

Contesting Slave Masculinity in the American South. By David Stefan Doddington. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. 245. Cloth,)

Reviewed by Andrea Livesey

Gender, when used as both a theoretical and methodological tool for understanding the enslaved experience, continues to help scholars to produce nuanced studies on slavery throughout the United States. Beginning in the 1980s with the work of Deborah Gray White, who explored the gendered worlds of enslaved women and the networks and friendships that allowed them to find space within the parameters of enslavement, studies of enslaved women have been rich and numerous. Even more recently, the historiography of gender and slavery has taken another turn with Stephanie E. Jones Rogers's work on the violent racism of slaveholding women. The gendered lives of enslaved men, however, have so often been excluded from the gendered turn.

The most prominent of the few works on enslaved men over recent years is that of Sergio Lussana, whose research has drawn on both gender and the history of emotions to understand how slavery enabled enslaved men to form bonds of friendship and solidarity. Lussana argued in 2016 that Black men carved out an alternative culture of masculinity within the limited constraints offered by enslavement.¹ He places homosociality at the center of his analysis, thus imagining resistance through the close relationships formed by men that could ameliorate both the power differentials on the plantation, but also aid in larger acts of outright resistance such as rebellion and through the Underground Railroad. David Doddington positions *Contesting Slave Masculinity* in direct opposition to Lussana's work, and in the introduction described the latter as flattening the "complex relationships enslaved men had with one another and these who enslaved them" (8).

The historiography of slavery has long been dichotomized over the extent and nature of enslaved people's resistance. Models that stress Black solidarity against enslavers are, by nature, in opposition to those that allow for the toxic influence of enslavers to permeate and destroy the

solidarity fostered by enslaved people. This book is in the latter camp. The work can be considered alongside Jeff Forret's *Slave against Slave* in revealing the limitations of monolithic models of Black solidarity.² Doddington draws attention to the fractures that existed within enslaved society borne out of power, sex and status. He presents evidence that Black overseers and drivers constructed a rival masculinity based on collaboration with enslavers. He argues that overseers received material benefits through their position within the plantation hierarchy: They would have been able to provide clothing and additional rations for their families, thus forging a masculine identity based on the notion of providing, and in doing so reproduced the gendered ideals that upheld the institution of slavery. In short, Doddington argues that by fulfilling certain markers of masculinity, enslaved men often served the interests of enslavers.

The work's five key chapters on resistance, authority, work, sex, and violence explore competing versions of masculinity formed in a relational context between enslavers and their fellow enslaved. The voices of formerly enslaved women are important in these contexts. Doddington pays close attention to the Works Progress Administration interviews with the formerly enslaved, and his analysis relies heavily on the testimony of Black Americans. In an important chapter on sex and power, Doddington discusses evidence that sexual dominance and sexual violence could also be used to form part of a masculine identity. He documents cases of physical and sexual violence to show how this particular aspect of enslaved masculine identity was articulated. This attention to gendered power dynamics within enslaved communities themselves is an important recent development within the historiography of slavery, helping to understand how Black male dominance affected enslaved women.

Studies that have stressed Black solidarity have overlooked Black male sexual violence against enslaved women. This oversight can be attributed to the very real need to combat the myth of the Black male rapist, but it has silenced the experiences of women such as Rose Williams, a WPA informant, who recounted her experiences of coerced sex with 'Rufus.' Williams described Rufus as a 'bully' who had nevertheless been told by the master that he had to enter into a sexual

relationship with her. Such cases, according to Doddington, reveal the “intersections of dominance and power when considering sexual agency and slavery” (128).

The chapters taken together reveal that in the slaveholding states, no one lived outside of the frameworks created, perpetuated and benefitted from by white men. Whether it was through sexual violence, violent demonstrations of strength through leisure activities, violent fights over honor, or the authority and responsibility associated with trusteeship, Black men proved susceptible to the benefits offered to them through the performance of masculinity. This book does two things: First, it helps readers understand the complex, contested, nature of masculinity, revealing that the field of gender studies has far to go in applying the same level of detail to men’s gendered experiences as historians apply to women’s gendered experiences. Second, the book indicates that the all-encompassing debate over enslaved people’s accommodation versus resistance persists. This is a valuable read for anyone interested in gender and slavery.

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¹ Sergio Lussana, “‘No Band of Brothers Could Be More Loving’: Enslaved Male Homosociality, Friendship and Resistance in the Antebellum American South,” *Journal of Social History* 42, no. 4 (2013), 872–95.

² Jeff Forret, *Slave against Slave: Plantation Violence in the Old South* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2015).