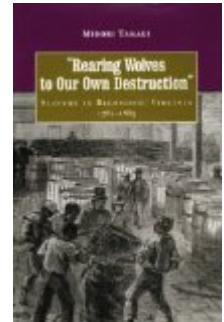


Midori Takagi. *"Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction": Slavery in Richmond, Virginia, 1782-1865.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999. xi + 187 pp. \$37.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-1834-1.



Reviewed by Douglas R. Egerton

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Given Richmond's importance to both Virginia and the Confederacy, it is quite surprising that until now, no scholar has undertaken a comprehensive study of slavery and freedom in the capital city. Fortunately, Midori Takagi's elegant and detailed study of the small metropolis from incorporation to freedom is of such genuine excellence that no other writer need believe that the task has yet to be done right.

For all scholars of nonagricultural slavery in the Old South, the pioneering account remains Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities, 1820-1860* (1964). His now-famous thesis suggested the fundamental incompatibility between enslaved labor and the relative liberty of coastal towns. "City air makes free," Medieval peasants once said, and Africans in America rarely disagreed. In most of the ten cities Wade studied, young bondmen were increasingly sold into the countryside by nervous masters, leaving behind a disproportionate number of enslaved female domestics. Richmond was the exception, and Takagi explains why.

As the tobacco economy declined around Henrico County in the years after the Revolution,

rural slaveholders increasingly sold or hired their surplus laborers to the emerging tobacco and iron industries in the new capital. Because of the heavy nature of much of this labor, industrialists rarely employed bondwomen. As a result, where by 1840 Baltimore bondwomen outnumbered enslaved men by a ration of 100 to 57, Richmond bondmen outnumbered slave women by 114 to 100. Although there were some jobs in the tobacco industry that required little upper-body strength, factory managers often selected older "seasoned" workers to train younger hands, and perhaps they believed that few men would accept instruction from senior women (p. 29).

Enslaved women, however, are hardly absent from Takagi's superb study. As the city grew, so too did the number of boardinghouses and taverns and cookshops. Enslaved domestics not only washed and cooked for their masters, they frequently took in laundry for white neighbors or hired their time during quiet evenings. Because of the failure to maintain adequate labor controls in Richmond, most bondwomen participated in the market economy by selling baked goods near fac-

tory doors. A few brave and enterprising women transformed their masters' kitchens into illegal restaurants, where they offered slave workers cheap hot meals.

The war years transformed the nature of urban slavery in the Confederate capital, just as it changed the lives of all who resided there. Especially during the final two years of the conflict, as both nationalist hopes and enslaved labor collapsed about them, prudent whites not only hired fewer bond servants, they increasingly shortened traditional contract terms (which during the antebellum era might stretch as much as one year). This adaptation appealed to white refugees who planned to stay in the city for only a brief time, as well as to those for whom financial deficiencies made long-term planning impossible. For bond-people, who were forced to accept inflationary Confederate script or had to seek new employment every few weeks, the last moments of the war contained equal portions of heartache and hope.

Like all exceptional studies, Takagi's monograph raises almost as many questions as it answers. At times, the author's text is almost at war with her thesis. "For all intents and purposes," she writes early on, "slavery in Richmond did work" (p. 4), and she explicitly criticizes Clement Eaton's theory that urban conditions -- and specifically the hiring-out process -- created a dangerous "twilight zone" between slavery and freedom. But if *Rearing Wolves* demonstrates that the industrial nature of antebellum Richmond made that city unlike other southern port towns, it also confirms that slavery "worked" in Virginia's capital only because city masters ultimately scrapped every form of control that kept aggressive men like Nat Turner in bondage. "Slave workers soon discovered that city working and living conditions often left them 'unattended to,'" she admits (46). Four pages later Takagi suggests that urban conditions "sowed the seeds for future resistance by enabling certain slaves to gain skills and nurture beliefs

that would threaten the ideological foundations of slavery" (p. 52). And this: "Industrialists' efforts to boost productivity combined with city living conditions generally proved antagonistic to a strong, tightly controlled slave system" (p. 72). By the time this reviewer reached this admission -- "the very success of the city's industrial economy relied on the widespread use of labor practices that helped slaves defy their masters" (p. 95) -- it became clear that the historiographical distance between Takagi and scholars like Wade, Eaton, and Loren Schweninger was not all that pronounced. Indeed, toward the end of her study, Takagi even employs Eaton's previously-maligned characterization of urban slavery as a "twilight zone" of quasi-freedom (p. 138).

Admittedly, as modern proponents of a capitalist Old South never tire of suggesting, the antebellum decades were full of political economists who argued that slavery was perfectly compatible with industrial capitalism. This is not to say, of course, that any of these writers posed theories that remotely resembled reality. (James DeBow even suggested that enslaved lumberjacks might harvest timber in Oregon territory). Takagi appears to be relatively agnostic on this point, as the term "capitalism" never appears in her index. Yet she does concede that because Richmond's relative success in maintaining a slave regime -- as opposed to Baltimore's relative failure to do so -- depended upon giving enslaved workers "control over their lives and labor" (p. 146), the system would probably have collapsed within decades had the Civil War not intervened. Left unanswered then is the perhaps unanswerable question of how many Richmonds and how many Tredgar Iron Works the slave south could afford before it ceased to be the slave south. Unfree labor, as every scholar well knows, had been a worldwide form of production for thousands of years, and the question was never whether enslaved Africans could perform tasks more complicated than hoeing cotton, but rather whether an urban system that allowed self-hire, living apart, and

cash bonuses could long survive in the modern world.

The University Press of Virginia is to be congratulated for producing a handsome product -- with an equally attractive jacket -- at a reasonable cost at a time when many publishers are happy to inflict plain, exorbitantly-priced volumes on both authors and the public, just as they are to be criticized for hiding Professor Takagi's detailed notes at the end of the text and eliminating *all* discursive or historiographical discussion from the notes. In several instances, as on page 116, the author employs revealing anecdotes without explaining the fate of the bondpeople in question; it is a pity that specialists will have to scour her Columbia University dissertation to find the conclusions to those stories, which might easily have been tucked into relevant footnotes.

These are quibbles. Takagi's impressive archival research, her obvious grasp of the pertinent secondary literature, and her elegant and clear prose will make this the standard account of slavery in antebellum Richmond. The author's successful challenge to classic studies by Wade, Robert Starobin, and Claudia Goldin reminds us of the varieties of unfree labor, not merely between town and country, but between town and city as well. It stands with Bernard E. Powers, *Black Charlestonians: A Social History, 1822-1885* (1994), T. Stephen Whitman, *The Price of Freedom: Slavery and Manumission in Baltimore and Early National Maryland* (1997), Tommy L. Bogger, *Free Blacks in Norfolk, Virginia, 1790-1860: The Darker Side of Freedom* (1997), and Kimberly S. Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans, 1769-1803* (1997), as a first-rate study that every specialist in the Old South will have to read.

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