African American women are noticeably absent from most historical studies of punishment and prisons in the Jim Crow South. Talitha LeFlouria’s recent monograph, *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South*, provides a necessary corrective to the literature on punishment during Jim Crow. She builds on the work of Kali Gross, Sarah Haley, and others by exploring the intersection of white supremacy, the patriarchy, and economic exploitation through the experiences of black women punished through the Jim Crow convict labor system. African American women in Georgia labored alongside incarcerated men and suffered whippings and other inhumane tortures, many of which had been used to control the enslaved. These women often survived sexual assault while incarcerated, and prison guards, whipping bosses, wardens, and prison contractors routinely used sexual humiliation—publicly stripping and whipping incarcerated black women—as punishment. LeFlouria painstakingly sifts through prison commission reports, prison physicians’ records, whipping reports, clemency applications, contemporary newspapers, and medical journals to reconstruct these and other experiences of incarcerated black women. In telling these women’s stories, she recovers voices from the past that have been silenced for over a century.

LeFlouria argues that, under slavery, African American women were valued not only for their monetary value as chattel and productive value as laborers, but also for their reproductive value as mothers whose children became the property of slave masters. Jim Crow convict labor systems, however, only placed value on the productive value of black women, and some wardens went so far as to encourage or to even carry out infanticide since children, in the Jim Crow prison system, were a “nuisance” rather than a financial asset. She makes other significant interventions in the literature on Jim Crow, most importantly by arguing that the convict labor system, which included convict leasing, state prison farms, and chain gangs, propelled the modernization and industrialization of the New South. At the inception of the industrialization in the South, states across the region leased incarcerated black women at a profit to fledgling private sector industries like brick factories, coal mines, and railroads. Once legislatures began to phase out convict leasing in favor of chain gangs in the name of “reform,” states in the region used incarcerated labor to build the infrastructure necessary to support further economic development. LeFlouria argues that convict labor, much of which was performed by incarcerated women, spurred the modernization of the New South, directly tying modernization to racial, gendered, and economic exploitation. LeFlouria exposes how the existing literature on convict labor systems often obscures the significant ways in which the experiences of black women differed from those of black men and white women, and in doing so, she does not subsume gender and class considerations under the category of race. Much in the same way that Tera Hunter’s *To ’Joy My Freedom* (1997) reimagined Jim Crow through an intersectional lens, LeFlouria further complicates how historians should understand the very nature of Jim Crow.

The modernization of the South sits at the center of LeFlouria’s research, not just because convict labor propelled modern mining, manufacturing, and infrastructure, but also because of the emergence of what she calls the industrial prison plantation. However, recent scholarship on slavery and capitalism, in particular Walter
Johnson’s *River of Dark Dreams* (2013) and Ed Baptist’s *The Half Has Never Been Told* (2014), traces the industrial prison plantation and modern infrastructure to the early nineteenth century in ways that disrupt conventional wisdom about when modernization began in the South. Both Johnson and Baptist contend that slavery was a modern, capitalist institution. In fact, Baptist prefers to describe antebellum plantations as “slave labor camps” precisely because planters and overseers used modern technologies of torture on enslaved bodies to “[extract] an amount of innovation virtually equal in numerical measure to all the mechanical ingenuity in all the textile mills in the Western world” (p. 140). In fact, planters coveted the productive value of enslaved women who were particularly deft cotton pickers so much that they discouraged those women from having children. The “modernized” technologies of punishment and torture that LeFlouria sees in the early twentieth century—the whipping chair, bucking machine, solitary confinement chamber, etc.—had antebellum equivalents like the whipping machine and slave collars. Similarly, although convict laborers built roads and railroads during Jim Crow, the infrastructure necessary to ship cotton around the world was extensive in the decades leading up to emancipation, and in Louisiana, for instance, privately and publicly owned slaves as well as jailed runaway slaves built roads and levees, further complicating the boundaries between enslavement and incarceration, Old South and New South, premodern and modern. A deeper engagement with this recent literature on slavery and capitalism, perhaps in a future study, would help to flesh out the complicated—and uneven—modernization of the South, and would clarify the continuities and discontinuities between unfree labor before and after 1865.

LeFlouria’s research is particularly valuable because she excavates the experiences of incarcerated black women who languished in Georgia’s convict labor system, women like Mattie Crawford and Eliza Randall. Both Crawford and Randall received life sentences for murdering their abusive fathers. After their trials, Crawford became a blacksmith at the state prison farm in Milledgeville, and Randall all but ran the prison camp, Camp Heardmont, as a gristmill machinist, sawmill engineer, and blacksmith. Despite New South rhetoric championing the protection of women—a rhetoric itself steeped in the patriarchy—state protection from violence only extended to white women. When black women like Crawford and Randall killed their abusive fathers, the state not only punished them, but profited from its systematic disregard for black women’s lives. LeFlouria tells stories like theirs not only to provide a glimpse into the interior lives of incarcerated black women, but also to underscore the intersectional experiences of black women in the convict labor system and in the Jim Crow South more generally. At times, however, the broader context of the postemancipation convict labor system gets lost amid these individual stories. In particular, I wondered how political debates and social anxieties shaped the emergence of prison farms, convict leasing, and chain gangs over time. I would not want to displace the centrality of incarcerated black women’s experiences in LeFlouria’s narrative; rather I would like to have seen, in more depth, the interplay between individual experiences and these broader historical shifts.

_Chained in Silence_ raises questions that are as important as they are timely. In the past few years, national attention in the United States has finally turned to mass incarceration, and Americans have much to learn from LeFlouria and the incarcerated women whose stories she tells. The dominant narrative of incarceration remains a story about African American men, even though the 2009 incarceration rate for black women was three times that of white women.[1] This book demonstrates that, before Americans can dismantle mass incarceration, the nation must understand the intersectional ways in which the US criminal punishment system remains oppressive and therefore recognize all the people it oppresses. Past failures of “reform,” like the chain gang as a solution to convict leasing, remind us, too, that we need to be wary of reforms that may very well reproduce existing systems of oppression while failing to address the root causes of crime. LeFlouria’s research challenges us to see Jim Crow in its full complexity and to reimage the very meaning of punishment in a democratic society.

Note


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