poets and saints who currently make up the subject list of feminist studies can now be joined by female slaves. Morrissey, Bush, and Fox-Genovese help correct women's absence from historical memory; reading their latest publications, one cannot help but be grateful.

Nevertheless, to the extent that they write about "Women" without questioning how they have received or constructed the word their titles share,

they tend to re-enact the discrimination they describe, forming their definitions of female experience on a base of male centrality. These works thus direct us to a realm they don't quite reach, which I propose as feminist and slavery scholars' next field of investigation. In this neighboring arena, the quest is not only to study women, but womanhood, or even more broadly, gender, both on its own and as it intersects with and disturbs our understandings of race, class, and slavery. How do we come to these conceptual tools, and how do they enhance or disturb each other? It may require some sacrifice of certainty to discard assumedly stable bases of meaning that have allowed us to construct women, and slaves, by their conformity to or deviation from monolithic notions such as "West Africa," "peasantry," "men," "family." But uncertainty seems the only accurate depiction of a condition which often made meaning impossible. Black bondwomen were an oxymoron to the white imperialist elite which depended on their labor to maintain its dominance. Paradox, then, rather than borrowed stability, seems the more realistic medium in which to represent our experience of their experience.

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