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# Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery

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## **Abstract**

In this book review, I reflect on a selection from Jennifer L. Morgan's (2004) book, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*. I have returned to this selection several times to process its applicability, not only to the time in which it was written about, but to my existence as a Black woman in the world today. Throughout modern history, Black women's lives have been marked by contradiction and nuance, in large part because our physical, sexual, and reproductive labour figured prominently in shaping the plantation structure and economy, a central tenant of modern society. In what follows, I share my thoughts about how Morgan engages these insights in her book, giving focus to her introductory chapter.

## **Keywords**

Black women, labour, plantation life, book review

I want to reflect briefly on Jennifer L. Morgan's (2004) introductory chapter to *Labouring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*. This chapter explores the extraction of Black women's labour, the importance of the labour of the Black woman and its ideological function, and the disconnect between the invisibility of Black women's labour and the centrality of their labour as an organizing principle of plantation life (p. 1, 3, 6-7).

I appreciated Morgan's analysis of the importance of Black women's real and imagined reproductive labour as one of the most significant factors in the flow of bodies across the Atlantic and within the plantation state. Black women's ability to continue to produce free labour rendered them highly valuable, even as they were subjected to the most dehumanizing violence (Morgan, 2004, p. 3; also see Hartman, 2016; James, 2016).

For example, Morgan writes that Black women's ability to reproduce was central to the system of racial slavery (p. 4). In fact, enslavers included the speculative value of Black women's reproductive capacity in their cost benefit analysis (p. 3). Black women's presence on the plantation had a direct impact on the importation rate of Africans to sustain the enslaved population (p. 6). The high value of enslaved Black women's physical and reproductive labour was reinforced through manipulated images depicting them as prioritizing hard work and experiencing pain free reproduction, thus giving the false impression that they had the ability to give birth and work the land simultaneously (p. 8).

Morgan's chapter highlights how Black women were, in some ways, more important to the preservation of the plantation economy than Black men, and yet their experiences have not been held to the same level of significance in mainstream scholarship (p. 3, 8). I also appreciate that Morgan invites the reader to consider how Black women's sense of agency and resistance to plantation violence needs further exploration, as it is often absent from dominant narratives on Black women's existence in plantation life.

One interesting contradiction that Morgan (2004) highlights is that "for the enslaved, the

possibility of intimacy at the heart of creolization challenged the narrow and contradictory racialized categories to which early modern slaveholders confined them" (p. 6). Morgan complicates the narrow scripts that have existed in the literature about the nature of plantation life.

All these intimate experiences were nuanced, which becomes most disturbing when one considers the brutality of slavery and the reduction of the Black body to a dollar amount on a ledger. Morgan's first chapter of *Labouring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*, and work writ large, makes clear that a deeper exploration of Black women's narratives and experiences of the plantation will further complicate our understanding of this period in our history, and I am here for that!

## Author Biography

Kamilah Clayton (she/her) is a PhD student in Social Work at York University. She completed a Bachelor of Social Work at Toronto Metropolitan University in 2009 and a Master of Social Work at York University in 2015. Her dissertation focuses on experiences of belonging among Black students in Ontario secondary schools, and how school social workers support these experiences of belonging and/or collude with educational systems in the perpetuation of anti-Black racism. Her research is supported by a Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Doctoral Fellowship Award. Kamilah has over fifteen years of experience in various areas of social work, including child welfare, mental health, and African Centered Rites of Passage work with adults and youth.

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