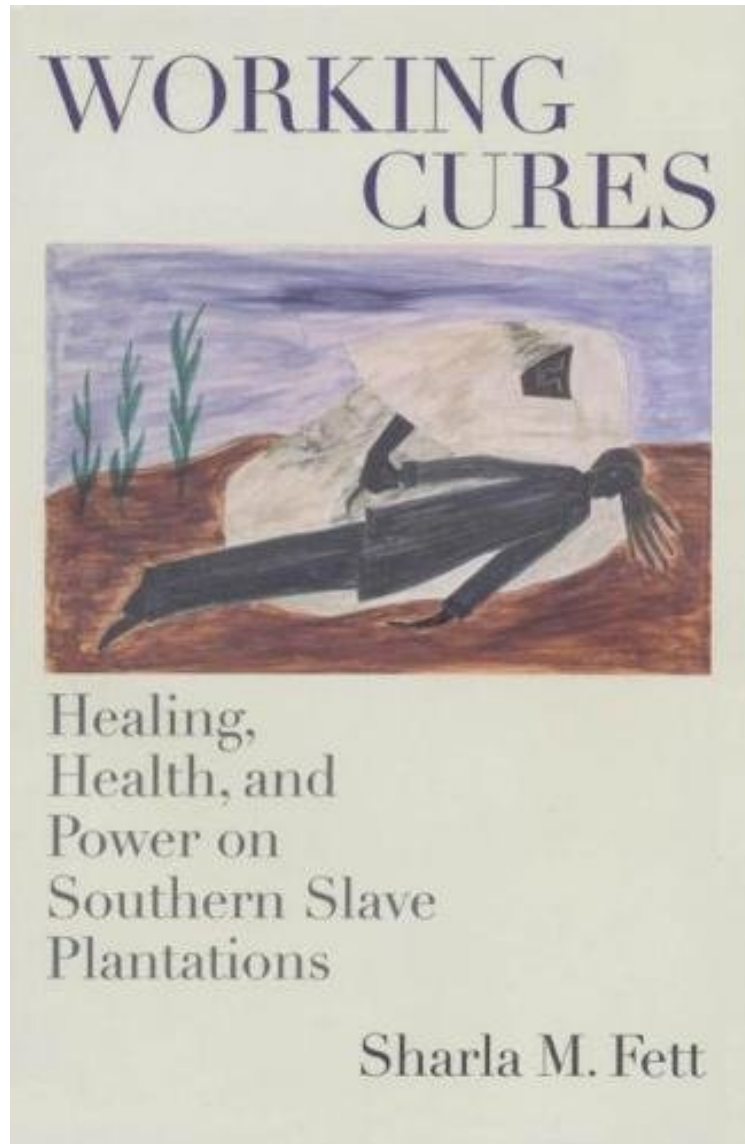


[E-BOOK] Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations

# Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations

*Sharla M. Fett*

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**Sharla M. Fett : Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations:

13 of 14 people found the following review helpful. Outstanding, Unique, Valuable Contribution By Stephanie Rose Bird So many people attribute African American healing to other cultures, particularly European Americans or Native Americans. While there were bound to be cultural sharing, Professor Sharla Fett makes it perfectly clear that enslaved Africans brought their own wisdom with them concerning farming and healing, as well as certain medicinal plants, with them to the Americas during the Middle Passage. "Working Cures" is an outstanding contribution to understanding distinctly American contributions to healing made by African Americans. Fett also presents the history of conjure, root doctoring, midwifery and a great deal more as it relates to medicine and healing in the African American community. Fett also illustrates the mind/body/spirit, holistic approach of African healing employed by African Americans. "Working Cures" is essential reading for those interested in learning the unique aspects of African American healing in the United States.

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In *Working Cures*, Sharla Fett provides an insight into healthcare in the antebellum South. She illustrates the healthcare struggles faced by both enslaved Africans and the antebellum plantation owner. Health was a multifaceted concept; it was more than just the absence of disease. Thus, the struggles faced by both parties went beyond physical well-being. Fett uses personal narratives from various sources to exemplify the struggle for health in this area at this time. The narratives demonstrate the obstacles slaves and slave-owners faced in health over religion, family, sexuality, and labor. Plantation owners during this period evaluated slaves potential based on a system called soundness. Soundness was developed to look into the past, present, and future condition of slaves health. The plantation owners hired physicians to evaluate the mental, behavioral, and physical health of the slaves (Fett, p.18). For example, a slave with multiple lash marks meant that the slave was defiant of authority and had behavior issues. That slave would have a lower value than a slave with no marks. A female slaves soundness included the ability to bear children. Age also played a role in soundness. Older slaves were seen as more prone to injury, which would take away from productivity (Fett, p.27). Therefore, a young slave who could work, bear children, and was mentally healthy would bring in more money. When an owner bought a new slave, the slave was evaluated by a physician for his worthiness. Some slaves came with a warranty based on observations made by doctors. If a slave was sold with a fraudulent warranty, the new plantation owner could sue and use the doctor as witness (Fett, p.39). In the process of buying and owning slaves, physicians and the health of the slaves played a major role in a slaves soundness. For plantation owners, a slave with poor health meant low productivity and lack of value. Slave owners combated this problem with white physicians and plantation hospitals nursed by enslaved women. Slaves who claimed to be ill received checkups to confirm the lack of productivity actually stemmed from disease and not just laziness (Fett, p.171). Once it was verified that the slave was ill, he received care from the plantation hospital and local white doctors. They used the medical knowledge they had received from experience, schooling, and intuition (Fett, 47). The successful care for ill slaves increased the wealth of the plantation owner and the physician. For the Africans in slavery, treating illness came with a spiritual component. Unlike the white doctors, enslaved healers used their knowledge from nature, divine intervention, and spiritual gifts from their ancestors to treat and cure disease (Fett, p.39). They used various plants as well as spiritual cleansing. The enslaved Africans also believed that the community and kin played an important role in ones health. Fett writes the story of Calia, a slave girl, who died of Tuberculous according to the plantation overseer. However, in the enslaved community, she was believed to have been tricked or conjured (Fett, p.85). Conjuring, also known as hoodoo, was used to heal, harm, and protect through spiritual forces (Fett, p.85). This method was very popular amongst enslaved Africans. Those who wished to cause harm used root workers to put spells or hoodoo on their enemies and their enemies could use other root workers to cure them of the spell (Fett, p.86). For the plantation owners, conjuring became a burden. In *Working Cures*, an enslaved woman named Darkey, as a retaliation against her owners, threatened her fellow enslaved workers. The slaves, fearing Darkeys conjuring threat, stopped work. They asked to move to different quarters and during work, they stayed in the overseers view (Fett, p.90). The workers stayed in constant fear of Darkey, thus reducing their productivity. Spiritual practices like conjuring became a way for slaves to cause personal harm and defend themselves in the enslaved community. The white slave owners had to intervene when productivity became low or endangered one of the slaves lives. In the case of Charles, he believed he had an illness inflicted by hoodoo after traditional antebellum medicine failed to cure him. Due to his value, the white overseers sought out a black doctor or root worker to cure him (Fett, p.89). Although frowned upon, slave holders understood that the aspect of spirituality played an important role in keeping slaves healthy and increasing their wealth. Enslaved Africans integrated spirituality into every part of their lives. This allowed them to remain spiritually free, and provided an escape from the struggles of slavery. They even borrowed parts of Christianity and added them to their own traditions (Fett, p.47). Enslaved Africans believed that divine intervention occurred when their cruel owners were struck down with smallpox, for example. Even those with strong beliefs in spiritual forces accepted Christianity. Some slaves were whipped into submission; You are rebellious sinners they were told (Fett, p.51). Spirituality and Christianity merged into a kinship (Fett, p.42). Although, the enslaved community accepted Christian views either by choice or force, it still held onto spiritual beliefs and conjuring practices, all of which contributed to its rich spiritual culture. Spiritual practices created further healing conflicts

between slaves and their owners. The owners at that time believed in the mind-body relationship and an equilibrium between the two. Some took to mesmerists or hypnotists for healing, while others called it negro-superstition (Fett, p.45). Fett uses the narrative of a plantation nurse to further portray racial ideology in southern medicine. A plantation nurse named Mildred Graves was called by owners to help a complicated birth. She came to find two male white doctors working on the pregnant women. The hostile doctors told her to go away; they didn't require her hoodoo medicine. They used race to discredit Graves's healing practices. However, the doctors were sent away and Graves delivered the baby (Fett, p.51). The doctors would not have been so hostile if Graves had been a white midwife. Her race was the only thing troubling the white doctors. In the antebellum South, gender played an important role in the enslaved community. Enslaved men and women had different roles in the plantation. Men were mainly used for field work and females were a dual form of wealth, valued as both productive laborers and potential child bearers (Fett, p.193). Women in the enslaved community had many overlapping roles. They were cooks, maids, nannies, and midwives. They fulfilled these roles in their own homes, as well as those of their owners. African enslaved women also endured many unique dangers to their health. They feared their owners and slaves of the opposite sex due to the threat of rape. Conjuring and physical punishment occurred if the women denied any advance made toward them. Female slaves were used as Guinea Pigs for experimental medical procedures. Cesarean sections, which almost always resulted in fatality for the mother and child, were mostly carried out on enslaved women. A slave woman named Anarcha endured thirty experimental operations in a five-year period by white doctors without anesthesia (Fett, p.120). Some African enslaved women became expert healers like Elsey, but this came with its own set of health risks. Elsey was so skilled, the plantation owners would only call a doctor if she could do no more for the patient (Fett, p.111). While being an expert healer may have seemed alluring to females at the time, it was in fact very detrimental to their health. They were exposed to many dangers like bodily fluids. The places these women worked, like the field hospital or infirmary for the slaves, were dirty, damp, and dark. These healthcare places for the slaves were daily attended by black doctresses like Elsey (Fett, pg.120). African American enslaved women endured many dangers to their health with or without being healers. Those dangers to enslaved women also affected their family life. Being enslaved meant comply with orders or receive punishment. Many enslaved women were used for their womb. Partnerships or relationships in the enslaved community were non-permeant. Slaves were forced like animals to breed with other slaves in order to produce sellable offspring. Children and husbands were snatched away from their household to be sold at market (Fett, p.132). The concept of family was ever-changing in the enslaved community. However, the fear of being sold did not stop women from teaching their children healing practices and trying to have a healthy family (Fett, 136). In fact, some women were so good at healing in their family they were put in charge of healthcare for the plantation owners. These women were forced to take care of their owners families while their own families suffered from neglect (Fett, p.161). Family structures relied heavily on the enslaved women; without their care, many would've suffered. In the institution of slavery, health served a very important role for the enslaved and their owners. Increasing in health meant more wealth for the plantation owner. For plantation owners, health provided a view of slaves past, present, and future conditions. For the enslaved community, healthcare was a spiritual escape mixed with a touch of Christianity. In terms of non-physical health, plantation owners and the enslaved community did not see eye to eye. Owners believed their slaves spiritual attachment to health was quackery. Even with quackery, enslaved women received authority to heal from their owners. This type of power given to a woman, let alone an enslaved woman, was unheard of in the nineteenth century. However, this authority came with a pricedisruption and lack of care for their own families. In the antebellum South health created a struggle in the realms of labor conditions, religious beliefs, gender, and family life.

Exploring the charged topic of black health under slavery, Sharla Fett reveals how herbalism, conjuring, midwifery, and other African American healing practices became arts of resistance in the antebellum South. Fett shows how enslaved men and women drew on African precedents to develop a view of health and healing that was distinctly at odds with slaveholders' property concerns. While white slaveowners narrowly defined slave health in terms of "soundness" for labor, slaves embraced a relational view of health that was intimately tied to religion and community. African American healing practices thus not only restored the body but also provided a formidable weapon against white objectification of black health. Enslaved women played a particularly important role in plantation health culture: they made medicines, cared for the sick, and served as midwives in both black and white households. Their labor as health workers not only proved essential to plantation production but also gave them a basis of authority within enslaved communities. Not surprisingly, conflicts frequently arose between slave doctoring women and the whites who attempted to supervise their work, as did conflicts related to feigned illness, poisoning threats, and African-based religious practices. By examining the deeply contentious dynamics of plantation healing, Fett sheds new light on the broader power relations of antebellum American slavery.

From Library Journal In this work, which is based on her 1995 Rutgers University dissertation, Fett assesses slave health and medical care in the U.S. South. She portrays slave society as a culture that developed its own healing

methods while subject to abuse and racist theories from white medical practitioners. Slave healthcare was an amalgam of various African tribal traditions transmuted by their dispersal throughout the South. Important to these systems were such factors as kinship relations in the community and the role of slave women in healing practices. White medical care of slaves concentrated on their fitness for labor in the household or fields. Written in a lively and engaging style, this book is a unique overview of the complex interaction of white and slave medical care in the antebellum South. Fett, who is currently a visiting scholar at the University of California, Los Angeles, also provides an important background to African American health since the end of slavery. Recommended for academic and large public libraries. A.J. Wright, Univ. of Alabama Lib., Birmingham Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. "Lively and engaging. . . . [Fett] provides an important background to African American health since the end of slavery." -- Library Journal An innovative and multifaceted exploration of one of [the] most vital components of slaves' culture and power.--Journal of Interdisciplinary History This is a groundbreaking work. By linking personal health and collective freedom, Fett redefines the study of slave health. . . . Compelling in argument and superb in scholarship and execution, Working Cures is a major contribution to the literature of the African American experience.--Journal of American History Incorporates and contributes to a wide range of existing scholarship on the history of medicine, the Atlantic world, and the religious, cultural, and social dimensions of the African American slave community.--Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Science Fett articulates the slaves' perspective with considerable dexterity. . . . [A] stimulating work [that] reveals the shifting terrain of black-white interaction.--Journal of American Studies This excellent study . . . fills a major void in the history of antebellum medicine and slave health. . . . Fett successfully unveils the numerous contributions slave women made to antebellum medicine.--Civil War Book Working Cures digs into an area of slave health untouched by previous historians. By skillful use of key fragments of primary source evidence and contemporary scholarship in fields like cultural and medical anthropology, sociology, and psychology, Fett draws a clearer picture of what health, disease, and doctoring meant to antebellum African Americans. She captures and explains the difference between the ways slaveholders and enslaved African Americans viewed health and healing.--Todd L. Savitt, East Carolina University [Fett's] careful research and clearly structured argument adds a fresh dimension to old questions of slave culture, treatment, and religion. . . . An important contribution to the literature on slave health conditions. Instead of using modern medical knowledge as the yardstick, as most previous investigations of slave health have done, Fett honors the enslaved view of health.--Journal of the Early Republic Engaging and impressive. . . . A signal contribution to our understanding of plantation life.--History Written in a lively and engaging style, this book is a unique overview of the complex interaction of white and slave medical care in the antebellum South. . . . [Fett] provides an important background to African American health since the end of slavery.--Library Journal Will give readers a much better sense of southern health care, for it carefully articulates both the white and black perspective on medical care and the important differences that slaves and whites used in doctoring patients. This well-researched study of plantation health care also adds another voice to those scholars who emphasize the strength and self-reliance of the slave community and again reminds readers of the profound differences between black and white worlds in the antebellum South.--North Carolina Historical Working Cures reveals how African Americans developed a distinctive health culture that drew on a panoply of therapies, remedies, and botanical knowledge from African, European, and Native American sources. Their philosophies of health and healing, endowed with divine faith, bolstered their abilities to weather and challenge the social order. This is an excellent study sure to invigorate interest in the history of medicine in the antebellum South.--Tera W. Hunter, Carnegie Mellon University This well-written volume provides an informative and insightful interpretation of medical practice on southern slave plantations. . . . Remarkably comprehensive.--Religious Studies This book fills in some of the missing links of American history in so many very important ways. Get it!--Journal of the National Medical Association Thoroughly researched and persuasive. . . . An important study of illness and care giving that deserves the wide readership it is sure to have.--American Historical Working Cities abounds with fresh insights into the practices and the beliefs about African American health held by masters, as well as slaves, and the relationship of health to broader interpretive debates in the political and social history of North American slavery. Students of the American South, of slavery, or of the African will not want to miss this fascinating and important study.--The Historian Fett is to be commended for the skill with which she brings her subject to life. Medicine and health strike at the heart of the master-slave relation. Whosoever controlled the body controlled the labor. This was a lesson not lost on the black men and black women held in bondage. Thanks to Sharla Fett, it is now a lesson not lost on historians.--Journal of Social History