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First Ladies and Their Bondspeople

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# SLAVERY AT THE GENDERED CROSSROADS OF THE REVOLUTIONARY ERA: FIRST LADIES AND THEIR BONDSPEOPLE

Brenda E. Stevenson

**Erica Armstrong Dunbar**, *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge*. New York: Atria Books, 2017, xvii + 253 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$26.00.

**Marie Jenkins Schwartz**, *Ties That Bound: Founding First Ladies and Slaves*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017, 420 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00.

As I walk attentively through the mansion houses at Mount Vernon, Montpelier, and Monticello as part of a series of plantation research outings during annual sojourns to my home in Virginia, my questions hover everywhere, but two in particular push to the forefront. What was it really like to work and live—young and old, male and female—within these beautifully conceived and adorned spaces, among the most powerful and privileged of one's age, with so limited an opportunity to insist on one's own humanity? How can historical narratives constructed today ever truly contain the truths of those captives' lives?

Erica Armstrong Dunbar's *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge* and Marie Jenkins Schwartz's *Ties That Bound: Founding First Ladies and Slaves* have powerful, even moving, stories to tell about some of these men, women and children. These engrossing monographs concern the institution of slavery in the eras of the American Revolution and the early Republic and how elites as well as those whom they enslaved shaped the margins of the nation's founding ideals of liberty and democracy.

The stories told in *Ties That Bound* and *Never Caught* indeed are not new ones, but Marie Jenkins Schwartz and Erica Dunbar have profoundly enhanced our knowledge of these people and events and, as a result, deepened our understanding of slavery, particularly the gendered relations within the domestic worlds of elite slaveholding households.

There is much to appreciate in Marie Schwartz's *Ties That Bound*. Its most significant contributions are found both in its content and analysis. It is certain,

for example, that enslaved women routinely described slaveholding women as “devils” and “hellcats,” particularly when they spoke of their own physical abuse by these women and the sale and abuse of their children. From this perspective, slaveholding women were no better than their husbands not only because of the ways that they treated their slaves directly, but also because they willfully hid, excused, enabled, and took part in the physical and psychological terrors visited upon black bondspersons and their families. This phenomenon is a nuanced lesson in Marie Jenkins Schwartz’s *Ties that Bound*.

Schwartz’s well-researched monograph is a discourse on the relationships of four of the most elite women in the early United States—Martha Washington, Martha Wayles Jefferson and her daughter Patsy, and Dolly Madison—with their slaves. The stories of these women take us through their transition from girlhood to matron status in the nation’s largest slave society at the time, Virginia. This point is important because Schwartz quickly establishes for at least Martha Washington and the Jefferson women that they were socialized from birth to accept the privileges of slaveholding as a financial anchor and social marker for their households and their descendants. As girls, they learned that black people were meant to serve them without question and had no right—inherent or otherwise—to freedom, personal wellbeing, or happiness.

Their childhood socialization also included learning that the men in their families routinely demanded the sexual services of enslaved girls and women; how to discount biracial kin; that slave domesticity could be tolerated as long as it did not undermine the operative racial hierarchy; that masters and mistresses must compel their slaves to work hard and be obedient; and that slaves, regardless of their age, gender, or importance within their own social worlds, were the most useful form of portable property that whites could possess. A slaveholding woman’s right to barter, sell, use as collateral, loan, give, or rent a bondsperson for the most petty of economic concerns, such as to buy an article of clothing—even more than their command of slave domestic labor as cooks, wet nurses, spinners, weavers, sewers, ladies’ maids, laundresses, cleaners, etc.—sat at the heart of these elite women’s connection to, and concern with, their human property. In other words, these women all learned how to “master” and benefit from the black bodies under their control, and they rarely questioned their racial prerogatives and privilege. Schwartz clarifies that it was the men (Washington, Jefferson, and Madison) who gave more thought to the idea of black freedom during the era of the Revolution—Washington famously emancipating his slaves in his will—than their “first ladies.” Martha Washington clandestinely foiled the plans of her spouse to carry out the details of planned emancipations; and Dolly Madison may have acted similarly.

Beyond the author’s documentation of the callous perceptions these elite women had of their slaves, Schwartz renders detailed accounts of the incred-

ible degrees and kinds of skilled labor that enslaved men, and particularly women, performed. Her description is essential to understanding how psychologically, physically, and intellectually taxing were life and labor for those closest in physical proximity to the most elite of slaveholding women. For example, *Ties that Bound* also solidifies our sense of the sexual violence that enslaved women endured in almost every slaveholding household. Jefferson's relations with Sally Hemings routinely draw attention. Schwartz too recounts this "scandal." It is, however, George Washington's and Martha Washington's households, before and after their marriages, that furnish the most evidence of this "tradition." *Ties that Bound* also links Washington sexually to an enslaved woman belonging to someone else, as well as implicates Martha's son in the rape of his maternal, biracial aunt. Both acts resulted in the birth of biracial children. Schwartz also lends much insight into the very private lives of these very public women, including their struggles with crafting and maintaining the "perfect" personae in the face of their domestic wrangling with sex scandals, insolvency, and the loss of their children to early death or addiction. All of this makes for compelling narratives that capture her audience's interest and imagination.

What Schwartz does not give her readers, however, is a more clear and dynamic portrait of the interior lives of the enslaved people in her study, including the details of their familial and communal ties. This unveiling would have allowed the reader to more deeply understand the complicated reverberations of slaveholding women's actions in the lives of those bound black people who lived and worked in close physical proximity to them as well as those in nearby quarters and locales.

Erica Dunbar Nelson's *Never Caught* fills the void left by Schwartz's work. Nelson's study recounts the life of Ona Judge, a biracial dower slave, skilled seamstress, and lady's maid to Martha Washington. While residing with the first couple in Philadelphia, Judge became optimistic that she might be able to gain her freedom. She had good reasons to hope. Gradual emancipation was by then Pennsylvania law. Moreover, Philadelphia had a large contingent of emancipated people of color who were available for Judge to consult with regarding obtaining her release from bondage. There also was an applicable law that stipulated that any bondsperson who remained in the state for more than six months could petition to be freed. Judge was cheated out of her freedom, however, through George and Martha Washington's illegal machinations. The last straw seems to have come when Mrs. Washington decided to send Judge back to Virginia as a wedding gift, not only dashing her desire for freedom, but also placing her away from her family and in the home of a mistress known to be difficult. Judge took off for the free state of New Hampshire and did not look back.

The reader gleans much in *Never Caught* about the daring details of Judge's brilliantly planned and executed escape, but equally important is Dunbar's ability to transport her audience into the private world of Mrs. Washington's most trusted enslaved female. Dunbar astutely exposes Judge's own familial connections and concerns while a slave in Virginia; her ability to gain vital information, comfort, and support from a Philadelphia free black community that became her own; and how she found a place for herself, including marriage and motherhood, as a self-emancipated woman in the seaport New Hampshire town of Portsmouth. One learns, for example, about the other enslaved people in the Washington home—some among their elite house and skilled slave force, others not—who tried to escape, occasionally successfully. Readers also are made aware of the "underground" railroad in Philadelphia that assisted enslaved people to their freedom long before the organized vigilance committee of Robert Purvis became a renowned beacon of emancipation during the 1830s and beyond.

Dunbar makes very clear that Judge abandoned a life of crippling bondage. The author also emphasizes that in order to do so, Judge had to leave her sprawling extended family, the only people in the world she really could rely on for love and support: her mother Betty, her full sister Philadelphia, and her half siblings, their spouses, and children. Her decision to leave on May 21, 1796 was sparked by Martha Washington's decision to gift her to a relative, leaving Judge little hope that she would ever gain emancipation if she remained. Still, Judge had to think long and hard about what and whom she was leaving behind, her chances for success, and the frightening consequences if she were to fail—certainly at least a harsh whipping and sale away from her family, probably to the lower South. The enslaved woman's plan had to include not only the advice of local blacks and some whites willing to help, but also was drawn on all she had learned while growing up and watching the movements and decision-making apparatus of her owners and the bonded persons around them who managed to avoid some of the worst consequences of enslavement by acting whatever part was required of them. Dunbar teaches that Judge, like most enslaved people, had played many different parts as an enslaved female. She had been the dutiful slave seamstress, the careful single woman assiduously avoiding circumstances that could lead to her sexual assault, a reliable member of the black community willing to keep its secrets so that hers would be kept in turn, and then the invisible fugitive cloaking herself in a free woman of color's mantle. Erica Dunbar's Ona Judge is an intelligent, charming, beautiful, courageous, talented young woman of great personal resolve, a more complex picture than that found in most slavery monographs.

One can, however, find these attributes in the autobiographical accounts of enslaved women themselves, *the* essential reference to their own lives. Consultation with these kinds of sources as part of one's methodological approach is

much more apparent in Erica Dunbar's *Never Caught* than in Schwartz's more broadly envisioned book. The writings of Mary Prince (1831), Sojourner Truth (1850), Harriet Jacobs (1861), Louisa Piquet (1861), and Elizabeth Keckley (1868), for example, provide interior perspectives of enslaved girls' and women's lives and their relationships with slaveholding women that remain paramount to this arena of scholarly discourse. Indeed, perhaps no better book represents the relationship between a black woman, who had lived as a slave, and a President's wife than Elizabeth Keckley's autobiography, *Behind the Scenes: Or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (1868). Although Keckley already was "free" when she went to work for Mrs. Lincoln, her earlier relationships with elite slaveholding women frames her interactions with Mary Todd Lincoln. This methodological choice of going directly to the actual words and reminiscences of the black, female subject when depicting their lives has taken more than a generation for scholars to embrace. A discussion of this historiography, necessarily brief and incomplete here, is still instructive for our understanding of the significance of Dunbar's and Schwartz's works.

One hundred and fifty years after Mary Prince managed to do the impossible—to tell her story of British colonial enslavement in English print—came the publication of Angela Davis's *Women, Race, and Class* (1981), Catherine Clinton's *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (1982), and Deborah White's *Ar'n't I a Woman?* (1985), which, collectively, initiated a serious analysis of the labor and lives of antebellum southern women on opposite sides of the slave experience. These scholars and their muses from the southern past have since afforded historians rich fields of intellectual thought and practice. Their works also followed pioneering monographs like Julia Spruill's *Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* (1938) and Anne Firor Scott's *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830–1930* (1970) that helped to lay the foundation for a gendered historiography (at least of white women) in the colonial and antebellum South.

Most of these early works and some later ones, however, did not thematically engage both enslaved and slaveholding women, as Schwartz and Dunbar manage to do in their monographs. Daniel Blake Smith's *Inside the Great House: Planter Family Life in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Society* (1980) distinguishes between the experiential spheres of slaveholding men and women and is relevant, therefore, when considering the ways in which Schwartz later analyzes gendered relations between the elite men and women whose lives she depicts. And while Jean Friedman's *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830–1900* (1985) and Victoria Bynum's *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (1992) include some discussion of black women's lives, most of this cohort of research monographs were dedicated to the experiences of free white women, if they included substantive discussions of women at all.

There are some exceptions. Allan Kulikoff's *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680–1800* (1986) supplies an in-depth study of gender relations in both white and black households, although there is little on the relations of slaveholding women and their property. Suzanne Lebsack's *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784–1860* (1984) includes an essential chapter on free black women that remains quite useful in its explication of the familial and economic status of these people in the urban upper South and in comparison to women's lives across the racial divide. Adele Logan Alexander's *Ambiguous Lives: Free Women of Color in Rural Georgia, 1789–1879* (1993) also engages the domestic lives of free women of color—this time in the countryside—but includes little about the relationships of multiracial southern women with the white females they must have encountered privately and publicly. Mechal Sobel's *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (1987), on the other hand, does not directly engage gender, but does contribute to an important conversation on the complex domestic, social, and work landscapes created by elite slaveholders and their human property, particularly her analyses of their religious practices and cultural exchanges. This early historiography offered precious little on enslaved women, but remains important because we still need to understand the “worlds” of slaveholding men and women who believed that they owned them, “body and soul.” Likewise, these monographs place these experiences in conversation with the male-centered monographs specific to the experiences of the bonded people, the most important of which emerge from the revisionist era of the 1970s, including John Blassingame's *Slave Community* (1972); Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1974); Peter Wood's *Black Majority* (1974); and Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (1976).

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's *Within the Plantation Household* (1988) broke this mold and she, like Schwartz in *Ties That Bound*, centered her substantial monograph on the domestic and work lives and relations of elite slaveholding women and their bondswomen. Stephanie McCurry's *Masters of Small Worlds* (1995) provided a much-needed analysis of poorer southern farm women and their place within the gendered antebellum agrarian economy and culture, including some discussion of the relationships between smaller slaveholders and their male and female property. Likewise, Kathleen Brown's *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriots* (1991) remains a significant introduction to social relations across color and gender lines in the colonial Chesapeake, providing legal, economic, and social context and comparative depth for any scholar of that place and time who hopes to take up the topics that Dunbar and Schwartz engage in their monographs.

Discussions of these themes are extended from the 18<sup>th</sup> century through the antebellum era in my *Life in Black and White* (1996), a monograph that compares

the social lives and kin relations of blacks, both slave and free, with middling and wealthy whites in the Upper South, and there is much here on the fraught relationships of enslaved women and their owners, males and females. *Life in Black and White*, along with Wilma King's *Slave Childhood* (1998), deepens our understanding of the lives of enslaved children who worked in the house, barn, garden, and yard under the watchful, and sometimes cruel, eyes of their mistresses. These books signaled the beginning of the historiographical emphasis on the hostility and harm that slaveholding women—once typically thought of as “elite” sisters who could do little to impact the ways that family patriarchs treated their bondspople—willingly took control of black women's lives, labor, punishment and families. Laura Edwards's *Gendered Strife and Confusion* (1997) follows these relationships into Reconstruction and is especially important in its explication of legal ties and expectations across race and gender lines. It is with Thavolia Glymph's *Out of the House of Bondage* (2008) and Margaret Washington's *Sojourner Truth's America* (2011), however, that the consistent “awfulness” of elite white women's treatment of enslaved and newly freed women arises in ways that resonate especially in Dunbar's and to a lesser extent in Schwartz's works considered here. These themes are taken up and expanded again in Stephanie Jones-Rogers's *They Were Her Property* (2019).

Within this diffuse and somewhat spotty historiography, scholars of slavery, the American Revolution, and U.S. women in particular have excavated, described, and analyzed the roles that the first slaveholding Presidents and their spouses played in the lives of their bondspople and, likewise, the impact that enslaved men and women had on the daily lives, economic strivings, intellectual musings and political ideologies of their owners and their owners' families. Elizabeth Dowling Taylor's bestselling *A Slave in the White House* (2012), in which the author had the good fortune to be able to draw directly on the published account of Paul Jennings, *A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison* (1860), an example of one of the best of these works about a slave man and his relationship to a president and his wife, providing information about the interior thoughts and lives of Jennings, his skilled family and enslaved associates, and particularly their struggles to remain with their kin and to gain freedom. This work on Jennings is insightful and foreshadows the best of what Schwartz offers in her study of slave/master/mistress relationships in the White House. It is the work on Sally Hemings, however, that remains most instructive, if not always most satisfying in actually excavating the underpinnings of an enslaved woman's actions in the ways that Dunbar is able to do in her biography of Ona Judge.

Still, Fawn Brodie's *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (1974), Annette Gordon-Reed's *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings* (1998) and *The Heminges of Monticello* (2009), and Lucia Stanton's “*Those Who Labor for my Happiness*”



(2012) have made Sally Hemings—Thomas Jefferson’s long-term concubine and mother of six of his mixed-race children—the most visible enslaved person, regardless of gender, of the Revolutionary era. These fine-grained monographs, as well as readily available primary documents, published memoirs, a protracted and well-publicized DNA inquiry, more than a few feature-length films, children’s books, and historical novels, collectively have established Sally Hemings’s place in the biography of the American Revolution’s most important political philosopher. The works of scholars also have made Hemings into an icon, configuring her life as a necessary window into the ugly, but popular, practice of using female slaves as convenient sexual outlets and markers of white patriarchal power.

While no scholarly, book-length work on Ona Judge existed before Dunbar’s important contribution, the story of the enslaved woman who sought her freedom and was hunted by Martha Washington (the misleading myth always has been that the president was resistant to tracking Judge down) has circulated for some time in individual and joint biographies of both Washingtons, such as Flora Fraser’s *The Washingtons* (2015) and certainly those of the nation’s inaugural first lady, including Helen Bryan’s *Martha Washington* (2002) and Patricia Brady’s *Martha Washington* (2005). Judge’s story also has been the subject of historical fiction writers and of children’s books for more than a decade. But Dunbar’s work is still vastly different in that she reveals so much about Judge’s life before and after her escape.

In Erica Dunbar’s *Never Caught*, Judge’s search for liberation is hardly an uplifting narrative of freedom fought for, won, and experienced. Judge did indeed manage to escape the clutches of the most powerful couple in North America, and Dunbar explicates the young black woman’s tremendous efforts on behalf of herself and her children. Judge simply would not allow them to be enslaved by allowing them, or herself, to be caught. But the author also reveals the very limited “freedom” Judge acquires. It is a freedom marred by continual legal uncertainty, coupled with a harsh poverty that Judge and her children endure once her husband dies. Dunbar’s work reiterates, therefore, not only the important story of Ona Judge, escaped Washington slave who is “never caught,” but the compromised legal, social, and economic freedom of emancipated (self-emancipated and otherwise) people of color, particularly the additional burden of economic marginality endured by female household heads and their children.

Ona Judge’s freedom is not just one that is hard-won and -wrought. Her self-determined emancipatory sojourn, Dunbar informs us, also is filled with irony. When Judge escapes, Martha Washington replaces her with Judge’s sister Philadelphia as the wedding gift to Eliza Custis Law. Eliza’s marriage, thankfully, does not keep Philadelphia from finding her own husband, a free black man named William Costin with whom she has two children. Ona Judge

did not want to have children before being freed because she did not want her status as an enslaved person to pass onto them; Philadelphia took that risk and it paid off in ways that neither she nor her sister could have predicted. Eliza Law, as it turns out, did not stay married. She also did not remain the owner of Philadelphia. Eliza allowed her estranged husband to emancipate Philadelphia, the bondswoman's two children, and some of their extended kin. The free black Costins then moved to Washington, D.C., where Philadelphia's husband became a successful property owner and businessman. The two sisters' experiences of freedom turned out to be as different as their paths to it.

Dunbar suggests in her concluding remarks that if Judge had known of her Virginia family's eventual release from slavery, that insight would have brought her a certain peace of mind. Undoubtedly it would have, but it also might have caused her to ponder again what her fate might have been if she, rather than Philadelphia, had gone into the Custis-Law home. The kind of social history and biography that Erica Dunbar achieves in *Never Caught*, and that Marie Jenkins Schwartz also attempts in *Ties That Bound* allows readers to piece together these kinds of psychological insights.

The stories told in *Ties That Bound* and *Never Caught* indeed are not new ones, but nevertheless they enhance our knowledge of extraordinary people and events and, as a result, deepen our understanding of slavery during the eras of the American Revolution and the early Republic, particularly the gendered relations within the domestic worlds of elite slaveholding households.

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