

Swing the Sickle for the Harvest Is Ripe: Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia

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Review

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Berry, Daina Ramey *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe: Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia*. University of Illinois Press, \$40.00 hardcover ISBN 9780252031465

The Contours of Slavery in Georgia

Forced labor lay at the heart of the institution of slavery; it defined and shaped much of the world in which the enslaved lived. Yet, no single experience characterized the institution of slavery. Rather, the existence of variations in slaves' experiences seemed certain in this system which rested on landscapes ranging from the rural to urban, agricultural to non-agricultural and from small farm to large plantation. Complications arising from the cultivation of different crops, geography, market demands, the gender of the enslaved, and the whim of the owner assured that slave experiences would vary. In *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe*, Daina Ramey Berry examines the diverse worlds in which bondmen and bondwomen labored and lived in Georgia.

Set in the context of two antebellum Georgia counties, the author assesses how the enslaved met the various challenges facing them in Upcountry Wilkes County with its predominantly small farm economy versus Lowcountry Glynn County where large plantations prevailed. Drawing on planter diaries, newspapers, and other primary sources, Berry analyzes how crops, geography, population, labor, gender, and the economy, among other factors, combined to affect the labor and inner lives of the bondmen and bondwomen of Wilkes and Glynn counties. Each county's setting presented different opportunities and limitations for the enslaved: what served lowcountry slaves well, for example, enhanced opportunities for marriage and family on the same large plantation, fell short when balanced against what the author maintains was Glynn County's "closed system" (4), one which limited the slave's geographic mobility and freedom. By contrast, upcountry slaves enjoyed a more "open system" (4), meaning enhanced geographic mobility and the opportunity to travel for work

outside the small farm environment, but balanced against this was a limited chance of marrying and sustaining a family on the same small farm setting. Yet no matter the challenge, bondmen and bondwomen in both counties did not hesitate to find ingenious ways to create as full a life as they could for themselves and their families.

Of particular interest to the author is the role of gender in defining the labor and lives of the enslaved, assessing the degree to which gender molded and impacted the labor and lives of the enslaved runs throughout the book. Berry rejects the traditional view which interprets skilled slave labor as a largely bondmen's preserve; the fault, the author informs us, lies with scholars for failing to accord skilled bondwomen the status and the recognition that contemporaries (bondmen, bondwomen and owners) did not miss. Instead, the author offers a new and bold analysis of skilled labor, defining it as "the ability to do any form of work well" (9). From this broad definition of what constitutes "skill" the author not only stretches the class of "skilled labor" to embrace many of the roles and duties performed by female slaves but counts more bondwomen among the rank of those slaves whose skills earned them valuable benefits and privileges within the slave system.

A well-researched and written book, readers interested in the history of African Americans, women, labor, slavery, and Georgia will find this book useful.

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