Alex Bontemps. *The Punished Self: Surviving Slavery in the Colonial South.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001. x + 224 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3521-8.

Reviewed by Sean Condon (Department of History, Messiah College)

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Searching for the Enslaved Subject

How did Africans and their descendants respond to the processes of enslavement in the Americas? Recent works, well attuned to the peculiarities of time and space, have uncovered many of the creative adaptations slaves made in their efforts to survive extremely hostile environments.[1] In *The Punished Self*, Alex Bontemps ranges widely across the southern colonies of colonial British North America in order to more systematically understand the psychological constraints that Africans faced in their efforts to survive enslavement. According to the author, his work "describes the enslavement of captive Africans and their Creole descendants as a systematic assault on their sense of self" (p. ix). Through close readings of the private records left by slave owning elites like William Byrd, Landon Carter, and Henry Laurens, as well as advertisements for runaway slaves and other items found in colonial newspapers, Bontemps delineates an essential dilemma for captive Africans. As people brought from an alien environment, they had an identity thrust upon them, an identity based on racial subordination and objectification. In order to survive slavery

with any independent "sense of self," these enslaved men and women had to appear as if they acquired this identity without completely embracing it.

To explain how this central dilemma was structured, Bontemps divides his study into three distinct thematic parts. Part One focuses on the ways that southern slave owners represented enslaved Africans. Throughout this first section, Bontemps explains that while southern elites could not help but notice the presence of blacks all around them, they nearly always described these men and women as objects. Compared to visitors to the South like Philip Vickers Fithian, or even to West Indian planters like Edward Long, white southerners appeared extremely reluctant to talk about individual "blacks as thinking, seeing, and feeling subjects" (p. 4).

Bontemps argues that the silence concerning black subjectivity not only made the recovery of black culture very difficult, it also actually aided in the process of creating a slave society: "Emblems of the power, prestige, and complacent self-image of those who presumed to own them, blacks were of greatest benefit to the widest number and range of people if their subjectivity could be over-

looked, thereby fostering the assumption that they were devoid of any capacity for self-regard or respect" (p. 27). In other words, this erasure of subjectivity was necessary because of the violence required to turn uncooperative Africans into productive laborers. The enslavement process–getting alien Africans to understand what was expected of them as slaves–required the constant use, or at least the threat, of physical violence to convince the enslaved that submission to the authority of their owner was of utmost importance.

While southern slave owners viewed slaves in many different ways, Bontemps finds that their inability, or unwillingness, to recognize the subjectivity of slaves is nearly ubiquitous in the South throughout the colonial period, for it characterizes the surviving records of practically every southern slave owner, whether they styled themselves generous, moderate paternalists, or stern, authoritarian patriarchs.

Chapters five through seven comprise Part Two of the book, which moves from a focus on the representation of the enslaved to consider how "the cultural assault of enslavement was initiated" (p. ix). Chapter five, which primarily investigates runaway slave advertisements from colonial newspapers, describes how slave owners in the colonial south distinguished between "sensible Negroes" and unassimilated "outlandish new Negroes." "Sensible" slaves were, according to the slave owning community, those who understood "their innate limitations as human beings, or, at a minimum, an accommodation by them to their condition and an appreciation of the opportunity enslavement had afforded them" (p. 99). In other words, whites believed that in order for enslaved Africans to become "sensible," they not only had to begin to speak and act like colonists of English descent, they also had to realize and accept their lowly place within colonial society.

Chapter six seeks to understand the methods by which "outlandish" slaves were turned into "sensible" ones. A close reading of runaway advertisements suggests that the "seasoning" process was inherently violent, and this violence had considerable psychological effects. Enslaved Africans had to realize that in order to survive, they would have to submit and to endure their suffering in silence. Bontemps argues that this silence served implicitly to sanction the status quo: "[I]n order to ensure the survival of all, the victim's violation and emasculation had to be endured, but to endure was to sanction slavery's original sin. Those who were directly assaulted, in that sense, were victimized by their own victimization. It would have been difficult for black people

in the colonial South to avoid the implication that they were exploited…because they were exploitable" (p. 117).

Chapter seven describes the dangers waiting for blacks who tested the limits imposed upon them. Because they faced quick and harsh retribution if they appeared defiant, slaves had to be careful to avoid any behavior that could be construed as "impudent" if they wished to escape punishment. At the same time, however, "…life on the edge or near the boundary…offered the greatest possibility of self-proclamation and affirmation" (p. 120). Given the dire consequences of failure, surviving both the physical and psychic dangers of slavery required that slaves be willing and able to "build a life for themselves in the narrow margins between total submission and open defiance" (p. 133). In addition to not overstepping the very fine and amorphous line between being "sensible" and being "impudent," slaves also had to try to "redefine defiance so that it could encompass what others saw as accommodation" (p 121).

In Part Three, Bontemps argues that efforts to develop a "sense of self" while simultaneously trying to avoid being perceived by whites as "impudent," led to what he calls the "Creole dilemma." When used in the context of cultural transformation, "Creole" has usually stood for people of African descent who were born in North America.[2] Bontemps uses the term in more of a cultural sense – creolization is the process whereby captive men and women become "sensible Negroes," wherever they happen to have been born. Thus, becoming "Creole" meant undergoing cultural change, but as Bontemps argues, "…for blacks living in a slave society it [creolization] was experienced in the concrete as forced acculturation that worked as a process of subjection and marginalization. To survive was to become creolized and thus to choose adaptation as a means of surviving, but forced acculturation fused adaptation to subjection as an expression of self-denial" (p. 142). So, adaptation required submission, and the slave who wished to avoid swift punishment needed to display that submission whenever they were being observed by whites: "For those who survived enslavement in the colonial South, the drama of their enslavement meant playing the part of a racially subordinate slave and thus acting like a Negro" (p. 149).

One dangerous possibility would be to practice this repeated behavior to the point where it became internalized. However, even if the behaviors were not internalized, and the enslaved individuals remained fully conscious that their outward behavior belied their inner beliefs, "…from a slave owning perspective…acceptance of

the part was what a 'sensible Negro' would do" (p. 148). Successful deception did allow the enslaved to carve out spaces where they could pursue their quests for freedom and community, but this deception was fraught with dangers from every direction.

The author's thematic approach to the subject of enslavement generates both strengths and weaknesses. Bontemps reads elite sources extremely closely, which enables him to identify subtle but important patterns, contradictions, ironies, and dilemmas. For just one example, his reading of a colonial newspaper piece about a free black man known for his medical skills allows Bontemps to locate an interesting and subtle paradox facing slave owners: "On the one hand was the demand that captives be culturally assimilated as fully and quickly as possible; on the other hand was the need [to] not break 'their hearts' to such a degree that their will to survive would be diminished or eliminated. The irony of course is that something of their former selves, the selves from which enslavement was to save them, had to survive in order for captives to become what owners wished and needed them to become" (p. 147).

Bontemps also provides a number of imaginative metaphors that allow students of slavery in the colonial South to conceptualize the problem of slavery in novel ways. In Part One, which is entitled "Spotlights and Shadows," the author repeatedly shows how the self-image of the colonial gentry was generated by the way these elites constructed images of their slaves; in effect, the "light" that elites shone on themselves inevitably cast shadows on those around them.

While Bontemps provides important insights into the process of enslavement in the abstract, readers will have some difficulty following the author's rapid moves across time and space as he strings multiple primary sources together to make particular points. Another minor quibble is the fact that the author interprets numerous visual representations of slaves, arguing that they provide an important source for understanding the objectification process, but no reproductions of any of the paintings discussed are included in the text, so it is difficult for the reader to see exactly how Bontemps uses the paintings to make his arguments. (The author does direct the reader to where these images may be found.)

A more fundamental problem derives from the lack of a clear geographical and temporal context for the author's unit of analysis. While Bontemps does occasionally contrast the experience of the colonial South with the West Indies, it is often unclear what parts of the enslavement process are operative whenever and wherever the institution of slavery has existed, and what elements were unique to, or emphasized in, the colonial South.

Bontemps displays a thorough and lucid understanding of the secondary literature on slavery in the colonial South, but it would have been helpful (to this reader at least) if at some point the central dynamics of enslavement in the colonial South would have been compared to the process as it unfolded elsewhere in the Americas. In addition, it is surprising that no connection was attempted between what Bontemps finds for the colonial South, and the arguments about slavery as a system of personal relationships that Orlando Patterson made in his comparative study.[3]

Despite this critique, Bontemps has created an imaginative and challenging work that provides a well-crafted template outlining the dynamics and psychic consequences of the process of enslavement. What we need are more studies that try to determine what the content of this form of acculturation looked like in different times and places. It appears very likely that the central problem articulated here will be the site of rich future investigations.

Notes

[1]. Essential recent works include Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); James Sidbury, *Ploughshares Into Swords: Race, Rebellion and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730-1810* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998); and Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

[2]. For a brief explanation of "Creole," see Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, pp. 381-82.

[3]. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

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