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AFRICAN RESISTANCE TO ENSLAVEMENT

The Nature and the Evidentiary Record

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The enslavement of Africans in the United States was a dangerous business for the enslaver. So precarious was the situation that enslavers very early instituted a series of measures intended to ensure that Africans would neither resist nor dream of resisting the humiliation of the Great Enslavement. Yet in spite of the best efforts of the White enslavers to guarantee a perpetual servility, Africans revolted, rebelled, and resisted in diverse ways. The debate that has raged around the question of African resistance can best be focused by an appeal to the evidentiary bases of the argument.

Primary sources that document resistance are narratives of enslaved Africans, European slavers' diaries, planters' letters and journals, and antebellum travel accounts, newspapers, magazines, and statutory records. All offer personal accounts, from different perspectives, which give a glimmer of what the process of enslaving human beings was about. They also all attest to the fact that resistance was not only real, but it was expected.

NARRATIVES: TOWARD AFRICAN SOURCES

The narratives of Africans who had been enslaved offer the most Afrocentric look at resistance, because Africans are most often telling their own stories. The narratives have an immediacy that attests to their veracity, although Eurocentric writers have dismissed

them as abolitionist propaganda. For example, Ulrich Phillips (1929), the father of Eurocentric antebellum historiography, condemned slave narratives as well as the narratives of travelers. According to Phillips,

Ex-slave narratives . . . were issued with so much abolitionist editing that as a class their authenticity is doubtful . . . [T]ravelers' accounts . . . are the jottings of strangers likely to be most impressed by the unfamiliar, and unable to distinguish what was common in the regime from what was unique in some special case. (p. 219)

A later historian, Randall Miller (1978), asserts that one must use caution in dealing with the narratives of enslaved Africans because they are most often "the products of rebels and resisters rather than accommodators [and] . . . constitute a sample of the work of only a limited number of the total slave population" (p. 12). In response, the question becomes: Who better to document the history than the Africans who were outstanding in their efforts to resist the system?

C. Vann Woodward (cited in West, 1973), speaking at the 1973 Annual Rayford W. Logan Lecture at Howard University, defended the use of the narratives of enslaved Africans:

For a long time the testimony of slaves was ruled out on the ground that it was biased or unreliable — as if the same objection did not exist to the testimony of slaveowners . . . It is time we penetrated these institutional abstractions [in interpreting antebellum enslavement], stereotyped roles and statistical averages to capture the human realities underlying them, the infinite variety, complexity and ambiguity of human beings. The slave narratives will help us to do just that. (p. B2)

Autobiography is usually the work of exceptional individuals who record historical truth as they see it. The same applies to the autobiographical narratives of once-enslaved Africans.

The narratives alone reveal, in the words of enslaved Africans, what it was like to endure enslavement. And because most of the narratives were necessarily written by African Americans who resisted by fleeing bondage, they give testimony to the fact that Africans

were committed to resistance. Further, they present the most compelling indictment of antebellum life and American society.

In his narrative, *Twelve Years a Slave*, Solomon Northup (1854/1970) challenged abolitionists who counseled nonviolence:

Let not those who have never been placed in like circumstances [enslavement], judge me harshly. Until they have been chained and beaten—until they find themselves in the situation I was, borne away from home and family towards a land of bondage—let them refrain from saying what they would not do for liberty. (pp. 68-69)

Northup was a free Black from New York who was kidnapped and sold into slavery in the Deep South. His narrative tells of his own resistance and the resistance of other Africans. He tells of two incidents in which he attacked his master, his own attempts at escape and the escapes of others, of attempted rebellions, and of the preoccupation enslaved Africans had with insurrection. The idea of insurrection “is not new among the enslaved population of Bayou Boeuf [Louisiana]. More than once I have joined in serious consultation, when the subject has been discussed” (p. 248), Northup said. He clearly disputes the idea of the passive, accommodating African:

They were deceived who flatter themselves that the ignorant and debased slave has no conception of the magnitude of his wrongs. They are deceived who imagine that he rises from his knees, with back lacerated and bleeding, cherishing only a spirit of meekness and forgiveness. A day may come—it *will* come . . . a terrible day of vengeance, when the master in his turn will cry in vain for mercy. (p. 249)

One of the most famous narratives by a woman is *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs (1860/1988). Initially writing under the pseudonym Linda Brent, the author details her own struggle against enslavement, the struggles of other Africans, the dehumanizing effect slavery had on slaveholders and particularly the sexually exploitative nature of enslavement for women. The Africans in her narrative do not docilely accept enslavement. She tells of her 12-year-old brother, William:

Master Nicholas said he should be flogged, and he would do it. Whereupon he went to work; but William fought bravely, and the young master, finding he was getting the better of him, undertook to tie his hands behind him. He failed in that likewise. By dint of kicking and fisting, William came out of the skirmish none the worse for a few scratches. (p. 30)

She says of herself, "though one of God's most powerless creatures, I resolved never to be conquered" (p. 31). And while undergoing great physical and emotional deprivation, she never allowed her spirit to be broken, hiding in a garret for several years before finally fleeing bondage.

Jacobs (1860/1988), like so many of the other narrative writers, disparages the United States for its hypocrisy in calling itself a Christian democracy while denying freedom to its Black population. A White friend offered to buy Jacobs from her southern owner, after her escape to New York. She says,

I felt grateful for the kindness that prompted this offer, but the idea was not so pleasant to me as expected. The more my mind had become enlightened, the more difficult it was for me to consider myself an article of property; and to pay money to those who had so grievously oppressed me seemed like taking from my sufferings the glory of triumph. (p. 299)

Her friend succeeded in purchasing Jacobs's freedom. Jacobs is clearly cognizant of the historic and damning nature of the transaction:

So I was *sold* at last! A human being *sold* in the free city of New York! The bill of sale is on record, and future generations will learn from it that women were articles of traffic in New York, late in the nineteenth century of the Christian religion. It may hereafter prove a useful document to antiquaries, who are seeking to measure the progress of civilization in the United States. (p. 300)

"*Dear Master*": *Letters of a Slave Family*, edited by Randall Miller (1978), is a compilation of newly discovered letters from members of the Skipwith family, emancipated slaves who had been repatriated in Liberia, to their former master, John H. Cocke. The

volume also includes letters from other members of the Skipwith family Cocke still held in bondage. The letters give instances of subtle resistance. Miller says the letters show the Skipwiths' love for and dependence upon Cocke. He praises the slaveholder for his efforts to liberate some of his enslaved Africans. Cocke's goodness is tempered, however, by the fact that he continued, for his own benefit, to keep some of the Skipwiths in bondage, while retaining ties with those in Liberia. The Skipwiths' letters need to be examined in the context of the coercive nature of the relationship they had with Cocke. It is no wonder that the letters carry an ingratiating tone since the treatment of those still held in bondage by Cocke had to be considered.

Robert Starobin (1988), in *Blacks in Bondage: Letters of American Slaves*, uses the letters of enslaved Africans to paint a different picture of John Hartwell Cocke and the institution of slavery. He notes that Cocke bequeathed the remainder of the Africans he held in bondage, including members of the Skipwith family, to his grandson, rather than free them. Ostensibly, this was because he was not pleased with their moral and intellectual progress (p. 170). Starobin comments on the issue of resistance:

The various forms of slave resistance suggest that American blacks managed to retain their humanity under dehumanizing conditions, and to confront their masters with an array of ingenious protests. Slaves created a way of life opposed to that which masters desired and perpetuated a tradition of vigorous opposition to oppression. (p. 98)

Bullwhip Days, edited by James Mellon (1988), is a collection of narratives of former enslaved African Americans, which were recorded by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration from 1934 to 1941. The narratives offer a brutal look at the institution of slavery and at American society. Mellon believes that the legacy of slavery has created "a cultural abyss that yet separates the two races" (p. xvi). Resistance is documented in the words of former bondspeople. One of them, Edward Lycurgas, says,

I met many runaway slaves. Some was trying to get north and fight for de freeing of they people. Others was jes' runnin' 'way 'cause dey could. Many of dem didn't had no idea where dey was goin', and told of havin' good marsters. But, one and all, dey had a good strong notion to see what it was like to own your own body. (p. 302)

THE EUROPEAN SOURCES: DIARIES AND JOURNALS

The logs, diaries, and journals of Europeans who engaged in the trading of enslaved Africans present a chilling view of the horrors of the trade. Most often written to satisfy ship and company owners, these records rarely show any realization on the part of the participants that they were engaging in an immoral enterprise.

Nicholas Owen (1930), in *Journal of a Slave-Dealer*, documents revolts and resistance to enslavement in Africa and the Americas from 1746 to 1757. He recalls

fighting a French ship who was taken by the slaves, all the people kil'd save the capt. and docter who was ashoar, but without success, for the slaves behaved so as to make us give over the attempt [to recapture the vessel from the mutinous Africans] with loss on our side. (p. 24)

Owen makes no apologies for his participation in the European slave trade. Rather, he sees the issue in purely economic or pecuniary terms.

John Newton (1962) was the captain of an English slave trading vessel who later became an ordained minister and an antislavery worker. He is best known as the author of religious hymns, including "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds." His *Journal of a Slave Trader 1750-1754* is the log of three voyages he took to procure Africans for the Liverpool slave trade. The log does not reflect abolitionist sentiment because Newton had not converted at the time it was written. He converted after he made his fortune. The work, then, exhibits the economic concerns of a slave trader. The log documents resistance, insurrections and the fear of revolts.

This day fixed 4 swivel blunderbusses in the barricado, which with the 2 carriage guns we put thro' at the Bonanoes, make a formidable appearance upon the main deck, and will, I hope, be sufficient to intimidate the slaves from any thoughts of an insurrection. (p. 22)

Newton describes several attempted revolts on his own ship and the punishment meted out, and he notes several successful insurrections on other ships with which he came into contact. In "Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade," which he appended to the *Journal*, he notes:

The risk of insurrections is to be added [to the other disasters which may befall a ship]. These . . . are always meditated; for the men slaves are not easily reconciled to their confinement and treatment; and, if attempted, they are seldom suppressed without considerable loss; and sometimes they succeed, to the destruction of a whole ship's company at once . . . One unguarded hour, or minute, is sufficient to give the slaves the opportunity they are always waiting for. (pp. 102-103)

Adventures of an African Slaver by Theodore Canot (1854) recounts the author's 20-year career as a slave trader. Like Owen, Canot does not apologize for his participation in the European slave trade. He notes his first encounter with an African at age 12 when he signs on a ship for the first time. Initially, he finds the sea not to his liking: "No one seemed to compassionate my lot save a fat, lubberly negro cook, whom I could not endure. He was the *first* African my eye ever fell on, and I must confess that he was the only friend I possessed during my early adventures" (p. 2). Canot gives no reason for his dislike of the man, but this admission sets the stage for the ease with which he will later enslave Africans.

Canot relates many instances of individual and collective resistance on his slave-trading voyages. In one instance a young Fullah girl refuses to acquiesce in her enslavement: "The girl . . . resisted with all her energy. She refused to walk . . . She swore never to 'see the ocean,' and threatened to dash her skull against the first rock in her path" (p. 185). Canot saves the girl by pretending to put her on

a slaver when he had actually given her to a Fullah friend of his. The slave trader notes the measures taken to prevent resistance.

It is the duty of the guard to report immediately whenever a slave refuses to eat . . . Negroes have sometimes been found in slavers who attempted voluntary starvation; so that when the watch reports the patient to be "shamming," his appetite is stimulated by the medical antidote of a "cat." (p. 103)

Now and then, billets of wood are distributed among the sleepers, but this luxury is never granted until the good temper of the negroes is ascertained, for slaves have often been tempted to mutiny by the power of arming themselves with these pillows from the forest. (p. 105)

Canot (1854) describes a harrowing revolt on his ship.

From the beginning there was manifest discontent among the slaves . . . A few days after departure, a slave leaped overboard in a fit of passion, and another choked himself during the night . . . Suddenly . . . one fair afternoon . . . a simultaneous rush was made by the confined slaves at all the after-gratings, and amid the confusion they knocked down the guard and poured on deck . . . [T]he women . . . seconding the males . . . rose in a body, and the helmsman was forced to stab several with his knife before he could drive them below again . . . [T]he rebels were hot for fight to the last, and boldly defended themselves with their staves against our weapons . . . I strove as long as possible to save their lives, but their resistance was so prolonged and perilous, that we were obliged to disarm them *for ever* by a couple of pistol shots . . . I could never account for this mutiny, especially as the blacks from Ayudah and its neighborhood are distinguished for their humble manners and docility. (pp. 272-275)

In an offhand way, Canot (1854) describes the horrors of the slave trade:

I returned on board to aid in stowing *one hundred and eight boys and girls, the eldest of whom did not exceed fifteen years!* As I crawled between decks, I confess I could not imagine how this little army was to be packed or draw breath in a hold but *twenty-two inches high!* (p. 74)

In another example he reports a pestilence that killed half his human cargo, "The eight hundred beings we had shipped in high health had dwindled to four hundred and ninety-seven skeletons" (p. 254).

Without noting the irony of his own participation in the enslavement of Africans, Canot (1854) attacks the Arabs who engage in the slave trade:

My inquisitiveness prompted me to demand whether these holy wars spoken of in the Koran were not somewhat stimulated, in our time, at least, by the profits that ensued; and I even ventured to hint that it was questionable whether the mighty chief of Footha-Yallon (Arab) would willingly storm a Kaffir (African) fortification, were he not prompted by the booty of slaves. (p. 92)

Apparently, he did not see a contradiction between his own religious convictions and involvement in the European slave trade.

Frances Anne Kemble (1961), an English actress who married an American slaveholder, wrote *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839* in which she described her experiences on her husband's plantation. She notes the rabid fear slaveholders had of enslaved Africans and of insurrections. Her own observations confirm the assertions made concerning enslavement in the narratives of enslaved Africans.

In 1925, John Spencer Bassett edited the 1849 to 1853 letters from the overseers on plantations owned by James Polk, president of the United States. The compilation, entitled *The Southern Plantation Overseer As Revealed In His Letters*, includes letters that are full of references to runaways, recalcitrant and resistant Africans, individual and collective resistance, and maroon communities. Bassett is proslavery, blaming Africans for their inability to accept the redeeming qualities of enslavement.

A fundamental problem of the slave problem was the negro problem. The African slaves were close to savagery. They were to learn much in the process of forced labor and they learned it very slowly. The finer feelings of advanced peoples were not for them . . . they could not be expected to acquire them in American slavery in one, two, or five generations. For them uplift was a thing that could only come gradually and painfully. (p. 264)

Tombee: Portrait of a Cotton Planter by Theodore Rosengarten (1987) includes the journal of the planter, Thomas B. Chaplin. Chaplin owned Tombee plantation on St Helena Island, South Carolina. His journal graphically depicts the institution of slavery through the insensitive eyes of a slaveholder. One interesting instance of resistance which Chaplin documents is the habit of preventing pregnancies and engaging in infanticide by enslaved African women. Rosengarten lays the blame for the miscarriages and high mortality of African children on the nature of the medical care, but Chaplin clearly suspects that the women are sabotaging his efforts to increase his population of enslaved Africans. James Redpath (1859), a colonizationist, wrote a series of articles concerning his travels in 1854 and 1858 in the slaveholding South. He documents, through his conversations with Blacks and Whites, the dissatisfaction of the enslaved African and the fear that Whites had of insurrection. Redpath dedicates his compilation, *The Roving Editor*, to John Brown, who led the attack at Harper's Ferry. Redpath was in favor of the violent overthrow of slavery, stating, "I would slay every man who attempted to resist the liberation of the slave" (p. vii). Interestingly, he also called for reparations for enslaved Africans.

Frederick Olmsted (1953, 1959) is perhaps the most famous traveler to record his impressions of the antebellum South. Olmsted felt that enslavement was less economical than free labor so his observations tended to focus on that aspect of the system. He noted that several things made enslavement less profitable than free labor: the slaveholder had to feed and clothe the enslaved person; the slaveholder was responsible for doing so even when the enslaved person was unable or unwilling to work; it was necessary to maintain an apparatus of intimidation; unlike sailors and soldiers, the enslaved had nothing to lose by doing poor jobs, whereas free labor had greater motivation to complete work in a given time; it was necessary to employ someone to ensure that the enslaved performed.

Olmsted was also more concerned with the effect enslavement had on Whites than on Africans. For example, in *The Slave States*,

a Virginia planter tells Olmsted (1959) that enslaved Africans are better off than laboring classes in the North. When Olmsted demurred, the planter says,

Well, they are certainly better off than the English agricultural laborers or, I believe, those of any other Christian country. Free labor might be more profitable to us: I am inclined to think it would be. The slaves are excessively careless and wasteful, and in various ways—which without you lived among them, you could hardly be made to understand—subject us to very annoying losses. (pp. 40-41)

Olmsted (1953) lists many instances of resistance on the part of Africans, including work slowdowns, destruction of property, theft and, especially, self-liberation. Again, he sees these activities only in terms of the negative economic effect they had on the planters. He notes, “The interruption and disarrangement of operations of labor, occasioned by slaves ‘running away,’ frequently causes great inconvenience and loss to those who employ them” (p. 94). He goes on to relate the term Dr. Samuel Cartwright of the University of Louisiana gave to the tendency of Africans to run away: “Drapetomania . . . manifests itself by an irrestrainable propensity to *run away*” (p. 95). Dr. Cartwright also names and describes another peculiarity of enslaved Africans, what he calls *Dysaesthesia Aethiopica*.

From the careless movements of the individuals affected by this complaint, they are apt to do much mischief, which appears as if intentional, but is mostly owing to the stupidity of mind and insensibility to the nerves induced by the disease. Thus they break, waste, and destroy everything they handle—abuse horses and cattle—tear, burn, or rend their own clothing, and, paying no attention to the rights of property, steal others to replace what they have destroyed . . . They slight their work—cut up corn, cane, cotton, and tobacco, when hoeing it, as if for pure mischief. They raise disturbances with their overseers, and among their fellow-servants, without cause or motive. (p. 95)

DISTILLING THE SOURCES

African American scholars have long recognized the need for a corrective interpretation to the racist historiography about the period of enslavement. *The Journal of Negro History* attempted revisionist interpretations in many of its early issues. In a 1937 article entitled, "A New Interpretation for Negro History," Lawrence D. Reddick called for an African American historiography that glorifies African American culture rather than an African American historiography that glorifies White culture.

Saunders Redding (1950), in *They Came in Chains*, specifically challenges the myth of the passive African by documenting instances of resistance and White reaction to resistance.

How the concept of the patient, docile Negro ever came into being is a minor marvel of historical delusion. It was created against tremendous odds of fact and circumstance. Perhaps it was a psychological necessity of the sort that sometimes prompts people to blind themselves to wish-destroying fact . . . a sort of sublimation of guilt, or fear, or both. (p. 29)

In their own interpretations of African American antebellum historiography, early 20th century African American historians cited many examples of resistance to enslavement. Carter G. Woodson (1927), the premier African American historian, devotes a chapter, entitled "Self-Assertion," to resistance in *The Negro in Our History*. He discusses some of the major uprisings—led by Gabriel Prosser, Nat Turner, and Denmark Vesey—as well as the alliances Africans formed with Native Americans.

In *Slave Insurrections in the United States 1800-1865*, Joseph C. Carroll (1938) attacks the myth of the contented enslaved African. He gives a detailed account of the same three insurrections and mentions several others in order to contradict the pervasive view in the early 1900s of the meek, passive African. Carroll says enslaved African Americans "were outnumbered, and their backs were to the wall, yet with their last breath some of them fought back" (p. 9). He further states that "the attempts at Insurrection were frequent enough to keep the south in constant fear of such direful conse-

quences from this source as to create a real problem of slave control” (p. 12).

Black Odyssey: The Afro-American Ordeal in Slavery by Nathan Huggins (1977) is a long essay that does not use footnotes or endnotes. Attempting “a radical reversal of perspective” concerning enslavement by focusing on the humanity of African Americans, Huggins nevertheless ascribes to the Eurocentric theory that slavery was so all-powerful and debilitating that Africans rarely resisted.

Rather than reiterate the obvious—that black men and women would (and did) give their lives for liberty—we must honor those who abided yet salvaged their humanity . . . looking beyond the acts of defiance, rebellion and escape, we will find a quality of courage still unsung. It is in the triumph of the human spirit over unmitigated power . . . Many slaves lived their lives without much that we would call resistance. They died whole persons nevertheless. (pp. xii-xiv)

He goes on to assert: “The slaves’ tendency to adapt to their condition rather than to defy it attests to their realism rather than their contentment or inertia” (p. 238).

Huggins fails to see the contradiction in a position that concedes a human spirit which necessarily resists oppression to beings who accept enslavement. Although he notes his interaction with such leading African scholars as Cheikh Anta Diop, J. F. Ade Ajayi and E. U. Essien-Udom, Huggins credits Kenneth Stampp and Eugene Genovese with influencing his work. He uses Gerald Mullin’s contention that successful breaks from enslavement in the 18th century required the African to have a good grasp of the English language as well as some knowledge of the area and its mores. Advertisements in local newspapers seeking the recapture of fugitives dispute this contention. These advertisements noted that the escapees could not speak English, had only just been brought to the country, or had ethnic markings due to their recent arrival.

Margaret Washington Creel (1988), in *A Peculiar People*, studies the Gullah people of South Carolina. She posits that the Gullahs have a tradition of resistance which began in Africa. This heritage

manifested itself in the development of Gullah traditions, especially religion and a strong sense of community, which survive today. She notes the use of abortion and infanticide by African women to prevent slaveholders from benefiting from an increase in their stock of enslaved Africans.

Materials on the Underground Railroad are important sources of information on resistance, especially the form manifested by flight. But, as Blockson (1987) says in *The Underground Railroad*, these records contain

a serious distortion [which] has been an overemphasis on the amount of assistance rendered by white abolitionists, who wrote a great deal on the subject. This tended to make the people whom the Railroad was designed to aid—the fugitive slaves—seem either invisible or passive and helpless without aid from others. (p. 4)

Most of the Underground Railroad legends were written or compiled by Whites glorifying their own participation in the activities. Marginalized in their own historical drama, African abolitionists and freedom fighters have rarely been seen as central players in the underground activities. Hence, the African American actors in the legends are peripheral at best and invisible at the worst.

Robert Smedley's (1883) *History of the Underground Railroad in Chester and Neighboring Counties* is a glaring example of the method Whites used to coopt the role of hero in resistance activities. This is evident in the treatment of Robert Loney. Smedley dismisses the contributions of Loney, an active African American participant in Underground Railroad activities, in one sentence in three separate sections of the book.

On the third night they were transferred to the care of Robert Loney who ferried them over to the Columbia shore. (p. 49)

Samuel Mifflin gave him into the care of Robert Loney. (p. 51)

Early in the night they, with his sister and her child, fled to that well-known colored man, on the Susquehanna, Robert Loney, who ferried fugitives across the river in the night at various places below Columbia, and gave them into the care of William Wright, who distributed them to other agents. (pp. 77-78)

Although he gives short shrift to Black “agents,” Smedley describes the White conductors in detail, giving family histories and backgrounds and highlighting the sacrifices they were making in the work on the Underground Railroad.

The four-volume set of *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro* by Helen Catterall (1936) documents conclusively resistance by African Americans to enslavement and disenfranchisement. Using legal case histories and excerpts, the work chronicles the attempts by slaveholders to secure the institution of slavery as well as efforts by Africans to challenge it. The 1851 Christiana Resistance is covered in volume four in the Castner Hanway and Samuel William trials.

The publication of Herbert Aptheker’s *American Negro Slave Revolts* in 1943 excited much debate, especially among Eurocentric scholars who took issue with Aptheker’s contention that African American resistance to enslavement was widespread. Correctly viewing Aptheker’s study as an attack on Eurocentric historiography about the period of enslavement, his contemporaries responded by attacking Aptheker’s scholarship and motives. His Marxist leanings were a source of concern to his contemporaries. Stanley Elkins (1976) chides Aptheker for using “evidence [which] consists of unsubstantiated rumors in ante-bellum rural newspapers” and concludes that his study “is thus unreliable for judging how seriously . . . revolts should be taken” (p. 222). African American scholars, however, hailed the book as a long overdue corrective to the distorted historiography which had promulgated the view of a benevolent slave system and happy, contented human chattel. African American scholars were effusive in their praise of Aptheker’s book. John Hope Franklin (1974) applauded *American Negro Slave Revolts* as “the best account of resistance to slavery” (p. 527).

American Negro Slave Revolts is limited by the absence of information about resistance in Africa and on slave ships, because it only covers revolts by enslaved Africans on American soil. However, it is important to recognize the contribution Aptheker made to the study of African resistance to enslavement and to the effort to dispel the myth of the passive, docile Black. Such a

corrective goes a long way toward adding the resistance of Africans in the United States to that of Africans in the Caribbean and Africa.

George P. Rawick (1972) dedicates a chapter to resistance in *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community*, one volume of the series he edited entitled, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*. The multivolume series compiles the interviews of once-enslaved Africans conducted in the late 1920s and early 1930s by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Project Administration. The interviews led Rawick to insist,

While blacks were oppressed and exploited, they fought back in a constant struggle by all available means. These struggles eventually led to the crucial role that blacks played in the Civil War, the war for their own liberation . . . [African Americans], in order to prevent themselves becoming total victims, lash[ed] out against their oppressors and in doing so, create[d] their humanity. Only by resistance did the slave escape becoming Sambo, the 'infantile' personality of the myth. By their daily resistance they produced their Nat Turners. (p. 95)

As the title suggests, *From Sundown to Sunup* concludes that the African Americans preserved their humanity by developing a unique sense of community, which was an extension of the African culture they brought to these shores. Disputing Eurocentric historians, Rawick (1972) maintains that far from being "deculturalized," African Americans used the period from sundown to sunup to create a culture based on African values, which sustained their humanity.

Scholarly promulgation of the myth of the passive, docile enslaved African is usually said to have begun with the work of the Southern historian, Ulrich Phillips. Phillips's work was heavily cited and continues to be cited although his scholarship is seriously compromised by his racist subjectivity and his mission to ameliorate the sin of slavery by painting a distorted, mythical picture of the period of enslavement. That he does this at the expense of the humanity of Africans makes his "scholarship" more suspect. In *American Negro Slavery*, Phillips (1918/1966) says of African Americans:

While produced only in America, the plantation slave was a product of old-world forces. His nature was an African's profoundly modified but hardly transformed by the requirements of European civilization. The wrench from Africa and the subjection to the new discipline while uprooting his ancient language and customs had little more effect upon his temperament than upon his complexion . . . the negro's conversion was . . . thorough, partly because the process in his case was coercive, partly because his genius was imitative . . . [A] negro was what a white man made him . . . The traits which prevailed were an eagerness for society, music and merriment, a fondness for display whether of person, dress, vocabulary or emotion, a not flagrant sensuality, a receptiveness toward any religion whose exercises were exhilarating, a proneness to superstition, a courteous acceptance of subordination, an avidity for praise, a readiness for loyalty of a feudal sort, and . . . a repugnance toward overwork. (p. 291)

Eugene Genovese, who is also guilty of Eurocentric interpretations of the period of enslavement, wrote:

Phillips came close to greatness as a historian, perhaps as close as any historian this country has yet produced. We may leave it to those who live in the world of absolute good and evil the task of explaining how a man with such primitive views on fundamental social questions could write such splendid history. (Phillips, 1918/1966, p. vii)

Genovese (1974) was to expound his own Marxist views on fundamental social questions in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, asserting that "the slaves' success in forging a world of their own within a wider world shaped primarily by their oppressors sapped their will to revolt" (p. 594). Because he uses the parameters of the oppressors to judge the success of Africans at creating and maintaining their own "world," Genovese is ultimately Eurocentric in thought.

Genovese acknowledges limited African resistance by determining that the creation of an African American culture constituted a form of resistance. His view obviously does not take into account the various forms of resistance. He is more interested, however, in explaining what he sees as the mutual accommodation to slavery in a paternalistic, reciprocal system by Africans and slaveholders.

Genovese's (1974) chapter on miscegenation is especially telling. He states that slaveholders who cohabited with African women

would find it hard to live with a beautiful and submissive young woman for long and to continue to consider her mere property or a mere object of sexual gratification, especially since the free gift of her beauty has so much more to offer than her yielding to force.

This blatant sexism does not consider that as slaves, these women had no gift of beauty to give freely; she was the property of the slaveholder. The narratives of enslaved women clearly show that the rape of African women occurred frequently and that African women did not invite and, in fact, resisted attempts to exploit them sexually.

Stanley Elkins (1976) disagrees with Genovese's claim that enslaved Africans developed a nationalistic tradition of resistance. He says,

Genovese is to be taxed . . . for his supposing that such a "tradition" (long-term or short-term) was even thinkable . . . [because] for thousands there was no reason why they would want to revolt. They could simply pick up and leave. And the potential leadership, if any, for such revolts would have been the first to go. In short, every major force in the system—positive and negative—worked to discourage rebellion. (pp. 292-293)

Elkins declines to accept that to "pick up and leave" was a form of resistance.

Another historian to laud Phillips is Kenneth Stampp (1956/1984), who says, "Ulrich Phillip's *American Negro Slavery* (1918) is the pioneer work of American scholarship in this field . . . I learned much from his methods, his sources, and his findings" (p. viii). Because he uses Phillips's methods, sources, and findings, Stampp continues the Eurocentric tradition of examining the system of slavery through the eyes of Whites. He uses the narratives of slaveholders such as James Hammond while discounting the veracity of the narratives of enslaved Africans. Although he recognizes that Africans resisted, Stampp says that

their longing [for freedom] and resistance were not enough to render the institution unprofitable to most masters. The masters had power and . . . they developed an elaborate technique of slave control. Their very preoccupation with this technique was, in itself, a striking refutation of the myth that slavery survived because of the cheerful acquiescence of the slaves. (p. 140)

By failing to consider the issue from the perspective of the African, Stampf is unable to refute the myth.

Stanley Elkins (1976) is another Eurocentric historian who is often cited in the works of other historians. Whereas Phillips felt that the enslaved African's personality militated against resistance, and Genovese claims that the reciprocal nature of the master/enslaved relationship lessened the desire for resistance, Elkins feels that the "American slave system . . . was closed and circumscribed" and that it offered no opportunity for the development of resistant personalities. Elkins is responsible for the theory of the "Sambo" personality, which he outlines in his book, *Slavery*.

The question of personality . . . becomes a crucial phase of the entire problem of slavery in the United States . . . If it were taken for granted that a special type existed in significant numbers on American plantations, closer connections might be made with a growing literature on personality and character types . . . to add that the type corresponded in its major outlines to "Sambo" . . . It will be assumed that there were elements in the very structure of the plantation system — its "closed" character — that could sustain infantilism as a normal feature of behavior. (pp. 85-86)

Not only was Elkins wrong, but his opinions served malicious ends, which included convincing Whites in the South that Africans would never revolt. And although it is true that a great majority of Africans felt little inclination to revolt, a sizable minority not only felt inclined but were constantly planning to overthrow their masters. This myth of resistance is the principal reason for the emergence of Afrocentric consciousness in African Americans. Although revolts in the United States did not occur on the scale of those in Haiti, Mexico, or Brazil, the thousands of individual escapes, the petty sabotage, and the refusal to work became a

massive phalanx of resistance. Isolated murders of slave owners, revolts, and rebellions were committed by those who would rather die than live as slaves.

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