UC Merced

The Undergraduate Historical and Critical Race & Ethnic Studies Journal at UC Merced

Title

Book Review: Jane-Marie Collins, Emancipatory Narratives & Enslaved Motherhood Bahia, Brazil, 1830-1888 (2023).

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4nn1g4sw

Journal

The Undergraduate Historical and Critical Race & Ethnic Studies Journal at UC Merced, 10(1)

Author

Mateo, Virginia

Publication Date

2025

DOI

10.5070/H310165511

Copyright Information

Copyright 2025 by the author(s).This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Peer reviewed|Undergraduate

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

Book Review: Jane-Marie Collins, *Emancipatory Narratives & Enslaved Motherhood Bahia, Brazil, 1830-1888* (Liverpool University Press, 2023).

By Virginia Mateo

Jane-Marie Collins' recent monograph, *Emancipatory Narratives & Enslaved Motherhood Bahia, Brazil, 1830-1888*, examines the complexity of motherhood and women's strategies of emancipation for themselves and their children. Collins emphasizes the cultural and historical importance of her study as it bridges gaps in scholarship on slavery, which has predominantly focused on the experiences of enslaved men in the rural and urban settings of Bahia. Women, especially enslaved mothers and their children, are far less represented in the existing historiography. By acknowledging the imbalance between research on enslaved men and enslaved women, Collins highlights how it is necessary to conduct research on mothers and children because they navigated unique conditions under enslavement. Women endured gendered expectations, including giving birth to enslaved children, not by choice, but as a result of the violence and restrictions they faced. Thus, Collins' monograph analyzes race, gender, family, and freedom through the lens of mothers and their children to encourage scholars to study enslaved populations that have historically been overlooked in Brazil and in slave societies elsewhere.

Emancipatory Narratives & Enslaved Motherhood is divided into four parts, with eight total chapters. Part I, "Emancipatory narratives and enslaved motherhood" introduces four freedom suits, which were court petitions. These freedom suits are used to provide context into how motherhood motivated enslaved women to pursue freedom for themselves first, and then their children afterwards. Through this first section, Collins outlines the unpredictable results of freedom suits, explaining that many enslaved people adapted their petitions to obey politics at

the local and national level. For example, bills stating the sale and purchase of an enslaved person needed to be notarized, so enslaved people used this requirement to their advantage. They would show that their sale was never notarized, thus claiming their freedom. Part II titled, "Enslaving children, emancipating children" shifts the focus to enslaved and free children. The chapters in this second section focus on Collins' argument that manumissions were beneficial for children born to enslaved mothers, but not necessarily to enslaved mothers themselves. The data presented in this part exposes a dark truth about experiences of enslaved mothers. As Collins shows using baptismal records, enslavers who fathered children with captive women would deliberately not claim their paternal connections as a strategy to protect inheritances from their progeny. Part III, titled "Enslaved mother, enslaver father" provides deeper insight into the relationships between free and enslaved women with free men. For this section, Collins provides the experiences of two women, one freed and one enslaved, with the same Portuguese slave owner. By providing two different women and their experiences, Collins addresses how these individuals had varying limitations and advantages when considering their relationships with the Portuguese slaveholder, Alexandre Gomes Rodrigues. Part IV titled, "African mothers, Brazilian daughters" analyzes female slaveowners and how their gender influenced behavioral dynamics. In this part, Collins explains how after enslaved women were made free, some became slave owners themselves. These formerly enslaved female slaveholders, as the book outlines, often treated their captive mothers and children differently because they themselves recognized how their gender opened them up to sexual violence. The organization of *Emancipatory Narratives & Enslaved Motherhood* is structured intentionally so that the major findings and/or central arguments of each section builds onto or sets up the next.

When collecting data for her book, Collins draws upon a variety of primary and secondary sources that advance her key objectives. Her central primary sources include wills, testaments, baptismal records, and manumission letters, which were gathered from the Arquivo Público de Estado de Bahia (APEB), which provided the cases that were presented in the book under categories such as Seção Colonial e Provincial, Seção Judiciária, and Seção Jud. De Relação, Processo Civil. Her secondary sources include the work of researchers who have studied freedom suits, race and gender throughout other slave societies. These works contextualize the socio-economic and political circumstances of the time period and Collins uses them to demonstrate how *Emancipatory Narratives & Enslaved Motherhood* builds upon this long-established historiography. Moreover, her utilization of historical maps and other geo-spatial data is essential in demonstrating the geographies of slaveholding and the sheer number of enslaved mothers and children in Bahia. This is especially effective in her analysis of childhood manumissions in Chapter Four, where she offers statistical data from these manumissions ranging from age, race, and sex. Collins notes that 60% of all the freed children in her subsample were under the age of 14, with the average age being 5 years old.[1] She uses the primary sources in this section to emphatically outline the socio-cultural conditions that determined which children were freed and which remained enslaved.

One of the strongest components of the monograph is Collins' utilization of a black feminist approach to analyze how black women specifically experience violence and injustices at greater degrees than other women. As part of this approach, she references black women's history in Brazil, observing that their accounts offer details that broaden racial and reproductive

[1] Jane-Marie Collins, *Emancipatory Narratives & Enslaved Motherhood: Bahia, Brazil, 1830-1888*, Liverpool University Press, 2023: 132.

justice. Dr. Collins used a feminist approach to ensure that her narratives were centered around including women into research on slavery, especially as they appear in a vast amount of freedom suits. The works of prominent researchers in slavery studies and gender history are also incorporated into her book. Collins expands on the gendered research of scholars such as Angelyn Mitchell (*The Freedom to Remember*, 2002), Edlie L. Wong (*Neither Fugitive Nor Free*, 2009), and Alys Eve Weinbaum (*The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery*, 2019). When using a theoretical framework, Collins references the historiographies of Stephanie M. H. Camp, Jessica Millward, and Sasha Turner, for example, emphasizing how their works provide stark differences in their interpretations of slavery and gender. By referencing and analyzing the works of researchers in her subfield, Collins cultivates a comprehensive understanding of how gender, race, and age were factors that shaped the experiences of enslaved peoples. In addition to a black feminist approach, *Emancipatory Narratives* draws on the methodologies of micro history to shed light on findings at a local level within broader scalar contexts.

To bring attention to the gendered conditions of being a mother under enslavement, Collins includes first-hand accounts of enslaved mothers. The narrative of Harriet Jacobs, for example, vividly depicts the weight of worry that loomed over enslaved mothers regarding their children. Harriet Jacobs, as she gave birth to her daughter, recalled, "When they told me my new born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than ever it had been before."[2] Jacobs further explained her fear, stating that while slavery was horrible for men, it was a different kind of horrible for enslaved females. They would be vulnerable to violence and exploitation unique to their gender, and Jacobs knew this all too well, considering she lived it. This personal account,

[2] Jane-Marie Collins, *Emancipatory Narratives & Enslaved Motherhood: Bahia, Brazil, 1830-1888*, Liverpool University Press, 2023: 168.

which is one of many in *Emancipatory Narratives & Enslaved Motherhood*, identifies how women gave birth to enslaved laborers under reproductive slavery, with no guarantees for emancipation for themselves or their children, regardless of who fathered their children. Collins included other powerful case studies throughout her monograph that emphasize the importance of uncovering and recognizing the experiences of survivors of slavery in Brazil. This focus provides needed insight into the unique ways that enslaved and free mothers navigated their socio-cultural and economic positions in Brazilian society. Collins ultimately reflects on the contemporary legacies of this history, illustrating how race relations created under slavery connect to political, cultural, and socio-economic formations in the present-day.

Emancipatory Narratives & Enslaved Motherhood Bahia, Brazil, 1830-1888 is an impactful book that addresses the complexity of motherhood and the necessity of including children in studies of slave societies. Collins provides a well-rounded narrative on motherhood in an unimaginably difficult setting, highlighting factors of race, gender, age, and politics in the shaping of enslaved life at multiple scalar levels. The monograph seeks to restore humanity to enslaved subjects who endured inhumane treatment, including the stripping of the very names they were given at birth. Ultimately, Collins emphasizes the importance of studying overlooked groups in histories of slavery in Brazil and the broader Atlantic World.