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***Slave Against Slave: Plantation Violence in the Old South*, Jeff Forret, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2015, 521 pp., $65.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780807161111**

Since the 1960s, a significant amount of research on slavery and slave life in the United States has focused on the affective bonds and vibrant culture enslaved people created. Historians who have been influenced by this work have stressed the ability of enslaved people to fight against the worst of their oppression as a result of the supportive communities they carved out for themselves. Such positive depictions, while a necessary corrective to earlier visions of "Sambos" or abject victimhood, stimulated a response in turn. Peter Kolchin's seminal essay 'Re-evaluating the Antebellum Slave Community', noted the dangers in crafting a romanticised image of a 'utopian slave community' and the need to consider the impact the trauma, pain, and strife of slavery had on enslaved people in their interactions with one another. Over the past decade, Jeff Forret has been a leading figure in developing this historiography: this innovative and exciting monograph, *Slave Against Slave: Plantation Violence in the Old South,* is the product of extensive research and marks a significant contribution to the field. Forret creatively and skilfully engages with a vast array of source material from across the Old South, moving from the colonial period to the Civil War-era, using church and court records, slave narratives, traveller accounts, personal letters, and plantation journals and diaries in order to present a compelling image of slave communities marked by tension, violence, and strife.

Throughout the book, Forret is clear in stating that his focus on slave violence is not intended to belittle the importance of enslaved communal bonds and, more particularly, is not designed to give succour to politically loaded conservative claims that "black-on-black violence" is pathological or racialised (8, 385). Forret instead aims to refine and complicate our understanding of the everyday tensions of slave life and, indeed, to present a more human portrait of a life in chains. Throughout the book, Forret highlights that community formation among the enslaved involved exclusion as well as inclusion, and that the protection of friends, family, and loved ones could necessitate violence against internal aggressors. However, it is also clear that intra-slave violence was not always predicated on noble aims. Forret is at pains to note that this does not 'denigrate enslaved people' or imply 'any intrinsic weakness of character'. Instead, the analytical focus on intra-slave violence offers 'a more realistic appraisal of slave life (394)' and recognition of the harm enslaved people could do to one another alongside the harm they suffered in slavery.

Indeed, one of the central contributions of the book is the frequently tragic reminder that shared oppression did not unquestionably lead to harmony in the quarters. The murder of an enslaved man named John Robert, which Forret uses to open up chapter four ('Violence at Work and Play'), demonstrates how seemingly 'petty' upsets which led to conflict cannot be separated from the overall exploitation of slavery: 'Like practically every other slave across the South, John Robert had labored a good share of the day for the benefit of someone else. By the evening, he was exhausted and grew so frustrated with his comrade's pestering him and interrupting his rest that he unthinkingly uttered the offending words (167).' Similar stories – of ostensibly minor upsets, words, or deeds leading to violence and murder – are found throughout the book, and Forret is particularly skilled at using court records to bring to life the harm and horrors of slavery.

Forret's work speaks to and develops the vibrant historiographical discussions on enslaved people's agency, thinking, in particular, about the need to move beyond merely celebrating enslaved people's actions in order to incorporate the less savoury, but no less human 'rage, resentment, and passion' that could lead to violence (7-8, 394). Indeed, Forret notes: 'Whereas the scholarship on slavery conventionally discusses agency in overwhelmingly positive terms, with slaves seizing an array of opportunities to shape and control their lives, murder and other forms of violence within the slave community are no less a form of volition, however physically destructive (165).' Enslaved people exercised a degree of agency when they stole from one another, insulted and abused another, or attempted to rape or murder another enslaved person. In Forret's work, we get a sense of slave communities populated by real people, for better and for worse.

The book is divided into eight chapters, with the opening three providing more general insights into the prevalence, origins, and patterns of enslaved violence, as well as the criminal and civil laws of slavery. These opening chapters are perhaps the most unwieldy sections of the book, which is perhaps unsurprising given the ambitious geographical and temporal range of the study. Forret notes in his introduction that it is difficult to find any clear regional or chronological pattern to the violence he documents (15), but each of these chapters contains innumerable useful insights on slave violence and the varied efforts, concerns, and strategies for policing this by white society, as well as by enslaved people themselves. The depth of archival research and the detailed statistical tables and appendices will be immensely useful for future research. Forret uses the remaining five chapters to examine specific sites of tension and violence, including at work, leisure time, and in intimate settings, as well as providing a detailed look at the gendered nature of violence in slave communities. The section on male slave violence and honour adds to the growing literature on masculinity and slavery, while the depiction of female slave honour is refreshing in its recognition of the role of violence in upholding and asserting female identities in slavery.

Overall, this is an extremely valuable and useful book for students and scholars of American slavery. The depth of research is astounding and the conclusions and suggestions will refine and enrich our understanding of the complex social relations enslaved people created in the Old South.

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