

## Book Review

– *Slavery Unseen: Sex, Power and Violence in Brazilian History*, by Lamonte Aidoo, Duke University Press, 2018.

*Slavery Unseen* is disruptive. It disrupts the heteronormativity that has undergirded most of the historical studies of Brazilian slavery to date. It disrupts the shape of the archive, upending and privileging the constituent parts of the collections in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Lisbon to tease out enigmatic and troubling accounts. And it disrupts the reader, marching them through a textual horror show of eye-gouging, teeth ripping, genital mutilation, whippings, all manner of tortures conceivable (and inconceivable), and rape. Pages and pages of rapes described unsparingly, but never luridly. (It is difficult to imagine assigning this to a graduate seminar in a single week, though any Brazilian studies course should certainly make it required reading.) Aidoo's book is good – even great – but it is hard to *enjoy* as scholarship despite it being so expertly crafted.

The book's central premise is that “slavery was defined on the surface by differences that created a stark power differential: between free and enslaved, black and white, men and women, wealthy and impoverished, elite and marginalized. Yet slavery also depended on relationships of sameness that are less obvious in our traditional understanding, that is, relationships between men, between women, and between blacks” (p. 2). The book begins with an obligatory chapter on the paradoxes and “exceptional” characteristics of Brazilian slavery, rehearsing the foundational but now thoroughly derided Freyrean mythology of “racial democracy.” The chapter is a mercifully short sixteen pages and he was wise to trim down this literature review as this terrain is well-known to most students of slavery and/or Brazil. With this box checked, Lamonte moves on to the chapters where he does his best work.

Chapter Two, “Illegible Violence: The Rape and Sexual Abuse of Male Slaves” is the work of a first-rate historian. Aidoo's deep archival work summons the voices of these doomed men with remarkable texture and care, incarnating them for readers with much more humanity than they were afforded in life. Importantly, we learn as much about the Church and the peculiar sexual worldviews of the Portuguese Inquisition as we do about

slavery and sexual violence, per se. Although some of these accounts have been written about before (e.g., by João Trevisan in *Devassos no paraíso*), they have never been assembled in one place or analyzed so well.

Chapter Three, “The White Mistress and the Slave Woman: Seduction, Violence, and Exploitation,” is a searing indictment of white women as not only complicit but as perpetrators of physical and sexual abuse of slaves. It makes clear that female slaveholders were often just as sadistic and exploitative of their slaves, torturing them, prostituting them, and sometimes raping them. The chapter also includes some accounts of same-sex female relationships that occurred outside of slavery. By far the most delightful tale in the book (and genuine moments of delight are scarce in a monograph on this subject) is the love story of a freed black woman, Francisca Luiz, who was abandoned by her husband, and her longtime friend and lover, a white woman named Isabel Antônia, who had been exiled for sodomy in 1579 from Portugal to Salvador da Bahia, where she became known as The Velvet One (*a do veludo*). (Isabel was apparently infamous for her predilection for using a velvet-covered dildo on her many female lovers.) Thus, Aidoo’s work in this chapter also begins to fill the lacuna in studies of same sex female desire in Brazil, which has always been noticeably absent in a body of literature that has focused almost exclusively on male-male homoeroticism.

Chapter Four deals with black intraracial violence, specifically “relations between slaves and free people of African descent [in order] to observe how complex white supremacist mechanisms became a catalyst for violence, domination, and self-interest among blacks themselves” (p. 111). Aidoo addresses a variety of topics and issues under this rubric, including the politics of passing, white fears of black insurrection, black opposition to abolition, and reverse miscegenation. Chapter Five is the most discordant of the book in that it deals with race in the social hygiene movement in Brazil. Some of the material calls back to that of earlier chapters (such as medical and religious conceptions around male homosexuality and active/passive distinctions), which allows some thematic coherence overall but the chapter lacks the innovation and impact of the previous three chapters. One wonders if some of the material might have been moved into the case studies and literature review instead of being left dangling here at the end.

The book might also have been strengthened by a freestanding conclusion rather than jumping directly to an Afterword – a few pages musing about the life and subsequent media depictions of Chica da Silva, an enslaved woman who became rich and powerful and who is a famous historical figure known to every Brazilian schoolchild. The Afterword feels more like an afterthought and it would have been better to give over the pages to a full-fledged chapter on her. Much has been written and said of her, but I was so impressed by Aidoo’s analytical abilities that I wanted to know much more about her from his vantage than this brief Afterword had to offer. As it is, the book feels like it simply trails off rather than properly ending with the kind of “mic drop” Aidoo

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has truly earned. These minor criticisms aside, *Slavery Unseen* is revelatory and will change the field of Brazilian history. It is the kind of monograph that graduate students and early career scholars should read as they contemplate how to go from “dissertation to book.” In it, he has managed to condense an enormous amount of archival information into a compelling text with major implications for history, literature, gender studies, critical race studies, and Luso-Brazilian studies.

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