

Kelli Moore, **Legal Spectatorship: Slavery and the Visual Culture of Domestic Violence**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022, 248 pp., \$99.95 (hardcover), \$25.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by

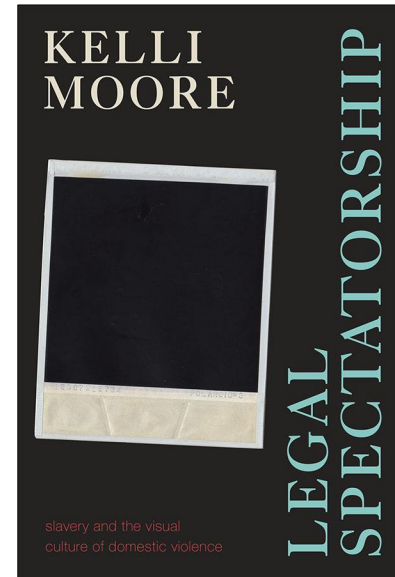
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Warning: This review contains content about physical, psychological, and sexual abuse.

***Legal Spectatorship: Slavery and the Visual Culture of Domestic Violence*** by Kelli Moore asks how hierarchy and oppression undergird domestic violence's visual culture, particularly in the United States. Moore employs several research methodologies, including "archival, ethnographic, rhetorical, and semiotic" (p. 158), to examine the (visual) text from the constitutional start of the United States until the current social media era.

The first chapter of *Legal Spectatorship* focuses on abolitionist media, particularly slaves' silent experience and witnesses of domestic violence, and the legal boundaries established by the U.S. federal government before and after emancipation. The second chapter addresses theories of affect in institutions of science, law, and cybernetics, especially those surrounding battered women's syndrome (BWS), that center on "power and control" (p. 68). To clarify, battering is relevant to domestic violence as defined in legal terminology as physical assault and abuse (Crenshaw, 1991). The author argues that BWS creates a fiction that the theory concerns universal women's experience while negating the history of settler colonialism and Black enslavement. The third chapter concerns photographic evidence of domestic violence in misdemeanor courtrooms in San Diego County, California. Through ethnographic observations and qualitative interviews, Moore employs Hortense Spillers' (2003) vestibular metaphor to discuss the "vertigo" or "vestibular imbalance" (p. 109) that the evidence process, or "remediated flesh" process, engenders (p. 101). The fourth and final chapter advances how global extralegal cases incorporate camp aesthetics in their use of police visual evidence, mimicking this evidence with "ironic vengeance" (p. 125). These global cases include a domestic violence subway campaign in New York City (NYC), anti-domestic-violence appropriation art of the Salvation Army in South Africa, public service announcements for a Serbian domestic abuse shelter in Europe, and Emma Sulkowicz's *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)* at Columbia University in NYC to raise awareness about intimate partner violence, etc.

*Legal Spectatorship* is groundbreaking and makes contributions for leveraging multiple research methods, but more important, for connecting slavery with domestic violence. As Sora Han (2015) posited, and cited by Moore, slavery persists in multiple U.S. legal doctrines, including contract, property, and domestic violence. Although *Legal Spectatorship* is more archival in nature, as cogently put forward in the book's coda, the book is relevant for more recent events, such as the #MeToo movement and the COVID-19 pandemic. #MeToo echoes BWS in that although it was started by Tarana Burke (a veteran Black activist),



it was only made more “universal” by Alyssa Milano (a White actress/activist) (Hsu, 2019). Furthermore, COVID-19 lockdowns and shelter-in-place orders exacerbated domestic violence in confined relationships, which are singularly traumatizing and oppressive for descendants of slavery (pp. 173–174). As such, the author advances the relevance of decolonialization and abolitionism in the present-day context.

However, the book has some limitations, particularly in terms of breadth and depth. It appears that the book covers domestic violence but also intimate partner violence, violence against women, and dating violence (p. 29). Yet not all those phenomena are equivalent. While “violence” in domestic violence can be broadly understood as physical, psychological, or sexual assault and abuse, “domestic” necessitates an element of shared home or cohabitation (Lamb, 2022). As such, Sulkowicz’s performance as a case study in the fourth chapter may not be most relevant to domestic violence because it is related to university campus dating violence. This is especially the case in that casual sexual relationships are more common among the youth and that such relationships lack a domestic nexus (Alexopoulos, Hall, & Huang-Isherwood, 2022). Put another way, not all assaults and abuse that occur in institutions that provide living quarters equate to domestic violence. Other than university campuses, additional settings include military quarters, jails, and prisons (Feller, Walsh, & Weaver, 2020; Harris, 2011; Turchik & Wilson, 2010).

An additional limitation of the book is that while it provides a foundation for understanding U.S. institutional systems and cites cases in other countries, the breadth of the book precludes it from discussing more nuanced context about the United States itself. Cases in other countries would have necessitated different institutional foundations. Serbia and South Africa have settlement colonialism, Black enslavement, or racial histories quite divergent from that of the United States (Bieber, 2015; Moodley & Adam, 2000). As such, the book would have benefited from more in-depth examination of the United States. For instance, in the state of California, domestic violence can be found in several legal areas, including criminal felony, family law, or civil law (Lamb, 2022). However, the book only examines domestic violence in misdemeanor courts. Another example that could have added more nuance to the U.S. context is a case that gripped the United States with jurisdiction in California courts in the 1990s and was more recently recreated on the small screen: Orenthal James “O. J.” Simpson’s (alleged) violence against Nicole Brown Simpson was at the nucleus of domestic violence, race, and visual culture (Griffin, 2018; Lamb, 2022; Toobin, Alexander, Karaszewski, & Murphy, 2016).

On a theoretical level, the book could have benefited from more discussion of intersectionality, which broadly refers to the idea that two or more sociodemographics that overlap are not mutually exclusive (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Related to *Legal Spectatorship*, Crenshaw’s (1989, 1991) key concerns were battering and rape and how, at the intersection of race and gender, the afflictions for women of color differ from those of men of color or White women. Especially in domestic violence, more top-down sexism or racism has been prioritized rather than those at the intersection (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991).

To conclude, *Legal Spectatorship* will have continued significance to the dialogues on domestic violence in the United States and even more broad dialogues on sexual assault. However, the book has some deficiencies that could have been overcome with more pertinent case studies and discussions.

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