



Jennifer L. Morgan. *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. 312 pp. \$27.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4780-1414-0.

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Jennifer Morgan's *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* focuses on how capitalism emerged alongside slavery and how both institutions depended on the commodification of human beings and the products that those persons generated, including additional slaves as well as crops and services. Morgan concentrates on enslaved women, noting that enslavement required a careful accounting of bodies while simultaneously rendering some bodies invisible in the archive and within the history of slavery. Similarly, Morgan notes that slavery valued kinlessness despite slavery depending on women bearing children who, like their mothers, were enslaved. Morgan's goal is to make visible what slavery erased—women, their bodies, their connections to their families and their kin, and their resistance to slavery. She locates her study in the English Atlantic, including the African coast, the Middle Passage, and the colonies, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Using various sources and methodologies, Morgan aims to center women in the history of slavery, resistance and rebellion, and Black radicalism.

Morgan employs a variety of primary sources to highlight the connections between capitalism,

slavery, and women. For example, she utilizes accounting ledgers to show the significance of numeracy to the process of enslavement. Europeans involved in the slave trade kept careful count of enslaved persons, transforming them from humans into commodities. Morgan characterizes this practice as the “alchemy of race making” (p. 14). Despite how crucial women were to slavery, the records often failed to take note of them. Morgan writes, “But to the captain, the imperative was only the total number of bodies on board that he successfully delivered ... minus those lost to the Atlantic graveyard” (p. 46). She sees these silences, these omissions in the archive, as strategic, as ways for Europeans to deny that enslaved persons had familial and kin connections, even though slavery required enslaved women to produce infants, whom slaveholders marked as property.

Travel books written by white men did work similar to the accounting ledgers. European authors highlighted what they perceived to be Africans' inability to value items correctly, stressed that African parents were indifferent and even cruel parents, and remarked negatively on the large African populations they observed. Morgan stresses the significance of trade and currency to African economies and the vital roles that women

played in those economies as agricultural workers and as sellers in the markets. Nonetheless, Europeans privileged their own understanding of economic value, using it to reconcile and obscure the violence required to enslave men, women, and children and fashion them into commodities. Morgan concludes, “Slavery as an economic practice and race as an ideological conviction emerged simultaneously in a field of meaning that propelled early modern capitalism in ways that were crucial and brutal” (p. 102).

In addition to accounting logs and travel narratives, Morgan employs newspaper advertisements that recorded the sales of the enslaved and that documented acts of flight by enslaved persons. Morgan uses these sources to show that enslaved persons experienced multiple sales over the course of their lives and that they clearly recognized their own value. By running away, they insisted “on their capacity to behave in ways that commodities never do” (p. 200). Morgan describes these ads and “the traveler’s observations and the ship captain’s logbook” as “the print capitalism of racial slavery” (p. 201). These sources were the “evidence” from which slavery and capitalism were derived and from which the history of slavery was written (p. 201). Noting that these sources often overlooked women or rendered them invisible, Morgan writes, “The archives of gender and slavery emerged in a maddening synchronicity of erasure and enumeration” (p. 9).

Inspired by various scholars, Morgan situates women at the center of the histories of capitalism, enslavement, resistance, and Black radicalism. Motivated by the work of political scientist Cedric J. Robinson, Morgan focuses on how reproduction and enslaved women were central to the simultaneous development of capitalism and slavery.[1] In addition, Morgan recognizes the impact that anthropologist Jane Guyer’s ideas about self-valuation has on her study; specifically, Morgan investigates the knowledge that enslaved women brought to bear on capture, transport, sale, resist-

ance, and rebellion.[2] Morgan’s work also is indebted to Hortense L. Spillers’s concept that “enslaved women were forced to ‘reproduce kinlessness’” (p. 10).[3] Despite the oppression and violence to which their bodies were subject, enslaved women recognized that their bodies and their reproductive potential were important to resisting slavery. Ultimately, Morgan concludes that women were crucial to the development of slavery, racial capitalism, and the Black radical tradition.

Morgan’s book will be welcomed by scholars who study the history of slavery and women’s history. She concentrates on women, their bodies, their experiences, their feelings, and their decisions. The book should be required reading in graduate courses on the history of slavery, economic history, the history of the body, and women’s history. Finally, it should be included in historical methodology classes due to its excellent incorporation of theory and its outstanding analysis of primary sources.

Notes

[1]. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

[2]. Guyer, “Wealth in People and Self-Realization in Equatorial Africa,” *Man: Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 28, no. 2 (June 1993): 243-65.

[3]. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 65-81.

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