BOOK REVIEWS


In this cogent and lucid analysis of African-American women and families in Civil War-era Mississippi, Noralee Frankel continues the trend whereby historians are using specific regional studies to explore the specific social consequences of “national” events such as the Civil War. Drawing extensively upon the immense historiography devoted to the Civil War and Reconstruction periods, Frankel’s meticulously footnoted work reveals a no less impressive grasp of the almost equally extensive fields of women’s and family history. To glean insights into the “interior lives” (73) of the former slaves, and to explore the relationship between their public and private lives, Frankel has also exploited diaries and unpublished collections of private papers located in a number of Southern archives, as well as an array of published memoirs and reminiscences and official reports. The result is a carefully balanced case study of the relationship between racism and sexism, that makes effective use of numerous vignettes of the ex-slaves’ familial and gender relationships, but which deftly avoids the potential pitfall of losing the reader in a mass of detail. Mississippi, a state long notorious for the tenacity and persistence of white racism, presents a rich opportunity to explore the ways in which African-American women’s lives were affected by freedom. Unquestionably, emancipation constituted a momentous change for African Americans. Nevertheless, as Frankel argues, there were significant continuities between the pre- and post-emancipation periods.

Freedom’s Women begins with a survey of gender and familial relationships amongst African Americans living under slavery in Mississippi. Affirming the significance slaves attached to their marriages despite their lack of legal sanction, Frankel then proceeds to analyse how the Civil War—or, from African Americans’ perspective, the “War of Liberation”—affected familial and working relationships among the former slaves. While the War extensively disrupted established social institutions, it also tested prevailing gender codes and practices, and promised opportunities for ex-slaves to build and sustain more stable marriages and family lives. Initially optimistic about their future opportunities, and hopeful that the Federal Government would appropriate and redistribute the landholdings of the former slaveholders, African Americans understood that familial and gender relationships would be shaped to a significant degree by the labour and property relationships that developed in the post-Civil War era. Frankel does a fine job of connecting these issues. In her third chapter she reveals how African Americans’ aspirations for land, and their determination to use their labour as they chose, threw up a host of...
issues, some of which had specific implications for women. No aspect of slavery, for example, had been more painful and controversial than the sexual abuse of African-American women. Frankel analyses the ways by which black women’s reproductive labor, which in the era of slavery had been valued—if not respected—by slaveholders as a means of increasing the value of their investment in human chattels, was subsequently considered by many whites as little more than an excuse used by African-American women to avoid their obligations under the labour contracts that were commonplace in the post-emancipation period. Yet as Frankel explains, while the former slaveholders frequently showed contempt for notions of feminine delicacy, African-American women struggled to maintain their dignity and independence—just as they had under slavery.

Beginning with an analysis of marriages between black men and women, then turning to the family lives and more extended kin networks they forged, and concluding with a look at the wider communities forged by African Americans, chapters 4 through 6 provide close analyses of specific aspects of gender, familial, and community relationships in post-Civil War Mississippi. The fourth and most impressive chapter of *Freedom’s Women* offers a shrewd and detailed analysis of the intimate relationships forged by African Americans. Arguing that the attitudes toward marriage that had been formed under slavery were more resilient than historians have often assumed, Frankel demonstrates that while many black women sought to assert their individuality and rights, and although white society “restrained the familial rights” (122) of black men, marriages among African Americans could hardly be described as egalitarian. Indeed, whether their marriages were legalised or remained more informal as they had under slavery, black women were disempowered and frequently relegated to domestic drudgery and impecuniosity. If that is not a surprising conclusion, Frankel’s achievement here is to synthesise her understanding of national processes with specific case studies of African-American marriages in Mississippi. In her analysis of family life amongst the ex-slaves, she reveals that where the slaveholder had previously been the “final authority” (123), emancipation provided space for African Americans to assume family responsibilities and duties with less control and interference from whites. Reluctant to relinquish any of their power, Mississippi whites often found themselves in conflict with black men, who emerged as intermediaries between their families and white employers. In arguing that black families in post-Civil War Mississippi became “male-headed but not patriarchal” (144)—a distinction she explains with characteristic care—Frankel offers a nuanced analysis of gender relations amongst the former slaves, and challenges the assertions of previous scholars who have examined these issues. Chapter 6 of *Freedom’s Women* explores kin networks among African Americans. Again, Frankel emphasises the lasting legacies of slavery, with extended kin regarded as “members of the family,” which was defined in such a way as to “include relatives on fairly distant branches of the family
Frankel’s final chapter shows that as local slave communities expanded into wider black communities, African-American women sought to use religious and political activities to assert their rights and demand space in the public sphere.

There is little to criticise in this study. The inclusion of a map of Mississippi, and perhaps a map of the South as a whole, would have been helpful for many readers, but that is perhaps a quibble rather than a criticism. Frankel’s insightful exploration of the ways in which emancipation simultaneously tested and reinforced the gender codes and practices that had prevailed under slavery, and her challenge to several longstanding assumptions concerning black life in the aftermath of slavery, will be of interest not just to students of nineteenth-century American history, but to anyone contemplating the inevitably complex intersection between gender and race.

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