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Slavery in Peril or Peril in Freedom

Arnold R. Highfield, and George F. Tyson, *Negotiating Enslavement: Perspectives on Slavery in the Danish West Indies*. St. Croix, U. S. Virgin Islands: Antilles Press. 2009. 218 pages. p.b. \$29.95.

Traditionally, historians who are specialists on enslavement have focused their analysis on French, English, and Spanish colonial settings with a high demography of slaves in order to study the relationship between slavery and empire, or the origins of their structural development. However, it can be argued that studying slavery and freedom in New World plantation systems and societies within the Danish West Indies, focusing on island-nations with smaller demographies of slaves, may offer a new understanding of slavery.

This is the prime logic behind *Negotiating Enslavement: Perspectives on Slavery in the Danish West Indies*, edited by Arnold R. Highfield and George F. Tyson. There are perhaps familiar comparative analyses of slavery, freedom, and emancipation in the Danish West Indies. There is some general understanding about various negotiating perspectives of enslavement, specified most clearly by Elizabeth Rezende's analysis of the nature and degree of freedom through the process of manumission in Danish West Indies between 1800 and 1848.

By and large, the book is simple to read, and it offers the reader a sensible look into the many facets of the slavery system in the Danish West Indies. To accomplish this, the editors of this collection should be quite pleased with the wide range of perspectives suggested, and, to some extent, undertaken by the 14 contributors to this book.

If there is a weakness in the book, it is that the editors introduce too many perspectives in a relatively short text. They aim to study slave law and slave society, resistance in the forms of revolt, rebellion, emancipation, compliance or complicity, cultural *marronage*, as well as the ways in which some enslaved individuals managed to negotiate servitude – moving from slavery to plantation manager or plantation owner.

To develop this further, each essay speaks in some manner to the subject of negotiating, coping, compliance, complicity, accommodation, and the bittersweet disappointments of both enslavement and freedom. If I am reading them [contributors] correctly, they call for an inventory of the perspectives on slavery in the Danish West Indies period of what Edgar O. Lake has called a remarkable beacon of the best of the new World idealism(vii).

Indeed, the circum-trinity of hindsight, insight, and foresight has grown ever tighter; with the sixteen essays published in this collection the editors seem to suggest a rethinking of what is meant by *enslavement*, and invite us to "revisit our collective past in the quest to better come to grips with current circumstances" (xxxii). In other words, we need to redefine carefully within specific perspectives of Danish West Indies those bundles of rights of which the slaves were deprived, and which defined their status.

Per Nielsen's piece on the enslaved Africans in Denmark reminds us that, "freedom remained a dream to the enslaved Africans"(120). Per Nielsen further revises some previously held misconceptions and Svend Green-Pederson rejects Danish historiography by debunking the Peter Von Scholten myth. Nielsen suggests that we re-think what is meant by freedom and emancipation and re-define within specific cultural contexts the transition from slavery to freedom.

Professor Erick Gobel asks with innocence born of wisdom: what is comparative in the comparative study of the debate for and against abolition of the slave trade? He suggested that although in 1792 Denmark promulgated a law abolishing the trans-Atlantic slave trade, in 1803, just one year before Haiti's independence, the "Negro slaves of the Danish West Indies were not emancipated until 1848"(139). And, it was not until 1917, sixty-eight years later, that Danes found themselves obliged to sit and negotiate with the offspring of slaves in order to recognize their humanity. Charles Turnbull provides strong description of the schools in the Danish West Indies and a plethora of new information to understand many negotiated contradictions and the complexity of establishing schools in Danish colonial West Indies, which was incompatible with the

needs, interests, and aspirations of the people, as well as the best interest of the colonial government and ruling elites.

This collection of essays addresses the intermingling of contradictions in the historiography of slavery, in the Danish Caribbean and beyond, where “there were modest acts of courage, love, and abiding faiths, which still offer accretions for today’s path forward” (vii). The book explores the unresolved contradictions of slavery, emancipation and freedom in Danish West Indies through negotiation, which highlights this contradiction, demonstrating the Danish historic ambivalence. The diverse contributors include a historian, a linguist anthropologist, and an archivist, who seek to examine the social and cultural historiography of slavery, plantocracy, emancipation, and freedom, as they intersect with the legal, political, and economic perspectives of the untold Danish West Indies in the ongoing Atlantic saga (vii).

Editor and contributor George Tyson writes that “the vast majority of the working poor lived constantly on the thin razor’s edge of survival. Colonial authorities, bent on making the prevailing sugar economy profitable for the Mother Country, generally supported the interests of the plantocratic elite, and demonstrated little concern for the welfare of the Black masses.” (114).

Addressing the issues of resistance in the forms of revolts and rebellions, essays by Akosua Adoma Perbi, Michael O’Neal, and Svend Holsoe reflect the increasing resistance manifested by enslaved Africans from both sides of the Atlantic, from Ghana’s pre-colonial social structure in the 15th century to the 1823 slave rebellion in Tortola and the subsequent 1848 slave rebellion in St. Croix. In all these manifestations, where slaves defied their masters and the institution of slavery, there were many contradictions in the shift of social relations of production, and the relative impunity through awkward negotiations. As Svend Holsoe cogently captures it in the following quote: “Freedom had been won by the people, but a price for everyone”(209).

Arnold Highfield, David Knight and Per Nielsen also bring readers closer to understanding the quest for freedom in the Danish

West Indies, discussing the improbable life of Mingo—or the story of George Francis, or the enslaved Africans in Denmark during the period of 1770-1810—by analyzing the ways in which individuals or collectives negotiated their freedom. Be it “freedom of speech, freedom to learn, freedom for the peasant to leave the estate and move to other locations” (123).

Another strong point of the collection is that it attempts to conceptualize enslavement in a multifaceted way, relating slave resistance, particularly *cultural marronage*, both to development and cultural identity. For example, the essays by George Tyson and David Knight use a comparative analysis to examine the life and tribulations of ex-slaves from the islands of St. John and St. Croix. More specifically, George Tyson’s essay examines the life of ex-slave planters in post emancipation St. Croix whose primary objectives lay in acquiring lands that they could use to further improve their conditions (95).

In the same vein, David Knight’s essay traces the life of George Francis of St. John by analyzing the dichotomous notion of “compliance” or “complicity,” which reveals the anxieties and preoccupations demonstrated “by one individual’s response to the constraints of imposed servitude within the framework of a discrete period, in a distinct geographic area” (90).

In fact, both writers seem to raise a deep and perplexing question about forms of resistance of ex-slaves in two different islands taking individual actions, which appear to be in compliance with the accepted societal structure of the period.

Senior Archivist in the Royal Academy of Denmark, Poul Erik Olsen, provides a legal framework. Olsen argues how the Danske Lov “of 1683 very presence in Danish settlements were conflicting and contradictory. As Poul erik Olsen argues, the enforcement practices seeking to exclude and detain slaves as noncitizens, and “viewed [them] as property, the slaves were stripped of every human quality” (6). As a result, it is not slaves’ resistance, such as running away, rebellion, or stealing, considered as crimes that have risen, but “illegality” itself, including new ways to be resisting and more severe consequences for those infractions.

The following words of Poul Erik Olsen cogently capture the conflicts and contradictions: "The primary object of the local regulations was to protect the property rights of the slaveholders against, paradoxically, the property itself that had the faculty of being able to resist the possessor. He further states, "To ensure propriety rights as much as possible, it was necessary to keep the slaves in a constant and effective suppression" (6).

The collection posits a wide-ranging advocacy agenda in light of a paradigm "shift in the social relations of production which necessarily accompanied the decline of the plantation mode of production"(188) that has affected treatment of slaves and their descendants throughout the Caribbean for more than four centuries.

The editors contend that enslavement haunted most of the policy discourse [that took place] during the [immediate?] post-emancipation period. The collection also qualifies this contention, making clear that the legislation, infrastructure, and political currency gained from "post emancipation" periods had been on the rise for decades. The manumission process, for example, had long employed racism, racialization, and racial profiling in purchasing freedom, or granting freedom, and given rise to the growth of the free colored, as demonstrated in the essay by Elizabeth Rezende. Michael O'Neal [also] addresses this contradictory question directly, pointing out how differential access became a source of overt conflict following the 1823 slave rebellion in Tortola British West Indies.

Given the diverse forms of enslavement [that affected the] status of millions of families, the importance of this book cannot be overemphasized. Modern enslavement is becoming a permanent part of our global society, and as the editors argue and the volume's contributors demonstrate, we ought to reinterpret *enslavement* in a manner that can now protect our humanity in the modern world.

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