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chained in silence: black women and convict labor in the New South

Talitha L. LeFlouria, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2015, 264pp., ISBN: 978-1-4696-2247-7, \$39.95 (Hbk)

The publication of Talitha LeFlouria's *Chained in Silence* is both timely and necessary. Given the increase in both activist and scholarly attention to the rise of the carceral state in America, this volume deploys an intersectional lens that has been, until relatively recently, notably absent. The emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, with its emphasis on the interplay between race, class, gender and sexuality, speaks to the ways in which the experiences of African American women have been marginalised, particularly in relation to issues of police brutality and the prison industrial complex. The #SayHerName campaign has developed precisely because of the silencing of women's experiences in the present. Covering the immediate post-emancipation period up until the early 1910s, LeFlouria's insistence on naming and remembering African American female convicts within the historical narrative is a powerful reclaiming of the past—it is an insistence that black women's lives mattered then as well as now.

LeFlouria's research engages with a rich array of source material including police and courthouse records, commission reports, physicians' accounts, clemency applications, personal papers, business records and census data. Importantly, she also includes a number of photographic illustrations, an image of female convict Mattie Crawford notable among them, so that the book not only gives voice to these women but also visibility. Chapter 1 grounds the reader in an understanding of prevailing ideas of both gender and race, and in particular the pathologisation of black criminality that had its roots in the slavery-era and was refined in the post-emancipation period. Emerging in a time in which scientific racism was coupled with the financial incentives offered by the ability to reinstate forms of unfree labour for those convicted of a criminal offense, LeFlouria deftly shifts between the economic and ideological impetus for the establishment of the convict leasing system in the wake of the abolition of slavery. Chapter 2 offers a comprehensive account of the different forms of work the women were compelled to undertake, including work in brick and broom manufacturing, mining, agriculture, the lumber industry, on the railroads and domestic labour. Interestingly, she argues that the lack of gender differentiation in the earliest convict leasing programmes afforded women access to areas of the labour market from which they would have been traditionally excluded, for example, skilled trades like blacksmithing. Chapter 3 charts the shift away from private commercial mixed-gender convict leasing into more regulated single-sex prison camps. This, she argues, created gender-segregated spaces that conformed to a greater degree with prison reformers' codes of Christian morality. It also provided the first steps towards what we would now recognise as the modern penal system. From the days of slavery, agricultural work had long since been characterised as

the proper form of labour for African American women. Chapter 4 charts the rise of the prison state farm, which forcibly returned African American women to the plantation fields of Georgia. The final chapter documents the most common form of female prison labour: the chain gang. The trauma of this intensive labour regime is detailed unflinchingly as LeFlouria recounts the terrible physical and psychological cost of maintaining productivity.

Personal stories are central to the book's narrative style; the reader is introduced to a cast of different women who, despite being subsumed into a system designed to negate their subjectivity, are reanimated through LeFlouria's determination to represent them as individuals. One of the most affecting moments within the text is a table drawn up showing punishments of female convicts at Georgia State Prison Farm (pp. 163–164). The table is accompanied by an image of a confinement chamber or 'sweat box'—a tool used to physically and emotionally control and contain the women. The table introduces the women by name and asks the reader to consider the nature of their 'offense' in relation to the grueling punishments they received. Articulating both resistance and retribution, the table functions as a literary memorial to the personal suffering of the inmates. It is these, and other, precise personal accounts of women's lives, labour and deaths that offer the reader intimate insight into the operations of class, race and gender as a lived experience.

The issue of sexual abuse is threaded throughout the text, highlighting the gendered terror inflicted on African American women in the penal system. LeFlouria is particularly concerned with what she describes as the issue of defeminisation, 'the demeaning assault on black femininity, through dress and labour' (p. 90). This process, she argues, was designed to exclude African American women from the 'Cult of True Womanhood' making them more vulnerable to sexual violence through a denial of the gendered norms that applied to white women. The levels of sexual exploitation experienced by convict women leads her to revisit Orlando Patterson's notion of 'social death' under slavery, reconfiguring it for convict women as 'social rape' (pp. 88–89). This, she argues, was the attempt to erase identity through oppression, disempowerment and humiliation—an erasure that LeFlouria insists could never be fully completed because convict women maintained a sense of self through everyday forms of resistance. Her discussion of rape, pregnancy and child-rearing raises important issues as to the gendered difference between slavery and convict labour. Rejecting the idea that the system was simply 'slavery by another name', LeFlouria argues convincingly that for women the loss in value of their reproductive labour meant that the penal system was in some ways worse. Without the financial gains to be made through the replenishment of the workforce (as under slavery), those who leased convicts had no incentive to support these women's children. This resulted in appalling levels of neglect, disease and death as the women were forced to maintain their productivity levels at the expense of nurturing their children.

There has been an upsurge of scholarly interest in the relationship between slavery and American capitalism in recent years (see Johnson, 2013; Baptist, 2014; Beckert, 2014). Whilst these texts pose some problems for LeFlouria's periodisation of modernity, they also provide a strong basis upon which to make broader claims for the role of African American labour in the making of the industrial New South. In combination, this body of work underscores the racialised and gendered contours of American capitalism. *Chained in Silence* disrupts the narrative shift from slavery to emancipation, highlighting the precarious nature of freedom for African Americans. LeFlouria's work reminds the reader that even today, unfree labour continues to sit on a spectrum rather than existing in an absolute binary.

references

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Katie Donington
University of Nottingham

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