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2025-10 | October 2025

Botma, Gawie. *Reconsidering the History of South African Journalism: The Ghost of the Slave Press*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2025, 308 pp., $190.00 (Hardback). ISBN 9781032954714. Reviewed by Martial Fanga Agbor, Wits Business School, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa and Danat Al Emarat Hospital, UAE martialfangaagbor@gmail.com

Gawie Botma's *Reconsidering the History of South African Journalism: The Ghost of the Slave Press* is a groundbreaking contribution to media history, particularly within the context of South Africa's colonial and postcolonial narratives. Authored by Botma, an Associate Professor at Stellenbosch University with extensive expertise in journalism history, the book interrogates the often sanitized or celebratory narratives of press freedom by unveiling the complicity of early colonial newspapers with slavery and slave owners at the Cape between 1800 and 1838. Its central thesis challenges the conventional heroic tales of journalism as a liberating force, instead framing the press as intertwined with the colonial project, including its oppressive mechanisms.

Botma's core argument posits that the so-called "slave press" initially coined for publications like *The Cape Town Gazette and African Advertiser* must be critically re-examined to uncover its dual role: as a vehicle of colonial enterprise and a facilitator of slavery's normalization. The book spans eight chapters divided into three parts: History, Content, and Aftermath.

Part one is termed the historical foundation and contextualizes slavery at the Cape, emphasizing that the early press was founded during a period when slavery was integral to colonial economic and social order (Chapter 1, pp. 13–30). It innovatively links newspaper ownership with the economic interests in slavery, a nexus often overlooked in media historiography (Chapter 2, pp. 30–51). It also discusses the rise of liberal voices (1824–1829), including figures like Thomas Pringle, and examines how some journalists began to challenge the moral fabric of slavery, though often within the limits of colonial ideology (Chapter 3, pp. 51–95). Chapter 4 (pp. 95–111) explores the period of "Freedom and Feuds," analyzing how press debates surrounding emancipation intertwined with colonial conflicts, revealing complex loyalties and contradictions.

Part two conducts a nuanced content analysis of news and commentaries, revealing how newspapers framed slavery, often through advertisements that portrayed enslaved Africans as commodities, and editorials that oscillated between paternalism and abolitionist rhetoric (Chapter 5, pp. 131–215). It also examines advertisements, a key source for understanding the normalization of slavery, including ads for slave sales and services, which serve as empirical evidence of the press's complicity (Chapter 6, pp. 215–239).

Part three, the "Aftermath and Legacy," critically reevaluates the legacy of these early newspapers, arguing that their influence persisted into modern South African journalism, complicating narratives of press liberation (Chapter 7, pp. 241–271). It then synthesizes these findings, emphasizing that the "ghost of the slave press" haunts contemporary discourses on media freedom and race (Chapter 8, pp. 271–284).

Botma employs a rigorous qualitative narrative analysis, integrating archival research, content analysis, and socio-historical critique. His interdisciplinary methodology draws from media studies, colonial history, and critical race theory. Notably, the use of digital archives (pp. 221–222) facilitates comprehensive re-examinations of 19th-century newspapers, exemplifying how technological advances expand historiographical possibilities. The theoretical framing, informed by Christopher Hill's view that history must be

rewritten (pp. 10–11), underscores the importance of reinterpreting colonial media as active agents in perpetuating slavery.

One of Botma's most original contributions lies in his detailed content analysis of advertisements (pp. 215–239), which exposes the material culture of slavery embedded within colonial newspapers. This approach bridges media history with economic history and material culture studies, offering a layered understanding of how newspapers functioned as instruments of colonial commerce and ideology. Moreover, the book's focus on the ownership structures of early newspapers (pp. 30–51) offers a novel perspective, showing that the press was often owned by slave traders, thus complicating narratives of press independence or moral progress (pp. 45–47).

Chapters 2 (*The founding of the "slave press"*) and 3 (*The rise of "liberal" champions*) stand out for their originality. Chapter 2 (pp. 30–51) reveals how newspapers like *The Cape Town Gazette* were embedded in slave-owning networks, a critical insight that reframes the origins of colonial journalism in morally complex terrain. Similarly, Chapter 3 (pp. 51–95) explores how liberal ideas emerged within a press still entangled with slavery, challenging simplistic notions of progress.

While the book excels in archival depth and interdisciplinary analysis, its heavy emphasis on textual and content analysis (pp. 131–239) occasionally risks under-theorizing the broader societal implications. For instance, while the book convincingly demonstrates the press's complicity, it could further engage with postcolonial theory to explore how these histories impact contemporary notions of journalism's role in racial justice (pp. 245–271).

Additionally, some chapters, notably Chapter 4, could deepen their analysis of the political economy of the press (pp. 95–111), perhaps integrating more economic data or comparative colonial cases to strengthen claims about the press's structural ties to slavery.

Botma's analysis can be situated within a broader scholarly conversation about the complicity of media in colonialism and slavery, echoing works including Vincent Brown's *Tacky's Revolt* (2019), a project that explores the entanglements of colonial economic interests and media representations. It is also in dialogue with postcolonial critiques of journalism's colonial legacy (e.g., Chakrabarty, 2000). Unlike more celebratory histories of the press (e.g., Schudson, 1978), Botma's critical lens underscores the need to reckon with the media's role in sustaining oppressive structures and thus providing a nuanced, morally complex narrative.

The book's primary audience includes scholars and advanced students in media history, South African history, postcolonial studies, and race studies. Its methodological rigor and interdisciplinary scope also make it suitable for historians interested in material culture and economic history, as well as media practitioners contemplating the legacy of colonialism.

Botma's *Reconsidering the History of South African Journalism* is a landmark study that challenges sanitized narratives of press freedom by exposing the intertwined history of journalism and slavery at the Cape. Its innovative analysis of advertisements and ownership structures, combined with a reflective methodological stance, adds depth and originality to the field.

References

Brown, Vincent. (2019) *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War*. Harvard University Press.

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