

Review

Sasha Turner, *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), pp. viii + 316. ISBN 978-0-8122-4918-7 (hb).

This is a thoughtfully crafted study on how the ‘contested bodies’ of enslaved women and children were integral to discourses on slavery and abolition in Britain and Jamaica c.1780s–1834. Drawing on a wide range of sources, Sasha Turner argues that slave reproduction became a key battleground in the abolitionists’ campaign to persuade MPs to end the slave trade. Low fertility and high child mortality were formidable obstacles to the natural increase of the West Indian slave population and reinforced pro-slavery arguments that the slave trade had to be maintained in order to sustain the wealth of the sugar colonies. Abolitionists blamed low population increase on the gross mistreatment of enslaved women and exploitative labour routines, and insisted that through the introduction of pro-natalist laws and improved conditions and treatment, the slave population would naturally increase and, in turn, render the slave trade null and void.

Pro-slavers and abolitionists came to agree on the importance of slave reproduction to the continued wealth of the colonies, but they sharply disagreed over its meaning. Indeed, competing visions over the role of the enslaved in the West Indian colonies lay at the heart of debates and proposals for the reform of slavery. While Abolitionists turned their gaze forwards, to a free society of free workers, slave owners remained opposed to emancipation and resisted viewing the enslaved as anything but perpetually servile workers. These divergent views were played out in the pronatalist policies introduced into the colonies and in new laws designed to ameliorate the lives of the enslaved.

It was not only abolitionists, slave owners and managers who ‘contested’ the meaning of enslaved women’s bodies and the measures and policies devised to increase reproduction and infant survival rates. Crucial to Turner’s study are the ways in which enslaved women themselves, along with their kith and kin, contested and resisted elements of both abolitionist and slave owner pronatalism. Prior to the 1780s, Turner argues, enslaved women were able to exercise relative autonomy when it came to giving birth and rearing their children. Pronatalism threatened to undermine this by redirecting the medical care and support networks surrounding birth and childcare from

pregnant women and enslaved midwives in the slave quarters to European doctors in plantation hospitals. Enslaved women's distrust of the latter, Turner suggests, in hand with pressure to renounce their customary lactation and weaning practices, drove them to acts of 'maternal' resistance. This included running away with their children. It also included the most desperate and traumatised response of all, infanticide.

New laws and practices designed to encourage reproduction were fully taken advantage of by enslaved women to improve their own and their children's lives. For example, by accepting (and demanding more) material rewards – in the form of extra food and clothing and respite from labour – as part of initiatives to incentivise reproduction. In this way, enslaved mothers can be seen to have conspired in the reproductive agendas of both slave owners and abolitionists, as Turner highlights: 'a confounding paradox of slavery was that women's proactive efforts to ensure their children's survival also extended the proprietary interests of slaveholders and the colonial interests of abolitionists' (p. 209). Nonetheless, putting the wellbeing of their children first, Turner proposes, also had the effect of encouraging enslaved women to mount their own assault on slavery by taking advantage of the new courts of protection to demand redress from abusive and exploitative slave owners and managers. It also led to the criminalisation of the rape of enslaved women and girls.

Reforming slavery through pronatalism also resulted in greater scrutiny of the treatment and rearing of enslaved children. In line with their vision of a free society, abolitionists demanded that slave families be kept together, and slaves be allowed to marry – but their anxiety that enslaved children might acquire their mother's vices led them to discourage strong mother-child bonds. As Turner astutely argues, enslaved mothers put up as much resistance to the abolitionist 'ideal' of slave motherhood as they did to that of the planters.

Contested Bodies makes a vital contribution to studies on enslaved women as well as to the historiography on slavery and emancipation. Turner succeeds in centralising the experiences of enslaved women and children, at the same time as she politicises the meaning and significance of their responses to slavery reforms. Just as convincingly, she reveals that reproduction and the treatment and care of enslaved women and children were pivotal to the politics of slavery and abolition in Britain and Jamaica.

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