The Souls of Womenfolk: The Religious Cultures of Enslaved Women in the Lower South. Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh. University of North Carolina Press, 2021. 320 pp. $95. Hardcover ISBN: 9781469663593.

In recent years, a growing body of literature has highlighted the experiences of African women living around the Atlantic rim during the era of slavery. Jessica Marie Johnson, Marisa Fuentes, and Sowande' Mustakeem, among others, have mined a wide-ranging and interdisciplinary body of archival sources toward the development of truly breathtaking narratives of life, loss, and resistance under slavery. Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh adds significantly to this body of work in *The Souls of Womenfolk*, an impressive study that explores the religious and spiritual lives of African women on the continent and their progeny living under slavery in the United States. In an intellectual nod to W.E.B. Du Bois, Wells-Oghoghomeh argues that women enslaved in the Americas endured not a double-consciousness, but rather a triple-consciousness, rooted as they were at the nexus of both the productive as well as the reproductive brutalities of American slavery.

Wells-Oghoghomeh's study begins with a gendered analysis of slavery in West Africa, where women navigated two separate, though interrelated, slave trading networks. In West Africa's internal slaving system, women were regularly bought, sold, traded, and ransomed as prized commodities. Meanwhile, a growing external slave trade developed in response to the transatlantic trade that witnessed the capture and sale of African women bound for the plantation Americas, despite European traders' stated preferences for male captives. In both instances, African women developed myriad strategies for navigating their fraught political and sexual worlds.

Some elite women living along the West African coast positioned themselves as commercial brokers and intimate partners with European traders. More than mere sexual consorts, these "wives of the coast" worked as cultural and linguistic interpreters, helping to establish and maintain trade between local African elites and European traders. Though these women exercised significant power and influence, Wells-Oghoghomeh raises difficult questions regarding consent in the relationships between elite African women and European traders. She notes that against the backdrop of transatlantic slavery, the prevailing structures of racialized violence in West Africa "diminished or in many cases eradicated women's capacity to consent to or refuse the sexual advances of powerful men."

If elite African women on the coast exercised at least some power and influence, the options for non-elite and enslaved African women were much more constrained. Unable to forge formal partnerships with coastal elites, women of lower status worked assiduously to secure more pragmatic gains. For non-elite women, this often meant shielding themselves or their children from enslavement. Once bound to labor, enslaved women struggled to secure manumission for themselves and their loved ones. Wells-Oghoghomeh makes clear that well before the transatlantic slave trade reached its apogee in the eighteenth century, West African women of all classes were already keenly aware of the fraught relationship(s) between sex, slavery, and socio-political power.

From this, Wells-Oghoghomeh offers the crucial insight that captive women who subsequently found themselves bound for the plantation Americas likely "apprehended the meanings of their enslavement through the paradigm of gender prior to their comprehension of race." That is, by the time captive African women disembarked in the Americas, "they had already witnessed the steady decline of the stabilizing structures of their societies and apprehended the meanings of transatlantic transport within the expanded purview of domestic slavery and politics." Wells-Oghoghomeh chronicles the development of a shared understanding of slavery for African women in which "the experience of capture, removal from kin ties, economic dependency, and sexual vulnerability burrowed into the collective psyche of enslaved women whether they were marched to another West African household, the barracoon of a European slave factory, or the dark hold of a Savannah-bound slave ship."

Notwithstanding their previous experiences of sexual vulnerability, slavery in the plantation Americas entailed significant changes for enslaved women. Wells-Oghoghomeh argues that while interracial sexual relationships had the potential to create pathways to social ascendancy in the West African context, no such pathways existed in the slaveholding South. In a wide-ranging process that Wells-Oghoghomeh calls the "resignification of the womb," slavery effectively altered the social and biological role of reproduction into an engine of capital accumulation. Maternal processes were monetized in the slave South such that women's wombs became "simultaneously property and machinery." Slaveholders attempted to alienate bondwomen from their children through formal law, slave sales, customary practices, and punitive violence. In short, the planter class engaged in a gendered attack on enslaved women in order to "impugn bondwomen's moral credibility, demean their sexuality and degrade their humanity."

In response to these dislocations, enslaved women embraced what Wells-Oghoghomeh calls "womb ethics," a series of interrelated beliefs and practices that established alternate theories of "good, just, right, and necessary action." Rather than being fixed and universal, "womb ethics" were highly situational and contextual, including, among other things, abortion, filicide, child abandonment, surrogacy, and adoption. Wells-Oghoghomeh argues for a new vision of gendered resistance in which bondwomen "gauged the 'rightness' of their actions in terms of the limited range of options available to them." Against the culture of sexual dismemberment, black women embraced oppositional theories aimed at remembrance. In a broad cultural ethic that Wells-Oghoghomeh calls "common sense," bondwomen established and disseminated alternate ethical codes, comprising a knapsack of necessary survival skills for black women. As a regulatory tool and a peremptory logic, "sense" helped bondwomen determine when and under what circumstances they might retaliate against an oppressor or restrain their hand, when to name their attacker, or remain silent. In a particularly poignant passage, Wells-Oghoghomeh argues for the importance of the "ethics of acquiescence" in which bondwomen, ever aware of the stark choices set before them, might opt for acquiescence as a necessary technique of survival.

If "sense" helped bondwomen navigate the quotidian forms of racialized and gendered violence, "trans-sense" provided a means to commune with the otherworld. In the remembrance of birth and funerary rituals, bondwomen imbued childbirth and death with meanings that eclipsed

the strictly capitalist concerns of their captors. In addition, enslaved men and women elevated terms like "Aunt" and "Granny" to honorific status, effectively imbuing all women with spiritual power, regardless of blood relation. Midwives and nurses created spiritual spaces dominated by women in birthing spaces, sick rooms, and plantation infirmaries. Notably, Wells-Oghoghomeh argues that even in the absence of overt spiritual power, bondwomen often emerged as "larger-than-life transcendent figures in familial mythology." In properly performing birth and death protocols, administering medicines and remedies, and conveying ethical lessons and pearls of wisdom, bondwomen emerged as vital spiritual forces on southern plantations.

The ritual powers that enslaved women harnessed were further amplified by special categories of gendered beings, including hags, witches, and mermaids, each imbued with special spiritual powers. In providing key avenues for redress and resistance, "sense" and "trans-sense" provided enslaved women a means to reach beyond the limits of their confinement toward broader meanings that were, at once, transnational, transatlantic, and transethnic. When taken together, African women's myriad responses to slavery and the slave trade provided examples of "audacious, antagonistic, protective, and violent female and feminine power."

The Souls of Womenfolk is a powerful addition to a robust body of literature devoted to the experiences of African and African American women living under slavery. Wells-Oghoghomeh offers crucial insights, close analysis, and some surprising findings along the way. This book will likely become required reading for scholars in diverse fields, including African and African American studies, the transatlantic slave trade, and black women's history.

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