

Novel Bondage: Slavery, Marriage and Freedom in Nineteenth Century America

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Review

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Chakkalakal, Tess *Novel Bondage: Slavery, Marriage and Freedom in Nineteenth Century America*. University of Illinois Press, \$40.00 ISBN 978-0252-03633-0

Examining Slavery Through a New Lens

Tessa Chakkalakal, Assistant professor of Africana Studies and English at Bowdoin College, addresses the topic of slave marriage from a unique perspective. It is one filtered through the challenge posed to historical scholarship on slavery, that of slaves' existence in a voided space where they had no legal identity and no voice. How did slaves express their legal consciousness where they were deemed to have none?

Drawing upon novels and short stories that expressed slaves' understandings of marriage, she attempts to fill the scholarly gaps. Fictional works that attempted to humanize debates about slavery fell within the genre of the sentimental fiction of major anti-slavery writers of the antebellum period, the Civil War era and Reconstruction. Much of our current understandings of slaves' perspectives on marriage, she argues, have been limited in that there are few primary sources from slaves themselves. Attempts to interpret the sources have raised questions about historical methodology, truth and fiction. She finds that fictional accounts thus fill the gap and serve a valid and important function.

Positioned outside conventional forms of literary and nonliterary discourse, the marital bond formed by slaves gained meaning and political value through particular works of nineteenth-century fiction. These works took aim not only at the familiar 'horrors of slavery' but also at legal conventions of marriage in nineteenth-century America (6).

Slave marriage acted as a counterpoint to conventional marriages as writers presented their vision of marriages based neither on "property" nor "power;"

these marriages “came to embody the principles of an ideal marriage, a union of souls that transcended the earthly concerns upon which legal marriage was based (6).

The book addresses the fictional writings of several authors: William Wells Brown, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frank J. Webb, Frances Harper, Charles Chesnutt and Hanna Crafts. These writings served several purposes, namely they “were vital to the coherence and resilience” of “postslavery slave community” (14). Through Chakkalakal’s readings of these works, the reader discovers a view of the intimate lives of slaves that cannot be found elsewhere, even in the “first-person accounts, testimonials, and marital records compiled after the Civil War” by historians of slave culture. (14).

Bernie D. Jones is Associate Professor, Suffolk University Law School and the author of Fathers of Conscience, Mixed-Race Inheritance in the Antebellum South (University of Georgia Press, 2009).