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Corinne Kreeger  
*San Jose State University*

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## Writing Black Women and Native Americans Back into the Slavery Narrative

### Abstract

The field of history is constantly in flux as academics re-examine questions and conclusions from the past through contemporary perspectives. This establishes a dynamic dialogue between past historical interpretations and current ideas, allowing analysis to provide a foundation to build new theories and explanations. Ira Berlin's work on American chattel slavery has proven to be one such building block. Before Berlin's work, historians often generalized slavery across the colonies and throughout history using Virginia's large tobacco or cotton plantations as a model. However, these plantations were a later development in North America, and focusing exclusively on that model inaccurately portrayed slavery as unchanging. Berlin's pioneering work proposed an analytical approach centered on the evolving slave labor systems in British North America. His theory takes into account the ways geography in the colonies shaped crop choices, and how those choices facilitated an evolution over time from a "society with slaves" to a "slave society." The following paper will illustrate how Berlin's insightful analysis inspired other historians, such as Jennifer L. Morgan and Andrés Resendez, to expand his theory to include traditionally marginalized groups.

### Keywords

American chattel slavery, slave labor systems, marginalized groups, Black women, Indigenous peoples

**Writing Black Women and Native Americans Back into the Slavery Narrative**

Corinne Kreeger

Department of History, San Jose State University

History 210A: Advanced Colloquium United States History

Professor Katherine Chilton

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### **Abstract**

The field of history is constantly in flux as academics re-examine questions and conclusions from the past through contemporary perspectives. This establishes a dynamic dialogue between past historical interpretations and current ideas, allowing analysis to provide a foundation to build new theories and explanations. Ira Berlin's work on American chattel slavery has proven to be one such building block. Before Berlin's work, historians often generalized slavery across the colonies and throughout history using Virginia's large tobacco or cotton plantations as a model. However, these plantations were a later development in North America, and focusing exclusively on that model inaccurately portrayed slavery as unchanging. Berlin's pioneering work proposed an analytical approach centered on the evolving slave labor systems in British North America. His theory takes into account the ways geography in the colonies shaped crop choices, and how those choices facilitated an evolution over time from a "society with slaves" to a "slave society." The following paper will illustrate how Berlin's insightful analysis inspired other historians, such as Jennifer L. Morgan and Andrés Resendez, to expand his theory to include traditionally marginalized groups.

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### **Writing Black Women and Native Americans Back into the Slavery Narrative**

In 1980, Ira Berlin wrote a scholarly article challenging colonial American historians to look at slavery using a new theoretical context. He encouraged researchers to consider the way slavery changed over time and how crop selection affected these changes (Berlin, p. 78). Berlin took up his own challenge and, in 1998, published *Many Thousands Gone*. Within this book, he created a system of analysis for unfree labor based on four regions of English colonization in North America: the North, the Chesapeake, the Low Country, and the Mississippi Delta. Each of these regions began with subsistence farming. The area's climate and geography dictated what crops would thrive as farmers began to expand into commodities for export. Berlin's thesis emphasized how these crop choices, influenced by environmental factors, created different demands on the systems of slave labor (Berlin, 1998). His framework helped move American history away from the static, *Gone with the Wind* setting of slavery, which had inaccurately portrayed Black African men on plantations overseen by paternalistic plantation owners, and Black African women in the domestic service of plantation owners' wives. Southerners promoted this "romanticized" vision during Reconstruction, and it remained a rationalization of their contribution to oppression in the past. It also served as justification for continued oppression of Black people from the 19<sup>th</sup> and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Berlin, 1998, p. 359). Berlin's scholarship on slavery opened the field and inspired authors to expand on his theory of changes to the system of enslaved labor through time and across locations.

Jennifer L. Morgan's 2004 book, *Laboring Women*, was a direct response to Berlin, placing enslaved Black women at the center of her thesis (Morgan, p. 2). Andrés Reséndez's 2016 book, *The Other Slavery*, references Berlin's definitions of "societies with slaves" versus "slave societies" to show how Britain's colonial system of African slavery cannot be mapped

onto the enslavement of Native Americans in the West. On the frontier between Spanish America (Mexico) and what would become the American West, slavery thrived despite its prohibition by the Spanish crown in 1542 (Reséndez, 2016, p. 185). All three authors make complex arguments about slavery as each author chooses particular places and times on which to focus broad subjects. Ultimately, these authors agree that cultural context, as it changes over time, is a crucial focus of historical analysis. However, a closer look at how Morgan and Reséndez differentiate their theses from Berlin's shows the limitations of Berlin's argument. Morgan emphasizes the centrality of Black women's labor and reproductive potential in slave culture, while Reséndez argues for the primacy of the illegality and non-heritability of slavery for Indigenous people under Spanish rule.

Alongside Berlin's primary theory of changes over time and place, he asserts that as slavery evolved, so did the abilities of enslaved people to wield influence on the system. Resistance to enslavement was an inherent aspect of slavery from the beginning. Even with an extremely lopsided power dynamic, relationships were and always are negotiated (Berlin, 1998, p. 2). Ultimately, slavery was about exploiting the labor of others to accumulate wealth for enslavers. In addition to creating a system of coerced labor maintained by violence, slavery also established a class system defined by extremes. Enslavers strove to exact the maximum amount of labor, while enslaved people sought to maintain a portion of their humanity. Aware that enslaved people and enslavers never negotiated on equal terms, Berlin acknowledges that enslaved Black people still had power in a system dependent upon their (coerced) cooperation. Even small actions, such as slowing down work or purposefully losing tools, allowed enslaved people to influence a society where changes in production methods were the principal way cultural changes were made (Berlin, 1998, p. 2-10). These negotiations would adapt as slavery

evolved in the English colonies, from small-scale farms to plantations, and from a more subsistence enterprise to the growth of commodities for export.

The geography of the Low Country (now coastal South Carolina) provides an excellent example of how the specificity of place affects the broader system of slavery. Unbearably hot, humid, and full of malaria, most larger landholders spent warmer months in Charlestown (today's Charleston), leaving work supervision on plantations in the hands of overseers or even a trusted enslaved person. The absence of vigilant monitoring allowed enslaved people to finish daily plantation work quotas and still have time to work on their small plots of land or to create useful household objects, such as baskets. In addition, the enslaved people brought to accompany enslavers for their stays in town had lighter workloads compared to those on the plantation, leading to systems of hiring out. Enslavers ordered their enslaved men and women to engage in additional work in various urban trades, motivating their cooperation by occasionally sharing the earnings they received with them. For enslaved people, what might have begun as resistance to work on farms through the misplacement of tools or slowing down work on plantations ultimately became a more sophisticated system of negotiated work agreements (Berlin, 1998, p. 10-11). Due to the particular circumstances of this location and time, urban enslaved Black women in the Low Country were able to establish carts to sell produce, grown on small plots allocated from their enslaver's plantations, and household items they constructed. They sold goods both to other enslaved individuals (often shopping for their enslaver's city residence) and less wealthy whites purchasing items for urban consumption. This economy, driven by enslaved people, thrived despite many attempts to curb it by law because of its popularity among both other enslaved people and the urban white community. Enslavers were then pushed to concede the need to allow enslaved people some time to work independently (Berlin, 1998, p. 202). In

contrast to Berlin, the other two authors show in their theses that power could be challenged in other ways as well. Morgan's fundamental argument involves the use of invisible and personal resistance by enslaved women. Reséndez describes resistance to enslavement in the West as a choice between enslaving others to protect one's status as free, or to openly rebel against Spanish Colonial rule.

Though Morgan pays due respect to this foundational work by Berlin, she ultimately criticizes him for neglecting the fundamental role of Black women in British chattel slavery. Morgan anchors her thesis on the capacity of women's bodies to perform the labor of fieldwork and the potential for their bodies to produce children. These were the two most valuable sources of wealth in the colonies and therefore crucial to any examination of colonial life or slavery (Morgan, 2004, p. 3 & p. 197). As landholders expanded their farms to include more and more slaves (what Berlin calls "The Plantation Generations"), justification shifted from categorizing enslaved people as mere "outsiders" to justifying enslavement based on supposed "inherent characteristics" of race. Morgan asserts that the heritability of race makes gender of paramount importance to any theories of colonial chattel slavery because only Black women could give birth to a slave. That potential to increase the wealth of enslavers through reproduction fundamentally affected how Black women experienced enslavement (Morgan, 2004, p. 197). Black enslaved women were, in Morgan's work, the literal embodiment of how slavery was continually made and remade. The possibility for an enslaved woman to negotiate within a system where everything she produced, even her babies, was part of the plantation inventory, was greatly limited. Consequently, Black women wielded their power through a private and invisible process of birth control, abortion, infanticide, or, when possible, abstinence. Since an enslaved woman's children were never her own, detachment from the possibility or reality of



having children could also be a form of resistance (Morgan, 2004, p. 114-116). Morgan and Berlin both address the system of English slavery, and Morgan agrees with Berlin that relationships are negotiated and dependent on the specificities of time and location. However, Morgan is resolute in her emphasis on the inseparability of enslaved women's reproductive potential from even the most basic examination of racial slavery.

Reséndez's thesis pulls further away from Berlin than Morgan's does by not only analyzing a system under Spanish control rather than English but also by asserting that the heritable chattel slavery of the English was fundamentally different from the enslavement of Indigenous people by Spaniards in the West. On the frontier between New Spain (now Mexico) and the Western third of what would become the United States (after the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo), Indigenous tribes were already practicing a culturally specific type of enslavement. Spanish colonizers were able to expand the existing system and commodify it for their own particular needs (Reséndez, 2016, p. 3). Since the Spanish crown had made enslavement of Indigenous people illegal (with some exceptions) since the New Laws of 1542, conquistadors and settlers maintained the practice as a kind of open secret (Reséndez, 2016, p. 75). The Spanish on the frontier made liberal use of linguistic gymnastics to profit from free labor in a place where it was illegal; Spain was ineffectual in enforcing laws from across the ocean. Using exceptions in the laws against enslaving Indigenous Americans that were sanctioned by the Spanish crown, Spaniards could simply adapt the enslavement of Indigenous people to comply with the letter of the law, if not the intent (Reséndez, 2016, p. 75). Or, they could simply adopt the crown's language of accepted reasons for enslavement (such as enslaving those captured in "just wars") to provide cover for the illegal ways Indigenous peoples were forced into enslavement. It was quite a transparent practice that worked remarkably well for those who wished to use enslaved

people for labor. Because Indigenous people who might become enslaved lived among and around the locations of their captivity, there was a seemingly endless supply of labor. This created little incentive for the kind of power negotiation Berlin describes as possible on English farms in the East. Instead, many Indigenous people aspired to become owners of enslaved people themselves or supply the insatiable demand of the Spanish by trading in enslaved people. If caught up in the system of forced labor, Indigenous people could avail themselves of their rights in Spanish colonial courts by suing their enslavers, though they rarely prevailed (Reséndez, 2016, p. 49). Enslaved people of African descent could not petition the English colonial courts, as their enslavement was sanctioned by law, whereas much of the Spanish enslavement of Indigenous Americans was not. The fiction of Indigenous rights was a direct consequence of Spain's view that Indigenous people in America were free from the taint of Jews and Muslims in Europe and therefore perfectly suited to become pure Christians.

The Spanish crown's primary goal in the Americas was to convert Indigenous Americans to Catholicism through missions and presidios. However, the realities of life in Nueva México made the exploitation of Indigenous peoples so profitable that poorly paid soldiers and administrators found it hard to resist. What in other contexts might have led to negotiation and compromise instead became coercion. The reality of the profits that could be made off "Indian" labor ultimately trumped dictates from faraway Spain (Reséndez, 2016, p. 203). Two Spanish practices designed to encourage colonization and reward soldiers and officials were ripe for exploitation: repartimiento and encomienda. Repartimiento was designed to grant Spanish colonizers land and the right to recruit forced labor as tribute, *for a limited time*, and to help provide essential food and goods for settlers. Encomienda was permission from the crown to require Indigenous people to provide labor in exchange for protection and Christian education. In

the first case, time limits on labor were essentially never enforced, and for those made to work in silver mining, could be deadly. In the second case, the imperative of the crown to convert Indigenous peoples was undermined by the marriage of Catholicism directly with a system of forced labor (Reséndez, 2016, p. 3).

Rebellion occurs in every area where slavery is found, but for it to be attempted on a large scale, there has to be little other recourse available for individuals to alleviate their situation. The brutal and deadly forms of labor that went into silver mining, along with the growing realization among Indigenous people that the missionaries' god did not protect them as promised (and whose spokesmen were at times complicit in their punishment, torture, and enslavement), led to a widespread and coordinated multi-tribal attack known as "The Great Northern Rebellion" (Reséndez, 2016, p. 165). It was so successful that only two months were needed for the surrounding Indigenous population to gain the upper hand. Isolated in one building and out of options, the Spanish fled on foot to what today is Mexico and did not return for twelve years (Reséndez, 2016, p. 163). But return they did, and adjusted themselves to the new social orders created, while native tribes had rearranged their relationships in the absence of the Spanish. Reséndez brings the history of Indigenous American enslavement by Spaniards out of the shadows of chattel slavery, where it had traditionally been obscured, and in that way fills a gap in the story of slavery left open by Berlin. Despite their differences, Reséndez and Berlin would agree that slavery had an insidious staying power as it evolved and adapted over time in the spaces it occupied for hundreds of years.

All three of the books discussed in this paper are indispensable for their contributions to the scholarship on slavery, a fundamental institution in the making of a distinct American identity, whose consequences we must still deal with today. The ways Morgan and Reséndez

amend Berlin's framing device highlight the strengths of Berlin's work while making plain the voices scholarship has traditionally sidelined: the narratives of Black women and Indigenous peoples. Taken together, these three books and their authors give an insightful look at the evolution of American slavery and demonstrate the importance of moving away from a static approach to history toward a history dynamic enough to be inclusive.

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