

SLAVERY AND RACISM

The main reason why it can still be hard to discuss slavery is that the nation still struggles with its legacy today. That legacy, already noted, is racism. Students must make this connection. They need to see that racism began as a rationale for slavery. If this is not clear, then all kinds of dangerous misinformation can fill this void. I have heard serious adults—teachers, social scientists, historians—say that whites are racist by nature—that is, genetically. Nonsense. No one is born with the notion that the human race is subdivided by skin color, let alone that one group is or should be dominant over the others. Racism is a product of history, particularly of the history of slavery.

Slavery had not always been caught up with race. Europeans had enslaved one another for centuries. The word itself derives from “Slav,” the group most often enslaved by other Europeans before 1400. Native Americans and Africans likewise enslaved their neighbors long before Europeans arrived. Ethnocentrism has long existed among human groups. Many—perhaps all—societies have been ethnocentric. Saying “we’re better than they” can rationalize enslaving “them.” But then the enslaved grow more like us, intermarry with us, have children, and speak our language. Now ethnocentrism can no longer rationalize enslaving them. Neither can ethnocentrism unify people from different societies across cultural differences. Indeed, Europeans did not think of themselves as a group before the slow increase of racially based slavery beginning around 1400.

As Europeans sailed down the west coast of Africa, however, they traded with coastal tribes for captives from the interior. Slaves came to be more and more identified as dark-skinned Africans, and vice versa. Increasingly, whites viewed enslavement of whites, especially Christian whites, as illegitimate, while enslavement of Africans was acceptable, maybe even “good for them.” Unlike in earlier slaveries, children of African American slaves would be slaves forever. They could never achieve upward mobility through intermarriage with the owning class. The rationale for this differential treatment was racism. Racism arose around 1400 to justify this permanent form of slavery.⁹ As Montesquieu ironically observed in 1748: “It is impossible for us to suppose these creatures to be men, because, allowing them to be men, a suspicion would follow that we ourselves are not Christian.”¹⁰ Therefore, racism gradually increased in Western culture. At first, Europeans considered Africans exotic but not necessarily inferior. Shakespeare’s 1604 depiction of Othello, derived from a story written in 1565 by Giovanni Battista Giraldi, still fits this description.¹¹ As more and more European nations joined the slave trade, followed by the United States, whites came to characterize Africans as stupid, backward, and uncivilized. Concurrently, they came to see themselves as “white,” as well as civilized and intelligent.

The slave system in America changed over time. We have already noted a tendency in American popular culture and history textbooks to assume that things always progress. Slavery was *not* getting easier or nicer as decades passed in the nineteenth century. In the Upper South—especially Maryland, Virginia, and Kentucky—owners were increasingly finding that their biggest source of profit was people. So they split up families and sent children and young adults hundreds of miles away, to slave markets

in Natchez, New Orleans, and Mobile. In the Deep South, these young slaves would clear land and grow cotton or cane sugar, destined never to see their parents or friends again. Meanwhile, cotton was becoming so profitable that Natchez claims to have had more millionaires per capita in 1860 than anywhere else in America. Of course, "King Cotton," as it was called, was planted, cultivated, and picked by unpaid labor. Egypt and India could not compete.

Nothing in the development of American slavery suggested it was on its last legs or would come to an end in the foreseeable future. On the contrary, slavery was growing more rigid. Between 1820 and 1860, several slave states passed new laws interfering with the rights of owners to free their workers. Some made it impossible to free slaves without getting them out of state. At the same time, some nonslave states required African Americans or their former owners to post huge bonds before they could enter. The legal position of already-free African Americans became ever more precarious. In 1859, Arkansas passed a law requiring all "free Negroes" to leave the state within the year or be enslaved. Several other states considered following suit. In the North, too, African Americans found life getting harder every year. Increasingly they were barred from voting, except in New England, and faced growing threats from slave catchers, even if they had never been enslaved.

Racism as an ideology intensified in the period 1830–1860, as slave-owners labored to justify slavery's injustice. Chapter 10 will suggest ways students can investigate America's increasing and decreasing levels of racism over time. By the 1850s, many white Americans, including Northerners, claimed black people were so hopelessly inferior that slavery was a proper form of "education" for them. After all, it removed them physically from the alleged barbarism of the "dark continent." The rise of racism as an ideology is a perfect example of cognitive dissonance (see Chapter 3). At some point, every course in U.S. history needs to give an explanation for racism. Unfortunately, few textbooks even try.¹²

Although textbooks mostly avoid the "r word," they do tell how slavery increasingly dominated our political life between 1830 and 1860, how the cotton gin made slavery more profitable, and how its ideology grew harsher. By the 1850s, Southern politicians no longer apologized for slavery as a necessary evil, the way Jefferson had. To get elected, they now had to claim that slavery was "of positive value to the slaves themselves," to quote one textbook.

Racism is thus a product of history. It is not innate or necessary. Students must never be allowed to say that it is without being contradicted—preferably by other students. Of course, showing how racism developed to rationalize slavery does not mean that whites adopted it consciously

and hypocritically to defend the otherwise indefensible unfairness of slavery. Whites sincerely believed it. Indeed, Chapter 9 will show that most white Southerners came to view the 4 million African Americans in their midst as a potential menace, were slavery ever to end. Slavery had given rise to white supremacy as an ideology; between 1855 and 1865, white supremacy prompted a fierce defense of slavery.

FOUR KEY PROBLEMS OF SLAVE LIFE

To understand slavery, students need to understand the four key problems it posed to men, women, and children in bondage. First and most obvious was their lack of freedom. One day while walking toward the Library of Congress, where I was researching slavery, I spotted a squirrel ahead of me on the sidewalk, eating an acorn. Seeing me coming, he carried the acorn off to the middle of the street. There he sat, munching.¹³ I thought him stupid—after all, Second St., SE, complete with a Federal Express dropoff store, is a fairly busy thoroughfare. Then I realized, stupid or not, the squirrel had the capability of making his own decisions. Deciding what to do is the basic condition not only of humankind, but of all thinking creatures.¹⁴ Depriving people of this freedom is the basic *inhumanity* or *unnaturalness* of slavery. Slaves could not decide whether to work, or where or how, what to eat or when or how to eat it, or simply what to do from moment to moment.

Students need to grasp this indignity. Not for a moment should they buy into the idea that it might be nice to have someone else take care of someone, make all the tough decisions. It might—if that was what slavery was about and if one had granted them that authority. But slavery first and foremost stripped from people their ability to act. That is what “seasoning” was all about. An owner or overseer could tell a slave to sit, or stand, or how to sit, or to stand on one leg, and the slave had to comply. Defiance would be punished, sometimes by death, if it came to that.

Related to the removal of freedom was slaves’ lack of control over their own family relationships and lives. Slavery was not a matter of someone else taking care of a person. On the contrary, slavery often forced slaves to be on their own even as children. In narrative after narrative taken down by the WPA in the 1930s, elderly African Americans tell of having their parents sold away from them as children and being unable to plan for the future. On many plantations, this anxiety peaked every year around Christmas, when some slaves were rented for a year to off-site employers beginning January 1. It might be a year or even more before husband saw wife or child saw parent again.

Near the end of her life, one African American in Maryland, "Old Elizabeth," recalled the impact of such a relocation on her:

In the eleventh year of my age, my master sent me to another farm, several miles from my parents, brothers, and sisters, which was a great trouble to me. At last I grew so lonely and sad I thought I should die, if I did not see my mother. I asked the overseer if I might go, but being positively denied, I concluded to go without his knowledge. When I reached home my mother was away. I set off and walked twenty miles before I found her. I stayed with her for several days, and we returned together. Next day I was sent back to my new place, which renewed my sorrow. . . . On reaching the farm, I found the overseer was displeased at me for going without his liberty. He tied me with a rope, and gave me some stripes of which I carried the marks for weeks.¹⁵

Many slave weddings were sham ceremonies, conducted to foster the production of a "crop"—enslaved children—and to let owners feel they were fostering moral behavior among their slaves. Owners were not bound by the vows and frequently sold couples to different owners, thus ending the marriages. Some marriage vows even included the phrase, "'til death or distance do us part," taking note of the problem. Selling children away from parents was also common. Many enslaved persons valued their family relationships greatly, of course. An adult might refuse to work or hide out in a nearby forest or swamp until the owner agreed to let him or her see and even live with their partner again. When the Civil War disrupted and ended slavery, many newly freed people went to great lengths to find their partners and children, reestablish family ties, and marry spouses again, this time for real.¹⁶

Before 1863, most slaves had no control over their destinies and no way out of slavery, even for their children, no matter how hard they worked. A way to help elementary children see the unfairness of slavery is to enlist a group to play Monopoly, but with a rule change: except for one player (the "Owner"), none of them can own real property. They will participate happily for a few minutes, happy to play during school hours, until gradually they realize there is no point. The winner is foreordained, despite their best efforts. No strategy or tactics are even useful—just like slavery, for most enslaved participants.

The third problem slaves faced was violence. Paul Escott studied over 2,000 slave narratives that were recorded during the 1930s. He found that when interviewers asked ex-slaves to assess their owners, whipping was the most important single attribute to which they referred. Whippings could be life-shattering experiences. Consider this old black man in Texas in the 1930s, remembering a whipping he had received as a young boy, 70

years earlier: "I just about half died. I lay in the bunk two days, getting over that whipping—getting over it in the body, but not the heart. No, sir, I have that in the heart 'till this day." Some overseers then rubbed salt in the wounds. Escott found that about 70% of the slave narratives told of being whipped as slaves—and these narratives came from people who averaged perhaps ten years old when slavery had ended. Women and girls faced the special problem of forced sex by their owner, overseer, or a slave chosen for them as a likely breeding partner.

Overt resistance was never prudent and often not possible. Another old man told of the whipping given to his young sister 70 years earlier, who had accidentally broken a clock:

My old marster took her and tied a rope around her neck—just enough to keep it from choking her—and tied her up in the back yard and whipped her I don't know how long. There stood mother, there stood father, and there stood all the children and none could come to her rescue.¹⁷

Some students—usually boys—find it hard to grasp the nature of outright coercion. "I would have done *something*," they insist. Such youthful exuberance is often to be applauded, but here it amounts to inadequate *verstehe*nde of the situation. Teachers can head off such responses by stating the problem to the class before it occurs. Invite students to invent or imagine demonstrations that would convince such a student that constraint in slavery posed a problem that mere strength of character could not overcome.

For example, the teacher might ask for one student to volunteer to be the "slave." She should choose an agreeable person, but an "alpha male" who is popular with his peers. She then tells him to stand on one leg—except that this exercise should be done hypothetically, not in reality. Students will probably agree that the student, especially if the teacher has singled out an agreeable person, would probably do as asked at first. But after 5 minutes? After the class is no longer watching but has moved on to other things? After putting the other leg down and getting yelled at for so doing? After it hurts? Students can further discuss why even this rather mild simulation of slavery had best be done as a mental experiment engaged in by the class, rather than an actual demonstration, lest the teacher get in trouble. Students can continue the mental experiment, predicting what might happen if the teacher kept the student standing to the end of the period and even beyond. They will understand that the student has resources. Parents, other students, other teachers, the principal, even the American Civil Liberties Union might play a role. Slaves had resources, too, including other slaves and perhaps other masters, but far fewer. The power imbalance tilted greatly toward their owners.



"Gordon" had been whipped on Christmas day, 1862. He then escaped from his Louisiana plantation and made his way to the U.S. forces that held most of the Mississippi River. There, an army officer photographed him, stripped to the waist for his physical examination. This is what a whipping looks like in slavery, some five months afterward. Gordon of course moved on, rising to corporal in the U.S. Army.

The fourth key problem of slave life was the sense of racial inferiority that most whites believed and many blacks half-believed. Much of the slavery system expressed extraordinary inequality along racial lines. Consider the seemingly uncomplicated matter of eating. Earlier I mentioned that many slaves were not allowed to decide for themselves how to eat their food. Fanny Kemble, who was married to a South Carolina planter, wrote that their "slaves mostly ate with crude wooden spoons or by using their fingers, as the children did." Archaeologist Teresa Singleton says that crews excavating slavery plantations have recovered so few spoons or forks as to suggest that this was how slaves ate on most plantations. This was not by choice. Many African Americans interviewed in the WPA collection complained about such practices. "The slaves had to eat with mussel shells for spoons," related a Mississippi woman, "and we sopped our gravy with our bread." Children had it still worse. On some plantations, planters had slave children eat from troughs, with or without wooden paddles or spoons. One former slave remembered:

There was a trough out in the yard where they poured in mush and milk, and us children and the dogs would all crowd 'round it and eat together. We children had homemade wooden paddles to eat with, and we sure had to be in a hurry about it, because the dogs would get it all if we didn't.

Even without dogs, children often competed with each other for basic sustenance.

While their slaves ate like animals, the richest planters and their children ate like gods. Today dining tables at many plantation homes still display the elaborate serving dishes, fine china place settings, silver tableware, and crystal glasses that impressed visitors before the Civil War. Such splendor encouraged everyone, then and now, slaves and tourists alike, to believe that no ordinary mortals inhabited these halls. No, these were impressive elegant people who are worthy of our respect. Conversely, visitors then—and even to a degree enslaved people themselves—witnessing slave children tussling over their morning or evening meal, might conclude, “They eat like animals!” The contrasting scenes could reinforce the notion that slavery was right.

Viewed another way, the comparison reinforces the opposite conviction: such astounding inequality was deeply unjust. No slaves thought slavery just. Students can research spirituals dating back to slavery time and sing them or read them aloud together: “*Nobody* knows the trouble I’ve seen”; “Got hard trials in my way; Heaven shall be my home.”

Nevertheless, students should not conclude that slaves were only victims. While blacks did sometimes buy into the notion that whites were superior, at other times they knew better. Some escaped and hung out in the woods for weeks to repay an owner for unfair treatment and negotiate better terms for the future. Some even escaped to Mexico, Indian tribes, the North, or Canada. Most enslaved people never had a good opportunity to escape, but they helped each other, from giving birth to funeral ceremonies. They developed sly stories and jokes in which African Americans got the best of their “masters.” They resisted slavery in subtle ways (like doing bad work that had to be repeated), stole extra food (but not enough to be noticed), or became indispensable (to win better treatment). Some learned to read and informed themselves of political affairs. They built a religious faith that promised a better life to come. Simply staying alive, remaining sane, and retaining the hope of eventual freedom, whether in this life or in an afterlife, was a form of resistance to enslavement.

Although no analysis of slavery should suggest that whites had it rough, too, slavery did have at least four major problematic effects upon white culture. First, it gave rise to an anti-work ethic that persists to this day among some social strata in the plantation South. Under plantation ideology, hard work, especially manual labor, was looked down upon as “nigger work.”¹⁸ Second, slavery caused the slave system to become defensive and fear ideas. As slavery tightened between 1800 and 1860, just to *receive* abolitionist literature became a crime. During the Nadir, political

orthodoxy reigned in the South as an outgrowth of white supremacy; to be anything other than a Democrat prompted suspicion. Third, as we noted, slavery led to racism among whites. Finally, as the next chapter will discuss, slavery led to distorted history.