

*Mothering slaves: motherhood,  
childlessness and the care of children in  
Atlantic slave societies*

Book

Accepted Version

Cowling, C., Machado, M. H. P. T., Paton, D. and West, E.  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3444-3814>, eds. (2018)  
Mothering slaves: motherhood, childlessness and the care of  
children in Atlantic slave societies. *Women's History Review*  
(special issue), 27 (6). Taylor and Francis. doi:  
10.1080/09612025.2017.1336832 Available at  
<https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/70559/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the  
work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Published version at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09612025.2017.1336832>

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2017.1336832>

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

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**Special Issue Women's History Review: Mothering Slaves: Motherhood, Childlessness and  
the Care of Children in Atlantic Slave Societies**

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**Introduction**

Rio de Janeiro, 1845: Inácia, an enslaved woman, gives birth to triplets, attended by a white doctor at the request of her slaveholder. All her babies die during their first night.

Havana, 1854: a formerly enslaved mother, Dolores Justiniani, petitions the authorities on behalf of her enslaved son, Narciso, to remove him from a rural plantation where he is being subjected to severe physical punishments.

Texas, late antebellum era: Rose Williams' mistress threatens her with a 'whipping' if she does not bring forth 'portly children' with an enslaved man, Rufus, whom she dislikes. Rose relents and bears Rufus two children before leaving him after emancipation.

These brief snapshots of the lives of women living in different Atlantic slave societies reflect the diversity and complexity involved in mothering under slavery. They underscore, first and foremost, the loss, abuse, and exploitation their protagonists experienced, but they also suggest their resilience and determination in seeking to practise motherhood on their own terms, even under the most painful of circumstances. The stories come to us from different historical moments and spaces, yet their compelling common elements also suggest a rich potential for thinking about motherhood and slavery in connected, comparative, and transnational ways. The articles in this collection, and the companion issue of *Slavery & Abolition*, together undertake this important task.<sup>1</sup>

The articles in each special issue were originally presented at three conferences held by the 'Mothering Slaves' research network in the UK and Brazil in 2015 and 2016.<sup>2</sup> The network brought together scholars working on motherhood, the care of children, and childlessness in slave societies across the Atlantic World, as well as in medieval Europe, while other participants offered comparative perspectives on motherhood in non-slave settings. A key goal of the network was to engage with the extensive scholarship on the social history of

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<sup>1</sup> See Camillia Cowling, Maria Helena P.T. Machado, Diana Paton and Emily West, 'Mothering Slaves: Comparative Perspectives on Motherhood, Childlessness, and the Care of Children in Atlantic Slave Societies', Special Edition, *Slavery and Abolition*, forthcoming 2017.

<sup>2</sup> The network was funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/L015501/1) with additional support from the São Paulo State Research Council (FAPESP), Newcastle University, the University of Reading, and the University of São Paulo. We are very grateful for all their support.

slavery produced in recent decades in Brazil, the Americas' largest and longest-enduring slave society. Historians based both in Brazil and internationally, some of whose work is showcased in these two special editions, are now turning their attention to the intertwined history of gender and slavery, offering important comparative insights.

Enslaved women's ability to bear children was central to property holding in persons, since enslaved status was inherited through the maternal line. In the Latin phrase that was part of the inheritance of Roman law to the Americas, *partus sequitur ventrem* (literally, the child's status follows the mother's womb). 'Mothering slaves' references both the multiple forms of 'mothering' performed by enslaved women and the fundamental linkages between slave systems and reproduction.

Both of these special issues consider enslaved women's relationship to reproduction in terms of their experiences of pregnancy, birth, and infant care, as well as in terms of slaveholder and state policies that aimed to regulate women's reproductive potential. Moreover, as well as giving birth to and caring for their own children, enslaved women performed a range of mothering work for children who were not their own. For example, they provided the intimate labour of caring for, and sometimes breastfeeding, slaveholders' children. They also 'mothered' other enslaved women's children when the conditions of enslavement prevented some women from being able to do so themselves.

### **Sources and approaches**

The articles in this special issue draw on very diverse sources for the study of enslaved motherhood. In part, this reflects the fact that the kinds of sources available differ significantly from region to region. For the United States, the Works Progress

Administration interviews collected in the 1930s provide rich oral testimony from former slaves and their descendants, on which the essays by Rosie Knight and by Emily West and Erin Shearer are able to draw. Such sources are mainly lacking for the Latin American context. Instead, like many other social histories of slavery in Latin America, the essays by María de los Ángeles Meriño Fuentes and Aisnara Perera Díaz and by Camillia Cowling draw on the copious documentation generated by the sustained engagement of the enslaved with the Spanish legal system in colonial Cuba. For enslaved women in Cuba, struggles over motherhood were central to these legal and official negotiations. In turn, for eighteenth-century Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, Carlos Eugênio Líbano Soares and Raíza Canuta da Hora undertake a different approach: a quantitative analysis of baptism records of African women and their children, tracing demographic patterns that are suggestive of individual women's reproductive decisions. Focusing on the Brazilian north-eastern province of Ceará in the nineteenth century, Martha Santos mines sources from post-mortem inventories to census and newspaper materials, revealing enslaved women's importance both to production and reproduction within the province's slave system. For the city of Rio de Janeiro, Tânia Salgado Pimenta and Lorena Silva Telles each draw, in different ways, on records relating to the developing medical profession, tracing the increasing attempts in the city to professionalise obstetrics and midwifery and their implications for enslaved women. Finally, Lilia Moritz Schwarcz turns to visual sources so often overlooked in the history of enslaved women by analysing the troubled depictions by French artist Nicholas Taunay of enslaved nurses in early nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro.

Taken together, this great diversity of materials suggests the rich potential for further comparative studies of mothering under slavery, despite enslaved women's illiteracy and

relative powerlessness. Indeed, because of the concerns of property-holders to secure the “fruits” of enslaved women’s wombs, records of enslaved motherhood are often much more abundant than those that document, for example, enslaved men’s relationship to their children, which was systematically undermined by *partus sequitur ventrem*. The greater challenge, perhaps, is to get beyond the concerns over property that led such records to be generated in the first place. Instead, most of the essays in this collection also attempt to glimpse enslaved women’s lived experiences of motherhood, as well as considering the social universe that undergirded individual women’s relationships with children: fathers, grandparents, and associational and religious networks. In the process, the essays also necessarily problematize some of the imagery that, since the abolition of slavery itself, has been associated with enslaved mothers both at the popular and scholarly level. Historians of enslaved motherhood thus face a particularly complex task in selecting, interpreting, and presenting their materials.

### **Comparisons and connections**

The essays in this issue cover regions and periods that differed significantly in their demography, type and extent of plantation development, and legal systems. The United States was one of the few cases in the Americas where the enslaved population eventually achieved natural reproduction overall. In contrast, in almost all other American slave societies, death rates among the enslaved population were tragically high while birth rates were low. Overall, the enslaved population could only be replenished through the Atlantic trade, with its devastating impact on family formation but also its role in creating new ties of community and ethnicity across the Americas. In many parts of the hemisphere, particularly

Brazil, Cuba, and the South of the United States in the nineteenth century, internal trading relocated thousands of enslaved people from one region to another within the Americas, refracting the stories of family loss and fragmentation that began with the transatlantic trade.

As well as differences between national or colonial settings as whole units, the essays also call our attention to the very varied conditions under which women experienced motherhood in each setting. Large cities like Salvador da Bahia, Rio de Janeiro or Havana presented particular conditions for enslaved mothers: the potential for more labour autonomy and access to the law, on the one hand; greater instability and the lesser likelihood of being able to live with their partners, on the other, as many households only owned one or two slaves. Internal trades had regionally very different impacts: As Martha Santos notes, Ceará in the Brazilian north-east, for example, had a much more balanced sex ratio than the plantation regions of the south-east, and across the slaveholding Americas, cities held many more women than plantations where men often outnumbered women.<sup>3</sup>

Despite such differences, taken together the articles underscore a fundamental commonality: mothering under slavery obliged women to reconcile the contradictory demands of both production and reproduction. Even in early nineteenth-century Cuba, where historians have mostly emphasised slaveholders' disregard for reproduction and preference for importing new slaves to work to death, women faced gruelling struggles if they wished to wrest their children from the control of slaveholders.<sup>4</sup> And in the US South,

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Laird W. Bergad (2007), *The Comparative Histories of Slavery in Brazil, Cuba, and the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press), pp. 96-131 and pp. 194-5. For a collection with a significant emphasis on urban enslaved and freed women, see David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Eds.), (2004) *Beyond Bondage: Free Women of Colour in the Americas* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press).

<sup>4</sup> For a survey of this literature and an excavation of enslaved family histories at the height of the slave-



where historians have traced slaveholders' concern with reproduction to the point of sometimes deliberately attempting slave 'breeding,' women's ability to nurture children was severely undermined by the demands of productive work.<sup>5</sup> Focusing on motherhood thus underscores the importance, within Atlantic slavery scholarship more generally, of considering production and reproduction in tandem, rather than as separate categories.

### **African Mothers and the Atlantic Slave Trade**

While the shadow of slave trades looms over all of the papers in this collection, the experiences of newly-traded West African women are explored by two essays in particular. Carlos Eugênio Líbano Soares and Raíza Cristina Canuta da Hora explore such women's experiences of motherhood in eighteenth-century Salvador da Bahia (Brazil's capital until 1763). Salvador had a large urban slave population in its own right but was also Brazil's largest slave port throughout the era of the slave trade (which ended in 1851). The authors situate women's experiences within the gradual formation, in the central parish of Sé, of a specific West African ethnic community, the *jeje*.<sup>6</sup> Analysing baptism records, they suggest that female captives typically did not have their first surviving child until years after arriving in Brazil; when they did, these women would already have attained a position within the evolving *jeje* community that would offer better support to mother and child. Meanwhile, such children had a higher social recognition and status than did their mothers.

The quest of West African women to influence their pregnancies in Bahia is suggestive of the

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trading era, see Karen Y. Morrison (2015), *Cuba's Racial Crucible: The Sexual Economy of Social Identities* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), chapters 1-3.

<sup>5</sup> See Gregory D. Smithers (2012), *Slave Breeding: Sex, Violence and Memory in African American History* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press), especially chapter five.

<sup>6</sup> *Jeje*: Gbe-speaking West African ethnic group who inhabited today's south-eastern Benin.

challenges such women faced in mothering in the context of the Atlantic trade. Aisnara Perera Díaz and María de los Ángeles Meriño Fuentes's essay also emphasises such challenges. The article follows the trajectory of a group of West Africans imported into Cuba on the *Dos Hermanos* ship, who were collectively freed by royal decree in 1817. Although many of the women had become mothers since arrival, almost all the children had been separated from their mothers by sale and scattered across western Cuba. Despite this, the women had struggled to maintain contact with their children, and used the emancipation decree to claim their rights as mothers, demanding custody and the ability to raise the children themselves. Each essay underscores the heart-breaking loss experienced by enslaved mothers – a theme that resonates throughout the 'Mothering Slaves' collections - yet each also emphasises the creative ways in which, against tremendous odds, women sought to mother on their own terms.

### **Slavery and the Medicalisation of Childbirth**

The articles in this section explore how enslaved women were affected by the development of new obstetric and midwifery practices in nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro. Such practices were used in the nineteenth century with growing frequency as a means by which slaveholders strove to guarantee the survival of their enslaved women's children. Tânia Pimenta situates medicine's professionalization within wider urban growth and transformation stimulated by the transfer of the Portuguese Court (1808) and the advent of national independence (1822). Meanwhile, the city also functioned as a major Atlantic slaving port and had a very high urban slave population in its own right. In this period, most of the

city's poor, whether enslaved or free, continued to depend on traditional healing practices. Enslaved women had recourse to midwives who were often former slaves themselves, who continued to be respected and trusted within their own communities. However, such figures came under increasing attack from the white, elite, and male-dominated medical profession, which explicitly excluded women of colour from accessing professional training.

Lorena Telles' essay then details how male medical 'experts' made their names in obstetrics research by subjecting enslaved pregnant women to painful experiments, with agonising and often fatal results for the women and infants concerned. Slaveholders took these women to such doctors because they were conscious of the women's own value as workers and the future marketability of their children. In the process, however, enslaved women's bodies provided a third kind of value: that of professional knowledge. In the interstices, both Pimenta and Telles glimpse at the possible choices and experiences of enslaved pregnant women themselves. They resisted some of the more violent experimentations on their bodies. They also took up doctors' exhortations to give birth in institutions and hospitals rather than at home, not necessarily because they wanted 'expert' help but as a temporary refuge from the oppressive domestic conditions in which they normally lived and worked.

### **Motherhood, Locations and Human Movements**

In different ways, the essays in this section explore how particular spaces and regions helped shape the conditions in which 'mothering slaves' occurred. They also highlight the centrality of human flows – particularly internal slave trades - in connecting different regions, even as they constantly broke families apart. Martha Santos' article focuses on the province of Ceará

in north-east Brazil, a region that until recently has received less attention in the Brazilian nineteenth-century slavery scholarship than the expanding coffee regions of the south-east. Santos' essay underscores the deep connections, wrought in the sale of enslaved family members, between the two regions. As the trade took more male than female slaves to the south-east, Santos demonstrates enslaved women's ongoing centrality both to a rise in commercial agricultural production in Ceará and to the reproduction of the enslaved workforce, producing both workers and human capital that could be sold. Meanwhile, even as they struggled to mother their own children or witnessed their sale, enslaved women also cared for the children of slaveholding families.

The way in which particular locations, and the experience of movement between them, affected women's experiences of motherhood is the focus of Camillia Cowling's essay. In mid-nineteenth-century western Cuba, a newly intensified plantation society had grown up thanks to a major upswing in the Atlantic slave trade. Even after the traumas of the transatlantic trade, a buoyant internal trade led to constant further family separations. Meanwhile, slaveholders also used what Cowling defines as 'spatial discipline' to dominate and intimidate enslaved people, moving them from city to plantation as a punishment. Such actions had specific consequences for enslaved women, who experienced greater spatial limitations than enslaved men as they had less access to work that involved autonomous mobility. Spatial discipline helped facilitate the abuse of their reproductive bodies and family ties. Yet women also used space in creative, resistive ways, finding opportunities either to be mobile themselves or to alter their own or their children's physical locations.

## **Visual representations of enslaved motherhood**

Historians seeking to explore the lives of subaltern people relatively neglected in more traditional sources have to think laterally about how to utilize available evidence in order to overcome archival silences. Historians of Brazilian slavery -- and gradually more historians of the United States -- have increasingly turned to visual cultures in their attempts to comprehend enslaved motherhood, especially the 'other mothering' of enslaved women who cared for white children.<sup>7</sup> Creating portraits of such women, slaveholders helped convert them into a powerful symbol of their belief that slavery worked well, that women cared for white children, and that reciprocal love and affection across racial lines were commonplace: a symbol that, in private archives and family collections, outlived slavery itself and took on new life in post-abolition settings. In the US, and especially in Brazil (where enslavement continued later than the US and hence photographic techniques developed further before it ended), such women were made to sit for 'family' portraits in which they held the white infants they cared for and sometimes wet-nursed. However, more recent conceptualizations contained within these two special editions stress the exploitative nature of this 'mothering' labour. Lilia Schwarcz explores the tensions of enslaved motherhood depicted in the Brazilian paintings of the prominent landscape artist Nicolas-Antoine Taunay whose representations convey conflicting inter-racial and inter-generational intimacies. They expose some of the inherent binaries of slavery and freedom, of childhood and adulthood, of women who mothered white infants but were unable to mother one's own children.

Influenced by Enlightenment ideas, Taunay's images of enslaved women were complex. In a similar way to abolitionist texts, Taunay used his medium to convey some of

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Marcus Wood (2013), *Black Milk: Imagining Slavery in the Visual Cultures of Brazil and America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); Molly Rogers (2010), *Delia's Tears: Race, Science and Photography in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University press).

slavery's horrors. His landscapes commonly included small depictions of enslaved women holding white babies and he painted these women in a static, immobile way, in contrast to their white infant charges. The enslaved women's own children are also notably absent. Schwarcz suggests that his representations of enslaved mothers are ambiguous, even contradictory, illustrating both the common pro-slavery tropes of nurture and devotion across racial lines and, simultaneously, white society's denial of enslaved women's own motherhood. Hence enslaved women could be both superior carers of white infants while also denigrated for their alleged inability to mother their own biological children, and the labour of childcare which has all too often been romanticised and undervalued. Schwarcz seeks a different understanding of slavery's visual cultures than those of contemporaries, allowing us to see women highly vulnerable to exploitation, physical violence, and sexual assault.

### **Motherhood Beyond Exploitation and Resistance**

In the final section of this special edition, Rosie Knight and Emily West (with Erin Shearer) seek to move beyond some of the binaries that have shaped discussions about enslaved mothers and to highlight some of the contradictions and complexities of mothering within the US South. Knight explores the exploitation of enslaved mothers by slaveholding women within the intimate environments of plantation households. White mistresses assumed that a shared experience of motherhood, especially when their pregnancies occurred simultaneously, brought black and white women together in a domestic realm. However, as Knight shows, white women's extensive interventions into and appropriation of enslaved women's motherhood – through using their mothering labour and sometimes their breast

milk -- redirects our understanding of these more intimate spaces as areas of conflict where white women routinely exploited female slaves. Rather than simply being differentiated by race and class, the relative privileges and disadvantages black and white women experienced as mothers were systematically connected and plantation mistresses typically regarded enslaved women's motherhood only in relation to their own needs, desires and aspirations.

Conceptualizing motherhood in a more relational way also expands our understanding of how enslaved mothers moved beyond 'biological' mothering in their attempts to survive the regime. Emily West shows how slaveholders exploited enslaved women as both labourers and reproducers, but despite the arduous nature of their everyday lives, female slaves also found motherhood a place of companionship and camaraderie where they could enjoy their children. Motherhood hence took multiple and flexible forms, and enslaved women were more likely to partake in forms of 'shared' or communal mothering than their white counterparts. They were also well aware of the tensions their dual roles as workers and reproducers caused slaveholders. Enslaved women sought to wrench a degree of control over their lives by prioritizing their children above all others and seeking to control their fertility in the face of slaveholders' exploitation. Maternal love for children hence co-existed with more ambivalent attitudes towards motherhood for many enslaved women.

Overall, these essays on Atlantic slavery and motherhood help complicate some of the binary distinctions that are often unconsciously drawn within the wider scholarship on slavery: between production and reproduction; between different locales, temporalities, and economic and demographic contexts; between experiences and representations of motherhood; and between exploitation and resistance. The exploitation and loss involved in

mothering under slavery reverberates through every essay in this collection. Yet, while mothers could never escape the shadow of slavery, the essays as a whole also remind us that their lives and actions were not entirely reducible to it. Women mothered in ways and for reasons that came from far outside American slave societies, drawing on a plethora of African cultural understandings of motherhood, as well as shaping their actions according to the rules of the societies in which they ended up living. They made decisions that, fraught with anguish and pain, may appear ambiguous. For example, they might love and care for children conceived in violence and exploitation, or who were likely to be lost to them through sale. Such attitudes perhaps represent the height of enslaved people's maintenance of what contributors Perera and Meriño call a 'possible utopia': the continuing hope, which could sometimes be transformed into reality even under the most hopeless of conditions, of preserving, enjoying and honouring their links to their children.