

Linking the Histories of Slavery: North America and Its Borderlands

Sterling Evans

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Evans, Sterling (2016) "Linking the Histories of Slavery: North America and Its Borderlands," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 18 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.18.3.08

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss3/7>

Review

Evans, Sterling

Summer 2016

Martin, Bonnie and Brooks, James F.. *Linking the Histories of Slavery: North America and Its Borderlands*. School for Advanced Research Press, \$39.95
ISBN 9781938645600

Slavery in the North American Borderlands

The editors of *Linking the Histories of Slavery* state that the goal of their volume is that by introducing “unexpected scenes” and by “challeng[ing] assumptions about how slavery worked across North America,” they want readers to “expand the perspective on slavery that we gain from narratives of commercial slavery in the United States in the decades before the Civil War.” And they want to do so by “showcase[ing] less familiar slave systems and less recognizable consequences of slavery across what would become the United States, Mexico, and Cuba from the days before the Europeans arrived and into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries” (p. xvi). I congratulate them here for accomplishing that noble goal, and for providing a very readable, useful, and important volume on slavery across the North American borderlands. As Martin and Brooks write at the end of their introduction, the book’s chapters “provide a wide sampling of North American slave systems over time . . . with distinct culture groups and across networks linking many cultures” (p. xxv).

This theme of connections also comes across loud and clear in *Linking the Histories of Slavery*, as the title aptly portends. This is part of a “global theme”—there were transnational links used by “enslaving and enslaved people [who] were migrating in cross-cultural trading networks” (p. xix). The eleven chapters in the book, in great interdisciplinary fashion written by scholars from history, anthropology, psychology, and ethnic studies, all evidence this fact for various regions, peoples, and places across the region. And the editors divide these into three parts: I “Links to Early Slavery,” II “Links to Expanding Slave Networks,” and III “Links to Legacies of Slavery.”

The first part is comprised of two essays. Chapter 1 on “Captives and Slaves in Indigenous North America” by Catherine Cameron is a terrific opener. It is comprehensive, synthetic, and regionally comparative to show that “captives were common in small-scale societies in the Americas and that their presence had important effects on these groups” (p. 26). In Chapter 2 “From Westo to Comanche” (by Eric Browne) we move into the colonial era and witness the geopolitics of slavery involved between Native and European peoples. As Browne explains, the factors that made commercial slavers – no matter from what group of people – powerful were “a decided military advantage, a strategic geo-economic location, an easily exploitable resource, access to markets, and a lack of European military interference” (in slave-taking) (p. 46).

The six chapters in Part II go far in advancing the history of how slave networks expanded across North America. Paul Conrad, for example, in his fascinating Chapter 3 on the Apache Diaspora shows these links between colonial Mexican policy to send hostile Apache Indians into slavery to Cuba, and how the policy, while it did not last long, had long-lasting effects on the Apache people. In Chapter 4 (by Boyd Cothran) we move from the Southwest to the Northwest and the history of slavery and the “indigenous political landscape” in the Upper Klamath Basin. There, Modoc, Klamath, and Paiute peoples “turned to commercial slavery as they maneuvered for economic advantage, fundamentally restructuring tribal political identities” (p. 99). South of there, in the deserts of southern California and northwest Mexico, Natale Zappia outlines in Chapter 5 similar geopolitical and economic changes that occurred in the Alta California/Sonora borderlands. His excellent essay also explores gendered roles, especially how “women helped to shape the landscape of the raiding economy” as part of the larger “formidable economic force in the burgeoning trade linking California with the interior” (p. 140). From there, we go to the more familiar slavery grounds of the American South in Chapter 6 where Calvin Schermerhorn re-examines the importance of Indian removal through the lens of both Native and Anglo-American slavery. It is truly a terrific chapter that helps to clarify the entire history of the economic reasons for removal and the Trail of Tears. South of there, in northern Mexico at the time of Mexican independence and before the U.S.-Mexican War, the leaders of the giant state of Texas-Coahuila debated if slavery should be allowed with their borders—the topic discussed by Andrew Torget in Chapter 7. Likewise fascinating, this essay gets into the nitty gritty pro-slavery discourse of those like Stephen F. Austin bringing colonizers into Texas and pining for slavery to advance a cotton economy they were bringing

with them versus the more enlightened abolitionist discourse of legislators in Coahuila. And finally, in Chapter 9 (by Mark Golberg) we stay in antebellum Texas to see how Comanche slave traders negotiated with Anglo-American establishments as part of the political-economic Comanche hegemony in the region. Combined, the chapters in this section offer important case studies of slavery across the expanding borderlands of the United States and Mexico.

The three chapters in Part III diverge from case-study histories and bring readers into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Enrique Lamadrid in Chapter 9 “Cautivos y Criados” uses ethnomusicology and analysis of folk poetry to explore cultural memories of slavery and colonialism in New Mexico. This is a highly interesting study and important, especially for scholars like historians who deal with more traditional ways of studying slavery, too see through cultural lenses the long-lasting legacy of indigenous slavery. Sarah Deer also pushes readers to look in different ways in her chapter (10) on “Relocation Revisted” for the twentieth century. U.S. policies of relocation and urbanization, she argues, led to significant incidences of sex trafficking—very much a form of slavery—on Indian reservations. Historically, as she relates, the “tactics of traffickers are consistent with many of the tactics used by colonial and American governments to subjugate Native women and girls” (p. 259). The book concludes with Chapter 11 (“Slavery and Prostitution”) by Melissa Farley. Farley sets out to give a “twenty-first-century abolitionist perspective” of prostitution which she convincingly argues is a form of current-day slavery. Her essay is comparative showing strong evidence of trafficking as slave-raiding as prostitution as slavery. It is an important and provocative way for the book to conclude.

Linking the Histories of Slavery should be on the shelves and syllabi of anyone interested in learning or teaching more on North American slave systems. It is fine borderlands history (with the possible exception of the final chapter which serves other important purposes). That the editors and the press missed a couple of minor proofing errors (e.g. the editors in their introduction mistakenly saying that the Seminole were allotted in “Oklahoma,” when at the time that area was still Indian Territory, and a real lack of lead-ins to introduce quoted material) hardly takes away from the quality of the book as a whole. More information—at least one chapter— on black slavery in Indian Territory among the Five Tribes would have been useful here and seems glaringly missing. But other than that, I hope other scholars will join me in welcoming this new book on North American slavery and assign it in their courses.

Sterling Evans, University of Oklahoma. Evans researches agricultural and environmental connections in the history of the North American West and borderlands. He is the author of Bound in Twine: The History and Ecology of the Henequen-Wheat Complex for Mexico and the American and Canadian Plains, 1880-1950 (2007), and is currently at work on Damming Sonora: Water, Agriculture, and Environmental Change in Northwest Mexico.