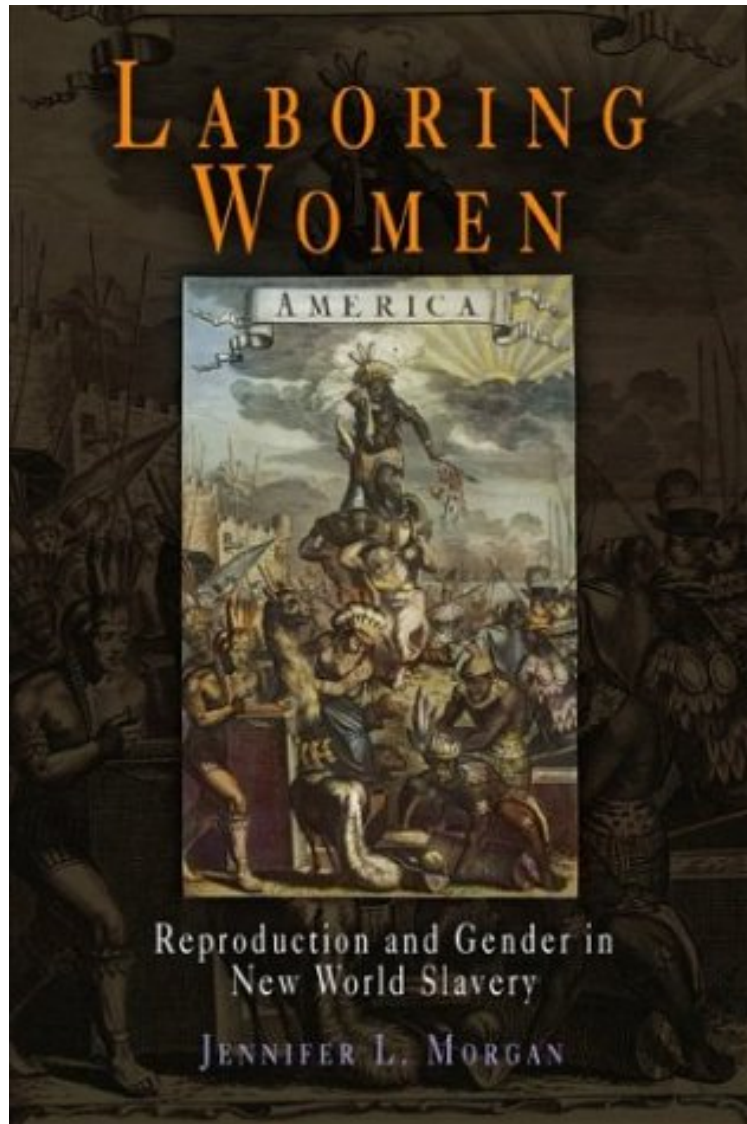


[Free pdf] *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Early American Studies)

## **Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery (Early American Studies)**

*Jennifer L. Morgan*

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**Jennifer L. Morgan : Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery (Early American Studies)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery (Early American Studies)*:

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Not the easiest read, but fascinatingBy Thomas W. RobinsonIn this engaging work, Jennifer Morgan looks at African women and slavery in early colonial Barbados and South Carolina.

She focuses on these women's dual roles in production and reproduction. Thus, Morgan discusses not only women's bodies and gender issues, but also their labor. She argues that enslaved women's labor was physically vital to the evolution of slavery in these British colonies. While their physical labor helped the economy expand and develop, their reproductive labor ended up defining the system of slavery. Unlike slavery in the past, the children born to enslaved women became slaves themselves. Morgan begins by discussing the emergence of a gendered racial ideology of African women, which led to the view that African women did not feel pain in childbirth or strenuous labor. This lack of pain made them un-Christian and suitable for slavery (p. 40). It also made them suitable for hard work. Morgan argues that these depictions also shaped English ideas about race before they ever laid eyes on an African. Thus, Morgan agrees with David Eltis' assessment that racism existed before the colonies were ever settled. Morgan then discusses the experience of enslaved women in the Americas by discussing slaveholders' attitudes about reproduction, the disruption of enslaved families, and the ways that work affected reproduction. Morgan emphasizes that the slaveholders held the power, but is also quick to point out that enslaved women were able to shape their own familial experiences. This is a well-crafted work, but it does seem to be lacking in two areas. First, Morgan discusses sex and reproduction, but there is practically no discussion of slave women being exploited as sexual objects. Throughout the book, Morgan discusses the dynamics of the power slave owners held, but does not bring up miscegenation. Second, the subtitle of the book is a misnomer. Morgan focuses almost exclusively on Barbados and South Carolina. That does not seem to be indicative of "New World slavery." In the end, these are minor problems. Morgan's discussion of African women's labor is insightful as is the focus on the dual roles of production and reproduction. These topics are important and have not been investigated to this depth by other scholars. Especially interesting is her discussion of the origins of the stereotypes of African women and how those led to African women being viewed as racial, sexual objects. This book is sure to be a valuable resource for scholars of slavery, gender, and British colonial history.

11 of 13 people found the following review helpful. "What is this curious thing?" By Rukayya Furo In his poem "Yet Do I Marvel," Harlem Renaissance poet, Countee Cullen writes, "Yet do I marvel at this curious thing," this "curious thing" being the figure of a black poet. Cullen's "curious thing" can also be extended to the "curious" being of the African woman and her body. Writers, explorers and colonists alike, in traveling to the African continent, "grappled with the character of a contradictory female African body—a body both desirable and repulsive, available and untouchable, productive and reproductive, beautiful and black" (p. 16). In her book, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*, Jennifer Morgan brings to light this contradictory, dual nature of African women as being both producers and reproducers simultaneously of labor and laborers. Her work is illuminating in that it examines issues relating to enslaved African and African American women's lives that have received little or no attention in past works. *Laboring Women* traces the histories of enslaved African women from the African continent through the Middle Passage, and then on to their lives as laborers in the New World. In doing so, Morgan skillfully and systematically forces her readers to imagine the lives of African women outside of the popular discourses that limit our full understanding of the culture and history that is so rich and prevalent in the lives of African women. In chapter one of her book, Jennifer Morgan begins by providing a history of the emergent thoughts and views that led to the characterized and stereotypical image of the African woman. Written accounts of travelers and colonists alike commonly depicted African women as anomalies, as women who were not like the civil white woman. The descriptions of African women's bodies were described as being "nude" and "savage" and focused on their reproductive capabilities (p. 29). This "indictment opened the descriptive passages...making women's sexual availability the defining metaphor of colonial accessibility and black African savagery" (p. 29). The curiosity with which the colonists regarded the African women is also reflected in their accounts of the reproductive and child rearing capabilities of the women, who appeared to have the "propensity for easy birth and breast-feeding." (p. 36). This perceived myth of easy child bearing and strong labor skills "highlighted [African women's] propensity for easy birth and breast-feeding [and] reassured colonizers that these women could easily perform hard labor in the Americas" (p. 36). The manipulation of the image of the African woman's body, and her painless child delivery, juxtaposed with that of the civil, white woman, was used as a marker by which to separate African women from "the Christian community" (p. 40). Thus, the colonizers were able to justify their subjugation and exploitation of African women and their offspring and continue with their crude practices of slavery. By providing an in-depth analysis of gender and race, Morgan continues her work and examines the effects of these two categories on the everyday livelihoods of the enslaved women. Her additional focus on reproduction enables her to discuss the issues of creolization and slave-ownership, as well as describe the family relationships of the enslaved African women and their children. Women's dual roles as producers and reproducers, along with the "inheritability of race as a sign of debasement...destroyed any illusions that childbirth and the reproductive potential of women's bodies were somehow private, contained, or inconsequential" to the labor production and cultivation of "wealth from the New World colonies" (p. 68). The method of slave owners who "constructed their lives as separate and distinct from the lives of those they enslaved profoundly shaped the terrain of violence, control, and navigation" as well as helped justify the continued enslavement and exploitation of generations of enslaved Africans (p. 69). Morgan's striking comparisons and parallels between the economics of slavery and the reproductive capabilities of enslaved African women provides an eye-opening insight

into the ways that the enslaved Africans were viewed and treated on the plantations. African women, in essence, were merely baby-making machines, and "slave owners whose prospects might have seemed somewhat bleak looked to black women's bodies in search of a promising future for their own progeny" (p. 83). In other words, "Black women's bodies became the vessels in which slave owners manifested their hopes for the future; they were, in effect, conduits of stability and wealth to the white community" (p. 83). Through her accounts, Jennifer Morgan is able to show the clear and instrumental role that enslaved African and African American women played in the development of the New World's economy. *Laboring Women* is a bold work that enters the world of enslaved women, a territory that has in the past, received very little attention. The accounts of the experiences and narratives of the enslaved African women as well as the slave owners is a compelling historiography that bridges the gap between African women's roles as workers, mothers and tools of a racist, capitalist machine. Sometimes emotional, Morgan's work brings to life the enslaved women's harrowing ordeals and their determination to resist the powers that kept them in bondage. *Laboring Women* is a historiography that is definitely one of a kind, and a great tool for all those interested in the history, culture, economics and every day lives of enslaved African women.

6 of 8 people found the following review helpful.

**Remembering Women of Slavery** By Michell G. Goetz

By challenging conventional wisdom of slavery, the roles of enslaved women in the West Indies and South Carolina take new shape and greater meaning in Jennifer Morgan's *Laboring Women*. The topic of slavery is discussed and written about at length by many; however, only four authors prior to Morgan have written literature in regards to the enslaved women of this era. The records, documents, and literature left behind to evaluate this period rarely and vaguely mention women, and there are numerous assumptions and misconceptions about them that must be addressed. Morgan's book places African women at the center of slavery by highlighting their significance in determining the shape of the slave system, as well as the ways in which the system shaped their experiences and culture. Prior to the mass displacement of African men and women by colonialists, travelers began to record various travel logs that racially scrutinized Africans. Traders pointed out extreme cultural distinctions between themselves and Africans to vindicate slavery, and further to exploit a race for economic benefits. Morgan points out that "the publication of images fueled the imaginations of settlers and would-be colonists alike and constituted an essential component of the ideological arsenal that European settlers brought to bear against African laborers (13)." The strangeness of African women only made colonialist's justifications more solidified. Morgan claims that women are understood to be the true laborers of slavery as a result of their duty to reproduce and work the fields. They carried an unimaginable burden that demands attention and acknowledgement from historians. The author adds, "The work women did under slavery was simultaneously agricultural and reproductive, and the interplay between the two arenas is dependent also upon the symbolic work these women performed (198)." Through the process of excruciating travel and intensive labor, enslaved women developed new aspects of culture that was shaped by the social roots kept from Africa and the adoptions of new Western ideas. It is vital to understand the major role enslaved women played in the revolution against slavery which consequentially led to abolishment. Through her book, Jennifer Morgan gives these women a voice, and exemplifies their significance as far from paltry.

As colonies expanded to West Africa, the images portrayed through travel logs exemplified the natives' differences and described women as sexual, vulgar, and monstrous. Anything seen as abnormal was a cultural deficiency. This led Europeans to believe they must have descended from a different species. By establishing this biological distinction, they further created a hierarchy of cultures that distanced themselves from Africans. Western culture is obsessed with physicality and imagery, and as a result every physical aspect of women was stereotyped and examined by comparing them to the women of Europe. Morgan posits, "While descriptions of naked native females evoked desire, travelers depicted black women as simultaneously unwomanly and marked by reproductive value that was both dependent on their sex and evidence of their lack of femininity (14)." Their breasts were described to hang down below their navels; their noses were seemingly flat because they continuously banged into their mother's back while being nursed; their childbirths were performed with ease; they breastfed over their shoulders with their infants on their backs; their earrings stretched to their shoulders; and their bodies were voluptuous in size and shape. These irrelevant characteristics marked women as inferior and savage. Travelers claimed they could not distinguish the gender of an African without the presence of their breasts. In their eyes, these women were disgusting creatures, with manly and monstrous features that were barbarian in nature. Morgan believes that these demarcations established and justified an inferior race, and later led to the institution of slavery in the New World.

There is a misconception that women were a minority during the slave trade and in the New World. During the shipment of Africans they were greatly outnumbered by males, and some voluntarily left to be with their loved ones. As slavery relocated to the West Indies and Americas, women became more prevalent and more important to slaveowners as in the case of the Bight of Biafra. Morgan emphasizes that women were often valued higher than men because they bore children and were easier to control. Slaveowners became more and more aware of the necessity of women for their reproductive purposes. Their children became accrued pieces of property, with their value increasing the older they got. Morgan adds, "Enslaved women would find themselves reminded of the fact that they and their children, sometimes together and sometimes separately, found themselves marked as a source of burgeoning wealth (119)." In order for the system of slavery to persist, reproduction became a center focus of production. Morgan explains that "this suggestion that

slaveowners purposely attempted to create couples for the reproductive benefit of a planter's progeny was both common and significant in colonial Barbados (99)." Women were valued by slaveowners for their multi-usefulness. Slaveowners put equal gender ratios among the enslaved to prevent civil unrest and male besiege. The women helped calm the males and made them more passive to their masters. The author added, "Carolina planters themselves, like their Virginia brethren, valued the presence of these women, who promised to combine plantations labor with sexual gratification, reproductive gain, and inexplicit level of social control over an enslaved population that was rapidly outnumbering colonial slaveowners (95)." Unlike any other author, Morgan claims that enslaved women were the essential piece for the continuance of slavery. In this time period the rights of women were limited, and all were forced to work without question. Enslaved women were supposed to work for their entire lives, unlike white women who were told to rest during their pregnancy periods. Morgan explains, "All women must procreate, but some women procreate for the social and economic good of their own community and other do so for the social and economic good of someone else's community (75)." The women who were enslaved obtained a dual identity of a worker and a mother. They were forced to deal with maternal affairs, while simultaneously working in the fields. They adapted by carrying their children on their backs during the weaning period. The progeny of the enslaved were their only happiness as powerless human beings. They protected and cared for their young "by anointing them with palm wine, adorning them with safeguarding fetishes, and strapping them to a mother's back until they could walk (81)." In some cases women ran away to protect and keep their children. In a sense, reproduction for the enslaved evolved as a part of their work. Slaveowners relied on the wombs of these women to pass on wealth. Another common misconception is that women spent the majority of their time in the home as cooks and mothers. Unfortunately these women were characterized by their ability to "labor ceaselessly (146)." Females worked just as hard, if not harder than their male peers. They were limited to the unskilled tasks that consisted of excruciating work in the fields. A blatant consequence of their position at the bottom of the work pyramid involved lower rates of fertility and higher rates of death. Rice labor in the Carolinas exemplifies their horrible daily routine: "The work was grueling, the tasks stretched the workday out until well into the night, and the toll that the pounding of rice took on the bodies of the enslaved was so extensive that slaveowners took careful notice of the destruction of their human property (164)." Women were left to work endlessly and they suffered greatly. There is much more to learn about the roles of women during slavery. Jennifer Morgan has opened the windows for better understanding just how important they were. Through this book, women will no longer be an inconsequential part of slavery. They will be remembered for the burdens they endured while simultaneously balancing motherhood and work.

Challenging conventional wisdom, Morgan reveals how expectations regarding gender and reproduction were central to racial ideologies, the organization of slave labour, and the nature of slave community and resistance. She compares the experiences of slavery endured by the different sexes.

"Morgan's remarkably lucid treatment of the role of gender in constructing racial ideologies and in justifying the economic system of slavery should make such complex themes accessible to advanced undergraduates. Her book succeeds in highlighting the importance of African women in determining the shape of the slave system in the New World, as well as the ways in which the system shaped the experiences of African women. . . . Highly recommended."Choice

"Morgan's highly original study transforms our understanding of the fundamental assumptions behind slavery in the Americas."Kathleen M. Brown, University of Pennsylvania

"The author of this study has made a major contribution . . . by looking specifically at the issue of gender as a lens through which better to understand the establishment of race-based slavery in Britain's colonies in the Caribbean and North America."The Historian

From the Publisher

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