

Slave Against Slave: Plantation Violence In The Old South

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Recommended Citation

Gilpin, R. Blakeslee (2016) "Slave Against Slave: Plantation Violence In The Old South," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.18.4.15

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss4/10>

Review

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Fall 2016

Forret, Jeff *Slave Against Slave: Plantation Violence in the Old South*. LSU Press, \$65.00 ISBN 9780807161111

The Nuance of Violence: Reassessing Intraracial Conflict on the Plantation

No matter how well researched, no matter how beautifully written, our understanding of American slavery often takes the form of furtive glimpses through moving keyholes. When we are granted a view, our subject quickly disappears into the unknown. Next to the history of the plantation house and its residents, the paucity of reliable and detailed sources on the people tied to those homes is a source of constant frustration. Given these general contours, it is not surprising that the historiography of slavery is so contentious and controversial. Accordingly and unfortunately, there is no better place to observe the functioning of a zero-sum dynamic.

When the brutality of slavery is emphasized (see Stanley Elkins), slave agency is minimized. When slave community and agency are investigated (see John Blassingame), the apparatus of control seems reduced. Indeed, in the case of Blassingame and the many historians inspired by *Slave Community*, critics saw evidence that challenged the cohesiveness of the slave community being deliberately ignored. Inspired by Peter Kolchin's criticisms, Jeff Forret's *Slave Against Slave* seeks to expose what Kolchin called "the grubby reality" of the slave community. In particular, Forret explores acts of violence committed by slaves against other slaves.

While bestselling authors like Ed Baptist and popular history like *12 Years a Slave* have emphasized the horror and ubiquity of violence that defined the institution of slavery, Forret's study explores what kind of violence was taking place amongst the slaves themselves. As he explains, in order to truly comprehend "the culture of those held in bondage" we have to look at intraracial slave violence. Doing so makes it possible, Forret argues, "to elucidate slaves' cultural values in their own terms" and to "complicate our understanding of

black life under slavery.” (25, 27, 70)

Forret does a wonderful job of both problematizing his sources and explaining how he uses them. Indeed, this book would be immensely useful simply to walk young scholars through the use of a complex source base. In Forret’s case, these are mostly court records, which he manages to use deftly to emphasize dynamics that not many in the antebellum world were recording or concerned with. Forret, on the other hand, reveals a great deal of life (and violence) taking place in the slave quarters. He also does a careful job of explaining, through his sources, that this violence does not make the slaves themselves better or worse, just more three-dimensional, especially to those seeking to understand the history of American slavery.

Through this exploration of slave on slave violence, Forret strikes on a greater than zero-sum approach to these historical actors’ humanity and their inherent complexity. The thrust of this study underscores the truly devastating inhumanity of the institution of slavery and those who designed it while keeping the agency of slaves constantly in focus. Forret makes a great case, one that dovetails very nicely with all the recent scholarship on slavery and capitalism, that a system of labor and society so imbued with violence truly saturated all involved in very different ways.

Still, it is difficult to forget the circumstances of Blassingame and his historical moment of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Blassingame’s work on slave community was so influential because it arrived in a moment where black humanity and black history demanded to be acknowledged by a hostile world. That dynamic certainly does not endorse hagiographies of slaves or slave community, but it begs the question of the unique demands and responsibilities scholars of slavery take on. Moreover, we must still ask, notwithstanding Ed Baptist or *12 Years a Slave*, about the current tilt of our public, popular and scholarly histories: is there still hostility to slave humanity and agency? While the answer must be yes, Jeff Forret makes a powerful case that without the dark side of that humanity, our history will not be any better off than it was before.

R. Blakeslee Gilpin is an assistant professor of history at Tulane University. He is the author of John Brown Still Lives! and is currently finishing a study of William Styron, Nat Turner, and the 1960s.