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Kirt Von Daacke. *Freedom Has a Face: Race, Identity, and Community in Jefferson's Virginia.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press. xi + 269 pages. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-3309-2.

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"Slaves without Masters" No Longer

Whites in early Virginia often imagined their society as a biracial one, comprised only of enslaved blacks and free whites. Free blacks, on the other hand, were defined as "foreign" interlopers and anomalies who threatened the social fabric. Thomas Jefferson called free blacks "pests in society" who committed "depredations" on society by acting as the primary instigators of revolt. Since he conceived of free whites and enslaved Africans as distinct peoples, free blacks represented the danger of "admixture" between these two "nations." Such race mixing, at least in Jefferson's mind, would unleash a genocidal race war that would tear apart the federal union.[1] For decades, historians have taken this biracial view of early Virginia society at face value, assuming that whites' fear of this anomalous "class" was a reality in the slaveholding South during the post-Revolutionary period.

But Kirt von Daacke's fresh and compelling portrait of free blacks in Albemarle County, Virginia, reverses these formulations, showing instead that free blacks enjoyed relative safety, security, and inclusion in this rural community. First, he argues for the "existence and continuation of a relatively easy-going interracial social order" rather than a rigid color line and racial enmity between whites and free blacks (p. 8). Second, he shows how and why free blacks were able to become a recognized and accepted group in Albemarle County society, despite a flurry of laws passed in the state legislature in the early 1800s designed to curtail the supposedly dangerous free black population in Virginia. And finally, von Daacke draws upon nearly five thousand documents–accounts, court records, land rolls, wills, memoirs, and other documents–to piece together the lives of the individual free blacks who made Albemarle County their home, and this focus on individuals undermines our previous understanding of free blacks as a monolithic class.

As von Daacke points out, free blacks have long been considered an anomaly, not just to Jefferson and his contemporaries, but also to modern-day historians. As Ira Berlin claimed, free blacks were "slaves without masters" who struggled under the persecution and violence enacted upon them by what amounted to a veritable white police state. Berlin's thesis was revisionist at the time, for it undercut the overt racism of U. B. Phillips and other Southern apologists by emphasizing the agency and humanity of free blacks for the first time.[2] Still, von Daacke rightly points out that the slaves-without-masters paradigm was based on a number of assumptions, including rigid and oppressive anti-free black laws, pervasive racism in rural areas, the reversal of more liberal manumission laws passed coupled with the "reassertion of a binary racial order" (p. 3), and lastly, the existence of a "strict color line" (p. 4). But Von Daacke's book systematically undercuts these assumptions, showing that white Virginians did not view their "social landscape" in strictly binary terms, comprised of "black slaves and white citizens." Rather, they saw in free blacks "people who had names attached to faces and reputations attached to those names" (p. 8). As von Daacke shows, racial hierarchies were secondary in a community that was defined first and foremost by property ownership.

The first two chapters focus on the experience of free blacks during and after the American Revolution. Despite Jefferson's claim that African Americans, whether free or enslaved, would have no *amor patriae* in America because they were a foreign people, free blacks did exercise their own kind of patriotism by enlisting in American militias. Free blacks' wartime experience made them seem less anomalous and more like a part of the community of patriots who had fought against the British. This shared experience of service to one's country became a "calling card of sorts" that allowed free blacks to become "known quantities" as "trusted and respected people" (p. 5). In short, the collective experience of Revolutionary

war service domesticated those free blacks who had once appeared as foreign interlopers in Virginia society. In addition, children of these free black veterans made "slow but steady progress toward greater property ownership, wealth, and skills" (pp. 42-43). Despite two major slave conspiracies–Gabriel Prosser's in 1800 and Nat Turner's in 1831–as well as increasingly restrictive state manumission laws, the postwar generation of free blacks were not marginal figures who remained "fearful of white surveillance." Instead, they "interacted in myriad positive ways with their white neighbors" and remained "deeply connected to a web of free black families" and moved about rather freely (p. 5). They worked to claim a legitimate place in the Albemarle community through efforts to attain "reputation, respectability, and property-owning independence" (p. 73).

Von Daacke's next two chapters describe how free blacks' mobility and ability to negotiate the legal system depended upon their reputation within the Albemarle County community. Reputation was secured through property ownership as well as "upstanding economic behavior," two things that allowed them to become "known within the broader white community" (p. 62). Despite the Virginia state legislature's restriction of manumission laws in 1806, von Daacke offers compelling evidence that the supposedly rigid law did little to "alter Virginia's social landscape," especially in rural areas like Albemarle County. For example, local authorities granted many petitions for free blacks to remain in the state and did not enforce the 1806 removal law until the 1840s, in response to northern abolitionist agitation (pp. 76, 80). In a county whose free black population ballooned from less than two hundred in 1780 to more than six hundred by 1860, free blacks undertook self-fashioning projects by buying property, paying debts and gaining credit, and by protecting their families. As von Daacke indicates, free blacks "acted and lived in ways that contradicted notions of a strictly enforced color line in which blackness was equated with slavery and only whites could be free" (p. 112). Moreover, free blacks' reputations and participation in an interracial society paid dividends if they ever got entangled in the law. In many court cases in which free blacks were accused of violence toward whites, the suspects were not mistreated or denied basic legal rights. In fact, free blacks were "treated in much the same way" as white defendants rather than as "dangerous or frightening" men (p. 6). Since white neighbors perceived these free blacks as "named and known" figures, rather than "dangerous and foreign" individuals, the court supported this view, adjudicating cases for free blacks in much the same way it would for whites. Court cases thus reinforced the social structure of Albemarle County–free blacks were viewed as "propertied masters of lesser worlds" rather than "slaves without masters" (p. 138).

The final two chapters center on the important theme of miscegenation. Von Daacke explores how prostitution and interracial sex were fairly commonplace, even in rural Virginia, and that these activities were only lightly policed by local authorities. Somewhat paradoxically, unmarried women of color used sex–and their ownership of brothels–to become landowners of social standing and reputation in Albemarle County. Moreover, von Daacke shows that even interracial relationships were widespread and in many cases accepted in the community. An interracial couples' respectability often trumped "racially proscriptive and punitive policies" (p. 199). Many white men were permitted to live with free black women and form families without incident, but on those occasions that interracial couples faced persecution for cohabitating, the courts usually offered acquittals or prosecutors declined to proceed with litigation. As von Daacke's investigation of race-mixing in brothels and interracial relationships indicates, a "pronounced gap existed between law and local practice" in Albemarle County (p. 198). Indeed, reputation and face-to-face contact rather than racial antipathy or adherence to strict legal codes were the criteria by which whites judged free blacks in their community.

While von Daacke offers a substantive revision of long-standing scholarship on free blacks, I wish he had pushed his analysis a little further in a few areas. The theme of property ownership is nascent in all of the chapters, yet von Daacke never deals with this theme explicitly. Since we know that the protection and expansion of property rights defined the post-Revolutionary regime in America, and since we now know, thanks to Michal Rozbicki's recent scholarship, that patriots equated liberty with the privilege that was afforded by property ownership, it would have benefited von Daacke to apply these ideas to the free black community. These free blacks, like poor whites, sought to gain property and create households, and it was this quest that cut across racial lines.[3]

I also wish that von Daacke would have used his analysis of free blacks to speak to whites' vacillating perceptions of people of color in early Virginia. As Alan Taylor has recently pointed out, white Virginians thought of blacks in two "radically different ways"–as domesticated "servants" or as an "internal enemy" who might stage a rebellion at any moment.[4] What von Daacke

shows us is that free blacks were not feared or persecuted if they were perceived as known and trusted faces in the community. Von Daacke should have pushed his analysis further to show that free blacks became domesticated members of society through property ownership. Only when free blacks seemed to divorce themselves from the property-owning, or property-seeking, community, and became dangerously disconnected individuals, did they pose any real threat to white society.[5]

Still, von Daacke has written a compelling and revisionist account of free blacks in early Virginia that will appeal to scholars and lay historians alike by overturning the widely accepted understanding of this group as marginal outsiders living in a rigid and racist society. His study should push historians to question whether racial paradigms actually illuminate or obscure the complex issue of race in early America.

Notes

[1]. Thomas Jefferson to Edward Coles, Aug. 25, 1814, in *Papers of Thomas Jefferson Digital Edition*, ed. Barbara Oberg and J. Jefferson Looney (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008).

[2]. Ira Berlin, *Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: New Press, 1974); Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Régime* (New York: D. Appleton, 1918).

[3]. Michal Jan Rozbicki, *Culture and Liberty in the Age of the American Revolution* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011).

[4]. Alan Taylor, *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia, 1772-1832* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 7.

[5]. On the danger of individuals unattached to any legitimate community, see Maurizio Valsania, *Nature's Man: Thomas Jefferson's Philosophical Anthropology* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013).

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