

The Souls of Womenfolk: The Religious Cultures of Enslaved Women in the Lower South

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Review

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Wells-Oghoghomeh, Alexis. *The Souls of Womenfolk: The Religious Cultures of Enslaved Women in the Lower South.* University of North Carolina Press, 2021. PAPERBACK. \$24.95 ISBN 9781469663609 pp. 320

Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh's *The Souls of Womenfolk: The Religious Cultures of Enslaved Women in the Lower South* is one of the most important books in African American religious history of the past decade. Her work provides a necessary and significant corrective to the ways in which "slave religion" is often theorized as ungendered. With a title that expands on W.E.B. DuBois's landmark text *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Wells-Oghoghomeh expertly and boldly builds on the work of pivotal Black male scholars and centers the experiences, cosmologies, and practices of enslaved Black women. DuBois argued that Black Americans had a double-consciousness—the tension between self-knowledge and awareness of how white people viewed them. With her creative and critical use of a variety of primary sources, Wells-Oghoghomeh unpacks how Black women "were compelled to a triple consciousness," as they bore "responsibility for the biological and social reproduction of enslaved humanity" (2). In the process, Wells-Oghoghomeh productively, convincingly, and modestly reorients the field.

Her goal in *The Souls of Womenfolk* is to reveal how enslaved women "made critical decisions" and "the ethics that guided their actions, how they regarded spirit power(s), and other dimensions of interiority" (3). Wells-Oghoghomeh succeeds on all counts. She also shifts our understanding of "religion" when it comes to historian Albert J. Raboteau's groundbreaking term "slave religion." With her focus on women, Wells-Oghoghomeh examines the "activities and orientations" that offered "tools and platforms through which to grapple with the psychic and material changes wrought by slavery and its purveyors" (3). This includes concepts and practices from Africa, Black adaptations of Protestant Christianity, and new ideas and rituals indigenous to their lives in the American South. In 2013, historian Judith Weisenfeld wrote about the invisibility of women in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Africana Religions*. Nearly a

decade later, Wells-Oghoghomeh demonstrated that much is gained by centering women in our studies of Black religion in the U.S.

A central dynamic in Wells-Oghoghomeh's work is the relationship between dismemberment and re/membrance. Dismemberment refers to the violent, intrusive, and exploitative ways in which slavery attacked women's bodies and relationships. Re/membrance is Wells-Oghoghomeh's creative and ingenious apparatus for understanding Black women's responses. By pulling from memories and oral histories from West and Central Africa, in terms of cosmologies and rituals, Black women "reconfigured and innovated practices aimed at mitigating the effects of dismemberment" (6). With this framework in place, Wells-Oghoghomeh's methodology emphasizes religious interiority as well as embodiment. While many works in the field of Black religious history have continued in the Melville Herskovitz vein of searching for "Africanisms" to demonstrate the ongoing influence of African religions in the Americas, Wells-Oghoghomeh values creativity over cultural purity. Africa and African religions are, then, not merely physical places and static cultural practices but rather are tools for building processes of cultural and physical survival.

After a helpful and ground-breaking Introduction, Wells-Oghoghomeh organized her book in six chapters with a short Conclusion that weaves all the themes and trends back together. The first chapter considers the relationship between Georgia and the lowcountry, her main regional focus, and West and Central Africa. Before the system of slavery "raced" women, it "gendered" them. Men and women in West Africa experienced slavery differently and they brought those experiences, memories, and lessons with them across the Atlantic Ocean. This is followed by a chapter that devastatingly unpacks what Wells-Oghoghomeh calls "the moral dimensions of enslaved motherhood." This includes sexual violence and the economic exploitation of women's reproductive biology. Amid the physical, psychical, and familial violence of slavery, Black women fought for "cultural and familial survival" (56). This included maternal and familial devotion, as well as the hard reality of abortion, filicide, and surrogacy. Never judging her subjects, Wells-Oghoghomeh carefully considers the negotiation between enslaved women's "moral misgivings" and their fierce devotion to survival (91). The third chapter further centers the ways enslaved women responded to sexual violence, including sharing knowledge and stories with younger women and their dedication to building and maintaining family connections. In response to "the racist, sexist national discourses that went to

great lengths to present women as bodies devoid of moral subjectivity,” Black women developed “alternative ways of defining good, right, and moral sex and relationships” (115).

Chapter Four is at times a heart-breaking and at times an empowering look at women’s prenatal, postpartum, and postmortem rituals. As mothers, Black women were at the center of life and death. While enslavers saw enslaved childbirth as a means to grow their property assets, enslaved women resignified childbirth into a “spiritual event” (133). High infant mortality rates made this a precarious process. With her transatlantic framework, Wells-Oghoghomeh makes connections between African practices of midwifery and medicine to ground the rituals of childbirth and bodily health in the American South. Midwives in particular “adapted, reinforced, and transmitted the cosmologies of their ancestors to ensure the survival of enslaved mothers and children” (141). Death reminded women and men of the enslaved body’s vulnerability to violence. As Wells-Oghoghomeh argues, “sorrow always lurked just below the surface of [enslaved] people’s veneer of composure” (159). The following chapter examines how female figures ruled the sacred imagination of the enslaved. Stories of flying Africans pushed back against the dehumanizing system of slavery. Hags, witches, and ghosts bridged the world between human and spirit and stories about them offered lessons about the world that centered African diasporic perspectives. Witches and hags were almost always female, reflecting how women possessed both the power to create life and to destroy life. As such, Wells-Oghoghomeh shows how otherworldly figures of malevolent female power were another response of re/membrance to the dismemberment of slavery. Chapter Six returns to Wells-Oghoghomeh’s reorientation of DuBois’s work. Rather than emphasize the “preacher, music, and frenzy” of southern Black Christianity (as DuBois did), Wells-Oghoghomeh centers the African ancestral “cultural modalities” of “power, sound, sociality, and movement” (195). Women provided the bedrock to all four of these. Black women’s engagement with Protestant Christianity did so in ways that emphasized those four themes, as they “trained their children to challenge rhetoric that supported slavery” with “redeployed Christian vocabularies” (196). Both Christianity and African spirits and practices offered simultaneous avenues for power and cultural autonomy. It is not surprising that Wells-Oghoghomeh identifies a correlation between enslaved girls joining the church as they entered puberty. While slavery violated their bodies, religion offered a means of empowerment, feminine healing, and community. Finally, a short conclusion reinforces the book’s argument and contribution to the field.

Many scholars of African American religious history have shown how the development of Black religion in the U.S. was not merely a reaction to slavery. What is unique about Wells-Oghoghomeh's *The Souls of Womenfolk* is that she centers the traumas, spiritual power(s), and experiences of enslaved women. By placing women at the center, she shifts the field's focus away from the pulpit as a means of empowerment. Her book "liberates un-ordained authorities, non-Christian practitioners, and everyday religious practices" *because* it emphasizes women. While there is an increasing library of scholarship that explores the complexity of enslaved people's conversions to Christianity, *The Souls of Womenfolk* untangles these complexities in clear ways that bring Black Christianity into larger Black women's practices of re/membrance. The book is a triumph.

Emily Suzanne Clark is an associate professor of Religious Studies at Gonzaga University. She is the author of the multi-award-winning A Luminous Brotherhood: Afro-Creole Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans (University of North Carolina Press, 2016) and co-editor of Race and New Religious Movements in the USA: A Documentary Reader (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019) and Digital Humanities and Material Religion: An Introduction (De Gruyter, 2022).