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**Published on** H-Environment (February, 2024)

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Slavery dispossessed people of African descent of their bodies as the peculiar institution exhausted the soil and remade the topography of the American landscape. David Silkenat’s environmental history of slavery in the American South from the colonial period through the Civil War era surveys the “complex interplay” between slavery as an institution and its effect on ecosystems. Expanding on the foundational scholarship of historians, including Avery Craven, Mart Stewart, David Cecelski, and Lorena Walsh, Silkenat puts forward that slaveholders fundamentally saw the American “landscape as disposable” and that “slavery laid waste to fragile ecosystems,” such as longleaf pine forests, mountain valleys, river deltas, and grasslands (p. 1). The book plumbs a diverse archival corpus that includes the Works Progress Administration Slave Narrative Collection; the private papers of slaveholders like Edmund Ruffin; the autobiographical narratives of formerly enslaved people, such as William J. Anderson, Charles Ball, and Octavia Victoria Rogers Albert; and travel accounts by authors like Frederick Law Olmsted and Frances Anne Kemble. In addition to these primary materials, Silkenat has immersed himself in the secondary literature of the archaeology of slave plantations and mines. *Scars on the Land* takes a thematic approach to its organization and is divided into seven chapters that explore diverse kinds of human-environmental relations between the late eighteenth century until the second half of the nineteenth century.

Soil depletion and erosion were endemic to the political ecology of slavery. In the first chapter, Silkenat shows that slaveholders saw land as a “disposable commodity” and that tobacco monocropping rapidly leached nitrogen, phosphorus, calcium, and potassium from the topsoil (p. 11). Monoculture exposed plants to root rot and fungi and gullied the landscape of the Tidewater Chesapeake. In the 1840s and 1850s, enslaved people manured plantations with guano imported from the Chincha Islands of Peru, yet dunging did little to replenish worn-out fields. In his discussion of the Georgia gold rush, Silkenat highlights how enslaved people navigated hazardous tunnels and
mercury exposure while mining Appalachian hillsides. Given the comparatively low level of oversight, some enslaved miners stole gold dust concealed in their clothing after leaving these mines.

Wild and domesticated animals made up a “complex zoological framework for slavery” across the American landscape, as Silkenat illustrates in the second chapter (p. 32). Enslaved people labored alongside livestock animals and hunted and fished beyond the range of their enslavers to support their meager rations. Hunting afforded opportunities to study landscapes with future fugitivity in mind and to learn to avoid venomous snakes and other dangerous predators. Furthermore, enslaved people thought seriously about the dehumanizing effects of slavery, including being compared “like cattle” or being beaten “like a dog” (p. 55).

Deforestation for pine tapping and clearcutting by enslaved lumbermen transformed ecosystems, the subject of the third chapter. Timbering and lumbering supplied the cabinetmaking and shipbuilding industries with hardwood produced by slaves in the Carolinas. Like soil exhaustion, timbering eroded landscapes and riverine environments by uprooting tree rhizomes. Lumbering also supplied ironworks with charcoal fuel made from pine and oak. Lumberjacking and the knowledge gained from forest work enabled enslaved people to construct “hush harbors,” clandestine meeting places covered with brush that the enslaved used as gathering spaces for worship, meditation, and discussion (p. 76).

Slaveholders sought control over hydropower and riverine environments to expand slavery’s frontiers in the antebellum period. Levee construction on the Mississippi delta came from enslaved “riparian proprietors” provided to the state by slaveholders (p. 94). Building on the research of Kevin Dawson (Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora [2018]) and Julius S. Scott (The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution [2020]), Silkenat adds in the fourth chapter how enslaved maritime workers joined a “greater Black Atlantic” through communication networks that reached far beyond their enslaver’s surveillance (p. 101).

Storms and periods of intense heat and cold buffeted African American communities under slavery. Race science, as discussed in chapter 5, buttressed the forced labor of slaves in sweltering temperatures, as physicians like Samuel Henry Dickson taught that people of African descent were healthiest “under the hot sun of the South” (p. 115). By contrast, enslaved people spoke out against heatstroke, dehydration, and the dangerous nature of working under excessive heat conditions to plantation visitors. Silkenat adds to the study of race science and slavery by focusing on the experimentation of enslaved people by Thomas Hamilton, a physician and planter. Hamilton tested ideas about Black invulnerability to heat by exposing slaves to intense heat in covered pits in an effort to produce a remedy for heatstroke (p. 117).

Enslaved people weaponized swamps and mountain hideouts as sites of marronage. Silkenat discusses in the sixth chapter the uses of swamps throughout the South, with a particular focus on the Great Dismal Swamp spanning North Carolina and Virginia. Efforts to drain the swamp, including the formation of the Dismal Swamp Company, are rightfully framed here as part of a wider campaign against the freedom of fugitive and free Black communities led by slaveholders. A final chapter turns to the lives of fugitive communities during the Civil War. Silkenat stresses how the war itself is best understood as an effort to expand the ecological frontiers of slavery and sheds light on how Black scouts and pioneers secured the Union’s victory by providing critical environmental knowledge on the frontlines. In the conclusion, Silkenat raises the hopes of thinkers like Frederick Douglass for a “new kind of Black ecology” that could have flourished during Reconstruction (p.
Douglass and others hoped for a new revitalization of the land by small-scale Black farmers, yet sharecropping and Jim Crow undercut these environmental visions.

Scars on the Land is a remarkable achievement of political ecological analysis, and teacher-scholars will find the book excellent for courses on African American and environmental history. One critique is Silkenat’s tendency—with the exception of a citation to the work of Tony C. Perry—to downplay the highly influential literature on the Little Ice Age and climate history developed by scholars like Sam White (A Cold Welcome: The Little Ice Age and Europe’s Encounter with North America [2017]). Historians and literary critics—including Jason Hauser, Joe T. Carson, Cristin Ellis, and Mary Kuhn—have profitably brought in methods and questions from studies of the Little Ice Age and climate change to interpret the expansion of slavery as well as Black environmental thought in this period.[1] Moreover, one wonders to what extent the continuation of West African ideas about materials like iron or metallurgy played a role in the histories of mining and iron plantations Silkenat discusses, which has been a topic of past and recent debate and discourse in the scholarship on the African diaspora.[2] Nevertheless, this book is an outstanding contribution to the environmental history of slavery and African American environmental studies.

Notes


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