

Scars on the Land: An Environmental History of Slavery in the American South

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Review

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Silkenat, David. *Scars on the Land: An Environmental History of Slavery in the American South*. Oxford University Press. 2022. Hardcover. \$31.00. ISBN: 9780197564226. Pp. 272.

In *Scars on the Land*, David Silkenat offers an authoritative and expansive treatment of slavery's environmental impact on the American south. Based on a wide range of sources – from slave narratives to slaveholders' reports on nature – and a deep reading of recent scholarship on early environmental reform, the rise of capitalism, and Black resistance to bondage, the book expertly examines the ecological transformation of southern landscapes between the colonial era and the Civil War. According to Silkenat, slavery poisoned everything it touched: flora, fauna, people, places – even southern memory. In this way, “slavery more than nature defined the South as a region.” (2) Though related to the rapacious development of capitalism in and beyond the United States, southern slavery created its own brand of ecological destruction, ultimately defining people as well as nature as disposable resources. It is an incisive and ramifying book, one that deserves a wide readership and a prominent place on the bookshelf of scholars examining not just race and slavery but environmental change and destruction in the American past.

Broken down into seven chapters (plus a relatively brief introduction and conclusion), *Scars on the Land* examines slavery's environmental and human impacts across a broad range of topics through southern time and space: soil exhaustion, animal use and abuse, the denuding of treescapes and the clear-cutting of forests, the rise of extractive industries such as turpentine and the build-out of southern environments through levees, roads, and canals, all in the name of

creating and perfecting slaveholding economies. Indeed, Silkenat's eye remains focused on the way that generations of slaveholders reproduced versions of the same exploitative racial regime across incredibly diverse southern environments stretching from the Chesapeake to the Gulf states. "Nothing in the southern environment made slavery necessary," he asserts. (4) Rather, slaveholders defined bondage as an essential part of the southern landscape. The result was a region that was redefined and transformed by slavery in a relatively short period of time. Though he examines environmental variations among slaveholding regimes across the South, Silkenat largely ignores northern bondage and its ecological and social after-effects; that is a seemingly different story. As he sees it, the South was very nearly a singular entity. If industry and the market were the tools that remade northern environments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, then the chattel principle – slavery -- was the vehicle for massive ecological change and devastation in the South. After reading Silkenat's book, it is hard not to conclude that southern slavery was as destructive as northern industrialization in American history and should be thought of as one of the nation's great ecological as well as human catastrophes.

That becomes clear when Silkenat drills down into slavery's manifold impacts on southern nature. For instance, he argues that the classic problem of soil exhaustion transcended tobacco production; similar problems arose in other slaveholding sectors, from cotton (which also depleted soils and required slaveholders to search for new lands in the Southwest) to mining (which compelled enslaved laborers to dig deeper into the earth in search of gold, silver and other resources). Slaveholders' constant emphasis on resource extraction on fragile landscapes impacted people as well as places. Just as slaveholders searched for new lands to revivify bondage, so too did they turn unfree Black laborers into a disposable commodity that could be exploited, exhausted, and ultimately discarded. Linking slavery's expanding environmental

frontier to the rising domestic slave trade in the nineteenth century, Silkenat shows that human and ecological peril went hand and hand in the South. While other scholars have made similar claims, Silkenat's book offers the best and most inter-connected portrait of human and natural exploitation below the Mason-Dixon Line.

Yet the great virtue of Silkenat's book is the prominent place it accords African Americans in the saga of environmental transformation across the South. It is an often-chilling tale, as Silkenat traces the ways that each slaveholding regime – from tobacco to rice to cotton to mining to turpentine production – created a “particular type of torture on the enslaved body and soul.” (3) But *Scars on the Land* also traces African Americans' ingenuity and resourcefulness in the face of brutal environmental conditions and ecological change. For instance, enslaved lumberman toiling in the cypress swamps of Louisiana overcame a bevy of environmental challenges (from mud to alligators) to fell massive trees while also cutting out secret pathways that allowed them to avoid prying white eyes and trade in hidden exchange markets. As Silkenat notes, enslaved people used their own “robust environmental knowledge” to survive slavery's brutalities (in the form of food and medicine gathered from diverse landscapes they knew intimately), escape from bondage (via the labyrinth of nature that they knew better than their enslavers), and offer critical comments about the ecological destruction occurring all around them. (166) This last point is critical, for Silkenat notes that nineteenth-century African Americans were already mindful of the need for a conservationist ethos that preserved and protected the land from the ravages of plantation regimes and monocultures. From inside the plantation complex, African Americans became an unheralded band of environmental reporters and commentators. Indeed, following the lead of other scholars – especially contributors to Dianne Glave and Mark Stoll's seminal book on African Americans and environmental history,

To Love the Wind and the Rain – Silkenat notes that we might give a more prominent place to African Americans in the history of nature study, ecological change, and environmentalism.

Though forced to do exhaustive and sometimes deadly work in a host of southern climes, African Americans managed to tell their own stories about the natural and human costs of bondage. Thus, Silkenat treats slave narrators such as Charles Ball and Solomon Northup as perceptive guides to slavery's environmental toll as well as its human consequences.

Silkenat's final chapter on secession, slavery and the Civil War brings his environmental saga to a fitting conclusion, as Confederates' vision of protecting bondage in a new nation where they alone harnessed natural resources and people fell prey to human and environmental factors well beyond their control. As he shows, the environmental stakes of the war were already well known during the secession crisis, as Deep South slaveholders argued that the Republican agenda of establishing firm territorial limits on slavery's growth would strangle bondage. According to Silkenat, this sense of crisis flowed not simply from sectional politics or racial ideology, but slaveholders' accumulated ecological experiences, which showed that slavery could only thrive when it was opened to new lands.

Yet the southern environment also shaped Black resistance during the war. Not only did African Americans use their environmental knowledge to find freedom behind Union lines but they provided critical information on the lay of the land to Union forces trekking into the South. Black flight had further consequences on the southern wartime environment, as the African American exodus from plantation zones led to "widespread land abandonment." (166) As Silkenat observes trenchantly: "Cotton went unpicked and tobacco plants became subsumed in weeds." (166). With no crop cover, soil erosion accelerated in North Carolina's Piedmont region and some southern plantations witnessed new tree growth where crops once blossomed. This left

big holes – literally and figuratively – in the Confederate economy and war machine. Yet precisely because Confederate ideology rested on the notion that Black laborers were the best fit for southern plantation agriculture, slaveholders had little recourse or alternative. They were prisoners of their own faulty environmental sensibilities.

For their part, African Americans claimed that Civil War freedom was necessarily tied to place – to their ownership of southern lands which they had long occupied and on which they would serve as the best environmental stewards. Silkenat ends with the elegant and forceful pleas of former enslaved people along the Atlantic coast who argued that this brand of environmental reparation – Black land ownership and stewardship -- was a critical part of Black liberation. For without access to the landscapes they knew so well, African Americans would face an uncertain future. Decades before American naturalist Aldo Leopold called for a new land ethic that tied people to the landscape in a symbiotic rather than exploitative relationship, African Americans in the post-Civil War South had already done so.

It is a powerful reminder that environmental remedy and environmental tragedy are often tightly linked in the American mind. As Silkenat notes in his conclusion, even today calls for environmental justice in the South “cannot be disentangled from the long histories of the land and the people who lived there” during slavery. (172) Indeed, as Americans learned yet again in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Black communities have long been trapped in perilous places where bondage once dominated the landscape. Only when we recognize the enduring pain of those human and environmental scars, Silkenat concludes, will true change occur, in the South and beyond.

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Abolitionism: A Very Short Introduction and Love Canal: A Toxic History from Colonial Times to the Present.