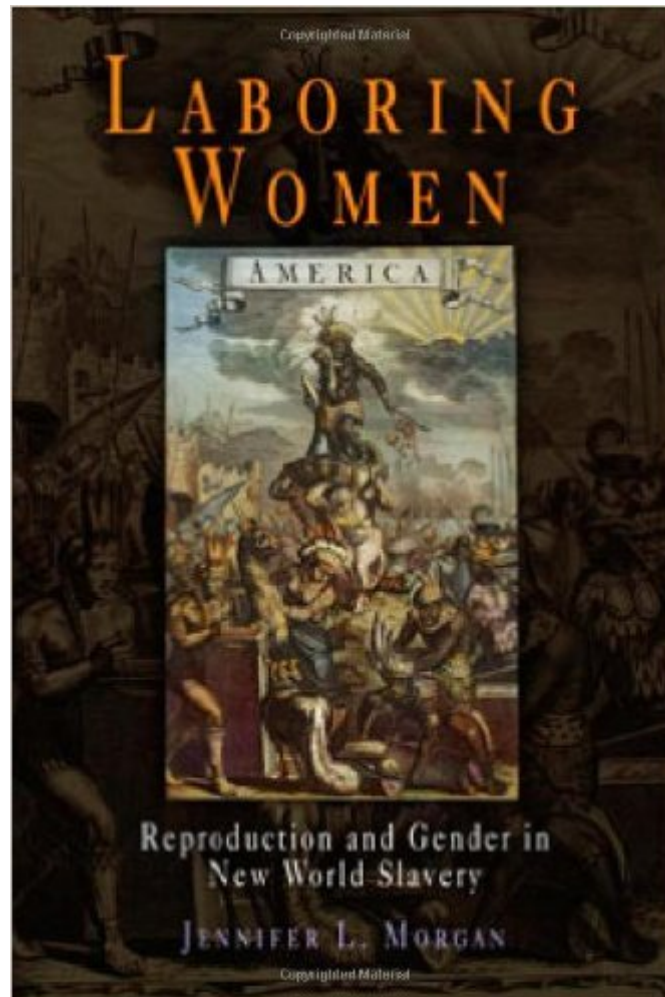


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# Laboring Women: Reproduction And Gender In New World Slavery (Early American Studies)



## Synopsis

When black women were brought from Africa to the New World as slave laborers, their value was determined by their ability to work as well as their potential to bear children, who by law would become the enslaved property of the mother's master. In *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*, Jennifer L. Morgan examines for the first time how African women's labor in both senses became intertwined in the English colonies. Beginning with the ideological foundations of racial slavery in early modern Europe, *Laboring Women* traverses the Atlantic, exploring the social and cultural lives of women in West Africa, slaveowners' expectations for reproductive labor, and women's lives as workers and mothers under colonial slavery. Challenging conventional wisdom, Morgan reveals how expectations regarding gender and reproduction were central to racial ideologies, the organization of slave labor, and the nature of slave community and resistance. Taking into consideration the heritage of Africans prior to enslavement and the cultural logic of values and practices recreated under the duress of slavery, she examines how women's gender identity was defined by their shared experiences as agricultural laborers and mothers, and shows how, given these distinctions, their situation differed considerably from that of enslaved men. Telling her story through the arc of African women's actual lives "from West Africa, to the experience of the Middle Passage, to life on the plantations" she offers a thoughtful look at the ways women's reproductive experience shaped their roles in communities and helped them resist some of the more egregious effects of slave life. Presenting a highly original, theoretically grounded view of reproduction and labor as the twin pillars of female exploitation in slavery, *Laboring Women* is a distinctive contribution to the literature of slavery and the history of women.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In this engaging work, Jennifer Morgan looks at African women and slavery in early colonial Barbados and South Carolina. She focuses on these women's dual roles in production and reproduction. Thus, Morgan discusses not only women's bodies and gender issues, but also their labor. She argues that enslaved women's labor was physically vital to the evolution of slavery in these British colonies. While their physical labor helped the economy expand and develop, their reproductive labor ended up defining the system of slavery. Unlike slavery in the past, the children born to enslaved women became slaves themselves. Morgan begins by discussing the emergence of a gendered racial ideology of African women, which led to the view that African women did not feel pain in childbirth or strenuous labor. This lack of pain made them un-Christian and suitable for slavery (p. 40). It also made them suitable for hard work. Morgan argues that these depictions also shaped English ideas about race before they ever laid eyes on an African. Thus, Morgan agrees with David Eltis' assessment that racism existed before the colonies were ever settled. Morgan then discusses the experience of enslaved women in the Americas by discussing slaveholders' attitudes about reproduction, the disruption of enslaved families, and the ways that work affected reproduction. Morgan emphasizes that the slaveholders held the power, but is also quick to point out that enslaved women were able to shape their own familial experiences. This is a well-crafted work, but it does seem to be lacking in two areas. First, Morgan discusses sex and reproduction, but there is practically no discussion of slave women being exploited as sexual objects.

In his poem "Yet Do I Marvel," Harlem Renaissance poet, Countee Cullen writes, "Yet do I marvel at this curious thing," this "curious thing" being the figure of a black poet. Cullen's "curious thing" can also be extended to the "curious" being of the African woman and her body. Writers, explorers and colonists alike, in traveling to the African continent, "grappled with the character of a contradictory female African body-a body both desirable and repulsive, available and untouchable, productive and reproductive, beautiful and black" (p. 16). In her book, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*, Jennifer Morgan brings to light this contradictory, dual nature of African women as being both producers and reproducers simultaneously of labor and laborers. Her work is illuminating in that it examines issues relating to enslaved African and African American women's lives that have received little or no attention in past works. *Laboring Women* traces the histories of

enslaved African women from the African continent through the Middle Passage, and then on to their lives as laborers in the New World. In doing so, Morgan skillfully and systematically forces her readers to imagine the lives of African women outside of the popular discourses that limit our full understanding of the culture and history that is so rich and prevalent in the lives of African women. In chapter one of her book, Jennifer Morgan begins by providing a history of the emergent thoughts and views that led to the characterized and stereotypical image of the African woman. Written accounts of travelers and colonists alike commonly depicted African women as anomalies, as women who were not like the civil white woman.

By challenging conventional wisdom of slavery, the roles of enslaved women in the West Indies and South Carolina take new shape and greater meaning in Jennifer Morgan's *Laboring Women*. The topic of slavery is discussed and written about at length by many; however, only four authors prior to Morgan have written literature in regards to the enslaved women of this era. The records, documents, and literature left behind to evaluate this period rarely and vaguely mention women, and there are numerous assumptions and misconceptions about them that must be addressed.

Morgan's book places African women at the center of slavery by highlighting their significance in determining the shape of the slave system, as well as the ways in which the system shaped their experiences and culture. Prior to the mass displacement of African men and women by colonialists, travelers began to record various travel logs that racially scrutinized Africans. Traders pointed out extreme cultural distinctions between themselves and Africans to vindicate slavery, and further to exploit a race for economic benefits. Morgan points out that "the publication of images fueled the imaginations of settlers and would-be colonists alike and constituted an essential component of the ideological arsenal that European settlers brought to bear against African laborers (13)." The strangeness of African women only made colonialist's justifications more solidified. Morgan claims that women are understood to be the true laborers of slavery as a result of their duty to reproduce and work the fields. They carried an unimaginable burden that demands attention and acknowledgement from historians.

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