In Response

Richard S. Dunn

I am very grateful to Simon P. Newman, Terri L. Snyder, Daniel Livesay, Jennifer L. Morgan, and Thavolia Glymph for taking the time and trouble to grapple with my long and complex book. I am also very grateful to Brett Rushforth and the William and Mary Quarterly for scheduling this Forum and offering me the opportunity to respond. The five reviewers have approached this topic armed with a broad range of appropriate expertise: Newman has written about the seventeenth-century evolution of racial slavery in Barbados; Snyder has a book on slave suicide in eighteenth-century British North America; Livesay has examined the migration of mixed-race Jamaicans to Britain, 1733–1833; Morgan has written about slave motherhood in early Barbados and South Carolina; and Glymph has studied black and white women in the southern plantation household during slavery and after emancipation. Naturally I am glad to find that they all have kind things to say about my reconstruction of slave life and labor at Mesopotamia in Jamaica and Mount Airy in Virginia, and I am especially pleased with the strongly positive commentaries by Newman, Snyder, and Morgan. But here I focus on the criticisms offered by all five reviewers because they illuminate many of the chief issues in current debates over how to interpret the history of racial slavery in America.

Newman, who has observed me working on this project over many years, opens the discussion helpfully by linking A Tale of Two Plantations to my earlier book, Sugar and Slaves. I agree with the linkage and thank him for pointing out the big strategic difference between the two books. In Sugar and Slaves I roundly condemned the sugar planters for their brutal exploitation of their African slaves, their crass materialism, and their...
reckless behavior and felt confident in making these aggressive assertions because I had abundant supporting evidence. But investigating slave life at Mesopotamia and Mount Airy means tracking stateless people with no personal records who are seemingly invisible, as if they never existed. Though I have managed to rescue two thousand enslaved human beings from oblivion by uncovering their hidden histories buried in plantation documents compiled by their enslavers, my knowledge of their lives is severely limited. When I first attempted to compare Mesopotamia with Mount Airy in a 1977 *William and Mary Quarterly* article, my grasp of slave life in the two communities was superficial at best, and I reached the unfortunate conclusion that Virginian slavery was “better” than Jamaican slavery. Publishing that premature article taught me that reconstructing the differences between Virginian and Jamaican slave life was going to take long and careful effort and that judgmental conclusions would trivialize any comparison. Gradually I developed an alternative argument that both slave communities suffered terribly but in strikingly dissimilar ways. In my book I invite the reader to join me in exploring major interpretive issues and try to show rather than tell what was happening, so readers can form their own evidence-based opinions about slave life at Mesopotamia and Mount Airy. And on my accompanying website, www.twoplantations.com—mentioned by two of the reviewers but never discussed—I present minibiographies of 431 slaves from the two plantations so the inquisitive observer can use this fact-crammed database to further interpret slave lives and family relationships.

Newman also opens up a big question that has long intrigued me: what was the relationship between black slaves and mixed-race slaves? The Jamaican planters clearly distinguished between the two groups by assigning domestic and craft jobs to the mixed-race slaves and offering them the possibility of manumission. I believe that the mixed-race slaves saw themselves as superior and used their lighter skin color to distance themselves from the blacks, whereas Newman believes that the slaves, black and mixed-race, rejected white notions of racial hierarchy. Hence he criticizes my presentation of Sarah Affir’s mulatto son Robert McAlpine in mortal conflict with two blacks and her quadroon granddaughter Jane Ritchie scheming with other mixed-race slaves to outmaneuver and humiliate the Moravian missionaries. Newman’s view is certainly possible, but my view seems to better accord with the behavior of those Jamaican mixed-race people who obtained manumission. They often became slaveholders and worked far harder to obtain civil rights for themselves than to rescue their

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enslaved black colleagues. Since the publication of my book, I have been in touch with the descendants of a quadroon Mesopotamia slave named Richard Ridgard, born in July 1834 on the eve of emancipation. These descendants, living today in London and New Jersey, had supposed that Richard Ridgard was a British man who came to Jamaica, but when they read my book and looked at my website they discovered that the British man was actually Richard’s father, William Ridgard, the Mesopotamia attorney.3 Richard Ridgard became a fisherman, his sons became shopkeepers, and two of his granddaughters migrated to Britain and the United States. Some members of this Jamaican family were practitioners of “shadeism”— intraracial discrimination based on skin tone. One of Richard’s descendants is the British author Andrea Levy, who has explored this theme by writing a wonderful novel, Small Island, about Hortense, a Jamaican with a superiority complex because of her near whiteness, who migrates to London in 1948 and finds that the British see her as black.4

Snyder’s appraisal of my book is, for the most part, embarrassingly laudatory, and I much appreciate her thoughtful commentary on my biographical approach. But she is concerned—as other reviewers also are—by my exclusive reliance on the Mesopotamia and Mount Airy datasets and my refusal to employ sources used by other slavery scholars, such as travel accounts and parliamentary investigations for Jamaica, the narratives of escaped slaves, or the Works Progress Administration interviews of ex-slaves for Virginia and Alabama. Snyder believes that these sources would expose brutal features of slave exploitation that cannot be found in my plantation records, which is undoubtedly true. But they would also highlight slave agency, activism, and exceptionalism, which has been thoroughly demonstrated by the historians who have used these sources. I admit that my book probably understates the day-to-day physical and psychological violence in both communities. But by sticking to my datasets and tracking two large cross sections of ordinary people over many years, I can achieve something else: a portrayal of two slave communities in action that focuses on the large number of followers as well as the small number of leaders on both plantations. And on the issue of brutality, I think that concentrating on the impact of disease and death at Mesopotamia and the impact of dispersal and sale at Mount

3 Richard Ridgard is unfortunately misidentified on p. 104 as William B. Ridgard, but he is correctly identified as Richard and a member of Minny’s family on the website “Two Plantations: Enslaved Families in Virginia and Jamaica,” http://www.twoplantations.com.

4 Andrea Levy, Small Island (London, 2004). Levy has written four other novels partially based on family memory, including The Long Song (London, 2010), about the adventures of a mixed-race Jamaican girl during the slave revolt of 1831–32 and the early years of emancipation.
Airy demonstrates—more graphically than most accounts of the slave experience—that both communities were trapped in equally horrendous situations.

Livesay likes many features of my book: the in-depth analysis of lives spent in bondage, the multigenerational examinations of slave families, the emphasis on the culture of death in Jamaica, and the documentation of the Moravian mission at Mesopotamia. But Livesay has a much more upbeat view of Jamaican slavery than I do and complains (correctly) that I fail to show how Tacky’s Revolt in 1760 and the Haitian Revolution in 1791 inspired the Jamaican slaves with hopes of freedom and terrified their owners. Naturally he cannot be entirely happy with my focus on a Jamaican plantation where the Moravian missionaries preached passive obedience to the slaves, where during the 1760 revolt the slaves captured a rebel who was burned alive, and where during the slave revolt of 1831–32 they captured two rebels who were severely punished (see pp. 335, 346–47). But I offer an alternate way of looking at the Haitian Revolution. The collapse of Haitian sugar production caused an immediate spike in London sugar prices, which persuaded Joseph Foster Barham II to buy ninety-one new slaves in 1791–93, drastically altering the size and composition of the Mesopotamia slave community. Furthermore, the unusually large and exceptionally profitable sugar crops produced in 1791–1813 greatly overtaxed the Mesopotamia workers and helped to cause a huge population drop from 380 in 1793 to 298 in 1813 (see pp. 135–37, 430).

This demographic catastrophe, it seems to me, had more direct consequences for the slaves than their hopes of Haitian-style liberation. Livesay also complains that “with such a hyper-focus on a single plantation, Jamaica nearly comes across as a place where almost nothing changes.” But a principal theme of my book is that the Jamaican slave system became increasingly dysfunctional from the 1760s to the 1830s and was close to collapse when Parliament shut it down in 1834. At Mesopotamia, a male-majority workforce turned into a female-majority workforce around 1800, the number of runaways was large from the 1780s onward and kept growing, and by the 1820s the slaves were openly discontented and rebellious. And I demonstrate that these same deep changes were happening in all of the other large Westmoreland sugar estates from 1807 to 1834 (see pp. 61–68, 424–26).

Morgan, to my mind, has written a particularly acute appraisal. She is strongly attracted to my book because it focuses on women and “illuminates in sometimes astonishing detail the lives and experiences of enslaved women.” Like Newman and Snyder, she applauds my effort

to reveal the humanity and “personal dynamics” of numerous enslaved individuals. But Morgan also notes my considerable shortcomings in gender analysis, rightly objecting (as others also have) to my clumsy portrayal of white-black sexual relations. If *A Tale of Two Plantations* were to have a second edition, I would stress much more emphatically that enslaved women were continually subjected to sexual violation by white men. But I would not use “rape” as a blanket term, since I believe that some of the Mesopotamia cases I describe were consensual and that Winney Grimshaw’s ten-year relationship with Richard H. Donnahan may also have been consensual. Some historians insist that white-slave sex was always rape, but this deprives the enslaved woman of all agency and ignores the fact that Jamaican enslaved women had sound reasons to want to have mixed-race babies. On another issue, Morgan contends that I have been taken in by William Henry Tayloe’s claim that the young Mount Airy slaves wanted to go to Alabama and migrated voluntarily. I do believe that the Mount Airy teenagers saw adventure and a change of scene in the migration to Alabama and that they were buoyed by traveling in company with their siblings and cousins. And after emancipation I think the same factors persuaded many of the younger freed people to band together in 1865 and leave Tayloe’s two Alabama cotton plantations in search of something better. But as Morgan rightly points out, my emphasis on the “balm” of family ties conflicts with my argument about the distressing impact of family dispersal at Mount Airy.

Glymph’s review gives me the most trouble. She starts by finding my book “richly rewarding” and “a stunning achievement of historical scholarship,” then points out that my sources reveal little about the inner lives of the Mesopotamia and Mount Airy people and devotes most of her space to challenging my interpretation of the evidence that I do have. I understand some of her criticisms. Like Morgan, she objects to my insensitive depiction of white-black sex. Like Newman, she disputes my belief that there was serious friction between black and mixed-race slaves. Having written a book about the abusive treatment of female slaves employed as domestics, Glymph rejects my argument that female field labor was more arduous and debilitating than female domestic labor. And, viewing the slave system more militantly than I do, she also rejects my

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8 Morgan, *WMQ* 72: 678.

argument that slaveholders in the Caribbean and the United States operated on the premise that a majority of the slaves would cooperate. But I cannot imagine why she supposes that I accept the Jamaican slaveholders’ notion that mixed-race slaves were “genetically superior” (78) or why she thinks that my narrative favors mixed-race slaves over black slaves. And I also do not understand why she insists that I find Caribbean slavery more devastating than U.S. slavery. Obviously, physical conditions were a great deal harsher at Mesopotamia than at Mount Airy, but there are many other dimensions to slave life. Throughout my book I stress that the Jamaican slaves were trapped in a system “where slaves greatly outnumbered masters and many masters were absentees, where rebelliousness was common and rising,” whereas the U.S. slaves were trapped in a system where whites outnumbered blacks, where the slave system gained steadily in strength and in geographic spread, and where white surveillance “made black protest difficult and dangerous” (7). And my emancipation chapter emphasizes that the white majority in the U.S. South continued to harass and box in the freed slaves far more than whites did in Jamaica. Clearly the combustible nature of the topic invites highly charged responses to any effort at analysis. A telling difference between us is that Glymph is disturbed that I find anything to admire in slaveholder William Henry Tayloe. In my opinion, an interpretation in which all slaveholders are vilified is not very useful.

Finally, I note that none of the reviewers pays much attention to my final chapter on emancipation. I regret this, because I was really excited to find more than half of the Tayloe slaves in the 1870 U.S. census, meaning that I could track their movements during their first five years of freedom. At emancipation, 86 percent of Tayloe’s ex-slaves were living in Alabama: about 250 at Larkin plantation and 150 at Oakland. During 1865 about 210 of the Larkin people and 30 of the Oakland people departed, with further withdrawals from Oakland during the next few years. But by 1870 a great many of these people had returned. According to the census, 25 of the 36 Larkin workers’ cabins and 26 of the 27 Oakland ones were occupied by Tayloe ex-slave families, a total of 115 people at Larkin and 110 people at Oakland. I believe that these freed people had come back not out of any love for the Tayloes but because they could not secure land of their own and needed to band together in community solidarity for protection against white mob violence. At Mesopotamia the ex-slaves behaved differently. They left the sugar estate en masse and most of them dispersed into unoccupied land, establishing themselves as independent peasants. And as the Jamaican ex-slave population immediately started to increase after emancipation, they began to raise thriving families just like the Mount Airy people. This is well illustrated by the example of Richard Ridgard (mentioned above), the last slave baby born at Mesopotamia, in July 1834. Richard was the youngest recorded enslaved grandchild
of Minny, whose large family of fourteen children (born between 1785 and 1815) was decimated by disease and early death.\textsuperscript{10} As a freedman, however, Richard had eight children and numerous grandchildren. Third-generation members of his family began to emigrate abroad, and today his descendants are living in Jamaica, Britain, the United States, New Zealand, and Vietnam. I am now hoping that a genealogically minded descendant of one of the 351 Mount Airy slaves listed on my website will tell me how his or her African American family has fared since 1870.