



PROJECT MUSE®

---

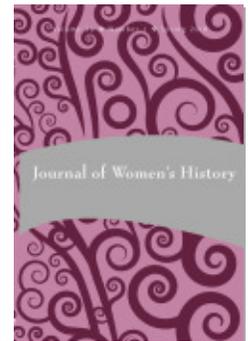
Reconstituting Archives of Violence and Silence in Early  
American Women's History

Sharon Block

Journal of Women's History, Volume 30, Number 1, Spring 2018, pp. 154-162  
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2018.0007>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/689110>

---

## BOOK REVIEWS

### *Reconstituting Archives of Violence and Silence in Early American Women's History*

Rachel Hope Cleves. *Charity and Sylvia: A Same-Sex Marriage in Early America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. vii + 267 pp.; ill. ISBN 978-0-19-933542-8 (cl); 978-0190627317 (pb).

Marisa J. Fuentes. *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 1 + 217 pp.; ill. ISBN 978-0-8122-4822-7 (cl).

Jen Manion. *Liberty's Prisoners: Carceral Culture in Early America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. ix + 278 pp.; ill.; tables. ISBN 978-0-8122-4757-2 (cl).

Honor Sachs. *Home Rule: Households, Manhood, and National Expansion on the Eighteenth-Century Kentucky Frontier*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2015. xv + 193 pp.; ill. ISBN 978-0-300-15413-9 (cl); 979-0300234657 (pb).

#### Sharon Block

When the *Journal of Women's History* editors first suggested a review essay on early American women's history, we had a discussion about the state of the field. In the interest of portraying some of the new directions of scholarship, they kindly allowed me to write about four books that may not seem obviously comparable. Rachel Hope Cleves pens a contextualized biography of two women who joined their lives together. Marisa J. Fuentes constructs a history of the impact of violence and power not just on enslaved women, but on entire historical methodologies. Jen Manion adds a sexuality studies critique to traditional social history readings of archives. And Honor Sachs analyzes the impact of masculinity on localized nation building. These works are set across a wide geography: New England, Barbados, Pennsylvania, and Kentucky. Their methodological approaches range from social history to theory-infused analysis to biography to a focus on macro-level political economy.

What they all share, however, is their success in moving the field of early American history away from its parochial city-on-a-hill and Founding Fathers roots. Together, they question the nature of the archive, the

boundaries of American history, and the foundations of modern mores and institutions. They illuminate the many ways to tell histories of women and the centrality of all women to early American scholarship. As importantly, reading them against one another suggests the stakes and struggles of shifting these boundaries, and it encourages us to confront the consequences of each archival, methodological, and analytic choice we make.

*Liberty's Prisoners* brings to fruition a new generation of Philadelphia social history. A dexterous scholar, Manion takes a theoretically-influenced empirical approach to tracing the development of the carceral state in post-Revolutionary Pennsylvania. An average of nearly two hundred footnotes per chapter and an appendix of fourteen tables make clear this commitment to evidentiary documentation of lives too often erased. With its twist on the title of Mary Beth Norton's foundational early American women's history book, *Liberty's Daughters*, Manion's *Liberty's Prisoners* describes how the ideals of the Revolutionary era led not just to expanding opportunities for some, but to the use of "penal authority to reassert social order" in ways that prefigure the modern carceral state (195).

The book is organized both chronologically and thematically, with individual chapters focusing on the ways that incarceration and criminal justice intersected with labor practices; sentimentalism; social regulations; race and slavery; and sexual behavior. Readers learn how male prisoners' public labor in the 1780s made them the face of imprisonment, thus erasing the treatment of imprisoned women from public view. A discussion of runaways, petty thefts, and class and racial prejudice make clear the effects of the criminal justice system on Pennsylvania's most vulnerable residents. Using the writings of prominent legal and social reformers alongside commentaries on life inside prison, Manion concludes that "the regulation of sexual intimacies was at the heart of the nationwide transformation of old jails into penitentiaries" (160).

Many of *Liberty's Prisoners'* strongest analytic claims rethink the role of gender and sexuality in the state's definition of an orderly society. It is to Manion's credit that she pushes these theoretical interventions in an early American study that also succeeds in its rich reconstruction of Philadelphian history. Manion effectively identifies the gendered expectations of prisoners' submission and the replication of a domestic sphere in prison labor practices as aspects of the "heterosexual political economy" (45). Throughout the book, this term documents the centrality of assumptions of heterosexuality to state and social power. Other useful analytic classifications include the "distorted prison family," and a contrast between "intimate patriarchy" and the prison's "institutional patriarchy" (61, 78). Chapters note the pornographic nature of reformers' gazes, and show how

the penitentiary became a place for people who did not fit into images of proper dependency and domestic family life.

Focused a few states westward, Sachs' book, *Home Rule*, is a well-written history about the ways that "visions of patriarchal household order forged the experience of nation building" in Kentucky from 1776 to 1800 (4). As both a microhistory and a study of state formation, this book explores the impact of geographically and socially peripheral actors on the economic and political landscape. In five chapters, Sachs adds to the historiography that connects the personal to the political by tracing the lived economic reality of a shift that reinscribed power in both the image and hands of white men.

Sachs effectively traces Kentuckians' disappointment with the failed promise of white masculinity, tracing its role in solidifying post-Revolutionary Kentucky into a governable state. The myth of a ruggedly individualistic household contrasted with actual life in a "frontier war zone" (16). That new Kentuckians had to seek security in forts while land speculators limited small farmers' land ownership opportunities challenged "white male ambitions of mastery" (39). Sachs' case study of Bullitt's Lick salt works shows the gap between the ideal of men's household authority and the reality of women's necessary labor. Through the 1780s, crises abounded for would-be home-ruling white men: demographic shifts continued to disadvantage tenant farmers; free people lived on the threshold of indigence; and the violence inherent in "settling" a land already populated by Native Americans was an ongoing life-and-death challenge. This complex reality planted seeds of discontent among white men who were unable to become the self-sufficient household heads and land owners they imagined as their due. By the 1790s, a new political order answered the previous decade's economic unrest by emphasizing white manhood in lieu of land ownership and wealth. The rhetoric of frontier economic achievement was (at least partially) replaced by an emphasis on white men's privileges of race and sex.

Focused beyond the continental United States, Fuentes' *Dispossessed Lives* offers a critique of historical methods that fundamentally rethinks how we write women's and enslaved people's histories. Addressing urban slavery in Bridgetown, Barbados, Fuentes centers each chapter around on the experiences of individual eighteenth-century women: Jane, Rachael, Joanna, Agatha, Molly, and in the final chapter, the emblematic "Venus." Each chapter imaginatively and convincingly reconstructs their experiences, despite the fact that we generally have only handfuls of words about—and never written by—them in the historical record. These women's stories offer a compelling picture of the violent, exploitative, and traumatic experiences of enslavement. For instance, in telling the history of Jane, a scarred runaway, Fuentes creates textual images of wharves, markets, and

taverns; of houses and communities; and of sites for public punishment. By inviting the reader to imagine Jane navigating through this urban environment in her bid for freedom, *Dispossessed Lives* reveals the architectures of control that upheld white supremacy and colonial power. Rather than use theory as an introductory or framing device, Fuentes interweaves it with empirical research to create a compelling and multi-dimensional portrayal of enslaved women's lives.

Fuentes emphasizes the ways that "enslaved women disappear by the violent circumstances of their lives" (128). Women's experiences are eclipsed by their representation in the historical record only as objects of someone else's control: always subjected to violence rather than subjects themselves. A chapter on the relatively well-known free woman of color, Rachael Pringle Polgreen, documents a paradox in the ways that hypervisibility masked women's lived experiences. Polgreen was renowned but not known. Slave trade abolition testimonies, too, made enslaved women's anonymous suffering hypervisible by erasing their individual stories and own perspectives in favor of their appearance as objects of pity and suffering, rather than having subjectivity themselves.

Fuentes brilliantly explores the intersections of gendered performance, raced sexuality, and access to public space in the subjugation of black women. For instance, on a December Saturday in 1768, authorities executed an enslaved woman named Molly who lived toward the north end of Barbados for attempted poisoning. There are almost no records about Molly's life, the circumstances leading up to her alleged crime, her family, or her own version of events. But Fuentes uses the fragments of information about Molly's execution to reveal how her community ritually mourned her death, effectively challenging white supremacy's insistence that enslaved bodies were disposable and desecrated property. In another chapter, Fuentes describes the forced sexual labor of the enslaved, questioning if there can be a category that exists in the "space between rape and consent" that does not reify the problematic nature of both of those terms to describe enslaved women's sexual experiences (64).

Fuentes exposes the shortcomings of current historical methodologies and makes manifest what an alternative history of enslaved women might look like. "It is about resistance to historical methodology that limits our ability to recognize or historicize sparsely and violently produced enslaved female subjects; resistance to our search for subversive agency as the dominant way to understand enslaved humanity; and resistance to what is disciplinarily or historically 'impossible'" (143). *Dispossessed Lives* interrogates not just the violent production of the archive, but also the archive's ongoing production of racial supremacy.

---

Cleves also takes a biographical approach in her deeply researched account of Charity Bryant's and Sylvia Drake's lives in early national New England. *Charity and Sylvia* is outstanding creative nonfiction. Cleves seamlessly weaves an impressive amount of detailed archival research into this compelling narrative. Instead of the traditional academic handful of bulky chapters, *Charity and Sylvia* offers readers nineteen short chronologically thematic episodes of important moments and relationships in the women's lives. Cleves is well versed in historiographical arguments, choosing to make them occasionally informative rather than integral to the narrative. Instead, the book's central argument is the recreation of the multi-faceted, richly textured story of two women's lives and love for one another.

Despite its subtitle, Charity and Sylvia only meet halfway through the book. Before that, we primarily follow Charity's better-documented life through her loves and losses, her work as a teacher, and her family and community relationships. Cleves sets her in-depth portrait of the women within their families, friends, community, and cultural milieu. Thus, the book is as much about the normalcy of Charity and Sylvia's lives in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as it is about their marriage.

And this gets to Cleves' point: we ahistorically assume that same-sex sexual relations were rare, or uniformly condemned, or could never receive acceptance in supposedly less progressive ages. Cleves convincingly challenges the presumption of heterosexuality, showing beyond a shadow of a doubt that Charity and Sylvia lived their lives as a same-sex *de facto* married couple in the nineteenth century. Building on arguments made about gay and lesbian history in later periods, Cleves asserts that the women's and community's public silence about their relationship paradoxically created a space for acceptance. There are certainly less-than-rosy moments: besides conflicts with individual family members and early-in-life damaging gossip, the women repeatedly worried over the sinful nature of their relationship. Cleves smartly suggests, however, that their Congregational Church's theology of sin could also allow for acceptance of one's misdeeds: because everyone sinned, even good people might spend a lifetime trying to overcome their sinful natures. In the eras before homosexuality became an identity, same-sex relations could be just one sin among many, making Charity and Sylvia into fallible sinners much like everyone else.

Cleves also makes an important intervention into histories of sexuality by emphasizing that Charity and Sylvia were sexually active with each other. Her close analysis of poems and writings is particularly persuasive: the women's anachronistic use of "vale" as a euphemism for women's genitalia and for women's space of their own; the deciphering of allusions; and the hidden references to erotic content. Cleves emphasizes physical and erotic desire in the women's lives, beyond the romantic friendships that

---

---

early women's historians identified as the norm in the period. The book's brief afterword most directly ties her narrative to other sexuality scholars' use of Charity and Sylvia's lives. Here, Cleves calls Charity and Sylvia's intertwined lives a "tale of creative ingenuity and accommodation" that has, unfortunately, too often been beyond our imagination of the past (199). These women were typical and extraordinary, and Cleves convincingly makes the case that they could be both at the same time.

Despite their different topics, approaches, and arguments, these books reflect a range of shared analytic interests. Cleves' work on *Charity and Sylvia* and Sachs' study of *Home Rule* each center on the structure and construction of households. Sachs and Fuentes mark the political work done by the privileges of whiteness. Fuentes' focus in *Dispossessed Lives* and Manion's in *Liberty's Prisoners* each make visible the violence committed on subjugated bodies in urban settings. Manion and Sachs explore how early republic power structures built themselves on ordinary lives. Fuentes and Cleves tell stories of individuals whose perspectives have been erased by both historians and archives. Cleves and Manion interrogate assumptions of heterosexual social systems. In conjunction with one another, these overlaps raise important questions about how scholars understand their archive; women's lives; and the role that race plays in American history and historiography.

Fuentes most directly conceptualizes her work as a challenge to "the nature of history" and as a "methodological and ethical project" (1, 2). *Dispossessed Lives* offers instruction to anyone who aims to write the histories of people whose own narratives have been largely erased by racism, sexism, and colonialism. But Fuentes is not just on a journey of recovery. She wants to mark the ways that "violence is transferred from the enslaved bodies to the documents" (5). In other words: while historians regularly face a gap between the historical record and the stories we would like to tell, Fuentes convincingly shows that the violence of white supremacy is inseparable from enslaved people's archival record. While scholars like Saidiya Hartman, Ann Stoler, and Ashley Falzetti have made important related arguments, Fuentes rethinks the specific historical practices of early North American history, fully integrating theory into practice.<sup>1</sup>

All of the authors under review emphasize the need to document and reconstruct women's lives. Sachs peppers her narrative with engaging stories, like that of Ann Wilson Poague Lindesy McGinty, whose life (and many marriages) offer a case study of the tribulations of Kentucky life and false promises of frontier rhetoric. Manion is similarly committed to documenting the lives of the marginalized Pennsylvania women and men whom we know only from records of their incarceration, rule breaking, or appearance as subjects of reform activities. Fuentes makes vibrant the lives of enslaved

---

---

women beyond their place in a ledger or inventory. Cleves may be dealing with relatively more elite subjects than the other authors, but her work in numerous local archives is particularly noteworthy, as is her ability to offer a deep portrayal of the women's beliefs, struggles, and life trajectories.

At the same time, it is impossible to escape the contrast between Cleves' ability to tell Charity and Sylvia's story and Fuentes' inability, for example, to empirically document a single thought of the woman named Jane, before or after Jane's bid for freedom. Cleves explains that Charity wrote about fifteen hundred letters over the course of her life, but only thirty-six escaped her requests for correspondents to destroy them. Any historian would bemoan that loss, wondering how much more we could have known about these fascinating women if more than that small number of letters had survived. I simultaneously think about Fuentes, however, who could not find a single enslaved Bridgetown woman's recorded words. Not. One. Thirty-six letters written by eighteenth-century enslaved Bridgetown women? That would be a treasure, not a tragedy.

If historians do not want to replicate intertwined systems of racism, sexism, and oppression, how can we address these fundamental inequities in the archive? To be sure, the lack of one archive does not mean we should turn our backs on others. I applaud Cleves' impressive work bringing Charity and Sylvia to life. But what does it mean to read such wonderful stories without, as a profession, fully recognizing the privilege and context that allows those stories to exist? Gossip about a young Charity Bryant's affect or sexual behavior, for example, may have led to her depression, embarrassment, loss of friends, and decision to move to a teaching position in a new town. For the enslaved women in Bridgetown, it is not a stretch to imagine that similar gossip might lead to torture or to the destruction of their families; choosing to move away from those who held that knowledge was not an option. When Cleves concludes that these women's lives offer a "tale of creative ingenuity and accommodation," readers will likely be eager to embrace her celebratory picture (199). Yet the opportunity for that accommodation and ingenuity was not just a function of individual will. It was dependent on the women's relationship to their community, to the political economy, and to white supremacy.

Thus, we can use the compelling story that Cleves tells to push historians to think about how best to address the power dynamics that underlay Charity and Sylvia's ability to incorporate their atypical relationship into a world of typicality. How might we confront the invisible privileges that allow the stories of relatively elite white women to propagate? The materials that Cleves dazzlingly uses also silently reflect the archive's violence against other women. Do we risk losing some of our critical gaze when seduced by a deeply developed biographical portrait? In a profes-

---

sion where Founding Fathers biographies seem to proliferate endlessly, we certainly should not avoid compelling stories about any early American women. But perhaps the field of women's history would ultimately benefit if we could balance that productive impulse against the recognition that archival and historical practices prevent us from recreating so many other women's stories.

Other juxtapositions of these works offer more historically specific opportunities to broaden each author's conclusions. Manion explains that New Englanders and Pennsylvanians, for instance, both experienced a "sex panic" over sodomy in the 1820s. This apocalyptic rhetoric contrasts with Sylvia and Charity's relatively unmolested relationship in the same period. It may be that Manion's findings suggest ways that historians could better distinguish between concerns over men's versus women's same-sex, long-term intimate relationships. Or Cleves' work could encourage Manion to further deconstruct the rhetoric's application to individuals' lived experiences. Fuentes' analysis of sexualized slave punishments in abolitionist rhetoric might similarly benefit from a comparison to Manion's analysis of the pornographic gaze of prison reformers or to her conceptualization of the heterosexual political economy. The power of white supremacy in Fuentes' monograph made me wonder how specific Sachs' story of white masculinity was to Kentucky and to the Revolutionary period. Turning oppressed people into objects, rather than subjects, was a feature of power beyond the bounds of legal slavery.

Because I read these books one after another, I kept wishing for more shared definitions and explanations of crucial terms that I could take from one work to another, to help us comprehensively and comparatively analyze early American gender and women. How does Sachs understand the historically contingent meanings of manhood versus manliness versus masculinity? Are they dialectic with womanhood, womanliness, and femininity? While Fuentes spends the most time detailing her theoretical footings, she might have more consistently theorized the centrality of urban spaces to her arguments. Manion productively moves heterosexuality out of the proverbial bedroom and into the sociopolitical structure. I would have benefitted from more explicit discussion about her definition of heterosexual political economy. Is it historically specific? How does it relate to heterosexual ideologies beyond the political economy in early America? Manion's work further raises questions about the degree to which heterosexuality is dependent on particular conceptions of sexed bodies.

At the heart of some of their differences may be each author's approach to the operation of power and violence. Cleves has written a biography of women's lives, communities, and families, rather than focusing on state intervention, violence, and suffering. Legitimated violence, conversely, is

inseparable from the entirety of Fuentes' narrative of Barbados slave society. Manion's project focuses on the shifting operations of class, race, and state power that all too often redefined violence into authority. And violence operates largely in the background of household and society formation in Sachs' work because she primarily writes about one side of the Kentucky frontier. Native Americans generally appear as causes of violence, or something against which Americans reacted, not as subjects themselves. Had Sachs chosen to focus on the role of violence in nation building, perhaps she might have rethought her use of the terms "settled" and "settlements" to refer to colonial settler expansion onto Native American lands.

A welcome trend in all of these early American studies is their explicit ties to modern American life. Sachs ends by noting that "the inequalities of race and gender embedded within the dynamics of households continue to shape our national story today" (150). Fuentes' epilogue movingly explores her place as a scholar and researcher of past horrors; she hopes that *Dispossessed Lives* will be "a gesture toward a reckoning of our own time" (148). Manion begins her conclusion with the stark statement that "the modern penitentiary was born of failure—not success" (190). And, as mentioned earlier, Cleves notes the "failure of imagination" inherent in the modern surprise at the existence of historical love stories like Charity's and Sylvia's (199). These scholars' openness to linking power relationships of the past to the present enriches their studies and their scholarship.

Rachel Hope Cleves, Marisa Fuentes, Jen Manion, and Honor Sachs have written important books that, together, reflect the substantial recent expansions of the field of early American women's and gender history. That they can be put into a shared conversation and that each can point to ways the others might be pressed, expanded, or reconceptualized is a welcome sign of the health and diversity of the field. We are no longer limited to writing just about Abigail Adams' pithy request to be remembered, to reading about the romantic friendships of New England women, or to referencing a single book on the history of colonial enslaved women. With this growing breadth of scholarship comes even more opportunity to think carefully about the consequences of our archival, methodological, and narrative approaches to early American women's lives.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14; Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); and Ashley Glassburn Falzetti, "Archival Absence: The Burden of History," *Settler Colonial Studies* 5, no. 2 (Winter 2015): 1–17.