
Charlie Gleek

Comparative Studies Program

Florida Atlantic University
Modernity can emerge as a slow drip and other times like a thunderclap. For black women in postbellum Georgia, their sudden emancipation from slavery was just as quickly curtailed by de facto and de jure economic, gendered, social, political, and cultural structures, conforming to the contradictions and inequalities of capitalism while simultaneously propelling southern American economies into the modern era. Talitha LeFlouria’s *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South* ambitiously takes on the task of highlighting the roles that black women played in the modernization of the Georgian economy and culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; roles that were products of material and ideological circumstances as well as acts of resistance against hegemonic class and racial forces. LeFlouria carves out a space for her study of black women distinct from other scholarship on oppressive convict labor systems in the New South. Relying on a detailed reading of periodical records, primary sources, and historiography, LeFlouria conveys the unique economic and cultural experiences of black women in Georgia, who through choice and circumstance, end up involuntarily providing an invisible, exploitive form of labor for rebuilding the Empire State of the South. Georgia’s particular system of convict labor—a partnership between the state and capitalist interests to develop and sustain an exploitative, profitable, and renewable labor force—comes to serve as a way of modernizing state and private institutions through the continued oppression of black women’s labor, bodies, and identity. LeFlouria distinguishes her analysis work from other studies of convict lease systems in the American South through the way in which black women’s work is made visible; not merely in the domestic sphere, but through the broad range of vocational labor and acts of resistance otherwise underrepresented in postbellum American historiography.
LeFlouria begins the text by sketching a critical historical arc of black female convicts, framing their experiences in the context of the Jim Crow South, where exploitive capitalism, white supremacy, and sexualized violence disrupted the potential for black women’s economic and social progress following emancipation. In the first chapter, radicalized, gendered, and pseudo-scientific constructions of criminality provide the cultural justification for a pernicious form of discrimination of “Negro crime;” a scheme which allows for the state of Georgia and their venture capitalist partners to develop a system of labor free from the uncertainties and complications of the emerging industrial wage labor market. LeFlouria goes on to argue in the second chapter that prison labor comes to serve as the basis for rebuilding and advancing the industrial economy and infrastructure in Georgia, one that is explicitly for the benefit of white citizens in the state. White supremacy was therefore replicated and extended on the backs of black labor– both indentured and imprisoned- building an economic and social culture in the New South partitioned along racial, gender, and class lines. These divisions are more fully explored in the third chapter of the book, where LeFlouria suggests that the position of female prisoner laborers in the unisex Georgian carceral system became the subject of contested political and cultural debate, culminating in efforts to modernize the Georgia carceral institutions away from the sexually integrated, decentralized, and exploitive prison system. This newly-segregated prison institution, outlined in the fourth chapter, becomes the site for black women working to modernize Georgia’s convict labor system across a range of vocational areas, thereby rejecting stereotypes and limits about the gendered nature of labor. LeFlouria then broadens the historical analysis of black convict labor in the fifth chapter, highlighting how the successful system of women’s prison labor extended to include misdemeanant women who’s
forced labor came to modernize state infrastructure, roads, and public work projects; often at the cost to black women’s bodies and identity. LeFlouria closes *Chained in Silence* with a familiar, yet continually-necessary call for the inclusion of female voices in establishing historiographies of complex social phenomena.

One of the more interesting aspects of *Chained in Silence* is the extent to which LeFlouria captures the agency of individual black women. In contrast to purely structural arguments which would locate female convict laborers as merely objects of class and racial politics, LeFlouria argues that black women’s choice of vocation, their criminal activity, and their work within the convict labor system served as acts of resistance against the institutional nexus of early industrial capitalism and white supremacist violence. Unlike their male counterparts, black women came to work across the range of agricultural, domestic, and industrial sectors of Georgia’s prison economy. This diversity and agency of labor provided black women vocational opportunities otherwise excluded from them in Jim Crow South. However, as with many contradictions in exploitive economic systems, black women’s labor also provided capitalists and state authorities with the evidence that women’s labor, in particular, could be used to scaffold industrial and modernizing projects. Therefore, while the diversification of gendered labor practices may have proved emancipatory for individual women in otherwise oppressive carceral conditions, the very success of black women's convict labor became the basis for an extension of racialized criminal justice practices which extended the material and ideological power of white supremacy in 20th century Georgian society.
Moving beyond Spivak’s notion of a subaltern silence where oppressed people are never able to articulate their histories and agency, LeFlouria provides a documentary and scholarly voice for a particularly marginalized group –black women convicted of crimes –highlighting the complexity of their experience in postbellum Georgia. Rather than fetishizing the experiences of female domestic workers turned convict laborers, LeFlouria is able to get out of the way of the personal stories of women who found themselves once again propping up the economies of the New South against their will, while at the same time providing a compelling historical and cultural analysis that explains the macrosocial conditions which framed and drove these women’s lives. In considering contemporary conversations about American culture which are increasingly rejoining topics of labor and class with those of race and gender, *Chained in Silence* not only provides readers a trajectory for the exploitive way economies in the New South achieved economic and cultural modernity, but also a road map for uncovering and listening to voices of those who continue to be oppressed in 21st century capitalist culture here in the United States.