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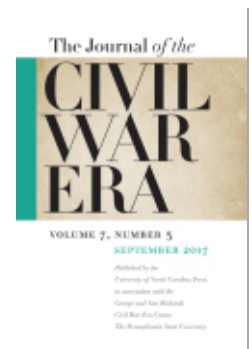
*No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim  
Crow Modernity* by Sarah Haley (review)

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which, while useful in highlighting the connections between the past and the present, might jar some readers.

*David Silkenat*

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***No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity.*** By Sarah Haley. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. Pp. 360. Cloth, \$34.95.)

Sarah Haley's *No Mercy Here* reveals the routine exploitation of black women's bodies and labor by the carceral state in Georgia in the late nineteenth through early twentieth century. Haley powerfully uses the story of black female incarceration to show "that gender is constructed by and through race, and that the production of woman and other stable gender categories required violence" (8). From the Reconstruction era through 1908, most incarcerated black women were sent to work camps under the convict leasing program. When convict leasing was abolished that year, they worked on the (state-run) chain gang and were often ordered to spend a probationary period as domestic servants.

Haley traces the "queering" of incarcerated black women. The Progressive Era was the moment of the production of normative heterosexuality: marking incarcerated black women as queer was part of this project. Agents of the state labeled them as hypersexualized, mannish, and insufficiently domestic. In the convict leasing system, and then the chain gang, the women were forced to take on male work, sometimes even to wear men's clothing. State agents also displayed the women as hypersexual, punishing them by forcing them to appear partially naked in front of male guards and convicts, and subjecting them to sexual assault so regularly that when they became pregnant while incarcerated, the state treated their pregnancy as a natural event, asking no questions. Because the state imagined black women as outside of womanhood, forcing them to labor as men was natural, and their right to reject sex was unthinkable.

Haley suggests that anxiety about white womanhood motivated this queering of black women prisoners. At a time when all women were claiming economic and political rights and sexual self-ownership, queer black

female prisoners became caricatures; by contrast, white women were rendered as domestic, modest, and compliant. White women who were arrested or incarcerated found both the public and agents of the state sympathetic to their claims that it was intolerable for them to be incarcerated alongside, or treated as though they were, black women.

Black women through these years were approximately six times as likely to be arrested as were white women. Atlanta police arrested girls as young as twelve and women as old as sixty. Half were arrested for violent crimes (including infanticide, often on thin evidence), but some were arrested for even petty theft or vandalism. Arson convictions were also common. Standards of evidence to convict black women were demonstrably lower than those applied to white women. For instance, a white man accused a black woman of pickpocketing him on a city street in the dark. He was able to identify her as the culprit later, he claimed, because of the large size of her breasts.

Haley catalogues the many physical abuses and deprivations that the white men who ran institutions like Milledgeville State Prison Farm regularly inflicted. In addition to being constantly subjected to sexual violence, incarcerated black women suffered physical injury from the grueling labor they were required to perform. They suffered sickness and early death from unhygienic conditions at the camps, exposure, lack of adequate medical care, and malnutrition. They were subjected to whippings that combined physical pain with a deliberately perverse display of gender role violation meant to underline their status as nonwomen.

Even as it disciplined their bodies, the state constantly observed and labeled incarcerated black women: white people who worked in the prison system held themselves forth as experts who could explain black women's true natures and character. Incarcerated black women learned to explain themselves in terms that whites would find compelling. Unlike incarcerated white women, incarcerated black women had little success in asking for leniency on the grounds of their womanliness; courts and parole boards looked skeptically at black women's claims that they had committed crimes under duress, that they were too frail to do physical labor, or that they needed to be released to care for their children. Rather, the most effective strategy for black women—and the one, Haley shows, that they repeatedly took—was to claim inadequacy, depravity, and incompetence and to promise that now, chastened by the system, they had become compliant and productive workers.

This hegemonic characterization of incarcerated black women was never unchallenged, however. The National Association of Colored Women, despite its politics of respectability, recognized that the characterization

and treatment of incarcerated black women were part of a larger project of the humiliation of black womanhood and advocated powerfully for the abolition of convict leasing. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union, particularly through Rebecca Felton, was an unexpected ally in the battle against convict leasing, though largely because it deemed the racial mixture that occurred within convict leasing dysgenic.

Haley uses several strategies to reclaim the lost humanity of incarcerated black women. She asks readers to dwell imaginatively on what might have been in the blank spaces in the records. What relationships did incarcerated women Adeline Henderson and Nancy Morris, who worked together in a coal mine and then as agricultural laborers at Camp Heardmont, have to one another? Haley combs through the records to find moments of resistance and escape, which she reads within the era's tradition of industrial sabotage. She also draws on the women's prison blues of the period. Prison-themed songs by singers like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith expressed a contemporary black radical political world, which the prisoners can be imagined to have inhabited, even if they were not allowed to speak it.

Part of an explosion of transformative new work that recognizes oppressive and discriminatory incarceration as central to the project of modernity—including, most recently, Talitha LeFlouria's important *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South* (2015)—this book is required reading for anyone who would like to understand race, gender, incarceration, and violence in the Progressive Era. Haley's unique and effective combination of intensive and methodical research with bold, creative analysis makes for an engaging and authoritative treatment of this until-recently neglected subject.

*Elaine Frantz Parsons*

ELAINE FRANTZ PARSONS, associate professor of history at Duquesne University, has recently published *Ku-Klux: The Birth of the Klan during Reconstruction* (2016). Her current project traces the significance of paid violence work in the history of Pittsburgh.