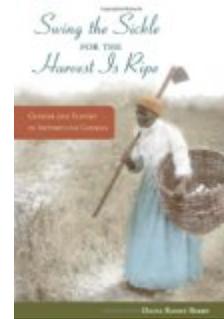


Daina Ramey Berry. *"Swing the Sickle for the Harvest Is Ripe": Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia*. Women in American History Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007. Plates. xvi + 224 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03146-5.

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Published on H-SAWH (February, 2009)

Commissioned by Antoinette G. van Zelm



Comparing the Experiences of Female and Male Slaves

Daina Ramey Berry has combined largely untapped sources with thoughtful analysis to produce an innovative approach to issues of bondage and slavery. *"Swing the Sickle for the Harvest Is Ripe"* shows how gender, labor, and social relationships were interwoven in the complicated world of slaves and slave owners in Georgia. Although the book focuses on Georgia, it can easily be used as a microcosm for much of the agrarian South prior to the Civil War. The majority of the text focuses on the mid-1800s, but Berry draws on sources dating back as early as the 1700s and as late as the 1870s. The introduction carefully lays out the historical context, geographic scope, and methodology, piquing the interest of the reader and presenting a blueprint for the entire book. Berry also defines the key terms of "slavery/bondage," "open/closed system," and "skilled/unskilled labor."

In the first two chapters, Berry explores agricultural and nonagricultural modes of slavery and the gendered divisions of labor and family life. She primarily uses two Georgia counties to investigate the experiences of people in bondage. In Wilkes County, an open system was employed that allowed greater slave mobility between plantations, which remained relatively small. In contrast, the closed system of slavery was commonly practiced in Glynn County (near Savannah's Chatham County) where plantations were larger and managed more as inclusive communities. Most interestingly, Berry extends the definition of "skilled labor" to include female enslaved workers who performed agricultural labor. By

viewing skilled labor as the "ability to do something well," Berry argues that there were more skilled female laborers than male and that, in many cases, women were preferred because of their lower cost-to-output ratio and their ability to reproduce (pp. 16-17). For example, at Glynn County's Kelvin Grove Plantation, more than 60 percent of the workers in the cotton fields were women. Based largely on sources from plantation mistresses, Berry also shows that bondwomen were valued by the planter class as nonagricultural laborers. In addition, Berry found sources showing that many female slaves considered themselves "estate women" and preferred domestic life as "house girls" despite physical demands from their white counterparts and sexual demands from their plantation masters.

Chapter 3 reveals the fascinating and variegated associations that constituted family and community for slaves in southern society. The phrase "fictive kin" is used to describe the mix of biological, extended, and nonbiological familial units that slaves formed to create and maintain a sense of identity and security. The chapter investigates courting rituals, marriages, social gatherings, religion, and holidays. Despite the sprawling range of topics covered, Berry is able to weave a loose thread among them all. She does not divide men and women in a comparative approach but rather treats them as complements of one another. This chapter provides the best insight into the ordinary lives of people in bondage. Berry shows how slaves fashioned community and social relationships de-

spite the despair that often crept into their lives and the fundamental inability of enslaved peoples to choose with whom they lived.

The fourth chapter supplements the third but expands on the role of the planter class in the formation and destruction of slave family and community. Berry recounts the ruthless but routine separation of families through sale or trade and the forced breeding and rape of African American women at the hands of both white and black males. The sources for this chapter are rich, and Berry should be credited for her persistence in researching and documenting this history so effectively. One female slave, Mary Peters, told the story of her mother and explained that her mother's gang rape was "the way I came to be here" (p. 81). Equally fascinating evidence and analysis abounds in this chapter, which vividly reminds readers that ultimate control and power rested with the master of the plantation. Although many of these men claimed that their plantation management was paternalistic, it remains agonizingly clear that white men often and arbitrarily misused their authority to force fear and submissive obedience into their bondpeople.

The fifth and final chapter of "*Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe*" is perhaps the weakest with evidence that

surveys the informal economy of individual slaves and slave communities. This chapter is disconnected from the driving focus of the overall text. However, Berry's findings remain relevant given that in the 1850s, as the Civil War neared, slaves increasingly earned some small income, in cash or in kind, which increased their bargaining power. By mid-century, it was fairly common for enslaved workers to earn money off the plantation as well. In fact, many enslaved men and women were hired for extra seasonal work. This chapter returns the reader to the important role of profit and money for both slave owners and slaves themselves.

"*Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe*" illuminates a history carefully buried by the white patriarchal structure. Though hidden for many years, this history has not been lost. Berry brings the realities for slave families back to life. Well written and well researched, this book provides a new understanding of the diversity of experiences for enslaved peoples in the Deep South. Berry argues that "gender, labor skill, and economy dictated every bondperson's way of life and influenced all familial relationships" (p. 133). Through these categories, the book demonstrates that it remains possible, 160 years later, to (re)humanize a group of people cast into a system designed to dehumanize them.

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Citation: Mary Ellen Pethel. Review of Berry, Daina Ramey, "*Swing the Sickle for the Harvest Is Ripe*": *Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia*. H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. February, 2009.

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