

The ‘Problem’ of Numbers

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Gloria McCahon Whiting, [*Race, Slavery, and the Problem of Numbers in Early New England: A View from Probate Court*](#), 77 *Wm & Mary Q.*, 3d ser., 405 (2020).

In *Race, Slavery, and the Problem of Numbers in Early New England: A View from Probate Court*, Gloria McCahon Whiting makes significant contributions to the study of slavery in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England. She offers new insights into who made up that labor force, as well as into scholarly debates regarding the utility of quantitative analysis for historians of slavery.

Whiting examines volumes upon volumes of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century probate sources to better understand who lived and labored in Suffolk County, Massachusetts. In this, “the wealthiest and most populous county in New England,” Whiting argues that not only were indentured servants “supplanted early on by a near-complete reliance on African slavery,” but also that local Native populations “never provided a significant source of bound labor in the area.” (P. 407.) The first part of her argument is not one with which most scholars would take issue. Her assertion that local Native populations never made up a significant proportion of the enslaved labor force in the region, however, is more surprising. This argument challenges the scholarship of historians such as Margaret Newell, Wendy Warren, Jared Hardesty, and Linford Fisher, who have argued that large numbers of enslaved Natives played an important role in New England’s labor force well into the eighteenth century.

Whiting’s study is quantitative in nature and based on careful demographic calculations drawn from thousands of records. It required her to count. In the extant 110 volumes of Suffolk County Probate Court records, Whiting found that “wills, inventories, accounts, and other documents filed in the court mentioned 2,160 people in servitude” between 1639 and 1760. (P. 411.) Whiting traced the proportional decline of European indentured laborers over time and the increase in enslaved African laborers. Moreover, Whiting’s findings illustrate the difference in the ways that European indentured servants, enslaved Africans, and Native people, who were both enslaved and indentured by their masters, experienced bondage, and the early date at which New Englanders turned to enslaved labor.

Whiting takes a deep dive into legal documents in this essay, and focuses particularly on wills and the probate records that surround them. Because this is a case study, Whiting’s article speaks only for Suffolk County, “the commercial linchpin of the region,” and the county that “relied more heavily on the toil of people in bondage than ... any other.” (P. 407.) If her findings differ from broader New England patterns, they emphasize the importance of considering regions—and in this case particular counties—on their own terms. Suffolk County, she asserts, is not and cannot be a proxy for the rest of New England. Other regions and towns developed different economies and most likely relied on different forms of labor.

But Whiting does more than quantify data. She also discusses the racial categorizations New Englanders used to identify their unfree laborers as a way to trace the racialization of Suffolk County’s labor force during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Here, too, Whiting challenges previous understandings, arguing that the fluidity of “racial terminology” that might have erased Native people from the records in post-revolutionary New England did not exist in pre-revolutionary Suffolk County. Instead, Whiting claims that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New Englanders identified their bound laborers consistently as “Negro” or “Indian” from entry to entry and did not shift back and forth between terms, and in so doing misidentify their laborers, or use them inconsistently, as was the case in later years. She concludes by providing insight into the ways that probate records can “enable us to trace the contours of Black families by revealing ties of blood and marriage recorded nowhere else.” (P. 429.) Probate records, then, offer more

than quantifiable data and can allow scholars to access the lives of those who left little, if any, documentary evidence behind.

The so-called problem of numbers Whiting refers to in the title, then, is not a problem with *her* numbers, per se, but with the perceived problem of quantitative histories of slavery and the ways in which numbers erase—or fail to provide—information regarding the lived experiences of enslaved laborers. Critiques of quantification, Whiting discusses, arose around the creation of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, which provides significant amounts of quantitative data on hundreds of thousands of nameless enslaved Africans. (P. 408 n.9.) And those critiques have continued. Scholars have rightly alerted us to all that “the archive” cannot tell us and the violence it reinscribes on those who experienced enslavement first-hand. Aggregation and the counting of bodies, they argue, tell us nothing about the brutality and horror that defined the institution and, instead, dehumanize the enslaved all over again. But even as Whiting makes plain that this study requires her to count, and is, indeed, about counting, she also acknowledges that the Suffolk County archive allows her to do more than *just* that. Her work is both quantitative and qualitative and, when possible, Whiting moves beyond the numbers.

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