H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Stephanie M. H. Camp. *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. xi + 224 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2872-4; $18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5534-8.

Reviewed by T. M. C. Stubbs (Pembroke College, University of Cambridge)
Published on H-South (September, 2006)

Space, Time and Female Resistance to Slavery on Antebellum Plantations

In the introduction to this important book, Stephanie Camp notes that while slave resistance "is a necessary point of historical inquiry," which "continues to demand research," historians of antebellum slavery can expect few new sources to come to light (p. 2). What we need, therefore, are new ways of reading the documents we have. She is by no means the first scholar to make this argument. Eugene D. Genovese's iconic *Roll, Jordan, Roll* famously viewed the nineteenth-century conceit of slaveholder paternalism through the prism of Gramscian cultural hegemony, maintaining that enslaved people prosecuted no successful large-scale revolts due to the powerful psychological suasion of this ideology.[1] Resistance was rendered minimal and sporadic since the most efficient paternalist regimes encouraged accommodation, and perhaps even consent, among bondpeople.

Scholars working in the field of subaltern studies have presented a different way of looking at "small" acts of resistance. They argue that a focus on such actions presents an alternative view of the scope and nature of subalterns' struggle against their superordinates. The political scientist James Scott has been particularly influential to subaltern historians of South and South-East Asia, and a number of students of American history have embraced his thesis.[2] Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* indicates, along with his *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, that the capacity for tool-breaking, foot-dragging, and flight to disrupt productivity can render each of these tactics politically useful to subordinated agricultural laborers.[3]

Stephanie Camp's book fits squarely into this body of work. For her, Genovese's theory of slaveholder paternalism is inadequate since it "overestimates the extent of consent at the expense of the determining role of force" (p. 144). Camp examines how force upheld limits to enslaved people's autonomy of action; more importantly, she considers how bondpeople redefined these limits for themselves. Tool-breaking, foot-dragging and flight were each tactics that allowed for the bending–even the breaking–of the plantation's temporal rules.

While other scholars have highlighted the importance of time in the subjection of enslaved people, few have focused on space.[4] It is here that Camp excels. Enslaved men and women continually strove to create a "rival geography," featuring "other kinds of spaces that gave them room and time for their families, for rest from work, and for amusement." This geography might include the "quarters [and] outbuildings" of their owners' plantations, but it just as likely featured "woods, swamps and neighboring farms as chance granted them" (pp. 6-7). Flight–or absenteeism, as Camp rather more descriptively has it–not only secured time for rest or for visits to family members, it represented resistance to the spatial strictures enforced by overseers, passes and slave patrols.

Space and time intersected similarly when enslaved women regulated their reproductive labor. Women transformed the few hours they were allocated for rest into time for making and mending clothes. In so doing, they put their labor to work for themselves and their kin, not for their masters or mistresses. Their bodies, like the cabins in which they worked, became loci of resistance. And when they wore the fancy dresses they had made to illicit parties elsewhere in the "rival geography," their appearance, indeed their very movement as they danced with enslaved men, underlined women's rejection of their putative subordination.

Camp is not the first to view the body as women's first line of attack against oppression.[5] However, she places the female body on a much broader locative scale than is usual. Women, who made for themselves "third bodies" that were sites of pleasure and resistance, also helped to make the "rival geography" by assisting others in short-term flight (pp. 62, 47-55). Women, too,

were involved in more overt oppositional activity. Towards the end of the book appear two neat vignettes that demonstrate how some southern bondwomen engaged directly with northern abolitionism. California, an enslaved woman from Mississippi, in 1847 stuck abolitionist posters on the wall of her cabin (p. 98). Fifteen years later, during the Civil War, the mother of Mattie Jackson, a Missouri bondwoman, was discovered to have a picture of Abraham Lincoln hanging in her room in her owners' house (pp. 114-116). Both women made the most accessible spaces they knew into places of resistance. By engaging with outside currents in the struggle against slavery, the women also made these spaces part of a much larger "rival geography," where bondage was believed unequivocally to be sinful, not a positive good.

Because they indicated an awareness of this alternative antislavery world, the abolitionist prints created a visceral fear in the hearts of the women's captors. These were no small acts of resistance; they were acts that could cause major sedition amongst the enslaved labor force, and were indicative of a dangerous desire for liberty. On finding her posters, the manager of California's plantation complained to her owner that "California especially has an idea that she is free. Goes & comes & does as she pleases, [and] infuses a good deal of these feelings & notions in her childrens heads" (pp. 97-98). In one phrase, this southerner summarized the link between movement and freedom that California had long appreciated.

The confusion of civil war, and the tabescence of a plantation management system denuded of military-age men, offered many other bondpeople novel but long-awaited opportunities to move freely. As Camp puts it, "Mrs. Jackson's actions in the early 1860s and California's in the 1840s were early harbingers of the saturnalic claims on southern space to come during and immediately after the Civil War" (p. 116). The book's final chapter describes the escape of thousands of enslaved people to the Union ranks. Men, blessed with prior knowledge of local geography, were the first to leave in large numbers. Informational inequalities failed to blunt women's desire for freedom, however. One bondwoman, cognizant that these gender norms militated against a woman fleeing alone, "came through 200 miles in Men's clothes" to Union lines. Eventually women would make up almost half of the runaways admitted to some Union-occupied areas (p. 125).

Camp's book is final testimony to the inadequacy of Genovese's take on the resistance of enslaved people. Slaveholders might have held the monopoly on force, but bondpeople, like all subalterns, refused to accept that this force legitimated their subordination. An attack on the boundaries that strove to curtail their liberty was politically astute for, as the historian Mary Douglas has argued, "any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins" (p. 6). Enslaved people's resistance naturally began in the spaces closest to them, the areas where their subjugation was most clearly manifested.[6] Every small act of that resistance therefore brought them, literally and spiritually, closer to freedom.

The author's main references are nineteenth-century autobiographies by ex-slaves, and twentieth-century Works Progress Administration interviews of the formerly enslaved. The methodological difficulties involved with the latter collection have been discussed elsewhere, namely that the interviews were conducted years after slavery, and that the testimony they contain was also warped by the fact that it was recorded, in the main, by whites.[7] Conscious of these problems, the author builds her story out of agreements between the accounts, and from the insights provided by their differences (p. 8).

And, where formerly enslaved people emphasize the cruelty and violence of slavery we should be persuaded, at the very least, of the ferocity of actions that inspired bitter memories after so many years. Camp uses eyewitness depositions to colorful effect, to chart the very human emotions of people who so often have little voice in the primary record, and to avoid the condescension of posterity that informs studies such as Genovese's. The narratives also enable Camp to tie together experiences of enslavement from across a broad geographical range.

Sometimes works that focus on the South at large conflate regional differences for ease of argument and organization. Camp avoids this pitfall by describing in her first two chapters the consequences of slavery's structural variations for the oppositional activity of the enslaved. Not unexpectedly, bondpeople in the Upper South were more likely to attempt to flee northward than their contemporaries elsewhere (p. 38). Under the task system of the Lower South, women spent less time in the fields than under the gang system, although their free time was more likely to be taken up with reproductive labor (p. 33).

Stephanie Camp's book is unsurpassed as a study of the mechanisms of spatial control that defined slavery, and of the mechanisms that enslaved people used in opposition. Perhaps naturally for a work with this focus, bondpeople's interactions with white people in places away from the plantation are little covered. Such actions could be just as disruptive to the normative racial hierarchy as those Camp describes.[8] But this is a minor

point. *Closer to Freedom* is a vividly rendered, elegantly expressed work that should be standard reading for students of American slavery.

Notes

[1]. Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), especially pp. 3-158.

[2]. See, for example, Alex Lichtenstein, "'That Disposition to Theft with Which They Have Been Branded': Moral Economy, Slave Management, and the Law," *Journal of Social History* 22 (1988): pp. 413-440; Marvin L. Kay and Lorin Lee Cary, *Slavery in North Carolina, 1748-1775* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); and James Baird, "Between Slavery and Independence: Power Relations between Dependent White Men and Their Superiors in Late Colonial and Early National Virginia with Particular Reference to the Overseer-Employer Relationship" (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1999).

[3]. James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

[4]. For time, see Ira Berlin, "Time, Space and the Evolution of Afro-American Society on British Mainland North America," *American Historical Review* 85 (1980): pp. 44-78; Mark M. Smith, *Mastered by the Clock: Time, Slavery, and Freedom in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); and "Old South Time in Comparative Perspective," *American Historical Review* 101 (1996): pp. 1432-1496. For space, see Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), pp. 52-53; and Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), pp. 13-14.

[5]. Dorinda Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution: Sex, Class and Political Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p.1; C. L. R. James, Grace Lee and Pierre Chaulieu, *Facing Reality* (Detroit: Benwick, 1974), p. 5; and Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, pp. 289-299.

[6]. For Michel Foucault, power is a "multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate"; resistance therefore "depends upon a multiplicity of points of resistance." Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Press), pp. 95-96.

[7]. See C. Vann Woodward, "History from Slave Sources: A Review Article," *American Historical Review* 79 (1974): pp. 470-481; and Charles L. Perdue Jr. in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, ed. Charles L. Perdue, Thomas E. Barden and Robert K. Philips (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), pp. xi-xlv.

[8]. See, for example, Timothy J. Lockley, *Lines in the Sand: Race and Class in Lowcountry Georgia, 1750-1860* (Athens, Ga. and London: University of Georgia Press, 2001); and Philip D Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), pp. 256-437.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: T. M. C. Stubbs. Review of Camp, Stephanie M. H., *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South.* H-South, H-Net Reviews. September, 2006.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12259

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.