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Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW

Medicine and Healing in the Age of Slavery

Edited by Sean Morey Smith
and Christopher D.E. Willoughby

(Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2021.

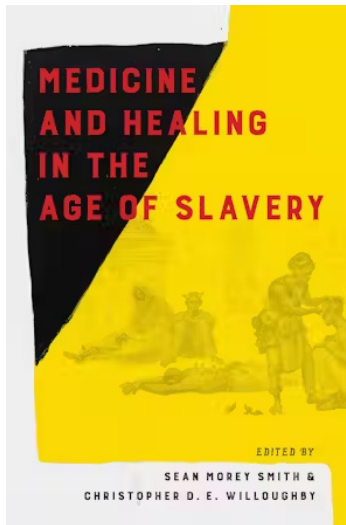
Foreword, acknowledgements, notes, contributors, index.

Pp. vii, 224. \$45 hardcover. ISBN: 0807171219.)

Few methodological obstacles have plagued historians of the United States and of the Atlantic World as chronically as the layers of racial bias that limit and mediate the archival footprint of enslaved people. Scholars such as Marisa Fuentes and Pablo Gomez, in particular, have begun to wade through such bias and to suggest potential means to overcome these investigative hurdles (in various printed and conference settings), establishing a promising foundation for future researchers. The editors of *Medicine and Healing in the Age of Slavery* build on that foundation and push the field in exciting new directions. While the archive will continue to present difficulties, the essays in this collection give one hope that even the most prejudiced records can be read and reinterpreted in a manner that opens more direct avenues to the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the

enslaved.

The editors set out with three ambitious goals: to “position western medicine as one of many healing systems that circulated within the Atlantic World,” to “reveal new insights into the inner world of the enslaved and their health desires and choices,” and “to highlight the role of state intervention . . . while also grappling with the diversity of states in the Atlantic World” (2). The contributors indeed make great strides not only in relativizing the—all too often triumphalist—history of Western medicine, but also in addressing points of contact between the healing and medical traditions of Africans, Amerindians, and Europeans. We learn, for example, that areas of significant overlap existed between “Iberian and West African methods of bloodletting” and that “sick enslaved people . . . could [and regularly did] integrate formal and folk networks of healing in their efforts to survive” (74, 125). Likewise, multiple contributors go



beyond well-trodden “frameworks of resistance” and “grand narrative[s] about master-slave power struggles” and focus instead on the “quotidian work of survival, self-reliance, and self-advocacy that happened in the thick of slavery” (47, 112). Transcending this “grand narrative” includes analyzing conflicts that arose between enslaved individuals, amidst the tension that frequently characterized the “forced intimacy of plantations” (52). The first two goals are thus consistently achieved. The authors’ attempts to capture the life-worlds—and even the “tactile [or ‘haptic’] experiences” (88)—of the enslaved are especially admirable and enlightening.

The analyses of state intervention and diversity are, on the other hand, rather less commendable. Although the role of various European states in upholding and emboldening the racist and gendered practice of medicine through the licensing of practitioners is thematized in several essays, those states remain essentially undifferentiated. European states and their medicinal traditions generally appear as vague monoliths, and this is the volume’s primary weakness. Contributors point out that European traditions were consistently elevated above those of indigenous or African cultures, yet we scarcely glimpse what those European traditions entail. To focus too narrowly on European society would, of course, be an affront to the subject matter. For the sake of orientation, though, the volume could have profited from more extended, substantive discussions of the legal, social, and intellectual

characters of the metropolises that imposed their ideological frameworks on colonial societies.

Such minor flaws notwithstanding, this edited volume represents an important—even pathbreaking—contribution to the field. I know of no other works that manage to draw readers so deeply into the everyday lives of the enslaved, and the contributions are generally well-written, accessible, and informative. No piece of scholarship is free from jargon; one might occasionally need a dictionary to define terms such as “undisciplinarity” (114), “anthropometry,” and “craniometry” (190). But on the whole, the book should be suitable even for advanced undergraduates, and a more general educated audience could certainly read and profit greatly from it. As always, there is more work to be done; the historians who contributed to this volume have *initiated* the process of integrating the study of diverse medicinal and healing traditions as well as of the idiosyncrasies of transplanted European legal systems with that of slavery in the United States and Atlantic World—but they certainly have not finished it. In sum, *Medicine and Healing in the Age of Slavery* represents the cutting-edge of the historiography surrounding medicine, healing, and slavery in the Atlantic World, leaving readers with the impression that the future of the subfield is bright.

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