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Book Review - Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South

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Off the SHELF

Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South by Talitha L. LeFlouria (University of North Carolina Press, 2015: ISBN 978-1-4696-3000-7, \$24.95)

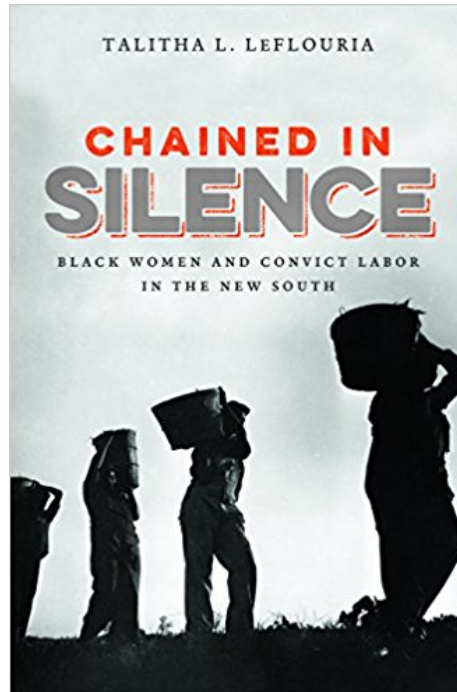
Talitha L. LeFlouria's *Chained in Silence* focuses on Black women in the convict lease system in a post-emancipation Georgia where freedwomen's lives were controlled by terror, poverty, and racial hostility. The Thirteenth Amendment, passed in 1865, abolished slavery but left open the possibility for involuntary servitude as a punishment for crime. Passage of the Thirteenth Amendment combined with prevailing ideas of race and gender, ubiquitous anti-Black and "Negro Crime" propaganda, and an economy devastated by the Civil War conspired to bring about the convict lease system.

On May 11, 1868, the State of Georgia began leasing its prisoners. At one point, shortly after the lease system began, all 393 felons in the Georgia state penitentiary were leased to a private railroad company; 13 of those convicts were women who worked side-by-side with men building railroads. Between 1868 and 1908, the number of felons whose labor was leased yearly to private firms grew to over 2000 in what had clearly become a lucrative revenue stream for the state.

Chained in Silence details a convict lease system that moved from private companies to public agriculture to state prison farms and chain gangs. In the process, many Black women's (and

men's) lives were completely consumed by the grueling, dangerous, and exhausting work of railroad building, coal mining, brick making, and lumberjacking. Through prison records,

newspaper accounts, camp hospital reports, jail records, court documents, and whipping reports, LeFlouria reveals the individual lives of African-American women in Georgia's penal system. Through these primary sources and others, LeFlouria traces several women by name through conviction, sentencing, and prison terms and includes their personal stories, skills, accomplishments, and, sometimes, their triumphs of resistance. LeFlouria has given voice and humanity to the women of convict labor, most of whom were illiterate or semiliterate.



Several topics covered in depth in *Chained in Silence* are:

1. The view that the convict lease system was not, as others have proposed, a continuation of slavery, because it was not heritable and did not rely on reproduction to maintain a labor force;
2. The ways in which Georgia, unlike any other state, made no distinction between the sexes, using men and women for the same labor;
3. The important contribution women's labor made to Georgia's industry and economy;
4. The ever-present violence or threat of violence, cruelty, humiliation, sexual exploitation, disease, and neglect; and

5. Regardless of circumstance or fear, the courageous acts of resistance by women of color.

Chained in Silence is a riveting account of Black women in Georgia's penal system in the mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and will be an invaluable source for research on

gender studies, women prisoners, race relations, and economics in Georgia. It is well documented with chapter notes, bibliography, and index.

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