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AmHist 6501

Fall Semester

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF SLAVE RESISTANCE:

The Emergence of the Enslaved Protagonist

The history of slave resistance has roots that reach through centuries and across the globe. Where there are enslaved people there is resistance, and the “peculiar institution” plays a prominent role throughout history. The empires of Ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, and South America are but some of the many examples of the use of slavery to exploit a position of power. The United States of America provides yet another example.

Slavery was an integral element in the culture and economy of the United States from the colonial era until the end of the Civil War in 1865. The origin of slavery America was the Portuguese exploration of the African coast. Accounts of resistance to enslavement are found in the surviving documents of the time. Historical studies of slavery, however, were conspicuously silent on the subject of resistance, despite its now-obvious relationship to the subject. Herbert Aptheker’s *Negro Slave Revolts in the United States 1526-1860* finally broke the silence in dramatic fashion¹.

¹ Herbert Aptheker, *Negro Slave Revolts in the United States, 1526-1860* (New York: International, 1939)

To understand Herbert Aptheker and his work he must be seen in the context of the history of slave resistance. It is the purpose of this study to provide that context—both the intellectual community that he was responding to and the diverse studies that have followed his groundbreaking work. The study of slavery prior to Aptheker largely ignored resistance to enslavement and consequently could be seen as incongruous in a historiography of slave resistance. These works are included because they provide the appropriate framework from which to understand Aptheker and later studies; he didn't write in a vacuum and it is important to know to whom he is responding.

The authors of the books and articles that are the focus of the latter part of this study have transformed this field of study in ways unimagined by Aptheker. In fact, although Aptheker will be shown to occupy a place of privilege as founder of the field, it is another historian—Frank Tannenbaum—whose work allowed the maturation of the study of slave resistance. Although each author examined in the study is worthy of individual research the narrative of their collective work will take center stage.

This study is divided into two parts. The first examines the contentious debates that defined the historiography of slavery until the 1950's. The reader will be introduced to the plantation nostalgia of U.B. Phillips, the righteous anger of Aptheker, and Elkins's "Sambo," among others. The second part begins with Frank Tannenbaum's *Slave & Citizen*, the book which expanded the field of study both geographically and intellectually. The reader will witness how modern thinkers have increased the sophistication of slave resistance studies by incorporating psychology, community, and gender in the discussion. The result is a fully mature field of study that is limited only by the creativity and ingenuity of future scholars.

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The debate over slavery was polarized and contentious in the antebellum era. A geographic and cultural divide separated the abolitionists in the North from the apologists in the South. The abolitionists used crude media such as images to appeal to the illiterate as well as sophisticated propaganda. William Garrison made an historical impact with his newspaper *The North Star*. In the academic community, John Codman Hurd's *Law of Freedom and Bondage* is an excellent example of partisan literature against the institution of slavery². Less interested in convincing others than with protecting their way of life, the South's apologists wrote less material directed to the public at-large. Thomas R.R Cobb's *Inquiry into the Law of Slavery* is typical of an academic response to the intellectual attacks from the North³. Of course not all intellectuals of this time were emotionally invested in a particular position on the subject. Frederick Law Olmsted, famed park architect and editor of *The Nation*, traveled through the South in the 1850's and was widely respected for his ability to fairly depict an accurate assessment of slavery. His work has been a critical source for later authors on both sides of the argument⁴.

With the conclusion of American slavery at the end of the Civil War there was an opportunity to study slavery with a fresh perspective. The partisan nature of the debate could be discarded as the new history would not be regional but American. Further, the emotional intensity of antebellum years was able to cool off with the passage of time. Ultimately, however, the lines of debate were too entrenched to escape. James Ford Rhodes emerges as the historian who defined

² Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1959), 3.

³ Ibid. p.3

⁴ Frederick L. Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971)

this generation of scholarship. He contributed a significant advancement to the field by recognizing that slavery was a systemic problem that indicted both the North and the South, but his scathing attack of slavery served more to fuel the old polemic than advance historical understanding. Rhodes' detailed criticism of specific aspects of slavery would establish the pattern for subsequent research⁵.

In 1918, twenty five years after the publication of James Rhodes's *History*, Ulrich B. Phillips ushered in a new era in the historiography of slavery with his book *American Negro Slavery*⁶. Written during the Progressive Era—an era characterized by racism, anxiety over threatened values, and the effects of industrialism—*American Negro Slavery* systematically portrayed plantation life as honorable for the whites and benevolent to the blacks. Phillips had bucolic memories from childhood of visiting his relatives on the plantations and his protective nostalgia shaped the content of the book. The explicit claims of the book are the racial inferiority of black people and the necessity of paternal management. The power of the work came from its exhaustive research and precise articulation of apologist sentiment. The Southern position now had a clear, scholarly voice that would dominate the field until after World War II.

Phillips's later work, *Life and Labor in the Old South*, is often referred to as the seminal work of slavery studies and the prototype for the Southern slaveowner perspective. This study argues that that designation is misplaced. As many iconic books are more often referred to than read, *Life and Labor* has mistakenly replaced the earlier *American Negro Slavery* for many scholars. The earlier publish date of *American Negro Slavery* is the first indication of which book

⁵ Elkins, *Slavery*, 7

⁶ Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (Baton Rouge: LSU, 1918)

should have priority of place, but there are enough examples of authors' later works being more important to prevent chronology from being the sole determinant.

The reason *American Negro Slavery* is more accurately described as the prototype of the Southern slaveowner perspective is because the attributes that define that perspective—racism and paternalism—are more forcefully argued in this book. The racism that justifies racial slavery in *American Negro Slavery* has been moderated to a cultural justification in *Life and Labor in the Old South*. And while cultural chauvinism isn't mistaken for progressive thinking, it does mark a step away from his earlier stance. The paternalism in *Life and Labor* has undergone a similar change in emphasis. The beloved master now recognizes "I am violating the natural rights of a being who is as much entitled to the enjoyment of liberty as myself (sic)."⁷ Phillips's contemporaries recognized the iconic stature of *American Negro Slavery* and respond most directly to that work.

The hegemony of Phillips's ideology was challenged by several authors⁸. For primarily racial reasons these critiques were unable to significantly redirect the dominant perspective. The Harlem Renaissance fostered the articulation of a black intellectual voice and W.E.B Dubois represented that voice with his alternative views on slavery. His views were largely ignored. C.L.R. James wrote *Black Jacobins* in 1939 to demonstrate the brutalities of slavery in Haiti and the leadership of the slave community to confront their subjugation. Unfortunately the lesson many academics learned from James's treatment of the Haitian Revolution was that the violent barbarism of the black revolutionaries served as evidence of the need for white control.

⁷ Phillips, *Life and Labor*, 210

⁸ Rudwick, Bracey M., *American Slavery: A Question of Resistance* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1971), 1.

It is at this juncture Herbert Aptheker makes his entrance into the historiography. As a young PhD student Aptheker published his *American Negro Revolts* in 1938 for his dissertation⁹. The title suggests the challenge to the premise of slave accommodation in *American Negro Slavery*. Inside the cover the reader is confronted with an exhaustive list of over two hundred and fifty incidences of resistance to enslavement. The sheer numbers erase any claim to universal black acceptance of slavery. With his impressive use of primary sources and eye for detail, Aptheker raises a serious challenge to Phillips's thesis.

Despite its obvious scholarship, a few considerations limited the immediate impact of the *American Negro Revolts*. First, Aptheker's emotional political investment. He was a committed communist who allowed his beliefs to color his work. The content of the work is undermined by his frequent use of exclamation points, which is not meant as a critique of style but seen as an indication of a lack of objectivity. Indeed, the book ends with an emotional appeal to take the lessons from slavery "to defeat fascism." Second, Aptheker's status as a novice. In the hierarchy of academics Aptheker was irrelevant at this point in his career. As late as the 1950's Richard Hofstadter refers to him only as "a student." Lastly, the narrow focus of the book. At the time scholars of slavery were dealing with the subject as a whole. Aptheker's narrow focus provided specific insight but was not in a position to challenge the overall perspective of Phillips. The task of formulating a broad new perspective to counter the full range of Phillips's ideology would be left to later, more established scholars.

⁹ Herbert Aptheker, *Negro Slave Revolts in the United States, 1526-1860* (New York: International, 1939)

Richard Hofstadter wrote “U. B. Phillips and The Plantation Legend” in 1944, the same year he published *Social Darwinism in America*¹⁰. The article is a measured criticism of the methodology used by Ulrich B. Phillips in his two books. Before dissecting Phillips he acknowledges there are practical reasons for Phillips sources; the larger plantations generally kept better records and were more prominent in the legal records. However, Hofstadter claims that Phillips was “well aware” of the limitations of his sources and the resulting misrepresentation their use would entail. He cites as a primary example Phillips’s selective sampling of States’ records. Phillips’s books only examine plantation records in states with the largest plantations. The result is a skewed perspective that illuminates the practices of only a small percentage of slaveowners. Hofstadter precludes any justification for Phillips on the grounds that he was unaware of other possible sources by referring to the writing of Frederick Law Olmsted. Olmsted, claims Hofstadter, “made a practice of traveling off the main river lines” in order to more accurately portray the full spectrum of slavery. Ultimately, Phillips is found to have allowed his personal bias to shape his research and therefore his conclusions are invalidated.

In 1956 Kenneth Stampp wrote the book that would definitively end the Phillips legacy, *The Peculiar Institution*. Stampp addressed each category that Phillips used to glorify plantation slavery and systematically dismantled his arguments. If the debate on slavery is viewed as a competition, it is clear fifty years later that Stampp “won.” But academics aren’t a competition and the moral conviction that helped Stampp write such an excellent book also caused him to fall into the pattern of partisan conflict established by the abolitionists and continued through Rhodes and

¹⁰ Richard Hofstadter, “U.B. Phillips and The Plantation Legend,” *The Journal of Negro History* 29, no.2 (1944) 109-124.

Phillips. In addition to the knock-out punch Stamppp delivers, *The Peculiar Institution* was important for introducing the concept of “day-to-day resistance.”

Stamppp provides several examples of slave resistance that corroborate Aptheker’s depiction of slavery in the South. Far from being the stupid and obedient quasi-humans that Phillips portrays in *American Negro Slavery*, the enslaved men in Stamppp’s book actively fight their subjugation. Aptheker emphasized revolts to demonstrate the intelligence and courage supposedly absent in African-Americans and Stamppp uses examples of revolts to the same end. In fact, Stamppp celebrates slave revolts as a testament to the inner dignity and desire for freedom shared by all mankind. In addition to the revolts and conspiracies Stamppp describes “day-to-day resistance.” Looking past the overly simplistic revolt/accommodate model, Stamppp writes about subtle resistance like breaking tools, feigning illness, and performing careless work. Due to the covert nature of these actions the evidence for their existence is largely speculative. The long-term impact of Stamppp’s examination of the different forms of resistance has been to validate resistance as field of study and to greatly expand how resistance is defined and studied. The short-term impact was to claim victory for the abolitionist perspective.

“Enough is enough” was the response by Allan Nevins to the seemingly interminable back-and-forth between opposing camps of thought. His magnum opus *Ordeal of the Union* was an eight-volume examination of the civil war that sought to end the partisan scholarship surrounding slavery¹¹. In Nevins’s view it was clear that the enslavement of black people was “the greatest curse...that America has ever known”; however, the South needed “compassion and help, not

¹¹ Allan Nevins, *Ordeal of the Union*, vol. 1, *Fruits of Manifest Destiny, 1847-1852* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1947)

condemnation.” Following the political legacy of Abraham Lincoln in his academic writing, Nevins sought to preclude further malice toward past adversaries. As an accomplished and respected scholar Nevins closed the books on the subject of slavery. At this point in the historiography slave resistance had been introduced by Aptheker and expanded upon by Stamp but still had not been recognized as a field of study worthy of examination outside the larger picture of slavery in general.

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The study of slavery and resistance was not over. In 1946 Frank Tannenbaum opened the doors to a completely different approach to researching slavery—an Atlantic perspective—and reinvigorated slavery studies in the process. *Slave & Citizen* was a comparative study of American and Latin American slavery¹². Tannenbaum argued that the legacy of slavery on the Iberian Peninsula resulted in a framework of customs and laws that provided relative humanity to enslaved people in Latin American colonies. The absence of such a legacy in Dutch, English, or French history meant that enslaved people in their colonies wouldn’t have a framework to protect them against the cruelty of the market. By contrasting American slavery to slavery in other cultures Tannenbaum was able to transcend the question of whether slavery was wrong and begin a discussion of what lessons can be learned from analyzing slavery.

Slave & Citizen, which is a small book, had a big impact. The impact wasn’t felt at first. Stamp didn’t even mention Tannenbaum in *The Peculiar Institution*. Eventually, however, the implications of the book became clear. From his background as a Latin American scholar

¹² Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave & Citizen: The Negro in the Americas* (New York: Vintage, 1946)

Tannenbaum was able to influence future research by recognizing American slavery as part of a larger, Atlantic phenomenon. A lot of the research being done today follows in his footsteps, as having a broad geographical understanding of slavery is fundamental to contemporary studies. With the opening of a new door in slavery studies there was an implicit challenge to open other doors and continue the enrichment of the field.

Stanley Elkins takes up the challenge in his book, *Slavery*¹³. As a PhD student at Columbia University Elkins studied under Richard Hofstadter, a well-known intellectual who was introduced in this study as a critic of Ulrich Phillips. Elkins's dissertation would turn into the book that defined his career. An incredibly ambitious study, *Slavery* sets out to accomplish several things: one; differentiate between slavery in capitalist and non-capitalist cultures; two, use psychology to interpret the lack of resistance in American slavery; and three, to compare American and British abolitionists. This study will focus on Elkins's explanation of resistance.

Elkins addressed the lack of slave revolts in the American South by explaining the psychology of "Sambo." According to Elkins, earlier authors either ignored or denied the existence of Sambo because his existence undermined their beliefs in racial equality. The evidence, however, suggests that Sambo did exist and that he was the dominant archetype among slaves. If the old racial justifications of southern slaveowners are rejected, there must be another explanation. Elkins argued that the institution of slavery couldn't be the answer because there was not a corresponding personality type in other cultures with slaves. Elkins arrives at the conclusion that it is American plantation slavery that creates the Sambo archetype.

¹³ Elkins, *Slavery*

Specifically, the closed-system nature of American slavery was responsible for Sambo. By closed-system Elkins means a situation where the dominant values have hegemony and there are no alternative models of success to emulate. In America the slaveowners were able to create such a system. Conversely, in South America the Crown and the Church were powerful institutions that prevented the slaveowners from exerting omnipotent control over their slaves. Elkins uses an analogy to the concentration camps of World War II to demonstrate how the closed-system of the South was able to turn presumably resistant people into Sambo. In the concentration camps the survivors exhibited infantile behavior and internalized the kapo value system. They did so because deviation to the dominant values was penalized by death. The shock of initial capture transitioned to feigning acceptance to the almost inconceivable, allegiance. According to Elkins enslaved men and women in the American South underwent a similar process. *Slavery* was a controversial book that aroused heated criticism (comparing Sambo and the “infantile” Jews in concentration camps tends to do that). And although there were fundamental flaws in his argument Elkins reinvigorated the discussion of slavery and of slave resistance.

In the 1960s Eugene Genovese was a radical intellectual who found many faults in Elkins’s thesis¹⁴. For example, Elkins claimed that Sambo was a uniquely American personality archetype. The reality according to Genovese was that the stereotype of slaves as lazy, stupid, and happy was universal among slaveowning cultures throughout the Americas. The absence of a corresponding moniker isn’t sufficient to claim an absence of the personality archetype. Further, Elkins assumed that obedience necessarily indicated an acceptance of the dominant values. The enslaved men and women in Saint Domingue were obedient until 1791. Slaveowners knew that violence was

¹⁴ Eugene Genovese, “Rebelliousness and Docility in the Negro Slave,” *Civil War History* XIII (1967): 293-314.

underlying the veneer of plantation serenity. Their elaborate system of laws and punishment was designed to maintain security in a tenuous situation. Lastly, the distinctions that Elkins used to differentiate the closed-system of slavery in the American South from the open-system of slavery in Latin America were false. The power of the Crown and Church in Latin America was too distant to be influential in day-to-day activities on the plantations. And when their representatives did involve themselves in the affairs of slavery they often tacitly supported the status-quo in order to benefit financially. Elkins's thesis falls apart if any Genovese's arguments are valid.

John Blassingame was another author who felt compelled to respond to Elkins's concept of the compliant Negro slave. In 1972 he published *Slave Community* to argue that the relative lack of slave revolts did not indicate an acceptance of enslavement¹⁵. Enslaved men and women actively resisted their subjugation in a variety of ways besides armed conflict. Specifically, Blassingame demonstrates that slaves formed communities as a means of establishing autonomy and an identity outside of their owners' control. These communities are forms of resistance because they contradict the paternal view of slaveowners that their slaves are simply extensions of their will.

Families and Religion are two of the cultural associations slaves formed to distance themselves from their owners. The slave family has often been characterized by its lack of cohesiveness. The practice of breaking up families through sale did not, however, completely dismantle the power of enslaved families. In a clear response to Elkins, Blassingame argues that parents were authority figures to their children that embodied different values than the masters and therefore prevented the formation of a "closed-system" of slavery. Although slaveowners

¹⁵ John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford, 1972).

encouraged the family unit for reasons of security and profit, the enslaved families found companionship and love that denied their defined role as a slave. Slaveowners also supported religion on the plantation. They hoped the bible's message of obedience and acceptance would resonate with the slaves. But the enslaved community shaped their religious practices to fit their own needs. In particular they emphasized the emancipation of the Jews and the reuniting with loved ones in the afterlife. And if there is any doubt about the inherent resistance of slaves' spirituality, the lyrics "when will the lord free the sons of Africa?" serves as a poignant response.

The introduction of slave communities as forms of resistance and identity was an important contribution to the historiography of slavery and slave resistance. Blassingame's greatest contribution, however, was to place the enslaved men and women at the center of the story. Throughout the American South, Caribbean, and Latin America black people comprised a majority of the population. Incredibly, until Blassingame their perspective was ignored. When the enslaved were discussed, even in instances of resistance, they were presented as peripheral to the larger story of white history. This bias is evident in the sources. Previous authors attempted to depict the history of slavery through plantation records, travel accounts, and court records—all written by contemporary whites. Blassingame was the first to primarily rely on slave memoirs and interviews. Aptheker was ahead of his time in recognizing the agency of the enslaved, but even his catalogue of slave resistance is more an indictment of the system than an attempt to understand slavery through slaves' eyes. By establishing the slave as a protagonist in the narrative, Blassingame facilitated a much richer history of slavery.

The protagonists in *The Making of Haiti* by Carolyn Fick are the thousands of slaves who took advantage of the confusion in the French revolution to successfully fight for their freedom¹⁶. This revolution, seen from the traditional white perspective, can only be seen as a disaster or a result of French benevolence. Neither captures the story. Shifting the frame of reference to the participants in the struggle allows the greater truth to be revealed: the Haitian revolution was an historical moment of global importance. The demise of Napoleon's empire, the Louisiana Purchase, and the independence of South America are all directly related to the events that unfolded on the politically divided island in the Caribbean.

An academic silence followed the failure of white historians to view the Haitian Revolution through the perspective of the enslaved. In 1990 Carolyn Fick gave a voice to the common slave revolutionary and provided valuable new insights in the process. As the subtitle of her book implies, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* demonstrates that the course of the struggle was often dictated by the masses and not by elites. Several heroic moments by the elite, such as General Dessalines's defection from the French army, would not have been possible without the power of mass resistance. Fick's bottom-up approach complements C.L.R James's portrayal of Toussaint L'Overture and other leaders in *Black Jacobins*.

By emphasizing the role of the common slave Fick is able to bring to light conflicts within the struggle. The elite blacks, creoles, and the masses all had unique interests that sometimes conflicted with each other. In fact, both the creoles and elite blacks were willing to support the institution of slavery as long as their own rights and privileges were protected. The understanding

¹⁶ Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1990)

that black people did not share universal values and see each other as belonging to a homogenous community continues to play a major role in research.

James Sidbury continued the exploration of new aspects of cultural tension in slave resistance in his excellent book, *Ploughshares to Swords*¹⁷. Written seven years after the publication of *The Making of Haiti*, Sidbury focuses on the American revolt conspiracy popularly known as “Gabriel’s Rebellion.” The tension is manifested in the Virginian nature of the slaves’ revolt. Although the slaves were brutalized by Virginian society they attempted to gain their freedom within the society, not overturn it. This form of struggle for freedom was very different from the Haitian model and Sidbury argues this distinction is due to the influence of American culture among African-Americans.

The revolutionaries in Haiti were largely African. Because they had experience with African society they could aspire to recreate maroon communities and eventually Haiti itself according to African values and norms. The Voodoo religion served to unite the revolutionaries, sanctify their actions, and distance themselves from their Christian oppressors. In 1801 Virginia the enslaved population had been born in America and only knew American values. Instead of reference to an alternative society, they were forced to appropriate the white symbols of power to serve their own needs. Thus, instead of voodoo the would-be revolutionaries united under the banner of Christianity. Christianity was far less radical than voodoo because its equality rhetoric was tempered by the doctrine of obedience. With every attempt to demonstrate the power and legitimacy of the revolution through American symbols such as literacy and horses, the leaders

¹⁷ James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel’s Virginia, 1730-1810* (New York: Cambridge University, 1997)

paradoxically confirmed the structure of the dominant culture. The tension between acknowledging Virginian society while simultaneously attempting to overthrow it is captured perfectly in the slaves' use of Virginian legal ceremony to swear allegiance to the revolution.

The decision to either partake in the revolution or benefit from alerting the authorities provided a more conscious tension for the enslaved. Terms like “traitor” or “snitch” have often been given to the men and women who decided to inform on the “heroes.” Sidbury argues that complex circumstances blur such easy black-and-white distinctions. To label someone a traitor and someone a hero it must first be assumed that the two individuals belong to the same community and share common interests. The primary obstacle to this unity was the variety of relative freedoms allowed slaves in early nineteenth century Virginia. Many slaves had won hard-earned privileges such as hiring out their time and visiting their family. These slaves had a lot to lose if the revolution failed and the whites retaliated harshly. Many urban slaves also enjoyed friendly relationships with lower-class whites and wouldn't want to see them hurt or those relationships put in jeopardy needlessly. Lengthy slave negotiations and The Great Awakening had opened up many small liberties and interracial bonds that precluded universal acceptance of rebellion.

Walter Johnson, in his 1999 book, *Soul by Soul*, argued that slave resistance did more than create limited opportunities for a select few; it shaped the entire Southern culture¹⁸. With over one million slaves sold in the United States between the Constitution and the Civil war, the intranational slave trade was integral to the Southern economy and westward expansion. Beyond the numbers the threat of sale loomed large over daily plantation life. The slaveowners used this

¹⁸ Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1999)

threat to maintain control of the slaves, their most valuable and most dangerous property. Slaves shouldered the owners' dreams of both fortune and status and with so much depending on them, they had leverage.

Johnson depicts Antebellum South society as a constant interplay between the owners and slaves. The owners used every method to trick, cajole, or force their slaves to conform to their imagined roles. The slaves used corresponding methods to assert their individual wants and needs. This dialogue was necessarily uneven because the power of the government stood behind the slaveowner, but the slaves' unique role in Southern culture held influence as well. An example of this process was the sale of the slave at the trading block. Described as a "hall of mirrors,"¹⁹ the trading block featured the slave, slave-trader, and potential slaveowner each manipulating shared symbols and jargon to influence the sale. Although the buyer had the final say because he had the money, the slave shaped the sale by presenting himself as a hard-working, healthy, and obedient slave or as an ill malcontent with a lack of skills. From the transaction of sale to everyday life on the plantation the enslaved were able to use their knowledge of what the owner desired—a functioning farm to establish his status—to manipulate him to accede to their desires. These privileges were substantial and an overseer or anyone else who tried to undermine the established precedent was fiercely challenged.

Stephanie Camp agrees that the "daily tug-of-war over labor and culture" shaped Southern society to accommodate competing interests. She argued in her 2004 book, *Closer to Freedom*,

¹⁹ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 67

however, that historians need to look deeper²⁰. The emphasis on public negotiations has failed to properly acknowledge the role of women, as women's resistance often took place privately. To understand the "hidden and informal" aspects of women's resistance requires new approaches.²¹ The distinctions between personal/public and resistance/accommodation are blurred when the typical fields of resistance for a bondswoman—her body and her home—are the focus of the study. Camp's accounts illustrate how women's history in enslavement transforms the field of slave resistance.

Enslaved women faced unique challenges. They were prevented from performing skilled labor and traveling off the plantation to work. The resulting lack of geographic knowledge limited their opportunities to run away. The slaveowner custom denying paternity rights placed the family obligations on the shoulders of the women. And, worst of all, they suffered sexual abuse from the overseers and owners. The bondswomen responded to these unique challenges in different ways. Camp uses an example of women dressing up nicely to attend a dance to demonstrate the reclamation of their bodies. If the owners thought their bodies belonged to them, a well-dressed woman dancing illegally challenged that assumption. Her fancy clothes state her personal worth and the dancing on contested terrain proves her autonomy.

A bondswoman's home was another private terrain of resistance. The owner defined this space as a location to rest and prepare for labor. Camp's protagonist who placed abolitionist propaganda on the walls of her home was defining her home in a radically different manner: as a

²⁰Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women & Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2004)

²¹ *Ibid.*, 3

source of rebellion. Both of these private acts of resistance would not be included in previous histories because they lack a direct encounter between slave and slaveowner. Camp wishes to make clear that the myriad ways slaves resisted transcended the spectrums and dichotomies placed upon their behavior. In unique ways each individual resisted enslavement through thoughts and actions that held meaning for them.

The study of slave resistance has come a long way. The original discussions of slavery placed the enslaved on the periphery of their moral battles. Eventually slave resistance was recognized by Aptheker and later utilized by Stamp to shift the academic community away from Phillips's slaveowner perspective. The back-and-forth debate wasn't moving forward until Tannenbaum demonstrated the opportunities left to explore. The later studies placed the enslaved as the protagonist of the story and greatly enriched the field. Because there are likely to be few new sources to become available on slave resistance, future scholarship will have to become increasingly creative to make further advances.

One opportunity that this study recognizes is the concept of slave obedience amidst rebellious slaves. After Stanley Elkins's *Slavery* the field has become united in its focus on resistance as the defining characteristic of enslavement. But throughout many of the works mentioned in the previous pages there were indications that large numbers of slaves felt loyalty to their owners. Some even lost their life in protecting his honor or property. A moral position against slavery should not preclude research on an unexplored subject. Whatever paths the studies of slave resistance take, the authors will have the works of an impressive group of people to support them.

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