The Many Faces of Slavery seeks to "examine the practice of slaveholding and the experience of slavery as it evolved over time and space" (p. 8). The authors selected by editors Lawrence Aje and Catherine Armstrong are a multidisciplinary group of European and North American scholars at various career stages in history, area studies, art history, and anthropology. Two conferences in 2014 and 2015 led to the publication of the volume, which examines diverse practices of slaving through the lens of what the editors define as nontraditional enslavement, including urban slavery, self-hiring, nominal slavery, and enslaved concubines, vendors, soldiers, sailors, preachers, and overseers. The breadth of this analysis also extends to the slaveholders they present as nontraditional: poor whites, women, free blacks, Native Americans, Jews (and their Christianized descendants), corporations, and the state.

The editors begin by framing the book's historiographical positions. In addition to identifying enslavement arrangements they define as nontraditional, atypical, and marginal, Aje and Armstrong place their study in a comparative and Atlantic framework, arguing that comparison and multidisciplinarity are what set their volume apart from other works in the field. While the bibliography cited includes many classic works, some of the most recent studies of urban slavery and the boundaries between slavery and freedom are missing and might have helped to enrich the comparative framework.[1] The remaining chapters are organized into three parts. Part 1, “Documenting Non-traditional Slavery and Slaveholding,” investigates the elements of both groups that the editors have defined as nontraditional. The five chapters consider evidence from the perspectives of social and economic history as well as anthropology and archaeology to read well-known sources in new ways. The four chapters of part 2, “The Politics and Economics of Atypical Forms of Slavery and Slaveholding,” turn the gaze directly to those slaveholding arrangements defined as nontraditional because they complicate historical understanding of the master-slave relationship. The authors collected for this section use macro- and micro-level analysis to understand these arrangements and how they challenge traditional understandings of slaveholding. Part 3, “Social Mobility on the Margins of Slavery, Freedom and Slave Ownership” examines in five chapters the opportunities and challenges for both upward and downward social mobility for slaves, freedpersons, and non-elite white managers. The tripartite organization creates a logical path for the reader to follow and nicely
bookends the volume with essays of synthesis and comparison by two major historians of slavery.

Seymour Drescher’s chapter that starts the volume compares Jewish and crypto-Jewish slaveholders in the Iberian Americas with their counterparts in Suriname. He concludes that their behavior was generally similar to that of Christians, but that in the Iberian world slaves could denounce their masters’ faith practices as a way of gaining power. While he draws primarily upon secondary studies of Jewish slaveholding, Drescher effectively unites disparate parts of the Atlantic world in the same frame. The author acknowledges the major influence of converted Iberian Jews in the slave trade but does not extend his argument or speculation to what these slaveholding arrangements were like at sea or in port, a direction for further research that could enhance understanding of early modern slaveholding Jews and crypto-Jews. The final chapter, by Herbert Klein, compares the transitions from enslaved to free labor across plantation societies. He identifies “differing historical experiences with slavery, manumission and emancipation; ecological, technological, demographic, and economic constraints; political power and race relations; and the competition of alternative sources of labour” as the key variables that influenced the degree of change and contours of the new labor regimes (p. 211). While plantation regions of mainland Spanish America are noticeably absent, Klein enriches the study by including British, Spanish, French, Dutch, and even Danish Caribbean possessions to extend the comparison beyond the zones of the “second slavery” in the US South, Brazil, and Cuba that sometimes dominate scholarship on the post-emancipation transition. [2] Klein’s careful attention to the different contexts and outcomes of these regions makes an effective case for his comparative model, and he includes an extensive and essential bibliography for further study.

The authors of the essays in The Many Faces of Slavery are to be commended for using what are mostly well-known sources in unexpected ways. Drescher’s contrasting of Inquisition sources in the Iberian empires with plantation records in Suriname, Sandrine Ferré-Rode’s analysis of Henry Bibb’s account of slavery among the Cherokees, and Ahmed Reid’s use of the claim records for slaveholder compensation upon Jamaican emancipation are particularly effective in employing this revisionist strategy. While other scholars have used these sources to study religious practices, Cherokee slaveholding, and Jamaica’s absentee British planters, these essays ask sharper questions about the relations between enslaved people and slaveholders and diverse enslavement patterns that were integrated into large-scale plantation societies.

The important contributions of The Many Faces of Slavery are somewhat inhibited by the editorial framework Aje and Armstrong propose. Comparative and even multidisciplinary analysis are not a new approach to Atlantic slavery and few of the essays make comparisons or engage directly with the same themes to create a comparison within the volume. Furthermore, limiting the scope to only the Americas and primarily the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries makes what are actually traditional slavery arrangements look nontraditional, and such an approach also leaves out valuable comparative contexts from other periods and places. When one zooms out from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Americas, it is plantation slavery that is an aberration. Even during the apex of plantation societies, parts of the Americas were dominated by urban slavery or integrated plantation systems with other arrangements described here.[3] To call these other arrangements “nontraditional” possibly inverts the historical context and conflates a historiographical problem with a problem of penetrating popular understanding. In the latter realm, thanks largely to film and fiction, the brutal and lifelong slavery of the plantation complex (with a white, Christian, male master) that existed mostly in the nineteenth-century zones of second slavery remains
the dominant image of slavery in popular understanding. Yet historians, many of whom are cited here, have long illustrated that these societies were a historical aberration with a clear rise and fall, not a traditional model of slavery.[4] Overall, the historiographical framework detracts from the authors' individual projects. Reframing the volume as one that documents diversity among and alongside plantation regimes or which questions why and how multiple forms of slavery and slaveholding coexisted would make the historiographical contribution clearer and better highlight the efforts of the essay authors.

Reservations about the volume's framing aside, the numerous collected authors successfully contribute studies of underexplored slavery and slaveholding experiences as well as arrangements that coexisted alongside plantation slavery. Their research questions can prompt further inquiry and new questions concerning how plantation slavery functioned and the less visible arrangements that the system required. Specialists will no doubt benefit from a discussion and debate over Klein's model and its various permutations upon emancipation. The short studies and clear presentation of methodology in the other essays of The Many Faces of Slavery enable the volume to serve as good introductory reading for undergraduate students. The directions the authors propose for future research suggest many possibilities for further inquiry into the history of human bondage.

Notes


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