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Sharon M. Harris. *Executing Race: Early American Women's Narratives of Race, Society, and the Law*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005. x + 240 pp. \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8142-5131-7; \$73.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8142-0975-2.

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## Narrative as Resistance

In *Executing Race*, Sharon Harris investigates how women shaped narratives about race, gender, and the law in eighteenth-century America. Challenging the idea that colonial and revolutionary era law erased the presence of women, Harris recovers female-authored texts through which women negotiated the legal regime. Using criminal conversion narratives, legal cases, petitions, novels, and poetry, *Executing Race* explores the ways women both contested and reinforced the gendered and racialized norms that prescribed their existence.

Harris's detailed introduction outlines the impact of Enlightenment thought on American ideas about race and gender in the eighteenth century. This is not new material, but it provides useful context for the reader, particularly those who may be unfamiliar with the literature. In Harris's view, these ideas are critical to understanding how the new American nation was formed, with white men placed at the top of the racial and gender hierarchy, and black women at the bottom. Scientific beliefs, forged in the Enlightenment, linked female reproductive capacities to male rationality and superiority. Women had large pelvises and wide birth canals to accommodate the large male cranium. The brain adjusted to a suitably proportionate size as men developed. Women's brains, like their pelvises, remained disproportionately large, reflecting, in the case of the cranium, an underdeveloped intellect. As Harris argues, the emphasis on reproduction supported the ideology of Republican Motherhood that pervaded the new nation. The roles of daughter and mother assumed privileged status, though

it was a status that excluded African-American women. In her synthesis, Harris links understandings of women's anatomy to the ideological basis for female inferiority, as embodied in the culture of Republican Motherhood. The culture justified the legal and social exclusion of women from any context other than that of the family.

Having persuasively established that women's oppression related to their circumscribed role within the familial unit, Harris's larger purpose is the study of resistance. *Executing Race* is an investigation of the construction of ideas through discourse about race, gender, and the law in the eighteenth-century United States. The first chapter is a detailed analysis of criminal conversion narratives relating to infanticide, a crime committed primarily by women. Sharing a common structure, the narratives, generally authored by white, male spiritual leaders, outlined the details of the convicted woman's crime, her confession, and her ultimate salvation. Predicated on the assumption that infanticide, like murder, represented a rejection of God, religious leaders of the community dedicated themselves to ensuring the convicted woman's spiritual salvation prior to death. In their eyes, this was achieved through repentance, conversion to God, and ultimately an acceptance of the punishment for the crime. The purpose of these narratives was not to save the woman from the gallows. Rather, the severity of the punishment was central to the narratives, which were often read as sermons from church pulpits, and otherwise circulated widely throughout the eighteenth century. Harris examines how narratives about infanticide

and its associated implications operated to oppress and silence women, particularly African Americans and Native Americans because elite white men controlled authorship and distribution of the narratives. The remainder of *Executing Race* explores how selected women constructed their own narratives to contest the dominant discourse about law, race, and society.

In her opening chapter, Harris characterizes cases of infanticide, like many eighteenth-century murder cases, as “cultural productions” (p. 2). Women’s bodies were initially “colonized” or controlled through the laws pertaining to infanticide (p. 34). These laws were particularly harsh, as the relevant statutes mandated that if a woman concealed the birth of a bastard, she had done so to conceal the murder of her illegitimate child. The burden of proving a child was born dead, rather than alive, rested solely with the accused woman. Laws dealing with infanticide consequently targeted poor, young, and single women. Characterized as a capital crime, execution was then the only punishment available to the courts when sentencing a woman convicted of the crime. These punitive laws reflected male anxieties about the consequences of unrestrained female sexuality. Harris asserts that, like the legal statutes, other forms of cultural discourse such as conversion narratives produced in response to infanticide, were another means of disciplining women’s bodies and behavior. As Harris demonstrates, religious ministers controlled representations of both the crime and its consequences. In this context, the actual identities of the murderers were often irrelevant. Executing one woman for the crime became a means of policing the actions of other women in the community. Community leaders produced and manipulated the cultural response to the murders. In prefaces to the narratives, for example, the authors usually noted that the published text did not employ the actual language used by the condemned mother. The narrative was mediated through the voice of the male leader to convey the appropriate cultural message.

By the mid-eighteenth century, according to Harris, some women had managed to wrest control of these “cultural productions” from men (p. 2). Harris cites the example of Flora, from an unusually well-documented mid-eighteenth-century Massachusetts case. Even Flora’s deposition survived, though obviously mediated by the hand of the court reporter. An African-American slave, Flora challenged her conviction for infanticide on the basis that her dead child was not a bastard, an important argument because she could only be prosecuted under the infanticide statute if her child was illegitimate. Flora ar-

gued she was married to another slave. The court found in her favor on the basis that Flora and her partner lived together like husband and wife with her master’s consent, even if the marriage was not strictly recognized according to the law of Massachusetts. Though she did not contest existing laws in relation to infanticide, Flora assumed a greater challenge by asking the court to consider the legitimacy of slave marriage and of children born of those marriages.

As Harris observes, the laws dealing with infanticide changed to the benefit of women by the early nineteenth century. Throughout the eighteenth century, executions of women charged with infanticide were commonplace partly because execution was the only punishment available if infanticide was proved. New England laws changed at the turn of the century, shifting the burden of proving a child was born dead, rather than alive, from the accused woman to the prosecution. Concealing a birth was also no longer defined as a capital crime. Yet, as Harris acknowledges, these changes were largely related to events over which women had limited influence, primarily debates about the appropriateness of capital punishment as a penalty for a large number of crimes, including infanticide. The introduction of state penitentiaries also provided alternative forms of punishment. In this context, the case studies with which Harris follows her initial chapter assume greater significance as she makes a larger argument about the importance of female discourse and agency in the revolutionary era.

The remaining chapters of *Executing Race* are linked by the thematic figure of the “resisting colonizer” (p. 80). On the basis of her analysis of selected women and their writings from the eighteenth century, Harris defines the “resisting colonizer” as a woman who contested patriarchal and colonial structures, yet often reinforced them through the use of racial and class-based assumptions. The concept is a useful one for Harris, enabling her to reinterpret the voices of some women traditionally marginalized by critics as supporters of white male hegemony. *Executing Race* assesses how particular female authors of the eighteenth century challenged gendered constructions of women’s roles through discourse. In the process, however, these same women reinforced racial and ethnic stereotypes.

One such example is that of Tabitha Tenney, a white, female novelist. Harris closely analyzes Tenney’s *Female Quixotism* (1801), illustrating how Tenney’s vision of an alternative world for women, one in which marriage was not the only option, rested on the correspond-

ing denigration of immigrants, the working-class and African-American women. Tenney's protagonist in *Female Quixotism*, Dorcasina Sheldon, rejected marriage in favor of "spinsterhood" (p. 135). By making this choice, Tenney, via the character of Dorcasina, challenged prevailing beliefs about Republican Motherhood and True Womanhood. These ideologies linked women's purpose in the New Republic to reproduction and child-rearing. By opting not to marry, Dorcasina rejected these cultural ideals. Yet, as Harris astutely observes, other characters acted as a counterpoint to temper the extent of Dorcasina's apparent rebellion. She chose "spinsterhood," for example, rather than pursue an ongoing relationship with the working-class Irish man who wooed her (p. 135). The decision was an enormous relief to Mr. Sheldon, her father, who was somewhat chagrined at Dorcasina's rejection of American fellows. Tenney casts the choice of a single life as a better one than marrying a foreigner. Dorcasina's disgrace was also mitigated by her contrast to the figure of her servant, Miss Violet, the highly sexualized black woman. Ultimately, a white, single woman devoted to charitable work, Dorcasina's goodness was literally inscribed by Tenney on the presence of Miss Violet's dark body in the text.

The strongest case study focuses on Margaretta Bleecker Faugeres, characterized by Harris as an exemplar of "the new activist woman" who emerged at the turn of the century (p. 114). A prolific writer, Faugeres's work was frequently published in *The New-York Magazine* between 1790 and 1801, the year in which she died at twenty-eight. The editors of the magazine also supported the publication of two texts by Faugeres, the first being a collection of her own works and those of her mother, Ann Bleecker, and the latter the publication of her mother's unfinished histories for which Faugeres drafted conclusions. Faugeres's principal subjects included antislavery, the French Revolution, and capital punishment. She supported the first two movements, and opposed the latter penalty. The discussion of Faugeres is convincing precisely because it is so closely linked to highly charged debates of the day. Harris clearly situates Faugeres's contributions within an historical context outlining, for example, the New York legislature's changing attitudes to slavery and capital punishment and the extent to which Faugeres commented on these debates. Harris also observes that even if America has forgotten Margaretta Bleecker Faugeres, she is well remembered in the annals of French history for her support of the revolutionary cause.

The final analysis revisits the only surviving poem

of the slave and freedwoman Lucy Terry Prince, "Bars Fight." The story of Prince, the first African-American woman to argue a case before the Supreme Court, which she subsequently won, is well documented. Given Prince's spirited defense of her family and property rights, it is unsurprising that Harris selected Prince as an example of a woman who resisted oppression. Harris reads "Bar Fights" as a satire of colonial captivity narratives. The poem was a product of the European and African historical cultures to which Prince laid claim. Though the local white community assumed the poem a tribute, Harris convincingly suggests that a "bicultural" reading of the poem illuminates a multiplicity of meanings. Importantly, this reading suggests Prince's poem is a form of resistance even if the colonizers do not realize they are being satirized. As a "cultural construct," the poem is yet another example of the way in which Prince negotiated her oppression.

By situating works in historical context and examining both fiction and nonfiction as discursive constructions of a particular period, Harris's work is particularly illuminating. As she observes, questions about the authenticity or fictitious nature of particular works then become less important. Examining *The History of Maria Kittle* (1793), authored by Ann Bleecker, Margaretta Faugeres's mother, Harris closely picks apart how factual details, early features of sentimental fiction, the editorial hand of Faugeres, and the racial prejudices of Bleecker converged to produce a story long considered a work of fiction. Harris makes a persuasive argument for the history's basis in fact, but as she demonstrates, the significance of novels or captivity narratives is what they reveal about the attitudes and ideas of the authors. The way in which the author constructed the story enriches our understanding of that historical actor's mind. The text becomes a window to an individual's thoughts, rather than an isolated artifact. In *Executing Race*, Harris's concern for context illuminates the benefits of linking history to literary studies.

The example of Belinda, however, illuminates the potential frustrations of such a methodology for historians. In February 1783, an African-American woman known only as Belinda, filed a petition with the Massachusetts legislature seeking freedom and financial compensation for her fifty years of service as a slave to Isaac Royall, a Charlestown merchant. Belinda's petition was one of many filed with New England legislatures during this period. Many of them were successful, including Belinda's initial petition in 1783. Awarded an annual pension of fifteen pounds, it was withdrawn twelve months later.

Harris chose Belinda's petition for two reasons. First, the document presumably circulated widely because the antislavery movement published it in England in 1783, and four years later in the United States. Second, the former slave's location made the petition a compelling example of resistance. Harris claims Charlestown had a reputation for using particularly brutal means to punish those slaves who transgressed.

Harris uses Belinda as an example of a woman who negotiated the complex operation of the white, male legal system, making it work to her advantage. But, without more historical detail, the question of what Belinda's petition meant in the larger context of African-American and female activism during this period is difficult to assess. Though successful in 1783, Belinda filed her petition several times after that. The only two instances, however, where Belinda succeeded in receiving a pension occurred in the two years in which the movement published the document. Harris deftly analyses the difference in language between the petitions published in England and in the United States. But there is limited analysis of the significance of publication and of the sponsorship of the white-dominated antislavery movement. We also know little of how the language in Belinda's petition compared to that of other petitions, for example, or of the differing ways in which the antislavery movement used petitions from female and male slaves, if there was any difference at all. Harris's discussion of Belinda only whets the appetite for more information about these petitions and how they were employed by slaves themselves and as tools of the antislavery movement. Though her discussion of the individual petition is enriched by close attention to language use and the details of Belinda's life, this example also suggests the benefits of greater historical context.

The significance of the women analyzed in *Executing Race*, argues Harris, is that they all resisted oppression through the production of narratives which challenged the prevailing legal or social order. Tabitha Tenney, for instance, produced a novel in which she presented an alternative future for women, that of choosing to remain single. In *Executing Race*, Harris argues that resistance is measured through the circulation of discourse. Her goal is not to assess the extent to which this discourse directly or even indirectly correlated with historical change. By uncovering women's voices or recasting them, in some cases, as protesting voices, Harris demonstrates that the women profiled in *Executing Race* contributed to the atmosphere of dissent against the status quo which circulated in the United States throughout the late eighteenth

and early nineteenth centuries. In the revolutionary era, claims Harris, dissent was characterized as a male virtue. In *Executing Race*, she seeks to challenge that view by exploring the varying ways in which women articulated dissent.

Historians may find the tenuous relationship sketched in *Executing Race* between the circulation of discourse and historical change unconvincing. As Harris acknowledges via her examples of changes in the law with respect to infanticide, even when reform took place, it sometimes occurred independently of the challenges made by women to the existing legal regime and for reasons unrelated to their dissent. Changes in the law, however, were frequently slow, and often related to a variety of factors that accumulated over time. In this context, Harris's example of Margaretta Bleecker Faugeres is particularly convincing. Faugeres contributed to an ongoing discourse related to pertinent debates of the day. Though Faugeres was not directly responsible for change to the law, her voice was one of many that spoke out in favor of reform. Based on this example, Harris's argument is persuasive. But, as the close study of Belinda's petition illustrated, the argument is not as convincing when there is less historical context and fewer relationships developed between different forms of historical discourse.

The problematic nature of this methodology for historians is similarly illustrated when the significance of Tabitha Tenney's *Female Quixotism* is reconsidered. Based on her close analysis of the book's language and themes, Harris convincingly argues that Tenney resisted oppression by rejecting the cultural ideals of marriage and motherhood, as illustrated within the novel. It is difficult, however, to assess the "impact" of Tenney's story of Dorcasina on prevailing attitudes within eighteenth-century society (p. 23). In order to do so, some understanding of responses to the novel, circulation of the book, or the extent to which its theme was atypical of other fiction of the period seems necessary, contextualized within a discussion about reception of other novels at the time. The type of historical detail included by Harris in her discussion of Faugeres, specifically the fine illustration of the relationships between Faugeres's discourse and relevant historical debates, might have strengthened the argument for the significance of Tenney's novel.

A larger geographic sweep may have aided Harris's efforts to construct a more persuasive argument, supported by a greater range of examples. Though the book claims to concentrate on U.S. cultural productions, it is

primarily limited to those from New England. In the case of infanticide and captivity narratives, for example, such a focus is understandable. This is the region in which such narratives were produced. Yet, this fact raises interesting issues Harris might have explored further. If women murdered their babies in their North, they almost certainly did so in the South. Rather than trying to make a broader argument about Early American culture based on evidence from New England, future historians may wish to consider the question of what was so unique about the region that it produced such narratives. For example, the inverse question of how Southern society dealt with women who committed infanticide during this period remains largely unexamined. Harris might also have considered the extent to which the figure of the “resisting colonizer,” the useful theme that linked various

chapters of her study, differed in the South.

These examples are suggestions for future research that other historians or literary scholars may wish to explore. Harris’s strong study draws on a variety of sources, including novels, magazine articles, narratives, and histories, to assess the ways in which women negotiated mechanisms of power in the eighteenth-century United States. In this way, *Executing Race* contributes to the growing body of work demonstrating the myriad ways in which women resisted oppression during the eighteenth century. As ably demonstrated by Harris, the nature of this resistance was often complex. While some women successfully resisted, others, by virtue of racial and economic privilege, perpetuated the same hierarchies they challenged.

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