American Slavery in History and Memory and the Search for Social Justice

Ira Berlin

Tho’ de slave question am settled, de race question will be wid us always, ’til Jesus come de second time. It’s in our politics, in our justice courts, on our highways, on our side walkes, in our manners, in our religion, and in our thoughts, all de day and every day.

—Cornelius Holmes, Winnsboro, South Carolina, c. 1937

The ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution in December 1865 abolished slavery in the United States. In the years that followed, southern planters and their allies proved extraordinarily resourceful in inventing new forms of labor extraction and racial oppression, but try as they might, they could not resuscitate chattel bondage. Yet, almost a century and a half later, the question of slavery again roils the water of American life. Indeed, the last years of the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first have witnessed an extraordinary resurgence of popular interest in slavery, which has stimulated its study and provided the occasion for a rare conversation between historians and an interested public. Slavery has a greater presence in American life now than at any time since the Civil War ended. The intense engagement over the issue of slavery signals—as it did in the 1830s and the 1960s—a crisis in American race relations that necessarily elevates the significance of the study of the past in the search for social justice.

The new interest has been manifested in the success on the big screen of the movies Glory, Amistad, and Adangnman, along with a blockbuster with Oprah Winfrey as

Ira Berlin is Distinguished University Professor in the Department of History at the University of Maryland, College Park. This article is a revised version of the presidential address delivered to the convention of the Organization of American Historians in Memphis on April 5, 2003. An earlier version of this essay was delivered at a National Park Service forum on May 8, 2000 (it is published in Robert Kent Sutten, ed., Rally on the High Ground: The National Park Service Symposium on the Civil War [Fort Washington, Pa., 2001]), and as the Farns bury Memorial Lecture at the Civil War Institute, Gettysburg College, November 19, 2001.

I would like to thank Linda Sargent Wood, Linda Noel, and Jonathan White of the University of Maryland for their assistance in navigating the World Wide Web. My colleagues at the University of Maryland, Gary Gerstie and Katherine Masur, and the editors of the Journal of American History provided a last round of advice that improved this essay in many ways.

Readers may contact Berlin at iberlin@deans.umd.edu.

The Journal of American History March 2004 1251
producer and star, Beloved. They have been followed on the small screen: The four-part TV series Africans in America traced the course of slavery's development from the forcible deportation of Africans to the celebration of an American emancipation; in a televised sojourn with Africa, the scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. confronted the painful matter of African complicity in the transatlantic slave trade; and HBO's "Unchained Memories" explored the remembrances of slavery collected in the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration. The television docudramas were paralleled by radio broadcasts and audiobooks, of which Remembering Slavery, a collaboration of scholars (including myself) at the University of Maryland, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Library of Congress, was but one. They come hard on the heels of John Michael Vlach's "The Back of the Big House" exhibition at the Library of Congress and the presentation of the famous Augustus Saint-Gaudens frieze of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Regiment at the National Gallery. Workers in Washington have but recently put the finishing touches on a monument to black Civil War soldiers. Styled after the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, it lists the names of more than two hundred thousand soldiers and sailors, most of them former slaves. The city of Windsor, Ontario, placed a monument to the Underground Railroad on the border between the United States and Canada. A monument to the Amistad captives stands in front of city hall in New Haven, Connecticut. The Amistad itself has been reconstructed at Mystic Seaport in Connecticut, and the ship recently completed its journey of reconciliation down the east coast and began a new one around the Great Lakes. The National Slave Memorial Act (H.R. 196), introduced by the Republican representative Cliff Stearns of Florida (who was joined by an unusual coalition of congressmen that included representatives John Lewis and Dick Armey), acknowledges the "injustice, cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity of slavery in the United States and the 13 American colonies," proposing to memorialize slaves on a site to be recommended by the secretary of the interior (a position currently held by a woman who has publicly regretted that the defeat of the Confederacy undermined the doctrine of states' rights).}


Some of those monuments—and others—are connected to larger sites of remembrance. One such site, the multimillion-dollar National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, is nearing completion in Cincinnati, Ohio. Other museums of slavery are proposed for Fredericksburg, Virginia, Charleston, South Carolina, and Washington. When those massive halls of slavery’s history are completed, they will stand alongside dozens of smaller ones as well as scores of Underground Railroad safe houses, hundreds of roadside markers, and thousands of miles of freedom trails.5

Historic sites that had been the residences of slaveholders, such as Belle Grove, Montpelier, and Mount Vernon in Virginia; Drayton Hall and Middleton Place in South Carolina; the Hermitage in Tennessee; Shadows-on-the-Teche in Louisiana; and the Decatur and Octagon houses in Washington once told only the story of the great men and women who rambled through their hallways, ate from fine china, and slept in plump feather beds. The itinerary that greets visitors now includes the history of those who lodged in the basement, ate from wooden bowls, and slept in hammocks or on hard pallets. Such matters are not the concern of the estates’ keepers only. At Antietam, Fort Sumter, Gettysburg, and other famed battlefields, congressional mandate requires that National Park Service rangers address the role of slavery in the coming of the Civil War. Federal law thus returns the nation’s battlefield parks to their first purposes in order that these “sacred sites” become—in the words of one historian—places “of reconciliation and healing.”6

In the past year, according to the Gilder Lehman Institute for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University (itself evidence of the renewed interest in slavery), some sixty scholarly books on slavery and related subjects have been published. Those are apparently not enough, for the institute has established the twenty-five-thousand-dollar Frederick Douglass Prize for the best book on slavery, in part to encourage further work in the field.7 To the scholarly books, numbers

---


7 That interest in slavery is not confined to the United States is suggested by the establishment of the Harriet Tubman Resource Center for the African Diaspora at York University in Ontario, the International Centre for the History of Slavery at the University of Nottingham in England, and the Slave Route Project of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). On the UNESCO slave trade project, see Douglas
of novels, textbooks, children's books, chronologies, and genealogies can be added, as well as hundreds of Web sites, dozens of CDs, and at least two operas. Slavery has been on the cover of *Time* and *Newsweek*, above the fold in the *Washington Post*, and the lead story in the "Week in Review" section of the Sunday *New York Times*. And, if that was not enough, there is the continuing controversy over the paternity of Sally Hemings's children.8

That controversy provides a reminder of how much slavery has become part of contemporary American politics. Bill Clinton early recognized slavery's political significance, hence the debate or phantom debate over "the apology" that President Clinton eventually delivered at Gorée, a former slave factory on the west coast of Africa in 1998. Since the press reported the event so poorly, it is not clear what Clinton said at Gorée. But it soon became evident that Clinton had indeed apologized because conservative congressmen demanded he retract "the apology."9

Five years later, much has changed in American politics, but slavery, if anything, has grown in significance, as was suggested by the lack of controversy over President George W. Bush's visit to Gorée. There, amid references to Olaudah Equiano, Phillis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass, he denounced slavery as "one of the greatest crimes of history." Although Bush faced the ire of angry activists for not apologizing directly for the part the United States played in the slave trade, the American press greeted his condemnation of slavery as the conventional wisdom.10 His visit suggests that presidential sojourns to African slave factories may become as much a part of the protocol of American politics as the once ritual Labor Day visits to Detroit's Cadillac Square.

Still, it remains easier for American leaders to address the question of slavery from the coast of Africa than from the heartland of the United States. Between the two presidential visits, controversy continued as President Clinton's National Advisory Panel on Race Relations—chaired by the distinguished historian John Hope Franklin and charged to initiate a national dialogue on race—hove into view. When it too flagged, a dispute over the placement of the Confederate banner atop South Carolina's capitol erupted, and like controversies respecting the Confederate flag soon spread to neighboring Georgia and Mississippi. In the latter state, a contentious plebiscite disturbed local politics.11 A like dispute in Virginia over the naming of April as

---


Confederate History Month embarrassed the governor and set loose another long controversy, as did Virginia’s state song with its cheerful references to “darkies” and “ole massa.” To avoid such strife, although perhaps also to prove that the Potomac River still divides the states that stood with the Union from those that joined the Confederacy, the District of Columbia officially reinitiated the commemoration of April 16 as Emancipation Day—the date Abraham Lincoln signed the legislation freeing slaves in the federal district—and Maryland has appointed a commission for the study and commemoration of slavery. It is the first in the nation, although doubtless not the last.12

As the twenty-first century is aborning, the press and the TV news daily present some new controversy over slavery—and not just in the states of the former Confederacy. Washingtonians have discovered that slaves built the national Capitol building. New Yorkers have found that the entire lower end of Manhattan Island is underlain with the bones of slaves. Philadelphians have learned that a proposed visitors’ center to house the Liberty Bell sits directly on the ground where President George Washington housed his slaves.13 Students at Yale University uncovered slave owners and slave traders among the university’s most prominent founders and benefactors.14

Each discovery has generated its own controversies, whose political resonance has echoed on the hustings and, given the litigious nature of the American people, in the courts and legislatures. Thus the reduction of the size of the Confederate flag incorporated into the Georgia state flag allegedly contributed to the defeat of a sitting governor. A suit against the insurance company Actua, Inc., for insuring slave property more than a century earlier has not only unleashed a host of similar legal actions but also prompted the California legislature to require all insurance companies doing

---


business in the state to reveal whether they have insured slave property. And insurance companies are not the only corporate entities at risk. The accusations against Aetna encouraged the Hartford Courant, one of the oldest newspapers in the nation, to apologize for advertising the sale of slaves. Then, in one of the most remarkable events of recent American journalism, it republished the history of slavery in Connecticut in a seventy-nine-page supplement to its Sunday edition. While the Hartford Courant confesses, dozens of corporations—including some of the largest banks, railroads, and manufacturers—send their lawyers scrambling, issuing denials and preparing for their day in court. As such events resonate in the daily press and on the nightly news, their cumulative presence grows, for lurking behind them wait debates over thousands of schools named for Confederate generals and slaveholding politicians (including the most revered leaders in American history) and the vexed question of reparations, a subject that has already been the topic of congressional hearings, books, articles, Web sites, conferences, seminars, and talk shows.

Although such matters seem to appear and disappear without reason, they reflect no fleeting engagement. A story on the front page of the Washington Post described a living history performance that disturbed the quiet of Colonial Williamsburg. The enactment began with a slave auction, an inescapable reality in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Williamsburg. The local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) objected to the performance as not only in bad taste but also insulting and harmful to people of African descent, a painful and unwanted reminder of a nightmarish past. The director of the project, Christy S. Coleman, now the president of Detroit's Charles H. Wright Museum of African-American History, refused to retreat, arguing that slavery was an essential part of the history of Colonial Williamsburg. The NAACP has since conceded Coleman's point. The results of the incorporation of the slave trade into the reenactments astounded observers, as visitors to Colonial Williamsburg became caught up in the presentation in all of the complicated ways that slavery and its memory touches Americans, black and white. Some have stepped forward to help "slaves" escape, others have offered to protect slaves from abusive masters, and some have even turned on the putative owners—and not merely to debate the issue. Indeed, several visitors have had to be physically restrained. Lest it be thought that it was only the visitors who forgot that they had witnessed an enactment, the actors themselves—mostly young black men and women—were also moved.


12 For recent discussions of the reparations debate, see "Why We Did (or Didn't) Publish the Ad," Washington Post, April 1, 2001; Sophia A. Nelson, "We Need to Put Slavery in Its Place," ibid., June 10, 2001; and Jesse Levenson and Kevin Canfield, "The Reparations Debate," Hartford Courant, June 15, 2001. Also useful is Roy L. Brooks, ed., When Sorry Isn't Enough: The Controversy over Apologies and Reparations for Human Injustice (New York, 1999).
women—have been caught up in the drama as well. In playing slaves, they found that they were often treated as slaves, not merely by visitors but also by others, setting in motion depressing fantasies.17

It is rare for Americans to engage their history, especially with such intensity and persistence. The past has not been of great concern to the American people, especially its most painful aspects. For most of the twentieth century, slavery was excluded from public presentations of American history and played no visible role in American politics. It is useful to ask why the sudden and dramatic change. Surely part of the reason for the explosion of popular interest is related to the recognition of the sheer weight of slavery's importance. Simply put, American history cannot be understood without slavery. Slavery shaped the American economy, its politics, its culture, and its fundamental principles. For most of American history, the society of the mainland colonies and then the United States was one of slaveholders and slaves.

The American economy was founded on the production of slave-grown crops, the great staples of tobacco, rice, sugar, and finally cotton that slave owners sold on the international market to bring capital into the colonies and the young republic. That capital eventually funded the creation of an infrastructure on which rest three centuries of American economic success. The great wealth slavery produced allowed slave owners to secure a central role in the establishment of the new federal government in 1789, as they quickly transformed their economic power into political power. Between the founding of the Republic and the Civil War, the majority of the presidents—from George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, and Andrew Jackson through John Tyler, James K. Polk, and Zachary Taylor—were slaveholders, and generally substantial ones. The same was true for the Supreme Court, where, for most of the period between the ratification of the Constitution and the Civil War, a slaveholding majority was ruled over by two successive slaveholding chief justices, John Marshall and Roger B. Taney. A similar pattern can be found in Congress, and antebellum politics revolved around the struggle between the slaveholding and nonslaveholding states for control of Congress.18

The power of the slave-owning class, represented by the predominance of slaveholders in the nation's leadership, gave it a large hand in shaping American culture and the values central to American society. It is no accident that a slaveholder penned the founding statement of American nationality and that freedom became central to the ideology of American nationality. Men and women who drove slaves understood

---


the meaning of chattel bondage, as most surely did the men and women who were chattel. And if it is no accident that Jefferson wrote that "all men are created equal," then it must certainly be no accident that some of the greatest spokesmen for that ideal, from Richard Allen and Frederick Douglass through W. E. B. Du Bois and Martin Luther King Jr., were former slaves and the descendants of slaves. The centrality of slavery to the American past is manifest.

It would be comforting—particularly for historians—to conclude that a recognition of slavery's importance has driven the American people to the history books. But there is more to it than that. There is also a recognition, often backhanded, sometimes subliminal or even subconscious, that the largest, most pervasive social problem of the United States—what Du Bois called the great problem of the twentieth century, which is fast becoming the great problem of the twenty-first century, that is, racism—is founded on the institution of slavery. There is a general if inchoate understanding that any attempt to address the question of race in the present must also address slavery in the past. Indeed, Du Bois's racial imperative becomes all the more compelling as the United States becomes more racially segregated and more unequal and as a previous generation's remedies for segregation and inequality are discarded as politically unacceptable. In short, behind the interest in slavery is a crisis of race that returns Americans to the ground zero of race relations: chattel bondage.

The crisis in black and white is compounded by changes within black society. The great success of the Civil Rights Act of 1965—the substantial enlargement of the black middle class—has allowed some black men and women to enter more fully into American economic life and enjoy its benefits. The appearance of business leaders such as Kenneth I. Chenault of American Express, Robert Johnson of Black Entertainment Television (BET), and Richard Parsons of America Online (AOL) and of political figures such as Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell can be regarded as evidence of the massive expansion of the black professional and managerial class. However fragile this new class, its members stand apart from those left behind in the "hood," whose children have a greater chance of going to jail than going to college. Such expanding class differences are further complicated by the fact that many of those left behind are new arrivals. The Immigration Act of 1965 may have had as much effect on black society as the Civil Rights Act of the same year. In time, it not only dehroned black people from their place as the nation's largest minority but also transformed the black population. In 1960 fewer than in one in one hundred black Americans was an immigrant; in 2000 one in twenty black Americans was an immigrant, a proportion that is doubtless higher still in most American cities. In New York City, always an anomaly but often a harbinger of change, more than one-third of the people of African descent are immigrants.20

21 Computed from the U.S. census enumerations, Census 2000 Summary File 3 (SF 3) Population Tables—Sample Data (see 14; 597); sect. 19 (Place of Birth for Foreign-Born Populations), sect. 63B (Place of Birth by Citizenship Status [Black or African Americans Alone]). U.S. Census Bureau <http://www.census.gov> (Oct. 19, 2003), Barr Landry, The New Black Middle Class (Berkeley, 1987).
Post-1965 demographic changes have greatly expanded the range of the black experience, creating growing divisions within black society. The forebears of many contemporary black Americans did not share the experience of wartime emancipation, disfranchisement and segregation, and the long struggle and heroic triumph over Jim Crow. Many derive from places where, despite their African lineage, they were not considered black. Others identify themselves, not as black, but as Latin American or, more specifically, as Brazilian, Cuban, or some other nationality. Their presence requires reimagining a black American nation and a return to the mainspring of the African American experience in the New World: chattel bondage. Small wonder that the diaspora has become the trope of choice in studying the black experience.

The confluence of the history of slavery and the politics of race—the political interactions both between black and white and among people of African descent—suggests that slavery has become a language, a way to talk about race in a society in which race is difficult to discuss. In slavery, Americans, black and white, have found a voice to address some of their deepest hurts, festering anger, and the all too depressing reality of how much of American life—access to jobs, housing, schools, medical care, justice, and even a taxi—is still controlled by race. The renaissance in the interest in slavery—the movies, TV docudramas, books, museum exhibits, monuments, and living history reenactments—has become an emblem, sign, and metaphor for the failure to deal directly with the question of race and the long legacy of chattel bondage.

For black people, the slave experience may offer common ground. Slavery is not the shared origin of black Americans only; that common travel also joins together all peoples of African descent touched by the transatlantic diaspora—Brazilians, Britons, Cubans, Haitians, and Africans of many nations. It provides a means to construct a sense of unity among men and women whose experience has become increasingly diverse and who, with the emergence of new minorities in the United States, are threatened with political marginalization.

Of course, employing slavery to those ends does not always clarify matters. Take, for example, the dispute over John Vlach’s “Back of the Big House” exhibition, an exemplary presentation of slave housing by a premier folklorist that was drawn from Vlach’s fine book of the same title. Its placement in the Library of Congress angered employees of the library—mostly black and nonprofessional—who demanded its removal. They saw in the pictures of the slave quarters an all too perfect representation of the plantation metaphor that they employed to describe their stormy relationship with the library’s administration. The librarian of Congress, a historian by training and trade, readily acceded to the demand. But no sooner had the exhibit been dismantled than the librarians at the District of Columbia’s Martin Luther King Library welcomed it and made it a centerpiece of their Black History Month commemoration. A similar double take occurred when some black members of Savan-
nah's City Council objected to the words to be inscribed on a proposed monument to enslaved Africans. "We lay back to belly in the holds of the slave ships in each other's excrement and urine together, sometimes died together, and our lifeless bodies thrown overboard together" seemed too graphic a representation of their ancestors' arrival in the New World. "I myself wouldn't want to be reminded of that every time I look at it. History's a hell of a thing. It can hurt," declared a black city councilman. And so it can.23

If slavery has emerged from the hidden recesses of the American past, it has not done so gracefully. Wherever the issue of slavery has appeared—whether in books, museums, monuments, or classroom discussions—there have been tense debates over how to present the topic, often accompanied by charges that interpreters have said too much (why do you dwell upon it?) or too little (why can't you face the truth?). Should slaves be portrayed as pitiful victims or resolute heroes? Is the new presence of slavery an incitement to racial conflict or the beginning of a healing process? Little wonder that the debate over "the apology" began with great fanfare and ended in muffled silence, or that the National Park Service has struggled with the congressional mandate, or that the white Jeff Fersons cannot come to terms with the black Jeff Fersons over access to Monticello's graveyard. The fact that some of the black Jeff Fersons are whiter—at least to the eye—than the white Jeff Fersons only reveals the knurled complexity of race relations in the United States and suggests that Karl Marx was right. History does repeat itself; first as tragedy, then as farce.24

Those troubled cases demonstrate that the discussion of slavery is not easy. Even as slavery serves as a surrogate for race, it too becomes tangled in the very same emotional brier patch. For slavery, like race, also carries with it deep anger, resentment, indignation, and bitterness for some and embarrassment, humiliation, and shame for others, along with large drafts of denial. Almost 140 years after slavery's demise, the question still sits on tender and sensitive ground. It is so sensitive that many Americans cannot even say the word. For some, it is "servants" or "servitude," a recognition of subordination, but an obfuscation of the slave's unique status as property; for others, it is "enslaved people," or more awkward still, "enslaved circumstance," a recognition of the slave's humanity and a pointed denial of the slave's consent to enslavement, but a similar beclouding of the unique meaning of property in man. As the struggle over nomenclature reveals, Americans feel the need to address the subject of slavery, to understand it, but they do not exactly know how.


A good deal of the difficulty lies in the confusion between the history of slavery and the memory of slavery and the ways they are similar and different. The similarities and differences reflect the way historians have addressed the history of slavery and the way Americans have confronted the memory of slavery.

Start with slavery's history in the United States. Scholars have detached slavery from its Civil War nexus and extended its reach across the Atlantic Ocean and around the world. From this perspective, chattel bondage in the United States has taken on a new look. What was once an appendage of the sectional conflict has become a fulcrum for understanding American history and the basis for teaching world history, as historians recognize the universality of slavery. Slavery is no longer a southern institution or a peculiar institution; it is a global institution whose ubiquity belies peculiarity. Chattel bondage extended across the continents and into a primordial past. For most of world history, slavery was embraced—almost without question—by nearly everyone, often including the slaves themselves.

Slavery's universality makes it an ideal subject for comparative studies, and historians raced to create a new genre, comparing the slave trade in the United States with that in Brazil, manumission in New Orleans with that in Havana, slave insurrections in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and emancipations in various nations at various times. Such studies proved remarkably revealing, but historians soon outgrew such static comparisons in favor of seeing the worldwide development of slavery as one piece. Emerging from the remnants of antiquity in the twelfth century, the modern plantation order—with slavery at its center—spread first across the Mediterranean Sea, then into the Atlantic, and finally to the most distant corners of earth. As it did, slavery created new connections between peoples unknown to one another, new economies, new social relationships, new cultures, and, of course, new histories.

Historicization of slavery does not deny the exceptional character of the North American experience. Indeed, attention to the globalization of slavery revealed with ever greater precision what made slavery in the United States unique: the early emergence of an indigenous slave population, the rapid development of a Creole culture, the peculiar definitions of race, and the particularly bloody and destructive emancipation. But the historicization of slavery countered a vision of slavery as static and transhistorical. In the United States, as elsewhere, slavery was not made but constantly remade, taking a variety of forms that themselves have become a subject of enormous debate.

32 To grasp how comparative the study of slavery has become, see Joseph Miller, comp., Slavery: A Worldwide Bibliography (White Plains, 1985). This work is updated annually in the journal Slavery and Abolition. For the distinction between direct comparison and transnational histories, see Jurgen Kocka, "Comparison and Beyond," History and Theory, 42 (Feb. 2003), 39–44. The most ambitious attempt to historicize the global history of slavery is Joseph C. Miller, "The Problem of Slavery in History," lectures delivered at the University of Virginia, March 2003 (in Berlin's possession), courtesy of the author. For the modern period, see Philip D. Curtin, The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex: Essays in Atlantic History (Cambridge, Eng., 1998), and David Eltis, The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas (Cambridge, Eng., 2000).
The lives of slaves differed as much as those of free laborers differed across both time and space. During the seventeenth century, men and women of black America's charter generation—the Atlantic Creoles—lived in a world different from anything that could be imagined by those who followed them in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the plantation came to dominate much of mainland North America. Similarly, men and women who came of age at the end of the eighteenth century—the revolutionary generation—followed a very different course from that of those who escaped bondage during the American Civil War. While the Atlantic Creole Paulo d'Angola of New Amsterdam shared the status of slave with Phillis Wheatley of Boston, Frederick Douglass of Baltimore, and Harriet Jacobs of Edenton, North Carolina, their lives in bondage were as different from one another as from those of John Winthrop, George Washington, Harriet Beecher, and Abraham Lincoln in freedom. The historicization of slavery rests, as does the historicization of freedom, on the differences that emerge over time and are peculiar to different places.26

What is true of slavery is also true of slavery's modern companion, race. With the transformations of slavery came a transformation in the definition of race, as blackness and whiteness gained new meanings. European and European American masters denigrated Paulo d'Angola and other members of African America's charter generation as untrustworthy, manipulative, cunning, deceptive, and too smart by a half. Few European contemporaries thought to apply those epithets to the members of the plantation generation, whom they depicted as dull, dirty, stupid, indolent, libidinous creatures, whose lies could be easily detected and whose attempts to be clever revealed them as both witless and ignorant.

Uncovering how slavery and race were continually remade is central to the project of freeing slavery in the United States from the stereotypes that have bound it. Those are stereotypes that fixed the history of slavery exclusively to the master narrative of the Civil War; that connected it to the history of cotton, the black belt, and Afro-Christianity and to contemporary notions of race, which were read back into the past; that denied historical contingency and scorned historical agency. In their place has arisen a history in which slavery was made and remade by men and women on their own terms, if rarely to their own liking. It is a history that reminds all that once something was different, and that men and women made it so.

Like all history, this new history of slavery is a critical reconstruction of past events based on the belief that the past was different. It is not simply that the past was slow and the present is fast or that the eighteenth century was wooden and the twentieth century is plastic or that once there were quills and now there are personal computers. Rather, the fundamental assumptions that governed men and women in the past and the basic relationships that they created were different. The axiom is that the past is a foreign country and that it must not be studied with an eye on the present, not looking for precursors of nowadays or harbingers of the contemporary world. The

past must be reconstructed on its own terms, with care not to weigh it down with
anachronisms or to confuse it with the present.

Like all history, this new history of slavery rests on the careful, dispassionate recon-
struction of lived experience. Whatever slavery became after the age of revolution and
however it is viewed in the twenty-first century, it must be comprehended in its own
time. For the historian, context is all, and to step outside the assumptions of the his-
torical moment violates the fundamental canons of the craft. This does not deny
slavery’s brutality, mute the violence on which slavery necessarily rested, or even
make such brutal impositions more explicable. It simply provides the basis for under-
standing the actions of master and slave.

Finally, like all history, the new history of slavery is inclusive. However personal or
unique the story, its connections to the larger narrative—as example or exception—
make the history of slavery one piece. History is about seamless relationships that
cannot be parsed. Whatever the convenience of dividing the study of the past into
components—economic, social, or political history, for example—it must encompass
all people. Universities may teach courses on workers, women, and gays, but the his-
tory of workers cannot be separated from the history of bosses, that of women from
that of men, and that of gays from that of straights, any more than one can distin-
guish “political man” from “social man.” Although historians rarely succeed, their
aim is to be universal and to connect all.

Thus the new history of slavery is part of a continuing debate about the past, what
happened and what it means. It is an ongoing debate because historians understand
that the past can never be recovered in full. New evidence and new perspectives will
inevitably shift interpretations. Likewise, it must be acknowledged that some aspects
of the past will be known imperfectly and, sadly, that some things will never be
known. By definition, the reconstructed past is contested terrain. The reconstruction
proceeds with great skepticism. Nothing is taken for granted. Everything is con-
tingent; the presumption is that everyone lied.

Such an understanding puts slavery’s history on a collision course with popular
understanding, which is prone to fix institutions in time and place and to see events
marching inevitably forward to the present, thus accentuating aspects of the past that
shape contemporary life. Searching for the present in the past, popular understand-
ing almost always returns to the last years of the southern slave regime. Such a view
emphasizes the slaves’ labor in cotton and sugar, their residence in the black belt, and
their worship in African-Christian churches. It ignores or denies slavery’s long his-
tory, its near universality, its association on mainland North America with tobacco
and rice, its presence in the North as well as the South, and the centuries in which
slaves rejected Christianity. Such popular understanding is often based on human
recollections.

Those recollections, themselves contested, have taken a variety of forms, always
maintaining the facade of truth and insisting on unchallenged allegiance. In the
hands of former slaveholders and their apologists during the late nineteenth and

much of the twentieth centuries, they yielded a vision of slavery as a benevolent institution that civilized the savage Africans and of masters as compassionate paternalists who prepared a benighted people for a distant freedom. Following World War II historians called into question slavery's benevolence and the slave masters' compassion. Their histories offered a radically different understanding in which slavery violated, rather than promoted, liberty and deprived men and women of their most basic human rights.

From this—now dominant, but still contested—perspective, the story of slavery has two large themes. The first is the physical and psychological imposition that slaves suffered. It is affirmed in the record of hideous, obscene violence: of murders, mutilations, beatings, and rapes; of the forcible separation of husbands and wives, parents and children; of husbands forced to see their wives abused, and of wives forced to do unspeakable things. Slavery is the story of power over liberty, of a people victimized and brutalized.

But there is a second theme, for the story of slavery is not only one of victimization, brutalization, and exclusion. If slavery was violence and imposition, if it was death, slavery was also life. Slaves did not surrender to the imposition, physical and psychological. They refused to be dehumanized by dehumanizing treatment. On the narrowest of grounds and in the most difficult of circumstances, they created and sustained life in the form of families, churches, and associations of all kinds. These organizations—often clandestine and fugitive, fragile and unrecognized by the larger society—became the sites of new languages, aesthetics, and philosophies as expressed in story, music, dance, and cuisine, worlds that were sacred and worlds that were profane. They produced leaders and ideas that continue to inform American life.

Appropriating the dual theme of imposition and resistance as it resonated in social movements and reverberated through popular understandings, the memory of slavery celebrates a cultural creativity that has its roots in the devastating rupture of the middle passage and the utter refusal of enslaved men and women to acquiesce in the abuse that followed. Necessitated by the threat of cultural annihilation and social disintegration, their ingenuity required innovation, as the world had to be conceived anew. While centuries of indignities, physical and psychological, marked slavery's victims—many of whom broke under its weight—the affronts did not define the society and culture that slaves produced. Slaves redirected the ridicule back at its source, transforming weakness into strength and denying the dispiriting message of inferiority. Indeed, if slavery is the bleakest element in the American past, it may also be the most creative. It is impossible to imagine American culture without the creative legacy of slavery.

Its mission of giving voice to the dual message of the dehumanizing force of slavery and the slaves' refusal to be dehumanized reveals how memory differs from history. For memory, unlike history, rejects a skeptical, detached reconstruction of the past. For the keepers of memory, it is unquestioned and reflexive, absolute, and instantaneous; not distant from the present but conjoined with today and contiguous with tomorrow. Memory speaks, not to a desire to understand the whole and to include all in the story, but to personal, individual understandings based on the most
intimate experiences in families, churches, and communities. It is conveyed through
symbols and rituals and knowing gestures, through often-repeated stories passed
from grandparents who were too often ignored but never forgotten, and through
kitchen table banter that was barely audible but always heard. Although scholarship
may be incorporated into memory, the appropriated interpretations and perspectives
are transformed, for they soon become emotively charged and morally freighted.
Memories are anything but tentative, distant, contingent, or dispassionate. They are
immediate, intense, and emotive. They do not evoke skepticism but command com-
mitment; they demand loyalty, not controversy. Memories are not debated (except in
the most trivial sense), they are embraced. If history is written with the presumption
that everyone lied, memory presumes the truth. No one lied.30

The memory of slavery in the United States is constructed on different ground
from its history. Rather than global, it is local. Memories generally derive from the
particular rather than from a consideration of the larger context. Looking to the past
for an understanding of the present, they are progressive, attending to aspects of the
past that shaped current circumstances. Thus the memory of slavery rarely dwells on
the longue durée and, indeed, often is oblivious to the existence of slavery at different
times and places except as they too connect the past to the present.

Rather than dispassionate and boundless, the memory of slavery is immediate,
emotive, and highly selective. In recent times, slavery’s memories can be found in the
picture of the slave ship Brooks, with its cargo of tightly packed men and women
stuffed spoonlike into its hull, that has recently appeared on posters in college dormi-
tories and on T-shirts, often emblazoned with the words “Never forget.” They cluster
around Thomas Jefferson’s relationship with Sally Hemings and the refusal to recog-
nize paternity—personal but also national.31 They figure in the debates about naming
high schools after Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, and the slave rebel Gabriel and
about removing the names of Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Jefferson Davis
and, of course, the Confederate flag.32

If history is skeptical, contested, and universal, memory is certain, incontestable,
and personal. If, at its best, history is a detached and disinterested weighing of all the
evidence, memory is a selective recall of a portion of the past that makes no pretense
of universality. If the history of slavery speaks to the world transformed, the memory
of slavery addresses what was done to my people, to my family, to me. If history uses
memory opportunistically and even parasitically, playing one memory against

30 For the modern discussion of memory, see Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mé-
moires,” Reproduction, 26 (Spring 1989), 7–24; and Pierre Nora, editor, Revisions of Memory: Rethinking the French
the slave trade in history and memory that parallel my own, see Ralph A. Austen, “The Slave Trade as History and
Memory: Confrontations of Slaving Voyage Documents and Communal Traditions,” William and Mary Quarterly,
31 On the slave ship Brooks, see Monica L. Haynes, “Escaped Slaves’ Tales Remain Inspirational,” Pittsburgh
son’s involvement with Hemings, see n. 24 above.
32 On controversies over school names, see Ann O’Hare, “Racial History Fuels Growing Debate over School
14, 1998.
another in its search for some larger truth, memory adopts historical events, issues, and persons in order to condemn injustice and honor heroism.

Because it touches individual men and women with such power, memory becomes the driving force in the search for social justice, the mortar that bonds the violations of the past to the grievances of the present. The keepers of the memory of slavery reiterate that lives lost and mutilated should not be forgotten. The suffering and the sorrow, the pain and loss must be remembered. A rich legacy was created at great cost, and homage is owed to those who paid the price. The enemy must be identified, and crimes must be acknowledged. If the criminals can no longer be punished, at least they can be exposed and those who have benefited from the crime made to confess. The shibboleth of states' rights and a war fought only by brave white men and supported by true white women is no longer acceptable. The Confederacy and its symbols must be unmasked. The long complicity of the North must be unveiled. The memory of slavery demands that deniers be rooted out, dissemblers be exposed, that those who would forget be reminded. Never forget!

True enough, but such a formulation speaks against the skeptical, critical, and all-inclusive inspection of the past that is at the very heart of the historical enterprise. For those who draw on the remembered past, the study of slavery is not something that can be viewed dispassionately, questioned, inspected, and debated. Their truth is not one among many. Their understanding must be recognized, embraced, and celebrated, for the reality of slavery was absolute and undeniable.

But if this is so, what of the diverse worlds of Paulo d'Angola of seventeenth-century New Amsterdam and other Atlantic Creoles? How is their universe distinguished from that of Phillis Wheatley in eighteenth-century Boston or even more sharply from that of Frederick Douglass in nineteenth-century Baltimore? What of slavery's history, the unique experiences of Africans and African Americans in bondage, unique because they were Africans or descendants of Africa, but also because of the diversity of the landscapes on which they lived, the economies in which they worked, the societies in which they were enmeshed, and, perhaps most important, the battles they won and lost and the identities they thereby created. For, if the memory of slavery is understood as fixed and undeniable, the history is contingent and endlessly debatable. How many slaves crossed the Atlantic Ocean? What was the nature of the slave family? Why were there so few slave rebellions, or so many? When did slaves become Christians; what did the slaves' Christianity mean? Those matters must be debatable because to deny the debate is to remove slaves from history, to separate them from the real world, and to mummify them in some transhistorical nether land of "social death" and "absolute aliens."35 It too denies the undeniable.

History and memory both speak to the subject of slavery and the long experience of people of African descent in their American captivity, but they speak in different tongues. Not surprisingly, where history and memory meet, the results are often

unpleasant. So it was at the conference to introduce the slave trade database in the summer of 1998 at the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture in Colonial Williamsburg. An enormous machine-readable compilation of some twenty-seven thousand slaving voyages, the slave trade database, constructed under the leadership of David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson, and Herbert S. Klein with the support of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University, promised to revolutionize understanding of black life in the Atlantic world between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. The organizers of the conference expected to host several dozen historians, who would explore the initial findings and gain hands-on training in the use of the database.34

Even before the conference met, the organizers learned of their miscalculation. Rather than several dozen interested scholars, news of the database drew hundreds of people. Most were descendants of slaves with no particular academic or scholarly interest in the slave trade, but a desire to learn more about the enormous forced migration that had propelled their ancestors across the Atlantic. In haste, the conference was moved to a larger facility and a larger facility still. In the end, no venue could contain the growing number of interested parties, and buses full of would-be participants—many of them organized by church groups—rolled into Colonial Williamsburg.

As scholars presented their findings, the difference between history and memory manifested itself and the gap between scholars and the public grew into an unbridgeable cavern. In one particularly memorable session, historians debated the relationship between the size of slave ships and their construction and the mortality rates of the African captives packed in their holds while the majority of the audience pleaded for an understanding of the moral rupture that separated the slaves from their forebears. While technical aspects of the transport of Africans to the Americas are worthy of debate, nothing could convince the audience that historians were not wasting their time or, worse yet, obfuscating the critical moral issue. With tension rising, the differences between historians and the public dissolved into a mutual distrust founded on ignorance of one another.

Such is often the case when the question of slavery goes public. The problem is not confined to the subject of slavery, for it arises again and again whenever historians address a subject that, for whatever reason, engages "the people." While such differences are often—and rightly—blamed on poor writing, obscure jargon, or narrow conceptions, there is enough well-written and broadly conceived history to ask why the best scholarship is often viewed as irrelevant; why books that win prizes within the academy go unread by the public; why TV's History Channel has an audience in the millions and university presses publish books in the hundreds. At base, history and memory simply do not mix well. They speak past one another. Their dialogue is uncomfortable and rarely respectful.

And yet they desperately need one another. Consider the question of slavery. If memory is denied and history is allowed to trump memory, the past becomes irrelevant to the lives of all Americans at the beginning of the twenty-first century; their politics and their values; the kind of world they live in; the kind of world they would like to make. But if history is denied and memory is allowed to trump history, then the past becomes merely a reflection of the present with no real purpose other than wish fulfillment or, at best, myth with footnotes: a source of great satisfaction to some, but of little weight beyond assertion.

Slavery lives and will continue to live in both history and memory. But the time has come to join the two: to embrace slavery's complex history and the difficult realities of this extraordinary and extreme form of domination and subordination and to accept the force of slavery's memory and the passionate legacy it necessarily entails. Incorporating the emotions that accompany the memory with the uncomfortable realities of slavery's history just may produce a collective past that honors forebears and that acknowledges the connections between past and present. Indeed, only by testing memory against history's truths and infusing history into memory's passions can such a collective past be embraced, legitimated, and sustained. And perhaps by incorporating slavery's memory into slavery's history and vice versa, Americans—white and black—can have a past that is both memorable and, at last, past.