

Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South

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Review

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Kaye, Anthony E. *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South.* University of North Carolina Press, \$34.95 hardcover ISBN 9780807831038

Slave Communities

Winthrop Jordan, Christopher Morris, and Michl Wayne count among the prominent scholars who have written noteworthy studies on the slave society of Mississippi's Natchez District. That region is also the focus of Anthony E. Kaye's important work, *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South*. Examining slave narratives, plantation journals, Southern Claims Commission records, and, most uniquely, the U.S. Pension Bureau files of Union veterans, Kaye introduces the idea of neighborhood as a new and significant interpretive framework for understanding antebellum southern slavery.

As Kaye explains, bondpeople created neighborhoods unintentionally as they went about their daily lives. Their neighborhoods consisted of adjoining plantation spaces in which slaves socialized, forged kinship networks, worked, and resisted the terms and conditions of enslavement. Because Natchez District slaveholders commonly purchased most of what slaves had to sell, the internal slave economy does not appear in *Joining Places* as a vital means of constructing neighborhood, although it may have been more important than Kaye's sources suggest. Most crucial to the creation and survival of antebellum slave neighborhoods were bonds of family and kinship. Kaye examines a range of intimate unions — sweethearting, taking up, living together, and the one distinguished by ceremony, marriage — that forged ties between slaves on contiguous plantations. Neighborhoods afforded slaves not only a sense of place but, more deeply, an identity, serving as the locus of all the bonds that shaped the contours of their society (4). Because the domestic slave trade took a toll on the maintenance of slave neighborhoods, they were necessarily the products of an ongoing, dynamic process of making, remaking, and becoming (5).

Kaye presents the slave neighborhood as an alternative to the long-standing slave community paradigm that has informed so much slave scholarship since the early 1970s. Although *Joining Places* regrettably lacks the extensive historiographical discussion found in his powerful article in *Slavery & Abolition*, Kaye nevertheless challenges the sense of unity and harmony implicit in the notion of slave community. As Kaye observes, slave society cannot be explained in simple terms of autonomy and universal solidarity because it was not monolithic but plural, comprised [of] not a single community but many neighborhoods (10). Rethinking slave society in terms of innumerable neighborhoods throughout the South affords the advantage of permitting among slaves division as well as solidarity, exclusion as well as inclusion. Just as Natchez District slaves might harbor or otherwise aid truant bondpeople from within the neighborhood, they sometimes apprehended fugitive strangers from outside the neighborhood. Likewise, the exclusionary possibilities of Kaye's concept of neighborhood offer a compelling explanation for the difficulties of organizing concerted slave uprisings across plantation boundaries.

The Civil War and emancipation had profound effects upon the slave neighborhoods of Natchez District. With the onset of war, Kaye explains, slaves looked increasingly outward from their neighborhoods, and those who emerged as sources of news and information gained the esteem of their fellow bondpeople. Boundaries of antebellum slave neighborhoods dissolved as emancipation permitted a freedom of movement unknown during bondage. Kaye includes an interesting discussion of when Natchez District slaves believed themselves free, arguing that liberation did not take place at a single moment. Some slaves keyed in on the Emancipation Proclamation, others on the siege of Vicksburg. For still others, freedom hinged on the Union's ultimate military victory. Regardless, the war introduced Natchez District slaves to new forms of governmental power as bondmen served as colored troops or saw the Union army appropriate private property for its own use. With the war's close, the freedpeople worked to reconstitute neighborhoods. Antebellum conceptions of neighborhood helped ease the transition to freedom, but with important distinctions. Former slaves, for example, proved anxious to achieve legal sanction for their marriages. The postwar world also ushered in new sets of labor relations. During slavery, most bondpeople's working lives grounded their sense of neighborhood in the home plantation. Given the demands of cotton cultivation, few slaves in Natchez District left the plantation for work and therefore could not utilize labor routines as a significant avenue for the creation

of neighborhood. Indeed, the concept of neighborhood virtually disappears in the chapter on work. Emancipation eliminated restrictions on former slaves' movement, however, and made work routines central to postwar neighborhoods in the making (209).

A welcome addition to the John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture, *Joining Places* is an important book whose formulations steer slave scholarship in promising new directions. The best historical works invite questions, and Kaye's work is no exception. If, as he explains, Slaves in the Natchez District conceived of themselves most broadly as a people' (174) and forged a collective identity that coexisted, cross-cut, and rose above that of neighborhood, (175) then scholars still must grapple with the issues of slave consciousness Kaye raises.

Jeff Forret is an assistant professor of history at Lamar University and author of Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Southern Countryside (LSU Press, 2006). He is currently working on a book on violent conflicts within the slave quarters.