BOOK REVIEW FORUM ON SLAVERY

INTRODUCTION

Ships, Borders, Community, Prices, the Archive, and More: New Studies on the History of Atlantic World Slavery

Brenda E. Stevenson

The Journal of Negro History "created" slavery studies in the early twentieth century, pioneering article-length historical analyses of the institution, serializing longer monographs, and producing an archive of primary documents on the subject. Under both its initial title and *The Journal of African American History* (*JAAH*), this publication has been most responsible for robust intellectual discourse on the economic, political, and legislative aspects of the institution of racial slavery in North America while examining the enslaved person's subjectivity and voice; cultures and cultural change; archival sources and methodologies; resistance, fugitivity, and revolutionary strategies; as well as slavery's institutionalization and practice in the Atlantic World, both in Africa and the Americas. Likewise, it was the first such academic publication to dedicate entire issues to scholarship on enslaved black women. The *Journal*, indeed, has premiered all the major trends in slavery's expanding historiography since it began publication more than a century ago.[1] It is fitting, therefore, that we routinely turn our attention to the new and continuing research on this ever-essential

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1. Brenda E. Stevenson, "'Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves': Carter G. Woodson's *Journal of Negro History* 'Invents' the Study of Slavery," *Journal of African American History* 100 (Fall 2015): 698–720.

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topic within the history of African-descended peoples in the modern world more generally.

During the last few years, historians have produced numerous research monographs, surveys, and edited volumes on African Americans and slavery. Some of the most important of these works—but certainly not all—are reviewed here. Their contributions are multifaceted. Collectively, they address important subfields within the discourse, including slavery in the Atlantic World, the economic implications of the institution, the slave community, gendered experiences, resistance trends, transnationalism, the "archive," pedagogy, and "unfreedom." All of these studies advance our knowledge of the African and African American experience during the era of enslavement to a certain extent, while some interrogate "standard" perspectives, or advance new methodological approaches, and others expand the canonical vocabulary.

AFRICAN SLAVERY IN THE ATLANTIC WORLD CONTEXT

Scholars of the Atlantic slave trade certainly have made tremendous breakthroughs in the past two decades, contributing a growing number of books, articles, and databases that establish more accurate numbers of African captives and detailed experiences of bonded men, women, and children in the Middle Passage/Maafa. Particularly exciting among these monographs are the case studies of specific slave ship voyages that allow the reader to imagine not only the experiences of captives on these actual vessels, but also the experiences of tens or even hundreds of thousands of other Africans crossing the Atlantic to enslavement in the Americas in the same year or years. Sean M. Kelly's *The Voyage of the Slave Ship* Hare: *A Journey into Captivity from Sierra Leone to South Carolina* (2016) is the latest iteration of such work, following in the path of Robert Harms's *The* Diligent: *A Voyage through the Worlds of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (2002), and, in particular, Marcus Rediker's *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (2008).

The beauty of the case study, of course, is that one becomes intimately invested in a relatively small number of persons about whom the scholar, and the reader, can expand one's knowledge and historical imagination to grasp a sociocultural world and interiority of those held captive in these ships on the Atlantic. Not only is one able to do so with Kelly's *The Voyage of the Slave Ship* Hare, but one is also able to learn some of the details of these captives' lives both in their Upper Guinea homelands and once they reached their Lowcountry destinations. Sharla M. Fett, the *JAAH* reviewer for this book, notes that of equal importance is Kelly's documentation of these captives' ability to reconnect, at least culturally, with their previous African communities in South Carolina, then dominated by other Mande peoples. Indeed, revealing that at least 17 per-

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cent of those who arrived on the *Hare* came to reside within "walking" distance of their fellow Middle Passage captives breathes new life into the contested conclusions of earlier works that emphasize the continuing importance of West and West Central African cultural influences on Lowcountry religious rituals, kinship structures and practices, resistance, and community formations.

Black enslaved workers, Randy J. Sparks asserts in *Africans in the Old South: Mapping Exceptional Lives across the Atlantic World*, were not the only African-descended people who populated the American South. In what is an interesting study of people of exceptional circumstances who came to reside as elites in the United States, Sparks reminds us that the Atlantic World in the modern era did not always exhibit the black slave/white elite dichotomy generally projected. Scattered archival references have left us with documentation of a few African and African-descended persons who were able to gain wealth and status in North America through participation in the Atlantic slave trade and the institution of slavery, not as victims, but rather as economic actors because of personal experiences that allowed them to gain freedom, and then pursue wealth.

Sparks's biographical studies introduce some new historical figures, but their lives will remind one immediately of the exceptional individuals profiled and documented in works by Jane Landers, Philip Curtin, Michael Johnson and James P. Roark, Marne Campbell, Jessica Millward, Marissa Fuentes, and others. Collectively, the stories include those of hundreds of enslaved people, some fugitives from the institution, who were able to gain their freedom, and a few who were able to move on to create comfortable lives for themselves. These accounts also are available in numerous published accounts and collections, as well as in online sources. The *JAAH* reviewer for this work, Jason Young, however, rightfully notes that what is most important about Sparks's study is the historian's willingness to share his research process—his navigation through, and interrogation of, various archival sources, providing important lessons through revealing the kinds of difficult choices and reasonable leaps of faith that scholars have to make in order to uncover the lives of non-elite persons who are typically marginalized in the archive.

THE SLAVE ECONOMY

One of the most significant of the recent works on an economic sector of slavery is Daina Ramey Berry's *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation*, reviewed by Stephanie Jones-Rogers. Berry's monograph is important for several reasons, but particularly because of the enormous database of prices assessed for slave "property" during all stages of enslaved people's lives that Berry is able to amass and analyze. Some of the books reviewed in this forum are important because their

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authors have given themselves permission to roundly critique and then "liberate" themselves from the narrowness, biases, and silences of the "typical" slave "archive." Ramey's work, on the other hand, benefits from her active construction of an archive that she then manipulated to answer important questions about "value," both externally and internally imposed.

Likewise, most scholars of the US slave economy have centered their assertions on shifting economic indices such as varying demand and prices of crops, changing land values, soil fertility and the availability of enslaved workers, fees for their "care" (clothing, housing, food, medical attention), and the prices of "prime" laborers. Ramey, on the other hand, has determined the prices for bondpeople across a range of variables, including their gender, age, generational cohort, skills, health, fertility, and location. Her meticulous calculations have readjusted our sense of the monetary values not only of both skilled and less specialized workers, but also of those not yet born, those at the end of their lives, and even the deceased—who had "ghost values." Moreover, Berry reaffirms the bonded person's sense of self-worth by providing evidence of his/her own internalized personal, familial, and group values.

Ramey's extensive knowledge of slave prices also is on display in her review for the *JAAH* forum of Ned and Constance Sublette's *The American Slave Coast: A History of the Slave Breeding Industry*. This is a lengthy work whose authors purport to explore the ways in which African-descended peoples impacted the US economy during the various eras of slavery. They focus particularly on "slave breeding," or practices that they believe contributed to increased birth rates after the legal end of the transatlantic slave trade. These birth rates, they assume, are the direct result of slaveholder interventions. In so doing, however, the authors neglect the importance of children to their birth families and the difficulties that slave owners had trying to "commodify" enslaved children, given their high mortality rates and the lengthy periods of material investment before they could sell them for a profit. Likewise, the Sublettes' lack of engagement with the historical literature and important archival collections narrows their work's scholarly influence as a monograph in either economic or social history.

DEGREES OF ENSLAVEMENT AND THE SLAVE COMMUNITY RECONSIDERED

Jared Ross Hardesty's *Unfreedom: Slavery and Dependence in Eighteenth-Century Boston* seeks to shed additional light on the various practices and statuses that defined one as bonded labor in the important maritime city of Boston. Hardesty challenges the binary of slavery and freedom by collecting under his "unfree" umbrella not one category of workers, but rather a "continuum of unfreedom"

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that included poorly treated and compensated contract laborers, hired workers, and "chattel slaves." His "unfree" are not necessarily designated by skin color, but rather by a lack of rights and worker protections. To "prove" his point, Hardesty details overlapping labor, social, and legal relationships, arguing that class and status were more significant markers of one's life experiences and social world than race. Of course, these blurred lines and "quasi" free status arguments have been examined previously by researchers who have written about "free blacks/people of color" and freed blacks in the "slave" eras, including historians John Hope Franklin, Leon Litwack, Suzanne Lubbock, Ira Berlin, Brenda Stevenson, Wilma King, Erica Nelson Dunbar, Leslie Harris, Jane Landers, and a host of other scholars who have contributed essential monographs about the limits of black "freedom" before and after general Emancipation. As our reviewer Jessica Millward notes, this is an interesting analysis, but it unfortunately allows the reader to avoid "directly addressing the distinctive plight of those at the severe end of the continuum"—enslaved black workers.

Indeed, one cannot help but be reminded of the famous sociological study from 1980 that promoted the idea of the "declining significance of race," as well as more recent assertions about social "hierarchy" in what some believe is a "post-racial America" and, of course, earlier studies that compared black slavery with white indentureship; or chattel slavery in the United States with practices in other places in the Atlantic World.[2]

Hardesty's other attempted intervention is to "replace" John Blassingame's "notion of 'slave community' with [that of] a social world." Perhaps a more appropriate ambition would be to expand on the idea of "neighborhoods" and "joining places" crafted by Anthony Kaye in his 2009 monograph *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Antebellum South*, also an extension of Blassingame's brilliant conceptual innovation. Hardesty's description of the eighteenth-century urban social world among the "unfree" in Boston is one that is marred by violence on every level, including in public spaces like taverns and churches, the intimate sites of family and home, and work environments. Of course, Blassingame and others who have written about the slave community over the decades have also attested to its internal violence, even if their critics tend to bypass these revelations and center their attention, instead, on what they mistakenly deem as "romanticization."

2. William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions* (Chicago, IL, 1980); Toure, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means to Be Black Now* (New York, 2012); Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1968).

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Among these critics of the studies of the slave "community" are Jeff Forrett and Christine E. Sears, editors of the collection *New Directions in Slavery Studies: Commodification, Community, and Comparison*. Indeed, *New Directions* includes an entire section titled "The Slave Community." With articles by Forrett and Anthony Kaye, John Davies, and Kathleen Hilliard, this work, along with Forrett's single-authored monograph *Slave against Slave: Plantation Violence in the Old South* and Hardesty's *Unfreedom*, tries to convince a new generation of slavery scholars that the notion of a slave "community" should be roundly challenged.[3] Forrett, himself, is particularly influenced by historian Peter Kolchin, whom he quotes as noting the "conceptual misuse and abuse of Blassingame's work" that produced "an exaggerated picture of the strength and cohesion of the slave community."[4] Forrett, like Hardesty, centers his analysis on intraracial violence. But of course violence was part of the southern way of life during the era of slavery, and among Americans more generally throughout the nation's history, a reality and legacy shared by all US ethnic/racial and class groupings and generational cohorts. Enslaved people were not exempt from these "customs." They were subjected to unbelievable amounts of unbridled violence and, as a result, learned to terrorize those within and outside of their families and communities. As with other groups of Americans too, however, the evidence of communities, created in response to shared state violence and slaveholder oppressions, but also as a result of "class" and "cultural" affiliations, indicates that many enslaved people forged strong communal ties that sometimes stretched across long distances. The *JAAH* reviewer Gerald Horne adds that the scope of *New Directions* should be broadened temporally, spatially, and culturally; engage more fully questions of the slave economy and resistance; and make use of a "diversification of sources" if the work is to indeed deliver on its title *New Directions*. To do so might also enhance future discourse and analysis of "the slave community."

THE ARCHIVE

The slavery "archive" posits a reimagined field of methodological analysis centered in recent monographs on the slave experience. As it has always been, the problem, of course, is that the vast majority of archives—even when they are available in digital form to larger numbers of researchers—still reflect the concerns, attitudes, and information prioritized, collected, organized, and "cleansed" by document owners and archivists, often to the detriment of the enslaved and other marginalized persons. Accounts of slaveholder abuse and criminal be-

3. Jeff Forret, *Slave against Slave: Plantation Violence in the Old South* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2015).
4. Ibid., 3–7, quote on 3.

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havior, for example, often are absent, while the interior lives of the enslaved never were fully, or even partially, recorded or were recorded without duress. Even though most slavery historians inevitably recognize the limitations, errors, and even lies that the "archive" can deliberately tell about the institution and those who have benefited or suffered within it—and even the limited access to these materials that scholars of color have been held to—not since the revisionist intervention of the 1970s has so much scholarly attention been turned to "the slave archive." Much of that attention has paid off richly.

On full display at the intersection of slavery, gender, and the challenged archive is Jessica Millward's *Finding Charity's Folk: Enslaved and Free Black Women in Maryland*. The *JAAH* reviewer Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor correctly notes of this slim, but powerful, monograph that "what situates Millward's book at the forefront of recently published (and in process) enslavement studies is her willingness to . . . step beyond the archive," commenting that, in Millward's words, history "unfold[s] in real time." Millward, like others, "is self-consciously in conversation with the archive."

Marisa Fuentes's *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* contributes mightily to this intervention. It is a rich collective account of enslaved women's lives in Bridgetown, Barbados, methodically executed through a series of essays revealing her innovative discourse on methodological practice and process. As *JAAH* reviewer Marissa Jenrich notes, "Processes of both historical recovery and methodological reorientation . . . remain central to this thoughtful and compelling work." Fuentes openly reads "along the bias grain," problematizing for her audience the varied types of documents typically left in the archive as stilted, violent annotations of enslaved women's lives.

Lisa Ze Winters, in *The Mulatta Concubine: Terror, Intimacy, Freedom, and Desire in the Black Transatlantic*, takes on questions of women of color, specifically the "free mulatta concubine" from Africa (Senegal) to New Orleans and Saint Domingue/Haiti. Navigating through difficult French and English archival sources including antebellum periodicals, travelers' narratives, petitions, and letters, Winters, like Millward and Fuentes, is able to move the discourse on African and African-descended women, and on methodological practice and process, forward.

SLAVE RESISTANCE, REVOLT, AND REVOLUTION

Digging deep into newspapers, an archival source that has been a staple for slavery scholars across the generations, Brian Gabrial, in *The Press and Slavery in America, 1791–1859: The Melancholy Effect of Popular Excitement*, documents how the post–Revolutionary War, European-American press described, analyzed, and exploited some of the best-known incidents of armed black resistance

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in North America, Haiti, and other parts of the Atlantic World.[5] James Alexander Dun's *Dangerous Neighbors: Making the Haitian Revolution in Early America* recounts the ways in which the two major political parties—Federalists and Jeffersonians—viewed the Haitian Revolution. Situating his study in the nation's early capital, Philadelphia, Dun describes how both political groups manipulated their public responses to the Haitian Revolution in order to enhance their specific agendas during the era of the early nationhood. Reviewer Aaron Silverman explains that *Dangerous Neighbors* is a study of the "Haitian Revolution's importance to the development of the 'body politic' in the early republic . . . [weaving] a narrative that blends the emerging Haitian Revolution with the evolution of US national politics." Dun, as with Brian Gabrial, peers through a Eurocentric lens to make his argument, relying on European-American print culture as his major archival source. To their credit, this monograph and Gabrial's cross multiple topical boundaries related to US slavery, including the American and Haitian Revolutions and the impact of slave resistance on diplomacy in the Atlantic World and the legal status of the enslaved.

SLAVERY, BORDERS, AND TRANSNATIONALISM

Bridget Ford's *Bonds of Union: Religion, Race, and Politics in a Civil War Borderland* explains why whites on the borderlands of the slavery empire in the United States remained within the Union, rather than joining the Confederacy during the Civil War. She does so by studying the multilayered microhistories of two cities divided by the Ohio River, but united by ideological factors. Cincinnati, Ohio, and Louisville, Kentucky, Ford argues, were connected by shared cultural, social, and political elements. Both had a strong antislavery presence, including African American activists who were well-regarded educators and businesspersons, along with sympathetic whites whom they associated with in local churches and abolitionist organizations.

It was in the churches, in particular, reviewer Joan Waugh notes, that Ford finds literate whites with "an emerging Christian consensus on the essential immorality of slavery and racism." These persons supported African American advancement efforts and the pursuit of literacy, even as they strongly held onto their belief in colonization outside the United States as the best solution available to the "problem" of an expanding free black population. Waugh concludes that *Bonds of Union* undoubtedly will cause scholars to consider the methodological approaches of borderlands history within the context of the Civil War. More can be learned from reviewing the economic, political, intellectual, and reli-

5. Brian Gabrial, *The Press and Slavery in America, 1791–1859: The Melancholy Effect of Popular Excitement* (Columbia, SC, 2016).

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gious ties between the middling classes (both black and white) in the "borderlands" of a mythologized and real physical boundary—in this case, the Ohio River.

Exploration of a "borderland" is also the intent in Karolyn Smardz Frost and Veta Smith Tucker's coedited volume, *A Fluid Frontier: Slavery, Resistance, and the Underground Railroad in the Detroit River Borderland*, as well as in Lucy Maddox's *The Parker Sisters: A Border Kidnapping*. The latter, like Bridget Ford's work, centers on the border between the slaveholding and nonslaveholding states. Michael Omolewa, the *JAAH* reviewer for this book, found that Maddox offers a riveting case study of the precarious status of free people of color, who were subject to being kidnapped and sold into slavery, especially after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. This work explores the myriad connections across racial lines of persons who lived and worked along this borderland, and who not only opposed slavery, but organized various ways to assist the fugitives or to recover kidnapped free people. What is also significant about Maddox's monograph is that it offers the rare example of, and describes in some detail, the experiences of free black females stolen from Pennsylvania, placed in a Baltimore slave pen, and eventually sold in New Orleans.

A Fluid Frontier provides much-needed insight into the transnational operations of the Underground Railroad at the border between the United States and Canada, especially in the Detroit River and Lake Erie regions. This body of essays contributes to the ongoing corrective regarding the movement of self-emancipated African Americans to Canada by exploring both the struggles of individuals who had no known assistance, and those who had some benefit from the collective efforts of "freedom workers" who readily identified themselves as part of the Underground Railroad network. Vanessa Holden, the *JAAH* reviewer, concluded that *A Fluid Frontier* captures the transnational lives of black persons, both free and self-emancipated African Americans, who moved back and forth across this border between the United States and Canada, describing their social histories and the larger diplomatic and legal implications of their lives and mobility.

Bonds of Union, *A Fluid Frontier*, and *The Parker Sisters* complement well the voluminous and ambitious historical survey of the antislavery campaigns that is Manisha Sinha's *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*. Sinha's purpose is to tell a comprehensive story of the abolitionist movement from the multiple perspectives present in the 300-year time period she considers—virtually an impossible task to accomplish in one book (even a very lengthy one). Reviewer Wilma King reports that Sinha, to her great credit, brings together in this sixteen-chapter survey a detailed analysis of much that we know about the labor of men and women traditionally labeled as "the abolitionists." Within their organizations also were all manner of freedom fighters—rebellious ship-

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board captives, enslaved revolutionaries mounting insurrections, the thousands of fugitives who fled seeking freedom, and those who pursued an end to their personal bondage before local judges and in appeals courts. Others supported the antislavery cause through their sermonizing in local churches; signing and submitting legislative petitions; providing formal education for the formerly enslaved; and publishing newspapers, novels, speeches, sermons, autobiographies and biographies about the slave's cause. Their collective struggle, in which black men and women always were leading actors, is well documented, and Sinha offers an impressive and effective "counternarrative" to the self-congratulatory praise of the slaveholding republic that was the United States of America.

Another survey reviewed in this forum that is even more centered on the experiences and actions of the enslaved—their capture and transport, kinship and communities, work lives and resistance strategies—is my recently published answer to the question *What Is Slavery*? The book begins by explaining the universality of slavery with a broad account of the globalized institution from the eras of the ancient world until the early modern beginnings of the Atlantic slave trade. It then moves on to center on the transport of Africans to the Americas and their enslavement in North America. *What Is Slavery?* includes discussions of major developments in US history, including colonial settlement, the American Revolution, Western expansionism, the development of the antebellum South's cotton economy, and the abolitionist forces that challenged the institution. These discussions are interpreted through a gendered analysis of these developments' impact on the lives of the enslaved and, to a lesser extent, on the lives of "free" blacks. The narrative, supplemented with demographic and economic data compiled in accessible tables, is meant to provide a comprehensive overview and a humane history that hopefully is useful in teaching about this most inhumane subject. It places the institution in a wide historical context and presents it through the voices, cultural attributes, and experiences of the enslaved African-descended peoples themselves.

Many of the related pedagogical challenges of teaching slavery are taken up in great detail in Bethany Jay's and Cynthia Lynn Lyerly's collection, *Understanding and Teaching American Slavery*. The contributors to this text explain the difficulty of teaching the subject, given the different impact on, and responses to, the topic in racially diverse college classrooms. Trying to describe and have the students explore the topic both practically and intellectually, the best of these articles indicate, can elicit feelings of embarrassment, guilt, shame, or, even worse perhaps, indifference, thereby hindering the learning process. Those who hope to nurture a successful academic experience while engaging this topic must be aware of these diverse attitudes and feelings, and how to either respect, acknowledge, or at least negotiate them.

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One of the topics more likely to be absent in older texts on slavery, but that certainly has become popular recently because of its importance in explaining to students the typicality of this practice across American society, is the ownership of bondpeople by churches, schools, colleges, industries, and various businesses. Jennifer Oast's *Institutional Slavery: Slaveholding Churches, Schools, Colleges, and Businesses in Virginia, 1680–1860* tackles this important topic by focusing on this type of institutional slavery in Virginia, North America's largest slaveholding colony and state.

Oast not only documents how these establishments used enslaved people for their financial benefit and support, but also compares the treatment of enslaved workers owned by these institutions with those held by individual slaveholders. As such, she enters into the long-standing debate comparing the practices of enslavement that has preoccupied generations of slavery scholars—indigenous African versus New World; Latin America and the Caribbean versus the US South; plantation slavery versus small landowners; Deep South states versus Upper South. What is most clear, beyond the generalization that slavery, no matter the circumstances, was an awful experience for the enslaved, is that the task of bringing forth the voice of the captives from the archives of institutional owners is perhaps even more difficult than finding these voices in the archives of individuals who owned them.

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