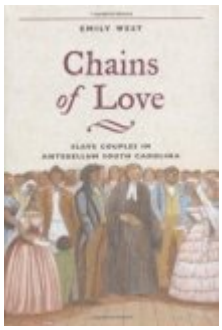
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Emily West. *Chains of Love: Slave Couples in Antebellum South Carolina.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004. x + 184 pp. $30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-02903-5.



Reviewed by Jennifer Stollman

Published on H-SAWH (March, 2006)

Scholars of American slavery have long attempted to uncover the history of intimacy within slave couples. The nature of the topic and the lack of corresponding detailed sources have made this a difficult task. In *Chains of Love: Slave Couples in Antebellum South Carolina*, Emily West uses Works Progress Administration slave testimonies, slaveholders' records, and quantitative studies to uncover the relationships of slave couples, their family dynamics, and patterns of individual and collective resistance.

While previous scholars have uncovered evidence of gendered networks and individual acts of resistance, West argues that primary bonding occurred between men and women in abroad relationships and that out of these relationships important social spaces were created by slaves beyond the reach and influence of their owners. According to West, these areas represented sites of resistance against oppression.

West focuses on South Carolina slavery. Her in-depth analysis not only helps to clarify enslaved peoples' intimate relationships but also challenges long-held scholarly assumptions regarding the nature of slavery and its deleterious effect on slave marriages and families. Laying a foundation for her study, she begins with a specific focus on courtship and marriage. These rituals were influenced by both African and American culture.

Importantly, West's research disputes most scholarly claims that the often temporary and distant nature of slave marriages prevented real affection to grow between slaves as couples.[1] The bonding and affection that took place represented the basis by which slave agency developed, according to West. She also argues that family life, including abroad marriages and families, were not only important to the slaves themselves but also represented another crucial method by which certain slaves could improve their autonomy. Additionally, West's research demonstrates that slaves were dedicated to their spouses and risked a great deal to have a few hours in their company.

West is careful not to construct slave culture, autonomy, and resistance apart from the influence of slaveholders. Slave space was constructed

not only within slave communities but also between slaveholders and enslaved persons. Sex-segregated work inhibited courtship rituals, thus placing a premium on slave spheres. Previous studies, like Deborah Gray White's seminal work *Ar'n't I a Woman?* (1985), placed a premium on the roles of female networks in caring for, educating, and protecting slave children.[2] West's research challenges this as she argues that enslaved men also strived to create loving environments for their children. West also disputes the conclusion that slaves gave higher status to slaves who worked in greater proximity to whites. Arguing that this understanding of slave hierarchy was actually a justification for slavery by whites, West claims that slaves garnered respect from other slaves principally through their actions and roles within slave communities.

Narrowing her analysis to women, West contends that slaves tended to treat slave women in a more egalitarian fashion than whites did white women. She also argues, however, that the double burden of working for their owners' and their own families somewhat degraded enslaved women's status. In addition, West looks at how enslaved men and women experienced sexual abuse differently. Echoing White's research, West finds that in South Carolina slave women had to contend not only with the threat of rape or forced procreation but also with the ire and subsequent abuse of slaveholding women. More importantly, West concludes that slave women did not often deploy their sexuality to ameliorate the oppressive nature of slavery but instead endeavored to create strong relationships with their spouses.

West next addresses the effects of sales, forced separations, and abroad marriages. Scholars like White and Eugene Genovese assumed that these events caused tremendous disruption to slave marital dynamics. West encourages readers to broaden their definitions of family and marriage geographically in order to recognize the existence and importance of cross-plantation ties and their ability to provide supportive and sustaining alliances. Additionally, West argues that being away from the watchful eyes of overseers and owners through separation and hiring encouraged the development of slave autonomy. Clearly, West situates her research within the growing body of scholarship on slaves that emphasizes their agency.[3]

West's research is significant because it challenges previously held notions that slave marriages could not exist as important defense mechanisms against the brutality of slavery and as foundational structures in the development of slave culture. Her research also demonstrates that in South Carolina slave marriages were not anomalies. Enslaved African Americans believed in marriage and its benefits. Despite the problems caused by slavery, individual slaves worked diligently to maintain intimate relationships within plantations and across long distances. With its clear and concise language, West's slim volume is an excellent choice for undergraduates across the humanities.

Notes

[1]. Many scholars of enslaved African-American families have concluded that the brutal nature and potential dislocation of slavery inhibited solid bonding between slaves as couples. Examples of this interpretation include, but are not limited to, John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972) and Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Random House, 1972).

[2]. Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985).

[3]. Initially, challenges to the work of scholars like Ulrich B. Phillips, who overtly argued that slavery benefited slaves, emphasized the brutality of the system and the physical and psychic damage suffered by slaves. Over the past several decades, almost all scholars of African-American

slave history have focused more on instances in which slaves possessed agency and participated in subtle and obvious acts of resistance. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (1918; reprint, Gloucester: P. Smith, 1959); Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1929).