H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Virginia Meacham Gould, ed. *Chained to the Rock of Adversity: To Be Free, Black & Female in the Old South.* Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1998. liv + 96 pp. $22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-2083-0; $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-1996-4.

Reviewed by Martha Jane Brazy (Department of History, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee)
Published on H-SAWH (February, 1999)

Rare Private Writings Convey the Challenges of Life in the South for Free Women of Color

Virginia Meacham Gould's *Chained to the Rock of Adversity* is a most welcome and significant contribution to the fields of southern women's history, southern African-American history, and southern history in general. Gould, the historian for the Sisters of the Holy Family in New Orleans, illuminates a segment of antebellum southern society about which we know relatively very little–that of free women of color. With this book, we are able to catch a glimpse of what shaped the contours of daily life for free women of color through the private letters written to Ann Battles Johnson, a free woman of color from Natchez, Mississippi, and her oldest daughter, Anna Johnson, also of Natchez. Ann Battles Johnson's nieces, who resided as free women of color in New Orleans, authored most of the letters in the collection, which date from the mid-antebellum era to the turn of the century. Also included is the diary of Ann Battles Johnson's daughter, Catharine Geraldine Johnson, who at the age of twenty-two in 1864 started to keep a private journal and wrote in it sporadically over the next ten years. Perhaps what makes the letters and diary extraordinary is that they are rare examples of private writings penned by free women of color.

Interestingly, the writings of the Johnson family women were among the voluminous papers of Ann Battles Johnson's husband, William T. Johnson, whose own multi-volume diary illustrates the experiences of a free man of color in the deep South during the antebellum era.[1] In spite of the well-known story of William T. Johnson, who built a successful business as a barber and merchant in the wealthy Mississippi River town of Natchez, the story of his wife, daughters, sister, and nieces has long remained in obscurity. *Chained to the Rock of Adversity* sheds bright light on the Johnson women, as well as the often overlooked lives of free women of color in the South.

The letters contained in this work are organized in chronological fashion and grouped into the prewar and postwar eras. The daughters of Ann Battles Johnson's sister-in-law, Adelia Johnson Miller, authored most of the prewar correspondence sent to Johnson. During the postwar period, the Miller women continued to communicate with the Johnson side of the family, as Anna Johnson took over the role of family correspondent when her mother died in 1866. Unfortunately, we see only the letters written to Ann and Anna Johnson, since their correspondence to the Millers is not known exist.

Through these writings, the story of Ann Battles Johnson and the Johnson-Miller women begins to unfold. Many of the letters contain information about such daily concerns as health, money, and news about family members. But along with these common subjects of nineteenth-century women's correspondence are the concerns that were unique to free women of color who lived in a society where race, gender, and slavery defined all people's lives. Such influences can be seen, for example, in the remark by Ann Battles Johnson's niece, Lavinia Miller, that a free woman of color in New Orleans had gotten "married to a white man last saturday night," but had to go to "bay of St. Louis to marry becaus they could not get lawful married here" (p. 7).

Free blacks' position was tenuous in the Old South. Though Ann Battles Johnson and her family were among the wealthiest free black families in Mississippi and occupied a high status within their community of Natchez (where most of the state's free people of color lived), their social standing and prominence were not enough to guarantee their safety. This was especially the case for Ann Battles Johnson, whose former master had illegally manumitted her outside of Mississsippi in 1826. Under Mississippi law, this illegal manumission could be grounds for deportation from the state at any time. As free people of color, the Johnsons felt threatened by slavery, yet their free status also challenged the social order itself. The pre-

carious nature of freedom for the Johnsons and other free blacks is well-illustrated by a warning that William Johnson received from his sister: "Those Log Cabin Seal that you seal your letters with is to easy open. A word to the wise is a nuft" (p. 5).

Despite her husband's murder by a neighbor over a property-line dispute in 1851, Ann Battles Johnson and her family continued to build their wealth. With the onset of the Civil War, however, their prosperity began to fade. Catharine Johnson confided in her diary that their economic woes had grown profound as the war dragged on: "I believe that to all our other ills and troubles is to be added that of poverty. For every year we grow poorer and poorer" (p. 89). The lives of the Johnson women during the war are most vividly sketched on the pages of Catharine's very personal diary. As she relates her experiences during that time, we get a clear sense of the horror of war and the isolation that stemmed from the lack of communication with loved ones. Furthermore, we see Johnson's confusion over why the war was being fought, as well as periods of what seem to have been deep depression for her.

It is through these diary pages and letters that we can begin to understand what it was like to be black, female, and free in the slave South. Although, as Gould points out, these documents do not suggest that the experiences of the Johnson and Miller women were universal to all free women of color, "there are fundamental issues of race, gender, and condition that are played out in the lives of these women that would have been central to any free women of color" (p. xlix). Gould argues that free women of color found themselves caught between identities and unable to relate to either white women or slave women. Southern white men sharply drew the lines of identity for southern white women by prescribing that they embody the ideals of purity, virtuousness, and chastity. Meanwhile, both southern white men and women constructed black slave women's identity as being in direct oppostion to that of the virtuous white southern "lady." Whites believed that slave women's "tainted" status touched that of free black women, who were thus "deemed to be incompatible with the ideals associated with white women" (p. xxii). Nevertheless, according to Gould, white men "expected free women of color to at least aspire to that ideal" (p. xxii). If free women of color did not attempt to fulfill such ideals, they also would have "brought disdain and degradation upon themselves and their families" (p. xxii). Caught between an idealized identity which could not be achieved and the reality of their place within the dominant culture's dictated social order, free women of color "constructed a discreet identity that reflected neither that of black slave women nor of free white women. In response to their unique roles within southern society, they created instead another identity" (p. xxii). Unfortunately, Gould does not go on to flesh out this "discreet" identity of free women of color.

Chained to the Rock of Adversity is an extremely compelling collection of documents that adds greatly to existing works about free people of color in the antebellum South. Moreover, it opens the door for further examination of free women of color.[2] Additionally, this book is ideal for teaching because it provides students with rich primary source material, as well as a good foundation of knowledge about the varied experiences of southern free blacks. Finally, Gould makes an extremely thought-provoking argument about identity and free women of color, an important avenue of discussion that she might have explored to a greater extent in her introduction. Nevertheless, *Chained to the Rock of Adversity* leaves us looking forward to hearing more from Gould in the future about the lives of free women of color and their constructions of identity in the antebellum South.

Notes:

[1]. William R. Hogan and Edwin A. Davis, eds., *William Johnson's Natchez: The Antebellum Diary of a Free Negro* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1951; paperback edition, 1993). Hogan and Davis also authored Johnson's biography, see Hogan and Davis, *The Barber of Natchez*(Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1954).

[2]. For a general history, see Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Press, 1974). For illumination of the lives of free blacks in South Carolina, see Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark, eds., *No Chariot Let Down: Charleston's Free People of Color on the Eve of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 1984), and Johnson and Roark, *Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1984). For full examination of free women of color, see Lois Virginia Meacham Gould, "In Full Enjoyment of their Liberty: The Free Women of Color of the Gulf Ports of New Orleans, Mobile, and Pensacola, 1769-1860," Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1991, and Adele Logan Alexander, *Ambiguous Lives: Free Women of Color in Rural Georgia, 1789-1879* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1991). See also the appropriate chapters in Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1984), and Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Com-*

munity in the Slave South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Martha Jane Brazy. Review of Gould, Virginia Meacham, ed., *Chained to the Rock of Adversity: To Be Free, Black & Female in the Old South.* H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. February, 1999.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2789

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.