

Strategies for Survival: Recollections of Bondage in Antebellum Virginia

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Review

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Dusinberre, William *Strategies for Survival: Recollections of Bondage in Antebellum Virginia*. University of Virginia Press, \$40.00 ISBN 978-0-8139-2822-7

Listening to Slaves in their Own Words

William Dusinberre has spent the better part of his career working over a particular set of questions about the master-slave relationship. Yet reexamining the same set of questions is an improbable strategy for an accomplished scholar of intellectual ambition like Dusinberre. How can you open new ground plowing the same rows again and again?

His latest book tacks between three waves of revisionism. During the 1950s, scholars underscored the oppressions of slavery. Dusinberre's previous books, harrowing accounts of the slaveholding practices of President James K. Polk and lowcountry rice planters, had most in common with this first wave of revisionism. He took relatively little notice of a second wave that broke over the field during the 1970s. Scholars dug into new sources of testimony by former slaves, excavated ties within "the slave community," and insisted on its autonomy. A third school argued that at the crux of the master-slave relation was an ideology of paternalism, a complex reciprocity in which planters demanded obedience in return for subsistence and protection. Paternalism, these scholars argued stymied the slaves' quest for autonomy and constrained their struggles in terms that bolstered planters' hegemony.

Strategies for Survival is divided into three parts, each focused on a major revisionist thesis. The claims of paternalism are considered in part I, "Alleviations;" the first wave of revisionism in part II, "Offenses;" and the agency of slaves and the autonomy of the slave community in part III, "Responses." In twelve concise chapters, he submits revisionist arguments to the discipline of evidence--the testimony of former slaves in Virginia. In close

readings of interviews conducted by the Works Progress Administration during the 1930s, Dusiaberre navigates a series of vexing problems: "the good master," sexual relationships between slaveholders and bondwomen, the contradictions of urban and industrial slavery, the terms of discipline, material provisions, the slaves' religion, their families, and solidarities. He has a hunch that former slaves were more frank with African American interviewers in Virginia than in other states with mostly white interlocutors. Here and there he supplements these 159 narratives with other interviews and antebellum autobiographies. Throughout he wants to hear what former slaves themselves had to say about the question undergirding debates among revisionists: "What was the balance between the master's power and the agency of the slaves" (1)?

At its best, Dusiaberre's approach makes satisfying, sometimes cathartic, reading. It is as if putting the scholars' arguments to the test of the slave narratives makes enslaved people the historians' collaborators and, at long last, the masters' peers. He takes the slaves' perspective seriously enough to tell their stories at length, sift their implicit meanings and contradictions, and gives welcome consideration to their generalizations about slavery. Caroline Hunter, who saw three brothers sold away, distills the threat of sale to a potent formula of discipline: "If de massa coudn' rule you," she intones, "dey would sell you" (77). His tone, prosecutorial in previous work, has turned judicious.

This is certainly new territory for Dusiaberre. Ex-slaves compel him to give arguments he had formerly neglected their due. When witnesses recalled their families, they talked mostly about their mothers, he notes. He recognizes that fathers were important figures in nuclear families but agrees with historians who argue that slave families were generally matriarchal. Reading over Dusiaberre's shoulder, we find him taking instruction from his witnesses. The evidence compels him to admit that when slaves deemed an owner a "good master," they meant it. The good master was the one who allowed a slave to buy her own freedom, provided the people with better clothing or worked them less than other owners round about, or were simply cordial, mostly with bondwomen who worked in the house.

Dusiaberre has not backed away from the abysses of American slaveholding. He airs the rage of black people, one after the other, at the rape of slave women, yet he agrees with other scholars that some bondwomen and owners developed long-term relationships. The terms in which historians typically debate this matter, "rape" versus "consensual unions," do not quite

capture the dilemma that these women faced, he concludes (32). If anything, much of what he learns from slave narratives seems to renew his astonishment at the sheer wickedness of slavery.

What has changed in Dusiaberre's thinking is a newfound feel for the middle ground, between revisionist interpretations and between slaves and slaveholders. In part, he has come alive to the circumstances and places in which self-interest obliged owners to come to terms with enslaved men and women. In cities, some owners found it profitable to permit bondwomen to hire themselves out as house servants. When labor markets were tight in Richmond during the 1850s, factory owners reined in overseers, lest the enterprise gain a reputation for harsh treatment and make recruiting harder still. Moreover, the testimony of former slaves has sharpened his sense for the tenacity and successes of slave resistance. The frequency of running away forced owners to improve the treatment of slaves, especially in the Upper South, where flight to the North was on the horizon, and "fostered among white people a generalized anxiety about the slaves' disorderliness" (153).

What is most fresh in these reconsiderations of now perennial arguments is his attention to how enslaved people judged slavery and felt about it. Historian David Brion Davis has traced the origins of slavery to the domestication of animals. The slaveholders' attempt to reduce their human property to chattel, Dusiaberre finds, was palpable to slaves in Virginia. Enslaved children saw black people marched to the Deep South in droves, "like cattle in a herd," as Robert Williams recalled. Behind slaves' sense of material deprivation, meager food and threadbare clothes, lay fundamental principles about the wrongs of slavery, "wukin' fer de white man fer nuttin,'" in Charles Grandy's succinct formulation. "They knew that, near the heart of bondage, lay their deprivation of wages," Dusiaberre writes (116-117).

Subtle re-readings of the Virginia narratives yield valuable insights in profusion. The threat of sale gained credence and disciplinary force in the separation, not only of spouses and parents and children, but in the sale of siblings as well as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Ex-slaves' testimony hones his appreciation for the workaday burdens of slavery. The hoes provided by owners were heavy, "broad like a shovel," Allen Crawford remembered, as hard to lift as they were to break, with rough-hewn, knotted handles that slaves shaved with glass to safeguard their hands (105). Historians need to give more careful consideration, Dusiaberre suggests, to who embraced Christianity and

why, especially its everyday blessings: opportunities to socialize with slaves in the neighborhood on the way to church, a repertoire of religious songs to regulate the pace of work by, a gospel of forgiveness that kept defiant men and women from harm, an omnipotent God to constrain the power of slaveholders.

The determination to steer a middle course sometimes comes between Dusiaberre and his sources though. Historians increasingly refer to “privileged slaves.” Yet in *Strategies for Survival*, they constitute an analytical category, a distinct class of house servants and artisans with rare access to material rewards, opportunities to develop skills, and to gain recognition of their individuality from owners. This viewpoint reduces people to contradictions in terms, such as “a privileged butler,” a “privileged (and ‘pampered’?) butler, “[p]rivileged slaves” (24, 202, 200). He musters a grudging respect for those who turned their jobs to their own advantage without making themselves subservient to owners or betraying other slaves. On the whole, however, he thinks these folks divided the slave community. He upbraids Harriet Jacobs with abstractions for “the class prejudice of a literate mixed-race slave” (34). Rough treatment for so-called privileged slaves is the flinty outcrop on Dusiaberre’s middle ground. He wants to subject the slaves to the same tough-minded consideration that he gives the masters. Because he views them from on high, he can only condescend to judge, rather than explain, them.

Conceptually, hewing to the middle course breaks little new ground. Dissatisfied with the notion of resistance, he gets no farther than metaphors. (The struggle between slaves and slaveholders, he ventures, was less a shooting war than a cold war.) He is rightly critical of the concept of autonomy but proposes “self-determination” instead, a distinction that does not make much of a difference. New ways of thinking about slaves as agents in history will reshape the field as historians, one-by-one, make a clean break with autonomy and its cognates.

What is remarkable about *Strategies for Survival* is that after a quarter-century in the same field, Dusiaberre is still approaching it from new perspectives, working up fresh insights from familiar sources and old debates. His deep plowing turns up rich discussions for specialists’ consideration. He is an intelligent, persistent guide on many of the questions that thoughtful undergraduates are eager to consider. And some teachers may find this book a productive tool for introducing graduate students to the uses and disadvantages of historiography for cultivating new perspectives on history.

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