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Slave Cultures and the Cultures of Slavery

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Stephan Palmie, editor, 1995. Slave Cultures and the Cultures of Slavery. University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville. xlvii + 283 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 (cloth.)

Slave Cultures and the Cultures of Slavery is a collection of essays by historians and anthropologists presented at a conference at the Amerika Institut of the University of Munich, Germany, that provides an excellent review of the various debates surrounding New World chattel slavery. The essays address slavery in the Danish West Indies, Suriname, Jamaica, the American South, and the Gold Coast. The works in this volume assess the variety of factors that shaped the system of slavery. Instead of focusing primarily on the legal or economic relation between slaveholders and slaves, the essays examine the daily life of slaves and struggles with masters. They also explore the "continuities of the cultural process across the historical threshold between slavery and freedom" (p. xxviii).

While it is not possible to discuss each of the articles comprising the volume in this brief review, papers of particular interest to the readers of this newsletter will be highlighted. Stephan Palmie's introduction succinctly addresses themes and recent debates in slave historiography. In his discussion of definitions of slavery, he examines a variety of forms of dependent labor. David W. Blight also reviews major themes in slave historiography in "Analyze the Sounds!: Frederick Douglass's Invitation to Modern Historians of Slavery." Blight agrees that slavery historians must provide emphasis on the brutality of the system as well as a focus on slave strength and culture. He argues that slave culture enabled slaves to survive even though its roots were formed in rather brutal circumstances.

Sidney Mintz's suggests approaches to the study of resistance in "Slave Life on Caribbean Sugar Plantations: Some Unanswered Questions." He cautions that the intentions of slaves are not always known, and notes that some acts become resistant when viewed as taking place over the course of time. In this sense, resist acts need not be directly harmful or cause injury. His temporal perspective helps identify subtle accommodation.

Richard Rathborne looks at the experience of slaves in Africa in "The Gold Coast, the Closing of the Atlantic Slave Trade, and Africans of the Diaspora." He focuses on repatriates, slaves who returned to Africa, who were either integrated or reintegrated into African society.

Jean Besson's paper, "The Creolization of African-American Slave Kinship in Jamaican Free Village and Maroon Communities," examines the creolization of kinship in two case studies. She found that legal marriage coexisted with forms of African-Caribbean kinship in one community, while another permitted community

endogamy and cousin conjugality. While Besson does not address in detail the factors that accounted for these patterns, she does note that both communities prohibited incest and also established exogamous conjugality and bilateral kinship. This essay suggests considerable cultural variability among slave communities.

Two of the contributions address relations between African Americans and Native Americans. In "Indian-Black Relations in Colonial and Antebellum Louisiana," Daniel H. Usner, Jr., explores interaction between natives and enslaved Africans. While historians have tended to focus on these two groups separately, legal history indicates that laws were promulgated prohibit interracial contacts by keeping slaves on plantations. However, interethnic interaction took place extralegally and legally in the marketplace.

In the second paper on this topic, Renate Bartl considers "Native American Tribes and Their African Slaves." While this topic has not been addressed in the historiography of North American slavery due to its marginality and controversial nature, Bartl shows that some Native Americans enslaved Africans in a manner similar to European practice in the plantation economy.

The essays tend to focus on slaves as a homogenous group without addressing gender, ethnic, or labor organization issues. Nevertheless, this work provides an essential comparative context on slave systems of considerable utility.