

Cecily Jones, *Engendering whiteness: White women and colonialism in Barbados and North Carolina, 1627-1865* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), ISBN: 9780719064326.

Cecily Jones' recent book *Engendering whiteness*, first conceived as a PhD thesis, builds upon a growing interest in the conceptualisation of 'whiteness' in the emergent diversity of the Atlantic World. Historians including David Roediger, Theodore Allen, Matthew Frye Jacobson, Eric Lott and most recently Emma Christopher have begun exploring the position of poor white males who lived and laboured alongside African slaves. While acknowledging that privilege was associated with whiteness in this period, Jones veers away from this male dominated approach instead focusing on the role of European women as the lowest common denominators in the preservation of white hegemony in the Americas. Drawing upon theorists such as bell hooks, Catherine Hall, and Ruth Frankenburg, Jones seeks to demonstrate how integral white women were 'to the construction and reproduction of whiteness within plantation society' using the case studies of Barbados and North Carolina (p. 5). By placing the specific examples of Barbados and North Carolina side-by-side, she endeavours to 'provide a comparative framework that might reveal important connections and divergences in the lives of white women in these societies' using a series of parish records, property deeds, probated wills, court transcripts, women's private journals and letters, and slave narratives (p. 9).

Engendering whiteness is organised into three pairs of chapters. The first chapter, 'Mapping racial boundaries: gender race and poor relief in Barbados', uses a series of parish records (1678-1797) to examine the limited sphere of poor white women in Barbados. Despite the differing agendas of poor whites, wealthy planters, and the local government, all agreed on and reinforced ideas of white skin as social capital. However, poor white women often found themselves at the bottom of this social hierarchy with limited financial resources. This vulnerable position on the periphery of white power led to the micromanaging of poor white women's financial and sexual

interactions through legislation and distribution of poverty relief. Jones depicts the persistent struggle of poor white women against these mechanisms of invasive control. Chapter Two, “Worse than [white] men, much worse than the Negroes...”: sexuality, labour and poor white women in North Carolina” using North Carolina as a case study, closely parallels Chapter One although it deals more explicitly with the social control of sexual relationships of poor white women. These are the best paired chapters in the book.

Chapters Three and Four fit more loosely together, focusing on the role of women as property owners and managers. Chapter Three, “To serve her own desires”: white women and property holding in Barbadian plantation society’, focuses on a series of wills, deeds, marriage contracts and household inventories giving a broad range of experience for single, married, divorced and widowed women. It explains the legal status of both the *femme sole* and the *femme covert* and the practical application of these laws in the courts. Jones highlights the vulnerable position of ageing women in Barbadian society and the unique methods of wealth distribution and retention utilized by women to protect their autonomy. On the other hand, Chapter Four, “There may be my sphere of usefulness...”: the making of a North Carolinian plantation mistress’, focuses on the life of one woman, Sarah Hicks Williams, and her transformation from abolitionists’ daughter to plantation owner’s wife. Although this is a well-written and informative window into the life of a plantation mistress, including topics of abolition, whiteness and civil war, it seems only tenuously connected to the more general themes of the book, offering more questions than it does answers.

The last pair of chapters include: ‘White lives, black bodies: Barbadian women and slave holding’ and “She Would Labor Almost Night and Day”: white women, property rights and slaveholding in North Carolina’. In the former, Jones describes the value of slaves to white women and the methods of acquisition and manumission used by these white women. In the latter, she focuses

on the controversy arising from the will of Alice Ward Loomis, which involved the posthumous attacks on Alice's division of property underlining the constant attempts of men to undermine women's judgements in the division of their own property. The chapter goes on to discuss the role of gender in the treatment of slaves, both in care and punishment, suggesting that slaves were a mechanism through which white women could readily interact in economic advancement and this function was paramount to the relation of white women to their slaves.

Throughout this book Jones struggles to justify the value in comparing an American state, North Carolina 1730-1865, to a Caribbean colony, Barbados 1627-1838, though it can be assumed that this comparison was a result of available documentation rather than a historiographical strategy. Jones is dismissive of this problem merely stating in her introduction that 'this study does not...pretend to be a chronological history'(p. 11). Additionally, while Jones emphasises the role of gender in these societies, she does not address the similarities/differences in the formation of these societies. All in all, Jones makes a solid contribution to the history of the Americas in this examination of agency and limitation of white women, both wealthy and impoverished. Her writing style is fluid and accessible throughout, and the questions she raises in this book will be helpful to a new generation of historians who are seeking to uncover the forgotten actors in the formation of plantation societies in the Americas.

Stacey Sommerdyk¹

University of Hull.

¹ Stacey Sommerdyk's (stacey.sommerdyk@gmail.com) primary fields of interest include African History, Merchant Communities, Atlantic History, and the History of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. She holds an honours BA in History (2004) and a Masters in African History (2007). She is currently studying at the Wilberforce Institute for the study of Slavery and Emancipation at the University of Hull. Her PhD thesis is entitled: 'Trade and the Merchant Community of the Loango Coast in the Eighteenth Century'. She would like to acknowledge the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for its support.