

Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1998)

As the author himself notes in his acknowledgments, the academic community has been waiting a long time for this book to appear. Since completion of his doctorate in 1977, students of Southern slavery have regularly been impressed by Philip Morgan's publications, but until now these have only consisted of articles or co-edited essay collections. As if to make up for the long suspense, Morgan has produced a weighty tome indeed, nearly 700 pages of text that is nothing if not comprehensive in its scope. What is particularly gratifying about this work is that it comes at a moment of real historiographic interest in colonial slavery. Lorena Walsh has recently published a study of Carter's Grove plantation in Virginia, and Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood have co-authored an exploration of black religious beliefs in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For many years most studies of slavery focused on the antebellum period, reflecting the preponderance of evidence available for that era. While there are fewer plantation papers available for the eighteenth century, sufficient evidence exists, in terms of diaries, newspapers, letters and descriptive journals to allow a fuller reconstruction of colonial slavery than hitherto attempted. Moreover, Morgan makes good use of the explosion in archaeological data for Southern plantations being made available by those such as Theresa Singleton. It is partly because of this work that we now know far more about the everyday lives of eighteenth century slaves.

Morgan has logically chosen to study the lives of slaves in the two major slave regions in colonial America, the Chesapeake of Virginia and Maryland and the lowcountry of South Carolina (and to some extent Georgia). These two regions were "defined by slavery" (xv), and much of this book offers important comparisons between the two, in terms of slave populations, cultures, and interactions. While much of this discussion necessarily builds on the work of other scholars, Morgan brings a detailed knowledge of a wide variety of primary sources to bear on his incredibly comprehensive secondary reading. Not only has the author trawled through the obvious archives in Virginia and South Carolina, he has also visited some very obscure ones in the UK. As far as I am aware, no other study of colonial slavery cites materials held in the Lincolnshire Record Office, or the library of Aberdeen University.

The first part of this book is entitled "Contours of the Plantation Experience" and sets out to delineate the principal differences between the Chesapeake and the lowcountry in the eighteenth century. The most significant factor which distinguished the two areas was the degree of African influence. Throughout the colonial period the Chesapeake slave population was larger than that in the lowcountry, but it was creolised more quickly due in part to the smaller size of tobacco plantations compared to rice plantations. Even more

significant was the attachment of South Carolina to the Atlantic slave trade. Even in the post-revolutionary period Carolinians swam against the tide by keeping open the slave trade as late as 1808. By having a higher proportion of Africans in their slave population, and by keeping them in larger units on rice plantations, lowcountry slaveholders unwittingly facilitated a degree of Africanization in South Carolina impossible in the Chesapeake. Overall slaves in the Chesapeake and the lowcountry had similar lives which differed in some key regards. Carolina slaves, for example, received fewer provisions than their Chesapeake counterparts, but had a greater degree of self-determination through the workings of the informal economy encouraged by the task labour used by rice planters. Tobacco labour was more regular and probably less physically demanding than rice culture, and it allowed for a wider range of skilled slaves to emerge. To those looking for a “typical” experience of eighteenth century slavery, Morgan sides with James Oakes, who in his study of slaveholders denied that there was such a thing as a “typical master,” by stating that there was no typical experiences for slaves, only a likely range of experiences dependent on location, owner and size of plantation as much as a personal inclination. This emphasis on nebulousity is surely a correct description of plantation slavery in the eighteenth century.

The second section of the book is entitled “Encounters Between Black and White” and forms what is probably the most important analysis of colonial bi-raciality yet offered. Morgan describes owners’ treatment of slaves as based on patriarchalism which “mellowed” into the paternalism of the nineteenth century so eloquently described by Eugene Genovese. In this Morgan is leaving himself open to contradictions: there was no typical slave experience, but there was a typical masterly ideology. It is perhaps more correct to argue that *if* there was a coherent ideology of slaveholders it was most likely to be patriarchal/paternal ahead of anything else. James Oakes conversely argues that the variations among slaveholders, in terms of wealth, number of slaves, crop and region, makes any attempt to articulate an all-encompassing theory self-defeating. While there are some criticisms which can be leveled at Morgan’s description of the slave/master relationship, his discussion of the relationship between slaves and non-slaveholding whites is far more persuasive. Most slaves, especially in the two areas under discussion lived in a bi-racial world, where they came into regular contact, in a variety of forums, with both elite and non-elite whites. In the Chesapeake, slaves and poor whites interacted in a number of ways, some betraying a bi-racial class identification, such as illegal trading or conspiring to commit crimes together, while other spheres, such as the patrol or competition between black and white artisans, were more confrontational. On the whole, Morgan argues that fewer opportunities existed for bi-racial interaction in the lowcountry, due to small number of resident whites. However, the lowcountry did offer the opportunity for social mixing between poor whites and slaves in Charleston, one which was frequently utilized. The relationship between non-

slaveholding whites and slaves caused the elite some anxieties, and Morgan argues that in the post revolutionary period, the elite went out of their way to bring non-elite whites into the political, economic and social structures of whiteness, for example by extending the franchise to include all white adult males. While this argument is perhaps true, Morgan fails to appreciate that the independent mentality of the non-slaveholding class continued to fashion a relationship with slaves which was entirely their own, right up to the Civil War. Bi-racial relationships were indeed “riven with ambiguities” (316), but these interactions were not necessarily on the decline at the close of the eighteenth century. Throughout the history of African Americans in America, whites and blacks have been forced to live lives which are “inextricably intertwined” (437), and the depth to which Morgan has explored that bi-racial interaction is to be applauded.

The third and final part of the book is entitled “The Black World” and inquires into the relationship among slaves and between enslaved and free Africans and African Americans. Morgan argues that all African immigrants to America shared the experience of the middle passage, and that this bound many together even when separated. Once in America slaves were gradually creolized, more slowly in South Carolina than in Virginia. The slave cultures which emerged in these societies reflect these differences. Lowcountry slaves were more able to retain their African languages (eventually it became fused into a patois – Gullah), and their stories and songs all retain a strong degree of African influence. Chesapeake slaves were more easily creolized, being held in smaller groups and less frequently “topped up” with new African arrivals. There were even differences in family life, the high mortality of lowcountry slaves meant that fewer complete families existed in South Carolina than in Virginia, but the large size of plantations in South Carolina meant that families were less likely than their Virginian counterparts to be separated by sale.

Throughout this volume Morgan demonstrates his mastery of the historiography and his sensitivity to regionalism. As he points out in his conclusion, ninety percent of all slaves in colonial America lived in these two regions, yet slavery for each group differed in many important respects which in turn gave each quite different lives. By the time of the cotton boom of the nineteenth century, this regionalism had begun to fade and the experiences of slaves became more uniform. In sum, this volume is a bold and comprehensive examination of colonial slavery, and is a welcome addition to scholarship.

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