

2022

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### Recommended Citation

Mondragon, Brittany (2022) "Book Review: Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic," *History in the Making*: Vol. 15, Article 16.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol15/iss1/16>

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**Book Review: *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic***

By Brittany Mondragon

In 1441, Portuguese raiders attacked the native Idzagen community located on the Rio de Oro in Senegambia, Africa. The raiders captured an unnamed woman during the invasion by luring her onto the ship after kidnapping her children. This unknown woman marks the first human enslaved from Sub-Saharan Africa by European captors who eventually sold her to European traders as a commodity.<sup>1</sup> In a way, she is emblematic of the estimated 4 million women forced aboard slave ships and shipped mostly to the Americas from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries, and whose lives were forever changed.

Already a reputable historian for her renowned 2004 book, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*, Jennifer Morgan has further contributed and strengthened the discourse on slavery in the early Atlantic with her most recent 2021 publication, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic*. Placing women at the center of the conversation, Morgan innovatively paves the way for original and critical groundwork by examining the creation of Western notions of race and capitalistic value. Morgan conveys several new interpositions on a subject that has attracted extensive historical interest, but unlike most works of the early Atlantic, she places African women and their role in developing modern Western capitalism at the forefront of the discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 141.

*Reckoning with Slavery* unveils gaps in the extant scholarly research on the history of slavery and its simultaneous emergence with capitalism by combining economic demographics of the slave trade with the social ideology behind enslavement. Morgan demonstrates that Western ideas of race and value were intricately linked to racial hereditary slavery and capitalism by stripping the enslaved from their families and affectionate ties by portraying them as numerical commodities rather than human beings.<sup>2</sup> While enslaved Africans and their enslaved descendants were denied kinship, however, capitalism simultaneously relied on women's reproduction capabilities and familiar kinship to enforce racial hereditary slavery. Morgan contends that historians often diverge onto one side of this methodological binary, looking either at the social context of slavery or the economic aspect, and her work distinctly intertwines the two avenues of scholarship.<sup>3</sup> At the crux, Morgan's interdisciplinary and feminist methodology weaves together gender, race, and ideas of kinship with the rise of Western capitalism and human commoditization. Overall, she takes her readers through a series of questions including how enslaved women interpreted economic practices unfamiliar to them, what kinship came to mean in the early Atlantic between the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries, and how the Black female body became a commercial instrument in the slave economy.

The past couple of decades have witnessed renewed attention to Eric Williams's book, *Capitalism and Slavery*, published in 1944 and Cedric Robinson's book, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, published in 1983. Drawing from Black Radical Tradition and Black Feminist theories, Morgan further adds to this critical conversation by examining the "alchemy of commerce, race, and slavery in

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<sup>2</sup> Racial hereditary slavery refers to the Western colonial presumption that a child should follow the condition of slavery based on the mother's race and enslavement status not the father's race. Therefore, enslaved women's children inherited the status of slave once born and became part of the chattel slavery system.

<sup>3</sup> Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, 12.

women's lives" through a Black Feminist lens.<sup>4</sup> In the introduction, Morgan cites Robinson's argument that "capitalism and racism emerged, simultaneously, from European feudal order" which she builds on by investigating the categories of race, labor, and social hierarchy.<sup>5</sup> Morgan supports the notion that slavery was not a consequence of the emergence of capitalism, but rather racial slavery was central to the development of capitalistic economies, which relied on free forced-labor centering on women's reproduction.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, she challenges Robinson's implicit centering of Black masculinity by examining women's roles in resistance and rebellion. Morgan contends that just because there are few documents recounting women in resistance, that does not mean they failed to contribute to revolts or smaller acts of rebellion. Instead, their erasure may provide more insight into the anxieties and societal norms of Western colonies than the women themselves.

She also complicates historical debates on whether racism or slavery developed first and challenges the "savage to slave to black" narrative by showing how the commodification of African women, capitalism, and the Western concept of kinship rose simultaneously.<sup>7</sup> While Morgan focuses solely on enslaved women, the text itself is broad in scope. The beginning discusses the demographics of the Atlantic slave trade, which at times can read quiet densely. Examining the over 36,000 slave ship logs found on the most compressive transatlantic slave trade database (Slave Voyages), Morgan found that a mere 3,426 logs recorded sex ratios between 1514 to 1866. Even more surprising is the dramatic increase in sex ratio recordings after 1700. Only 366 voyage logs recorded the ratio between men and women between 1514 and 1700, however, after 1700, a total of 3,060 were recorded. Morgan suggests this indicates White colonists' shifting perceptions of enslaved women as producers to *reproducers*. She

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<sup>4</sup> Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, 20.

<sup>5</sup> Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, 108.

proposes this is because of the newfound importance on women's reproductive properties and the development of hereditary racialized slavery, which coincided with the rise of early modern capitalism. According to Morgan, "enslaved women provided crucial labor in American colonies but were also key in the emergent rationale for hereditary racial slavery, a rationale attached to the idea of kinless populations."<sup>8</sup> Throughout her work, she discusses the commodification process of human beings and how modern Western capitalism came into being in part due to the development of hereditary racialized slavery, which rested on enslaved women's ability to reproduce more slaves.

While historians have studied political thought over citizenship and population during the eighteenth century, Morgan contends that few have considered political theory and its correlation to citizenship in relation to the slave trade and capitalism.<sup>9</sup> One area requiring expansion though is the discussion on Europe's transition into a capitalistic society and the political climates of the eighteenth century. Morgan could have used the opportunity to provide more context about economic practices happening in Europe at the time and the shift from the Medieval feudal system to a capitalistic system to further show the changing political, social, and economic climate in Western society.

More importantly though, she examines how African women understood slavery in Africa and how their concept of slavery shifted as they came to understand what their bodies came to mean and what they were worth in captivity in the New World.<sup>10</sup> Africa possessed its own slave trade system for centuries, but European's misunderstanding of African practices meant they often viewed African ruler's gifting of people (enslaved from conquest) as a form of diplomacy or tribute as a justification for creating a free forced-labor system based on enslaved African men, women, and their descendants.<sup>11</sup> Thus, African women's

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<sup>8</sup> Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, 37.

<sup>9</sup> Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, 93.

<sup>10</sup> Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, 165.

<sup>11</sup> Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, 69.

understanding of slavery changed as they crossed the Atlantic and were forced into hard manual labor on plantations. In particular, chapter four is full of horrific scenes discussing enslaved women's experiences on slave ships from childbirth, sexual violence, disease, and death and their eventual sale in slave markets, an aspect not discussed in detail in Morgan's previous work, *Laboring Women*. For those captured and sent aboard ships, men and women often rebelled against their enslavers or sometimes took their own life before reaching the shores. Morgan discusses various documents that briefly mention unnamed women starving themselves to death, jumping overboard to drown, or who died fighting sailors who tried to physically and sexually abuse them. Journal entries from ship physician Dr. Alexander Falconbridge (c. 1760–1792) recalls some enslaved women who hung themselves aboard the ship by using the loose ends of rope before reaching the shore.<sup>12</sup>

Dehumanizing African kinship and motherhood paired itself with European's exploitation of female reproduction. Morgan suggests that "enslaved African women's reproductive capacity meant that they embodied the contradictions at the heart of the development of Atlantic markets."<sup>13</sup> Plantation owners and enslavers eagerly purchased enslaved females in the hopes of attaining any unborn children as a new source of free labor, yet they justified their enslavement and exploitation by stripping the title of "mother" from enslaved women. According to Morgan, "Motherhood had to be replaced by something more functionalist" as Black women were dehumanized and viewed as "breeders."<sup>14</sup> Devaluing human bonds between Black families also simultaneously came to define the meaning of kinship, family, and citizenship in a Western context for White Europeans and colonists. Considering enslaved women as property and "breeders" excluded them from womanhood, and thus, from what Europeans

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<sup>12</sup> Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, 168.

<sup>13</sup> Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, 204.

<sup>14</sup> Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, 165.

considered to be part of the legitimate population.<sup>15</sup> The last portion of the work takes a dramatic shift from demographics and enslaved women's experiences as commodities to their roles in resistance. In particular, she examines women's self-liberation efforts and their essential role as rebel activists in Maroon communities.<sup>16</sup>

Overall, Morgan compellingly shows how enslaved women's bodies were central to the development of the Atlantic slave trade as reproductive vessels and how ideas about kinship bound together to justify enslavement. But what makes her work stand out from the rest is Morgan's fueling question of how African women came to understand and navigate their commodification in the Atlantic World as well as how they came to comprehend an economic system unfamiliar to them. Enslaved women are often given a peripheral seat in the history of slavery by historians and scholars, commonly resigned to a passive existence to the larger narrative, but Morgan brings these women's experiences to the forefront as in her previous works. At times, the academic prose used is inaccessible for the average reader, especially when paired with the emphasis on quantitative data. Nevertheless, the book is brimming with new insights and questions that should alter any future historians' understanding of enslaved African women as individual intellectual agents rather than people who often take on a passive and peripheral role in the discourse of transatlantic history

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<sup>15</sup> Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, 104.

<sup>16</sup> Maroons were self-liberated enslaved Africans, Afro-Caribbeans, and their descendants who acquired their freedom by escaping chattel enslavement and who lived in remote tropical mountain communities throughout the Caribbean and the Americas.

***Bibliography***

Morgan, Jennifer L. *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021.



### ***Author Bio***

Brittany Mondragon graduated from California State University, San Bernardino in May 2022 with a master of arts degree in history. Backed with a master of science degree in geographic information systems from the University of Redlands, Brittany concentrates on issues revolving around environmental history, the history of science (specifically ethnobotany), colonialism, and trade. Her thesis explores the intersectionality of race, gender, and botany in the British colonial Atlantic during the eighteenth century by examining the appropriation and management of enslaved women, their uses of ethnobotanical medicines, and the power relations behind their depiction as witchcraft practitioners. She will start teaching at community colleges this year and possibly begin pursuing a doctoral degree in history. She currently works at Mt. San Jacinto Community College under the Professional Development department. Apart from scholarly pursuits, Brittany enjoys painting, hiking, gardening, playing board games, and learning the harp. She would like to thank Dr. Jeremy Murray and her editors for all of their support, guidance, and encouragement throughout the editing process.

