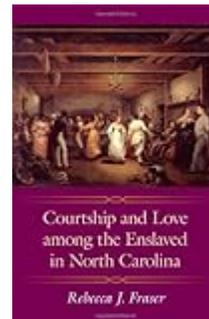




**Rebecca J. Fraser.** *Courtship and Love among the Enslaved in North Carolina.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007. x + 137 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-934110-07-2.



**Reviewed by** Victoria Ott

**Published on** H-SAWH (January, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Antoinette G. van Zelm (TN Civil War Nat. Heritage Area Center for Historic Preservation)

## Love and Resistance in the Slave Community

In the intimate world of courtship rituals and romantic ties, enslaved African Americans found a source of empowerment and personhood. So argues Rebecca J. Fraser in her book on slave men and women in North Carolina. Fraser explores the lives of courting couples and their interactions with slaveholders and the slave community. She aptly demonstrates how the enslaved created relationships grounded in particular ideals that resisted slaveholders' definitions of these relationships (p. 3). Adding to an already rich tapestry of studies on slave resistance, Fraser challenges readers to expand their interpretation of the standard sources on slavery and think about how courtship rituals were a way to defy the slave system.

Organized thematically, Fraser begins her study with an analysis of the racialized stereotypes that southern whites constructed to dehumanize slaves and validate interference into their personal and familial lives. Echoing the conclusions of Deborah Gray White in her study of slave women (*Arânât I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* [1985]), Fraser posits that whites used

the female imagery of the lustful âJezebelâ to justify the sexual exploitation of enslaved women. Conversely, the asexual âMammyâ identity alleviated concerns about female sexual prowess. Fraser likewise points to the stereotypes of male slaves created in the minds of slaveholders. The âSamboâ image, identified by John W. Blassingame in his study of the slave community (*The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* [1972]), neutralized the sexuality of enslaved men and reduced them to the status of children. Although current research into African American manhood places more emphasis on the sexualized image that emerged after the Civil War as southern whites sought to reassert white supremacy, Fraser contends that such perceptions of black men as aggressive âBucksâ existed in the prewar period as well. Slaveholders called on these dichotomous gender identities to intrude into the marital relations of enslaved couples and undermine parental authority in the slave family.

Fraser next explores how competing spheres of influence—the slaveholders' control and the slave

community-shaped the communal rules of courtships. From seeking permission to pursue relationships to choosing marital partners, slaves found that the master was a constant presence in the lives of courting couples. The slave community also imposed a moral standard and created its own courtship rituals, many of which defied the limitations of the slave system. Fraser contends that slave preachers, family members, and extended community relations enforced ideas of respectable behavior, challenging the sexual imagery that southern whites promoted. Moreover, courtship rituals required couples to seek approval of their union from parents, family members, and neighbors. Likewise, the larger slave community constructed courtship rituals, such as public ceremonies in which men and women competed for the attention of their romantic interest.

The remaining chapters provide critical evidence to support Fraser's contention that courtships played a crucial role in defying the spatial and temporal limits of the slave system (p. 63). The high demands of work coupled with slaveholders' strict rules limiting personal freedom diminished courtship opportunities. Yet, the traditions of the slave community, such as the John Kooner parade during the Christmas season, created spaces in which enslaved men and women could subvert and convert the system to their own ends (p. 59). In doing so, Fraser argues, the enslaved developed new landscapes that broadened their world. By transforming the church, woods, and quarters into places where young people could forge new relationships, enslaved men and women ultimately redefined the concepts of space and time (p. 68).

Another significant theme in these later chapters is Fraser's discussion of how the enslaved found ways to assert a sense of manhood and womanhood in spite of racialized sexual stereotypes. African American men, for example, reclaimed their masculinity by disregarding the slave patrols and sneaking to neighboring plantations for

visits, while women defied assumptions of the enslaved female's voracious sexual appetite through the promotion of modesty in their courtships. Moreover, using the informal economy to obtain extra wages or goods allowed slave men and women to fulfill the roles of protector and provider for their families.

Fraser also asks readers to reconceptualize the function of folklore tales, specifically the stories of tricksters in which slaves use deception to subvert the slave system and triumph over their masters. Historians typically view such narratives as revealing of a long tradition of slave resistance. Yet, the author posits that such tales often elucidated upon idealized gender identities (p. 80). The book's final chapter takes this story of romantic relations to its natural end by exploring the wedding ceremony. Although white southerners denied the enslaved legal marriages, men and women created unions regardless of approval from their masters and constructed wedding traditions. In the view of the participants, a divine sanctioning of marriages through public ceremonies in the slave community trumped the legal barriers and also provided a sense of respectability.

Fraser's analysis is compelling, calling on readers to reexamine the landscape of the enslaved community. Her reading of notable primary documents, such as the Works Progress Administration interviews of former slaves and Harriet Jacobs's narrative, through the lens of courtships, as well as her use of anecdotal evidence from church documents, family records, and plantation manuals illuminates how enslaved men and women transformed the world slaveholders created into a humanizing environment that fostered romantic relationships. *Courtship and Love among the Enslaved in North Carolina* is a welcome addition to the historiography of slave resistance and sheds new light on efforts of the enslaved to define gender identities on their own terms.

s

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-sawh>

**Citation:** Victoria Ott. Review of Fraser, Rebecca J., *Courtship and Love among the Enslaved in North Carolina*. H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. January, 2009.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23603>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.