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Foster, Thomas A. 2019. *Rethinking Rufus, Sexual Violations of Enslaved Men*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 174 pp. \$22.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0820355221

Reviewed by Anwar Uhuru

Rethinking Rufus by Thomas A. Foster is a groundbreaking contribution to the study of Black masculinity in particular, and the fields of critical race studies and slavery studies in general. Foster begins by focusing on the subject of the bodies of enslaved men. By doing this, Foster argues, “the ways that dominant American culture denigrated, celebrated and damaged the bodies of enslaved men” is of underappreciated importance in understanding the field of slave studies (p. 7). Foster specifically recounts the life of an enslaved man named Rufus and his wife, Rose. Rufus and Rose were forced to live together by their master in hopes that they would produce more slaves through their forced coupling.

Despite having no free choice of a partner and the threat of being separated from one’s own family, “the ability to develop family relations and to persist in maintaining marriage and family in all their forms and despite physical and psychological barriers erected by enslavement, was a key component of manliness” (p. 32). Foster uses the accounts of enslaved men as a way to illustrate how they fought to choose their partners and create a family, and despite their enslavement, forged intimate bonds and a counter-Eurocentric model of Black masculinity. Thinking of masculinity of the enslaved men pushes readers to consider the difference between the autonomous body and enslaved flesh. For example, Foster notes that “enslaved men had to carefully negotiate the will of masters and mistresses

in the area of intimacy” (p. 43). For Foster, intimacy is the relationship between the enslaved man and his partner, children and kin, as well as the relationship with his master and the master’s wife.

Rose and Rufus were expected to reproduce, but not all reproduction of enslaved men and women was coerced. According to Foster, “forced reproduction divided men along lines of fertility and virility, isolated men who were prolific, and fractured families and communities” (p. 46). Despite slavery and forced reproduction, enslaved men and women did experience moments of pleasure and chose to have children. Yet, Foster does not want readers to ignore that both women and men were forced to breed and states that “the lack of attention paid to the significance of forcing men to reproduce has resulted from a variety of factors” (p. 48). He notes that “the richest source of testimonies of forced reproduction of Black men is the collection of interviews conducted in the early 20th century by the U.S. government” (ibid.). Foster uses the terms *coerced*, *forced slave breeding*, and *intimacy* because he does not want to take away the legacy of those slaves who chose their partners and respect, the intricacies of intimacies between both the master and their slave but also the will of the master regarding with whom the slave is forced or allowed to partner.

By focusing on the roles of white women in slavery, Foster brings a “revised image of the role that white women, slave-owning and not, played in enforcing slavery and racial hierarchies” (p. 69). Foster does not ignore that “white women’s actions were targeted for legal punishments and cultural derision” (p. 73). For example, he points out that the first divorce cases in the states of Maryland and Virginia were on the basis of white women giving birth to mulatto children. The irony of their birth is that those children are born free because slavery is based on the status of the mother, not the father—if a white woman bore a child of an enslaved man, that child is born free. Foster argues, “white women derived power from a variety of social and cultural mechanisms, including the courts” (p. 78). Despite claims of infidelity, if a white woman bore a mixed-race child she could accuse the slave of rape. These accusations would commonly result in executions of the enslaved man. Foster

states that “twelve of the nineteen black men accused of rape between 1670 and 1767 were executed” (p. 79).

As Foster states, “enslaved men like Rufus were also sexually exploited and abused in a range of ways” (p. 113). Yet, “*Rethinking Rufus* allows also for rethinking Rose and the sexual violations of enslaved women” (p. 115). Ultimately, Foster’s project is to “imagine the worries, fears, and attempts of enslaved men and women to protect boys and young men from sexual violations” (ibid.). Arguably, *Rethinking Rufus* not only means “rethinking the community of enslaved people” but also “understandings of gender and sexuality continue to be shaped by the past” (p. 116). Foster highlights that in slave narratives of formerly enslaved men the physical and sexual violence between the slave master and an enslaved woman is viscerally depicted. Yet, only physical abuse between master and enslaved male is described in the narrative. However, the closeness and kindheartedness shown by a white male and a former slave alludes to a much more complicated homosocial bond.

Rethinking Rufus is not only an innovative and scholastically rigorous undertaking; it forces readers to reimagine the discourse on slavery and violation. As noted throughout his text, sexual violation and slavery due to patriarchy and abolitionist sensationalism have only been discussed between the slave master and enslaved woman, largely because of the slave laws that stated that to be born a slave one’s mother must be a slave. Secondly, enslavement is a system that protected the virtue of a white woman as long as she does not bear a mulatto child. If so, she can either accuse the enslaved man of rape, commit infanticide, or face divorce from her white husband. However, masculinity and intimacy are not to be ignored because moments of agency and pleasure did exist despite the physical, political, and psycho-social torture that slaves endured. The homosocial and same-sex intimacy between both master and slave, and slave and slave allows for new approaches of defining relationships and pleasure. Lastly, Foster’s book introduces a methodology that includes the full

spectrum of possibilities for slavery studies that are and continue to be excluded from the academic discourse.

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