Telling Slavery:
Archives of Life and Death,
Surveillance and Control

Thavolia Glymph

RICHARD S. Dunn’s *A Tale of Two Plantations* is a richly rewarding history of slavery on Jamaica and the North American mainland. This singular reconstruction of plantation life in three widely disparate settings—Virginia, the western plains of Jamaica, and Alabama—embracing some two thousand enslaved people is the winning product of a patient, meticulous, decades-long mining of the inventories of two prominent slaveholding families. From the vast and rich archival records of the Barham family of England, owners of Mesopotamia plantation in Jamaica, and the Tayloe family, owners of Mount Airy plantation in Virginia and two plantations in Alabama, together with the papers of the Moravian Church, the Jamaica Archives, Colonial Office records, census records, and other documents, Dunn reconstructs an extraordinary story of slave family linkages and the everyday burdens of life, work, and death that challenged the lives of enslaved people. This story takes place across seven decades and amid epoch-making changes in the Atlantic world as the rising demand for sugar transformed the demographics of the slave trade and slavery in the Caribbean and the growing demand for cotton transformed slavery in the United States and fueled the establishment of a new plantation regime in the Old Southwest.

The principal arguments of this work will be familiar to most scholars of slavery. In comparison to those in mainland North America, slaves in the sugar colonies of the Caribbean endured far more abysmal living conditions and significantly higher mortality rates. In both worlds, gender played a huge role in work assignments and thus access to spaces of autonomy. And, as Ira Berlin has notably observed, differences in the nature of the crop shaped demography, slaves’ life chances, and marriage,

Thavolia Glymph is Associate Professor of History and African and African American Studies at Duke University and the John Hope Franklin Visiting Professor of American Legal History, Duke Law School.

*William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 72, no. 4, October 2015
DOI: 10.5309/willmaryquar.72.4.0680
family, and work patterns.1 A Tale of Two Plantations is, nevertheless, a stunning achievement of historical scholarship. The evidence of slave family lines truncated by death, disease, and overwork, and, no less, of family lines traced across generations, makes a major contribution to the historiography and especially our understanding of slavery’s impact on the individual and collective lives of enslaved people. Detailed appendixes that chart childbirth, occupations, health and longevity, slave sales, and individual work histories contribute to making this an essential book for scholars of slave life and work in the Atlantic world.

Death is the end result of life, but in the way of Vincent Brown’s indispensable study The Reaper’s Garden, Dunn shows the particularly insidious ways in which death stalked enslaved people’s lives. The insight may not be new but A Tale of Two Plantations adds significantly to what we know about the subject and its implications for women and motherhood especially.2 At Mesopotamia, for example, deaths outpaced births for sixty-three of the seventy-two years under investigation, but as Appendix 18 makes clear, behind the gross statistics a more complex picture unfolds. Enslaved people were more likely to die of old age, for instance, than of any other stated cause, a statistic that defies the more generally accepted idea that overwork was the main killer of slaves in Jamaica. We know that slaveholders in Jamaica, as elsewhere in the Caribbean, relied on continuing imports of slaves, but to know that more than half of the women of childbearing age at Mesopotamia were motherless adds a critically important dimension. Other interesting patterns emerge within the larger demographics. Unsurprisingly, female household slaves bore the largest number of children per mother, but more surprisingly, Dunn shows that women in the first gang bore more children per mother than women in the second gang, even though the latter group was generally assigned less arduous work. Enslaved men generally enjoyed better health but lived on average three and a half years less than women. Interestingly, Dunn argues, psychological factors—particularly the emasculation of black men—provide a better explanation for high male mortality rates than more traditionally cited factors such as inadequate diet, a lethal disease environment, and a brutal labor regime.

Yet, notwithstanding the wealth of data this project marshals, the Tayloe and Barham archives, like all archives, present significant challenges. The Mount Airy records allow Dunn to follow the lives of 973 slaves by name, age, labor assignment, and location between 1808 and 1865. From the Mesopotamia archive, he can track the names, sex, age,

color, origins, employment history, and health of 1,103 slaves from 1762 to 1833. The archives document remarkably well a few family and individual histories that provide exceptional insight into the organization and gendered dimensions of slave labor, family structure, and health. Yet they yield but skeletal outlines of the lives of the vast majority of the 2,000 slaves. The records reveal little of their inner lives, even for the best documented. In trying to fill this gap—to give meaning to the lists of names, places, job titles, gender identities, births, and family and community connections—Dunn faced a herculean task that sometimes led him to speculations that neither sufficiently account for context nor adequately theorize about gendered violence, rape, or plantation records as systems of control.

In recent decades scholars have contested the notion that household slaves enjoyed an easier life, citing evidence of the harshness of labor in the plantation household. Dunn seems unconvinced. In his telling, household slaves, masons, and craftsmen held the most “attractive” (75) and “privileged job assignments” (78) at Mesopotamia; the children or grandchildren of white men, he tells us, “always received” (78) these positions. Color thus “greatly affected one’s employment opportunities” (75). It explains why two of Sarah Affir’s six children “were automatically exempted from their mother’s arduous toil as a field hand” (84). But even if not one “of the fifty-two mulattoes and quadroons who lived at Mesopotamia between 1762 and 1833 ever had to hoe a cane piece or chop down a stand of mature cane” (84), what this says about political economy remains an open question. It cannot account for thirty of the thirty-three “black” slaves who waited on whites in 1804, the “black” carpenters, or the seven of eight “black” (96) coopers at Mesopotamia in 1826. It does not explain why, if “there was a surplus of colored girls” (99) by the 1820s and too few “suitable domestic jobs for all of them” (100), one of the cooks was a “black” slave, as were two washerwomen (though Dunn does consider the latter a less prestigious job) and one head domestic. If the managers at Mesopotamia recorded the racial identities of mulattoes “because they were considered to be genetically superior to black children” (78), it is not clear what purpose it was intended to serve.

The evidence of a complex social environment tends to be overshadowed by Dunn’s focus on “genetically superior,” naturally clever, courageous, and rebellious mulattoes who tended to not “take kindly to discipline” (as though other slaves did) and who were more intelligent and apt to show “good judgment” (367) than field hands. Mulattoes, Dunn argues, were also the source of much of the conflict within the slave community, resented by and in turn resentful of “black” and

---

1 See for example Thavolia Glymph, Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household (New York, 2008).
African-born slaves. The murder of a “black” cooper by Sarah Affir’s mulatto son, Robert, Dunn speculates, was “probably” caused by Robert’s long-festering rage against “black” slaves who held skilled positions and also at being placed in the same class as his “black mother and black siblings” (92) rather than the white managerial elite. The fact that Robert and the murder victim were, respectively, twelve and fourteen years old might simply suggest a squabble between two children that could have arisen over any number of things and ended tragically. But Dunn holds tightly to the notion of mulatto envy, explaining an altercation between Robert and another slave some twenty years later similarly as “perhaps” a clash “fueled by mulatto-versus-black hostility” (96).

Then there is Jane, “young, attractive” (it is unclear how Dunn knows what she looked like) with “more white than black blood” (102). Like her uncle Robert, this “clever quadroon granddaughter” (21) of Sarah Affir looked down upon “black” slaves, but Dunn finds much about her to celebrate. She was the “sole person” among the 1,103 slaves at Mesopotamia he studied “who outmaneuvered her white masters in a major way” (105). Dunn gives us several instances of resistance to support this point. For one, he writes, Jane purchased her freedom. But did “parlaying her colored network to full advantage” to damage the reputation of white missionaries, marrying a freed mulatto, and “shar[ing] a bed (at least temporarily) with the white overseer” (105) constitute outmaneuvers that can be counted as resistance?

Dunn’s ruminations on sexual relationships, racial descent, and “the pattern of childbearing” (159), and his interest in “obscure mulatto women” (20), are at times perplexing. He finds Sarah Affir’s life “particularly interesting” as an illustration of “the process of racial mixing at Mesopotamia” (74) and “the quite different ways in which racial mixing was handled in Jamaica and Virginia” (107). In part because the context of power relations is left unexamined, it is never quite clear what this means. Phrases such as “the process of racial mixing,” “biracial sex” (83), and the even less decipherable “interracial coupling” (104), “subversive interracial sex” (130), and “miscegenated children” (168) fail to illuminate the hierarchies at work. Sex between enslaved women and white men occupies a large space in this book but it never rises to the level of rape or receives sustained theoretical analysis. Take for example Minny, the mother of fourteen children, nine with white fathers or grandfathers and five with black fathers. “Obviously,” Dunn writes, “a variety of men had sex with Minny” (166). “A variety of men had sex with Ann” (99) as well—“black men, mulatto men, and white men” (74). It is a narrative discourse in which recent scholarship on the gendered nature of slavery is largely kept at bay.

On the one hand, A Tale of Two Plantations offers the kind of mature judgment and fresh and rich insights that highlight the advantages of
long engagement with a subject. Many of his initial conclusions were reached too hastily, Dunn admits, and turned out to be “completely untrue,” most especially the notion that “if one had to be a slave, Mount Airy was a better place than Mesopotamia” (17). Yet Dunn remains inexplicably attached to the idea. “In sum,” he still maintains, “forced labor at Mount Airy was considerably less onerous and debilitating than at Mesopotamia by every index of measurement” (190), including corporal punishment, which was “apparently less ferocious” (323) at Mount Airy. This is difficult to judge given that corporal punishment and the physical conditions at both places went “generally unrecorded” (323).

Other indexes also suggest less stable social contrasts. John Tayloe III’s reputation as “an imperious and aggressive planter” (107) rested solidly on the “naturally expanding slave force” that “was the engine for his business success” (181). The very phrase “naturally expanding,” of course, betrays the coercion at the heart of slave reproduction. The difference between the numbers of runaways at Mount Airy and Mesopotamia, 0.05 percent and 0.04 percent respectively, is statistically insignificant. But the evidence of arson at Mount Airy and the individual acts of resistance that resulted in retribution against entire families all suggest a harsher form of slavery than Dunn seems willing to credit. The breakup of slave families was constant at Mount Airy and integral to its operation. In this context, it is hard to fathom that slaves forced to walk eight hundred miles to Alabama before the Civil War went “willingly” (321) or that the field hands forcibly removed in 1861–62 “actually wanted to go to Alabama,” even “probably” (365). Despite the “stormy tale of slave escape, family breakup, forced migration to Alabama, and interracial sex” (21), despite the Tayloe policy of deliberately constructing a male majority on the farm quarters by importing men and selling women, the Tayloe brand of slavery is rendered as less harsh.

In the end, as Dunn has stated elsewhere, “What we have here is ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ writ large—that is, the same kind of damage that made that romantic novel so gripping.” A Tale of Two Plantations is indeed a gripping tale. But we should remember that although Harriet Beecher Stowe saw slavery as a curse, she also saw among slaveholders examples “of the noblest and most beautiful traits of character.” In Stowe’s view, they were men and women “who, often without any fault of their own” became “involved in the trials and embarrassments of the legal relations of slavery.” In a similar vein Dunn finds in William Henry Tayloe, the last of the Tayloe owners of slaves, “a slaveholder

5 Harriet Beecher Stowe, “Author’s Introduction: The Story of ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’” (1878), in Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly (1852; repr., New York, 1965), xxiii.
6 Stowe, preface to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, xxvii.
whom I admire in many ways” (19). Dunn also finds much to admire in enslaved people. This admiration is tempered when a key operating assumption holds that the forms of slavery practiced at Mount Airy and at Mesopotamia were both “based on the premise that a majority of slaves would cooperate” (324). From here it is an easy move to the notion that during the Civil War slaves in the heart of the Confederacy “could make no move until the Union Army reached them” (360).

Most significantly, perhaps, *A Tale of Two Plantations* is a study of the disciplinary mechanisms of surveillance and control that stood at the heart of the project of keeping records of slave births, deaths, work routines, and family trees.