Life, By the Numbers

Terri L. Snyder

In this remarkable book, Richard S. Dunn compares the multigenerational experiences of enslaved people on Mesopotamia, a sugar estate in western Jamaica, and Mount Airy, a tobacco, wheat, and corn plantation in Richmond County, on the Northern Neck of tidewater Virginia. The study, which Dunn began in the 1970s, has all the hallmarks of the new social history. It features ordinary people, a search for demographic patterns, and an emphasis on comparative structural analysis, and it is based on a vast bedrock of evidence about 2,076 enslaved individuals, much of it displayed in charts, graphs, and tables contained in the internal appendixes and an external website that accompany the text.1 Despite all of that data, this book is anything but a rote exercise “by the numbers.” To the contrary, it is biographically driven; from first to last, Dunn is focused on the experiences of enslaved people. A Tale of Two Plantations exemplifies the possibilities for reconstructing comparative life stories of individuals and families across generations living under slavery. This is the fundamental, indeed often breathtaking, achievement of Dunn’s project.

The significance of Dunn’s accomplishment is perhaps best measured by considering the nuts and bolts of this monumental study. In order to reconstruct life stories of enslaved people, he first expertly culled details about them from the plantation inventories, accounts, ledgers, and letters of the Barham and Tayloe families, the owners of Mesopotamia and Mount Airy, respectively. These particulars reflect the distinctive history of slavery in each region and measure the common phenomena that structured enslaved peoples’ lives: population fluctuations, importation and migration, labor and punishment, illness and mortality, reproduction and sexuality, diet and provisioning, violence and resistance, color and naming, to list just a few. The results of this painstaking collecting process then became the evidentiary scaffolding of Dunn’s study.

It is upon this framework of data that Dunn is able to assemble and compare the life histories of enslaved women and men who, he believes, are more representative than those, such as Mary Prince or Charles Ball,


Terri L. Snyder is Professor of American Studies at California State University, Fullerton.
who are visible to us because they were remarkable or exceptional. The heart of the book, then, is the way in which Dunn transforms his collection of evidence into “skeletal biographies” (74). Importantly, he not only generates life stories of individuals but also situates them in the context of families, lineages, and generations and reflects on their relationships with one another as well as with white masters, overseers, and, in Jamaica, missionaries. He is therefore able to present dynamic portraits of life under slavery. This approach allows Dunn to go further than most in demonstrating how regional distinctions shaped the experience of enslavement. Most historians can identify the differences between the slave societies of Jamaica and Virginia: high versus low mortality, in-migration versus out-migration, more deaths than births versus a naturally replenishing labor force, and sugar versus tobacco. The brilliance of Dunn’s method is that he shows the experiential dimension of these differences and how they mattered to individual and family histories.

Two chapters in particular illustrate the success of Dunn’s approach to comparative life stories under slavery. Each is centered on a biography of an enslaved woman but also considers multiple generations of her ancestors and descendants. Because one of Dunn’s goals was to challenge the static portraits of the slave community that predominated in the literature when he began the book, each of these two chapters vividly exemplifies the constancy of change over generations of slavery. Beginning with women makes sense because under British American slavery the status of the mother determined that of her children, and enslaved children’s mothers are more likely to be identified or deduced from plantation records than are their fathers. In the absence of other information—only the Mount Airy enslavers identified enslaved fathers as well as mothers in their records—women are the key to reconstructing family relationships.

Each biography exposes the regionally distinctive experiences of enslaved men and women—the “life and labor” of the subtitle—over time. Sarah Affir (b. 1767), originally named Affy, marks the beginning of one Mesopotamia family story. Hers was a life of changing labor: put on a grass gang as a young girl, she worked in domestic service from age seven to twelve, and then was transferred to the sugar fields, where she toiled until her mid-thirties. During these years, she suffered from yaws and bore five of her six children who survived into adulthood. Eventually debilitated by fieldwork, she was cycled into the oppressive chore of laundering for the household. In 1814, when she was forty-seven, Affy, as she was still called, attended the Moravian Church and eventually was chosen for baptism, at which time she was renamed Sarah Affir. Ten years later, she had become a permanent invalid, incapable of further work, although she lived into the 1830s, possibly witnessing the beginnings of emancipation in Jamaica in 1834.

Looking beyond Affir’s life history of incapacitating labor, Dunn argues that the politics of skin color shaped the diverging fates of her descendants.
Four of Affir’s children were identified as “black” (74) in the plantation records and were shunted to fieldwork, like their mother. In contrast, two children were labeled “mulatto” (74) and became domestics; they could imagine that their white fathers, from whom they took their surnames, might manumit them, which would not have been all that uncommon in Jamaica. Affir’s mixed-race son, Robert McAlpine, for instance, labored as a domestic servant and, later, as a cooper and barrel maker. Yet his status inspired envy in the slave community, Dunn surmises, and led McAlpine into violent encounters with other enslaved men. McAlpine’s niece, Jane Ritchie, was also a domestic, like her uncle, and, like her grandmother Sarah Affir, a Moravian convert. Ritchie married a free, mixed-race man in great ceremony in the church, but according to Dunn, the missionaries found her impudent and disrespectful, and she eventually renounced her baptism. When slavery ended in 1834, her status was altered to apprentice laborer, but she purchased her freedom in 1836, two years before the official termination of apprenticeship in Jamaica. The story of Sarah Affir’s family, Dunn concludes, is one of changing labor contexts and rising fortunes within the constricted context of slavery in Jamaica.

In contrast, Virginia-born Winney Grimshaw (b. 1826), a spinner and weaver, was descended from two generations of skilled domestics and artisans, all of them owned by the Tayloe family of Mount Airy. It would be wrong to assume that this status implied stability, however. Enslaved family members were often separated across the Tayloes’ multiple holdings in and beyond Virginia. By the age of nineteen, for instance, Grimshaw married and had her first child, but soon thereafter, in 1845, her father escaped to Canada after a brutal whipping. The Tayloes retaliated by separating the family: some were sold and others were moved to distant quarters. Grimshaw, along with her infant and one brother, was sent to the Tayloes’ Alabama cotton plantation, where she was set to work as a housekeeper. Through rape, coercion, or consent—both her enslaver and Dunn appear to assume the latter—Grimshaw bore several children to the overseer and one child to his son. She remained in Alabama until just after the Civil War and then disappeared from the records. Unlike Affir, Grimshaw was born into what might be assumed to be the stability of a favored status, but the bonds of her family were easily fractured on William Henry Tayloe’s command.

Even as Dunn reconstructs these absorbing multigenerational life histories, he continually circles back to his empirical data to show the representativeness of the Affir and Grimshaw biographies. In this way, he interweaves individual and collective experiences of slavery. We learn, for instance, of the dreadful toll of debilitating labor, diet, and disease at Mesopotamia: field-workers predominated and were likely to be dead or disabled by the age of forty; nearly half (40 percent) of enslaved women of childbearing age were childless; infant survival rates were grim; and the gender balance of the workforce shifted over time and rarely reached
parity. In contrast, a substantial number (30 percent) of Grimshaw’s counterparts worked as skilled domestics because initially Mount Airy aimed for self-sufficiency. Enslaved men and women lived relatively longer, sex ratios were balanced, and most women (90 percent) became mothers. Mesopotamia’s absentee enslavers encouraged overseers to whip bondspeople extensively and regularly in order to motivate production and punish absconding, whereas, according to Dunn, Mount Airy’s resident owners favored separation and sale as a means of threatening and disciplining enslaved people. In Jamaica interracial sex—including rape—was referenced in missionary records; racial mixing at Mesopotamia was also documented in estate records because the children of white fathers often took their surnames. In contrast, at least some of Mount Airy’s owners outwardly disdained racial mixing and, unsurprisingly, its records are silent on the rape of enslaved women. While the Mesopotamia slave community was replenished with slaves purchased from other Jamaican estates as well as with newly imported Africans, out-migration was nearly nonexistent. Movement was a consistent feature of life at Mount Airy, however. Slaves were scattered from the home plantation across eight separate quarters; to the Octagon, the Tayloe town house in Washington, D.C.; and, after 1833, to Alabama cotton plantations. Slaves were also periodically sold. In 1797, the Tayloes advertised 200 slaves for sale (they possessed 370 at the time) and sold at least 100 of them. As the Tayloes expanded their holdings, they found that sales of 27 slaves could produce “as much income as the annual Mount Airy wheat crop” (217). In this way, the individual biographies reflect wider patterns of experiences of life under slavery at Mesopotamia and Mount Airy.

When Dunn began this project, he did not computerize his data because he wanted to view the enslaved as people rather than digits. This was a forward-thinking choice at that time, an astute response to the stripping away of individuality that could occur at the hands of cliometricians. Forty years later, however, historians approach the study of slavery in ways that could push his evidence in new directions. Dunn’s near-exclusive commitment to the data gleaned from the Mesopotamia and Mount Airy papers, for instance, may disappoint some readers. Except for a few letters from Winney Grimshaw’s sister, he does not use accounts by enslaved people who lived or passed through the West Indies or Virginia. He does not use slave trade investigations, abolitionist testimonies, slave and ex-slave narratives, or Works Progress Administration interviews, although he employs Thomas Thistlewood’s diaries to discuss the brutality of slave managers on Jamaica. Dunn is very explicit about this method, which gives integrity and symmetry to his base of evidence: unless a source links directly to the individuals in his database, such as the records of Moravian missionaries at Mesopotamia, he does not include it.

Like all methodologies used by historians, his choices raise questions. Can we trust slave owners’ records to reveal the myriad of personal experi-
ences—the harms—of slavery? Yes, in part. Dunn’s study exposes the painful physical and psychological toll of Mesopotamia’s labor and punishment regimes and the personal cost of Mount Airy’s system of separation and sale; surviving letters by one of the Grimshaws capture the anguish of families torn apart. Still, without evidence about other, brutal features of slavery likely to be found in slave narratives but unlikely to be found in planters’ records—rape, breeding, or forced concubinage, for example—Dunn risks understating their prevalence. A second problem emerges because comparative studies are inherently well, comparative. Dunn strenuously avoids “better or worse” assessments but some inevitably slip through. Take, for instance, his discussion of seasoning. Based on sources from the Barham and Tayloe archives, he concludes that seasoning was emasculating for African men in Jamaica and suggests that this may account for their shorter life span, relative to women. What more could have been gleaned about seasoning had he also considered the story of ’Sibell, an enslaved woman from Barbados discussed so effectively by Stephanie E. Smallwood, or the testimony of witnesses in the parliamentary investigation into the slave trade? ’Sibell’s account captures the fracturing of nascent social bonds formed among shipmates during the Middle Passage as an essential trauma of transshipment and seasoning; witnesses in the investigation testified to the dehumanizing nature of seasoning regardless of sex or age, although one observed that during shipment from West Africa to the West Indies, despondency persisted more generally in enslaved men than in women.² Perhaps seasoning was simply beside the point. Following West African roles, enslaved women in Jamaica maintained the agricultural provisioning plots; their knowledge may have given them more consistent access to food sources, which may have been a factor in their relative longevity.³

“Slavery is not an indefinable mass of flesh,” Ta-Nehiši Coates has recently written.⁴ In this regard, the spectacular achievement of *A Tale of Two Plantations* is to make visible the life stories of specific, named enslaved individuals and their families and to render clearly their diverse experiences of slavery in Jamaica and Virginia. *A Tale of Two Plantations* will be used to rewrite our lectures on slavery and early American and antebellum history. It will be read and debated in graduate seminars, and the rich data in the


⁴ Ta-Nehiši Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York, 2015), 69 (quotation).
appendixes and website are important resources for students and scholars. It will be considered alongside other biographical approaches to slavery, such as Annette Gordon-Reed’s *The Hemingses of Monticello* or Rebecca J. Scott and Jean M. Hébrard’s *Freedom Papers*, and against studies, such as Edward E. Baptist’s *The Half Has Never Been Told*, that utilize a different corpus of sources to demonstrate the centrality of slavery to the history and development of the United States. Dunn writes with clarity and passion, and his commitment to reconstructing the lives of Mesopotamia’s and Mount Airy’s enslaved people is unwavering. He fashions their life histories and explores their changing experiences with great precision, care, and insight, and his study demonstrates the superb results that come from reconstructing life, by the numbers.

---