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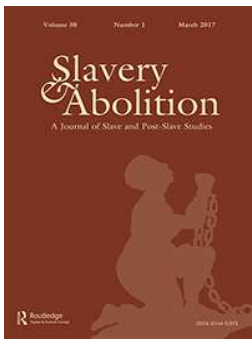
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# Slavery & Abolition

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## New directions in slavery studies: commodification, community, and comparison

Erik Mathisen

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contextual information or biographical background punctuate the action, occasionally distracting or digressing from it. As a result, it can sometimes be difficult to see the forest for the trees. In fact, while the introduction notes that these kidnapping cases would later find their way into Harriet Beecher Stowe's *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853), Maddox's brief epilogue eschews any sustained reflection as to these events' larger impact or meaning.

That said, *The Parker Sisters* offers a well-researched local history of antebellum Chester County, and it stands as a useful case study of the effects of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 on a particular border community. For example, Maddox paints a rich and disturbing picture as to the vulnerabilities faced by nominally free African Americans on the Pennsylvania side of the line and, in doing so, demonstrates that most white residents of Chester County were not particularly sympathetic to the cause of antislavery. She also ably reconstructs the network of Keystone-state collaborators – some of them black, some of them Quaker – who facilitated McCreary's predations. And that is not all. Across the line in Maryland, Maddox finds legal slave traders all too willing to buy kidnapped free people and send them south if the authorities were not looking and the price was right. She also illuminates the legal protections and financial incentives for owners of runaway slaves who wished to lodge false claims as to the true identities of kidnapped people, and she artfully exposes the extent of judicial corruption and sectional politicking at play whenever freedom suits came before courts in slave-states like Maryland. The result is a compelling account of human trafficking on the eve of the American Civil War.

Richard Bell  
*University of Maryland*  
 rjbell@umd.edu

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**New directions in slavery studies: commodification, community, and comparison**, edited by Jeff Forrett and Christine E. Sears, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2015, viii + 261 pp., \$47.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-0-8071-6115-9

No one working in the field of slavery and abolition is more deserving of a festschrift than Peter Kolchin. In an academic career which has spanned more than four decades, he remains one of the most searching, intellectually exacting and methodologically rigorous of historians. His passion for comparative example, best exemplified in his 1987 study of slavery and Russian serfdom, set the highest of bars. His impossibly slim 1993 survey of American slavery remains a model of historical synthesis and a stalwart text in survey courses wherever the subject is taught. The breadth of his reading and the depth of his knowledge have been matched only by his quietly passionate tutelage of younger scholars. It is a testament to Kolchin that this edited volume contains such an array of perspectives, written by historians who have been influenced by his work and his example. But this work is much more than a collective salutation to a scholar's life work. Deftly edited, this collection showcases some fascinating work which acts like a pulse check of a furious, restless field of historical research.

As Jeff Forret and Christine Sears make clear in their introduction, assessing the current state of the field in the study of slavery defies any easy categorisation. Over more than two decades, the historiography has moved in so many different directions that it is a herculean task to merely keep on top of it all. All the same, the 12 essays that comprise this collection are grouped according to two themes which have defined Peter Kolchin's work (slave community and comparative study), and another (commodification) which is currently changing the field. In each, the breadth of interpretive innovation is laid bare. The essays, individually and collectively, showcase a real diversity of opinion and research and they point us in some interesting directions.

One of these is an attention paid to circuits of trade, the flow of goods and the place of slavery within broader, international systems of economic exchange. Calvin Schermerhorn's excellent introduction to the volume and his own study on the American internal slave trade sets that trade and the development of American capitalism more broadly in a grounded historical context. As Schermerhorn suggests, the internal demand for slaves in the growing cotton economy was driven not only by the transatlantic demand for the fibre, but also by the flows of capital that allowed both to develop. Bonnie Martin and Karen Ryder follow different trajectories and time periods to arrive at studies that detail how slaveholders used the slave system to develop circuits of debt, collateral and the diffusion of risk through the purchase of insurance. In the hands of both authors, readers can see not only how interconnected slavery was to a maturing capitalist system, but also how slavery was the institution on top of which modern capitalism was built. It is also to the credit of each author that human stories have not been drained from their analysis, as can sometimes be the case with the newer work on the subject.

One of Peter Kolchin's great contributions to the history of slavery was his insistence that slave communities were so much more complex than many scholars of his generation allowed. The second section of this volume takes up his challenge and the result is a textured set of offerings. Perhaps the most interesting is Anthony Kaye's work, in which he urges scholars to interrogate the meaning and limitations of autonomy and agency. Kaye argues that this thread in the literature, which connected much of the work on slavery during the middle decades of the twentieth century, might have had political salience for a generation of historians who looked to reclaim a past for the enslaved, but he joins a growing number of scholars who suggests a new way forward. While a slim essay does not give Kaye adequate room to follow all of the new paths he envisions for the slavery literature, what his piece does do is set the very notion of autonomy on its head. He urges historians to be alive to space, the performance of race and a more reflexive understanding of our own ideological baggage, if we are to push past older frameworks of analysis.

Several of the themes that Kaye urges scholars to consider are also on show in the other essays in this volume. John Davies excellent study of white and black émigrés from Saint Domingue, living in early national Philadelphia, shows not only an attention to finer grained details but an emphasis on the often fraught relations between masters and slaves. Jeff Forret's work on slaves stealing from each other points to a more divided slave community in the antebellum South than traditional frameworks allow. Enrico Dal Lago's insights into the separatist movements of slaveholders in the American South, Cuba and southern Brazil offers a set of apposite comparative examples, in which the author investigates secession in the context of changes wrought by the 'second slavery'.

If these essays are to be a reflection of the field, as the editors intend them to be, it seems clear that the study of slavery looks nothing like it did only a few decades ago. Comparative work now matters more than ever before. Moving with care from the macro to the micro, scholars now also seem more attuned to systems and the place of

slavery in them. The plantation now seems less a backward space than the leading edge of modernity, and historians are now more careful than ever about following slaves from the field to other areas of economic production. Taken together, the essays in this collection offer specialists an arresting view of how the history of slavery could develop.

Erik Mathisen  
 Queen Mary University of London  
 ✉ e.mathisen@qmul.ac.uk

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**Freedom's dawn: the last days of John Brown in Virginia**, by Louis DeCaro Jr., Lanham, MD, Rowman and Littlefield, 2015, xxiii + 451 pp., \$45.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-4422-3672-1

Few figures have proved to be more controversial in American history than John Brown. Since his failed raid on Harper's Ferry in late 1859, generations of historians and biographers have endeavoured to get to grips with the enigmatic abolitionist and his legacy. Who was John Brown and what made him tick? How can we make sense of both his radical sentiments and deeds? And how did those deeds contribute to the deepening sectional crisis that would shortly lead to a bloody civil war in the United States? In this book, Louis DeCaro Jr., a noted Brown scholar, addresses these questions by eschewing a more traditional biographical approach and instead focusing intensely on the six weeks between the raid and Brown's execution. The end result is an impressively thorough, almost encyclopaedic, narrative account of how John Brown shifted from failed liberator to convicted felon to abolitionist martyr.

*Freedom's Dawn* is divided into four sections that chronologically address the raid itself, Brown's capture, trial and execution, before finally assessing the divergent reactions across America to these turbulent events. This analysis is rooted in a close consideration of Brown's prison correspondence, a collection of documents explored here in greater scope and depth than in previous scholarship, and a wide array of newspapers. This evidence is marshalled into an overarching interpretation of Brown that is unreservedly contrarian. Historians have, according to DeCaro, caricatured 'John Brown as a rabid terrorist full of religious fanaticism and violent rage' (169). Yet this book seeks to demonstrate that the Harper's Ferry raiders went about their task in a way that was designed to be as peaceful as possible. Brown accepted that bloodshed might be necessary to achieve his wider objective, the liberation of southern slaves, but this was not intended to be an orgy of insurrectionary violence motivated by a hatred or resentment of slaveholders. DeCaro deals with the abolitionist's religious and moral beliefs in a judicious fashion throughout the book, arguing that Brown was not the straightforward Old Testament Christian that he has often been portrayed as. In fact, Brown was left to rue his dedication to the New Testament's 'Golden Rule' as he blamed the raid's failure squarely on his 'lenient feeling toward the citizens' as he sought to both compromise and negotiate with hostages (33). Had he been more decisive and ruthless in his actions that fateful night, the abolitionist believed the success of the raid's first hours might have been sustained. This is a conviction largely shared by DeCaro.

One area where *Freedom's Dawn* is especially keen to revise the historical record is in terms of how Virginia's enslaved population reacted to the raid. 'The hackneyed