Gender and Slavery, Birth and Death on Atlantic Plantations

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A Tale of Two Plantations is many things. It is a detailed comparative history of slavery over time and space that engages most of the themes that drive studies of slave life: ethnicity; creolization; natural increase in North America; reliance on the slave trade to maintain populations in the West Indies; the relationship between cultivation and culture; the divisions between fieldwork, domestic work, and “skilled” labor; the role of Christianity; the consequences of the secondary slave trade and high mortality rates respectively on slave life in Virginia and Jamaica; and, finally, the experience of family formation. In Richard S. Dunn’s widely anticipated comparative study, he illuminates in microcosm the lived experiences of these broad themes at the core of life and death on plantations. For a scholar accustomed to reading the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century histories of slavery, Dunn’s work is something of a revelation. The text (and the accompanying genealogical website) offers a layered and complicated vision of enslaved family life. Further, it illuminates in sometimes astonishing detail the lives and experiences of enslaved women. Indeed, A Tale of Two Plantations is an important, if not entirely straightforward, contribution to women’s history and to gendered studies of comparative slavery.

Dunn introduces the study with an overview that details the sex ratios on the Mesopotamia plantation in Jamaica and the Mount Airy plantation in Virginia as well as the consequences of women’s higher mortality rates on Mesopotamia and of their higher vulnerability to sale at the hands of the planter at Mount Airy. Importantly, he illustrates these dangers not with generalities but with particulars, as when he concludes his discussion of John Tayloe III’s efforts to maximize profits through moving enslaved people on and off the Mount Airy estate, a practice Dunn describes as both calculated and manipulative, by centering its impact on the family of Winney Grimshaw: “Winney’s family was not broken up; it was completely wiped out” (55). Indeed, Dunn organizes the entire study around the family lives of women—both Grimshaw on Mount Airy and Sarah Affir on

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Mesopotamia. As he guides the reader into the text, Dunn emphasizes the centrality of women to the stories he will tell by structuring the next two chapters (which introduce the detailed histories of the two plantations) around Grimshaw, Affir, and their families. For Dunn, the story of slavery is one that can and should be told through women’s work and labor. This kind of history of daily life for African-descended people during the era of slavery is rare, and to shed light on the rhythms of enslaved women’s lives is even rarer. Although he would not use these terms, Dunn’s work is in many ways a study of gender and affect in which he pays full and careful attention to the experience of birth, death, partnership, and loss on the part of the enslaved in these two plantation communities.

While slavery is, of course, a system of labor, the story of slavery is always also the story of birth and death, or family formation and destruction. Dunn’s work in A Tale of Two Plantations enables readers to see these more personal dynamics and asks that they work with him to try to comprehend fully what it means to live and die in a community of enslaved people. His deep familiarity with these archives allows him to reconstruct the demographic rhythms of these two plantations in significant detail, but in doing so he never lets his reader forget that “demography” in a slave society is about violence, loss, and grief. Children are organized in sex-balanced lots in anticipation of the girls’ future reproductive labor, adults are sold away because of illness, and childless women succumb to the cane fields. His attention to detail is valuable not only for its microhistorical lens but also for the ways in which it complicates some of the broader themes and patterns that the work engages. Thus we see that for many Mount Airy families, the forced move to Alabama actually reunited some mothers and children and husbands and wives—a very different reality than the destruction of family ties that sales to the cotton South usually wrought. We understand that decisions about purchasing enslaved people for the Mesopotamia plantation had direct consequences for the number of women who lived there. We see that death destroyed families both where natural increase occurred and where it did not. We see the excruciating vulnerability to rape and exploitation at the hands of white men that women in Jamaica experienced, and we see also that well after the acts of interracial sex those women watched their black and “mixed-race” children experience widely different futures, unsettling the perception that siblings who lived on the same plantation would face similar circumstances. And finally, we learn their names. The names of mothers and daughters, grandmothers and sons, names that persistently interrupt the aggregates with which we are so familiar.

Dunn’s challenge here is to keep the complexity of human response to violence and dislocation at the forefront of his engagement with the demographic and genealogical material. Given the monumental source material he has uncovered, he is not always successful in his efforts to
channel the humanity both found and lost in slavery’s archive. While this study should certainly be understood as a contribution to the history of enslaved women, Dunn does not always center those women analytically. Thus, when describing the circumstances that led to the birth of two of Ann’s mulatto children fathered by white men, he notes that she was impregnated when “she was young and at her most attractive” (99). Winney Grimshaw Carrington’s inability to evade the sexual attention of an overseer is framed by the fact that she was “evidently attractive” (124), and Dunn characterizes the relationship between the overseer, his wife, and Winney as a “ménage à trois” (125). He quotes Moravian missionaries’ description of an enslaved woman as “a whore for the overseer” (236) and then in his own words describes her as the “mistress” (236) to two white men. These are moments in the text when Dunn’s archival sophistication outweighs his theoretical attentiveness and can be understood as narrative lapses.

Perhaps more challenging is Dunn’s assertion that family ties would always be experienced as a balm. Dunn asks, for example, whether the existence of family ties among the enslaved at Mount Airy served to make them willing migrants to Alabama, as their owner insisted it did. Certainly, from the perspective of the slave owners, the growth of families among the enslaved was proof of their well-being. As William Henry Tayloe’s overseer wrote of the Mount Airy migrants in 1851, “there has not been one of them whipped since we commenced working the crop . . . [and] 10 Children [have been] Born here in less than 12 months” (298). Scholars have long understood that slave owners believed that family ties would militate against discontent and even revolt. Richard Ligon wrote in 1657 that enslaved men would complain that they cannot “live without Wives,” and in 1715 South Carolina colonial legislators feared that removing slave women from the colony would have “occasioned a Revolt.” Here, Dunn is interested in critically engaging this belief and suggests otherwise when discussing Tayloe’s claim that those enslaved men and women he had moved to Alabama from Virginia were


“contented” (274) at least in part because they had been reunited with family. Although Dunn is careful to recognize this self-serving statement for what it was, his discussion of the move to Alabama asserts that the enslaved men and women who were removed to Alabama went “in the company of relatives and friends, which is why they wanted to come” (321). Once there, Dunn’s emphasis is firmly on the fact that the relocated men and women continued to have children in Alabama, not that those families were continuously riven by separation, violation, and death. Somehow the women raped by white men, the mothers who lost their children, and the women who were never mothers all fade into the background. Family formation serves as an index of a kind of resilient wholeness—one that Dunn later connects to the fact that many freed people remained in the vicinity of their former plantations after emancipation—rather than as a space of vulnerability and exposure.

Dunn ends with a disclaimer, saying that this study had no beginning and thus has no end. He gestures here, of course, toward the problem of the archive, one that he has explicated throughout this work to great effect. Dunn discusses his sources, and lack thereof, in the first person, pulling the reader into the problem of archival absences. He tells of the dead ends, of his thwarted ability to ascertain whereabouts or to confirm births and deaths, and ends by lamenting the fact that emancipated Jamaican blacks “who were documented in exceptionally full detail during the closing years of slavery, were so poorly observed after emancipation that they seem to have disappeared into historical oblivion” (384). He is right to lament the loss of attention, and yet one cannot quite help but discern a hint of challenge in his disclaimer. Given the fulsome nature of his demographic work, he has offered us conclusive evidence that the broad sweep of comparative demography gives way to something else entirely when one has the patience and attention to deal with its particulars. In his hands, it becomes quite clear that for the women and men on these plantations their comings and goings, deaths and births, all added up to something quite a bit more than natural increase or population decline, more than the large sweeping differences between sugar and cotton or between African and creole populations. His details problematize the categories that historians of slavery—Dunn himself included—have been working with for more than forty years, and do so in ways that pivot on the lives of enslaved women. Dunn rarely engages in gender analysis, and perhaps to expect him to do so is to ask more than is fair of this historian, but he does center women’s lives. In this regard, Dunn utilizes a methodological approach to the study of slavery that has been sorely lacking. Doing so is a provocation to scholars who should now approach the demographics of slavery with far greater attention to gender as an analytic category because of the monumental accomplishment that is *A Tale of Two Plantations*. 