African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

9-1-2006

Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World

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Book Review

H-NET BOOK REVIEW
Published by H-Caribbean, http://www.h-net.org/~carib/ (September 2006).

Pamela Scully and Diana Paton, eds. *Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005. vi + 376 pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, index. $84.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-8223-3581-6; $23.95 (paper), ISBN 0-8223-3594-8.

Reviewed for H-Caribbean by Bruce M. Taylor, Department of History, University of Dayton.

The Ties that Bind

Diana Paton and Pamela Scully begin their edited collection, of predominantly historical essays on postemancipation societies in the "Atlantic World," with an introduction that wastes no time in letting us know why they write. "The essays . . . draw on feminist theory which shows that gender involves 'doing' rather than 'being.' Scholars . . . have argued that there are no presocial gendered essences. There are just women and men who have different experiences, only people whose bodily differences are, through social and discursive processes, fixed and categorized into two opposed groups: male and female" (p. 2). While we are, therefore, warned to expect normative bias or at least some rooting for women who are struggling to find agency and space, the authors for the most part, neither lead witnesses nor spin evidence.

Offering a work on "Gender and Slave Emancipation in Comparative Perspective," which is the title of their introduction, presents, however, more substantive difficulties. Darlene Clark Hine, in her message to members as the President of the American Association of Historians, invited academics to "cross boundaries" and "engage in more collaborative and comparative work."[1] This volume certainly crosses boundaries as it examines the role of gender in a wide variety of settings including the United States South, Caribbean, Brazil, and Africa. But the authors of the articles do not engage one another in a collective enterprise of comparative analysis. Such an analysis demands some conceptual work in arriving at a coherent approach to comparison and contrast. Northwestern University's African American Studies program offers a graduate course in conceptual methodologies that includes in its description the lament that there is a "neglect of focused discussion on the application of critical concepts in interdisciplinary analysis." Several of the authors in

this collection individually use concepts that might serve as components of a comparative research design, but there is no extended application. The authors do, however, provide some organization by dividing the chapters into three sections: "Men, Women, Citizens"; "Families, Land, and Labor"; and "The Public Sphere in the Age of Emancipation." The divisions, however, do not constitute an algorithm for comparative analysis. Further, each case offers only a glimpse of asingle geographic area and for only a short time. As Martha Nussbaum warns in the introduction to her *Women and Human Development*, "Some writings . . . pull in thinly described examples from many different cultures, without setting any of them in a deep or rich context."[2]

This essay collection is an extension of comparative research on slavery in North and South America dating from, at least, the publication in 1946 of Frank Tannenbaum's *Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas*. Since then, researchers have vigorously debated issues of method and concept with respect to largely contemporary slave regimes. The comparative study of gender in post-emancipation societies is more difficult since many of the places discussed shifted from slave-based economies to wage/peasant ones at different times and at different speeds. Moreover, the scope has widened to include African colonies.

There is one conceptual theme that might be used for comparative purposes that is embedded throughout the collection, but is not explicitly advertised in the introduction and rarely called to the reader's attention in the essays: a gendered and hierarchical culture weaves a "socionet" that clutches all bodies in its strictures. When any one of them tries to break free, the network is reminded of its own existence and draws the sinews tighter. At times, some of the constrained find bargaining leverage when there is conflict among elites or when the ideology justifying the net provides an opening to exploit. The result may be some gain, but the legitimacy of the larger structure remains in place. The Tunisian Albert Memmi, in his 1957 classic work translated from the French as *The Colonizers and the Colonized*, described oppressed Algerians who accepted the role assigned to them by the French colonizer and acted in accordance with characterizations held in those minds.[3] The oppressor could remain justified in maintaining the system that treated others as inferior. Those individuals wishing to improve their lot did so by trying to emulate elites, which only strengthened the network. Even though such a hierarchical system is inherently unstable, it is remarkably long lived until it is attacked from outside or undergoes an inevitable decay as the absurdities on which it is based erode. Such an approach, sometimes billed as the "Memmi-Fanon-Sartre Thesis," or otherwise simplified into a structure/agency pairing, might be one way to approach the daunting task of comparing disparate cultures that are positioned by the editors into the rather large frame of Atlantic Studies.

Pamela Scully, in the first essay, discusses masculinity and emancipation in the Cape Colony 1834-44. Cobus, a newly minted "apprentice" in 1834, when British slavery ended, said he wanted to marry the white daughter of his impoverished female owner (now employer), claiming that he was equal to whites and so could marry anyone. Scully sees a case of a former slave now emerging from bondage to claim both his manhood and his place as a citizen in a new era. Scully recognizes this was an a typical case, yet, even here, we see that Cobus reaffirmed the dominant racial structure by his challenge. Also, Scully

reports that both Africans and Europeans continually placed women in an inferior position. Even after the British shook the socionet by its forceful and disruptive action, the strands of culture remained strong. Scully states, moreover, that racial consciousness increased after emancipation, as elites maintained social control in a potentially dangerous time.

Sue Peabody examines the experience of Saint-Domingue, Guadeloupe and Martinique 1650-1848 and concludes that emancipation brought more benefits to men than to women. As she sets out her intra-cultural comparative analysis, she also reveals the strength of the existing socionet. The Code Noir of 1685 was quite liberal in its provisions allowing freed people to assume all the rights of French subjects. But as free people of color began to accumulate wealth, the planter class in the colonies began to petition the crown for restrictions. The advance of the *gens de couleur* reminded the elite of the net that was in place and they took steps to mend it. Also, the account of two female slaves who were able to accumulate wealth, but did not at first try to leave servitude because their master assured them of protection, shows again the net in operation. And even when they decided to purchase freedom, conservative nobles who sought to pres�rve the system blocked their way.

Mimi Sheller uses the South Asian Studies concept of "subaltern" to examine relationships among working class males in post-slavery Jamaica. Here the gender analysis is focused on "how working-class black masculinity came to be enacted as Christian and British, through the exclusion of the indentured foreigner, the "Coolie" (p. 80). In an effort to assert their manhood after slavery, former slaves found it necessary to contrast themselves with newly arrived "others," who were imported to work plantations from which freedmen had withdrawn their labor. They identified with the British elite by looking down on those that were less "civilized." Of course, those elites still regarded the blacks as uncivilized and not worthy of full citizenship, and the women were even more oppressed as black males asserted their masculinity as a mark of freedom. One sentence underscores the power of the cultural net that was strengthened because of a challenge to it. Sheller mentions almost in passing, "even as (blacks) struggled against the dominant racial and gendered order, they were inescapably positioned by it" (p.94).

Roger Kittleson describes the efforts of Brazilian elite women to move into the public sphere as they joined the movement to abolish slavery in Brazil in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. While they had the effect of feminizing the abolitionist cause and thus rendering it less threatening, they failed to make any change in their assigned gender roles. "Abolition moved women's activities toward the center of public politics. While doing so, however, it embraced dominant notions about women's roles in society" (p. 106). And the patriarchal net grew stronger as men, threatened by talk of equality both in Brazil and elsewhere, reacted with open hostility. While it is true that Brazil did yield to pressure for social change, Kittleson mentions quite correctly that economic power had shifted by the end of the century and most of the elites of Brazil could accommodate the gradual shift to a wage/peasant system because their interests were not directly involved.

Carol Faulkner's piece on white women and U.S. policy toward freedpeople is a nice juxtaposition to Kittleson's work, but there is no effort to compare and contrast. Julia A. Wilbur and Josephine S. Griffing were two abolitionists who, in their work in the Freedmen Bureau, tried to ensure adequate help for vulnerable, newly freed slaves. They were also well aware that they were moving into new territory as they used the assigned feminine attributes of caring and nurturing to establish a more public role as administrators. Again we see the difficulty of gaining space within the socionet as their efforts to aid former slaves ran counter to an ideology calling for independent free labor. Whites assumed that blacks would not work unless forced to do so, and to support them would not contribute to acquiring good work habits. And the women who would advocate such a policy were obviously not fit to administer a public program. Faulkner reveals the strength and complexity of the existing cultural net when, at the end of the essay, she notes Wilbur and Griffing's "construction of Freedpeople as needy and dependent may have fed the racist arguments of feminists who believed that white women deserved the vote before African American men" (p. 133).

Bridget Brereton's essay closely analyzes the withdrawal of women from estate labor in the British Caribbean following emancipation and finds that women were consciously using a "family strategy" to secure some private space in the new wage labor environment. Brereton suggests that the pressure of Europeans to establish male dominated families with women staying at h�me to care for both the husband and the children did not sink deeply into Caribbean culture. Women rationally decided to establish households more in response to the hard work of the plantations, the threat of sexual abuse, the need to care for children, and the desire to pursue other work than to the influence of European gender norms. Brereton claims that there is a self-conscious effort to escape the socionet, but the evidence for this is not supplied.

Martin Klein and Richard Roberts provide a French West African case study of enslaved women and their brief effort to assert some independence after 1905, when the French finally got serious about enforcing their emancipation legislation of 1848. The authors describe a situation that differed markedly from the experience in the Americas and also from that of the Cape. France was not in a position to enforce abolition since they did not effectively control the territory until late in the nineteenth century. Throughout the period, male owners and husbands dominated African women as slaves and as free persons. For a brief period, from 1905 until 1910, they could seek divorce, but then the window closed and they again were under male control. In this area of the Atlantic World, we see the gendered socionet at its strongest. Except for those lucky enough to carry on limited trade in a few urban areas, there was hardly any room for women to acquire an independent life.

Michael Zeuske takes advantage of digitized Cuban notorial records to engage in a "microhistorical" study to determine the extent to which recently freed women were able to gain access to property. Was the socionet strong? He finds that women did have the opportunity to acquire land and, in some locations, more so than men, despite the fact that the latter enjoyed political advantage from their right to vote and by their participation in the Cuban fight for independence against Spain. But it would seem that the women needed, in most cases, a male representative to sign for them.

Ileana Rodríguez-Silva presents her research on post-emancipation Puerto Rico during the "apprenticeship" adjustment years of 1873-76. She concludes that women were largely unsuccessful in breaking free of the dominant cultural norm established by Spanish and Puerto Rican elites who uniformly referred to the freed worker as male. The goal of emancipation legislation was to insure the continuity of a reliable workforce by establishing a moral social order under-girded by stable, male-dominated families. The socionet was refashioned with vagrancy laws and contract requirements during the apprenticeship period.

Women were able to exploit the conflict between the need for agricultural labor, which called for contracts, and their assigned role as child bearers and nurturers. This strategy, however, did not gain them any independent space. "While women subverted the contract system, they often did so by legitimizing dominant mores of domesticity and consequently eroded their political legitimacy as workers" (p. 207). Women in urban areas fared no better in escaping the twin bonds of work under contract and assigned domestic role. To the degree that women could bargain in negotiating contracts, one could say that they were subverting the gendered cultural socionet restrictions, but there is little evidence that they were doing so in a self-conscious way. Their use of the language of female responsibilities or vulnerabilities only served to reinforce the prevailing gender assumptions.

Melanie Newton looks at the role of women of color in Barbados in the period of emancipation (1790-1850) as they sought to exert influence through philanthropic organizations. As a result of the moral pressure exerted by abolitionists, Barbadian planters were forced to abandon some of their basic assumptions about the merits of slavery and to justify their elite standing on self-evident grounds of moral superiority over people of color, freed or soon to be freed slaves, and poor whites. Philanthropic work could demonstrate to abolitionists that Barbadian planters were concerned for those less fortunate and at the same time could insure social control over the society.

Women of color who engaged in charity and educational work also had an agenda. They wanted to show that they too had the capacity to offer help to others, just like "respectable" whites. In terms of gender, moreover, they were not willing or able to break free of male dominated leadership of these enterprises. As a result, they reinforced both the overall social order as well as the gender norms.

Sheena Boa takes us to Kingstown, St. Vincent, where she describes patterns of public entertainment enjoyed by the various social classes following emancipation (1838-88). How successful were women in escaping the racial and gender network once slavery ended? Oddly enough, according to Boa, it seems that elite white women and poor black women were able to enjoy some gains during this period, although I would suggest that the gains were meager. One could argue also that some women of color advanced.

White women were pleased that their husbands could no longer have open sexual relations with their slaves or with free people of color after emancipation. Victorian standards played their part as did the loss of control over dependent females. White men were also kept more at home as men of color acquired property and political participation thus

making it less desirable for whites to organize public functions. Elite women of color were now able to give parties and organize public entertainment and chose, according to Boa, to emphasize their piety as abadge of sexual independence from whites. Their choices of dress and behavior, however, were in imitation of the white elite and underscored the class relationships that still existed.

Similarly, domestic workers in Kingstown would stage dances in which they would dress in the style of the upper classes and would steal china, cutlery, wine, and even the dresses from their employers. Boa suggests that the women were actually "rehumanizing" themselves (p. 253) by behaving in ways that were impossible during slavery. Moreover by stealing, they were defying authority. But, again, their activities served to reinforce the existing ranking system by using its symbols.

The poor were perhaps the most free to gain some space for themselves since they used the streets for their entertainment and behaved in ways thought indecent and disrespectful by the rest of society. For example, masquerading was a popular entertainment that was allowed under slavery as a means of letting the slaves release tension by mocking their owners. After slavery ended, however, and the society was perceived to be less stable, such behavior threatened to delegitimize elite authority. Yet, again, the exercise merely reminded everyone of the power of the socionet and expressed no clear vision of how it might be transformed.

Martha Abreu extends the inquiry into post-emancipation Southeastern Brazil, from 1888 to 1920. She offers lyrics of popular folk songs as evidence that, in spite of the pressures of a racially stratified society, possibilities existed for a more equitable social structure to emerge. "They presented an ironic view of the social and cultural conflicts of a society that was reorganizing the mechanisms of domination and social control after the abolition of slavery" (p. 270). Abreu, more than any other contributor to this volume, explicitly discusses the question of whether the socionet is being weakened or strengthened by challenges to it. Songs of the period revealed tensions, ironies and challenges within and among the various social divisions. At the center was the image of the mixed race female, the mulata, who emerged as a dominant subject in the conflicts over Brazilian cultural identity.

The *mulata* was a symbol of darker skinned female independence and a sign of growing acceptance of racial mixture yet it was also a symbol of elite male sexual opportunity. Now hear Abreu echo Memmi: "the dominant ideology among the slave-owning classes, and later among jurists and doctors, was passed to the dominated classes, forming yet another level of domination. Such arguments require us to conclude that the black and poor population . . . reproduced, without questioning, these judgments about themselves." She goes on to raise the possibility, although not the probability, "that these songs' images of mulatas, morenas, and crioulos might signify more than the reiteration and reproduction of inequalities. Indeed, by resorting to jokes and irony, these lyrics conveyed irreverence and challenged the measures of social control" (p. 281). She acknowledges, however, that more research needs to be done before conclusions can be drawn.

Hannah Rosen looks at Arkansas after the Civil War as the Reconstruction Acts forced a revision of the state's constitution in 1868. She contends that the rhetoric of miscegenation was really about political power and political power was all about race. The scene opens in the early days of Reconstruction with a debate in the constitutional convention, in which the central topic was how to deal with the black male's right to vote as called for by the Fourteenth Amendment. But John Bradley, a moderate white, rose and said that the big question was whether to allow interracial marriage. He received a response from Henry Grey, a black delegate, who suggested that they should ban all forms of cross-racial sexual relations. But that was not what Bradley was talking about. He saw blacks as challenging white rule and thus saw interracial marriage as a mark of black equality and a danger to white males' patriarchic sphere of authority. Grey recognized that white men would want to continue to sexually exploit dependent black women. Further on in the debate, Gayle Kyle, a white delegate, wanted to make sure that blacks who had gained wealth would not be allowed to seduce poor white women into marriage, implying that black men were predatory and less than honorable. It followed that only white males were worthy of full citizenship in the new era. A compromise was agreed upon which called for the ban on all "amalgamation" of whites and blacks whether legitimate or illegitimate. When the constitution was finally approved, however, black men received the vote and the ban on intermarriage was dropped. Arkansas whites, then, used gender as a way to express opposition to any attempt by blacks to tear apart that comfortable net of power and privilege. Did the net unravel? Rosen maintains that the debate, despite the outcome, established an agenda for white control through Jim Crow laws.

Marek Steedman turns to the Louisiana household following emancipation to investigate how gender, race, and politics combined to produce the sad story of Eliza Pinkston. Pinkston, a former slave, was sexually exploited by the son of her former master and was denied marriage. She married a former slave, Henry Pinkston, and was pleased that she now had a name that was not tied �o the plantation. But when her former owner tried to force both of them to attend a Democratic Party meeting, Henry Pinkston agreed only after being threatened. Henry Pinkston did make his claim to manhood by attending the Republican Party meeting and this time he had to force Eliza to go! Reprisal came quickly from the whites as the family was brutally attacked: Henry and their baby were killed and Eliza left for dead. In this case, the socionet appeared to be clearly frayed. It was only through force that whites were able to assert control. Eliza, moreover, was allowed to testify against the men who attacked her. But at the trial, Eliza's testimony was undermined by assaults on her character. Steedman concludes that "hierarchies of race, class, and gender made any freedwoman's standing suspect" (p. 322).

This collection of essays, while not adequately conceptualizing a comparative framework, nevertheless is a valuable addition to the literature on the significance of gender in understanding postemancipation societies. Most of the essays introduce new source material and, more significantly, interpret and analyze existing sources in imaginative ways. They also suggest possibilities for future comparative research.

The work can also be of value for upper division undergraduates and graduate history students as demonstrations of research skills, and as asource of new insights into the

dynamics of social relationships as slavery ended. The authors also assemble an excellent bibliographical essay showing recent research in the several areas under study.

Notes

[1]. Darlene Clark Hine, "An Invitation to Cross Boundaries," *OAH Newsletter* 29 (May 2001).

[2]. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 9.

[3]. Albert Memmi, *Portrait du Colonisé, Précédé du Portrait du Colonisateur* (Paris: Editions Bucher/Chassel/Corréa, 1957).