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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Double Character: Slavery and Mastery in the Antebellum Southern Courtroom* by Ariela J. Gross

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Gregg D. Kimball offers a rich study of Richmond's antebellum society and culture that explores the manners, styles, and outlooks of its inhabitants. He reveals Richmond's diverse urban culture through the stories of the men and women of the native-born merchant and manufacturing elite, German artisans and shopkeepers, British ironworkers, and enslaved black workers as well as free. Such diversity made antebellum Richmond a complex place, much like the fast-growing commercial cities of the North at midcentury. Consequently, Richmonders did not possess a single identity that might be characterized as southern. Instead, they constructed multiple identities shaped by the cultural, economic, and social relationships created in the city's hotels, churches, workshops, parade grounds, and countinghouses. In this complexity and diversity, antebellum Richmond possessed the elements of American urban culture.

To understand the urban culture of antebellum Richmond, Kimball rejects the methodologies and sources of urban history as social history. He eschews the social historian's reliance on census data, city directories, and tax lists, which he blames for the failure of urban social history to reveal the true story of American cities found in the interplay of people and ideas. Instead, he adopts the tools of the biographer and the historian of ideas. Scouring the impressive array of diaries, letters, and memoirs of those who made Richmond in the 1850s, Kimball ably uncovers the complexity of individual lives and the rich textures of antebellum urban culture to reveal the social and cultural contours of the Richmond community.

Kimball finds that by midcentury, with commercial development and immigration, there was an emerging tension between tradition and modernization that played out in class and ethnic divisions as Yankee peoples, ways, and ideas penetrated Richmond. With the secession crisis and the Civil War, Richmonders' separate identities shaped their responses. The war provided little room for ambiguity and forced Richmonders to embrace a controlling identity that directed their actions as the city went to war. Many could not adopt the identity of southern nationalism, however, and latent class and ethnic tensions erupted to

undermine Confederate loyalty and unity in Richmond.

Kimball's study of antebellum Richmond challenges the notion of a monolithic southern identity in the years leading up to the Civil War. In sum, he offers a fascinating account of Richmonders' shallow support for the Confederacy that is not surprising given the diversity of the city and the tensions lying just beneath the surface. Richmond's story is further evidence that the Confederacy encompassed diverse and frequently clashing experiences that contributed to its downfall. Yet, with his tight focus on Richmond, Kimball offers no insight into Richmond as exemplar of or exception to southern urbanization during the nineteenth century. Was Richmond an anomaly in the urban South, or did it share an urban culture with other southern commercial cities? Unfortunately, he does not venture to say. Nevertheless, Gregg Kimball's study of antebellum Richmond is a valuable addition to the growing historiography of urban places in the South.

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*Double Character: Slavery and Mastery in the Antebellum Southern Courtroom.* By Ariela J. Gross. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000. xii, 263 pp. \$39.50, ISBN 0-691-05957-8.)

Professor Ariela J. Gross moves the study of slave law beyond the traditional notion that the civil law of slavery concerned slaves only as property and not as people. Gross has successfully trawled local as well as state court records to find still another dimension of slave law. She argues that slaves' character was often at issue in damage or breach of warranty claims concerning slaves. (Professor Gross has generously posted three of her databases on her Web site.) Gross's analysis of these cases is necessarily subtle and extensive because proslavery white southern litigants and courts developed sometimes tortuous intellectual constructs to deny that dishonored, subordinated people could by their intentions or behavior exercise any influence over their owners and hirers and over court cases.

Gross provides an illuminating explanation of “court and market” practices in Adams County, Mississippi, and other cotton South jurisdictions. Adams County lawyer-planters’ “practices rested on slavery,” Gross reports. “In this way, slavery shaped legal practice, and lawyers and judges became invested in the institution of slavery.” Indeed, issues concerning slaves made up nearly half of the disputes argued by litigants and their lawyers in the Adams County circuit court.

Gross plows the well-tilled field of honor to explain the symbiotic relationship between white honor and African American dishonor in the courtroom. Suppression of slaves’ testimony and the refusal to honor explicitly their decisions, feelings, and perceptions also upheld white men’s honor. White men displayed their honor in court not only by their behavior but also by affirming their control of slaves. Therefore, lawyers often had to show that a slave in question was beyond anyone’s control. For example, if an enslaved person committed suicide, the strong tendency was to attribute that suicide to insanity rather than to a conscious decision to escape from slavery’s hardships and brutalities. The law ground fine even in cases of runaways and alleged thieves. Dr. Samuel Cartwright’s famous “medicalization” of running away as “drapetomania” had legal utility: it was often argued that slaves’ repeated running away resulted from addiction, not from cruel treatment.

White litigants, juries, and judges made a concerted effort to maintain legal control over slaves. In the face of such strong control, how could slaves have any influence over civil trials that affected them? Gross argues only for an indirect influence. Sometimes slave resistance meant that white men had no choice but to evaluate slaves’ choices in civil court. Enslaved people’s independent behavior often resulted in white men’s efforts to defend their honor against any implication that they had failed to control their slaves or had been successfully tricked by them. Most important in court was, of course, whose perception prevailed.

There are some small problems, but they by no means degrade the book. Gross’s explanation of the role of honor in civil trials concerning enslaved property is certainly valid, yet it is sometimes repetitive. Gross only

vaguely explains her case sampling method. And Virginia, rather than any of the cotton states, contained the largest slave population through 1860.

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*Political Culture and Secession in Mississippi: Masculinity, Honor, and the Antiparty Tradition, 1830–1860.* By Christopher J. Olsen. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. x, 266 pp. \$45.00, ISBN 0-19-513147-9.)

Two related features of Mississippi’s political culture contributed to the success of the state’s secession movement, Christopher J. Olsen argues. A masculine tradition of honor, which reified independence and sensitized citizens and politicians alike to signs of slavish submission, encouraged rhetorically violent reactions to the antisouthern pronouncements of the increasingly Republican North. That culture of honor thrived in Mississippi in part because political parties were relatively weak. Campaigns generally revolved around neighborhood issues and personalities, not statewide concerns, and voters and candidates were rarely bound together within a disciplined partisan framework. The heritage of Jacksonian party competition might have complicated the process of secession in other parts of the South, Olsen argues, but Mississippi’s secessionists operated in a political context largely free of institutional restraints. Honor and antiparty sentiments combined to create a volatile climate in the 1850s, as politicians scrambled for votes by defending slavery and championing manly independence against the demeaning insults of the “abolitionist” North. After an initial chapter setting the social and political context of Jacksonian Mississippi, Olsen devotes the rest of his book to a close analysis of the political forces at work in that crucial decade when the Union split apart.

Much of what Olsen describes enriches but does not alter our understanding of the politics of secession in the Deep South. He offers fascinating glimpses into the various rituals through which community and politics intersected, from the electioneering and voting day