MORE than forty years after the publication of what remains the best study of the English planters who settled the Caribbean, Richard S. Dunn has completed his account of the enslaved. While *Sugar and Slaves* recounted “what these English sons of Adam did to the Garden of Eden islands they discovered,” *A Tale of Two Plantations* painstakingly recovers the individual lives and collective experiences of approximately two thousand enslaved people who endured the final three generations of slavery on two plantations, Mesopotamia in western Jamaica and Mount Airy in Virginia.¹ Decades of research, tabulation of dry lists of human property, and painstaking reconstruction of lives and deaths has enabled Dunn to tell as complete a story of intergenerational enslavement as we have for British America, and with characteristic quiet authority Dunn lays bare the horrors of this labor system.

Dunn’s greatest achievement lies in his recounting of the lives of individuals, enabling readers to comprehend the humanity of the enslaved. Countless hours of work are distilled into the reconstruction of the individual and dynastic stories of one family on each plantation, and Dunn places a woman at the heart of each of these accounts. First is Sarah Affir and her Mesopotamia family, followed by Winney Grimshaw and her

Simon P. Newman is Sir Denis Brogan Professor of History at the University of Glasgow.

Mount Airy (and Alabama) family. Dunn reconstructs how the enslaved in the Caribbean and North America experienced birth, life, labor, and death, how they conformed and resisted, and how the planters who owned them affected their lives and families in numerous and profound ways. Rarely have we seen such detailed case studies in which familiar themes become so real and so human.

Affy, later known as Sarah Affir after she became a member of the Moravian church, was born at Mesopotamia in 1767. Her father was almost certainly one of the plantation’s black slaves, while her mother was probably Amelia, the black head servant in the main house. As a child Sarah worked with other children in the grass gang and then for five years she worked with her mother in the main house. But the best domestic jobs were given by whites to mixed-race people, and Sarah could not long escape the fieldwork that half of the male and most of the female enslaved suffered.

Sugar production and human reproduction wrecked Sarah’s body. By the age of about twenty she was working in the first gang, and for the next decade of her life she undertook some of the most strenuous plantation labor. During this time Sarah bore five of her six children, usually spending her first trimester as a member of the first gang, therefore undertaking the most arduous work on a sugar plantation. Sarah’s four black children followed her into fieldwork, while her two mixed-race children enjoyed the benefits of their mixed-race parentage. Harsh labor, multiple births, and almost constant pregnancy and child rearing meant that after twelve years of good health Sarah was, at the age of thirty-one, described as weak, and for the remainder of her life she would never again be described as healthy.

The racial hierarchy of enslaved labor emerges as one of Dunn’s key themes in his analysis of Mesopotamia, and he interprets the lives and experiences of Sarah and her descendants as evidence of the ways in which racial hierarchy defined Jamaican plantation slavery. Sarah’s children Robert and Ann were very likely fathered by the Scottish bookkeeper Andrew McAlpin. In their youth both worked in domestic service, although while Ann continued in this work Robert was then trained as a cooper and worked as a skilled artisan for most of his adult life. Like all other mixed-race enslaved people at Mesopotamia, Robert and Ann and their children never had to plant, tend, or harvest sugar cane. White Jamaicans assumed that racially mixed parentage made for superior slaves who were more adept at skilled labor, and white fathers sometimes secured advantageous positions for their enslaved offspring. The result was a hugely significant variation in labor and life within Sarah Affir’s enslaved family, mirrored in other families across the plantation.

However, Dunn presents privileged mixed-race slaves as anything but happy with their lot. As a young teenager, Robert fought with and inadvertently killed a slightly older fellow slave named Tamerlane. Twenty years later Robert attacked Peter, the head distiller, with such severity that he
once again contributed to a fellow slave’s premature death. Both of these unfortunates were black, and Dunn interprets the conflicts between them and Robert in racial terms. Tamerlane, Dunn notes, may have feared that Robert’s mixed-race heritage would enable him to usurp Tamerlane’s position as an apprentice cooper. At the same time, despite preferential work assignments “Robert reacted to his condition with acute frustration and blind rage” (98). Other white men manumitted their children, but Robert’s father was unable or unwilling to do this, and Dunn sees Robert as frustratingly trapped between the promise of not just a better life but freedom on the one hand and the hopelessness of plantation slavery on the other hand.

Dunn sees a similar pattern of frustration in Ann’s daughter Jane, whose father was the white doctor who ministered to the plantation’s slaves. From childhood on Jane worked in domestic service, initially under her mother, Ann, as head housekeeper. Jane received permission to marry a free mixed-race man named Peter Knight, after which she was ordered to serve in the household of new Moravian missionaries. But Jane was clearly unhappy in this position, and the missionaries regarded her as unruly. When they complained about Jane, she made a calculated and successful defense of her actions to her Mesopotamia masters. Dunn interprets Jane’s actions as those of a woman who regarded herself as far more white than black and married to a free man, and he argues that such attitudes meant that she would not “tolerate having to fawn on and toady to her [Moravian] master and mistress” (102).

Dunn’s interpretation of the beliefs and motivations of Robert and Jane, and even his account of at least some of their actions, is “conjectural” (480 n. 34). His comprehensive understanding and detailed analysis of the Mesopotamia inventories have enabled him to discern patterns in the listings of the names, ages, occupations, and conditions of the plantation’s enslaved. He is surely right that mixed-race slaves may have adopted and internalized the racial hierarchies fostered by their white masters, and he provides plentiful evidence of whites’ preferential treatment of mixed-race people. But Dunn is less convincing in privileging white ideas of racial hierarchy as a cause of Robert’s and Jane’s beliefs and actions. Perhaps such an interpretation is rooted too deeply in the world Dunn illuminated so brilliantly in Sugar and Slaves, his social history of the seventeenth-century white adventurers and the ways in which they fashioned and then institutionalized racial plantation slavery. Dunn did not hide his horror at “what these English sons of Adam did,” and he has never been an apologist for the slavocracy. In A Tale of Two Plantations, Dunn has focused on the enslaved, yet he finds the beliefs, attitudes, and practices of white masters to have been so powerful and so pervasive that they were internalized by enslaved mixed-race people.

This may have been the case, but we cannot be certain, and the surviving plantation records and lists on which Dunn depends reveal very little
of the mental worlds of the enslaved. Surely there are many other possible interpretations of Robert’s and Jane’s actions, including ones that do not depend on the internalization and acceptance of white ideas about racial hierarchy. As a child Robert was nursed through a serious case of yaws by African-born Lydia, and both Robert and Jane chose sexual partners who had more African ancestry than they did. In Robert’s case he had children with two black field hands. All of these were black women like his mother and sisters, and perhaps we should not assume that he felt different from and superior to the plantation’s black slaves in ways that so profoundly shaped his anger and actions. Robert was clearly quick to violent anger, but can we be sure that this was the result of “acute frustration and blind rage” (98) born of his mulatto identity? To assume this is to accept not just the physical mastery of white owners and overseers but also the power of their developing ideology of racial hierarchy in the hearts of the enslaved. It may give whites a victory that they did not so easily attain.

Similarly, Jane’s opposition to the Moravians she was sent to serve might not have been rooted in the notion that “she had more white than black blood and had just married a manumitted mulatto” (102). And can we be confident that “she probably disdained her black fellow chapel attendants” (102)? There is no direct evidence to suggest that either Jane or Robert felt disdain for black slaves, and perhaps we should more readily assume that there were strong bonds between Sarah Affir and her son Robert and her granddaughter Jane, to say nothing of the strong ties between Robert and Jane and other family members and indeed their chosen sexual partners. Plantation records, by definition, are unlikely to tell us much about the bonds between a black parent and a mixed-race child, or between a mixed-race woman and her black grandmother, cousins, aunts, and uncles. Beyond family, both Robert and Jane lived and worked with both black and mulatto enslaved people, and shared experiences and commonalities may have been just as significant as the differences that planters perceived to exist between them.

Racial hierarchies appear far less significant in Dunn’s account of life, family, and labor on the Mount Airy plantation. Perhaps what is most striking about Dunn’s reconstruction of this Virginia family is the frequency with which members were torn apart, in both casual and malevolent ways. For all that, the lives of individual Virginia slaves were often longer and healthier than those in the Caribbean, but families and communities were just as fragile. With characteristic understatement Dunn notes that John Tayloe III and William Henry Tayloe had a “major personal impact” (107) on the enslaved Grimshaw family and by implication on many of the enslaved families these planters owned.

Harry Jackson, a coachman, and Winney Jackson, a chambermaid, were among John Tayloe III’s favorite household slaves. They spent half the year serving their master’s family at Mount Airy and the other half of
the year serving the Tayloes in their Washington, D.C., town house, the Octagon. As a consequence, the Jacksons’ three children, Betsy, Esther, and Henry, spent their childhood years at Mount Airy and apart from their parents for half of each year. In 1817 Harry and Winney and their son Henry (a stable boy and apprentice to his father) began living year-round in Washington, until 1824 when Harry returned to Mount Airy. Winney remained in Washington and quite possibly never again spent time with her husband or daughters.

Winney Jackson’s daughter Esther became a skilled spinner and married an enslaved carpenter named Bill Grimshaw. As Esther knew from her childhood, skilled labor afforded no greater protection, and she must have been all too aware of the fragility of the family she raised and the vulnerability of their children. In 1829, after less than a decade of marriage, William Henry Tayloe separated Bill and Esther, and from that point forward they were unable to consistently live together as a couple. Their second child, Winney Grimshaw, eventually followed her mother into textile production, and when she was about eighteen she married Jacob Carrington, a worker at the plantation’s grist mill.

Everything changed when Bill Grimshaw reacted to a flogging by running away. He was perhaps the only Mount Airy slave between 1808 and 1860 to elope successfully. Tayloe sought to ensure that other slaves would not follow Bill’s example by punishing those who were closest to hand. One line in the plantation inventory book speaks volumes: “Sent this family away for misconduct of the parents” (117). Tayloe was unable to sell Esther, whom he probably suspected of aiding and then concealing Bill’s escape, and so he kept her at one of the family’s Virginia plantations while he set out to separate her permanently from all but one of her children. Two daughters were sold to other planters, while fourteen-year-old James and nineteen-year-old Winney (together with her infant son) were sent to the Tayloes’ Oakland plantation in Alabama. The family was sundered, with a father now free in Canada, one child working in Washington, two others sold to other Virginia planters, and two banished to the cotton fields of Alabama. Only Esther and her eight-year-old son Henry remained. Winney Grimshaw had value as a skilled textile worker, but she was banished to field labor in Alabama at the whim of a planter determined to exact vengeance and to prevent further elopements. Dunn succeeds brilliantly in demonstrating that the enslaved in both Jamaica and Virginia were equally vulnerable, and it is the terrible power of planters over individuals and families that resonates with the reader. As Dunn makes clear, many other Mount Airy families were separated in similar ways, usually for economic reasons.

Over the following years, Winney Grimshaw had several mixed-race children, to the evident consternation of William Henry Tayloe. We cannot know the circumstances surrounding these pregnancies and births, but Winney’s family history may have come into play. Only nineteen years old
when she was banished to Alabama, Winney had only a younger brother with her and no older family members to support, advise, and protect her as best they could. For generations her family had experienced enforced separation, of which her long trek from Virginia to Alabama was but one example. If she exercised a degree of choice in forming relationships with and bearing children to white men, perhaps Winney hoped for a degree of stability and protection for her family. If so, the hope was a futile one: Tayloe took Winney’s four-year-old son John away from her, presenting the child to his widowed niece as a New Year’s Day gift. While mixed-race identity enabled some of the Caribbean enslaved to secure protection and privilege, albeit uncertain, this was not the case in Virginia and Alabama.

In *Sugar and Slaves* Dunn lamented that “to see how the blacks themselves reacted to their treatment by . . . planters is scarcely possible, given the nature of the surviving evidence.” 2 How wrong he was, and in *A Tale of Two Plantations* Dunn has crafted a comprehensive study of intergenerational slavery in Jamaica and Virginia in which the enslaved come alive. Exploring black lives, black agency, and even black resistance, Dunn’s greatest achievement is his remarkable utilization of white people’s plantation records to reconstruct the relative helplessness of individual enslaved people and their families in the face of planter whims and fancies. Dunn’s outrage at the world wrought by these white sons of Adam is as powerful today as it was almost half a century ago, but now he has enormously expanded our understanding of how the enslaved experienced and reacted to their bondage.

2 Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, xvi.
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. 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, who have come to define the slave narrative.

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. 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.

“Slavery is not an indefinable mass of flesh,” Ta-Nehisi Coates has recently written. 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-Nehisi 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.

Family Matters on a Jamaican Plantation

Daniel Livesay

WHEN workers on the Cornwall estate came out to greet their absentee owner the day after New Year’s festivities in 1816, they brought with them an expansive understanding of the plantation’s particular history and composition. Many had likely been born in Africa, part of the last wave of captives legally imported into Jamaica, and had spent the previous decade familiarizing themselves with Cornwall’s social dynamics and sugar production routine. Most of the rest had undoubtedly grown up on the island and could sketch out the genealogies and relationships of the plantation’s workforce, as well as its recent financial successes and failures. All of them knew something about Matthew Gregory Lewis, the master who until that day had been often spoken of but not yet seen. Lewis, on the other hand, knew virtually nothing of Cornwall or its inhabitants. Instead, he looked out onto what he perceived as a mass of undifferentiated black faces. The plantation had previously been just a number on his account ledger, and its workers little more than abstractions in his mind. Now he could see Cornwall for what it was: a fabricated but nevertheless complex society.¹

Scholars of colonial slavery can often feel similarly to Lewis when confronted with the correspondence and financial records of planters who cared little about the individual experiences of those whose toil transformed the Atlantic economy. Typically, enslaved workers are simply names on an inventory, disconnected from their familial and social context. At best, they are rescued from obscurity only when enduring punishment for violating the codes of conduct of their masters. Despite our desire to recover lost voices, slavery scholars can still feel as though we are providing general assessments of a demographic bloc, rather than chronicling personal narratives. Yet, as Richard S. Dunn brilliantly demonstrates in his new book, A Tale of Two Plantations, with a great deal of care and attention historians can recover an enormous amount of information about those whose lives were spent in bondage. It gives readers a rare glimpse into the perspectives of those who worked the plantations, rather than simply those who profited from them.

Less than an hour’s walk from Matthew Lewis’s Cornwall estate stood Mesopotamia, one of the two plantations in Dunn’s account. The other is Mount Airy on Virginia’s Northern Neck. In holding up these two estates for examination, Dunn risks traveling over some well-trod ground. Historians have long made comparisons between the Caribbean and the Chesapeake in order to underscore just how much slavery could vary by region. Certain axioms have emerged out of these investigations: Jamaica’s enslaved population suffered much greater mortality and retained stronger African influences; Virginia’s population was more reproductively successful and “creolized.” But these truisms have mostly come from large overviews of plantation data. Dunn provides one of the first in-depth analyses of how these overall trends looked on the ground for the families and individuals who experienced them. The tragedy of Jamaica’s particularly gruesome climate and work routine, for instance, is laid bare in Dunn’s detailed biographies of mothers losing children, adolescent lives cut short, and young adults succumbing to terrible disease and mistreatment. Likewise, he meticulously documents the horror of Virginia families being torn apart in the early years of the Republic. Indeed, Dunn’s account of life in the “Second Middle Passage” from the Eastern Seaboard to the Cotton Kingdom is a welcome and original addition. Through his subjects, he chronicles the relatively unexplored topic of whole plantations moving westward, rather than individuals sold piecemeal into the slave traders’ coffles. Needless to say, Dunn’s perspective is large, his detail rich, and his evidence substantial.

Among the book’s many important contributions, Dunn’s analysis of enslaved families in Jamaica is a tremendous step forward, not just for that island’s history but also for both slavery and family studies generally. In documenting 1,103 workers on the Mesopotamia estate from 1762 to 1833, Dunn provides a number of major insights. Perhaps most impressively, he gives a multigenerational perspective on how slavery changed during a crucial period in colonial Jamaican history. Scholars such as B. W. Higman and Michael Craton have documented some of the larger demographic characteristics of the island, but Dunn shows how one individual plantation contributed to, and was shaped by, those trends over a substantial period of time. He gives names and stories to the cycles of African importation and anemic reproduction that typified Jamaica’s long demographic struggle.


With careful detail he narrates the lives of enslaved workers who married, took companions, lost multiple children, struggled to have children, gave birth to offspring fathered by white men, and in some exceptional cases raised sizable families. Aided by numerous tables in the appendixes that chart Mesopotamia’s demographic and genealogical trees, Dunn achieves the rare feat of making the plantation’s history read more like a collection of family stories than a business account. This was perhaps last accomplished by Trevor Burnard’s study of Thomas Thistlewood, but Dunn goes further by drawing out that close biographical investigation across multiple generations. This work will undoubtedly inspire scholars to jump more deeply into the archives in order to uncover how slavery was experienced at the familial level.

Dunn also succeeds at recovering the genealogies of highly fractured households. Mesopotamia’s kinship structures correlate well with what has long been argued about Jamaican plantations: multiple family structures abounded, including nuclear, solitary, and matrifocal units. But, once again, Dunn personifies this rather impersonal claim. In particular, he documents the life of Sarah Affir, an enslaved woman who had children with multiple black men as well as with a white bookkeeper. Using plantation inventories, Dunn incorporates the growth of Affir’s family into her biography of work on the estate. Likewise, those same inventories show a yearly divergence in labor and experiences for the children she bore by black men and those by a white man. Dunn is far too cautious, however, in his presentation of interracial relationships. Although he does ask, “How consensual were these black-white liaisons?” (168), it should be clear to him how few options existed for enslaved women on the island.

These genealogies create a personal history of what Vincent Brown has argued was the ubiquity and culture of death in Jamaica. Early in the book, Dunn lists several elderly slaves at Mesopotamia in the mid-eighteenth century who represented not a counterexample of colonial salubrity but instead a monument to the rare survivors who escaped the devastating effects of Jamaica’s sugar regime. Further into the study, he describes a number of women who had no children or who lost offspring within months of their birth. He writes alongside these numbers an account of the individual shipments of Africans routinely brought in to repair this reproductive deficiency and just how damaging they were to the organization and reorganization of enslaved families.


Finally, Dunn gives an extraordinary analysis of a thoroughly under-studied aspect of Jamaica’s history: early evangelical efforts within the island’s enslaved community. Previously, scholars have shown the effects of such missions in the lead-up to emancipation, as observers and officials came to see Christianization as a crucial step in preparing Jamaicans for freedom. But very little has emerged on the eighteenth century. In one of the most exciting recent studies of Jamaica, Dunn devotes a large chapter to the Moravian mission at Mesopotamia, which lasted seventy-eight turbulent years. Nearly a third of the estate joined the Moravian fold, and the missionaries had a tremendous impact on how those converts related to one another and to their masters. In one case, the Moravians oversaw a familial dispute when two of their married converts took new partners; in another, they married an enslaved woman of color named Jane Ritchie to a free man of color in 1830, though they later worried that the ceremony had made Ritchie insolent in her dealings with both the mission and the estate. This chapter adds vibrancy to an already distinctive tableau of Jamaican slavery and shows just how much can be learned about enslaved colonial life.

The novelty of this Moravian material provides refreshing insight into a topic so dependent upon the mundane notations of account registers. Yet it also hints tantalizingly at some of the wider contexts and diverse sources that fail to make it into Dunn’s analysis. So much is gained by such a close focus on Mesopotamia and its inhabitants, but something is also lost when the plantation’s boundaries feel, as they sometimes do here, as if they were impenetrable. Just as Jamaica was not a castle in the Caribbean, so too were its plantations not islands within an island. To his deep credit, Dunn stays steadfastly committed to his evidence, and he works aggressively not to make assumptions about his actors’ intentions or thought processes. However, so much work has been done in recent decades to show how connected the Caribbean’s enslaved populations were, and how cognizant they were of the political movements of the time, that it seems far too conservative not to attribute some of the actions of Mesopotamia’s workers to their understanding of the Atlantic world’s circulating currents of change. The most obvious omission in A Tale of Two Plantations is the Haitian Revolution, which is mentioned only once. Considering the degree to which that event inspired bound laborers throughout the Western Hemisphere, terrified their owners, and forever altered perceptions of the viability of slavery, it would have been useful to see Dunn read his sources in light of how the revolution worked its way into the daily negotiations of Mesopotamia after 1791. After all, thousands of Dominguans refugees made the quick, hundred-mile trek to Jamaica, and island officials would thereafter blame the revolution for every perceived instance of rebellion up to emancipation.

Some wider contextual points would have also greatly benefited Dunn’s portrayal of slave life and enslaved families in this period. With such a hyper-focus on a single plantation, Jamaica nearly comes across as a place
where almost nothing changes, beyond the vacillating statistics of Africans arriving and sugar casks departing. But a great deal did change, transforming how slaves lived. To use a particular example, the previously mentioned Jane Ritchie may have soured toward her enslavement due, as Dunn claims, to her 1830 marriage. But, as a light-skinned woman of color, she likely was also inspired by the passing of a bill that same year that gave free people of color full civil rights, which was the outcome of more than a decade and a half of fervent protest by mixed-race Jamaicans. Because he limits his scope primarily to Mesopotamia’s records, Dunn misses some of these wider political developments.

To use a bigger example, Dunn spends a few pages describing Tacky’s Revolt, a series of enslaved uprisings in 1760 that were some of the Americas’ largest slave rebellions prior to the Haitian Revolution. But Dunn portrays the revolt primarily as a brief moment of terror among the plantocracy. In fact, the revolt not only terrorized white Jamaicans but also motivated them to make significant changes to their legal code. The House of Assembly passed new laws in an attempt to control slaves more effectively, as well as a bill with the goal of discouraging interracial sex and limiting the growth of mixed-race families. Those laws did indeed affect slave life and led to substantial changes within certain enslaved households.

Dunn could have also utilized information from more diffuse sources, such as abolition pamphlet literature. Not only did abolitionists push for an end to the slave trade, they also advocated for drastic changes in slave marriage and family formation, some of which the Jamaican assembly adopted. Dunn is unquestionably aware of these background issues, and he truly may not have seen their impact in the daily correspondence and records at Mesopotamia. But silences are notorious in the archive of colonial slavery, and without factoring in these larger movements, he risks denying his subjects the narrow but important political agency they undoubtedly held.

If Dunn buries some wider contexts in his account, he has done so to unearth a much larger volume of material that brings us closer to understanding how enslaved people looked upon their worlds. No book can discuss everything. And Dunn has contributed so much during such a distinguished career to enrich our knowledge of slavery in the Americas. This is a monograph forty years in the making, and it will continue to inspire and inform for at least that long. It can feel perfunctory to review a book by stating that it is essential reading, but if A Tale of Two Plantations does not meet that standard, then nothing does.
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

Jennifer L. Morgan is Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis and History at New York University.

*William and Mary Quarterly, 3d ser., 72, no. 4, October 2015  
DOI: 10.5309/willmaryquar.72.4.0676*
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*. 
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.
family, and work patterns. \footnote{Ira Berlin, \textit{Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America} (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); Ira Berlin, \textit{Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves} (Cambridge, Mass., 2003).} \textit{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 \textit{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 \textit{A Tale of Two Plantations} adds significantly to what we know about the subject and its implications for women and motherhood especially. \footnote{Vincent Brown, \textit{The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery} (Cambridge, Mass., 2008).} 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” and “privileged job assignments” at Mesopotamia; the children or grandchildren of white men, he tells us, “always received” these positions. Color thus “greatly affected one’s employment opportunities.” It explains why two of Sarah Affir’s six children “were automatically exempted from their mother’s arduous toil as a field hand.” 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,” 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” coopers at Mesopotamia in 1826. It does not explain why, if “there was a surplus of colored girls” by the 1820s and too few “suitable domestic jobs for all of them,” 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,” 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” 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

---

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.”4 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.”5 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.”6 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.
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.1 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


Richard S. Dunn is Roy F. and Jeannette P. Nichols Professor of American History, Emeritus, at the University of Pennsylvania.
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

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. 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. 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.” 5 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


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.