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From Silent Object to Vocal Subject:
An Analysis of the Historiography of American Slavery

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In 1619, the English warship *White Lion* arrived in Jamestown, Virginia. Disguised as a Dutch ship, it had seized approximately twenty captured Africans from the Portuguese slave ship *San Juan Batista*, and it had come to Virginia to exchange these men and women for provisions. From this single sale, a major American institution was born. Over the next two and a half centuries the citizens of a young America would grapple with the social, moral, and economic implications of keeping human beings in bondage. As time went on, slavery became more and more controversial, until it came to a head during the American Civil War (1861–1865). A victory by the North ended slavery in the United States, but slavery’s legacy remained.

America’s next one hundred years would see the plight of ex-slaves and their descendants ignored. It would see the establishment of widespread segregation laws and a steady encroachment on the civil rights promised to freed slaves at the conclusion of the Civil War. These conditions persisted for nearly a century until The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s transformed the place of black men and women in society. De jure segregation was abolished and civil rights were restored and strengthened. This was, of course, not a perfect transformation. Prejudice did not disappear overnight, and words on paper do not enforce laws. Nevertheless, the American consciousness regarding race was transformed.

The Civil Rights Movement marked a point where the black voice began to be heard across the nation. Black men and women decided to seize their rights, and in doing so they seized control of their identity. The following historiographical analysis examines general trends in the writing of the history of slavery (particularly antebellum slavery) with an emphasis on how the language authors used in their research reflected the state of black autonomy and agency at the time of publication. To do so, we will examine these writings from the antebellum period to modern day to observe changes in content and language through time.

When contemporary antebellum historians wrote about slavery, all of them had one reference in common—the Bible. There are a number of passages in the Bible that talk about slavery, but only a few will be discussed in detail. Leviticus 25:44 underlies an essential proslavery argument. It reads, “Both they bondmen and they bondmaids, which thou shalt have, shall be of the heathen that are round about you; of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids.”¹ Reverend Fred A. Ross, a Presbyterian minister from Alabama, used this passage in his 1857 *Slavery Ordained of God*. He wrote: “Sir, I do not see how God could tell us more plainly that he did command his people to buy slaves from the heathen round about them, and from the stranger, and of their families sojourning among them. The passage has no other meaning. Did God merely permit sin?—did he merely tolerate a dreadful evil? God does not say so anywhere. He gives his people law to buy and hold slaves of the heathen forever, on certain conditions, and to buy and hold Hebrew slaves in variously-modified particulars.”² For Ross, non-Christian African men and women fit the requirements of Leviticus 25: 44 perfectly. It hardly merited further analysis.

¹ Stanley Engerman, Seymour Drescher, and Robert Paquette, *Oxford Readers: Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 94.

² Frederick Ross, “Slavery ordained of God,” Making of America Books, accessed May 8th, 2017, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moa/ABJ1203.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>.

Ephesians 6: 5-9 and Colossians 4 both give some insight as to the expectations of master and slave. Ephesians 6: 5 reads, “Servants, be obedient to them that are *your* masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart as unto Christ,” and Colossians 4, “Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal; knowing that ye also have a master in Heaven.”³ These passages describe fundamental elements the paternalistic quality of slavery espoused by its defenders. Other passages describing slavery include Exodus 21, Deuteronomy 15, Leviticus 27, Colossians 3, I Timothy 6, Titus 2, and I Peter 2.⁴

In his 1841 essay entitled “The Scriptural View of Slavery,” Thornton Stringfellow works his way through both the Old and New Testaments, identifying passages sanctioning slavery. He identifies its legitimate existence in the stories of Canaan and Shem, Abraham, Moses, and Christ himself.⁵ By pointing out that God had provided for slavery in Biblical times, he argues that Northern abolitionists have taken it upon themselves to judge the will of God, something truly unacceptable to a good American Christian.⁶

The biblical argument, however, was not the only one slavery’s defenders made. In 1837, John C. Calhoun, then U. S. Senator from South Carolina, gave a speech called “The Positive Good of Slavery.” Calhoun argues not only that slavery is a stabilizing force in society and an improvement on the lives slaves had in Africa but also, “that the existing relation between the two races in the South, against which these blind fanatics are waging war, forms the most solid and durable foundation on which to rear free and stable political institutions.”⁷ In his mind, the

³ Engerman, Drescher and Paquette, *Oxford Readers: Slavery*, 94.

⁴ Engerman, Drescher and Paquette, *Oxford Readers: Slavery*, 7, 94-95.

⁵ Thornton Stringfellow, “Scriptural and Statistical Views in Favor of Slavery,” Documenting the American South, accessed November 13th, 2015, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/string/string.html>.

⁶ Stringfellow, “Scriptural and Statistical Views.”

⁷ John C. Calhoun, “The ‘Positive Good’ of Slavery,” St. Olaf College, accessed November 9th, 2015, <http://www.stolaf.edu/people/fitz/COURSES/calhoun.html>.

political discord that accompanied the conflict between labor and capital did not exist in the agrarian South. This provided a more stable ground on which to develop good government.⁸

Calhoun's argument about the detrimental nature of Northern capitalism was a popular one. George Fitzhugh's own treatment of the idea, *Cannibals All*, was published in 1857. He argued not only that the slaves had a higher quality of life than oppressed groups in Europe, but also that Northern capitalism produced a type of "moral cannibalism"⁹ by transforming supposedly free men into virtual slaves working for their employer's benefit. A Northern worker faced the same economic exploitation that a slave did without any paternalistic protection.¹⁰

To the southern planter it was paternalism that set slavery above free labor. This concept defined the way that masters treated their slaves and what they felt they were owed in return. Good masters would recognize and treat their slaves as human beings, govern their slaves as they would their own family (with a balance of firmness and kindness), and make concerted efforts to teach his slaves Christianity. If the master adhered to these guidelines, then the slave would, supposedly, naturally respond to his recognition, fairness, discipline, and instruction with loyalty and obedience. By treating the slave well, by caring for him, the master made slavery humane. He gave it an edge over free labor by investing personal energy in the slave that the capitalist would never invest in the free worker.¹¹

On the other end of the spectrum, antislavery leaders made their arguments largely on abstract moral lines. One was John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. In his "Thoughts Upon Slavery," published in 1794, Wesley asks the question, "whether these things [actions towards

⁸ Calhoun, "The 'Positive Good' of Slavery."

⁹ Mary Alice Kirkpatrick, "George Fitzhugh, 1860-61: 'Cannibals All! Or, Slaves without Masters,'" Documenting the American South, accessed November 11th, 2015, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/fitzhughcan/summary.html>.

¹⁰ Kirkpatrick, "George Fitzhugh."

¹¹ Lacy Ford, "Reconfiguring the Old South: 'Solving' the Problem of Slavery, 1787-1838," *The Journal of American History* 95, no. 1 (2008): 110.

slaves] can be defended on the principle of even Heathen honesty; whether they can be reconciled (setting the Bible out of the question) with any degree of either justice or mercy.”¹²

With the Bible clearly providing for slavery, Wesley and his colleagues sidestepped the scriptural argument and appealed directly to the basic moral conflict of good vs. evil.

Nevertheless, Wesley still appeals to God for the justice he craves. His final paragraphs appeal to God as the ultimate representation of moral good regardless of what the scripture allows.¹³ This combination of secular morality and religious appeal would be repeated by later abolitionists.

In 1854, William Lloyd Garrison, abolitionist orator and editor of the antislavery newspaper *The Liberator* gave a speech now referred to as “No Compromise with the Evil of Slavery” in which he used this same sort of moral and religious argument. Garrison’s plea for justice turns first to the Declaration of Independence. He takes the guarantee of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness literally, arguing that to fail to extend these rights to the slave is a betrayal of the document and a moral failing. He then turns to justifying abolition in the eyes of God. He quotes scripture, but never a full passage, preferring to expound upon God’s justice and mercy. According to Garrison, as white men recognize that black slaves have souls that can be saved by Christ, they owe them the same consideration under man’s laws as they receive under God’s.¹⁴

White men wrote almost all of the contemporary sources on slavery. Frederick Douglass, a former slave himself, is the most notable exception. His 1852 speech, “The Meaning of Fourth

¹² Orange Scott and John Wesley, "The Grounds of Secession" from the M. E. Church: Or, Book for the Rimes: Being an Examination of Her Connection with Slavery, and Also of Her Form of Government," Hathi Trust, accessed November 12, 2015,

<http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=inu.30000053292102;view=1up;seq=191;size=125,212>.

¹³ Scott and Wesley, "The Grounds of Secession," 227-228.

¹⁴ William Lloyd Garrison, "'No Compromise with the Evil of Slavery' Speech, 1854," Lit2Go, accessed November 19, 2015, <http://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/185/civil-rights-and-conflict-in-the-united-states-selected-speeches/5061/nocompromise-with-the-evil-of-slavery-speech-1854/>.

of July for the Negro,” exemplifies his unique contributions to the debate over slavery. Douglass appeals both to secular and divine justice, but these particular appeals are noteworthy because of the impact of his rhetoric. Douglass used the same sort of arguments already mentioned, but his background gave him the authority to talk about slavery with a particular vigor. To him, this is meaning of the Fourth of July to the Negro: “I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to Him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy -- a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages.”¹⁵ Thus was Douglass’ mark on the subject. He pulled no punches.

Nine years after this speech was given, the United States entered into a civil war. The North rejected slavery as a social, economic, and moral ill, and the South rested entirely on slavery’s existence. Once the conflict was resolved in 1865, slavery was ended and guarantees of civil rights were made to surviving slaves. But then, the commentary on slavery became remarkably silent. The backlash against the destruction caused by the Civil War and the accompanying rise in American nationalism made discussions about slavery unfashionable. Given all the effort that was going into reuniting the United States, there was little motivation in intellectual circles to examine the issues whose discussion had pushed the country apart in the

¹⁵ Frederick Douglass, “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro’,” *Africans in America*, accessed November 12, 2015, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2927t.html>.

first place.¹⁶ By the time historical scholarship on slavery did pick back up during the 1880s and 1890s, historians like James Ford Rhodes, author of the multivolume *History of the United States*, had established consensus around an abolitionist paradigm, an unsurprising result of the Northern victory.¹⁷ With that established, the topic of the discourse on slavery turned from whether or not slavery should still exist to the nature of slavery when it did exist. One Progressive historian's characterization of slavery would define the major debate of the first half of the twentieth century.

This historian was Ulrich B. Phillips, a Southerner and slave apologist. The apologists minimized the negative aspects of slavery, often ignoring the plight and perspective of the slave. This was carried on in Phillips' work and came through in its criticism in future decades.¹⁸

According to Phillips, slavery was a means of racial control that created order in the Old South. John David Smith summarizes this view well in his article "The Historiographic Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of Ulrich Bonnell Phillips." He writes: "Phillips described slavery as a necessary and successful mode of racial control. He equated the plantation with both the modern factory and the social settlement houses of the Progressive Era. In his view the plantation served a vital social function: it created a controlled environment in which the master and slave lived in peace and harmony. Slavery, then, was a benign, paternalistic institution."¹⁹ In Phillips' view, slaves were well cared for, happy, and benefitted from their exposure to Christianity and white culture.²⁰

¹⁶ Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 5.

¹⁷ Elkins, *Slavery*, 7

¹⁸ John David Smith, "The Historiographic Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of Ulrich Bonnell Phillips," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (1981): 138.

¹⁹ Smith, "The Historiographic Rise and Fall," 139.

²⁰ Smith, "The Historiographic Rise and Fall," 142-144

That slavery was beneficial for society is further emphasized in the second part of Phillips' conclusion. He concluded that slavery was actually an unprofitable institution. It "kept money scarce, population sparse, and land values accordingly low; it restricted the opportunities of many men of both races, and it kept many of the natural resources of the Southern country neglected."²¹ Slavery was unprofitable, but paternalistic and socially indispensable.

Phillips passed away in the 1930s, but the discussion of slavery was dominated by his work well into the 1950s. Historians like W. E. B. Dubois, Carter G. Woodson, Lewis C. Gray, and Richard Hofstadter attacked Phillips for his racist attitude, his deliberate neglect of certain sources, his economic conclusions, and his research methods.²² However, no new paradigm replaced that of Phillips. These works demonstrate that Phillips, decades after his death, still monopolized the conversation about American slavery. More recent publications were not original inquiries in and of themselves, but direct refutations or criticisms of Phillips' work.²³

The work of Kenneth M. Stampp is a perfect example. Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution* (1965) was a direct reversal of Phillips' conclusion. Stampp saw slavery as an oppressive system that was only continued because it was profitable.²⁴ He gave new life to the slave by rejecting the image of the happy, submissive slave and putting in its place an image of an oppressed worker desperate for freedom and resentful of his master's authority.²⁵

Stampp was confident enough to refute Phillips because he had come to two major conclusions about Phillips' work. Firstly, since Phillips wrote, it had been pointed out that he had not examined all of the evidence available to him. Stampp aimed to discredit Phillips, and in

²¹ Ulrich Bonnell Phillips *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (Gloucester, MA: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959), 401.

²² Smith, "The Historiographic Rise and Fall," 142-144

²³ Elkins, *Slavery*, 21.

²⁴ Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution* (New York City: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 6.

²⁵ Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution*, 140.

some ways succeeded, by conducting a more thorough survey of available primary sources. Secondly, Phillips' racist attitudes were typical of the time he wrote in, but by the time Stamppp was writing, scientific research had rejected the idea that blacks were somehow physically inferior to whites.²⁶ Stamppp seems to have embraced these findings, stating in the preface of his book, "Negroes *are*, after all, only white men with black skins, nothing more, nothing less."²⁷ Their black skin, however, still burdened them. Stamppp's white men were not black men with white skin, and his black men were not people with a dark skin tone. The black men only had the potential to be equal if they remove their blackness to reveal the whiteness hidden underneath.

Stamppp's anti-slavery argument became the standard among historians of American slavery, and his conclusions reflect a change in race relations brewing in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s.²⁸ This change was partly academic. Social scientists like Gunnar Myrdal, Franz Boas, and Melville Herskovits examined "Negro" traits in the 1930s and 40s by applying techniques from anthropology, sociology, and social psychology. They concluded that there was, in fact, no fundamental differences between blacks and whites. Whatever "inferior" characteristics they displayed were the function of societal injustice.²⁹

There was more to this trend, however, than a shift in academic thought. The study of American slavery was forever changed by the end of World War II and the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement. At the end of World War II, black veterans returned home from service abroad where they had the chance to live outside of Jim Crow's America. Their return to a society that refused to recognize them for their sacrifices created a new level of black discontent with the state of American race relations. This discontent eventually became one of the driving

²⁶ Elkins, *Slavery*, 21-22.

²⁷ Stamppp, *The Peculiar Institution*, vii.

²⁸ Elkins, *Slavery*, 17.

²⁹ Elkins, *Slavery*, 18-21.

forces behind the Civil Rights Movement. When combined with post-war revolutions in European colonial possessions, the Civil Rights Movement brought a new racial consciousness in white America and a major paradigm shift in the historiography of American slavery.³⁰

Much of the literature that came out of this initial cultural shift was in reaction to a historian who wrote just before the Civil Rights Movement entered its heyday. In 1959, Stanley M. Elkins published *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*. He took a step away from the traditional debate defined by Phillips and made two arguments. Firstly, pro-slavery thought in the early nineteenth century limited the ability of Southerners to critically examine slavery.³¹ The South's generally pro-slavery position had traditionally been undercut by two types of anti-slavery sentiment: the first was that made famous by the likes of Thomas Jefferson. Slavery at the end of the eighteenth century was seen by many as economically backward and morally compromised. The alternative, however, was worse. Blacks could not care for themselves as free men, and turning them out of the plantations would lead to massive social destabilization. The second sentiment came from the southern backcountry. The plantation system did not adapt well to the Appalachian foothills of the western frontier. Here, blacks were anathema, whether slave or free, and residents were opposed to the plantation system because it threatened to bring blacks into their community.

These undercurrents were essentially snuffed out because of economic developments and the rise of Northern abolitionism. The development of the cotton industry in the lower South at least temporarily laid to rest the Jeffersonian claim that slavery was an unprofitable institution.³² At the same time, intensifying Northern anti-slavery rhetoric alienated all Southerners, even

³⁰ Smith, "The Historiographic Rise and Fall," 145.

³¹ Elkins, *Slavery*, 207.

³² Elkins, *Slavery*, 209.

those with weak ties to slavery. With economic reservations now removed, the debate over slavery was to be conducted on a social and moral playing field. The abolitionists painted with a heavy hand. Their criticisms were directed toward the most diabolical slaveholders, but they applied them to the South in general. They characterized as villains even those slaveholders who struggled with the morality of slavery and tried to treat their slaves well. These blanket statements caused Southerners to circle the wagons and solidify their regional position on slavery.³³

Elkins' second and more influential argument is his defense of the "Sambo" social type among slaves. According to Elkins, "Sambo, the typical plantation slave, was docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing; his behavior was full of infantile silliness and his talk inflated with exaggeration. His relationship with his master was one of utter dependence and childlike attachment; it was indeed this childlike quality that was the very key to his being."³⁴ The Sambo was created because of the very structure of the plantation system, which existed without any limitation by external institutions. Any institutions there were actually developed around the plantation system, allowing the planters to completely dictate the world slaves lived in.³⁵ The effects of these "closed systems" are comparable to those of German concentration camps during WWII. Slaves experienced the same sort of infantilizing treatment that prisoners of war did. The conditions they lived in were comparable, and they faced similar structures of authority that denied them their autonomy.³⁶ Elkins' conclusion that the Sambo was produced by institutional infantilization had a very

³³ Elkins, *Slavery*, 212.

³⁴ Elkins, *Slavery*, 82.

³⁵ Elkins, *Slavery*, 81.

³⁶ Elkins, *Slavery*, 87.

controversial implication. It meant that slavery destroyed the vestiges of the slaves' ancestral African cultures.

Elkins contrasts his generalization of the West African with his Sambo. "The typical West African tribesman was a distinctly warlike individual; he had a profound sense of family and family authority; he took hard work for granted; and he was accustomed to live in a highly formalized set of rules which he himself often helped to administer."³⁷ This is in direct contrast with Elkins' prototypical passive, lazy, and deceitful Sambo. His conclusion therefore was obvious. Since none of these admirable West African characteristics were observable in the Sambo slave, they must have been unable to maintain their own culture.

It should come as no surprise that a conclusion like this was challenged after the paradigm shift of the Civil Rights Movement. The replacement of the passive victim of the Jim Crow Laws with the active individual of the Civil Rights Era led to the replacement of the infantilized Sambo with an autonomous, culturally vibrant slave. Scholarship on slavery increasingly moved away from white-centered accounts of the institution of slavery towards the depiction of slavery from the slave's newly acknowledged point of view. These attempts to take on the perspective of the slave will be referred to as the Subaltern School.

The first authors of the Subaltern School concerned themselves with describing antebellum slave culture. In direct opposition to Elkins, they present slave culture as an enduring element in slave society. One of the first notable scholars in this vein is John W. Blassingame. In 1972, Blassingame published *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. In it, he emphasizes the importance of the slave quarters as a social and cultural center for slaves. The community formed there, he argues, determined behavioral expectations for each slave that

³⁷ Elkins, *Slavery*, 98.

were held by all other slaves on the plantation.³⁸ Blassingame's work is also notable for its incorporation of slave sources. Blassingame gave credibility to the autobiographies of the slaves, previously considered unreliable by mainstream historians.³⁹

Eugene Genovese's 1974 book, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, follows the same theme as Blassingame's work, focusing on independence within the slave system. He supports the idea of the paternalistic slaveholder, but instead of ministering to the Sambo, he ministers to a human being. Planters recognized that slaves had that essentially human desire for independence, and maintained the slave system by granting slaves a measure of independence. That way, they could control this independence drive.⁴⁰ Genovese ties this feeling of empowerment that the slaves gained from this allotted independence into an analysis of how slaves perceived their own power and how it encouraged them to build communities and engage in collective action.⁴¹

Herbert Gutman's contribution to the Subaltern School, *The Black Man in Slavery and Freedom* (1976), focuses on the structure and influence of the slave family. He asserted that slave families were based on extended kin relationships, and each network maintained a unique culture derived from their specific heritage. Immediate families were held together by stable, long-term marriages. The coexistence of strong networks and strong marriages meant that slave children had two major sources of cultural socialization within the slave community.⁴²

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's *Within the Plantation Household* (1988) was the first major study to assume the perspective of the female slave. Fox-Genovese's work examined gender

³⁸ John White, "Inside Slavery," a review of *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, by John W. Blassingame., *Reviews in American History* 1, no. 4 (1973): 516.

³⁹ White, "Inside Slavery," 515.

⁴⁰ William W. Bremer, review of *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, by Eugene D. Genovese, *New York History* 57, no. 1 (1976): 99.

⁴¹ Brener, Review of *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 100.

⁴² Robert E. Moran, review of *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, by Herbert Gutman, *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 19, no. 3 (1978): 360.

roles in the plantation system. According to her, the paternalistic element of Southern culture meant that only white men could exercise power, with no pretense of equality in regard to race or gender. This meant that men had absolute control over their dependents (women, children, and slaves). Politically, socially, and geographically isolated, Southern women on farms and plantations, black or white, were forced to define themselves totally within the private sphere. This monopoly on power was oppressive enough for white women, but doubly so for slave women who experienced oppression based on their race, social status, and gender.⁴³

The perspective of slave children, too, has been given some attention by historians like Wilma King and Marie Jenkins Schwartz. King was the first with her 1995 book *Stolen Childhood*. By examining childcare practices, work routines, leisure possibilities, education, discipline practices, and patterns of mistreatment, King concludes, “Childhood was stolen from slave children by work at an early age, and by the anxiety or reality of separations, the arbitrary exercise or authority, or punishments.”⁴⁴ Schwartz followed five years later with her *Born in Bondage*, published in 2000. Her focus is on the role whites played in the upbringing of slave children. Like King, Schwartz writes about the work routines, discipline, and punishment, but she adds an examination of slave identity. White interference started not when the slave went to work, but while the child was still in the womb. Schwartz describes the struggle of slave parents to raise their children in their own culture despite constant interference.⁴⁵

The Subaltern School, however, was not the only treatment of slavery at the time. While the Subaltern historians broke off from the traditional debate over conditions and profitability as

⁴³ David F. Weimann, review of *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*, by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *The Journal of Economic History* 50, no. 3 (1990): 760.

⁴⁴ Richard H. Steckel, review of *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America*, by Wilma King, *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 80, no. 3 (1996): 662.

⁴⁵ Jeffrey Robert Young, review of *Born in Bondage: Growing up Enslaved in the Antebellum South*, by Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 4 (2002): 1232.

defined by Phillips, some historians continued to work in this model. These historians were part of the New Economic School, and they focused on the application of mathematical analysis and economic theory to their study of slavery.

Eugene Genovese worked in both the Subaltern School and the New Economic School. He published *The Political Economy of Slavery* in 1965. His focus here is not on the slaves in particular, but rather on the way that the slave system separated the South from the modern world. In his words, the problem of slavery, “was neither economic or political, nor moral, nor ideological; it was all of these, which constituted manifestations of a fundamental antagonism between modern and premodern worlds.”⁴⁶ Genovese asserted that slavery was an economic drain on the South. Low levels of accumulated and liquid capital, anti-industrial ideologies, and low productivity, just to name a few, prevented Southerners from improving their agricultural output, developing a widespread industrial economy, or expanding their domestic market.⁴⁷ A discussion of the slave as an individual is almost entirely absent. Their importance in this work is simply as a labor source.⁴⁸

The other economic analysis of slavery that came out during this period was Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman’s *Time on the Cross*, published in 1974. Fogel and Engerman disagree with Genovese, describing slavery as a highly profitable institution, but they go even further when they claim that American Negro slavery was a humane system in which the health and well-being of the slave was an essential part of his or her owner’s investment.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy & Society of the Slave South* (New York City: Vintage Books, 1967), 3.

⁴⁷ Genovese, *The Political Economy*, 158.

⁴⁸ Genovese, *The Political Economy*, 79.

⁴⁹ Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: Economics of Negro Slavery* (New York City: W. W. Norton and Company, 1989), 4-5.

Fogel and Engerman used cliometrics, the use of mathematical and statistical methods in an economic analysis, as the basis for their study.⁵⁰ Historians who used cliometrics were responsible for a new analysis of American primary sources that focused on extracting quantitative data for analysis. While this method may sound more objective at first, Fogel and Engerman did not escape criticism. They were accused of performing their calculations on biased or incomplete sets of data and, in doing so, ignoring contradictory evidence.⁵¹ Even Fogel and Engerman admitted that many of the questions that they tried to solve had no quantifiable answer.⁵² Answering questions like, “Was slave labor efficient?” requires the researcher to devise his or her own metric for measuring efficiency. Not only does this mean that Fogel and Engerman would have had a choice in the data sets they used, but they also would have had a hand in selecting which factors would be a part of answering their questions at all.

Moving beyond Subaltern and New Economic history, a recent trend in the historiography of American slavery has been the study of how slavery changed over time. Examples of this trend include Peter Kolchin’s *American Slavery: 1619-1877* (1993), Ira Berlin’s *Many Thousands Gone* (1998) and *Generations of Captivity* (2003), and Edward E. Baptist’s recent *The Half Has Not Been Told* (2014). Kolchin’s main focus was the evolution of slavery, but he shares much in common with the subaltern studies group because of his emphasis on slave autonomy.⁵³ Kolchin also leaves his mark by comparing American slavery to not only Latin American slavery, which was done by Elkins, but also to Russian serfdom in an effort to make connections between geography, history, and social conditions in slave societies.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Fogel and Engerman, *Time on the Cross*, 6.

⁵¹ Frank B. Tipton and Clarence E. Walker, review of *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*, by Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *History and Theory* 14, no. 1 (1975): 92.

⁵² Fogel and Engerman, *Time on the Cross*, 9-10.

⁵³ Michalel P. Johnson, review of *American Slavery, 1619-1877*, by Peter Kolchin, *The Journal of Southern History* 63, no. 2 (1997): 409.

⁵⁴ Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery: 1619-1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), xiii.

Ira Berlin's look at the evolution of slavery includes two additional themes: geographic diversity and the negotiation between master and slave. *Many Thousands Gone* divides the first three hundred years of slavery into three generations (charter, plantation, and revolutionary) and devotes four chapters to each generation, each focusing on a different region. Berlin's argument of change over time and place may be simple, but he makes a notable effort to describe the conditions of slavery from the slave's point of view.⁵⁵ In his second work, *Generations of Captivity*, Berlin's argument became focused around a central theme, the negotiations between masters and slaves. Berlin adds two more generations to his chronological analysis (migrational and freedom) and extends the areas he analyzes accordingly. In his additional analysis of the slave economics and slave religion he discusses the way that slave society was constructed through a long-term negotiation of conditions between master and slave.⁵⁶

In Baptist's book, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, he aims to show slavery as something that was both a modernizing agent and modern – something that developed over time and drove that development.⁵⁷ In doing so, he moves forward chronologically, looking at elements from slave resistance and maltreatment to patterns of entrepreneurship and industrialization.⁵⁸ Around this chronological analysis, however, he presents fictional and non-fictional narratives about the lives of slaves in the time periods he is referencing. Davis was convinced that his book should not be a conventional historical narrative. Rather, he believed the material he wanted to cover could only be done justice by being told as a story—a different sort of narrative.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ James Oakes, "Slaves without Contexts," a review of *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*, by Ira Berlin, *Journal of the Early Republic* 19, no. 1 (1999): 103-105.

⁵⁶ David Brion Davis, review of *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves*, by Ira Berlin, *The American Historical Review* 109, no. 1 (2004): 183-84.

⁵⁷ Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), xxii.

⁵⁸ Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been*, xxv-xxvi.

⁵⁹ Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been*, xxiii.

“Narrative” has come to mean two very different things for historians over the past few decades. Traditionally, a historical narrative has been one focused on obtaining the “truth” of the matter. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the very nature and possibility of this activity has come under attack. In his article “The Public Relevance of Historical Studies: A Reply to Dirk Moses,” historian Hayden White examined the difference between what he called the “historical past” and the “practical past.” The historical past and practical past can be loosely equated to professional academic history and public memory or consensus about history, respectively. The practical past can include both fiction and non-fiction in the form of novels, documentaries, and television. Folktales, cultural traditions, and collective memories are also part of the mix. What White proposes is that to connect with a wider audience, we have to abandon our attempts at objectivity and attempt to “return to the intimate relationship it had with art, poetry, rhetoric, and ethical reflection prior to professionalization and embarkation on the impossible task of becoming ‘scientific.’”⁶⁰ This view of sources representing the practical past gives new legitimacy to a set of materials not viewed as traditional academic sources.⁶¹

When we apply this to the historiography of American slavery, the first thing that comes to mind is the increasing popularity of the slave narrative. Instead of paraphrasing the experiences of slaves, some accounts written by slaves are being published directly. Examples of this include Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller’s *Remembering Slavery* (1998) and David W. Blight’s *A Slave No More* (2007). Berlin, Favreau, and Miller lead the reader or listener through a sweeping discussion of slave life, identity, collective memory, and the evolution of slavery over time and place. They then connect the points they make to interviews

⁶⁰ Indira Gesink and Justin Wilson, *Philosophies of History* (Baldwin Wallace University, 2014), 358.

⁶¹ Gesink and Wilson, *Philosophies*, 386.

and photographs of men and women who survived slavery.⁶² Blight's book involves fewer narratives than Berlin, Favreau and Miller's book, just two, but he ties them into a greater story about emancipation. He uses the autobiographies of the ex-slaves Wallace Turnage and James Washington to tell a particular story about the fight *by* the slave, not *for* the slave, for emancipation.⁶³

Narratives, however, do not have to stop at primary sources or treatments written by academics. Slavery continues to be addressed in film and in novels. In film, we see portrayals of slavery in *Amistad* (1997), *Django Unchained* (2012), and *12 Years a Slave* (2013). Famous novels on the subject include *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), *Kindred* (1979), and *Beloved* (1987). Alex Haley's controversial family history, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976), and its television adaptation, though questioned for their authenticity, captivated the United States in the late 1970s. While none of these were made purely for academic purposes, they still act as vehicles for the presentation of information about slavery.

Hayden White's approach is the more common of the postmodern approaches, but it is not the only one. Mechal Sobel's *The World They Made Together* (1987) focuses on the creation of Virginian culture in the interstices between English and African culture. She focuses on the common elements of African and English cultures in the 1600s and how these common elements allowed these two peoples to blend their cultures around certain symbols and ideas. They were both "rural, pre-bourgeoisie, and preindustrial, similar enough in broad outline if not in detail to make fertile ground for interaction and coalescence around basic principles."⁶⁴

⁶² Christy S. Coleman Matthews, review of *Remembering Slavery: African-Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation* edited by Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller, *The Public Historian* 22, no.4 (2000): 49.

⁶³ Richard S. Newman, review of *A Slave No More: Two Men Who Escaped to Freedom, Including Their Own Narratives of Emancipation*, by David W. Blight, *The New England Quarterly* 82, no. 1 (2009): 192-93.

⁶⁴ Russell R. Menard, review of *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia*, by Mechal Sobel, *Journal of the Early Republic* 8, no. 2 (1988): 183-84.

Harry Hoetink took another approach when he looked at the relationship between American slavery and race relations. He argues, “Wherever there is a dominant/subordinate hierarchy the layers of which are marked by attributed distinctions, these distinctions will be used by the dominant strata as a ‘pretext’ (in the Weberian sense) for the maintenance of their dominance.”⁶⁵ In other words, in societies where people are divided into attributed statuses (i.e. master and slave) these attributed statuses are used by the dominant group to maintain their position in society. The names of both groups become symbols of their places in society. The black/white racial dichotomy in the United States evolved out of the fact that the attributed statuses of master/slave mapped onto white and black skin. Here, because the signifiers of “black” and “slave” both signified a subordinate, un-free laborer, they became synonymous with each other and permanently interwove the negative characteristics associated with slavery and black skin.⁶⁶

One area where research seemed limited was on the language used to write about slavery. Upon review of various texts on slavery, there were two remarkable language patterns. The first involves the noun used to refer to the slaves. The second is the place of the slave as either the object or subject of the sentences describing them. Phillips’ *American Negro Slavery* (1918), Elkins’ *Slavery* (1959), Fogel and Engerman’s *Time on the Cross* (1974), Kolchin’s *American Slavery* (1993), and Baptist’s *The Half Has Never Been Told* (2014) provide examples for how these patterns changed over time.

Slaves in Phillips are referred to as “negroes.” What is significant about this was not the fact that the word negro was used - it was common in the first half of the twentieth century - but

⁶⁵ Harry Hoetink and Arnold Sio, "Slavery and Race [with Commentary]," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 6, no. 1 (1979): 263.

⁶⁶ Hoetink and Sio, "Slavery and Race", 264.

rather that it was not capitalized. This is thrown into particularly sharp contrast when compared it to Elkins, who used the same term in 1959, but always wrote it as Negro, with a capital N. In general ethnic groups are capitalized (Latino/a, Asian, Anglo-American, etc.). Today, even if we might not use it, we can recognize Negro as correlating to an ethnic group, African-American. Not giving Negro the same treatment as other ethnic labels implies researchers did not give the same recognition to African Americans as they did to other ethnic groups.

When one moves into Fogel and Engerman, “Negro” is no longer in use. Black and, eventually, African-American take its place. The major shift in the nouns describing slaves came between 1959 and 1974. Obviously, the bulk of the Civil Rights Movement occurred between these years. The fact that the Civil Rights Movement redefined the way we speak about and think about race is reflected here in this simple shift of vocabulary.⁶⁷

The second pattern is that, over time, the slave shifted from being primarily objects in sentences to being their subjects. The clearest examples of this shift came from passages describing how slaves behaved on the plantation.

To Phillips, the slave is an object. A typical Phillips sentence involves the white master directing his actions toward a slave. An example is, “The purposes and policies of the masters were fairly uniform, and in consequence the negroes, though with many variants, became largely standardized into the predominant plantation type.” The master imposes his will upon the slave and shapes him or her as desired in the same way one trains a dog or shapes clay. Another would be, “He [the planter] had to make shift with such laborers as the slave traders chanced to bring or as his women chanced to rear.”⁶⁸ The planter has to deal with the objects he can get or is given.

⁶⁷ Phillips, *American Negro Slavery*, 291.

⁶⁸ Phillips, *American Negro Slavery*, 293.

Elkins, though he did not agree with Phillips' benign characterization of slavery, falls largely into the same pattern. When talking about the slaves themselves, Elkins is mostly presenting his argument for the existence of the Sambo type. Unsurprisingly then, much of his writing is about how external forces act on the slave. For example, he writes, "Not that he had really 'forgotten' all these things – his family and kinship arrangements, his language, the tribal religion, the taboos, the name he had once borne, and so on – but none of it any longer carried much meaning."⁶⁹ The slave has performed an action, but that action is forgetting. The slave does not take things or build things, but rather he loses things.

Again, we see a change after that 1959-1974 gap. Fogel and Engerman give slaves a lot of credit for their economic activities. "Slaves were involved in virtually every aspect of southern economic life, both rural and urban. They were not only tillers of the soil but were fairly well-represented in most of the skilled crafts."⁷⁰ But slaves were also, "whipped, sold on the auction block, separated from loved ones, deprived of education, terrorized, raped, forced into prostitution, and worked beyond the limits of human endurance."⁷¹ Slaves could now take action, but in a passive voice, and they were still passive victims. They endured the horrible things that were done to them, but they did not necessarily play a part in them.

Fast forward to Kolchin in 1993, and we see another change. When Kolchin talks about the variety of conditions slaves faced, he tells us that, "Some lived on large plantations and toiled under the watchful eyes of overseers and drivers, while others, on small farms, worked beside their owners; some had resident masters with whom they came in frequent contact, while others labored for absentee planters they barely saw."⁷² These different types of plantations are owned

⁶⁹ Elkins, *Slavery*, 101.

⁷⁰ Fogel and Engerman, *Time on the Cross*, 38.

⁷¹ Fogel and Engerman, *Time on the Cross*, 107.

⁷² Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 99.

by white men, but they are described in terms of how slaves lived on them. Slaves performed truly human actions. They “ate, sang, prayed, played, talked, quarreled, made love, hunted, fished, named babies, cleaned house, tended their garden plots, and rested.”⁷³ Slaves also resisted their masters. Resistance was not a smattering of failed rebellions. It was a daily effort by individuals, through work slow-downs, broken equipment, petty theft, and feigning illness, to protest their condition.⁷⁴ Slaves were now fully the subjects of sentences. They took action both to live as individuals and resist as individuals.

Baptist writes about the individual actions taken by slaves by inserting fictional and non-fictional narratives throughout his book. For example, when talking about communal property, Baptist tells a story about two slaves, Ball and Nero. “So as winter approached, Ball and Nero each bought three blankets with their small extra earnings. Cut up and sewn carefully, they made eight warm coats for Ball and the family.”⁷⁵ When introducing a chapter on the criticism of slavery, he pens another narrative starting with, “She had come from far away. Her journey down from Kentucky, all the tears she had cried when Robert Dickey bought her and left her mother at New Orleans – they had drained her.”⁷⁶ The use of narrative introduces an emotional element that turns representations of autonomous slaves into human beings.

Looking at the evolution of the language used to describe slavery, we see a definite split on either side of that 1959–1974 gap. This period encompasses the heyday of the Civil Rights Movement, and this change over time reflects the shift in white consciousness that took place because of black empowerment. As African Americans assumed political and social agency for themselves, they simultaneously assumed agency over their name and identity. By abandoning

⁷³ Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 149.

⁷⁴ Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 157-161.

⁷⁵ Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been* 152.

⁷⁶ Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been*, 145.

“Negro” and taking a new name with a new context they attempted to separate themselves from the legacy of slavery and the stereotype of the blacks. They sought to clear the way for a self-determined and empowered identity, and the rest of the nation began to listen.⁷⁷ The changes in our lexicon, methods, and perspectives in writing about American slavery reflected the developing agency of the black American population over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

This paradigm shift from “Negro” to “black” (or “African American”) was the culmination of a long-running pattern of increasing agency over time. It started with the lone black voice of Frederick Douglas among white men who, with few exceptions, wrote about slaves as commodities. Then black voices fell silent as they were marginalized in the years following the Civil War. Despite the promises whites made to them at the end of the war their plight and their voices were ignored. Black men and women were still written about as objects despite their nominal freedom.

After a century of this treatment, black voices would be quiet no longer. As black people found their voices during the Civil Rights Movement, black slaves became actors in history. When historians heard the black voice in American politics and society, they began attributing similar voices to the slaves they wrote about. When black Americans proved their ability to engage with white America on a national level, slaves began to have culture, families, and the desire for independence. As black voices have ebbed and flowed over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, slave voices have been captured in new mediums with different capacities for expression. As black Americans have found ways to express their voices, so too have slaves shed their silent, obedient mantle and emerged as their own agents.

⁷⁷ Lerone Bennet, Jr., “What’s in a Name? Negro vs. African American vs. Black,” *Ebony*, November 1967, 46-48, 50-52, 54.

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