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Talitha L LeFlouria, Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South

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Talitha L LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South*, University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, NC, 2015; 257 pp. (including index): 9781469622477, \$39.95 (cloth)

Talitha LeFlouria's *Chained in Silence* is a meticulously researched, and immensely illustrative record of the understudied labor efforts made by thousands of black female convicts in the post-Civil War South. Via primary sources, this text specifically chronicles how this labor force contributed not only to the New South's efforts to usher in industrial modernity, but also shaped early penal reform that accommodated both an expanding economic base as well as the need to subordinate and defeminize freed black women. In five detailed chapters LeFlouria takes on race, gender, biological notions of criminality, rehabilitation rhetoric, law, local economics, and the prison industrial complex—all while breathing life into long ago buried testimony and highlighting how state-sanctioned punishment and private commercial interests converge in the spirit of preserving racial hierarchy and nourishing budding economic pursuits.

The inquiry begins with an illustration of how racist, paternalistic beliefs around black women's incurably criminal selves, drove the need to round up criminal women who could not support themselves in the "civil" world. Indeed there were freed black women who—while working as cooks, maids, and laundresses—took advantage of their close proximity to goods that they could steal from their white employers. Records show that larceny was an unexceptional offense, committed perhaps out of necessity or as an indignant response to employers' unfair compensation offers and unwelcomed sexual advances. Some city-dwelling black women working in Atlanta's gambling, bootlegging, and brothel circuits, were rounded up for vice offenses that their white counterparts continued to take part in, largely undisturbed. The white Georgian penal response sought to curtail black women's crime but also to symbolically restrict black women's freedom. Legal officials alleged that these women were plagued by idleness and needed the discipline of structured work. Moreover, an entire terrain needed rebuilding and with little left in the state coffers to fund the effort, the option of private convict leasing could not have been more attractive.

LeFlouria demonstrates how black women's prison labor was absolutely critical to the launch of post-bellum modernity and convict leasing, prison camps, and state prison farms served several functions. Subsidized black labor provided a practical solution to the South's fiscal crisis, the state was relieved of the burden

of building and maintaining prisons facilities, and black women's freedoms were effectively minimized, allowing white supremacy to proceed uncontested. The nationwide push toward industrial agriculture, automobile innovation, and road improvement had a direct effect on how Georgia reframed its carceral structure at the start of the 20th century. By 1915, Georgia had more surfaced rural roads than any other southern state and it was misdemeanant black women sentenced to decentralized chain gang assignments, who built many of those roads and bridges. Black women felons served longer sentences, working on Georgia's railroads, in the coalmines, and as brick packers. In the all-women's prison camps, work squads toiled from sunrise to sunset hauling, stitching, cutting, and processing broomcorn, cotton, and lumber—effectively spearheading the southern industrial textile industry. These women were completely defeminized, dressed in tattered striped prison garb, compelled to labor as much if not more than their “weak and feeble” male counterparts, and were often sterilized via gynecological neglect and devastation. Some did actively resist their imprisonment by escaping, stealing, feigning illness, or burning uniforms or structures in the effort to undermine productivity. However, because the prison sites were rife with sexualized violence, illness, infection and fatality, ritual abuses were largely inescapable.

LeFlouria identifies several reformists who made it their charge to ameliorate the lived lives of black female convicts and as such, the roles of Black women in the new South “had to be revised to meet a new set of commercial demands and to abate public dissent” (p. 102). The redirection of black female convicts' labor efforts toward developing Georgia's agro-industrial penal complex was a solution that accommodated all “interested parties”. Back in the fields, a more “natural” site for black women workers, labor efforts included crop diversification and the development of more advanced farming implements. Some women acquired skilled trade expertise, though their mastery did not net them any tangible advantages in the labor market upon release. While in the custody of private and state correctional entities, workers routinely suffered major injuries and contracted infectious diseases. As bedbound workers were unproductive and expensive to care for, some were granted clemency and had their sentences commuted, but only after their invalid status was unequivocally confirmed. LeFlouria convincingly argues, too, that clemency rulings had little to do with mercy and everything to do with the economic unviability of these now broken women.

This remarkable work details how black women's overlooked lived experiences sparked both early penal reform as well as the advancement of new forms of labor. By lifting the veil that obscures the diversity and significance of black women's labor contributions, readers are armed with a more informed imagination of just who was responsible for (re)building the postbellum South's economic infrastructure. LeFlouria's research also takes on the work of introducing the traumatized voices of these women whose bodies and personhood were devastated by convict labor, and begs us to evaluate how in a contracted economy, the mechanisms of slavery and black labor exploitation have evolved in increasingly insidious ways. It appears that for black women imprisoned at the turn of the 20th century, convict

labor may have been worse than slavery. The new confinement context for these women was branded with all of the same violence and exploitation, but amplified by the additional terror of the decline in their procreative worth and the efforts levied against their maternity. Despite their massive contributions, these women were permanently relegated to a new devalued and disposable underclass. What was certain, too, was the state's unwillingness to invest in the correction and care of this new criminal class. So the question remains today: If the state imposes laws that regulate poor black women's movements but relinquishes its role in the treacherous handling wreaked upon black women's bodies while in correctional custody, can we still hold it accountable? What precisely is the state doing for/to the people who it cannot afford to punish but still identifies as useful for labor and profit production?

In addition to the historical perspective offered by LeFlouria's expertise, the book's contemporary implications are remarkably fertile and point to racialized, gendered rhetoric that animates contemporary profit-driven penal regimes. The relevance of this book's lessons is particularly pronounced during the current historical moment where poor, nonviolent, women of color constitute the fastest-growing convicted population in the United States. Simultaneously, we must confront the swelling influence of inconspicuous corrections privatization, where little oversight is enforced and our most vulnerable citizens will see everything extracted from them before any measure of (re)habilitation is introduced. These practices affect longstanding impacts on state budgets, convicted communities, and public conscience. Not unlike the "vagrant" women who were rounded up from the streets of Atlanta in the late 19th century, the presumption of guilt remains for multi-marginalized women of color who are disproportionately arrested, charged, and convicted of criminal offenses. LeFlouria implores readers to disrupt silences that mask legacies of gendered, racial bias that steers punishment outcomes, and she invites future studies to examine the role of race and gender in the construction of formal control and state-sponsored economic innovation. For every new way there is to blast through the ground and plant the seeds of profit, it seems that we find the same fingerprints on the tools and the triggers. We must keep digging.

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