Historians of slavery in the United States will likely be familiar with the narrative of Rose Williams. Interviewed in Texas in 1936 as part of the Federal Writer’s Project, formerly enslaved Rose recounted the details of her first night with Rufus, an enslaved man sent to her cabin by their master, as she put it, to “bring forth portly chillen” (p. 119). Rose fought Rufus at first, threatening him with a poker to keep him at bay. On the third night she yielded, and eventually she bore two children by Rufus. Rose explained that this experience was so traumatic that after emancipation she never married. Rose’s suffering was shared by many enslaved women; the sexual abuse of black women under slavery has been well documented. However, in Rethinking Rufus, Thomas Foster explores another dimension of her tale: enslaved men’s experiences of sexual violence and violation. Without seeking to diminish the trauma that Rose experienced, Foster argues that Rufus was also a victim, as he was subjected to “a kind of secondary sexual assault” (p. 112). It is the story of Rufus, and other enslaved men who experienced sexual violation, that are the focus of this fascinating and thought-provoking book.

The forced coupling of Rufus (and Rose) was but one of the many types of sexual violations of enslaved men that Foster uncovers. From fetishization and objectification, through everyday sexualised interactions, to assault and rape by both white men and white women, the sexual abuse of enslaved men ran along a continuum of violations that expose the complex and wide-ranging power dynamics of slavery. Across five well-written and concise chapters, Foster uses elements of Rose’s description of Rufus to explore and expose the ways in which black men’s bodies were subjected to abuse, violation, and domination by their enslavers.

At the heart of this exploration of the sexual violation of enslaved men is a story about power. Foster reminds us that the power structure of slavery meant that “enslaved men could not consent to sexual intimacy with enslavers” (p. 5). As with enslaved women, enslaved men who engaged in sexual contact with white enslavers (both male and female) were always vulnerable: these were relationships built on a system of coercion rather than consent. As such, it is vital to read enslavers’ descriptions of feelings of „intimacy”, „loyalty” or „love” for the people they enslaved in this context.

As readers might imagine, the source material for this study is incredibly thin. Foster acknowledges this, but convincingly points to the frequent explorations of his themes in American culture, particularly in fictional accounts of slavery in the twentieth century and in African American communities of knowledge, to demonstrate that the idea of the sexual violation of enslaved men is culturally familiar to us. Rethinking Rufus reveals that when one searches for evidence of the sexual violation of enslaved men, it is hidden in plain sight: in abolitionist imagery and contemporary art, in descriptions of violent punishments in which men were stripped naked and tortured, in divorce cases in which white women were accused of instigating relations with enslaved men, and in the practice of forced coupling like that experienced by Rose and Rufus.

In his discussion of same-sex violations, Foster argues that „enslaved people would be surprised to learn that today we do not know about same-gender abuses” (p. 86). While many of the written descriptions of same-sex abuse of enslaved men are cloaked in nineteenth century propriety, Foster argues that the limitations of the sources should not be used to „close down queer possibilities” (p. 91). Thus when Harriet Jacobs described the abuse of a valet named Luke as including his being subject to „freaks […] of a nature too filthy to be repeated” (p. 111) or Frederick Douglass was reticent about some of his experiences of abuse whilst at the same time detailing others, „the odd silence becomes one that suggests unspoken queerness” (p. 100). Foster is gentle in his handling of such sources, and on the whole makes a convincing case for his interpretation of them as potential evi-
dence for same-sex sexual violation.

However, there are moments where the sources are either entirely absent or so challenging that it is difficult to draw conclusions. Where sources do not exist, for example in relation to sexual assault during the Middle Passage, Foster uses broader evidence of „same-sex sex at sea“ to contextualise his claim that despite there being no documentation, „the conditions were certainly there“ (p. 93). At the other end of the spectrum of evidence, Foster cites examples from enslavers like Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica and James Henry Hammond in South Carolina, who both kept detailed accounts of various types of sexual activity and abuse in their diaries. However, these men were arguably somewhat unusual both in keeping detailed diaries, and (one can only hope) in their deviant sexual practices.1 We don’t know how typical the experiences of enslaved people owned by men like Thistlewood and Hammond might have been, and therefore Foster’s use of these sources as potentially indicative of a wider pattern of behaviour will need to be read with care.

Rethinking Rufus is the first book-length study to focus on enslaved men’s experiences of sexual violence and violation. As such it is a major contribution to the literature on both American slavery and the history of sexuality and will be essential reading for students and scholars alike. Rethinking Rufus forces us to think about sexual violence under slavery significantly more broadly than we have done before. By including enslaved men as well as enslaved women, and by exploring the wide range of ways that sexual violations were enacted upon enslaved bodies, Foster reveals enslavers exercising the full range of their power. Black men who experienced sexual violation often felt emasculated, denigrated, and humiliated, and such abuse took a psychological toll on enslaved hearts, minds, and communities. By rethinking the experiences of Rufus and other men like him, Foster has enabled us to see the contours of slavery and its legacy in sharper relief.


1Trevor Burnard describes Thomas Thistlewood as a „sexual predator and rapist [...] a brutal sociopath“; but also as „very normal“ in his context. See Trevor Burnard, Mastery, Tyranny, & Desire. Thomas Thistlewood and his Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World, Chapel Hill 2004, p. 31. Similarly, Louis Rubin describes James Henry Hammond as „resembling nothing less than a monster“ due in part to his sexual proclivities for young girls, but notes that „there must have been more to him than that.“ See Louis D. Rubin, Jr., Foreword, in: Carol Bleser (ed.), Secret and Sacred. The Diaries of James Henry Hammond, a Southern Slaveholder, New York 1988, p. xii.