As a journalist, Bigelow cultivated excellent sources and seemed to have communicated well with most groups on the island, and especially with elite members of the island’s governing hierarchy. Finally, Bigelow ventured into the realm of political prognostication. He predicted that Jamaica would never attain the height of her prosperity while she remained a dependency of Great Britain, and raised the possibility of Jamaica becoming an American state. But perhaps Bigelow considered the political environment in the United States in 1850, and decided that this was one battle not worth fighting!

Annette Palmer
Morgan State University


Hattie McDaniel, who in 1939 became the first African American film artist to win an Academy Award, responded to critics of her role as a Mammy in the epic motion picture Gone With the Wind, by saying “I’d rather play a maid than to be one.” McDaniel’s retort was in response to aspersions leveled at her and other African American actors for the demeaning roles they often portrayed in films during this period. Her announcement that it was better to play a maid than to be one acutely demonstrates McDaniel’s understanding that regardless of how effective her performance of a Mammy was, she in no way was one. Similarly, Forret’s claim throughout his book that poor whites in the antebellum South were “materially no better off” than enslaved African Americans, deserves a similar reply as McDaniel’s—better to be materially like a slave than to be one.

Forret’s work, situated primarily in the Carolinas and Virginia between 1820 and 1860, seeks to connect poor whites and enslaved black workers as strained and sometimes strategic partners against the white slaveholding elite in order to dispel the myth of persistent hostility between these two impoverished and exploited groups. In doing so his research attempts to examine the complexities of antebellum race relations through the interactions of poor whites and enslaved African Americans, a connection that he claims historians have often overlooked in favor of the master-slave relationship. County and state court cases, legislative petitions, and census records, as well as runaway slave advertisements and African American folklore and songs, helped to establish Forret’s argument that the close and combative experiences between these adversaries can be important to our historical understanding of black-white relations. And it is out of these documents that Forret attempts to show that the affiliations between enslaved African Americans and poor whites were more complex than just racial
antagonism, but rather their connections were built on a physical and material proximity to one another that most resembled a type of class alliance that in some instances seemed to transcend the racial ideologies of this era.

Forret builds his argument by neatly illustrating the extensive contacts between poor whites and enslaved black workers. Specifically, his research reveals the extent to which the two groups peacefully interacted in leisure and work, and gained camaraderie as laborers who often performed similar duties. And it was through these experiences that the two groups came to frolic and gamble together, as well as to attend the same church services. Additionally, Forret builds upon the complexity of these experiences by examining the extent to which enslaved African Americans and poor whites participated in a subversive underground economy that included buying and selling goods from each other such as produce and alcohol, as well as the stolen property from plantations. Moreover, out of these close associations this book reveals the apparent selflessness of some poor whites in assisting slave resistance by hiding runaways. And yet, Forret must acknowledge that even with all these shared experiences that would seem to make poor white and black workers the natural enemy of elite white slaveholders, when conflicts arose between them, poor whites would usually evoke white privilege, and demanded the same level of black deference as the slaveholders. This double standard of sharing and subservience that was implied in the relationships between enslaved African Americans and poor whites was best illuminated in the racial mores that surrounded the sexual liaisons between enslaved African Americans and poor whites. These racial mores decreed intimacy between white women and black men, while, at the same time, ignoring white male-black female slave liaisons, including those that produced mixed race children.

In the end Forret's work attempts to address the race question by positing a class explanation for many of the conflicts between enslaved African Americans and poor whites in the antebellum period. By depicting the many ways that the two groups interacted amicably due to their close social contacts and similar economic circumstances, Forret offers a way to consider their interactions outside the bounds of their well-documented racial antipathy. In this way Forret attempts to show that poor whites were another casualty of elite plantation society and were exploited socially and economically almost as badly as those enslaved. Yet despite their own social disadvantages, poor whites could vote, serve on juries, give testimony against other whites, and even whip enslaved workers with impunity. Thus regardless of how close socially and economically poor whites were to enslaved black workers, they were not slaves. It is here that Forret's work could have offered a significant contribution to our understanding of this under-researched, under-theorized group. By understanding the attitudes and behavior of poor whites in the antebellum South, we gain insight into the complexities of southern race relations. Unfortunately, despite the alliances
between the two similarly situated groups, more often then not, in pursuit of their own economic, social, and political self-interests, poor whites sided with the white elite, often to the poor whites’ disadvantage such as in the bloody and unsuccessful rebellion. To his credit, Forret does touch upon the tenuousness of the interactions between poor and wealthy whites.

For scholars of slavery and the antebellum South, Forret provides some interesting examples of amiable interactions between enslaved African Americans and poor whites. The historical record reveals the increasing complexities in the relationships between African Americans and whites of every social class. However, this book, focusing on the interactions between poor whites and enslaved African Americans, adds little to our understanding of the tenacity and pervasiveness of the slave economy and its impact on race relations in postbellum American society.

Carmen P. Thompson
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign


In The Essence of Liberty: Free Black Women during the Slave Era, Wilma King provides a substantial overview of the “disparate body of literature” concerned with the experience of free black women during the period of slavery. In her effort to fully understand “the heart, soul, and core of freedom,” King explores how her subjects defined liberty as well as how they actualized it. She draws upon an extensive body of primary source material, including rare publications, autobiographies, news accounts, etchings, photographs, and court cases in addition to quantitative data culled primarily from census records. Moreover, The Essence of Liberty adeptly summarizes and contributes to the body of work in this area from the classics such as Free Negro Heads of Families in the United States in 1830 (1925) by Carter G. Woodson, John Hope Franklin’s The Free Negro in North Carolina 1790–1860 (1971), and Letitia Woods Brown’s Free Negroes in the District of Columbia, 1790–1846 (1972) to Suzanne Lebsock’s The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784–1860 (1984) and Tommy L. Bogger’s Free Blacks in Norfolk, Virginia, 1796–1860: The Darker Side of Freedom (1997). Yet King builds upon these works by painstakingly tracing a broad array of free black women’s experiences both in the North and in the South and from the wealthiest to the most impoverished.