

## Book Review

**Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2021. Pp. ix + 296. \$23.50 (paper)**

In *Reckoning with Slavery*, Jennifer L. Morgan makes a significant contribution to the subfield of Atlantic History. Recent publications in the field, including that by Trevor Burnard, *The Atlantic in World History, 1490-1830* (2020), have rekindled the interest of historians in this field. Morgan's volume is centered on the theme of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade (TAST), a system that Morgan argues was built on the principles of racial capitalism, where peoples from Sub-Saharan Africa were the commodities of trade (6-9). Unlike other academic works, this book adopts a 'gender and history approach,' where enslaved African women's experiences are discussed alongside those of their enslaved male counterparts. The experiences include how the slaves were captured in Africa, what they went through in the slave ships across the Atlantic Ocean (the 'Middle Passage'), and also what transpired in the Americas (the 'New World'). Morgan argues that African women played key roles and influenced the designation, economic operations, and the long-term survival of the slave trade system (19-24). These narratives are located in several analytical approaches, including the social history approach and the black feminist theoretical approach. The former focuses on the lived experiences of often marginalized people and historical subjects, including enslaved African women. The latter, emphasizes the need to acknowledge the inherent value of women of African descent. There is also an element of transnational history, focusing on how the TAST affected the continents of Africa, Europe, and the Americas (10-14).

Aside from the introduction and conclusion, this volume has six main chapters. In chapter one, Morgan calls for a proper acknowledgment of the roles and experiences of enslaved African women. They were crucial to the slave trade's economic system and the accompanying racism that predominated the early modern Atlantic world. To achieve this, Morgan relied on several sources of historical data, including the TAST

Database Project, and the diaries and personal accounts of ship captains, slave merchants, and European slaveholders and settlers in the Americas. For instance, the Database Project, had, as of the year 2020, accounted for 36,110 Atlantic slave ship voyages, for the period from 1514-1866. Of that number, only 3,426 voyages indicated sex ratios or percentages, where male slaves averaged about 63 percent, and female slaves, the other 37 percent (29-30). Other records, however, indicate that the percentages were usually similar between male and female slaves. For instance, in the city of Lima, in Ecuador, where 50 percent of the slaves were male, and the other 50 percent were female. The same also applied to Barbados (32-34). Children, often not counted, were also part of such slave societies, implying the presence of kinship relations. The absence of proper records on the sex ratios in some of the voyages supports the argument of the ‘dehumanization’ of the slaves, who were considered as ‘cargo,’ hence no need to record their sexes (44-48).

In chapter two, Morgan posits that as an extension of European capitalism, the TAST was based on the concept of ‘human fungibility.’ This represented the notion that human beings had a monetary value and were made available for exchange with money and other goods (58). The European capitalist system was entangled with racism, hence the Europeans undermined the morality of enslaving fellow human beings. Since the enslaved Africans and Native Americans were also considered savages, barbarians, and illiterate, it cemented the racist tendencies of the slave trade era. The enslaved societies were regarded as ‘naturally inferior,’ and did not deserve the New World’s riches, including gold (57-64).

The theme of the commoditization of African slaves is discussed further in chapter three. The European merchants were more interested in the concept of ‘numeracy,’ rather than focusing on the ‘humanity’ of the captured slaves. Sixteenth and seventeenth century accounts of Europeans (traders, travelers, and investors) often described the African enslaved women in stereotypical terms. They were described as sexual favors, sellers of goods, and chaotic and unaffected parents (110-112). The prevalence of polygamy in African societies, including in Angola, where Pieter van den Broecke, discovered a king with 1,500 wives, was also used to justify the need to enslave African women, as an act of ‘rescuing’ them from patriarchal systems. The Europeans valued African women due to their sexuality and ability to bear children (120-125).

When crossing the Middle Passage, the African female slaves also encountered a lot of hardships. These included the high slave mortality rates, owing to overpacking and the overall poor ship conditions. Most of the women were also subjected to sexual exploitation, including being raped by ship crew members. Upon their arrival in Iberia and the New World, most female slaves often fetched higher prices than male slaves, especially as women were needed for both their labor and childbearing abilities (141-149). Some female slaves even gave birth in the slave ships, emphasizing the ‘kinship’ ties that prevailed at the time (155-156).

In the New World, the female slaves were initially paraded at slave markets, where, once purchased, they helped to propel the extractive economies of the Americas. They worked in plantations, mining areas, and households of slaveholders. The act of selling and buying the slaves, which sometimes saw slave families separated, signified the powers which the Europeans held over the Africans. The slaveholders often demanded total dedication and discipline from the slaves, including compelling the slaves to adopt new names (170-177).

Slave reactions to their 'enslaved condition' tended to vary. One of the common ways was through slave rebellions, where both male and female slaves participated. Morgan uses case studies of such rebellions in seventeenth and eighteenth-century English colonies. The enslaved women continued to experience deplorable conditions, including being raped and working under poor conditions. When captured, the female slaves involved in the rebellions were often subjected to severe punishments. Slaveholders raped some of these women in public view. Others were stripped naked and whipped in public view. These punishments were a testament to the high value accorded to female slaves, who often had a 'pacifying influence' in slave-holding locations (207-212). Other forms of reaction were acts of day-to-day resistance. These included the enslaved women's sullenness, clumsiness, feigning illness, carelessness, and refusal to work or to learn new tasks. To avoid having their kids enslaved, female slaves also committed acts of abortion and infanticide (221-225). In seventeenth-century Saint Christopher and Jamaica, female slaves were also involved in 'marronage.' This was where slaves escaped in groups and established their communities. In Jamaica, for instance, the maroon societies helped the English to defeat Spain in 1655 CE (228-230).

*Reckoning with Slavery* is a remarkable contribution to the histories of the Atlantic world and the TAST. Morgan's meticulously researched volume results from a compilation and analysis of an impressive range of primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include some rare visual records, population statistics, newspaper advertisements, and diary entries of the stakeholders of the slave trade system. Adopting the black feminist approach has also helped to put the previously sidelined women at the center of historical narratives. To fully and better understand the subject matters of this volume, one must first be familiar with introductory histories of both the Atlantic world and the TAST. Historians and other social scientists teaching in such fields as world history, Atlantic history, social history, and economic history, will find this volume very useful.

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