

History in Focus

S2 E5 Enslaved Women's Bodies in Fifteenth-Century Spain + Seeing Black America in Iran

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Conor Howard

Hello, and welcome to *History in Focus*, a podcast of the *American Historical Review*. This episode focuses on the half-lives of slavery in Spain and Iran. First, our own Matt Hermane speaks with Debra Blumenthal about how the slave markets of Valencia Spain influenced the development of understandings about women's health in the 15th century. Next is my conversation with Beeta Baghoolizadeh in which she and I discussed the legacy of racialized forms of enslavement in 19th and 20th century Iran. Both of these articles can be found in the December 2023 issue of the *American Historical Review*. Thank you for joining us for episode 2.5 for January 2024. I'm Connor Howard, and this is *History in Focus*. Here's Matt with Professor Blumenthal:

Matt Hermane

In the 15th century, the city of Valencia served as an important center of the Mediterranean slave trade. Enslaved individuals of various ethnic backgrounds from as far away as the Canary Islands in the West and Central Asia in the East, and then increasingly from Sub-Saharan Africa were bought and sold in the city. I spoke with Debra Blumenthal about her article in the December issue of the AHR titled, "'As [Healthy] Women Should': Enslave Women, Medical Experts, and 'Hidden' Menstrual Disorders in Late Medieval Mediterranean Slave Markets." In the article, she examines what Valencian court records reveal about the role of the slave market and the evolving understanding of women's health in the 15th century. Debra Blumenthal is an associate professor of history at UC Santa Barbara, where she focuses her research on the western Mediterranean of the 14th through 16th centuries, Muslim Christian Jewish interaction, premodern notions of race, and gender history, and the history of women's health. Here's my conversation with Professor Blumenthal. You open up the article by giving the story of a 17-year-old slave girl and a lawsuit surrounding her. Could you maybe kind of just talk about that a little bit to give listeners an idea of the context for your article?

Debra Blumenthal

Yeah, I mean, generally speaking, I'm somebody that really is interested in working with court records, because I think it enables people to hear or learn about the experiences of marginalized peoples. That's something that really drove my research for the first book, which

was looking primarily at the lives of enslaved men and women in Valencia, in the 15th century. And this, this article is really kind of an outgrowth of that work. What I'm focusing on is seven cases within, you know, really a 10-year period that are all fixated on enslaved women's menstrual cycle, the extent to which it's regular, and why they're so fixated on this and what the concern here was. This project is sort of a segue between my first book which is really a kind of a more general look at the role of enslaved people in kind of Valencian society and the importance of slavery and Valencian society. Whereas this article is kind of pivoting to my interest in the history of women's health by showing really the role of physicians in the regulation of the slave trade. They're kind of the expert witnesses being brought in, in these lawsuits to kind of determine the extent to which irregular menstruation is something that is serious enough to merit a refund. Most of these women would be probably purchased in domestic space. So they would be brought into a household and oftentimes there was a kind of a period of inspection. So they kind of assumed temporary custody of enslaved woman that they're interested in acquiring for their household for kind of a trial period. And that was kind of a way in which they would sort of prevent any future dispute claiming that there was an ailment or defect. After that time period would have elapsed, they would formally contract to the sale. The overall thrust of most of these cases is just the difficulty of uncovering menstrual irregularities, due to the fact that the time period is usually just several days, and maybe that's not the period in which they would be menstruating. So the trial period would not uncover that necessarily, it would be something that would only come to light weeks or months afterwards. In the marketplace, there's always concerns about fraud. And these court records are sort of an attempt on the part of disgruntled buyers to get the dress for being sold a labor that didn't sort of fit their expectations. What's sort of striking about the set of court records that's the focus of this article is that menstrual disorders are sort of becoming, you know, a real issue of intense interest. The obvious explanation is they're concerned about fertility. This is sort of seen as an index of fertility. The other point that isn't always recognized, or at least I didn't recognize initially, was that this was more just sort of an index of overall health.

What is really striking and looking at the testimony in these cases, or the argument made by the plaintiffs in these cases is that menstrual disorders are quite serious concerns. So we start off discussing this case involving the 17-year-old enslaved woman named Margarida and her lack of menses is seen as a sign that she could at any moment, you know, be struck with sudden death. Irregular menses or a lack of menses is something that is tied to heightened risk of stroke, what is referred to in these texts as apoplexy. There's also a strong linkage made between irregular menses and migrating pains or joint pain of various sorts. So again, is a whole panoply of ailments that irregular menses are linked with, ranging from again the most serious, which is sort of sudden death, apoplexy to migrating pains and arthritis to heart

palpitations, dropsy, jaundice, even sort of mental intellectual impairments and the last case I discuss is its linkage to breast cancer and breast disease. So these issues are seen as quite serious. And it's not just a question of whether or not these women are pregnant or they're infertile. These are serious signs that their health is compromised, that are in some respects on death's door.

Matt Hermane

So the experts who gave testimony in these cases, where did their knowledge come from?

Debra Blumenthal

In terms of what they're citing, they're certainly citing the established medical experts of the day—Hippocrates, Galen. But what I found really interesting about these court cases is that they're not simply citing these well-established ancient medical authority. What's useful about these seven cases is that it gives us a window into, you know, debates among experts at the time, about female physiology. Again, kind of why I get so excited about court records and their potential as sources—and I think it's an under-tapped source in the history of medicine—is that a lot of the historians of medicine are focusing on, you know, the actual treatises themselves, they look at medical handbooks, but what's unique or useful about court records is that it gives you kind of a window into actual practice. The fact that these physicians are increasingly, with the kind of medicalization of society that a lot of other scholars sort of talked about is something that's happening in the 14th century, that they're kind of rising in power and influence, and we're seeing in disputes that are being adjudicated in the court, a real reliance on physicians or other forms of expertise. But what I found striking in these cases is that they're not univocal. They have different perspectives and different interpretations, which really kind of show how, during this period, I wouldn't necessarily go as far as saying a clash of perspectives, but, you know, a real effort to kind of balance the knowledge that that has been handed down through texts with experience. There is a tendency to sort of see the Middle Ages, you know, kind of argue that there's a kind of a real disjuncture between the medieval and the Renaissance period in terms of the valuation of empirical experience. There's a lot of medievalists that push back against that and sort of say that actually, you know, there is an appreciation for knowledge gained through experience well predating the Renaissance, 13th-century, 14th-century. And so what we're seeing here also is that you have these physicians that are, of course, respectful and knowledgeable of Galen, but recognizing how experience and add some nuance if not contradict or question, these truisms that are articulated in some of these texts.

Matt Hermane

Is there a role for women in this new kind of appreciation for empiricism?

Debra Blumenthal

Yeah, I mean, you see testimony not only being collected from experts but also from significant numbers of lay people. And that's one of the other really surprising things that I encountered in my closer examination of these court cases is just the range, the diversity of voices that we hear kind of just discussing menstruation. Passengers on some of these ships that are transporting enslaved women from Rhodes to Valencia that you know, have a familiarity with this woman's menstrual cycle, which I guess shouldn't surprise us because these voyages take several months. They're taking seriously lay people's sort of what they're seeing and the knowledge that they're collecting in their daily interactions with these women and what they're witnessing in terms of their capabilities and women, you would think, would have the most intimate interactions with these enslaved women and would be most privy to knowledge about their menstrual cycle. What's striking here is overwhelmingly, you hear a lot of mansplaining in this testimony. There are a couple female witnesses, but you know, they're really kind of taking the back seat and in many ways, their testimony is discredited. One of the arguments that I make is that while references to midwives are quite frequent in these court records, we hear their voices sort of only indirectly, they're not called in themselves to give testimony. Women are often the first resort in terms of treating these women, but the testimony of these witnesses are often presenting them as kind of making false diagnoses, you know, saying they're pregnant when they're not, and really kind of exposing sort of the lack of expertise of these women?

Matt Hermane

Do we see male practitioners getting access to women's bodies outside of these court cases? Or is it only in the environment of the court or lawsuits that we see this happening?

Debra Blumenthal

Yeah, okay. Again, the broader argument that I make is that the slave market offers this unparalleled access to women's bodies. Certainly, I don't want to make it so black and white. I mean, there's certainly plenty of evidence showing particularly elite women have physicians and surgeons assisting them during childbirth, surgeons and physicians are also treating women and royal convents. So it's not as if there is absolutely no access on the part of physicians in other contexts. But nonetheless, if you listen to the voices of the male physicians, authoring these medical handbooks, they're still frustrated by the concerns of women who are, you know, not necessarily willing to have a male practitioner have access as to their bodies. It's

sort of striking in these handbooks that when they are making statements that suggest that they have direct access to women's bodies, the context in which they're describing the treatment of women is with kind of non-elite women. So I mean, I think when we kind of talk about the problem of shame, it's certainly a kind of a class-based or social status-based kind of definition of whose shame is going to be respected. So the slave market, I think, does offer kind of a venue in which male practitioners had much more unfettered access to enslave women's bodies.

Matt Hermans

You conclude the article by talking about Diedrich Cooper Owens' work on gynecological care in the US South in the 19th century and you talk about how physicians access to enslave black women's bodies saw this kind of, motivate this advanced in gynecological care in the 19th century. But you're making this argument that this was also happening as far back as the 15th century in Europe.

Debra Blumenthal

I guess. That's why I was most keen to have this published in a journal such as the AHR, is that I kind of want this research to reach kind of a broader audience really kind of show how we shouldn't ignore the medieval Mediterranean sort of roots of a lot of these things. I guess what I'm interested in showing is that this is not unprecedented, right? The fact that you see enslaved women's bodies being exploited to further medical knowledge is something that's hardly unprecedented. I don't want to say it's the same, obviously. I go to great effort in the article that expose distinctions, particularly the degree to which you could kind of characterize these enslaved women as being experimented upon. I mean, it's more a question of access. I guess one thing that I would want to underline as an important distinction is that in terms of sort of the treatment for menstrual disorders, enslaved women are being treated in exactly the same way. There's not experimentation on these enslaved women, it's more of just getting access purely for the sake of knowledge of getting kind of a more diverse cross-section of the physiology. What they're stressing here is not necessarily that these bodies are distinct racially, but more that they're valuing kind of access to a broader cross-section of bodies. One thing that's important to highlight about the character of slavery in the late medieval Mediterranean world is that it's not, you know, a black-white distinction. We have a tremendous diversity of people being enslaved. These women that are kind of subject of these warranty slipped suits include Russians, Tatars, Bulgars, Circassians, as well as Sub-Saharan Africans. So yeah, it's not as if there's an effort really to racialize these women. A lack of menses is not sort of seen as a way to kind of distinguish enslaved people from free people. But they're stressing here is the complexity and variability of bodies, that it's hard to establish or make a hard and fast

determination of what a lack of menses indicates that you've kind of really need to consider a host of factors, your moral complexion, age, the level of activity. So the access to enslaved women in the slave markets enables them to kind of, I don't know, have more data to get a sense of female physiology. It's not that they're being used as subjects for experimentation, but more just to gain knowledge. That's not to say that further research might uncover more nefarious sort of exploitation of these women. But so far, what I've uncovered is not really, you know, kind of parallel in that sense, they're receiving the very same sorts of treatments. It's not as if there's a distinction between the sort of care that enslaved people receive versus non-enslaved.

Matt Hermane

That makes sense. So thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me today.

Connor Howard

That was *History in Focus* co-producer Matt Hermane speaking with Debra Blumenthal of the University of California at Santa Barbara about the role which Valencian slave markets had in shaping late medieval understandings of women's health. Next up is my conversation with Beeta Baghoolizadeh on the legacies of slavery in Iran. It can be easy to overlook the influence of the American Civil Rights Movement on societies and nations with very different histories of race and slavery than that of the United States. Even so, following the spread of American culture around the globe, the Civil Rights Movement, and many of its leaders also gained considerable attention, sometimes in unexpected places. In Iran, controversial figures like Malcolm X were grafted into an existing yet rapidly evolving framework for understanding the meaning of racial hierarchies, of slavery, and of the resistance to the governments which were believed to support them. Recently, I had a chance to speak with Beeta Baghoolizadeh Associate Research Scholar at Princeton University's Center for Iran and Persian Gulf studies about the history of race and slavery in Iran, while their upcoming article, "Seeing Black America in Iran" found in the December 2023 issue of the AHR, primarily considers Iranian perceptions of the civil rights movement, our conversation digs a bit deeper into the background of this history, which is also covered in a forthcoming book, *The Color Black: Enslavement and Erasure in Iran*. I'm Connor Howard, and this is my conversation with Beeta Baghoolizadeh.

Beeta Baghoolizadeh

Hi, everyone, my name is Beeta Baghoolizadeh, I work on modern Iran and constructions of race through the lens of enslavement and abolition during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Conor Howard

Great. Thank you so much. I was just wondering if you could give maybe a quick overview of the history of Black or African African diaspora. How did these folks get to Iran? What was their life like in Iran, up until the 1960s when your article picks up?

Beeta Baghoolizadeh

Yeah, absolutely. Starting with the big, big questions, right? So there is a very long history of exchange, migration, belonging between Iran and Africa. This goes back millennia, we have records of Black people in Iran, people of African ancestry in Iran. My research is more on the 19th and 20th centuries and through the lens of slavery. Iranians had for centuries enslaved people from the Caucuses, Central Asia, South Asia, and East Africa. And there's a series of geopolitical changes that occur in the 19th century, Great Britain becomes much more powerful and they cut off South Asian slave trade, Russia becomes much more powerful in the north, and they cut off the Caucasian and Central Asian slave trade. And so East Africans remain the most vulnerable at this point. And they become sort of the face of enslavement in Iran, especially in the late 19th century. So even though you had precedence for different types of people being enslaved, regardless of race, now you have one very specific group being enslaved. And so this cements the idea that enslaved people are Black and that Black people are enslaved. Right. So that's what my broader project looks at. In 1929, Iran issued a manumission law. Enslavement in Iran during this time was a primarily domestic form of enslavement. There are examples of date plantations and pearl diving that occurred in the south, but I'm mostly concerned with what's going on in the urban centers. So we're looking at status symbols, right, and also people doing the sort of day-to-day maintaining a household so cooking, cleaning, taking care of the kids. At the Royal Court, this becomes a very elevated sign of prestige and pomp, and so you will have enslavement in the Royal Court and then elite households. But even though it's not widespread, it's very, very visible and so or people would have understood that an enslaved person was more likely to be Black or a Black person was more likely to be enslaved, regardless of whether or not they had the capability of enslaving someone. So Iran abolishes slavery in 1929, the article really picks up in the 1960s. And between 1929 and the 1960s, yes, Iran abolished slavery, but this was not really meant to be a humanitarian issue, this was an issue of erasure, this was an issue of rewriting Iran's history. Iranians of a certain generation will say, you know, Iran never had slavery. So by the time where the article picks up, by the time you have the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movements happening in the US, this fills a vacuum for Iranians. And it becomes the sort of central focus of what race looks like, what racial dynamics look like, what racism looks like, and who Black people quote unquote, really are. Right?

Conor Howard

That's such an interesting history that racialized slavery seems to be on the way in Iran, as it's on the way out in many other parts of the world. And yeah, I had always heard the like, and maybe this is part of the mythos that develops at this time, particularly with like ancient Persia, that slavery was never legal.

Beeta Baghoolizadeh

That's fascinating that you brought that up. Yes, this idea that Cyrus the Great freed all the slaves, this was something I heard ad nauseam in the first few years of my research. Once Mohammad Reza Shah becomes king, and he is crowned 1941 he's shot until 1979, until the Islamic Revolution. He really creates this narrative trying to connect his dynasty back to ancient Persia. And what he's trying to do is trying to show that it is the most modern, right? It's he, and he is just as moderate as Europe and the US. He gifts, a replica of the Cyrus Cylinder to the United Nations, mistranslations of the Cyrus Cylinder start to circulate. And so one thing that Cyrus says in the Cyrus Cylinder, which was found in Babylonia, which is not Iran, it's you know, present-day Iraq. It says, "I freed people from the yoke of servitude" and this has been re-translated as, "I have abolished slavery, and I never want anyone to ever be enslaved ever again and I think that we should have democracy." It just like goes totally in a totally different direction. I don't think that comes in this article, right? But it is part of the story of this vacuum, right? That they're rewriting the history of enslavement, they're rewriting the history of Blackness, they're re-asserting where Black people exist and don't exist and creating the sort of distance between that very, very recent history, right, just like you said, it's on its way in as it's on its way out around the world, but also in Iran, right, like the first outlet of treaty, abolishing slave trade in Iran, which focuses on on the Persian Gulf slave trade, which is intended to address the enslavement of people from the Indian Ocean world, especially South Africans is happening at the same time, as these racialized categories are becoming much more cemented in Iran, it's all happening at the same time.

Conor Howard

In your article, you use the term white-washing to describe the process of some Iranian intellectuals to hide the presence of Black Iranians and to promote the image of Iran as an Aryan society. Could you say a little bit more to how that happened, and how it continues to influence society in Iran today?

Beeta Baghoolizadeh

So one thing that I will say and I think I do mention this in the article is that there's a rewriting that's happening of the language. And so you have terms that were used in the abolition law,

like slavery, that are now being redefined and re-understood by the 1950s and 60s. So a term like slavery in 1929, referred to anyone who's enslaved all forms of enslavement. It's very much used as an umbrella term and would have included domestic forms of enslavement. By the time you are in the mid-20th century, that same term, and the term I'm thinking about is "bardeh-forushi" or "bardeh-dari" slave selling, slaveholding, slave trade and slavery, enslavement. Those terms really start to only refer to chattel forms of enslavement,

Conor Howard

Which wasn't the norm.

Beeta Baghoolizadeh

Which was not the norm, it starts to refer almost exclusively to US forms of enslavement. I mean, broader American forms of enslavement as well, but they're really thinking about the US and that imagery and it has a lot to do with sort of cultural products that are circulating in Iran, so "Gone With the Wind", wildly popular in Iran, "Uncle Tom's Cabin", also very popular in Iran. When you have that sort of powerful cultural product circulating and on top of that you have an erasure of Iranian forms of enslavement, it starts to rewire how people are approaching the idea of enslavement, because US forms of enslavement were so hyper-racialized, and had so become important news-wise, right, as context for what's going on in the US—for the protests for the marches for the uprisings happening in the US in the 1960s—that becomes, okay, that's what slavery looks like. Okay, that's what race looks like.

Conor Howard

As our conversation progressed, I asked Beeta what impact the transmutation of Iranian beliefs about race had on the course of the 20th century, especially with regard to the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the overthrow of the US-allied centuries-old monarchy.

Beeta Baghoolizadeh

The Shah and the US were allies at this time, right? And so it becomes very interesting the way people start to focus on the US as an extension of the critique to the Shah. And so as people are becoming more disillusioned with the Shah, it becomes more important to them that this is what the US as an ally of the Shah is doing. And so that sort of narrative becomes important once the 1979 revolution takes place that, okay, the Shah is our enemy, the US is our enemy, we are going to be anti-racism.

Conor Howard

Who are the like the real like on-the-ground movers of this, who is importing this idea of US race relations into Iran?

Beeta Baghoolizadeh

It's happening from so many different angles, right? I think one, one major angle that it's happening from is the Persian dictionary, and *The Persian Encyclopedia* started by Ali-Akbar Dehkhoda. He dies two years later, his partner in 1958, publishes, Māmad [Mohammad] Moin, he publishes the dictionary. And there's this very extensively long section on the term slavery. It starts with the history of slavery in Mesopotamia and goes into Roman slavery, Greek slavery, comes into the US, the US Civil War, and ends with the 1926 Geneva Convention on slavery and abolition and says slavery has ended everywhere after that. That dictionary cites *The Persian Encyclopedia*. *The Persian Encyclopedia* cites *The Columbia Viking Desk Encyclopedia*. So they've literally just translated a definition from a US encyclopedia into Persian. Of course, the US encyclopedia is not going to have a reference to Iran and neither of the Iranian editors working on *The Persian Encyclopedia* or *The Persian Dictionary*, think, oh, we should add Iran into this. So that's you have that then you have intellectuals or thinkers that are really writing and talking in the lead up to the 1979 revolution. They're not mentioning race, so explicitly, either, unless it's referencing the US, this is where I have to cite the work of Amy Motlagh. She's shown how some of these intellectuals both I mean, not just not just these intellectuals from the mid-20th century, and I'm thinking here of Simin Daneshvar but also Akhundzadeh/Akhundov who was writing in the 19th century, these intellectuals who are really important for Iranian nationalism, came from families who had enslaved people. Simin Daneshvar herself was raised by a Black nanny, and she's writing on race relations in the US, Amy Motlagh has an article on that. So you have intellectuals like Simin Daneshvar, you have intellectuals, like Ali Shari'ati who is trying to tie everything back to the prophet's family, the prophet's friends, creating metaphors out of that, you don't really have anyone talking about metaphors or symbols that you can take out of 19th century Iranian history, they're just skirting it. And then you have Khomeini himself, who ultimately does establish himself as the leader in opposition to the US. And so this is where the US narrative of slavery and abolition becomes really critical to Iranian politics. First and foremost, what becomes important to them as a symbol of rising up as a sort of like anti-imperialist. Focusing on the US as a racist country becomes even more important to them. There's something that happens after abolition in Iran where the families who had been enslaving people who were once very proud of it, don't talk about it, right, because it's backwards. It doesn't look modern, right? It becomes very quiet and it's sort of, you know, mentioned in passing, or recast as servants instead of enslaved or something like that, right? For those who were of enslaved ancestry, for, like Black Iranians whose grandparents or other members of their family might have been enslaved, there was a

different type of silence that occurs where, because of the stigma that they don't talk about it, right. And so there's no, like Jim Crow law, there's nothing like that that codified Black people as a separate group after abolition. So abolition happens in 1929, and 1930, 1932, everyone in Iran, overnight, is sort of deemed a citizen of Iran. And so what happens is, they technically legally have the same rights as every other Iranian, regardless of ancestry, regardless of class. And so that makes it also very quiet. That's not to say that there is no social or economic forms of discrimination. That's not to say that they're not underserved or underprivileged in different ways in the cities where you might see them as a significant minority. I'm not saying that at all, but legally, because they because there was no sort of legal category, it became a very powerful state tool of just silencing the conversation across the board.

Conor Howard

Aside from your article in the AHR, is there anywhere you delve deeper into the subject?

Beeta Baghoolizadeh

I discuss the sort of broader history of all of this in my book that's coming out with Duke University Press, it'll be out in March, and it's called *The Color Black: Enslavement and Erasure in Iran*. And it looks at both the period of enslavement during the 19th century, that last period of legal enslavement where Blackness is a racial marker becomes really critical to understandings of race and enslavement in Iran, and then the period of erasure after 1929, where they're just really rewriting, re-configuring what race looks like, or should look like in Iran.

Conor Howard

That was my conversation with Beeta Baghoolizadeh of Princeton University regarding the legacy of racialized enslavement in Iran, offering some additional background for her AHR article "Seeing Black America in Iran." Earlier, we heard from *History in Focus* producer Matt Hermene speaking with Debra Blumenthal of the University of California Santa Barbara, about the intersection of late medieval Iberian and slave markets and perceptions of women's health. Both of their articles can be found in the December 2023 issue of the *American Historical Review*. Thank you for joining us, if you're listening at the time of release and planning to attend this year's American Historical Association annual meeting in San Francisco, safe travels, and maybe we'll see you there. And if you have any AHR-related questions, or maybe we'd like to workshop an AHR article submission idea, please come by the AHR drop-in session on Friday morning. *History in Focus* is a production of the *American Historical Review* in partnership with the American Historical Association, and the University Library at the University of California Santa Cruz. This episode was produced by Daniel Story, Matt Hermene,

and me, Connor Howard. Audio engineering and transcription support was provided by Phoebe Rettberg. You can find out more about this episode and other episodes of “History in Focus” at americanhistoricalreview.org. That's all for this time, until we meet again, goodbye.