

Cowling, Camillia. *Conceiving Freedom: Women of Color, Gender, and the Abolition of Slavery in Havana and Rio de Janeiro.* Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2013. xiii + 326 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index.

This book signals an important shift underway in Atlantic abolition studies where historians are increasingly analyzing how the ending of slavery also sparked other profound social, political, and cultural developments. For Camillia Cowling, abolition reflects “a journey, and not simply an outcome” (6). Earlier historiographical debates over “who caused emancipation,” or even, “how do we assess the importance of slave agency,” form part of, but do not consume *Conceiving Freedom*. Instead, this book represents the most detailed and nuanced work yet on how women’s struggles for their own and their children’s freedom recast broader understandings about manhood and womanhood in general, and about the relationship between womanhood and motherhood in particular. Cowling asserts that “any number of their stories contained in this book could be seen as just as much struggles for custody as for freedom” (219). In perceptibly connecting the histories of Atlantic slavery and freedom to the histories of gender formations and public politics, this book reappraises the urban, legal, and social realities of Rio de Janeiro and Havana. Nevertheless, for those still more concerned with the cause-and-effect, nuts and bolts dimensions of the abolition story, this book carefully illuminates how free and enslaved agency catalyzed shifts in local politics and public opinion; it stresses that women’s petitions for freedom drew important public figures into the slavery debates, and thereby changed the tone and direction of such debates. From the municipal government of Rio de Janeiro to the Spanish parliament, political discussions about abolition reflected real-time developments on the ground. If seemingly obvious, this is a dynamic that, nonetheless, often goes under explored in works bent on identifying who deserves credit for abolition. *Conceiving Freedom* establishes a new empirical and conceptual starting point for future studies on women’s activism, race, and citizenship in the Americas.

The parallel and mutually-informing trajectories of gradual abolition in Spanish Cuba and Brazil frame Cowling’s discussions of the “free womb” laws and their wider implications. Both measures, one passed in 1870 in Spanish Cuba and the other in 1871 in Brazil, emerged from the turbulent 1860s. The U.S. Civil War, as well as, the outbreak of the Ten Year’s War in Cuba (1868–78) and the Paraguayan War (1864–70) in South America influenced the legal course of emancipation in these last slave strongholds. If precipitated by specific political crises in each place, it is important to underscore, as Cowling does, that these laws arose while slaveholding was still profitable on its own, and while the export economies of sugar in Cuba and coffee in Brazil remained integrally connected to local and Atlantic industrial capitalist networks (5–8). The process of abolition, then, unfolded amid a series of political, cultural, and legal changes that contradicted economic logic. The personal dramas traced in *Conceiving Freedom* reflect this period of great ferment, and the reader is reminded from the outset that enslaved women very much acted upon these changing times. Cowling sets straight the

all-too-often glossed over reality that, almost suddenly, “the wombs of enslaved women, previously vessels for transmitting enslavement, became spaces in which freedom was, literally, conceived” (9).

The book is structured thematically and divided into three parts. It begins by situating the political and legal context of abolition in Rio and Havana, arguing that these were much more different than similar despite their shared Iberian/Latin American heritage. It then carefully considers how gender and city life influenced the possibilities of claiming freedom, before closing with a gripping assessment of how discussions about womanhood and motherhood became sites where elites and freedpeople disputed the terms of such newfound freedom. The final chapters yield an invaluable perspective into how freedwomen attempted to consolidate their freedom in slavery’s waning years—buying property or defending their bodily integrity, for example—and the importance that reconstituting ideas of motherhood signified to this process. The stories of the freedwomen Josepha and Ramona that function as a narrative device across the text elucidate these processes powerfully.

The book ends with abolition, which is what precisely makes Cowling’s analysis of freedom different from much of the previous scholarship. Whereas most studies focused on the making of freedom start in the post-emancipation period, freedom is explored here within a slave context. Not only does this approach complicate ideas about a linear transition from slavery to freedom, it also makes one realize that former slaves’ demands for equality and inclusion has a history extending back, at least, into the 1870s and 1880s. In other words, scholars should be cognizant that situating studies of freedom from the point of “freedom” onward, or from 1886 and 1888 as it corresponds to these two cases, does not fully capture the reality that for many years, hundreds of thousands of enslaved people (and their former owners) had already been clashing over the terms of freedom. Elites’ post-emancipation reactions to abolition were, therefore, as much about the “new” context as about the “old” unrelenting pressures from freedpeople.

Conceiving Freedom is a product of an array of sources, from the press to traveler’s accounts to legislative debates, but its richest material, doubtlessly, emerges from the lawsuits and petitions for freedom. Here, Cowling draws on the likes of Sandra Lauderdale Graham, Keila Grinberg, Hebe Mattos, Sidney Chalhoub, Rebecca Scott and Alejandro de la Fuente, to emphasize that the enslaved’s use of the courts drew in wide rungs of society; that their persistent pursuits for freedom changed how lawyers, judges, and other sectors of the elite understood the law itself. The author demonstrates that the law was not an abstract, self-evident directive, but that it was always responding to real social pressures, which in these two urban contexts overwhelmingly involved enslaved women.

The book’s close attention to the expectations and experiences of women reflects their historical importance within the process of abolition. According to Cowling, “. . . in each city, women claimants . . . made up over half—and probably a significant majority—of the enslaved and freed people who approached the law during the gradual process of emancipation . . .” (2). They reconstituted ideas about motherhood to ground their petitions. “Claiming that their children

were ‘rightfully theirs,’” Cowling argues, “women placed maternity at the heart of their legal struggles for freedom” (95). Besides a recurring theme in freedwomen’s petitions, this invocation of motherhood was also a part of Princess Isabel’s defense of abolition in Brazil. Women from across the social spectrum, then, empowered themselves publicly on the basis of their status as mothers. Meanwhile, it was also the case that judges and slaveholders refused petitions for freedom precisely because freedwomen posited a vision of motherhood that was not defined by, “marriage and by male-headed households” (158). In connecting these histories of emancipation and motherhood, Cowling sheds new light on each and their interrelationship.

This book has already become a reference point for studies of urban slavery and freedom. Its success—winning two major international awards—derives, in large part, from Cowling’s willingness to “rethink where their [freed and enslaved women’s] stories start and finish” (215). In pursuing new research questions, the book has at the same time brought to light a host of other still unresolved issues pertaining to slave emancipation; some are more specific while others require book-length investigations of their own. On the former, Cowling’s work on gradual abolition in Rio makes clear that women’s petitions for freedom began making waves well before the 1880s—when most histories of abolitionism in the capital city begin. It follows, then, that future research will explore the role of such slave petitions, as well as that of associations and the press, in polarizing the emancipation debate after the 1871 law. Similarly, for both Havana and Rio, we have yet much to learn about the public politics and oppositional networks that these enslaved and freed women encountered. That is, it is evident from the resolute efforts of the likes of Josepha and Ramona that an equally multi-dimensional and evolving coalition of slaveholders (and sometimes public officials) also existed, and that their language and style of politics should also be analyzed historically. It is towards a broader, perhaps also comparative sense of how slaveholders’ politics unfolded, that scholars could now turn. Finally, I agree with the author who emphasizes that from enslaved women’s legal quests, we could also begin to think anew about the larger relationship between emancipation and the history of women’s political activism. For decades, historians of Brazilian abolition have sought in women’s political actions a call for suffrage, and in not locating such a demand have thus downplayed their levels of political consciousness. Cowling begins to change this historiographical narrative, noting that women did, indeed, play a vital and public role even in electoral contexts (despite not being able to vote)—through the press and through attending public rallies (113–14). Is it possible, then, to conceive of this period of political ferment as foundational to women’s public politics, writ large, despite the persisting electoral inequalities?

Conceiving Freedom is, in short, a fine study that will doubtlessly foster new comparative debates on Atlantic emancipations.

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