

V. Lynn Kennedy. *Born Southern: Childbirth, Motherhood, and Social Networks in the Old South*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. viii + 277 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-9417-6.

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## The Centrality and Complexity of Childbirth in Southern History

In *Born Southern*, V. Lynn Kennedy offers a sensitive and nuanced exploration of the multiple meanings attached to childbirth, mothering, and child rearing in the antebellum South. While “a person’s birth laid the foundation for the social identity that shaped his or her position and possibilities within antebellum southern society,” and law determined the significance of lineage and race, southern pro-slavery authors used the so-called facts of life to avoid taking responsibility for depriving individuals of human rights by subjecting them, once born to a slave mother, to race-based slavery (p. 22). The customs surrounding childbirth often highlighted and reinforced social hierarchies. For instance, during the recovery period, practical assistance, and child-care alternatives were allotted to new mothers. The birthing chamber was also “a unique social space in southern society,” where black and white women temporarily privileged the commonalities of shared experience over the hierarchies of slaveholding society (p. 57). Even though a “biological mandate” linked black and white women, narratives of childbirth and maternity could be used for a variety of purposes, including defending or critiquing slavery (p. 14). Ultimately, maternal metaphors helped frame the secession crisis and the Civil War in terms of southern-born white sons defending their birthplace and their rhetorical “mother,” the slaveholding South.

Because of the complex and often competing interpretations of childbirth and maternity, Kennedy concludes, “birth and motherhood provided a particularly

rich arena for negotiating status and identity in the antebellum South” (p. 166). Departing from earlier studies that focus on the social and medical aspects of childbirth and motherhood, Kennedy uses the notion of being “born southern” not only to describe the daily social realities of both white and black mothers and children, but also to examine the economic implications of the birth of slave children, the legal enforcement of “birth” and “blood,” and the political uses of maternalist discourse. Kennedy places birth and maternity squarely at the center of southern history.

To address these multiple facets of being “born southern,” Kennedy relies heavily on a limited number of personal accounts, many drawn from published diaries, edited collections of letters, and memoirs; the Works Progress Administration’s oral histories of former slaves; and digitized archival material made available through the Documenting the American South project at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She supplements these sources—which she examines closely as carefully constructed narratives rather than as transparent truthful accounts—with popular fiction by both northern and southern authors; legal codes and court documents; and southern periodicals and guidebooks for planters and their wives, overseers, and medical practitioners. One of the strengths of this book is the way in which Kennedy teases out the multiple meanings, unconscious suppositions, and deliberate omissions of her sources. Her careful attention to narrative strategy, identity construction,

and language use allows her to highlight the complexity as well as the centrality of motherhood and childbearing in southern history.

Kennedy's meticulous attention to the nuances of her sources has both benefits and drawbacks. The usefulness of Kennedy's careful reading of a relatively small collection of sources is evident in her sensitive exploration of the contested issue of "breeding." Rather than engaging in debate over the extent to which coerced reproduction occurred, Kennedy instead analyzes the language that slaves used to describe—and critique—whites' interference in the intimate matters of sexuality and reproduction. Offering examples of what were almost surely apocryphal narratives, Kennedy persuasively argues that "the statistical probability of such things happening was clearly less important than individual experiences and perceptions" (p. 151).

However, some readers may look askance at Kennedy's discussion of the "mammy" figure, which other historians have discounted as the product of post-war efforts to construct an image of a racially harmonious past. Kennedy offers an intriguing analysis of a handful of sources—mostly postbellum memoirs—to reach the conclusion that "the mammy ... became the symbolic

nexus of infant nurturing in the antebellum South, in which competing understandings about race, mothering, loyalty, status, and power both challenged and supported social boundaries and structures" (p. 111). Only in her notes, however, does she point out that "the actual number of women designated as mammies ... was relatively small" (p. 230n85).

Despite these caveats, *Born Southern* is an important book that offers a fresh perspective of childbirth and maternity in the antebellum South; transcends the boundaries of social, cultural, legal, and political history; and highlights the value of close readings of sources. Together with such works as Susan Klepp's *Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760-1820* (2009), *Born Southern* places women and children at the center of American history and thereby responds to pioneering women's historian Gerda Lerner's call for a truly "holistic history."<sup>[1]</sup>

#### Note

[1]. Gerda Lerner, "Holistic History: Challenges and Possibilities," in *Living with History/Making Social Change* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 163-179.

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