

***Setting Slavery's Limits: Physical Confrontations in Antebellum Virginia.*** By Christopher H. Bouton. (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2019. Pp. 179. Cloth, \$90.00.)

*Reviewed by David Stefan Doddington*

In *Setting Slavery's Limits*, Christopher Bouton makes use of trial records, executive papers, and a variety of antebellum and Works Progress Administration slave narratives to explore physical confrontations between enslaved people and their enslavers in antebellum Virginia. After asserting that violent actions were shaped by the contested dynamics of paternalism, as well as a discussion of the complex balancing act inherent to “dividing mastery” through hiring out or the use of overseers, Bouton explores how violence was shaped by, and helped to shape, gender norms and ideals among the enslaved. Analytically, much of this covers fairly well-worn ground but Bouton uses a nice range of material to show how enslaved men “linked violence with their masculinity” (36). He then shows how this related to cultures of honor as well as the wider oppression of slavery, noting continuities but also differences between white and black manhood given the inherent power imbalance. Bouton then tackles enslaved women’s experiences in slavery and their use of violence to resist sexual abuse, with a sobering emphasis on the “impossibly long odds” (82) they faced here. There is a neat exploration of the dynamic relations between white and black women in the household, showing how violence could erupt on account of divergent expectations surrounding work and conflict between “masters” and “mistresses” over who held the authority to impose discipline (105). This section is not as conceptually bold as Stephanie Jones-Rogers’s recent intervention on a similar topic, and at times risks reiterating arguments made by Thavolia Glymph, but the sustained attention to women’s violence is a useful point of the book.<sup>1</sup> The book then concludes with a brisk assessment of how enslaved people’s violence served to

disrupt the politics of white supremacy and the revolutionary afterlife of physical confrontations in challenging slavery writ large.

This is a useful text for undergraduate students and general readers looking for an introduction to the study of physical confrontations between enslaver and enslaved in Virginia. Bouton makes good use of archival and printed material, the text is clear and engaging, and there are excellent examples taken from the archives. There is, however, little in the arguments or conclusions drawn from this material that would not be familiar to graduate students and scholars of slavery. Bouton rarely engages with more recent work on the topic of exploitation, power, and the politics of violence, with only five books or articles published post-2010 cited; the arguments on paternalism tend to rely on Eugene Genovese's (no doubt still important) model without a consideration of challenges to, or refinement of, this analytical framework as regards the nature of the enslaver/enslaved relationship.<sup>2</sup> The arguments at times peter out by stating that enslaved people—women and men—sometimes responded with violence when they were abused beyond certain limits: “discord over punishment, food, and visits to friends and family could result in physical confrontations” (9). Similar statements made throughout the text are illuminated with interesting cases drawn from the historical record, and Bouton makes a perfectly valid case in stating as such. Few, however, would be surprised to read this.

At times, moreover, there is a tension between the assertions that physical confrontations were predicated on specific instances of failed paternalism—and thus might presumably have been avoided if only the “model” had been followed—with an emphasis on the radical significance and historical afterlife of violent resistance later in the text. This is an ambiguity that is not really addressed directly, and it has implications for the weighting of the argument. Bouton might also have considered work that emphasizes economic exploitation and brute force over paternalistic claims and directly addressed the argument that, instead of

being shaped by “the failure of whites to live up to the ideals of paternalism” (21), violence was inevitable given the nature of slavery itself.<sup>3</sup> By failing to directly speak to recent debates in the field or to directly resolve these tensions, the book ends up more as an episodic assessment of physical confrontations absent a novel or consistent intervention on the politics of power, resistance, and control.

The analytical force of the book is thus fairly limited. There are excellent descriptions of enslaved people’s violence drawn from archival and printed material, and these illuminating case studies are used well to show a range of physical confrontations between enslaver and enslaved. This would make the book useful for those looking to introduce students to the topic and to suggest areas for further study.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven, CT, 2019); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974). For only two examples, see Walter Johnson, “A Nettlesome Classic Turns Twenty-Five,” *Common-Place* 1, no. 4 (2001); Lacy Ford, *Deliver Us From Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South* (New York, 2009), as well as works cited below.

<sup>3</sup> William Dusingberre, *Strategies for Survival: Recollections of Bondage in Antebellum Virginia* (Charlottesville, VA, 2009); Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA, 2013); Edward Baptist, *The*

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*Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York, 2014); Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (Boston, 2016); Caitlin Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management* (Cambridge, MA, 2018).