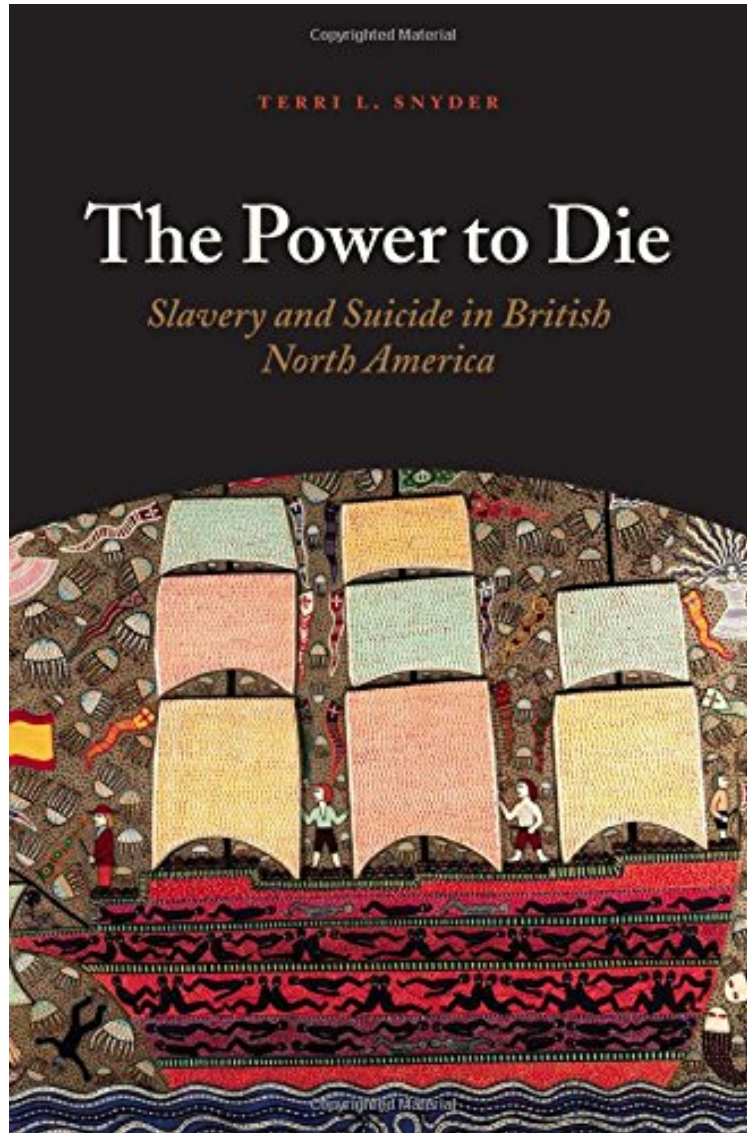


(Mobile book) The Power to Die: Slavery and Suicide in British North America

The Power to Die: Slavery and Suicide in British North America

Terri L. Snyder

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Terri L. Snyder : The Power to Die: Slavery and Suicide in British North America before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Power to Die: Slavery and Suicide in British North America:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Excellent!By JohnPowerful and moving.2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Okay people, where are the reviews? This is an important book that more people should read.By lyndonbrechtC'mon, people, where are the reviews? The subject is grim, but this book deserves more readers. I read it this morning and found I had to pause after each chapter, to reflect on whether it has any resonance for

American society today. If nothing else, it makes plain that the view that slaves were happy and that slavery wasn't so bad is a lie. Snyder's book is well-written, with a slight tendency to academic style in some sections. Among other details, she emphasizes that the sources must be used with care, and that slave suicide was a constant element throughout slavery times. There is no way of estimating the toll, save that it was sizable in the Middle Passage--one study she mentions found about 7% of embarked slaves killed themselves during transit. The toll of slave suicides must have been many thousands, but more than that is likely impossible to know. Slaves might kill themselves to avoid execution, to avoid torture, or as a consequence of families broken up for sale (infanticide and abortion is related but not described in this book), or from despair. Her thesis is that suicide was a way for slaves to assert some control, and it forced reactions. For one thing, a slave suicide was a lost investment. For another, suicides were noticed and in the long run served the purposes of abolitionist propaganda well. There seems to have sometimes been a grudging respect for suicides as resistance. There was also anger: a suicide's body might be decapitated, burned or left to rot. Slave owners feared that suicides could be contagious--and they seem to have been on board the slave ships. Chapter 6 examines slave suicide in literature, largely the impact a poem called "The Dying Negro," written in the 1770s about a real incident in which an American slave hoping for freedom in Britain was caught and about to be transported back to slavery in the colonies. This had huge impact in the propaganda wars between proponents and opponents of slavery. Another chapter discusses how slave suicide made a large appearance in fiction and theater of the day, making it seem like a morally proper and admirable act. There's also some discussion of how suicide is regarded in the Federal Writers' project of the 1930s interviewing former slaves; they regarded it as matter of fact and sometimes brought it up without it being asked about. Overall, this is a difficult but important subject.

The history of slavery in early America is a history of suicide. On ships crossing the Atlantic, enslaved men and women refused to eat or leaped into the ocean. They strangled or hanged themselves. They tore open their own throats. In America, they jumped into rivers or out of windows, or even ran into burning buildings. Faced with the reality of enslavement, countless Africans chose death instead. In *The Power to Die*, Terri L. Snyder excavates the history of slave suicide, returning it to its central place in early American history. How did people--traders, plantation owners, and, most importantly, enslaved men and women themselves--view and understand these deaths, and how did they affect understandings of the institution of slavery then and now? Snyder draws on ships' logs, surgeons' journals, judicial and legislative records, newspaper accounts, abolitionist propaganda and slave narratives, and many other sources to build a grim picture of slavery's toll and detail the ways in which suicide exposed the contradictions of slavery, serving as a powerful indictment that resonated throughout the Anglo-Atlantic world and continues to speak to historians today.

"Snyder attends to her subject with great intelligence, care, and sensitivity. Drawing together an impressive variety of sources, she probes the connection between the public interest in slavery and the forbidden private will of the enslaved. This excellent study of mortuary politics confirms that the power to die can be as historically consequential as the power to hold, punish, and kill."