

Amrita Chakrabarti Meyers. *Forging Freedom: Black Women and the Pursuit of Liberty in Antebellum Charleston*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2011.

In this book, Amrita Chakrabarti Meyers builds on a strong and growing historiography of women in Charleston, South Carolina. Long understood to be the heart of the Old South, Charleston is rivaled only by New Orleans as a laboratory for understanding the links among gender, race, sex, urban life, and slavery. Like Gary Nash's similarly titled study of free African Americans in Philadelphia, Myers's work focuses on the strategies by which legally- or quasi-free individuals sought to gain and hold on to freedom. As such, her analysis centers on the legal system and property-holding rather than on escaped slaves, the underground economy, or black life outside of whites' purview. Although her subjects are few in number, Myers offers new insights into how these women "found a way out of no way" (16).

One of Myers's principal interests is uncovering how the shifting legal and economic context in Charleston structured black women's access to liberty. Because interracial sex was never against the law in South Carolina, African American women could attempt to "negotiate sex for freedom" (59), although Myers posits that white male/black female relationships were never entirely consensual. The lack of anti-miscegenation laws highlighted patriarchal privilege, which also initially included elite men's right to free whomever they wished, including sexual partners or biracial children, simply by declaring their intention in court. By 1820, however, the legislature worried more about a growing free black population than white men's prerogatives and so banned court manumission and designated legislative petition as the only avenue to emancipation. When, in 1841, it became clear that local enforcers often permitted legal trusts to circumvent the intent of this action, the legislature prohibited them as well. Meanwhile, throughout the period, Myers notes, state and local authorities regularly restricted free African Americans' mobility and occupational access. Myers's close reading of city directories, probate records, and court petitions proves that some women successfully traversed these barriers, although they were less likely to do so by 1850, once legal restrictions had tightened and Charleston's economy declined.

Myers finds that success came most dependably to those women who located market niches and then bolstered their financial position by acquiring slaves and other forms of property. White southerners revered "capitalist enterprise," Myers claims, and so had to extend "the privileges basic to [its] promotion" even to those lowest in the social hierarchy, African American women (129). Although her arguments about the significance of market principles in the Old South and her subjects' savvy concerning them are justified, her claim that this avenue was more important to securing freedom than inheritance from white men seems less convincing. If inheritance both declined over time and was less common among Charleston women than their New Orleans counterparts, it is still true that "one-quarter of the city's black women who inherited property acquired it from white men to whom they had some kind of familial connection" (132). As Myers' own stories attest, such an inheritance could have a multi-generational effect.

Myers concludes with two captivating case studies, and both center on intimate relationships between enslaved women and their white male owners. Margaret Bettingall lived in comfort as the common-law wife of wealthy merchant Adam Tunno for nearly forty years, but with an unclear legal status her position remained "contingent and insecure" (180). In contrast, her daughters employed a fascinating array of strategies—including guardianships, femme sole laws, legal petitions, and extensive slave-holding—to extend their inheritance and solidify their own freedom. The enslaved house servant

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Commented [CS8]: See my use of dates in my brief summary of her argument? This is helping people who haven't read the book see the periodization the author set up. She argued that early on (early 1800s) the lack of large numbers of free AfAm women meant that white men allowed them more freedoms. But gradually (first cut, 1820, worse, 1841, then worst by 1850), the white elites eliminated these freedoms.

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Sarah Saunders had a similar experience. In 1831, sixteen-year-old Sarah's pregnancy displaced Cecille Cogdell, the legal wife of her master, Richard Cogdell. (Myers suspects Cecille was passing as white herself.) Regardless of Cecille's death, of Richard's high regard for Sarah (clear in both his word and deed), or of the fact that over the next twenty years she bore him six children whom he acknowledged, Sarah nevertheless died as his slave. But in 1858, Cogdell finally abandoned his native city in order to free his remaining enslaved children in Philadelphia.

The Saunders and Bettingall stories underscore the value of this book. While Myers' depiction of the marginality of most free black women fits with established interpretations of antebellum race and gender, her analysis of how and why some women rose above that fate is thought-provoking.

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