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**THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY IN AN ERA OF "NATION BUILDING":
SLAVE SCHOLARSHIP, 1956-1971**

By

John Campbell McMillian

A THESIS

**Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Department of History

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Professor Harry Reed

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ABSTRACT

THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY IN AN ERA OF "NATION BUILDING" SLAVE SCHOLARSHIP, 1956-1971

By

John C. McMillian

The civil rights and Black Power movements of the 1950s and beyond have had a profound shaping effect upon the ways in which scholars have approached the study of southern slavery. At the same time, exigencies that arose in response to the Black Revolt of this era also served to heighten the public's interest in slavery, especially where the historical identities of African-Americans was discussed. By exploring some of the significant works from this period, as well as the highly charged debates that they sometimes occasioned, one can gain a good deal of insight into the Black Power ethic, as well as to the ways that the cultural politics of the 1950s and 1960s managed to heighten the consciousness of millions of Black and white Americans.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I first returned to Michigan State, in the fall of 1994, things seemed awfully grim. I was struggling in the wake of a broken relationship, had very little money, and certainly did not believe that I had any compelling reason to be pursuing graduate study. It's somewhat remarkable, then, that things have turned out so well. Accordingly, there are a number of people I would like to thank.

Many of my professors, for example, have been extremely helpful, both personally and professionally. These would include Mark Kornbluh, Christine Daniels, Doug Miller, and Victor Jew. I am especially grateful to David Bailey, for serving on my thesis committee, and for his advice, encouragement, and interest in my life and career. Wilma King also deserves special mention, as she also agreed to serve on my thesis committee, in spite of the fact that I had not taken a class with her. Though I suspect that she still has some reservations about this particular study, many of her insights have proved helpful, and as I revise this paper in the years ahead, I'm sure that her critique will help me to further refine my analysis.

I would also like to extend a special "thank you" to professor Harry Reed, who has been a major influence upon my life as a teacher, mentor, and friend. Though it seems strange to be thinking in these terms just now, it is clear that the classes I have taken with him, beginning in the spring of 1990, have significantly shaped the course of my life. I'd further add that there are few people to whom I

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extend so much admiration and respect.

The History Department has offered me a teaching assistantship for the 1995-96 academic year, and the College of Arts and Letters has awarded me a generous Graduate Merit Fellowship for the spring of 1997, which has allowed me to devote a good deal more time to this study than would otherwise have been possible. Additional financial support and intellectual enrichment has come from Clayborne Carson and the staff of the King Papers Project at Stanford University, who gave me the privilege of working as a summer intern in Palo Alto during the summer of 1996.

Much more valuable than any financial assistance I have received, however, has been the support and companionship of a number of friends, both in and out of the History Department. In no particular order, and for a wide variety of reasons, these people would include Steve Wilkshire, Jeff Janowick, Matt Holcomb, Rich Van Tol, Brad Wood, Melanie Shell, Shannon Bonner, Laurie Konopka, Steve Charney, Jeff Toepfner, Jill Replogle, Fern Nietzsche, Eddie Stern, Chris Moore, Christy Hodsden, Jason Appelman, Besnick Aliko and Catherine Madden.

Finally, and above all, I would like to thank my entire family, and especially my parents, for their love, support, and encouragement.

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INTRODUCTION

As I'm still quite far from finished with my formalized training in the reading and writing of history, I hesitate to begin this paper with any lengthy ruminations about its nature as a discipline, or upon the craft of the historian. Fortunately, however, a scholar whom I have admired has already touched upon "the hopeless open-endedness of the subject of history," or, in other words, "its multi-dimensional quality, its lack of tidy beginnings and endings, its stubborn refusal to be packaged in any neat and satisfying manner." Regardless of your subject, or how much you know, or how many pages you write, there is always "something that had gone before, or come afterward, which you didn't have time to tell about, or which you didn't know about, and which was nevertheless essential to the completeness of the tale".¹

These are sentiments I can relate with. This particular study, for example, is centrally concerned with the ways in which some of the exigencies that arose out of the Black Revolt of the 1950's and beyond have had a sort of shaping effect upon the ways in which scholars have approached the subject of southern slavery. This is certainly something worth thinking about, for the revolution in slave historiography between about 1956 and 1974 "must certainly rank as a historiographical accomplishment of the first magnitude".² In Eric Foner's view, "the work reappraising the South's 'peculiar institution'" is arguably "the finest body of literature produced by American historians since 1960."³

Impossible to divorce from this, however, are questions and concerns about African-American identity. While historians do not generally write for large

¹ Kennan, George F. "The Experience of Writing History," *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, XXXVI (Spring 1960) 205.

² Dew, Charles. "The Slavery Experience" in Interpreting Southern History: Essays in Honor of Sanford W. Higginbotham, Boles, John B. and Nolen, Evelyn Thomas (eds.) (Louisiana State University Press, 1987) 161.

³ Foner, Eric. "Slavery and the Origins of the Civil War" in The New American History, Foner, Eric (ed.) (Temple University Press, 1990) 74.

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audiences outside of their respective fields, throughout this period, slave studies flourished to an unprecedented degree. Part of this was simply because, as David Brion Davis has remarked, “the modern reading public...retains a spasmodic need for quick historical orientation to immediate crises.”⁴ Likewise, Kenneth Stampp has noted that a “peculiar urgency” seemed to surround much of this work. If slavery was not of immediate concern to the nation, it certainly lingered, as it does today, around the peripheries of the public consciousness. Even if the great majority of Americans have never considered some of the issues that academics from this period debated, including the profitability of slavery, its psychological impact upon slaves, and the comparative history of the southern system with other institutions in the New World, they at least watched *Roots*. The foremost consideration, for scholars and the general public alike, was simply this: What did slavery mean? What was the slave experience like, for both Black and white Americans, men and women, free and unfree, and what did it do to the nation?

Yet just as slavery and the meaning of Blackness are inseparably linked, so connected are a broad range of other factors, involving various social, economic, psychological, and cultural issues, each of which hold an imponderable number of variables that one might write upon. While Meier and Rudwick have penned a study that professes to explore the ways in which “the general social climate” impinged “upon the consciousness of a number of individual historians” in the field of African-American history, their focus is really only upon the academic training and the personal backgrounds and associations of these scholars.⁵ By focusing too narrowly upon the goings-ons of various ivory towers, we run the risk of neglecting an awareness of the ways in which a wider social context invariably

⁴Davis, David Brion. “Slavery and the Post-World War II Historians,” *Daedalus*, (Spring 1974) 8.

⁵ See Meier, August, and Rudwick, Elliot, Black History and the Historical Profession: 1915-1980, (University of Illinois Press, 1986), especially chapter four, “The Historiography of Slavery: An Inquiry into Paradigm-Making and Scholarly Interaction”.

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⁶ Weiner, *Journal of American Studies*, 19 (September 1985), 1-10. To be brought into the dissertation effects upon the *Peculiar Institution* on the Stamp Act.

shapes the sorts of histories we both read and write. For example, where Jonathon Weiner has written about the debt that the profession owes to such radical scholars as Herbert Aptheker and Eugene Genovese, David Thelen notes that many scholars of Black history “drew heavily on the novels and poetry of James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, LeRoi Jones, to say nothing of popular music, or popular preachers, or the examples of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr.” Likewise, New Left historians were likely inspired by Paul Goodman, Albert Camus, Thomas Kuhn, and the Rolling Stones, among others.⁶ While we may not be able to speak with any real degree of specificity about the various effects of these sorts of broad cultural factors, we should at least acknowledge their influence - on both scholarship *and* identity.

Finally, it is important to remember that the monographic literature discussed in this study did not suddenly spring to life in 1956, nor did writings on slavery abruptly dissipate in 1974. Rather, each of the major works I’ve looked at were created in response to social and academic climates that had existed beforehand. Indeed, the general inter-connectedness of these studies, as we shall see, is somewhat amazing.⁷ Though I’ve chosen these starting and endpoints with some care, one might just as easily begin a discussion of the ways in which the slave experience has been interpreted in American history by looking at St. Jean de Crevecoeur’s *Letters From An American Farmer*, first published in 1782. For it

⁶ Weiner, Jonathon M. “Radical Historians and the Crisis in American History, 1959-1980,” *The Journal of American History*, (September, 1989); Thelen, David, “A Round Table: What Has Changed and Not Changed in American Historical Practice?,” *The Journal of American History*, (September, 1989) 397.

⁷ To be brief, both Stamp and Elkins’ books were shaped, in some significant degree, by Richard Hofstadter, with whom they each had close personal associations. (Hofstadter was Elkins’ dissertation advisor). While Stamp and Elkins were the two scholars who would have the largest effects upon slave historiography during this era, Moynihan and Styron drew especially deeply from Elkins’ theoretical framework. Starobin, however, modeled his work on Stamp’s *The Peculiar Institution*, as Stamp was his dissertation advisor. Finally, Fogel and Engerman wrote *Time on the Cross* as a direct challenge to Stamp, as well as to much of the literature that Stamp and Elkins had helped to inspire.

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was here, of course, that he posed his famous question, "What then is the American?" As Winthrop Jordan would point out nearly two hundred years later, perhaps more remarkable than his query was the provincialism of his own answer: "He is an European, or the descendent of a European..."⁸ Thus, Crevocoeur "simply defined the Negro out of American identity".⁹ Building only slightly upon this outrageously narrow perspective, subsequent generations of respected historians have tended to either marginalize or disparage the experiences of Black Americans. Save for the pioneering work of such historians as W.E.B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, and John Hope Franklin, before about World War II, the role of Afro-Americans in our nation's development was hardly considered at all. Additionally, before Stamp's The Peculiar Institution, slave scholarship could hardly escape the broad shadow cast by the writings of U.B. Phillips, a southern nationalist who was resolute in his belief of the racial inferiority of Blacks.

By 1970, however, it was clear that something remarkable had happened, and so noted historian Eugene Genovese remarked that "The full impact of the Black Revolt of the late 1960's on American scholarship in general and Afro-American history in particular has yet to be felt." In part, he argued that this was because "scholars...need time to assess political trends and to do the work necessary to support their points of view."¹⁰ While these points are well on the mark, I would add the observation that the chaotic racial politics of this age also worked to further discourage a critical analysis of Black Power's influence upon historical scholarship. Indeed, the tensions surrounding both a general resurgence in Black nationalist thought and a closely related drive for Black Studies programs

⁸ Crevocoeur, J. Hector St. Jean, Letters From An American Farmer (New York, 1945) 43.

⁹ Woodward, C. Vann, "Clio With Soul," *Journal of American History*, (June, 1969) 7.

¹⁰ Genovese, Eugene, "The Influence of Black Power on Historical Scholarship: Reflections of a White Historian," in In Red and Black: Marxian Explorations in Southern and African-American History (Pantheon, 1971) 231.

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led one British observer to remark that on campuses everywhere, “White facial muscles ache with nervous smiling, black ones with intimidating scowls.”¹¹

In any case, even under more propitious circumstances, the American historical profession has yet to offer a thorough examination of the complex dynamics that shaped the work of Black and white scholars of antebellum slavery during this period. This paper, it is hoped, will offer something of a framework for precisely such an undertaking. The “plot,” as it were, is easily summarized. In reaction to a long-predominate, so-called “Progressive” school of historiography, by the late 1950’s, Kenneth Stamp and Stanley Elkins had both penned innovative and yet controversial studies of slave life. Simultaneously, trends within the burgeoning civil rights movement began to further encourage a reexamination of the psychological and historical origins of white prejudice. As various funds flooded programs for the study of African-American life and culture, slave studies flourished to an unprecedented degree. Thus, Meier and Rudwick have pointed out that by the early 1970’s, “the JSH (*Journal of Southern History*) was reading almost like a JNH (*Journal of Negro History*).”¹² These developments, however, were not without their intricacies. For one, a large faction of an emerging Black intelligentsia had aligned itself with the view that African-Americans should have the exclusive power to define, interpret, and in some cases, even “create” a new, Black history. White responses to these pressures upon their scholarship were varied. Some historians began to shift their focus towards trends within the Black past with which orthodox nationalists could sympathize, paying special attention to slave resistance and the cultural dimensions of slavery. Yet others, who for the most part carried strong liberal credentials, nonetheless rejected the notion that history should exist solely in order to service the needs of the political present. Having long held a sort of monopoly over slave scholarship, they may even have

¹¹ Cunliffe, Marcus, “Black Culture and White America,” *Encounter* (January, 1970) 99.

¹² Meier and Rudwick, *Black History*, 178.

postured themselves as gatekeepers into the profession, consciously in opposition to the “tyranny” that they felt some Black scholars were exercising over white academics. As a result of these ideological clashes and the vibrant era in which they occurred, the American historical profession was witness to some of the most profound, bitter, interesting, and far-reaching controversies of recent memory.

This essay is developed in four parts. Chapter One looks at Stamp’s The Peculiar Institution (1956) and Stanley Elkins Slavery... (1959). In rebutting Phillips, Stamp’s work deserves praise as a landmark in American historiography, though many scholars would make up for some of its shortcomings in subsequent decades. Ironically, Elkins’ book, though much less well received, has had a larger influence upon the profession in that it prompted a great amount of discussion upon the “damage” that North American slavery was said to have wrought upon the personalities of typical bondsmen. In his view, the Sambo stereotype was not a racist fantasy, but rather a cruel fallout of racism. In other words, the Sambo personality was a pervasive phenomenon that had been born out of a “closed and total system of oppression.” Chapter Two will explore the ways in which the “damage,” “deficit,” or “victimization” model gained currency in public policy debates of the era, largely as a result of the so-called “Moynihan Report” of 1965. Arguing for massive federal assistance to the Black community, Moynihan hinged his case on the assumption that “Three centuries of injustice have brought about deep-seated structural distortions in the life of the Negro American.”¹³ Consequently, the report drew a firestorm of protest, leading Elkins to later remark that by the late 1960’s, “the entire ‘damage’ argument, as applied to any aspect of Negro life in America, had become untenable.”¹⁴ Chapter Three examines the cultural politics surrounding William Styron’s 1967 historical novel, The

¹³ “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” *Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor*, (March, 1965) 47.

¹⁴ Elkins, Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life (Third Edition) (University of Chicago Press, 1959, 1976) 271.

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Confessions of Nat Turner, paying special attention to the ways in which much of the angry Black response to this work was rooted in the Black Power ethic.

Finally, Chapter Four explores some of the dynamics between the Black Studies Movement and the approach of slavery historians by focusing, in large measure, upon the career of Robert Starobin - a white professor whose suicide in 1974 was seen by some to have been linked to demands that the revolutionary politics of the era had thrust upon him.

I might add here that though I am generally committed to a theoretical approach that includes gender analysis as well as the discussion of racial issues, there is little such discussion in the pages to follow. This stems from the fact that in the chronology that I have chosen, there does not seem to have been many Black women historians who were writing on slavery, or who spoke publicly on many of the issues I have concentrated upon. In a revised version of this work, however, I plan to extend my discussion to include the publication of Fogel and Engerman's Time On the Cross (1975), at which point I hope to weave an exploration of gender issues into my text.

Though the story I will try to tell doesn't really start to gather momentum until the latter half of the 1950's, as I've tried to point out above, we nevertheless remain victims of the general "messiness" of history. And so long as there are no true beginnings or endings, it would perhaps be most useful to briefly turn our attention, at the beginning of chapter one, to the unfortunate body of work that modern historians such as Stamp and Elkins have had to contend with.

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Historians...write for a time; that is, they write to reflect the concerns of their day and, it follows, for a period that inevitably is itself soon a part of history. Only in the rarest instance do thier writings outlast the ethos of the age that produced them.

-Merton Dillon

FORGING NEW GROUND: KENNETH STAMMP, STANLEY ELKINS, AND THE RE-BIRTH OF SLAVE SCHOLARSHIP, 1956 - 1959

Though African-American history may today be one of the liveliest fields in all of academia, it wasn't until the publication of Gunnar Myrdal's landmark sociological study An American Dilemma , in 1944, that the subject came to the attention of most Americans. As a whole, the profession was dominated by what might be called Traditionalist historiography, reigning from about the turn of the century to World War II. Generally, this school of thought regarded the Black presence in the U.S. as "an unfortunate mistake or at best a nuisance. Least of all did the traditionalists see American development as dependent to any extent upon the position of the Negro."¹⁵ As Benjamin Quarles has remarked, "the role of the Afro-American in our national life was thought to be hardly worth considering. An intellectual 'white flight' held sway; most writers in the social sciences and the humanities, whatever their individual specialties, assumed that they knew as much about blacks as they needed to know or as their readers cared to learn. With this static image, the black was considered something of an intruder, if not indeed an outsider."¹⁶ Indeed, the state of affairs was such that Frederick Jackson Turner could write, in a very famous work, that "when American history comes to be rightly viewed it will be seen that the slavery question is an incident."¹⁷ Meanwhile, Charles Beard held that the results of suffrage and the struggle of Blacks for social advancement in the wake of Reconstruction "would have been

¹⁵ Starobin, Robert, "The Negro: A Central Theme in American History," *The Journal of Contemporary History* (Great Britain, 1968) 37.

¹⁶ Quarles, Benjamin, "Black History Unbound," *Daedalus* (Spring, 1974) 163.

¹⁷ Turner, Frederick Jackson, The Frontier in American History (New York, 1920) 24.

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ludicrous is they had not been pitiable.”¹⁸ In a “popular history that had won acclaim from New Deal liberals,” slavery was characterized as a system that brought “incalculable harm to the white people of the South, and benefited nobody but the negro, in that is served as a vast training school for African savages...It taught (Blacks) discipline, cleanliness, and a conception of moral standards.”¹⁹ Historian I.A. Newby has gone so far as to identify several different types of historiography within this Traditionalist framework, making distinctions between “Invisible Man” history, which “ignores Negroes altogether,” and “spook” history, which acknowledges “the presence of Negroes but treat the race as a nebulous, ghostly host, always in the background, whose principle historical function has always been to constitute a problem for white men to solve or endure.” Closely related to this is “ghetto” history, wherein Blacks do not figure “until whites become seriously divided over slavery.” Finally, “Sambo” history simply portrays African-Americans as “racially inferior” or otherwise stereotypes them “in an offensive manner.”²⁰

I

The bulk of Ulrich Bonnell Phillips work on ante-bellum slavery, so easily disparaged from our contemporary vantage point, is perhaps an amalgamation of the sort of “spook” and “Sambo” histories that Newby discusses. This is not to suggest, however, that Phillips is a historian whose work we can afford to gloss over. With the appearance of American Negro Slavery in 1918, Phillips’ name “would become virtually synonymous with slavery historiography.”²¹ According to Thomas Holt, “Modern scholarship on slavery in the U.S. begins with U.B. Phillips.”²² In acknowledging Phillips death in 1934, David Potter wrote of “his

¹⁸ Beard, Charles, American Government and Politics (New York, 1911) 86.

¹⁹ Woodward, W.E., A New American History (Farar & Rinehart, 1936) 412, cited in Davis, David Brion, “Slavery and the Post-World War II Historians”, *Daedalus* (Spring, 1974) 1.

²⁰ Newby, I.A., “Historians and Negroes”, *The Journal of Negro History*, (January, 1969) 35-41.

²¹ Meier, August, and Rudwick, Elliot, Black History and the Historical Profession, 4.

²² Holt, Thomas C., “African-American History” in Foner, Eric, The New American History, 213.

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conciseness, his remarkable accuracy of expression, his avoidance of the trite and inane, and his profusion of fruitful suggestions...He never set pen to paper without expressing cogent ideas.”²³ Richard Hofstadter added in 1944 that “No single writer has been more influential in establishing patterns of belief about the plantation system of the Old South...His American Negro Slavery and Life and Labor in the Old South (1929) are the most widely read scholarly studies of the slave system, and have become classic sources of information and propaganda about ante-bellum Southern life.”²⁴ Another testament to the enduring quality of much of his scholarship lies in the fact that in 1966, just as the Black Power movement was just beginning to attract the attention of scholars everywhere, Eugene Genovese read a paper before the American Historical Association which suggested that Phillips “came close to greatness as a historian, perhaps as close as any historian this country has yet produced.”²⁵

A bit about Phillips upbringing says a fair amount about the assumptions he worked with as a scholar. A Georgian native, originally born “Ulysses” Phillips, he is said to have changed his name to “Ulrich” as a result of his antipathy towards Ulysses S. Grant. In one biographical profile, a rumor is passed that in 1877, (before he was born), a detachment of Sherman’s army pillaged his family home,

²³ Potter, David M., “A Bibliography of the Printed Writings of Ulrich Bonnell Phillips”, *Georgia Historical Quarterly* (September, 1934) 271; cited in Genovese, Eugene, In Red and Black: Marxian Interpretations in Southern and Afro-American History, (Pantheon Books, 1971) 261.

²⁴ Hofstadter, Richard, “U.B. Phillips and the Plantation Legend,” *Journal of Negro History* (April, 1944) 109-110.

²⁵ Genovese, Eugene, In Red and Black, 262. According to Genovese, this assessment “upset some people”. In fairness, it should be added that Genovese - along with each of the other historians cited above - was of course aware of Phillips racism and found it deplorable. In characteristically feisty prose, he followed the statement on Phillips near “greatness” by remarking that “We may leave 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. Let there be no mistake about it: Phillips was a racist.” While some have argued that Phillips was beginning to shy away from a belief in the *genetic* inferiority of Blacks towards the end of his life, Genovese holds that “it is difficult to become enthusiastic about a shift from a less to more sophisticated racism that could have not stood critical examination even in its own day.” Where Phillips is still read in many graduate seminars, his texts most often seem to be treated as mere cultural artifacts. In an effort to focus greater scholarly attention upon his work, Genovese has elsewhere remarked that “there is infinitely more to be learned from one smart son-of-a-bitch than an army of well-meaning fools”.

leaving only a single desk from which Phillips would later write his histories.²⁶ Consequently, his writings tended to carry a romantic and unapologetic, pro-southern bias. Slavery, in his view, was a benign and “civilizing” institution. Plantations were said to be “the best schools yet invented for the mass training of that sort of inert and backward people which the bulk of the American negroes represented.”²⁷ Paternalistic slaveholders, motivated by a desire to protect their own economic self-interest, treated slaves with kindness and compassion. Slave codes, from which one might have gathered a different portrait, were not seen as a reliable source, as they told very little about day-to-day life in the Old South. Ditto for numerous travelogues, including those of Frederick Law Olmstead, whom he generally distrusted. Yet at the same time, Phillips also argues that as slavery evolved, it became driven less by a profit incentive than by a desire to maintain social order. Consequently, the typical bondsman did not work terribly hard. In terms of food, clothing, and housing, slaves tended to be better treated than many wage laborers in the north, and plantation life “was punctuated by such congenial pastimes as ‘the dance in the sugarhouse, the bonfire in the creek with demonstrations from the sisters as they came dripping out, the rabbit hunt, the log-rolling, the house-raising, the husking bee, the quilting party, and the crap game’.”²⁸ He further suggests that since most slaves were generally content with their positions in life, episodes of slave resistance were few and far between, and where they did occur, they were rooted in the laziness, shiftlessness, and general criminal tendencies that resulted from poor discipline and training.

That Phillips’ racial bias seemed to shape many of his findings is obvious. In illustrating his belief in racial inferiority, there are many sources from which one

²⁶ Gray, Wood, “U.B. Phillips” in The Marcus W. Jernegan Essays in American Historiography, (University of Chicago Press, 1937) 354-373.

²⁷ Phillips, Ulrich Bonnell, American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime (New York: D. Appleton, 1918) 343.

²⁸ Quarles, Benjamin. 171.

might draw, though one particular essay from 1938 - "The Historic Civilization of the Old South" - says a great deal about Phillips' social views: the "civilization of the Old South," he writes, was "wholesome...its tradition of kindness, hospitality, honesty, moderation, and good humor is a precious possession, to be cherished and spread abroad." In spite of some "well-informed" and "thoughtful negroes" of the early 20th century, "the mass are somewhat another matter...Most of them have...yet to begin to suggest, that they can be taken into full fellowship of any sort in a democratic and civilized order. Their cousins in Africa represent a wonderful capacity to remain primitive - to perpetuate the crudest human beliefs and practices. If most of these cousins in America had an effective suffrage, they could not use it with intelligence and good effect."²⁹

It is significant to note that Black scholars were the first to point out Phillips' bias. W.E.B. DuBois, for example, regarded American Negro Slavery as "curiously incomplete and unfortunately biased...Nowhere is there any adequate conception of 'darkies', 'niggers' and 'negroes' (words liberally used throughout the book) as making a living mass of humanity with all the usual human reactions."³⁰ Carter G. Woodson echoed these complaints, albeit in a slightly more restrained tone. Among the author's shortcomings, he lists an "inability to fathom the negro mind, his failure to bring out the cycles of the history of slavery, and a tendency to argue the contrary when facts seem to be unfavorable to the slaveholders."³¹ Finally, L.D. Reddick, addressing a 1936 convention of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, noted that historians of slavery had heretofore "unexplored" instances of slave resistance, including

²⁹ Phillips, Ulrich Bonnell, "The Historic Civilization of the Old South," *Agricultural History* (January, 1938) 149.

³⁰ DuBois, W.E.B., *American Political Science Review* (November, 1918) 722, cited in Smith, John David, and Incoe, John C., Ulrich Bonnell Phillips: A Southern Historian and His Critics, (Greenwood Press, 1990) 83.

³¹ Woodson, Carter G., *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (March, 1919) 481, cited in Smith and Incoe, 87.

“suicide, flight...and group insurrection,” and that the profession needed to offer “a picture of the institution as seen through the eyes of the bondsman himself.”³²

While Reddick’s comments demonstrate a good deal of prescience concerning future directions of slave historiography, none of the critiques of these Black scholars attracted anything near the attention of Richard Hofstadter’s essay, “U.B. Phillips and the Plantation Legend,” first published in 1944. This piece is notable as “the first open challenge to Phillips reputation by a white scholar.”³³ While Hofstadter poked at Phillips racism, his central argument was that four of the chapters of American Negro Slavery were marred by a shabby methodology that tainted his findings. Through a statistical analysis of Phillips’ data, he revealed that an inordinate amount of attention was given not only to plantation-size estates, but to the very largest of these plantations. This was a major problem, since a majority of slaves did not live on plantations this large. Altogether, Phillips seems to have drawn generalizations from samples that included about ten percent of southern slaves and less than one percent of all slaveowners. “It would be too much,” Hofstadter wrote, “to say that he was studying the upper crust. For the most part he was concentrating upon the upper crust of the upper crust.” In addition to this quantitative work, however, Hofstadter also saw fit to issue a stirring challenge to subsequent generations of slave scholars. A “materially different version of the slave system will doubtless emerge,” he wrote:

when scholars animated by a counter-bias, or perhaps, if it is not too much to hope for, by a far greater spirit of detachment, have subjected the system to similarly intense study. There is...nothing inevitable about his point of view or his technique. Let the study of the Old South be undertaken by other scholars who have absorbed the viewpoint of modern cultural anthropology, who have a feeling for social psychology...who will concentrate upon the neglected rural elements that formed the great majority of the Southern population, who will not rule out the testimony

³² Reddick, L.D., “A New Interpretation for Negro History,” *Journal of Negro History* (January, 1937) 20, cited in Meier and Rudwick, 240.

³³ Smith and Inscoc, 183.

of more critical observers, and who will realize that any history of slavery must be written in large part from the standpoint of the slave - and then the possibilities of the Old South and the slave system as a field of research and historical experience will loom larger than ever.³⁴

There is some debate as to whether or not this essay significantly impacted upon the development of slave historiography. Genovese includes it in a list of “visible” and “widely read” pieces that, taken together, seemed to have inaugurated a challenge to Phillips views.³⁵ On the other hand, Meier and Rudwick discount it as “negligible”, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., claims that it did not “seem to have had much specific influence on historians’ attitudes toward slavery or toward Phillips.”³⁶ One point to raise here, however, is that Schlesinger’s essay was published in 1969, whereas in the decade to follow “a veritable avalanche of path-breaking studies on various aspects of the American slave system appeared. Even a partial list of the most notable works published between 1967 and 1977 is mind-boggling.”³⁷ Moreover, Schlesinger employs a curious criterion here for measuring “influence,” writing in a footnote that: “Neither Stamp in The Peculiar Institution (1956) nor Genovese in The Political Economy of Slavery (1965) mention the Hofstadter piece. S.M. Elkins’s single reference in Slavery (1959), p. 18, is quick and glancing.”³⁸ This is, simply, a bizarre statement. Common sense tells us that scholars often ideologically condition one another in deep and meaningful ways, which are nevertheless unlikely to often appear in the form of a direct reference. Moreover, while it is true that Elkins’ discussion of Hofstadter’s piece is brief, he

³⁴ Hofstadter, Richard, “U.B. Phillips and the Plantation Legend,” *Journal of Negro History*, (April, 1944) 122.

³⁵ Genovese, Eugene, “The Influence of the Black Power Movement on Historical Scholarship: Reflections of a White Historian”, *Daedalus*, (Spring, 1970), reprinted in In Red and Black: Marxian Explorations in Southern and Afro-American History, (Pantheon Books, 1968) 236.

³⁶ Meier and Rudwick, 245. Schlesinger, Jr., Arthur, “Richard Hofstadter”, in Cunliffe, Marcus and Winks, Robin W., Pastmasters: Some Essays on American Historians, (Harper & Row, 1969) 282.

³⁷ Dew, Charles, in Boles and Nolen, 120.

³⁸ Schlesinger, in Cunliffe and Winks, Pastmasters, 457.

does refer to it as “ingenious” and notes that one of its effects was to shift the moral center of gravity amongst scholars “to a strong antislavery position.”³⁹ Schlesinger may also be unaware that Stamppp once delivered a paper to the AHA, later published in 1952, which *does* make direct reference to Hofstadter’s essay of 1944. In addition to demonstrating a familiarity with the specifics of Hofstadter’s critique, he quotes him approvingly, and echoes his call for a “materially different version” of the slave system that would emerge “when scholars with different points of view and different techniques” approached the subject “with similarly intensive study”.⁴⁰ Also interesting to note is that Stamppp and Elkins each had their own, close personal associations with Hofstadter. Stamppp, for example, taught with him for a time at the University of Maryland and sent him drafts of each chapter of The Peculiar Institution, in return for comments and suggestions. Elkins, meanwhile, originally wrote his book Slavery as a Ph.D. dissertation at Columbia under Hofstadter’s supervision, thanking him in the acknowledgments for “detailed and searching criticism of the entire manuscript.”⁴¹

While it may be impossible to measure the pervasiveness Hofstadter’s influence with any degree of specificity, we can be reasonably sure that Stamppp, Elkins, and others all drew inspiration from the political and social milieu of the postwar world. While the 1940’s were hardly the most progressive years of the twentieth century, this period was marked by an identifiable increase in racial consciousness among educated, northern whites. As one scholar has noted, “by the end of World War II, white supremacy was no longer a publicly acceptable doctrine in the North, and civil rights reform to secure legal equality for black Americans was becoming an issue in national politics.”⁴² One way this can be

³⁹ Elkins, Stanley, Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life, (University of Chicago Press, 1959) 18.

⁴⁰ Stamppp, Kenneth M., “The Historian and Southern Negro Slavery,” *American Historical Review*, (April, 1952) 614-618.

⁴¹ Elkins, Stanley, Slavery, 311.

⁴² Kellogg, Peter J., “Civil Rights Consciousness in the 1940s,” *Historian*, (November, 1979) 18.

measured is through an examination of such organs of liberal opinion as the *Nation* and the *New Republic*, where their general readerships were exposed to essays and editorials preaching greater racial enlightenment. Much of this was propelled by a recognition that Nazi racism was not so far removed from notions of white superiority that were commonly advanced in the United States. In essence, the afterglow of the Second World War helped to cast a shameful shadow upon our own caste system. "The many liberals who had begun to see Americans, including themselves, in a new light also began to realize that...racism made America vulnerable to enemy propaganda and to loss of support in the nonwhite world at home and abroad."⁴³ Finally, exigencies arising from partisan political needs also played a role in shaping predominate white attitudes. By the late 1940's, for example, the Democratic Party felt a strong need to solidify the vote of the Black electorate, and so during the year of the 1948 national convention, Truman was offering an unprecedented degree of attention to civil rights. (This was of course a stark contrast to F.D.R.'s administration, which in the 1930's could hardly be moved to pass an anti-lynching bill or desegregate the military).

Along with many other white scholars of Black history from this period, Stamp's intellectual coming of age was rooted in both the Great Depression as well as an ideologically leftist family tradition. Though he might not have fashioned a distinct methodological approach to The Peculiar Institution until about 1950, his hopes for racial enlightenment in the political present were clear enough in a 1944 book review, where he spoke of "southern Bourbons...still doing business at the same old stand, while poor whites and blacks glare at each other across the color line. Indeed, one might ask as ironically as he likes, what is so 'new' about the 'New South'?"⁴⁴ Elkins, of Eastern European Jewish origins, also

⁴³ Ibid., 32.

⁴⁴ Stamp, Kenneth M., book review of Herbert Aptheker's American Negro Slave Revolts, *Journal of Negro History* (January, 1943), cited in Meier and Rudwick, 138.

demonstrated “early concern with racial and ethnic prejudices,” based on his experiences in the military and while studying at Harvard and Columbia “in the liberal glow of the Truman Fair Deal.”⁴⁵ Though they each took their own, autonomous paths to their respective conclusions about ante-bellum slavery, they both reflected a growing tide of intellectual reaction against racial discrimination. Moreover, they were both influenced by a growing sociological assault on racism, which peaked in the mid-1940’s. Just as civil rights lobbyists “drew intellectual legitimacy and sustenance” from such works, researchers rooted in a wide range of disciplines could hardly escape the diffusion of this activist-inspired scholarship into various textbooks and professional journals. Most typical of this genre was Drake and Cayton’s *Black Metropolis* (1945), and of course Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma* (1944) - a landmark study so vast in scope that it may well have functioned as a scientific paradigm.⁴⁶ As David Brion Davis remarks in an invaluable essay on the course of postwar slave historiography, by the early 1950’s, “however parochial their discipline, historians had...become aware of the growing sociological literature on racial prejudice and ‘the Negro problem’,” deciding that “their parents’ quiet convictions - the half-whispered ‘truths’ about Negro character - were dangerous stereotypes that had no place in a nation that had crushed Nazi racism and committed itself to the defense of the free world.”⁴⁷

II

Certainly Stamp’s book was part history, and part moral statement. While it’s generally agreed that The Peculiar Institution is impeccably researched, one might argue that it is also infused with a Faulknerian sense of the epic and tragic. Robert Abzug has offered that this quality “comes from depicting slavery as a

⁴⁵ Meier and Rudwick, 140.

⁴⁶ Meier and Rudwick, 136. Also see Southern, David W., Gunnar Myrdal and Black-White Relations: The Use and Abuse of *An American Dilemma* 1944-1969 (Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

⁴⁷ Davis, David Brion, 1.

southern tragedy within the broader national history” - a perspective that’s clear enough from the very first paragraph.⁴⁸ “To understand the South,” Stamppp begins:

is to feel the pathos in its history. This aura of pathos is more than a delusion of historians, more than the vague sensation one gets when looking down an avenue of somber, moss-draped live oaks leading to stately ruins or to nothing at all. For Southerners live in the shadow of a real tragedy; they know, better than most other Americans, that little ironies fill the history of mankind and that large disasters from time to time unexpectedly shape its course.⁴⁹

If Hofstadter was the first notable white scholar to take on Phillips’ view of a genial slave system, Stamppp was the first to do so systematically, over the course of some 430 pages. Foner has opined that The Peculiar Institution signaled “a full-scale refutation of the traditional interpretation,” while Abzug has noted that this book “has been justly credited as a landmark in the rewriting of Afro-American and race relations history.” Thomas Holt has written that the profession has seldom “witnessed such a thorough and completely successful revision of a major work of scholarship,” where David Brion Davis has simply referenced it as “a revelation” which “transformed the character of the debate”. Genovese, while noting that Stamppp’s book was hardly a bolt from the blue (“The critique of Phillip’s views and of those from the Big House generally had been building for twenty-five years or more”) nonetheless gave it credit for standing “the racist work of Ulrich Bonnell Phillips on its head”.⁵⁰

Strangely enough, while Stamppp responds to Phillips on an almost point-by-point basis, he is rarely mentioned directly. Only in the very first chapter is he

⁴⁸ Abzug, Robert H. and Maizlish, Stephen E., editors, New Perspectives on Race and Slavery in America: Essays in Honor of Kenneth M. Stamppp, (University Press of Kentucky, 1986) 3.

⁴⁹ Stamppp, Kenneth M., The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South, (Vintage Books, 1956) 3.

⁵⁰ Foner, 74; Abzug, 1; Holt, 214; Davis, 3; Genovese, In Red and Black, 236.

ever quoted, in part to ridicule the assertion, on page one of Life and Labor in the Old South, that one should approach the south by first “discussing the weather, for that has been the chief agency in making the south distinctive”.⁵¹ Stamp’s contrary assumption is that the south owes its distinctive character to slavery, and that this was rooted in a series of deliberate choices “made by men who sought greater returns than they could obtain from their labor alone, and who found other types of labor more expensive.” Moreover, Stamp quickly dismissed studies premised on the notion that Blacks owned some sort of innate, genetic trademarks which left them favorably disposed to a life of servitude. Historians who subscribed to such “artificial” views could no longer be taken seriously, and so Stamp cited Myrdal to prove, “beyond any reasonable doubt” that it is “impossible to make valid generalizations” about the “capacities and personalities” of an entire race. Indeed, in what was perhaps an unfortunate turn of phrase, Stamp prefaced his book with the remark that “innately, Negroes *are*, after all, only white men with black skins, nothing more, nothing less.”⁵²

Removed, then, from any inclinations to take a romantic view of the Old South, Stamp’s portrayal of plantation life is preoccupied with the violence and cruelty of the system. Though he makes broad allowances for a wide variety of differences in the treatment of individual slaves, there is little discussion of dances and corn-shucking parties. Owners tended to be “ambitious entrepreneurs,” not “selfless philanthropists”. In terms of food, clothing, housing, and medical care, slaves were rarely provided with much more than the bare amounts necessary for their daily, temporal sustenance. Nor were they the least bit happy or content in their bondage. Certainly they saw the peculiar institution “chiefly as a system of labor extortion”. They awoke early and worked late, usually six days a week, and almost always under the threat of the lash. The entire structure of the south,

⁵¹ Phillips, Life and Labor in the Old South, 1.

⁵² Stamp, 5, 10 and vii.

including its political and legal systems and social mores and customs, was all orchestrated in such a manner as “to make them stand in fear”. On the difficult question of the profitability of slavery, Stamppp argues that owners tended to make a reasonable return on their investments.⁵³ This was a result of the fact that, rather than a school yard, the plantation was most often a sort of factory run with prison labor.

Consequently, episodes of resistance occurred almost daily. Slaves were “a troublesome property,” and so, “whether bold and persistent or mild and sporadic,” this “created for all slaveholders a serious problem of discipline.”⁵⁴ Though large scale insurrections were of course exceedingly rare, slaves often malingered, broke tools, feigned illness, and stole from their owners at every opportunity. In other cases, slaves would take part in sabotage on a larger scale, and planters records show that it was not unusual for a trusted servant to one day be caught spitting in his master’s coffee or peeing in the soup kettle. Occasions where slaves committed arson, ran away, and sometimes even physically fought their brutal overseers or owners all helped to refute the myth that slavery rested upon the “cheerful acquiescence” of the slaves.

The weakest chapter of the book, “Between Two Cultures,” deals with life in the slave quarters. Though Stamppp acknowledges the reality of planter paternalism, his focus here is too often upon the harshness of the treatment meted out to most slaves. There is little room, in his formulation, for the existence or development of a viable Black cultural life. Where families in Africa were healthy and well-regulated, African-American slaves “as at so many points...had lost their native culture without being able to find a workable substitute and therefore lived in a kind of cultural chaos.”⁵⁵ In trying to determine “What else was there in the lives

⁵³ Just for the record, Stamppp further adds that slavery was not very profitable for the slaves.

⁵⁴ Stamppp, 91.

⁵⁵ Stamppp, 340.

of slaves besides work, sleep, and procreation?" Stamp, here as well as throughout the book, makes little effort to investigate the reminiscences of ex-slaves, their folk songs or folk tales, or their religion, which is dismissed as "striking similar to that of the poor, illiterate white men of the ante-bellum South."

While there were a few traces of "Africanisms" in Black speech, dance, music, folklore, dress, and religion, in Stamp's view, "Before the Civil War, American Negroes developed no cultural nationalism, no conscious pride in African ways." Accordingly, "The average bondsman...

lived more or less aimlessly in a bleak and narrow world. He lived in a world without schools, without books, without learned men; he knew less of the fine arts and of aesthetic values than he had known in Africa; and he found few ways to break the monotonous sameness of all his days...His world was full of mysteries which he could not solve, full of forces which he could not control. And so he tended to be a fatalist and futilitarian, for nothing else could reconcile him to his life.⁵⁶

As a new generation of scholars built upon Stamp's work, and as the scope and content of historical studies shifted dramatically during the 1960's, Stamp would find many of these points met with a sharp rebuttal. Though a number of monographs subsequent monographs would deal with regional variations in slavery, the free Black population, and the economic order of the South, we shall see that the most fundamental transformation in slave historiography involved a new focus on Black culture.⁵⁷ Revisionist historians explored hitherto unorthodox sources to try and reveal the true nature of slave life, and as a result, tended to come up with radically different perceptions concerning the vitality of the slaves' folklore, religion, family lives, and community organization.

⁵⁶ Stamp, 377, 361.

⁵⁷ For specifics, perhaps the single best bibliographic essay on the historiography of slavery is included in Peter J. Parish's *Slavery: History and Historians* (Harper & Row, 1989) 167-188.

While this point will be developed more fully in chapters to follow, it is worth noting that Stamppp himself has suggested that many of these studies have served as a useful corrective to his own. In his 1970 paper, "Rebels and Sambos: The Search for the Negro's Personality in Slavery," he acknowledged that though slaves suffered under an oppressive system, it "nevertheless permitted them a degree of semiautonomous community life"; that "it was custom for them to live in family groups"; that Christianity functioned not only as a "means of control," but also offered "subtle ways of protesting their condition (as) a system of beliefs that comforted and sustained them in their bondage...(and an) additional means of self expression that helped them retain their psychic balance." Though Stamppp remained steadfast in his belief that there was never "a truly autonomous Afro-American subculture...in slavery days," he did allow that "some ingredients for one were certainly there," and so following Emancipation, freedmen, "through their churches, their music, and a great variety of organized social activities" were able to create rich and readily distinguishable lives.⁵⁸ Secondly, in evaluating the strengths and weakness of any work, it is of course always a fair idea to take in to account the time and place in which it was written. Stamppp's book, as we've noted, was the first major reinterpretation of slavery in almost 40 years. As Nathan Huggins has remarked, the idea that slaves "were instrumental in the creation of the world they shared with the master" was "out of the question in the late 1950s." And though John Hope Franklin refrains from naming names in his 1986 essay "On the Evolution of Scholarship in Afro-American History," it seems clear that he recognizes The Peculiar Institution as a work that has been criticized by others for neglecting "some cherished attributes of Afro-American life and history, such as race pride and cultural nationalism." While he apparently agrees that such claims have some merit, he adds that they "overlook the important fact that the historians

⁵⁸ Stamppp, Kenneth M. "Rebels and Sambos: The Search for the Negro's Personality in Slavery," *Journal of Southern History*, (August, 1971) 382-83, 390. Cited in Meier and Rudwick, 271.

of (Stampp's) generation were compelled to fight for the integration of Afro-American history in to the mainstream of the nation's history."⁵⁹

Relatedly, Stampp would also be identified by subsequent writers as a "neo-abolitionist".⁶⁰ Oddly enough, in some cases was nearly an *ad homineum* thrust, for as the sixties evolved, not everyone appreciated the increasing number of liberally minded, white historians specializing in Black history. This too, will be a point further developed. Worthy of remark here, however, is that for all the acclaim Stampp received, he left himself vulnerable to at least two other, closely related criticisms. First, pervasive through his book is a tendency to sometimes lapse into an excessive sermonizing or moralizing that seems perhaps out of character for a historical monograph. Second, Stampp unwittingly came to symbolize some of the arrogance and paternalism of many white liberals of his era with his aforementioned remark that "innately, Negroes *are*, after all, only white men with black skins, nothing more, nothing less." According to C. Vann Woodward, the remark betrayed a "Northern type" of "self conscious", moral engagement, explicitly suggesting to "the Brother in Black" an awareness that slaves were "endowed natively with all the putative white attributes of courage, manhood, rebelliousness, and love of liberty."⁶¹ Charles Silberman, in a widely read book on race relations published in 1964, simply disagreed with Stampp. To argue that Negroes are white men with Black skins, he said, "is to pretend that we are all engaged in a masquerade."⁶² Elkins seized on this line as well: "Professor Stampp," he wrote, "like his abolitionist forbears, is still as much concerned as they to prove slavery an abomination and to prove master and slave equal before their

⁵⁹ Franklin, John Hope. "On the Evolution of Scholarship in Afro-American History," in The State of Afro-American History: Past, Present, and Future, Hine, Darlene Clark and Holt, Thomas C., eds. (Louisiana State Press, 1986) 21.

⁶⁰ See Franklin, John Hope, The State of Afro-American History, 17; Elkins, 22-23; .

⁶¹ Woodward, C. Vann, 7-8.

⁶² Silberman, Charles E. Crisis In Black and White (Random House, 1964) 73.

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Maker.”⁶³ Consequently, other scholars (and presumably, many readers), were able to draw a clear moral lesson from The Peculiar Institution: “If white Americans could understand the psychic and cultural traumas occasioned by generations of bondage, they would presumably experience the necessary sympathy and guilt to undo the wrongs of the past.”⁶⁴

Scholars have long debated whether it is a good idea for historians to try and resurrect a “useable past”. All too often, they assert, various political commitments or presentist ideologies have marred a necessary respect for the “pastness” of the past. These concerns became more pronounced as historians frequently saw their works more or less as political interventions into the contemporary debates that raged amongst them.⁶⁵ While Stamp, as we have seen, may have begun his work on slavery during a period of increased racial enlightenment, it’s doubtful that he ever had an idea of the vast extent to which slavery - and issues of identity politics linked to slavery - would later come to play such a key role in public discourse. As Davis has wryly remarked, “neither Stamp nor Elkins wrote for a bullish market”.⁶⁶

That said, Stamp could not have picked a more propitious time to release his book, and Holt is not the first scholar to candidly remark that Stamp’s success must be credited, in part, “to the fact that the prevailing ideology of the time was ripe for his message.”⁶⁷ It has been made clear that Stamp began research for his work during a period of increased racial enlightenment. But by the time his book was ready to be published, the pace of dramatic civil rights activity had increased

⁶³ Elkins, 22-23.

⁶⁴ Davis, David Brion, 3.

⁶⁵ This is not the place for a lengthy investigation into this dilemma, and perhaps the subject is best left for discussion by those scholars who feel themselves capable of attaining complete degrees of scholarly detachment. Peter Novick’s book That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession (Cambridge University Press, 1988) is easily the best treatment of the ways in which “the ideal and ideal of objectivity” has been “elaborated, challenged, modified, and defended over the last century”.

⁶⁶ Davis, David Brion, 7.

⁶⁷ Holt, Thomas C., in Foner, Eric (ed.), The New American History, 214.

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further. One significant victory involved the Supreme Court's decision in "Brown v. the Board of Education," which in 1954 struck a major blow against school segregation. As Harvard Sitkoff has recalled, the implications of the case stretched far beyond the realm of education:

Euphoric blacks declared that just as the first Emancipation Proclamation abolished slavery, so this second proclamation of emancipation would end all Jim Crow...More, it offered the realbeginning of a multi-racial democratic society. Brown heightened the aspirations and expectations of Afro-Americans as nothing ever had before. Nearly a century after their professed freedom had been stalled, compromised, and stolen, Blacks confidently anticipated being free at last.⁶⁸

In 1955, it became clear that a rising tide against African colonialism and imperialism would parallel much of the struggle for Black liberation in America. Many scholars and activists, who had heretofore been either ignorant or ambivalent about Africa, began to take an interest in struggles to fend against European domination. George Houser has noted that the Bandung Conference of this year, which "heralded the organization of colored peoples of the world to resist colonialism and racism," had "epitomized the spirit of the era". Likewise, Homer Jack, an American who attended the conference, wrote that "Bandung somehow caught the world's imagination, and early on its leaders were conscious that history was looking over their shoulder".⁶⁹

Likewise, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, culminating in December, 1956, doubtless sparked an interest in race relations amongst students, scholars, and the media. While this local movement certainly signified the rise of Martin Luther King, Jr., to the national limelight, it also served as an early indication of the ways in

⁶⁸ Sitkoff, Harvard. *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1992* (Hill and Wang, 1993) 22.

⁶⁹ Houser, George M., "Freedom's Struggle Crosses Oceans and Mountains: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Liberation Struggles in Africa and America," in Albert, Peter J. and Hoffman, Ronald, (eds.), *We Shall Overcome: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Da Capo Press, 1993), 170.

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which profound changes in racial consciousness (in general), and an awareness of the strength of collective Black protest (in particular), would later transform the nation. All of these developments, within a year of The Peculiar Institution's publication, helped to ensure that the revisionary spirit behind the book would not fall on deaf ears. As Meier and Rudwick have written, as a result of Stamp's wide readership and the great amount of acclaim that was heaped upon his book, "What in 1944 had been a heretical view of a dissenting minority was becoming the standard interpretation." Times were "auspicious" for the book's publication indeed.⁷⁰

III

As something of a corollary to Stamp's notion of a "peculiar urgency" surrounding slave studies of the 1950's, Elkins began his book Slavery with a brief discussion of the connection between his subject and the racial politics of the era in which he was writing. As we have seen, throughout much of the 1950's, the nation was witness to a precipitous rise in civil rights activity. Whereas Stamp's book came off the press hard on the heels of "Brown v. the Board of Education" and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Elkins study followed the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the development of Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the school integration crisis at Little Rock. Meanwhile, by virtue of the work of such writers as James Baldwin and Norman Mailer, much of the white reading public was finally beginning to pay attention to the psychologies of Black Americans. Without referencing any of these particulars, Elkins nonetheless noted that "How a person thinks about Negro slavery historically," typically "makes a great deal of difference here and now; it tends to locate him morally in relation to a whole range of very immediate political, social, and philosophical issues which in some way refer back to slavery."⁷¹

⁷⁰ Meier and Rudwick, 138-39.

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Though there's no denying that Stamppp's book was a landmark, it is widely held that Elkins study has had the larger impact upon the profession, even if few serious scholars have found his arguments convincing. As British historian Peter Parish has observed, "His influence is to be measured not in the band of disciples and converts he inspired, for their numbers were few, but in the army of critics he goaded into fresh thinking about a whole range of different questions."⁷² Charles Dew sees Slavery as a "seminal work" which "largely determined the direction" of many subsequent studies.⁷³ Nathan Huggins has credited Elkins work with having "led to a transformation and renewal of historical writing on the peculiar institution,"⁷⁴ and Stamppp himself has remarked that "It is no small tribute to Elkins's achievement that his essay should have provided the focus for virtually all scholarly discussion of slave personality for more than a decade, and that it elicited a volume of commentary, with a response from Elkins."⁷⁵

Though it is often claimed that Stamppp's work paved the way for Elkins to open new avenues of inquiry, Meier and Rudwick explain that he had already sketched out most of the ideas in Slavery before reading Stamppp. Yet this did not prevent him from using The Peculiar Institution as a springboard from which to launch his own concerns. While lauding Stamppp's study as the "culmination and quintessence" of a movement to replace U.B. Phillips' books as the "authoritative statement" on slavery, Elkins was distressed by an unintended consequence: slave

⁷¹Elkins, Stanley, Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life, (University of Chicago Press, 1959) 1.

⁷² Parish, Peter J., Slavery: History and Historians, (Harper & Row, 1989) 7.

⁷³ Dew, 121.

⁷⁴ Huggins, Nathan, "The Deforming Mirror of Truth: Slavery and the Master Narrative of American History," *Radical History Review* #49, 29.

⁷⁵ Stamppp, Kenneth, "Rebels and Sambos: The Search for the Negro's Personality in Slavery," *Journal of Southern History*, (August, 1971), in Stamppp, The Imperiled Union: Essays on the Background of the Civil War, (Oxford University Press, 1980) 50. The book of commentary Stamppp is referring to is Lane, Ann J., (ed.) The Debate Over Slavery: Stanley Elkins and His Critics (University of Illinois Press, 1970).

scholarship, he argued, was running a risk of becoming increasingly redundant.

"Is there anything more to say," he wondered, "that has not been said already?"

There is now very little that Phillips did with the plantation regime that has not been done with greater thoroughness by his Northern successor. Not only has Phillips' moral position been overwhelmingly reversed, but even his scholarship - though nearly forty years would have to elapse before anyone finally accomplished it - has been left in the shade by scholarship more painstaking still. Not only has the challenge been successful; the victory is devastating...And yet what is even more striking than Professor Stamp's triumph is the fact that the coercion's of a century-old debate remain irresistible: he has joined the debate, he may even have won it, but it is still very much the same debate.

Thus, in an effort to examine "the old subject in new ways," Elkins divided his book into three lengthy essays, on "Institutions and the Law of Slavery," "Slavery and Personality," and "Slavery and the Intellectual." This study will limit its focus to the first two sections, which involve the impact of slavery upon the personalities of typical bondsmen - clearly the most widely discussed aspect of the book.⁷⁶ While Latin American slavery may have been cruel, Elkins draws upon Frank Tannenbaum's Slave and Citizen (1948) to argue that it was nonetheless a much more "open" and flexible system than that which ever existed in the U.S. south. Long accustomed to slavery, New World colonies more or less adopted a set of social values that had been shaped over several hundred years. Specifically, there were three separate tiers of interests, involving a national church, a sort of royal paternalism, and a quasi-medieval planter class, which had been stewed together within the Latin American system in such a way as to preserve the general

⁷⁶ For a discussion of Elkins so-called Antislavery thesis, see Wyatt-Brown, Bertram, "Stanley Elkins' Slavery: The Antislavery Interpretation Reexamined," in *The American Quarterly*, May, 1973, pgs. 154-176. In this piece, Wyatt-Brown attributes a general neglect of Elkins' antislavery section to the fact that he "offered no imaginative analogies comparable to those which so provocatively illuminated slave psychology and Latin racial styles," as well as the fact that "the causes of the Civil War...did not excite the literary battles they once had. Historians of the '60's, like everyone else, were preoccupied with racial tensions, not with the rights and wrongs of sectional disputes." (pg. 154).

humanity of its slaves. Put another way, “three formidable interests,” though “distinct and not always harmonious,” were nevertheless all deeply concerned with the development of slavery as an institution. Accordingly, “this balance of power left its profound impress on the actual legal and customary sanctions governing the status and treatment of the slaves.”⁷⁷ As a result, the Spanish and Portuguese societies looked favorably upon manumissions, extended legal protection to slave marriages, and put limitations on the policing and disciplining of their slaves. Though owners of course controlled their slaves labor, for practical purposes this was seen as a contractual arrangement. In Elkins’ words, “the master owned the man’s labor but not the man,” for “master and slave were brothers in Christ.”⁷⁸ The primary consideration here is “not the severity or the laxness of the slave systems but the completeness with which the decisions concerning the slave (was) under the master’s control.” Given a greater array of rights and opportunities, Latin American slaves tended to have the necessary space to more fully develop their personalities.

By contrast, ante-bellum slavery developed autonomously, without any significant institutional safeguards. With unopposed capitalism a driving force, the result was “unmitigated slavery”. Personal relationships between owners and slaves were of course subsidiary to the exigencies that created the need for slavery in the first place, and so slaves were denied the fullest fruits of their humanity. Moreover, as a result of the “finely circumscribed” and “self-contained” nature of United States slavery, “virtually all lines of communication to society at large, originated and ended with the master.”⁷⁹ Slaves could expect a lifetime of bondage and servitude, and their family ties were always subject to the whims of their

⁷⁷ Elkins, *Slavery*, 71.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

owners. Matters of policing and discipline, while loosely regulated, were in effect almost always subject to the will and desire of the planter. Altogether:

the rights and property, and all other civil and legal 'rights' were everywhere denied the slave with a clarity that left no doubt of his utter dependency upon his master...In this sense, American slavery operated as a 'closed' system - one in which, for the generality of slaves in their nature as men and women, *sub specie aeternitatis*, contacts with free society could occur only on the most narrowly circumscribed of terms.⁸⁰

Elkins hypothesized that this closed system was so pervasive, and so powerful, that it had had a profound shaping effect upon the personalities of millions of bondsmen. In this view, the "Sambo" stereotype was no mere fabrication from Southern lore, but rather an accurate reflection of the predominate slave personality. In describing Sambo, Elkins did not mean to perpetuate racist dogma, but rather was trying to describe what he saw as a tragic consequence of racism. The "typical plantation slave," Elkins wrote, "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 childish 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."⁸¹

Elkins reasoned his assumption from the fact that so many contemporary observers of slaves, including planters and northern travelers, had left near-uniform descriptions of this "slavish personality". In his view, "The picture has far too many circumstantial details, its hues have been stroked in by too many different brushes, for it to be denounced as counterfeit. Too much folk-knowledge, too much plantation literature, too much of the Negroes own lore, have gone into its making to entitle one in good conscience to condemn it as 'conspiracy'." By

⁸⁰ Ibid., 59 and 81-82.

⁸¹ Elkins, 82,

contrast to this ubiquitous portrayal of Sambo in the south, he notes that "one searches in vain" for such a personality in the Latin-American system.⁸²

Though Elkins applied theoretical knowledge gained from social psychology to support his assumption that the plantation system fostered infantilism "as a normal feature of behavior," more controversial was his analogy between slavery and the German concentration camps of World War II. Both systems, he argued, were "perverted patriarchies," where masters or SS guards had complete control over their dependents. Accordingly, victims of both systems had minimal communication with the larger society beyond that allowed by their superiors. And just as slaves were held to have developed childlike qualities over the course of their lives in bondage, Jewish prisoners were said to have developed - in just a few months - "types of behavior which are characteristic of infancy or early youth." Just as slaves identified with their masters, Jews, "reduced to complete childish dependence," identified closely with their Nazi captors.

It is important to note that Elkins carefully qualified many of his main arguments. The comparison and contrast between Latin American and United States slavery, he insists, is but a model. To identify "infantile" behavior as predominate in slave society, he remarked, is to "generalize at a fairly crude level". Moreover, he acknowledged a "broad belt of indeterminacy between 'mere acting'" on the part of the slave, and his or her "true self". Finally, though he maintained the usefulness of the analogy between slavery and the Holocaust, he took care to delineate, with some specificity, some of their major differences. None of this, however, was enough to insulate Elkins from broad attacks upon his scholarship.

In analyzing the public reception of Slavery, Davis notes that "a considerable amount of energy has been expended to rebut Elkins". These would include attacks on Elkins belief that Latin American slavery was "more open,

⁸² Elkins, 84.

flexible, and humane than North American slavery,” and that the southern system wrought “a fundamental personality change in its victims, reducing the typical bondsman to a childlike, submissive, carefree and self-deprecating Sambo.”⁸³

To the first point, Davis himself has been one of several historians who have marshaled impressive evidence to suggest that Latin American slavery was in fact much more harsh than he had surmised. In spite of the laws which governed the system, overtly racist slaveowners enforced “military-like” discipline with impunity. They were also perpetually frightened by prospective slave insurrections, and prohibited the teaching of religion to slaves. Though Elkins’ argument hinges less on the cruelty of the slave system, and more on the extent to which these systems recognize the “basic humanity” of their slaves, Davis suggests that it is “unrealistic to draw too sharp a line between moral status and physical treatment.”⁸⁴ Genovese has taken a different tract here, arguing that Elkins was wrong to conclude that the Sambo stereotype was unique to the slave south. His claim is that Sambo was the manifestation of a “slave personality” that existed “wherever slavery existed”. Beneath this thin veneer, however, lay “dangerous and strong currents” which could prompt slaves to turn “fierce” and “violent”.⁸⁵

It was this very use of the Sambo stereotype, however, that exposed Elkins to the sharpest of criticisms. While some have allowed that slaves may have acted out a Sambo *role*, this was predominantly a clever means of manipulating their owners and overseers, who, for obvious reasons, needed to believe in myths of Black inferiority. Others have persuasively shown that “there were many more ‘significant others’ in the life of the slave than the master, that a self-perpetuating viable slave culture did emerge to compete with slaveowner’s authority and

⁸³ Davis, 4.

⁸⁴ Davis, David Brion, “The Continuing Contradiction of Slavery: A Comparison of British America and Latin America,” in Lane, Ann J., (ed.), The Debate Over Slavery: Stanley Elkins and His Critics (University of Illinois Press, 19??) 113.

⁸⁵ Genovese, Eugene D., “Rebelliousness and Docility in the Negro Slave,” in Lane, 43-74.

significance, a slave culture which the slaveowners were unable to perceive and therefore unable to pass down as reality.”⁸⁶ The most convincing analysis along these lines may have come from Sterling Stuckey, whose analysis of Black folk culture, (largely derived from Africa), affirms “the existence of a large number of vital, tough-minded (slaves) who, though severely limited and abused by slavery, had found a way to preserve their humanity in the he face of insuperable odds.”⁸⁷

While Meier and Rudwick have described the historical response to Elkins as “almost entirely negative,” this is not wholly accurate. John Hope Franklin, for example, heralded the book as one of “the most original and serious examinations of slavery or any other institution in America,” and applauded it as “bold and original”.⁸⁸ Sterling Stuckey considered the early response to Elkins to be “generally favorable.” “For the most part,” he wrote, there were “relatively mild criticisms.”⁸⁹ Davis lists John William Ward, Nathan Glazer, Eugene Genovese, and C. Vann Woodward as important scholars who, though they had some reservations, felt more or less the same way.⁹⁰ A more accurate delineation would be to say that over the course of the 1960’s, major critiques of Elkins built upon one another, until his work had become almost entirely discredited. This is interesting because it says a good deal about the ways in which slave scholarship has evolved. Though Stamp and Elkins had very different understandings of the effect of the peculiar institution upon the slave, the locus of each of their studies was the essential brutality of the system. In Davis’ view:

It is clear that Elkins intended his harsh portrait of slavery to provide the grounds for continuing white patience and forbearance. In the 1950’s, at least, it appeared that a more sanguine image of slavery could only reinforce unenlightened complaints that enough

⁸⁶ Lane, 10-11.

⁸⁷ Stuckey, Sterling, “Through the Prism of Folklore: The Black Ethos in Slavery,” in Lane, 268.

⁸⁸ Franklin, John Hope, “Slavery and Personality,” *Massachusetts Review* (Autumn, 1960) 123.

⁸⁹ Stuckey, Sterling, “Twilight of Our Past: Reflections on the Origins of Black History,” in *Amistad* 2, (1971) 268.

⁹⁰ Davis, 4.

allowances had been made, that enough time had elapsed for Negroes to begin to behave like white men.⁹¹

Echoing this point, John Hope Franklin noted that, "In language as strong as any used by Stamp, (Elkins) tells the apologists of slavery that the institution had a corrosive effect upon every aspect of the slaves being."⁹² Both scholars reacted against the tendencies of their predecessors to minimize the suffering of slaves, and both men insisted that historians could no longer afford to treat slavery as a peripheral issue. As a result of both their works, (but because of Elkins in particular), Eric Foner has written that:

A generation of historians sat out to demonstrate that rather being transformed in into "Sambos" entirely dependent upon their masters, slaves had created a viable, semiautonomous culture among themselves. Scholars delved into sources hitherto largely ignored - slave songs, spirituals, folklore, narratives written by fugitives, there minisces of ex-slaves interviewed during the 1930's by the WPA, marriage registers dating from just after the emancipation - to demonstrate that slaves possessed their own values, aspirations, and a sense of identity. Their work formed a major component of the broader efforts in the 1960's and 1970's to rewrite American history "from the bottom up". The study of slave culture continued to dominate writing on slavery in the 1980's...⁹³

Put another way, by the late 1960's, focus upon the damage of slavery had rapidly gone out of style. Kenneth Stamp has recalled that in 1969, criticism of his work "seemed to have erupted quite suddenly, with black militants insisting that because he was a white man, he had no right to do The Peculiar Institution."⁹⁴ The same year, a young Black scholar, discussing plans for an Afro-American Center at Cornell University, insisted that while some white scholars might be invited to do research there, he conspicuously noted that others, "like historians Kenneth Stamp

⁹¹ Ibid., 10.

⁹² Franklin, 124.

⁹³ Foner, 75.

⁹⁴ Meier and Rudwick, 292.

(and) Stanley Elkins," were hardly likely to make the guest list.⁹⁵ Stuckey added that "Elkins' treatment of Afro-American personality must surely stand as one of the most intellectually irresponsible of his generation."⁹⁶ Perhaps David Southern has best summed up the situation:

To say the least, neither Stamppp nor Elkins pleased those who were looking for a usable black past. In the 1960's and 1970's many militants and some white radicals fiercely attacked both Stamppp and Elkins for their views of slavery. They vehemently rejected not only Elkins' highly questionable "Sambo" image but Stamppp's idea of slaves as a "troublesome property." Prideful blacks demanded that historians find derring-do freedom fighters, efficient workers, and successful culture and family builders minimally scarred by the yoke of human bondage.⁹⁷

Much of this animosity was generated by rapid and unpredictable changes in the nature and the direction of America's Second Reconstruction. Long prior to the riots of Detroit, Watts and Newark or the very first cries of "Black Power" in Mississippi, millions of African-Americans had already become disillusioned with the slow progress of civil rights and the overweening paternalism of many white liberals. While many of the locally based struggles in the south had helped to inspire and politicize northern Blacks, there was also a growing awareness that the dismantling of Jim Crow would not significantly bolster their socio-economic standings. As Bayard Rustin remarked, past about 1963, "No longer were Negroes satisfied with integrating lunch counters. They now sought advances in employment, housing, school integration, police protection, and so forth."⁹⁸ While there has always been a contingency of middle-class Black leadership that has advocated various self-help strategies of racial upliftment, as the sixties progressed,

⁹⁵ Dunbar, Ernest, "The Black Studies Thing," *New York Times Magazine*, (April 6, 1969) 70.

⁹⁶ Stuckey, "Twilight of Our Past," 267.

⁹⁷ Southern, David W., *Gunnar Myrdal and Black-White Relations: The Use and Abuse of An American Dilemma, 1944-1969* (Louisiana State University Press, 1987) 216.

⁹⁸ Rustin, Bayard, "From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement," *Commentary* (February, 1965) 25.

many African Americans began to rail against such suggestions. Distrustful of ivory tower academics, with their judgements formed in "Sociology department seminar rooms, filled with aromatic smoke from judiciously smoked pipes," northern leaders refused to attribute ghetto poverty to the shortcomings of Blacks. Rather, blame was cast it upon a confluence of complex economic factors. As one scholar has put it, "Elkins' thesis seemed to provide support for a new 'racism' based on the concept of 'cultural deprivation,' which was replacing crude notions of biological inferiority as a rationale for denying equal justice to Afro-Americans."⁹⁹ In other words, just as historians had reacted against the "damage model" of southern slavery, civil rights leaders were becoming concerned that preoccupation's with the *impact* or the *legacy* of slavery might overshadow wounds that were presently being inflicted upon the Black community by virulent white racism. In one scholar's view, "After the mid-1960's the slightest mention by whites of pathology in the black community (past or present) for whatever reasons brought angry retribution from militant blacks."¹⁰⁰

Yet the largest reason for this emerging ideology can be found in the fact that the race questions of the 1950's proved to have had a profound consciousness-raising effect. Having effectively toppled Jim Crow and earned equality before the law, Black Americans shifted their focus to an array of cultural issues. Foremost amongst these was the idea that a strong emphasis on Black cultural heritage and Black identity would help to offset some of the damage that had been wrought by centuries of white oppression. A natural point at which to begin such an exploration, of course, was the Black experience in slavery. Malcolm X said as much with his declaration that "the cultural revolution will be the journey of the

⁹⁹ Frederickson, George M., "The Historiography of Slavery: Stanley Elkins to Herbert Gutman," *New York Review of Books*, (September 30, 1976) in Frederickson, *The Arrogance of Race: Historical Perspectives on Slavery, Racism, and Social Inequality* (Wesleyan University Press, 1988) 114.

¹⁰⁰ Southern, 216.

rediscovery of ourselves.” While nobody who was concerned with Black liberation wished to minimize the sufferings of those who had endured slavery, there was an inclination amongst African-Americans to focus upon the strength, integrity, and resistance of their ancestors. The discipline of history was to function, not only for its own sake, but also as a model of inspiration to Blacks who were still seeking their full freedom. The idea that slaves had lived in a depressing cultural void, with their lives stripped of meaning, or worse, that they were docile “Sambos,” was not merely to provoke embarrassment, but rather was worthy of vehement recrimination. Energy aimed at ending formal barriers to equality could only be met with diminishing returns, in that the most important victories had already been won, and besides, this would do little to end white racism. Suddenly it seemed clear, however, that broad efforts towards a revitalization of Black culture might be an important defense against the *effects* of white racism. Nobody has expressed this view as well as Ralph Ellison. “Sociologists,” he said, “are propagating an image of the Negro condition which is apt to destroy our human conception of ourselves just at the moment we are becoming politically free.”

We must assert our own values...beginning with slavery. Contrary to some, I feel that our experience as a people involves a great deal of heroism. From one perspective, slavery was horrible and brutalizing. It is said that “Those Africans were enslaved, they died in the Middle Passage, they were abused, their families were separated, they were whipped, they were raped, ravaged and emasculated.” And the Negro writer is tempted to agree. “Yes! God damn it, wasn’t that a horrible thing?” And he sometimes agrees with the next step, which holds that slaves had very little humanity because slavery destroyed it for them and their descendents. That’s what the Stanley M. Elkins “Sambo” argument implies. But despite the historical past and the injustices of the present, there is from *my* perspective something further to say. I have to *affirm* my forefathers and I must *affirm* my parents or be reduced in my own mind to a white man’s inadequate - even if unprejudiced - conception of human complexity...Any people who can endure all of that brutalization and keep together, who could undergo such dismemberment and resuscitate itself, and endure until it could take the initiative in achieving its own freedom, is obviously more than the sum of its brutalization. Seen in this perspective, theirs has been one of the great human experiences and one of the

great triumphs of the spirit in modern times. In fact, in the history of the world.¹⁰¹

Though few have articulated this view as eloquently as Ellison, his was not an elitist sentiment. Rather, he offered a shared understanding of the meaning of the Black past that helped to shape the lives of millions of African-Americans who both participated in and bore witness to the cultural revolution of the 1960's. And of course, such an understanding retains forcefulness and relevance, even today. Elkins has suggested that in reviewing this "precipitous change that occurred in the intellectual weather of the mid-1960's, one must see the famous Moynihan Report, together with what has happened to it, as a truly critical event."¹⁰² It is to this subject, then, that we shall briefly turn our attention.

¹⁰¹ Ellison, Ralph, "A Very Stern Discipline: An Interview with Ralph Ellison," *Harpers* (March, 1967) 83-84. Several scholars cited above, including Elkins, Holt, and Novick, have seized upon these and other words from Ellison by way of illustrating the point that African-Americans of the 1960's saw a need to open new avenues for understanding the experience of slavery.

¹⁰² Elkins, *Slavery*, (3rd edition) 271.

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The art of conscious accommodation, along with all its psychic consequences, is one of the skills that Negroes carried with them from slavery freedom. Accommodation continued to be a part of life for many of them, especially in the rural South, for another century. Being obliged to wear the mask of Sambo, whatever they may have been inside, (it is) doubtless (that) they were, as in slavery days, troubled to an extraordinary degree by the problem of role conflict. To escape this problem seems to have been one of the aims of the black revolution of the 1960's and 1970's, for the search for black identity is in part a search for role clarity. To end the dissembling, to be all of a piece, to force the white community to accept them as they really are, not as it so long wanted to see them, is quite obviously one of the determined goal of the new generation of blacks.

--Kenneth Stamp

THE "MOYNIHAN REPORT" AND THE VICTIMIZATION MODEL OF BLACK HISTORY

The so-called "Moynihan Report," formally titled *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*, was written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then the Assistant Secretary of Labor, in 1965. Merely 78 pages in length, about half of which are filled with government graphs and statistics, it is perhaps best described as a pamphlet. Though it would eventually be released to the public by the Office of Policy Planning and Research (a division of the Department of Labor), it was never intended for public consumption. Rather, it was meant to serve as a sort of internal memo, thousands of which are produced by the government each year. Through the lens of social science, Moynihan had hoped to enlighten top government officials over the failure of federal civil rights policy to meet the minimal needs of millions of African-Americans. While the report contained little in the way of policy recommendations, it did make clear that if federal programs were to include all of our nation's citizenry in the "full and equal sharing in the responsibilities and rewards of citizenship," then they must bear directly upon enhancing "the stability and resources of the Negro American family."¹⁰³

It is perhaps somewhat surprising then, that such a document could precipitate what has been, according to one pair of scholars, "the angriest and most

¹⁰³ Rainwater, Lee and Yancey, William L., The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy (M.I.T. Press, 1967) 48.

bitter controversy yet among government and private individuals all presumably dedicated to realizing Negro rights.”¹⁰⁴ Novick has remarked that “the report produced a storm of protest from blacks and from white liberals and radicals,” and that “It was widely denounced as a racist slander of the black community.”¹⁰⁵ More colorfully, journalist Gary Wills relayed an encounter with a Black police officer he met who, while speaking of Moynihan, remarked that “what that cat knows about us colored boys I could put in my eyeball.”¹⁰⁶

To many contemporary observers, it had seemed that the assault against Moynihan had reached a pinnacle in the mid-1960’s. By this point, his analysis had been effectively discredited in most intellectual circles, and it was clear that it would not prompt any major policy initiatives. In 1967, two sociologists, Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, offered a judicious, scholarly account of its rise and fall in their book, The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy. In 1971, however, William Ryan authored a widely read book, Blaming the Victim, which heaped further scorn upon “the mythology of cultural deprivation” that he felt “had been projected by Moynihan.”¹⁰⁷ And then in 1976, social historian Herbert Gutman published a massive study, The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom: 1790-1925, which, as one scholar has quipped, might be more usefully seen as “an attorney’s brief in the case of *The Black Family v. Daniel Patrick Moynihan*.”¹⁰⁸ The book was well received and occasioned even more discussion of Moynihan’s paper. Certainly this was all puzzling enough to conservative columnist Michael Novack, who wrote in December, 1976, that “eleven years after the Moynihan

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 48.

¹⁰⁵ Novick, 482.

¹⁰⁶ Wills, Gary, The Second Civil War: Arming for Armageddon (New American Library, 1968) 152.

¹⁰⁷ Ryan, William, Blaming the Victim (Vintage Books, 1971) 62,

¹⁰⁸ Novick, Peter, That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession (Cambridge University Press, 1988) 485.

Report was first made public, feelings still run high. He was branded a racist then, and the charge is still being made. Why?"¹⁰⁹

I

Before examining some of the pedantic details of the report or the reasons for its hostile reception, it may be useful to briefly describe some assumptions surrounding the role of the white liberal that were beginning to take shape during this era. In 1962, for example, NAACP vice president Loren Miller raised eyebrows with an article in *The Nation* called "Farewell to Liberals".¹¹⁰ James Baldwin, Miller reported, had "shocked or surprised" many white supporters of civil rights with his declaration that Blacks "twenty years younger than I don't believe in liberals at all."¹¹¹ Baldwin was thirty eight at the time, and so he was speaking about an identifiable trend amongst mostly younger African-Americans who had become frustrated by both the slow pace of civil rights reforms, and their lack of relevance amongst those in many urban centers. This disillusionment would spread quickly. A 1963 *Newsweek* poll, for example, revealed that "skepticism about white moderates and liberals was on the upswing. As one woman put it, 'All Negroes are tired of waiting for the white man to get ready to give him something that is his.'"¹¹²

As scholars Doug McAdam, Clayborne Carson and others have remarked, the 1964 Summer Project of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was in many ways a watershed event in this regard. Veteran activists who had been bravely struggling for years in the deep South in order to make only incremental progress had come to realize that they could only coerce federal intervention through the involvement of wealthy, white college students from the North. While this may have led to some moderate success, many of the northern

¹⁰⁹ Novack, Michael, "Race and Truth," *Commentary* (December, 1976) 55.

¹¹⁰ Miller, Loren, "Farewell to Liberals: A Negroes View," *The Nation*, (October 20, 1962).

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 235.

¹¹² "The Negro in America," *Newsweek*, (July 29, 1963) 15-34.

volunteers brought with them a good dose of paternalism and self-righteousness that had become counter-productive. Furthermore, in the wake of widespread non-compliance with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the refusal of Democratic Party leaders to seat more than two token delegates from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) at that year's National Convention in Atlantic City, disaffection with so-called white "moderates" had reached a high point. According to Cleveland Sellers, most activists left the convention "with the knowledge that our movement had turned into something else. After Atlantic City, our struggle was not for civil rights, but for liberation."¹¹³

Furthermore, by 1964, Baldwin was no longer appropriating the voice of younger militants in order to malign white liberals, but rather was doing a fine job of it himself. Speaking to a group of public school teachers in New York, he said simply "There is no role for the white liberal, he is our affliction."¹¹⁴ Later, he spoke for many when he told the editors of *Commentary* that "the liberal record is a shameful one. And the reason it is so shameful is that white liberals - with some exceptions - have been unable to divest themselves of the whole concept of white supremacy..."¹¹⁵

Such bitterness, as Southern notes, was not restricted to such writers as Baldwin and Malcolm X.

By 1963, moderate blacks demanded "Freedom Now". "Race Men" replaced the old accommodationist leaders. The new leaders directed their appeals less to white conscience than to white fears. They focused more attention on black identity and economics and less on integration. "White liberal" joined "Uncle Tom" as epithets in the militants lexicon.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Southern, David W., Gunnar Myrdal and Black-White Relations: The Use and Abuse of An American Dilemma, 1944-1969, (Louisiana State University Press, 1987) 236.

¹¹⁴ Baldwin, Glazer, Hook, and Myrdal, "Liberalism and the Negro: A Round-Table Discussion," *Commentary*, (March, 1964) 37.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹¹⁶ Southern, 235.

For the purposes of this study, it would seem that there are two more specific realms in which the Black critique of white liberalism has special relevance. For one, there was a concern that the moderate agenda was supportive of integration only to the extent that Black Americans would be willing to adopt what have traditionally been “white” world-views and patterns of living. For many African-Americans, this was hardly a sporting proposition. As the sixties progressed, they would increasingly seek the freedom to create their own identities, and in many instances resisted the efforts of those who would impose a sort of cultural hegemony upon them. Southern has touched on this point with his declaration that “the closer blacks moved to the threshold of integration, the more some feared that white culture would swallow up African-American identity.”¹¹⁷ Put another way, the “ideal self” was no longer to be synonymous with “white” or “middle-class” customs and mores. Again, Baldwin was eloquent on this point, remarking in 1964 that:

...if you don’t know what Ray Charles is singing about, then it is entirely possible that you can’t help me...there is something impertinent in the assumptions (whites) make about me. After all, I have watched the way most white people in this country live. I have worked in their kitchens and I have served them their brandy, I know what goes on in white living rooms better than white people know what goes on in mine. And what I repudiate is the idea that I should learn how to live that way...I happen not to own a Cadillac, but the liberal assumption is that I want one...and if I had to choose between the way most white Americans live and my spareribs and my watermelon, then I would take my spareribs and my watermelon. Of course, it’s a choice I refuse to make.¹¹⁸

Secondly, this backlash against white liberals was often directed more specifically towards white academics, (and more specifically still, towards white

¹¹⁷ Southern, 238.

¹¹⁸ Baldwin, *Commentary*, 38.

social scientists). Many African-Americans thought that whites tended to be too far removed from Black culture to see more than crude stereotypes, or that they would only interpret Black patterns of living through a white lens. As noted researcher William Julius Wilson has put it, a common assumption was that “because white sociologists have neither directly engaged in the black experience, nor been socialized in the life of black people, they do not possess the unique values and perspectives necessary to orient oneself to the problem or to fully comprehend the subtleties of black life styles, the nuances of black behavior, and the meanings of black conduct.”¹¹⁹ Others held grave suspicions that sociologists who were studied Black lifestyles were operating in bad faith, and that their work betrayed a deeper, somewhat disingenuous tendency to promote white interests. One writer, who has studied the role of the whites in the Black Revolution, remarked that “Negroes are apt to regard any research in their world that is undertaken by whites as a form of ‘exploitation,’ to quote one student. According to another student, they ‘observe Negroes through their little microscope of manipulation.’”¹²⁰ Consequently, William Holland, in his article “White Researchers in Black America: The Epistemological Boondoggle,” listed a number of reasons for which ‘white researchers are finding it difficult to continue teaching and researching in certain ethnically oriented areas.’¹²¹ Southern has added that “Suspicion about virtually all white scholarship was rife amongst Black intellectuals”:

According to (one) scholar, blacks felt that social science findings had been “useless and false” for blacks and “useful and false” for whites. The Black Caucus of the American Sociological Society went so far as to demand predetermined results from social

¹¹⁹ Wilson, William J., “The New Black Sociology: Reflections on the “Insiders” and “Outsiders” Controversy,” in Blackwell, James E. and Janowitz, Morris, (eds.) Black Sociologists: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives, (University of Chicago Press, 1974) 323.

¹²⁰ Levy, Charles J., Voluntary Servitude: Whites in the Negro Movement (Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968) vii.

¹²¹ Holland, William R., “The White Researcher in Black America: The Epistemological Boondoggle,” *Public Policy*, (Winter, 1974) 77.

research. It called for sociologists to produce research “which validates social humanism, liberation, and the legitimacy of the struggle of oppressed people for self-determination.” Many observers in the late 1960’s noted the feelings of resentment and the great depths of disagreement and misunderstanding between black and white scholars at professional meetings of the various disciplines in the social sciences.¹²²

Certainly African-Americans of the era had good reason for their skepticism concerning the inability or unwillingness of sociologists gain a meaningful understanding of Black life and culture. Just as historians had earned some contempt for failing to treat Black History as a serious discipline, white sociologists owned an equally shameful record. Pioneering scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois, Charles Johnson and E. Franklin Frazier never received a degree of recognition in accord with the significance of their accomplishments, and they were typically forced to work with limited funding, in segregated institutions. Moreover, sociologists seemed to have played a role equal to historians in perpetuating negative stereotypes without proof or even an adequate amount of investigation. Indeed, the situation was such that in the summer of 1965, shortly after the Moynihan Report had begun to attract national attention, *Newsweek* could speak this generally about the typical “Negro child”:

(He) has hazardous life. For one thing, his parents are likely to be divorced or living apart...For another, the Negro child is fairly likely to be illegitimate...In addition, the Negro child is far more likely to be a relief recipient...He is normally unsuccessful in school...He has trouble getting a job...and he is so psychologically and educationally bankrupt he can’t escape to the armed forces. *These and other characteristics about lower class Negroes are symptomatic of an ailment that began with slavery...Slavemasters began the process by denying Negroes the sacrament of marriage, by breaking up families on the auction block...Thus scarred by history, the Negro family was already fragile by the eve of the great black Diaspora to the cities.*¹²³ (Italics mine)

¹²² Southern, 266.

¹²³ “New Crisis: The Negro Family,” *Newsweek*, (August 9, 1965) 32-35.

II

In another era, then, perhaps the Moynihan Report might not have been so quickly engulfed in a storm of criticism and protest. As Rainwater and Yancey have pointed out, amongst professional sociologists, there really was nothing in this study that could be considered “new” or “startling”. Rather, in a “dramatic” and somewhat polemical style, they suggest that his goal was to orient public policy to a commonly accepted view of the plights of Black Americans. In fact, much of the report was modeled after the work of the famous Black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier. Southern echoes this point, claiming that “in its pessimistic tone and its recognition of the crisis” surrounding the Black underclass, “the study only reiterated what many social scientists had been saying for some time.”¹²⁴

Additional support for *The Negro Family* was gained from Myrdal’s An American Dilemma and Kenneth B. Clark’s study of Harlem, Dark Ghetto (1964), which also made frequent use of the concept of “pathology” in describing family instability in inner-city America.

Moynihan’s argument, though somewhat lengthy, is easily summarized. Collectively, he thought that African-Americans had no hope for achieving a meaningful degree of social and economic equality with white Americans unless “a new and special effort (was) made.” In spite of the fact that Blacks seemed to have gained full recognition of their civil rights, the social conditions surrounding their family lives had continued to deteriorate. As evidence, he presented the facts that: a) Nearly a quarter of urban Negro marriages are dissolved; b) nearly a quarter of Negro births are illegitimate; c) as a consequence, almost one fourth of Negro families are headed by females, and d) this break-down of the Negro family has led to a startling increase in welfare dependency.

¹²⁴ Southern, 253.

In Moynihan's analysis, the roots of this problem can be found in slavery, in the effects of reconstruction on Black family life, in the impact of unemployment and poverty upon Black families (particularly the Black male) and the fact that "the American wage system" has no mechanism to insure that family needs are met. As a result of higher fertility rates amongst Blacks, he expected the scope of these problems to magnify.

Following from this, he argued that most lower-class families were afflicted by a "tangle of pathology." Under this rubric, he posed the facts that "the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure"; that student achievement is considerably more rare amongst Blacks than whites; that Black communities are plagued by "higher rates of delinquency and crime"; that African-Americans disproportionately fail the Armed Forces Qualification Test, which measures "ones ability to perform at an acceptable level of competence," (thereby offering an indication of ones prospects in the job market); and, finally, he discusses the general "alienation of Negro men which results in their withdrawal from stable family-oriented society, in higher rates of drug addiction, (and) in despair of achieving a stable family life.

All of this information is presented by way of building "A Case for National Action." While Moynihan's report did not include any specific policy proposals, it was clear that he had hoped for "a kind of sweeping domestic 'Marshall Plan' of federal assistance to the black community"¹²⁵ in the form of jobs, job training, increased educational opportunities, and better designed welfare and social programs.

Of specific interest here is the fact that Moynihan hinged part of his case upon what has alternately been called the "damage," "deficit," or "victimization" models of slavery, which of course was largely drawn from Stanley Elkins' study.

¹²⁵ Elkins, Stanley, Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life (University of Chicago Press, [Third Edition] 1959) 271.

Thus, as Novick has pointed out, “The Elkins thesis was no longer of merely ‘historical interest,’ but was perceived as central to contemporary debates on social policy.”¹²⁶

His first assumption was that slavery “was the most awful the world has ever known.” With lengthy citations from Tannenbaum (whom Elkins had drawn from) and sociologist Nathan Glazer (who was very much influenced by Elkins), he reasoned that “American slavery was profoundly different from, and *in its lasting effects on individuals and children* (italics mine), indescribably worse than any recorded servitude, ancient or modern.”¹²⁷ Thus, in what has been called “the most hyperbolic passage in a document not generally given to understatement,”¹²⁸ Moynihan claimed that “it was by destroying the Negro family under slavery that white America broke the will of the Negro people.”¹²⁹

Before the report ever became public, Moynihan had co-authored a speech that incorporated many of its findings, which President Lyndon Johnson delivered to graduates of Howard University in June, 1965. The address was notable for the fact that instead of merely focusing upon the need to end segregation, Johnson spoke of the urgent need to improve the social and economic conditions of African-Americans. Upon reciting a litany of statistics that drew attention to a widening gulf between Black and white Americans in employment, income, and infant mortality, he suggested two causes. First, African-Americans were “trapped...in inherited, gateless poverty” brought upon by an inadequate distribution of government services; secondly they remained afflicted by “the devastating heritage of long years of slavery; and a century of oppression, hatred, and injustice.” Like Elkins, Johnson was careful to point out that he did not believe these problems to be the result of innate racial differences (as many presidents before him had), but

¹²⁶ Novick, 483.

¹²⁷ Rainwater and Yancey, 15.

¹²⁸ Novick, 482.

¹²⁹ Rainwater and Yancey, 15.

rather, “they are solely and simply the consequence of ancient brutality, past injustice, and present prejudice.”¹³⁰ His solution? Jobs that pay a family wage, improved housing opportunities, welfare programs, and medical care, as well as a plea for “an understanding heart” amongst whites. In order to facilitate discussion on these issues, he announced a fall White House conference, “To Fulfill These Rights,” which would be attended by a wide array of government officials, scholars, and Black leaders.

III

Martin Luther King, Jr., Roy Wilkins (NAACP), and Whitney Young (Urban League) had all read drafts of this speech and offered their approval, and it was well received in both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Each of these papers, however, painted somewhat contradictory portraits of the speech’s main theme. While the *Times* suggested that the federal government would be shouldering a heavier burden in an effort to promote family stability amongst African-Americans, the *Post* reasoned that the thrust of the speech was “self improvement”. “Implicit in his discussion,” said their editors, “is the fact that the government cannot reach all of the sources of maladjustment, except in a remote way...there is a need for...group efforts and a general improvement of the social, moral, and intellectual environment in which people live.” Thus, as Rainwater and Yancey have pointed out, “You could pay your money and take your choice.” Either the President was asking African-Americans to “pull up their socks and stop asking the government for so much money,” or he was encouraging the development of “massive federal programs” to aid Black communities.¹³¹ With such media scrutiny of the speech, along with the fact that the Watts riot of that summer focused greater attention upon the plight of urban Blacks, it was only a matter of time before the intellectual underpinnings of Johnson’s address would be

¹³⁰ Ibid., 28.

¹³¹ Ibid. 135, 244.

made public. In fact, by the time the Moynihan Report began running off the presses of the Department of Labor, most of its contents had already been leaked to various press representatives. (It was noted above that Moynihan never imagined his report would be read by more than a hundred or so government officials. As it turned out, over 70,000 copies were printed). Altogether, the effect of this coverage “was to subtly exaggerate the already dramatic and sensational aspects of Moynihan’s presentation,” thereby deepening “the impression that the report dealt almost exclusively with the family, (and) its ‘pathology’ and ‘instability’ as *the* causes of the problems Negroes have.” Thus, much of the press commentary about the report had an “Alice in Wonderland” character about it.¹³² Little was said about the “vicious cycle” of poverty that Moynihan felt was a consequence of unemployment, an insufficient wage system, poverty, and urbanization. Indeed, these figured as his largest “explanatory variables”.

Certainly Moynihan’s critics were quick to deny that ghetto life was marked by a “tangle of pathology”; Rather, they suggested that Moynihan had rushed to his conclusion, seeing only instability and family breakdown, where in fact he should have found healthy, cultural adaptations to white oppression. As Ellison argued, “Moynihan looked at a fatherless family and interpreted it...in a white cultural pattern. He wasn’t looking for accommodations Negroes have worked out in dealing with fatherless families. Grandmothers very often look after the kids. The mother works or goes on relief. The kids identify with stepfathers, uncles, even the mothers’ boyfriends. How children grow up is a cultural, not a statistical

¹³² Ibid. 153. Interestingly, Rainwater and Yancey point out that part of this problem resulted from the fact that stylistically, Moynihan greatly overused the word “fundamental,” where in many cases it is clear that he simply meant “important”. For example, he spoke of family structure as “the fundamental problem,” and the deterioration of the family as “the fundamental source of weakness in the Negro community.” The matriarchal family structure was “the fundamental fact” of Black family life. And, “the fundamental, overwhelming fact” is the high rate of Black unemployment. “This set of ‘fundamental’ quotations about the family was widely quoted and appear as much more accusatory in short press articles than in the report itself.” 161.

pattern.”¹³³ Floyd McKissick, then director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) remarked that his “major criticism” of the report was that “it assumes that middle class values are the correct ones for everyone in America.”¹³⁴ Frank Riessman further observed that Moynihan’s thesis was “one-sided” and that he ignored the extent to which “the Negro has responded to his oppressive conditions by many powerful coping endeavors,” one of the most extraordinary of which “has been the extended, female-based family.”¹³⁵

More importantly, it was held that in attributing unfortunate ghetto behavior to the legacy of slavery, (for which no contemporary American could be held responsible), Moynihan had employed a rather disingenuous maneuver, typical of white liberals. In effect, he was absolving government officials “from the true causes of family instability - racism and discrimination in the here and now.” As such, the phrase “blaming the victim” was first entered into the lexicon of public discourse by way of William Ryan’s critique of the Moynihan Report. Reducing Moynihan’s study to “a subtle form of racism,” he noted that:

We are told the Negroes condition is due to his “pathology”, his values, the way he lives, the kind of family life he leads. The major qualification - the bow to egalitarianism - is that these conditions are said to grow out of the Negro’s history of being enslaved and oppressed - *generations ago*....Liberal America is pleading guilty to the savagery and oppression against the Negro that happened 100 years ago, in order to escape trial for the crimes of today.¹³⁶

James Forman echoed this complaint, writing that in “laying primary blame for present-day inequalities on the pathological condition of the Negro family and

¹³³ Corry, John, “An American Novelist Who Sometimes Teaches,” *New York Times Magazine*, (January 20, 1966); in Maryemma, Graham and Singh, Amritjit (eds.), Conversations With Ralph Ellison (University of Mississippi Press, 1995).

¹³⁴ Rainwater and Yancey, 200.

¹³⁵ Riessman, Frank, “In Defense of the Negro Family,” *Dissent* (March-April, 1966); in Rainwater and Yancey, 475.

¹³⁶ Novick, 482.

community, Moynihan has provided a massive academic cop-out for the white conscience.” Though “well-intentioned,” his analysis “provides fuel for a new racism.” Disruption in Black communities, he argued, had taken hold not merely because of “the restraints of our past” but “because of systematic and continued discrimination.” Thus, in failing to pay due attention to this fact, he characterized the report as “irresponsible, dangerous, and just plain wrong.”¹³⁷ Others saw this as a deliberate means, on the part of Moynihan and his supporters, of trying to exonerate centuries of institutionalized racism.

Relatedly, many felt that in drawing attention to delinquency, crime, school dropouts, and unemployment, Moynihan gave fuel to the conservative view that federal intervention would be ineffective in improving the lot of African-Americans in urban centers. Others feared that since Moynihan argued “the demand of Negro Americans for full recognition of their civil rights was finally met” with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, he was discouraging further voting and civil rights legislation. Finally, a number of critics tried to show that the report was marred by methodological weakness and naive interpretations of statistical data that did not support its main conclusions, especially with regard to discussions of illegitimacy, criminal behavior, and welfare dependency.

The fall conference that President Johnson had mentioned in his summer commencement address took on a greater sense of urgency in the wake of the Watts riot of August, 1965. To be sure, the riots informed much of the nation of the perils of urban ghettos. At the same time, however, they may also have fanned the flames of anti-Moynihanism, as Black leaders reacted defensively against a number of commentators who were quick to cast blame upon “hooligans” and “avaricious criminals”. Where many hoped that rioters would simply be punished with tougher “law and order” policies, Sitkoff explains that another wing:

¹³⁷ Rainwater and Yancey, 410.

explained the riots as a response to deprivation, as a consequence of the inequalities and inequities of the ghetto, as a cry from the forgotten people of the Negro Revolution; and they advocated programs targeted to African-Americans for better housing, quality integrated education, improved job opportunities, and more generous welfare benefits.¹³⁸

In consequence, a number of civil rights leaders found that they had suddenly lost a great deal of credibility. The fact that some of the Black rioters took to the streets shouting “Long Live Malcolm X” reveals a great deal, for clearly his assassination in February, 1965, had left a gaping hole in Black Leadership. While many Black moderates who had fought courageously in the south could take credit for impacting upon the psychologies of northern African-Americans, their work had not led to any fundamental improvements in their lifestyles. As one “long-time observer of the movement” commented, immediately after Watts, “there was a whole series of *mea culpas* on the part of almost all the civil rights leaders” who were quick to admit “We are guilty, we have failed, we have established no contact with people.”

Accordingly, many well-established African-American leaders were in no mood to talk about “pathology” upon their arrival to the White House in the Spring of 1966. In their efforts to see that the week-long riots were met with a helpful government response, and in order to try and bridge their leadership into Black ghetto communities, it was necessary that they focus upon articulating the deeply felt bitterness of their constituents. Charles Silberman touched on this point in his article “Beware the Day They Change Their Minds,” the title of which was borrowed from a Langston Hughes poem. “The explosive increase of Negro anger,” he argued, had made it “virtually impossible for any Negro leader - indeed,

¹³⁸ Sitkoff, Harvard, The Struggle for Black Equality: 1954 -1992, (Hill and Wang [revised edition], 1993) 190.

any Negro intellectual - to acknowledge publicly the need for change within the Negro community.”¹³⁹ The newspaper commentary of Whitney Young - then the executive director of the Urban League - seems to offer support for this view. In an October article for the *Amsterdam News*, Young discussed Moynihan’s essay with approval, agreeing that families in Black communities were in significant disarray as a result of varying forms of white prejudice. By January of the following year, however, one observer noted that a second column on the subject was marked by “a defensiveness about the problems of the ghetto that was completely new” to his writing. This, he felt, might be seen as *prima facie* evidence of a shift in the mood of Black leadership. The period after Watts, he argued, gave rise to “a real intensification of Negro sensitivity...the movement changed, very radically in a short time.”¹⁴⁰

Sensing this, the executive director of the White House conference - which had been built upon the theme “To Fulfill These Rights” - jokingly informed its participants at the very first session that “I have been reliably informed that no such person as Daniel Patrick Moynihan exists.”¹⁴¹ Though Moynihan did indeed have some involvement with the conference, the subject of the Black family, which was originally to be a focal point, was instead featured in only one of eight panel discussions. And while he was able to briefly answer some of his critics, claiming that he only meant for the report “to bring about action” and “to show what unemployment does to people so we could do something about the problem (of unemployment),” *Newsweek* magazine reported that Moynihan figured prominently in a number of angry hallway conversations. While “the report was hailed within

¹³⁹ Ibid., 431.

¹⁴⁰ Rainwater and Yancey, 247-248. Rather annoying is the fact that this “long time observer of the movement” is not identified. The authors note in the preface to their book that some of the people they interviewed preferred to remain anonymous.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 248.

the movement last spring,” it had since “come under increasing criticism as off-target at best, subtly racist at worst.”¹⁴²

IV

There is a close link between negative assessments of both Elkins and Moynihan. As we have seen, the victim-pathology model of slavery had far fewer detractors at the tail end of the 1950's. Many professors whom Meier and Rudwick interviewed could not recall any of their Black students taking exception to Elkins' book in college classrooms until about 1963, and some even endorsed it for the fact that it so forcefully blamed whites for the travesty of slavery. Yet as African-Americans began to assert greater amounts of pride in their history through various cultural mechanisms, and as they became increasingly militant in their demand for the full recognition of their freedom, this paradigm suddenly seemed disjointed from contemporary realities. In other words, various:

dictates of protest strategy, fused with the swelling sense of pride and militance among blacks and the growing salience of nationalist sentiments, rendered illegitimate the pathological model of Negro behavior and spelled the downfall of the Elkins thesis that had become so fashionable. As a matter of fact, it would seem to be scarcely coincidental that the Elkins thesis became the object of systematic attacks not long after the appearance of Moynihan's report. What had happened was that, as Elkins later recalled, “without anyone's quite realizing it the entire ‘damage’ argument - as applied to Negro life in America - had become ideologically untenable.”¹⁴³

Scholar Kenneth Lynn has made virtually this same point, writing - in questionable taste - about the “Bedford-Stuyvesant stomping” that Moynihan received, and which “changed dramatically...the tenor of slave scholarship.” Though “the report discussed black pathology in far more moderate terms than Elkins Slavery...1965 was several worlds removed from 1959. The lesson of

¹⁴² “Civil Rights: What To Do Next?”, *Newsweek*, November 29, 1965. 28.

¹⁴³ Meier, August and Rudwick, Elliot, Black History and the Historical Profession: 1915-1980 (University of Illinois Press, 1986) 251.

Moynihan's experience was not lost on the slave historians engaged in research in the late 1960's."¹⁴⁴

Langston Hughes had warned America, in the early 1940's, that while "Negroes" seemed "Sweet and docile, Meek, humble and kind," the nation would do well to "Beware the day they change their minds!" Nonetheless, as Black anger seemed to suddenly begin to explode in all directions, much of world was stunned and surprised. In order to fully understand the significance of the Black Revolt past about 1965, one has to be willing to grant, first, the legitimacy of the rage of the militant spokespersons, and second, that broad changes in the cultural politics of the era have transformed, probably forever, the ways in which Black and white Americans will live together. Though the events surrounding the publication of William Styron's 1967 historical novel, The Confessions of Nat Turner, tell us a great deal about the Black Power ethic, they also speak to the ways in which scholars' perceptions of slavery shifted very visibly over the course of a few short years. This, then, will be the subject of the next chapter.

¹⁴⁴ Lynn, Kenneth "The Regressive Historians," 495.

WILLIAM STYRON'S *THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER* AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY IN SIXTIES AMERICA

By the fall of 1967, what has come to be known as the “Black Revolt” of the 1960’s was well underway. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s popularity amongst African-Americans was in steady decline, and talk of lunch-counter protests, non-violent direct-action, and civil disobedience had already begun to seem somehow dated or old-fashioned. In response, a new Black politics, focusing attention on issues of separation, self-determination, and self-defense began to gain credibility. Riots in Detroit, Watts and Newark, the militancy of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, and cries of “Black Power” amongst African-Americans of all social classes began to reveal, among other things, the full depths of the chasm between Black and white America. Yet if Black Americans were engaged in a war for political and economic equality, they were every bit as much engaged in a cultural war. Black cultural nationalists began to speak of “a culture, a style of life, a cosmology...and a set of aesthetic values that are distinct from that of white Americans in particular and white Europeans or Westerners in general.”¹⁴⁵ While some Black artists and intellectuals simply took this to mean that they therefore had a particular message which they were obligated to pass on the majority culture, more militant spokespersons such as Amiri Baraka and Ron Karenga began to speak in favor of an art that was exclusively designed to serve the needs of their revolutionary agendas. In particular, they held that Black Americans must become culturally aware of the triumphs, glories, and achievements of their race. At the National Conference on Black Power in 1967, participants overwhelmingly passed a resolution that, among other things, placed a premium on the notion of *self-*

¹⁴⁵ Bracey, John H., Meier, August, and Rudwick, Elliot. Black Nationalism In America (Bobbs-Merrill, 1970). pg. xxi.

definition, arguing that “Black people have consistently expended a large part of our energy and resources reacting to white definition”.¹⁴⁶

It was in this context, then, that Random House Books released their first printing of William Styron’s Pulitzer Prize-Winning historical novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Since at least the middle of the 19th century, few historical personalities have symbolized Black resistance to white oppression with as much clarity and forcefulness as the slave rebel Nat Turner. Yet somewhat paradoxically, the historical record surrounding the facts of Turner’s life and the slave revolt which he led is incomplete. The only significant primary source on the matter is Turner’s infamous jailhouse “Confessions”, from which Styron borrowed the title of his novel. Although Turner’s remarks were purported to have been transcribed faithfully by T.R. Gray, a white racist lawyer who interviewed him on the eve of his execution, there are a number of reasons for which few scholars have taken this seriously as a reliable document. That Styron would have the temerity to write a historical novel that portrayed Turner as something of a fanatic, with ambiguous motives, self-doubt, and an infatuation with a local white woman, was seen by many Black intellectuals (and some whites) as either conscious or unconscious racism. Specifically, they seethed at what they argued was a deliberate falsification of history. Indeed, the white Marxist historian Herbert Aptheker set the tone for much of this criticism with his declaration that “History’s potency is mighty. The oppressed need it for identity and inspiration; oppressors for justification, rationalization, and legitimacy. Nothing illustrates this more clearly than the history writing on the American Negro people.”¹⁴⁷ In response, a number of leading white scholars (and a few Blacks) came to Styron’s defense, decrying the “hysterical” and “overblown” reaction of the Black critics, fervently

¹⁴⁶ Barbour, Floyd B., editor. The Black Power Revolt: A Collection of Essays (Extending Horizon Books, 1968). pg 195.

¹⁴⁷ Aptheker, Herbert. “A Note on the History,” *The Nation* (October 16, 1967).

arguing that he was in fact “the better student of history”. Consequently, the protracted and bitter feud which resulted, featuring so many notable scholars and critics, has been labeled by one writer as “The most bitter, interesting, and far-reaching literary controversy in recent memory.”¹⁴⁸ Others have looked upon the tempestuous debate as yet another piece of evidence indicative of the widening ideological chasm between Black and white America: “For blacks, the praise and adulation initially accorded the book in the white community indicates how little understanding of black America survives in the white world. Americans, black and white, still have a long way to go.”¹⁴⁹

Accordingly, there have literally been scores of review essays and academic papers which have sought to analyze this debate in one fashion or another, along with at least two edited anthologies and one full-length monograph from Albert Stone, published in 1992. The great majority of these papers, however, have tended to simply argue a position on the issue, taking into account notions of historical accuracy, artistic license, and the utility of a white writer assuming the voice of an African-American. And although Stone’s work is a well-written and voluminous account which takes a sort of macro-view of the controversy, it is at best only marginally concerned with the socio-historical context from which it emerged. As such, this chapter aims to expatiate not so much on the subtle intricacies of the debate, but rather upon the larger context from which the *Black response* emerged. Though notions of authorial “objectivity” carry little currency these days, I have nonetheless tried to illustrate, in a fair and impartial manner, the sources from which many of Styron’s critics drew their fire, paying special attention to much of the rhetoric that surrounded Black Power, the Black Arts Movement, and Black Studies programs that were beginning to arise at universities

¹⁴⁸ Fremont-Smith, Elliot in Duff, John B. and Mitchell, Peter M. The Nat Turner Rebellion: The Historical Event and Modern Controversy (Harper & Row, 1971). pg. 117.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., pg. 119.

across the nation. A topic which clearly demands further investigation, however, and which I hope to pursue in the course of a larger work, would involve a careful study of the sociology of knowledge that lay behind the white counter-response. Why, one wonders, were so many white intellectuals eager to argue so ardently on Styron's behalf? Relevant to this discussion might be the fact that while Styron's book arose during the zenith of Black activism, these were also the most vital and formative years of African-American history as a scholarly specialty. Fellowship-awarding agencies were encouraging explorations into the Black past, and universities were aggressively recruiting Black faculty and graduate students to such an extent that by the early 1970s, as Meier and Rudwick have pointed out, "the JSH (*Journal of Southern History*) was reading almost like a JNH (*Journal of Negro History*)."¹⁵⁰ Whatever the merits of the arguments offered forth by Styron's defenders, the bulk of them were historians who had long held a sort of monopoly over slave scholarship and may have even postured themselves as "gatekeepers" into the profession.¹⁵¹ In the wake of earlier controversies that had impinged upon the reputations of Stanley Elkins and Daniel Patrick Moynihan for their analyses of slavery and its effect upon Black Americans, it would not be difficult to imagine that many white academicians might have suspected that certain Black Power spokespersons sought to exercise a sort of tyranny over those who wished to speak on the controversial issues of race, class, and identity.

I

While many of Styron's contemporaries would insist upon viewing The Confessions of Nat Turner as a parable of the state of American race relations during the latter half of the 1960's, Styron had in fact conceived of the story long before the advent of Black Power. As early as 1964 the *New American Library* had

¹⁵⁰ Meier, August and Rudwick, Elliot. Black History and the Historical Profession: 1915-1980 (University of Illinois Press, 1986). PG. 178.

¹⁵¹ I would like to thank Clayborne Carson for this insight, offered over the course of an informal conversation at Stanford University, August 15, 1996.

paid over \$100,000 for the paperback rights to the novel, and in April, 1965, *Harper's* magazine had published an essay of Styron's in which he reflected upon his Virginia childhood and explored his motives for investigating the Nat Turner slave rebellion of 1831. Yet as it would turn out, these were only the earliest rumblings of the publicity machine that would accompany the publication of Styron's fourth novel. Later, *Harper's* would run a 50,000 word excerpt, for which it would pay \$7,500 - the highest figure it had ever paid for a single piece of writing in its 117-year history. Likewise, the Book-of-the-Month Club also set a publishing record in offering Styron \$150,000 for the right to feature it as a selection, and there was immediate talk of a film version from 20th Century Fox. In October, 1967, *Life* magazine also ran excerpts from the novel, accompanied by photos and a story on Styron himself, while *Newsweek* would feature him on its cover.

With all of this hype, then, it is perhaps not surprising that Styron's novel was also embraced by the (largely white) critical establishment. Noted historian C. Vann Woodward called the book "the most profound fictional treatment of slavery in our literature,"¹⁵² while Philip Rahv wrote in *The New York Review of Books* that this was "A first-rate novel...the best by an American writer that has appeared in some years."¹⁵³ *Newsweek* called it "one of those rare novels that is an act of revelation to a whole society,"¹⁵⁴

Yet in spite of these generally positive reviews, there were also early indications that Styron's experiment in historical fiction might become problematic. James Baldwin, a close personal friend of Styron's, never reviewed the novel but he was among the first notable personalities to foresee that it would stir a heated

¹⁵² Woodward, C. Vann. "Confessions of a Rebel: 1831," *The New Republic* (October 16, 1967). pg. 28.

¹⁵³ Rahv, Philip. "Throughout the Midst of Jerusalem," *The New York Review of Books* (October 26, 1967). pg. 10.

¹⁵⁴ Sokolov, Raymond A. "Into the Mind of Nat Turner," *Newsweek* (October 26, 1967).

battle. Indeed, within a week of the book's publication, Baldwin remarked to a reporter that "Bill's going to catch it from black and white...Styron is probing something very dangerous, deep, and painful in the national psyche. I hope it starts a tremendous fight, so that people will learn what they really think about each other."¹⁵⁵ Yet perhaps even Baldwin, regarded by many as an elder statesman of Black militancy, underestimated the full force of the Black backlash. While he was right to suggest that Styron's novel would be called "effrontery" he apparently did not predict the ways in which the novel would come to be seen by many Blacks as such a clear symbol of insidious and deliberate racism.

By 1968, a year sometimes referred to as the "high tide of Black resistance", the atmosphere surrounding Styron's novel was decidedly more hostile. Noting that "No event in recent years has touched and stirred the black intellectual community more than (The Confessions of Nat Turner)"¹⁵⁶ John Henrik Clarke served as editor of a widely-read collection of polemical essays called William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond. Purposely drawn from a wide range of academic disciplines, some of the more notable contributors to the anthology included Black Power theorist Charles Hamilton, *Ebony* magazine editor and historian Lerone Bennett, Jr., psychologist Alvin Poussaint, historian Vincent Harding, and writer John Oliver Killens. "Though some white critics and reviewers referred, often derisively, to these black writers as unknown, radical, and irresponsible," Stone notes that it should be clear from their biographies that, as a group, they were scarcely wild-eyed radicals. "Although they were articulate, angry, and deeply disillusioned with white America...some were in the process of assuming positions of status in the dominant culture's intellectual cadre," while

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Clarke, John Henrik, editor. William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond (Beacon Press, 1968) pg. vii.

others were “just as derisively distancing themselves from white institutions.”¹⁵⁷ Although it would be difficult for this paper to provide an adequate synopsis of each of their critiques, some general comments can be made. First of all, each of the writers in the anthology offer either explicit or implicit support for Clarke’s contention that “The Nat Turner created by William Styron has little resemblance to the Virginia slave insurrectionist who is a hero to his people” and also that “the distortion of the true character of Nat Turner was deliberate.”¹⁵⁸ As Harding meant to suggest through the title of his essay “You’ve Taken My Nat and Gone,” the bulk of Styron’s Black critics expressed outrage over the fact that Turner’s legacy as a symbol of Black strength, manhood, heroism, and courage, had been greatly diminished. Furthermore, in addition to their obvious objections to white racism in general and Styron’s (perceived) racism in particular, many of the writers raised questions surrounding the plausibility of a white writer speaking through the voice of a Black slave, the tenuous relationship between literature and history, and the lack of regard paid by the white critical establishment towards the Black grassroots. As one of the Black respondents remarked, “Clearly we are in the presence of no mere ‘fiction’ but a cultural and social document which is both ‘illuminating’ and potentially definitive of contemporary attitudes.”¹⁵⁹ Yet if one is to treat Clarke’s Ten Black Writers Respond as something of a cultural artifact, then the tenor and the tone of the criticism seems at least as notable as the books’ content. Largely vituperative and ad hominem, Styron recalled (with more than a trace of bitterness) the Black critics “all-out assault”:

It contained such pitiless indictments of my artistry, my historical and social responsibility, my ethical stance, (“morally senile” was the most memorable quote) and even my probable sexual

¹⁵⁷ Stone, Albert. The Return of Nat Turner: History, Literature, and Cultural Politics in Sixties America (University of Georgia Press, 1992). pg. 129.

¹⁵⁸ Clarke, John Henrik, ed. pgs. vi-vii.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 29.

inclinations, that the savagery was at first truly impossible to comprehend...Gradually, it sank in that I was being subjected not even to discussible criticism but to the most intractable kind of hysteria - understandable, perhaps, though no less ugly for being part of the chaotic racial politics of 1968.¹⁶⁰

In an effort to impose a degree of order on the broad range of the critiques put forth in Ten Black Writers Respond, Stone has essentially divided their analyses into three distinct categories, evaluating their strengths and weaknesses as historians, literary critics, and interpreters of psychology. Those critics with a historical bend take issue with Styron's claim in the novel's preface that he had "rarely departed from the *known facts* of the revolt". Indeed, their precise point is that in addition to failing to make adequate use of the available evidence, Styron strayed dangerously far from the "facts" put forth by Turner in his original testimony. While the real Nat Turner did not mention to T.R. Gray that he had a wife, a Ph.D. dissertation written in 1861, which Styron was known to have read, had reported that he had indeed been married. Yet Styron's fictional protagonist appears both single and celibate, save for an isolated homosexual episode in his youth. In the eyes of his critics, this amounted to a deliberate attempt to "emasculate" the historical Nat Turner. Moreover, where Turner noted to Gray that his parents had taught him to read at an early age, in Styron's fictional treatment he acquires the gift of literacy through the help of a paternalistic owner. Additionally, Styron's Nat Turner makes no reference to his father anywhere in the novel, and yet he is mentioned in the original confessions. From Bennett, Jr.'s, standpoint this amounted to an overall "pattern of destruction in which the historical Nat Turner is deracinated and made impotent and irrelevant," the by-product of a fictional "ADC slave family".¹⁶¹ He further claims that Styron had downplayed Turner's spirituality, which was evident enough in the original confessions, thereby

¹⁶⁰ Styron, William. "Nat Turner Revisited," *American Heritage* (October, 1992). pg. 71.

¹⁶¹ Clarke, John Henrik, editor. pg. 8.

depriving him “of the meaning of his mission”.¹⁶² Finally, many of Styron’s critics charged him with ignoring evidence of a viable tradition of slave resistance, thereby failing to point to a “universal motive” (i.e. a simple bedrock of desire for freedom) that might have led *any* slave to lash out against his or her oppressor. As Clarke observed, “it should not be necessary to search for motives, personal or otherwise, for the Nat Turner revolt.”¹⁶³

Apparently unintimidated by the forcefulness of these charges and the emotional heat behind them, Styron and his defenders offered a multi-faceted response. Whereas many commentators lamented the fact that so much about Nat Turner’s life, career, and personal character had been irretrievably lost, Styron claims to have seen a rich opportunity. “While it may be satisfying and advantageous for historians to feast on rich archival material, the writer of historical fiction is better off,” for a number of reasons, “when past events have left him with short rations.”¹⁶⁴ On several occasions, Styron cited the authority of Marxist critic Georg Lukacs’ writings on The Historical Novel, which suggested that the novelists should be allowed broad latitude in their efforts to deal with the past. “What matters most,” Lukacs wrote, “is fidelity in the reproduction of the material foundations of the life of a given period, its manners and the feelings and thoughts derived from these...but this never means being tied to any historical facts. On the contrary, the novelist must be at liberty to treat these as he likes...”¹⁶⁵ It was for this reason, then, that Styron chose to portray Turner as a plantation resident, when in fact he was the property of families who owned only small farms. In his view, plantation slavery simply needed to be dealt with in order to faithfully reproduce the spirit of the age. This same inclination also led him to temper some of Turner’s religious fanaticism, which was displayed in his original confessions to such a

¹⁶² Ibid., pg. 15.

¹⁶³ Ibid., pg. x.

¹⁶⁴ Styron, William. “Nat Turner Revisited,” *American Heritage* (October, 1992). pg. 71.

¹⁶⁵ cited in Stone, Albert. pg. 8.

degree as to convince many readers that the “real” Nat Turner was a reckless and delusional madman. And yet there remained *some* facts which Styron would not have felt comfortable departing from. For example, had Styron believed that Turner had really had a wife, she would have appeared in the novel. As it turns out, he insisted that this evidence was thirty year-old “hearsay” that lacked credibility.

Turner’s celibacy is defended on the grounds that Styron sees all revolutionary movements as tending to be very “puritanical”. As he remarked to George Plimpton even before his critics charges came to print, “such impulses...seem an authentic part of the revolutionary drive: Luther, Castro, Danton, Mao - all of them are basically puritanical, repressive, and sublimated...Of course I can’t *prove* that this is Nat’s psychological history, but I think something like it was part of his psychic makeup.”¹⁶⁶ Eugene Genovese, perhaps Styron’s most able and eloquent defender, has supported this notion, arguing that in employing this literary device, Styron has simply sought to link Turner with “a great tradition of historical heroes.” Likewise, he points out that Turner’s single homosexual episode in his childhood only serves to suggest that he had something of a normal early life, as the Kinsey Report had presented evidence that a majority of males had some form of homosexual experiences during pre- and early adolescence. Finally, he sarcastically suggests that the Black critics think more carefully through their implication that sexual abstinence relates to one’s “manhood”.¹⁶⁷

Styron also takes issue with the claim that he ignored evidence of “hundreds of uprisings and conspiracies preceding the Southampton, Virginia uprising led by

¹⁶⁶ Plimpton, George. “William Styron: A Shared Ordeal,” *The New York Review of Books* (September 12, 1968).

¹⁶⁷ Genovese, Eugene. “The Nat Turner Case,” *The New York Review of Books* (September 12, 1968).

Nat Turner,” and that “slaves were constantly resisting and rebelling.”¹⁶⁸ The single authority the critics cite in support of this contention is the Marxist historian Herbert Aptheker’s 1943 publication, *American Negro Slave Revolts*. While perhaps something of a pioneering work, Styron was not alone amongst intellectuals who have discredited this study, for a variety of reasons, as being ideologically biased and politically expedient. As such, Styron maintained that the Nat Turner revolt was exceptional for the fact that it was “the only effective, sustained revolt in the annals of American Negro history.”

Finally, Styron and his critics make much of the aforementioned fact that Nat Turner’s “confessions” as reported by T.R. Gray are notoriously flawed as source material. Turner, of course, does not speak to us directly, but rather through the pen of another white southerner who did not happen to possess the strong liberal credentials of Styron. There is certainly reasonable doubt as to whether or not Turner’s testimony was “willfully, fully, and freely offered”, as Gray maintained, and even less reason to believe that the confessions were “faithfully recorded”. Shortly after Turner’s execution, as many as 50,000 copies of Gray’s pamphlet were sold throughout the South and beyond, leading to speculation that the document may have been deliberately sensationalized. Certainly Styron was of the view that the “entire pedantic, impossibly elevated and formal tone of the ‘Confessions’” suggests that Gray tampered with Turner’s words, twisting them to serve his purposes. “How much during that tense encounter was subtly bent and twisted by the interrogator?” Styron asks. “Gray was a man of his time, a Southern racist, and as a functionary of the Commonwealth it may well have been to his advantage...to distort many things that the helpless prisoner told him, to leave things out.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Clarke, John Henrik, ed. pgs. x and 87.

¹⁶⁹ Styron, William. “Truth and Nat Turner: An Exchange,” *The Nation* (April 22, 1968).

A second point of reference of many of the critics had less to do with the specific historical circumstances of Turner's revolt. Rather, they took issue with his very decision to write the book. In an era in which African-Americans were encouraged and inspired to fashion their own understandings of their identities and their past, Ernest Kaiser spoke of "the unspeakable arrogance of this young southern writer daring to set down his own personal view of Nat's life as from inside Nat Turner in slavery."¹⁷⁰ Likewise, Loyle Hairston suggested that the "basic weakness" of the novel related to Styron's inability as a white writer to "portray black characters as human types..." and the tendency of *all* white writers to "look upon the black man's condition of social degradation as being natural to his 'inferior' character, rather than resulting from the racial oppression of the American system."¹⁷¹

Though Styron, perhaps rather charitably, felt that these were "civilized sentiments" which he had to take seriously, he would also insist that they were guided by fallacious reasoning. The logical counter-position, he pointed out, would serve to deny the right of African-American artists such as Baldwin and Ralph Ellison to write from a white perspective, as they had both done to much acclaim. Yet perhaps the most eloquent and comprehensive articulation of his artistic creed was put forth in May, 1970, as he accepted the prestigious Howell's Medal, awarded twice each decade for the most distinguished work of fiction published during the preceding five years. Seemingly in response to much of the separatist rhetoric of many Black militants of the era, Styron suggested that:

this award...implies an understanding that a novel can possess a significance apart from its subject matter and that a story of a nineteenth-century black slave may try to say at least as much about longing, loneliness, personal betrayal, madness, and the quest for God as it does about Negroes or the institution of slavery...By

¹⁷⁰ Clarke, John Henrik, editor. pg. 56.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., pgs. 68-69.

recognizing *Nat Turner* this award really honors all of those of my contemporaries who have steadfastly refused to write propaganda or indulge in myth-making but have been impelled to search instead for those insights which, however raggedly and imperfectly, attempt to demonstrate the variety, the quirkiness, the fragility, the courage, the good humor, desperation, corruption, and morality of all men. And finally it ratifies my own conviction that a writer jeopardizes his freedom by insisting that he be bound or defined by his race, or by almost anything else. For one of the enduring marvels of art is its ability to soar through any barrier, to explore any territory of experience, and I say that only by venturing from time to time into strange territory shall artists, of whatever commitment, risk discovering and illuminating the human spirit we all share.¹⁷²

Perhaps the strongest lines of objection, however, have come from Black critics who were concerned with issues of psychology, with Alvin Poussaint, Vincent Harding, and Mike Thelwell foremost amongst them. In Ernest Kaiser's terms, the novel is "a witches brew of Freudian psychology, Elkins 'Sambo' thesis on slavery and Styron's vile racist imagination."¹⁷³ Thelwell, in more moderated prose, makes a similar claim in arguing that The Confessions of Nat Turner is an important book only for the manner in which it demonstrates the persistence of white Southern myths, racial stereotypes, and literary clichés...¹⁷⁴ for Poussaint, the only one of the anthologized critics with any formalized training in psychology, the novel "seems to reveal some obvious and some subtle manifestations of white racist attitudes."¹⁷⁵ In addition to these general charges of racism, however, are specific attacks from the Black critics who took issue with the emotional fixation that Styron imagines Turner might have had over a young woman named Margaret Whitehead - the only person Turner is known to have personally killed during the 48-hour insurrection. Though she is only mentioned in passing in the 1831 confessions, in Styron's novel she appears as a major character - a condescending

¹⁷² Styron, William, cited in Casciato, Arthur D. and West, James. Critical Essays on William Styron. (G.K. Hall & Co., 1982). pgs. 226-227.

¹⁷³ Clarke, John Henrik, editor. pg. 57.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., pg. 91.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., pg. 18.

but also somewhat sympathetic “adolescent tease” with whom Turner discusses poetry and the Bible. Beyond these somewhat tender encounters, however, are other moments where Turner alternately lusts for and despises “the belle of the county”, whom he naturally recognizes as “unattainable”. Thus, while there were no reports that any of the slaves who took part in the Southampton Rebellion ever raped or attempted to rape any of their victims, in Styron’s novel Turner has a graphically rendered masturbatory fantasy of committing precisely such a crime. Towards the end of the book, after Turner has murdered Whitehead with a blow to the head from a nearby fence post, he finds that he must repent for the hatred that led him to do this in order that he can re-unite with God.

Poussaint’s claim is that in inventing such circumstances, unknown to the historical record, Styron had capitulated to the “hackneyed racist belief that Negroes who are strong, successful, and masculine must also want to possess a white woman in order to give final sanction to their manhood.”¹⁷⁶ Harding echoes this sentiment, noting the conspicuous absence of a strong or beautiful Black woman in the novel, and wondering aloud what useful purpose Styron might have had in mind in creating Turner’s “overwhelming erotic fantasies” and his “strange love affair with a teenage white girl.”¹⁷⁷

In response, Styron argued that the plausibility of such a relationship justified the artistic decisions he made in this regard. Thus, when a pugnacious questioner appeared at a 1968 conference organized by the Southern Historical Association, demanding to know why Turner is portrayed as “completely obsessed” with Whitehead, Styron’s response was simple and direct: “Margaret Whitehead is a part of my fictional imagination. I have no apologies for her.”¹⁷⁸ Yet in other, less hostile forums, he has elaborated. For example, in the pages of

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., pg. 21.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., pg. 28.

¹⁷⁸ Stone, Albert. pg. 11.

The Nation he remarked that the stereotype of “the black man’s hang-up on white females” was treated in his novel in order to illustrate what may very well have been a historical truth, and furthermore, that such a suggestion is not implicitly racist. “Nat’s fateful impulse,” he argued, was “valid then as now...Nat Turner *was* hung up on Margaret Whitehead, bashing her brains out because of the same hatred and love and despair that make Americans today as well as then all hopelessly hung up - black and white - one with the other, wedded inseparably by the error and madness of history.”¹⁷⁹ As evidence, Styron asked his critics to take a look at Calvin C. Hernton’s well-researched Sex and Racism in America, as well as Eldridge Cleaver’s Soul on Ice. Additionally, he defended his handling of this inter-racial sexual dynamic by alluding to his earlier stated conviction that Turner’s revolutionary drive was largely “puritanical” and “ascetic”. As a result, it was doubtful that Turner would have known a “fecund sexuality”, but he might well have had “fantasies and fantastic, probably unspeakable drives and hang-ups and desires,” and so Styron “felt it was necessary to give this to Nat in order to fill out his revolutionary characterization.”¹⁸⁰ Genovese bravely echoes Styron on several of these points, suggesting that “American life throws whites and blacks together under circumstances in which they constantly affect one another and yet they remain apart. As one result, the sexual fantasies common to both sexes tend to be translated into racial terms.” Whitehead’s importance to Styron’s story, in this view, hinges on the fact that she is a character whom Turner sees “as a human being, rather than as a social type.” Accordingly, Genovese suggests that this would explain Turner’s appeal for God’s forgiveness. “In repenting, he does not repudiate his revolt, he repudiates that hatred which led him to deny the love he felt for a human being who was as trapped as he. This may or may not be convincing

¹⁷⁹ Styron, William. “Truth and Nat Turner: An Exchange,” *The Nation* (April 22, 1968) pg. 547.

¹⁸⁰ West, James L.W., editor. Conversations With William Styron. (University Press of Mississippi, 1985). pg. 106.

artistically, but the charge that this stamps Styron as racist is outrageous.”¹⁸¹ If anything, Whitehead’s inclusion in the novel only suggests to Genovese that Styron “had the courage to confront the depths of America’s racial tragedy.”¹⁸²

Throughout the remainder of the 1960’s and into the early years of the 1970’s, debates along these lines would continue in several prominent, left-leaning intellectual journal, including *The New York Review of Books* and *The Nation*. Although the major participants in these post-1968 debates included Aptheker, Harding, Genovese, and Styron, many lesser known students and scholars joined the fray, typically arguing with considerable amounts of verve, passion, and truculence. Yet as has been suggested above, much of the fury which plagued Styron and his novel can only narrowly be considered “historical” or “literary” in the sense that much of the discussion was stretched across disciplines, and many of those involved were only marginally preoccupied with the sorts of issues we typically ascribe to the realms of history and literary criticism. While questions surrounding the availability and the utility of certain historical sources do indeed come up from time to time, they are most often of a very esoteric nature, discussed solely amongst professional academicians and rarely put forth for consideration by the general, reading public. The very fact that in this instance, these questions *were* widely considered and debated suggests that much of the controversy was deeply rooted in cultural gaps or misunderstandings between Black and white America. The remainder of this chapter will attempt to locate more precisely the source of much of this dissonance from the Black intelligentsia. Although “Black Power” has always been a politically charged term that has meant many different things to many people, the focus here will be upon its cultural dynamic - that is, the ways in which Black Power “encouraged Afro-Americans to seize control of their own self-image

¹⁸¹ Genovese, Eugene. “The Nat Turner Case,” *The New York Review of Books* (September 12, 1968). pg. 34.

¹⁸² Stone, Albert. pg. 162.

and to validate that image via a wide array of cultural productions.”¹⁸³ Upon reaching an understanding of the assumptions and motivations that served as the driving forces behind this process, it becomes rather clear why Styron’s delineation of Turner and the slave south was widely seen as an obstacle to Black self-actualization.

II

Implicit throughout William Van DeBurg’s pioneering work New Day In Babylon is the notion that recent scholarship which has tended to marginalize the Black Power movement over its failure to realize many of its stated objectives has, to a large degree, overlooked the significance of the era’s broad contributions to American culture. While it’s certainly true that Black revolutionaries of the 1960’s were unable to achieve their dreams of territorial separatism, community control, and perhaps even an armed rebellion, it is also clear that many African-Americans of the age were educated, inspired, and politicized by the movement. Prior to the first cries of “Black Power!” in Greenwood, Mississippi in 1966, many African-Americans were clearly in the process of becoming disillusioned with the slow progress of the civil rights movement. As Doug McAdam, Clayborne Carson, and others have remarked, the 1964 Summer Project of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was in many ways a watershed event in this regard. Veteran activists who had been bravely struggling for years in the deep South in order to make only incremental progress had come to realize that they could only coerce federal intervention through the involvement of wealthy, white college students from the North. While this may have led to some moderate success, many of the northern volunteers brought with them a good dose of paternalism and self-righteousness that had become counter-productive.

¹⁸³ Van DeBurg, William. New Day In Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975. (University of Chicago Press, 1992). pg. 31.

Furthermore, in the wake of widespread non-compliance with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the refusal of Democratic Party leaders to seat more than two token delegates from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) at that year's National Convention, dissatisfaction with so-called white "moderates" had reached a high point. Meanwhile, it was also becoming clear that Martin Luther King's program of emphasizing civil disobedience and non-violent direct-action was doing little to remedy the harsh realities of Black ghetto life. The notion of a "Beloved Community" had come to be regarded in many circles as little more than an intellectual exercise, improbably idealistic if not altogether foolish. Likewise, "integration" had become synonymous with a sort of cultural assimilation that many feared would only serve to diminish and stigmatize Black cultural activities. In short, increasingly large numbers of Black Americans began to see themselves as oppressed members of an internal colony within the United States, in desperate need of liberation.

A cultural revolution, however, was a necessary pre-condition for such a movement. In spite of a formidable tradition of Black Nationalist and Pan-Africanist thought within the United States, the response of Black America towards the empowering rhetoric of Malcolm X and others tends to suggest that in the early years of the 1960's, this process was only beginning to come to fruition. Indeed, as Malcolm would repeatedly remark, it was widely held that much of the history and culture of Black Americans was "completely destroyed when (blacks) were forcibly brought to America in chains." Furthermore, he told his audiences that:

...it is important for us to know that our history did not begin with slavery's scars...We must recapture our heritage and our identity if we are able to liberate ourselves from the bonds of white supremacy. We must launch a cultural revolution to unbrainwash an entire people...Armed with the knowledge of our past, we can with confidence charter a course for our future. Culture is an

indispensable weapon in the freedom struggle. We must take hold of it and forge it with the past.¹⁸⁴

As such, many of Styron's critics who also had affinities with the Black Power Movement may be seen as fulfilling something of a mandate. As Van DeBurg has remarked "It was Malcolm X who had asserted that the basic need of black Americans was not to re-evaluate whites (whom they knew all too well), but to seek a re-evaluation of *self*. By changing their minds about themselves - by formulating a positive racial identity through *self-definition* and *self-assertion* - individual blacks could speed the process of acquiring material manifestations of group-based Black Power."¹⁸⁵

Of course Malcolm X was not alone in challenging African-Americans to make use of culture as a tool toward an eventual liberation. Floyd B. McKissick, in his prescriptive essay "Programs For Black Power," defined the movement as a struggle "to secure power for Black Americans in six specific areas, (including)...the improvement of the self-image of Black people."¹⁸⁶ Moreover, Black Power's foremost theorists, Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, (one of Styron's anthologized critics), also argued in this direction. For example, their influential primer Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America suggests that "Black people must re-define themselves, and only *they* can do that." By 1966, they acknowledged that throughout the nation:

...vast segments of the black community are beginning to assert their own definitions, to reclaim their history, their culture; to create their own sense of community and togetherness. When we begin to define our image, the stereotypes - that is, the lies - that our oppressor has developed will begin in the white community and end there. The black community will have a positive image of itself that

¹⁸⁴ Goldman, Peter. "Malcolm X: Witness for the Prosecution," in Franklin and Meier, Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century. (University of Illinois Press, 1982).

¹⁸⁵ Van DeBurg, pg. 53.

¹⁸⁶ Barbour, Floyd B., editor. pg. 17.

it has created. This means we will no longer call ourselves lazy, apathetic, dumb, good-timers, shiftless, etc. Only when black people develop fully this sense of community, of themselves, can they begin to deal effectively with the problems of racism in this country. This is what we mean by a new consciousness; this is the vital first step.¹⁸⁷

Along with these rhetorical suggestions that Black Americans must strive to create their own positive racial identities came many clear indications that Carmichael and Hamilton were on to something - a revolution of culture and consciousness was indeed running through Black America. As Van DeBurg has duly noted, nobody in the Black liberation movement seriously suggested that cultural changes in the African-American community would single-handedly lead to the collapse of the entire system of Euro-American oppression. However, new trends in fashion, such as the wearing of afros and dashikis, a reaction against the word "Negro" as a white-imposed label that had become synonymous with inferiority, and a re-emergence of the concept of a unique Black "soul" all helped to play a role in promoting racial pride and group solidarity - common elements shared by all nationalism's. Meanwhile, many African Americans began circulating Malcolm X's Autobiography and Frantz Fanon's Wretched of the Earth throughout their communities, both of which undoubtedly heightened their collective political consciousness. Certainly creative artists within the militant Black community resonated with Fanon's urging to "use the past with the intention of opening the future," for in his analysis, "culture was at the very heart of our freedom struggle."¹⁸⁸ Yet there were also *specific movements* within the context of Black Power which were designed to encourage further development along these lines, including the Black Arts Movement and the closely related drive for Black Studies

¹⁸⁷ Carmichael, Stokely, and Hamilton, Charles V. Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America. (1967) pgs. 37-38.

¹⁸⁸ cited in Van DeBurg, William. pg. 173.

Programs on college campuses across the nation. Again, one sees a close link between the ideological underpinnings which motivated these efforts and those which served as a sort of bedrock for many of Styron's Black critics. Yet at the same time, I do not mean to suggest that there is a rigid or causal connection between these trends and the Styron/Turner controversy. Just as it would be disingenuous and perhaps even condescending to charge, say, a Marxist historian with drawing all of his or her ideology from an association he or she might have with the American Socialist Party (or some such), I would not wish to argue anything more than the fact that many of Styron's critics drew from and tended to embrace certain cultural attitudes and ideas that were characteristic of the age in which they lived. In the absence of these ideologies, it would be difficult if not impossible to imagine the emergence of such a high level of discord in response to Styron's "meditation on history".

According to the participants of the Black Arts Movement, (which Van DeBurg has labeled as the "spiritual sister" of Black Power), art which sought to speak in terms of "universal human truths" which transcended both race and nationality - the very goal Styron had ascribed to his work - was no longer thought to serve a useful purpose for Black Americans in the midst of a revolution. Rather, they clung tightly to the notion that Black artists must use their creative powers with the expressed aim of furthering the movement's agenda. In an important anthology of critical essays called The Black Aesthetic, leading Black Arts advocate Ron Karenga further expressed this view, arguing that art must become "functional" - that is, it must "expose the enemy, praise the people, and support the revolution." Any notions of "art for art's sake" are, to Karenga, irrelevant, since "All art reflect's the value system from which it comes." By way of illustration, he offers an example of how a planter might have his work validated in Black cultural nationalist circles:

We do not need pictures of oranges in a bowl or trees standing innocently in the midst of a waste-land. If we must paint oranges and trees, let our guerrillas be eating those oranges for strength and using those trees for cover. We need images, and oranges in a bowl or fat women smiling lewdly cannot be those images. All material is mute until the artist gives it a message, and that message must be a message of revolution. Then we will have destroyed "Art for Art's sake" and developed "Art for our sake"...In short, the real function of art is to make revolution, using its own medium.¹⁸⁹

Implicit in this argument, of course, is the belief that work along these lines would have no message whatsoever for white people. Additionally, it was taken for granted that western aesthetics - that is, standards of truth and beauty and notions concerning the role of writers and the social function of art - all needed to be re-evaluated. According to Larry Neal, "The motive behind the Black Aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideals, and white ways of looking at the world...Euro-American cultural sensibility, anti-human in its nature, has, until recently, dominated the psyches of most Black artists and intellectuals; it must be destroyed before the Black creative artist can have a meaningful role in the transformation of a society."¹⁹⁰

Finally, the Black Arts Movement operated from a nationalist frame of reference that looked upon the cultures of Black and white America as not only separate and distinct, but also incompatible. As such, Karenga and Amiri Baraka and other proponents of Black Arts offered rhetoric similar to that which was presented by Malcolm X, Carmichael, Hamilton, and others. In addition to notions of "nationhood" and the construction of institutions that would be culturally and financially independent of white domination, they also spoke in favor of self-definition and identity. As Van DeBurg remarks, "According to Karenga and his

¹⁸⁹ Gayle, Addison. The Black Aesthetic (Doubleday and Co., 1971). pg. 33-34.

¹⁹⁰ *ibid.*, pg. 16.

followers, black liberation was impossible, by definition unthinkable, without breaking the white cultural domination of black minds. It was imperative that African-Americans 'overturn' themselves, rejecting the values of the dominant society while beginning to 'redefine and reshape reality' in their own image, according to their own needs..."¹⁹¹

Although these advocates of the Black Arts philosophy were generally speaking to fellow Black artists, with the hope of shaping their artistic visions, they offered intellectual cues which were clearly embraced by many of Styron's antagonists. Aware that a very positive image of Nat Turner had been carefully cultivated over the years through the Black oral tradition and in poetry and drama, Turner had already begun to serve a useful political purpose for the movement's founders. For example, a 1968 edited anthology of militant Black writings called The Black Power Revolt included a lengthy excerpt from Turner's original "Confessions". Put another way, the "Myth of Nat Turner" that had emerged and endured over the years was a precise example of the sort of "redefinition" and "reshaping" of reality that Black radicals were coming to advocate. As an early practitioner of the present-day Black Power ethic, Turner had come to serve as a model of inspiration for Black activists. When Styron's portrayal of Turner and his rebellion seemed to undermine these conceptions, his critics relied on the rhetoric and ideology of the Black Arts Movement as fuel for much of their analysis. Thus, Lerone Bennett's aforementioned declaration that "We are objecting to the deliberate attempt to steal the meaning of a man's life."

Like many other of Styron's detractors, Bennett had explicit ties to the Black Arts Movement. His 1972 work, The Challenge of BLACKNESS clearly promotes cultural nationalism along similar lines as Karenga and Baraka. In 1969, Vincent Harding founded the Institute of the Black World, which, among other

¹⁹¹ Van DeBurg, William. pg. 173.

things, sought to nourish “the development of a Black Aesthetic in the creative arts.” Moreover, the prose of John Oliver Killens and John Williams, both of whom had harsh words for Styron’s novel, largely seems to have been in harmony with these ideals. Killens, for example, often wrote in a style that mimicked urban slang dialogue in order to emphasize the distinctiveness of the expressive style within African-American culture. In this view, the proper rules of English grammar (i.e. “talking white”) were simply “tools, symptoms of the honkies ORDER.”¹⁹² Furthermore, many of his novels and plays sought to promote racial unity and pride and to emphasize the oppressive power of the majority culture. In his novel Sippi, for example, a Black child asks his Grandfather who won the Civil War. “The elderly man replied as if the answer was all too obvious. ‘White folks won it,’ he said without hesitation. ‘That’s how come you ain’t free yet’”.¹⁹³ Other characters, such as the Black female protagonist of the novel Slaves, forthrightly rejected white supremacist ideologies, proclaiming herself to be “pure black ain’t been messed with and damn proud of it.”¹⁹⁴ Finally, in a 1971 essay entitled “The Black Writer Vis a’ Vis His Country,” Killens offers a clear formulation of his artistic creed: “The French,” he argues, “needed legendary figures like Joan of Arc in order to develop a national consciousness, without which any revolution is impossible. So we black folk...must build a literature of heroes, myths, and legends. The lives of Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, and Sojourner Truth...(are examples). We need our myths and legends to regain our lost self-esteem, our regard for each other as a people capable of working together to move the mountain that stands before us.”¹⁹⁵ Similarly, William’s most acclaimed book, This Is My Country Too, is an eloquently rendered piece of non-fiction which sought to reveal

¹⁹² Killens, John O. The Cotillion, or One Good Bull is Half the Herd. (Trident, 1971) pg. 6.

¹⁹³ cited in Van DeBurg, William. pg. 273.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., pg. 276.

¹⁹⁵ Killens, John O. “The Black Writer Vis A’ Vis His Country,” cited in The Black Aesthetic, pgs. 390-391.

the psychological toll that white oppression was exercising over so many Black Americans, thereby foreshadowing some of the “grim anarchy” that would later come to characterize the urban riots of the 1960’s. Writings such as these were not meant to induce self-pity, but rather to “help their people reconstruct and re-experience the terrors of the past, awakening them to the necessity for unified action in the present...By enumerating black misfortunes, the writers transcended them, opening the way for a new appreciation of their ancestors’ capacity for survival. They focused on cruelty only long enough to make a point: Afro-American history was a study in adversity. But it also was an ennobling account of the many heroic struggles against it.”¹⁹⁶ The dissonance that emerged in the wake of Styron’s novel, then, had clear antecedents in the Black Arts Movement. In the eyes of these writers, Styron’s sketch of one man’s struggle against slavery was hardly “ennobling” or “heroic”.

Closely related to the Black Arts Movement was a somewhat chaotic push for the development of Black Studies Programs at some of the very finest universities in the nation - a development that will be more fully explore in Chapter Four. What seems of crucial importance here, however, is that although proponents of Black Studies often had very different conceptions of what this term meant and how it ought to be applied, they were unanimous in rejecting many of the ideals of white-defined society. Essentially, Black Students and activists of this persuasion sought to create a visible power-base from which they could articulate “cultural values specific to Afro-America”:

As a radical assertion of black peoplehood, Black Studies was thought to be capable of striking a telling blow at the intellectual and cultural under-pinnings of American racism...Whites no longer would control the context of black intellectual expression by defining the activities and experiences of white westerners as the universal yardstick of human experience. This mind control would

¹⁹⁶ Van DeBurg, William. pg. 273.

end as a new frame of reference was offered to black youth. With this new orientation, blacks themselves could determine both the ends and the ultimate beneficiaries of their college education. Strengthened by these initial victories, they would pursue their intellectual offensive against white myth-making until all Americans recognized the unique contributions of black people to American society.¹⁹⁷

Again, evidence suggests that many of Styron's most visible critics were also proponents of Black Studies departments which would be uniquely positioned to promote Black Power principles. Harding's aforementioned Institute of the Black World, for example, was conceived in Atlanta, Georgia with the expressed purpose of bringing together Black scholars, artists, teachers, and organizers who all shared a "determination to set (their) skills to a new understanding of the past."¹⁹⁸ Although many scholars admired Harding's attempt to create an organizational model for other Black Studies programs, thereby lending the fragmented movement a sense of order, rationale, and direction, others who were more wary of his politically charged agenda referred to the Institute more derisively as a "Black Studies Vatican".

One of the Institute's first fellows was Lerone Bennett, discussed above. Lamenting a "regrettable tendency on the part of some men to underestimate the importance of history in the formulations of social ideologies and the social character of a people,"¹⁹⁹ he argued that African-Americans should both read and write histories with one eye cocked towards the political present. Thus, although history is "a scaffold upon which personal group identities are constructed," in his view the "meaning" of the past is also quite malleable. Activists of the 1960's faced the unique opportunity to impose new understandings of the past upon society at

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., pg. 74.

¹⁹⁸ Harding, Vincent. "Institute of the Black World: Basic Program Elements," *Negro Digest*. (March, 1970). pg. 20.

¹⁹⁹ Bennett, Lerone Jr. *The Challenge of BLACKNESS*. (Johnson Publishing Co., 1972). pg. 193.

large. In Bennett's view, "We do not, as commonly supposed, receive a past. We make it by resuming the past in a contemporary project based on a projection into the future. In other words, we give meaning to the strivings of Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, and Marcus Garvey by what they do today."²⁰⁰ Likewise, Alvin Poussaint has also demonstrated a close affinity to Black Studies. For example, at a 1967 symposium at Yale University that aimed to facilitate programs of this nature, he made specific mention of Styron's Nat Turner. Arguing that "unconscious racism" within the novel was symptomatic of the racism that permeated so much of the majority culture, Poussaint saw a clear need for the "Black Power and black consciousness movements" of the day to serve as "launching pads for attacks upon the system and on society."²⁰¹ Although the news media of the 1960's often focused upon the more sensational aspects of student activism, Van DeBurg has documented the ways in which the drive for Black Studies in higher education "was an important step toward black self-definition and empowerment." Indeed, much of the political language used to justify Black Power in the academy seems strikingly similar to the rhetoric the "Ten Black Writers" aimed at William Styron.

III

Given Genovese's Marxist credentials and his clear identification with those who, historically, have been marginalized or oppressed, it may at first seem surprising that he would have put forth such a thorough and merciless critique of the points raised in ...Ten Black Writers Respond. A careful reading of his review, however, reveals that much of his frustration arose from what he perceived to be tactical blunders by the Black Power radicals, rather than a quarrel with their ultimate aims and objectives. "No matter how absurd most of the contributions

²⁰⁰ Ibid., pg. 202.

²⁰¹ Poussaint, Alvin. "The Role of Education in Providing A Basis for Honest Self-Identification," in Black Studies in the University, Robinson, Foster and Ogilvie, editors. (Yale University Press, 1969). pg. 200.

are,” he nonetheless argued that the book demanded serious attention for what it revealed “about the thinking of intellectuals in the movement.” In his view, the Black intelligentsia had been over-run by a Black Power ideology “which increasingly demands conformity, myth-making, and historical fabrication.” Thus, Genovese closed his essay with a word of warning:

...If they proceed, in a hysterical way, to demand new myths in order to serve current ends, they will find the same moral, political, and intellectual debacle at the end as did most of the Marxists (of the late 1930's and 1940's). Their political movement, being a genuine popular force, can only be served by the truth. The history of every people exhibits glory and shame, heroism and cowardice, wisdom and foolishness, certainty and doubt, and more often than not these same antagonistic qualities appear at the same moment and in the same men. The revolutionary task of intellectuals is, accordingly, not to invent myths, but to teach each people its own particular contradictory truth. This historian has never been sure which lessons can be drawn from the past to serve the future. Except perhaps one: Until a people can and will face its past, it has no future.²⁰²

Yet a counter-perspective might suggest that the “hysteria” which Genovese decried was, for the political intelligentsia of Black America, an essential component of their message. What Albert Stone has identified as the “rage” and “intemperate discourse” of many of Styron’s critics has strong antecedents within our own political tradition, going all the way back to the era of the American Revolution. “Since the Black critic’s common contentions are that Nat Turner represents in black culture...an emotional symbol of mythic manhood, heroism, and martyrdom, and that this figure’s potency as a political weapon has been diminished by a distorted white retelling...it is appropriate to find their attacks on Styron’s version, an on the author himself, as a symbolic white southerner, expressed with emotional passion and intensity.”²⁰³

²⁰² Genovese, Eugene. pg. 39.

²⁰³ Stone, Albert. pg. 173.

Likewise, Genovese would have to be among the first to agree that throughout American history, educators, political leaders, and the media have all resorted to successful myth-making and historical fabrication with the goal of imposing an element of cultural hegemony over our citizenry. At a most basic level, young students are encouraged to believe that George Washington confessed to chopping down a cherry tree because he “could not tell a lie”, that Abraham Lincoln walked ten miles in order to give someone a penny, and that Daniel Boone and Davey Crockett conquered a “wild frontier”.

This said, there can be little doubt that the Nat Turner who had been perpetuated as a folk hero in the African-American community was indeed a “myth”, at least so far as we apply the dictionary definition of the word. Whether one chooses to believe Margaret Walker’s claim that Turner represents to Blacks a preacher “who was fighting against all the tyranny and hatred and dominance”²⁰⁴ of southern slavery, or Addison Gayle’s assertion that Turner’s life can be most usefully seen as a negation of “the absurd and nonsensical philosophy of Martin Luther King,” he has most certainly been used as a character type in order to appeal to the consciousness and the ideals of Black America. But beyond a few facts of Turner’s life that are presented in a dated document of questionable validity, we really know next to nothing about him or his psychology. As Gross and Bender have persuasively argued in their essay “History, Politics, and Literature: The Myth of Nat Turner,” those of Styron’s critics who claim that he has “distorted”, “manipulated”, “rejected”, and “emasculated” the “real” and “true” “historical” Nat Turner have no rational basis whatsoever for such charges. Over the course of 32-pages of their densely packed and well-documented treatise, these scholars survey both the ways in which Turner has been portrayed in the American imagination and also the shaky foundations upon which this portrayal has always rested. Their

²⁰⁴ Rowell, Charles H. “Poetry, History, and Humanism: An Interview with Margaret Walker,” *Black World*, (December, 1975) pg. 11.

somewhat ironic conclusion is that the charge “that Styron is guilty of distorting ‘the facts’ is itself not supported by facts.” Rather, they find the bulk of these assertions to be “politically motivated” and “propaganda...masquerading as history.”²⁰⁵

Regardless of whether Styron’s 1967 novel was a noble attempt to bring life to the truths of slavery, or as a racist tract inspired by “sick and bigoted fantasies”, it seems clear that his portrayal of Nat Turner and the Southampton Rebellion of 1831 was no more less “imagined” or “mythical” than the Nat Turner that was endlessly promoted and lionized by some Black activists of the 1960’s. Yet as this paper has also demonstrated, the charges that the Black critics leveled at Styron were clearly colored by the era from which they came - an era of “nation building” within the African-American community, whereupon millions of people were embarked upon an unprecedented cultural revolution. While the aims of these activists often varied, they certainly shared the twin objectives of opening up new avenues of understanding issues of race in America, and of creating their own positive racial identities. A stale joke in many bookish circles which asks “why are academic battles so fierce?” hinges upon the answer that this is because “the stakes are so low”. In this instance, however, I would turn the quip on its head. Black intellectuals vigorously challenged the legitimacy of white-authored interpretations of the Black past because, in 1968, the stakes loomed so terribly, terribly large.

²⁰⁵ Gross, Seymour L. and Bender, Eileen. “History, Politics, and Literature: The Myth of Nat Turner,” *American Quarterly* (October, 1971). pg 517.

SLAVERY, BLACK STUDIES, AND THE PERILS OF SCHOLARSHIP

Writing in 1970, a white instructor of African-American history at Ohio State University suggested that the “furious hostility” generated by Styron’s novel should “serve to warn others who also would venture to write or teach about the Afro-American past of the reception that may await their efforts.” Yet even more “immediately instructive,” he felt, was the angry misunderstandings which surrounded the drive for Black Studies departments at so many major American universities.²⁰⁶ Accordingly, this chapter will focus primarily upon the ethic behind Black Studies, and the ways in which this impacted upon the work of historians of slavery. By way of illustration, much of the discussion to follow will center upon the career of Robert Starobin. Upon earning a Ph.D. at Berkeley under the tutelage of Kenneth Stamp, and then quickly publishing a book and landing a tenure-track position at the University of Wisconsin, it seemed likely that a promising career lay ahead. Yet as a white scholar of slavery who was well known for his leftist political views, his work was often laden with controversy. When he committed suicide in 1971, many of his peers clung to the view that this decision was closely linked to the personal and professional demands that the revolutionary politics of the era had thrust upon him. A case study of his remarkable and tragically short career, then, goes a long way towards illustrating the ways in which Black Power not only shaped our present understanding of slavery, but also took a huge personal toll on many politically committed scholars of the era.

I

Without doubt, the call for Black Studies struck many journalists, educators, and administrators as something of a bolt from the blue. Indeed, even some supporters of the movement allowed that in many instances, various campaigns to radically reconstruct the relationship between the university and its

²⁰⁶ Dillon, Merton L., “White Faces and Black Studies,” *Commonweal* (January 30, 1970) 476.

Black students was unceremonious and poorly planned. The eminent historian John Blassingame, for example, wrote about the Black Studies crusade in 1970 with a clear sense of befuddled amusement at how “It has all happened so fast.” Whereas in about 1967 “the notion that a university student could earn a degree in Black Studies was almost unimaginable,” over the course of only three years, “scores of colleges have answered insistent Negro demands by establishing a wide variety of Black Studies programs - often with precipitous speed.”²⁰⁷ Another professor remarked that “From its beginning in 1960 until well past the middle years of the decade, the black youth movement did not have much to do with what is commonly thought of as education.”²⁰⁸

This seems, however, a somewhat myopic perspective. Thankfully, other writers have correctly pointed to the linkage between the campus politics of this era, and the earliest stirrings of student activists in the 1950’s. Roger Fischer, for example, has remarked that “unlike most academic programs, black studies was not born in a faculty senate chamber or in a dean’s conference room, or even on a college campus.” Rather, “It all began...at those Southern lunch counters and deserted bus stops where black people finally rose in rebellion against nearly three-and-one-half years centuries of second-class citizenship.”²⁰⁹ Others have discussed Black Studies in the context of “a long and rich intellectual tradition within the black American community,” beginning in large measure with the work of DuBois at Atlanta University, and extending to the Race Relations Institute of Fisk University, led by sociologist Charles S. Johnson.²¹⁰

This movement was also fueled by the increasing professional embarrassment over several generations of the sort of racist scholarship discussed

²⁰⁷ Blassingame, John W., “Soul or Scholarship: Choices Ahead for Black Studies,” *Smithsonian* (April, 1970) 58.

²⁰⁸ Redding, Saunders, “The Black Youth Movement,” *Dissent* (Autumn, 1969) 584.

²⁰⁹ Fischer, Roger A., *Current History* (November, 1969) 290.

²¹⁰ Marable, Manning, “From the Director,” *Race and Reason: Journal of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies at Columbia University* (Autumn, 1994) 3.

in chapter one, as well as the circumscription of African-Americans from most universities. Certainly the inquiries of Stamp and Elkins had helped to inaugurate a tradition in which the African-American experience has moved from the periphery of historical scholarship, to somewhere near its center. Moreover, in their responses to the work of each of these scholars, historians of slavery proved to be at the forefront of a movement towards "Social History" that often served as a focal point of many Black Studies programs.²¹¹ Of course, the underlying preoccupation of social history, or "history from the bottom-up," was to give voice to those populations that had been largely ignored in previous narratives. Under this rubric, new attention was paid to the experiences of workers, ethnics, women, and of course, African-Americans. Historian Alice Kessler-Harris has effectively captured the spirit of this movement. In addition to pressures from within the profession, she notes that "the ascendancy of social history was also inspired by "the visible tensions of the 1960's":

With society rent asunder by the civil rights movement, anti-war protests, and feminist demands, a new generation of historians had difficulty reconciling myths of national progress and consensus with the tensions around them. Rejecting assumptions of unity, they argued that a history rooted in ideas of an unrepresentative Protestant elite of ministers, lawyers, and political leaders could hardly speak for all of American society. Instead, they sought to explore the dynamic interaction of a multi-racial and multi-ethnic population; to understand how interest groups and classes competed for power; and to develop a sense of how race, sex, and ethnicity served to mold and inhibit conceptions of common national purpose. The resurgent populist impulse of the 1960's also brought into question the assumption that a study of leaders could adequately reflect the political process, and it heightened interest in the agency of ordinary people. Beginning, then, with the challenge of a divided society, rather than with the assumptions of a unified one, social historians took the poor, the black, and the excluded as a special domain and set out to rewrite the history of the United States.²¹²

²¹¹ Banner-Haley, Charles, "Searching for the Proper Place: The Revising of Afro-American History," *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 87.

²¹² Kessler-Harris, Alice, "Social History" in Foner, ed., *The New American History*, (Temple University Press, 1992).

It is the perception of many observers, however, that Black Studies was above all a means of addressing the psychological and political necessities of many African-Americans. On this first point, I.A. Newby wrote in 1969, "It is my surmise that black youth are in need of nothing as much as a secure sense of personal identity, self-confidence, and racial pride."²¹³ This same year, Alvin Poussaint told an audience of educators that Black Studies must be understood as a response to the wide array of ways in which racism can inflict psychological harm. While there remains much debate as to whether or not African-Americans are ever led to internalize racist presumptions of their "inferiority," it was his view that tendencies towards a negative self-image and low self-esteem were common. African-Americans, he said, "are not just seeking equality, full rights, and freedom. What's going on now is also a search and a fight for an *inner* emancipation from the effects of white racism - to become somehow internally *purged*. It's also a question of legitimizing blackness." An *Atlantic Monthly* writer opined that "It seems clear that the advocates of black studies programs see it as a remedy for "white studies" programs...and as a way to bring pride, dignity, and community to black people,"²¹⁴ while a *New York Times* journalist commented upon "the almost desperate desire of young blacks to foster racial pride," which , "can be nurtured, and asserted, through black studies programs."²¹⁵

Yet in addition to fostering psychological identity and strength, many Black Studies proponents hoped to create cadres of young and talented African-Americans who, upon graduation, would prove to be of tangible use to the Black masses. There was much debate, however, as to precisely what this meant. Some educators doubtless imagined that Black Studies graduates would likely spend their time

²¹³ Newby, I.A., "Historians and Negroes," *Journal of Negro History* (January, 1969) 32-33.

²¹⁴ Penhony, Devere E., "The Case for Black Studies," *Atlantic Monthly* (April, 1969) 82.

²¹⁵ Roberts, Steven V., "Black Studies: More Than 'Soul' Courses," *Commonweal* (January 30, 1970) 479.

trying to build community support programs, modifying urban planning policies, and increasing voter turnout amongst ghetto residents. In other instances, the goal of Black Studies was to train militant (and sometimes even revolutionary) African Americans, who would focus on nation-building. A proper educational agenda, therefore, would include courses in self-defense, and would offer a stirring indictment of white American militarism, imperialism, and racism. According to many Black Power spokespersons, anything other than this would be “profoundly irrelevant”.

Still others saw Black Studies less as a training ground for Black liberation, and more as a practical means of addressing the dramatic failure rates of many Black college students. This was a particularly pressing problem, since during the very same years that Black Studies were beginning to flourish, African-American students began to enter college at even faster rates than those projected by the Census Bureau, and so by 1969, over 400,000 Black undergrads represented about 6 percent of the college population.²¹⁶ The impact of this change was felt by predominately white universities in general, and the Ivy Leagues in particular. In 1969, for example, they granted admission to 86 percent more Blacks than in any previous year.²¹⁷ As a result of the insensitivity and negligence of many white administrators, it was sometimes argued that the campus was a hostile environment for most Black students, who tended to come from disadvantaged backgrounds to begin with. Jack Cardoso, for example, held that “college society and all it infers is irrelevant” to African-Americans, while Fischer wrote that, “Stripped of their identities as black people and forced into a curriculum that denied their heritage by an unconscious conspiracy of silence, black students found themselves completely, irreconcilably alienated within the ivy-covered confines of the white

²¹⁶ Hill, Norman, “Integration or Segregation,” *Dissent* (March-April, 1969) 43.

²¹⁷ Dillon, 476.

universities.”²¹⁸ By way of elaboration, Blassingame noted that Black students felt unusually “heavy pressures”. “Accepting the myth that education liberalizes, in race as in other matters,” he noted that the typical Black student was likely to find, instead, “all of the degrading assumptions and usages of the larger society enshrined in white academia. Treated as an untouchable by his white classmates, expected blindly to imitate everything white, fearful that he may follow the path of other educated blacks and abandon his people, and thrown into brutal academic competition with students who frequently are better prepared for it, the black student’s life is understandably trying.”²¹⁹

In many instances, this sort of analysis led to the view that Black Studies should be exclusively controlled by Blacks, and that Black and white students should either be segregated or else whites should be excluded altogether. In large measure, this demand was simply a reflection of general trends within the civil rights movement. Many organizations, such as CORE, the NAACP and the Urban League, had taken more militant approaches towards America’s tragic racial condition, and SNCC had for many years been openly espousing African-American separatism. Though the text above has already suggested a number of reasons for which Black students might have wanted to direct their own course of study, and to live and dine in their own, separate facilities, sociologist Robert Merton has explained that this desire is best understood as a matter of social epistemology known as the “Insider Doctrine”. Over the course of several centuries, white American hegemony and overt racist bias had created a huge potential for “counterethnocentrism” - a rather common phenomenon whenever “a largely powerless collectivity acquires a socially validated sense of growing power.” In the case of Black intellectuals, Merton argues that an “intensified need for self-

²¹⁸ Fischer, Roger A., “Ghetto and Gown: The Birth of Black Studies,” in Blassingame, John, ed., New Perspectives on Black Studies (University of Illinois Press, 1971) 18.

²¹⁹ Blassingame, New Perspectives, xii.

affirmation,” led to the precept that “*only* black historians can understand black history, *only* black ethnologists can understand black culture, *only* black sociologists can understand the social life of blacks, and so on.” Put another way:

What the insider doctrine of most militant blacks proposes on the level of social structure is to adopt the salience of racial identity in every sort of role and situation, a pattern so long imposed upon the American Negro, and to make that identity a total commitment issuing form within the group rather than one imposed on it from without. By thus affirming the universal saliency of race and by redefining race as an abiding source of pride rather than stigma, the insider doctrine in effect models itself after a doctrine long maintained by white racists.²²⁰

In less esoteric prose, Blassingame has added that the idea of an autonomous, Black-controlled curriculum was indicative of a “deep-seated distrust of white institutions by American blacks.” In other words, African-Americans realized “they have been sold out so often by whites that they are no longer willing to entrust their destiny to any white man.” In many cases, it was observed that those whites who wanted to enroll in Black Studies programs were so bent upon relieving their own guilt that if they weren’t at least quietly paternalistic, they were likely to be found fawning over the Black students. To avoid being bothered by these sorts of distractions, African-American campus leaders argued that:

separate dormitories, classrooms, and social facilities will permit blacks to work on common problems, to find psychological support in their fight against white racism, and to perfect the plans needed to save the black community. These objectives are not so foreign to white students, and their lifestyles, dreams, behavior, and understanding of society are so different from Negroes that they would either be bewildered in classes with blacks or would slow the pace of the more advanced blacks. Separate, autonomous programs are a recognition of the uniqueness of black culture. Integration has failed. Negroes must withdraw into their own communities, strengthen them, and then obtain an equitable slice of the American

²²⁰ Merton, Robert K., “Insiders and Outsiders: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge,” *Journal of American Sociology*, (July, 1972) 18, 13, 20.

pie. On the campus, the black students must withdraw into separate classrooms and social centers to rebuild their psyches and rejoin pluralistic society.²²¹

Given this general thrust, it should hardly be surprising that many white academicians resisted Black Studies, at least in its most extreme forms. Genovese, for example, feared that universities had begun to “cowardly surrender to all Black demands, no matter how destructive to the university as an institution of higher learning or to American and Afro-American society in general.” Demands for all-Black students and faculties, he argued, represented an “ideologically fascist position,” and that no meaningful history of any people could be written solely “from within”. While it was certainly desirable to train and recruit more African-American graduate students and professors, further measures, involving “monopoly and exclusion” would “sacrifice principle” and “compromise the integrity of the university”.²²² C. Vann Woodward echoed this concern, fearing “a new separatism, an inverted segregation, a black apartheid.” Though American historiography “could profit from an infusion of ‘soul’ as a sort of corrective influence,” for several centuries of biased scholarship, “To disqualify historians from writing Negro history on the grounds of race is to subscribe to an extreme brand of racism.”²²³

There were also African-American critics of segregated Black Studies programs, including Bayard Rustin, Martin Kilson, Thomas Sowell, and John Blassingame. When Antioch College established a program that excluded white students, social psychologist Kenneth Clark promptly resigned from their Board of Directors, contending in a public letter that the college had evaded its “moral and

²²¹ Blassingame, *New Perspectives*, xv.

²²² Genovese, Eugene, “Black Studies: Trouble Ahead,” in *In Red and Black: Marxian Explorations Southern and Afro-American History* (Pantheon Books, 1971) 224.

²²³ Woodward, C. Vann, “Clio With Soul,” *Journal of American History* (June, 1969) 16.

educational responsibilities.” The administration, he held, had “made a mockery of its concern for the protection and development of human dignity.”²²⁴

Yet in addition to simply challenging the “Insider Doctrine” as “the final step on the road to apartheid,” critics of Black Studies were armed with a number of other reservations, most of which were phrased in intellectual terms. For example, while many scholars professed support for serious inquiries into the African-American experience, the idea that these programs could serve as forums for political and ideological indoctrination was characterized as “misguided” and “fanciful”. Likewise, it was wondered whether Black Studies was the proper rubric under which to prepare students for social work in impoverished ghettos, or whether or not such programs should try and strengthen the psychological identities of African-Americans. The whole point of higher education, it was argued, was strictly to impart knowledge and technical skills. Genovese, for example, came close to ridiculing “the alleged ‘psychological need’ of black people to do this or that or to be this or that in order to maintain their manhood, reestablish their ostensibly lost dignity, and God knows what else.” While these questions held relevance, there was no place for them “in the formulation of university policy.”²²⁵

Closely related to these arguments was the fact that white critics often invoked the specter of “standards” as the ultimate arbiter of the relevance of Black Studies programs. Though most university communities had been consistently negligent in meeting the educational needs of African-Americans, and in treating the subject of Black History with the intellectual rigor it deserved, there seemed to be a sudden panic that Black students might graduate with a meager background in so-called “soul courses,” without proficiency in an established discipline. One can be sure there was a good deal of behind-the-scenes mockery of such imagined courses

²²⁴ Clarke, Kenneth B. Black Studies: Myths and Realities (A. Phillip Randolph Educational Fund, 1969) 34.

²²⁵ Genovese, In Red and Black, 224-25.

as “Chitlins 101” or “The Ghetto Politics of Basketweaving”. As Armstead Robinson had pointed out, much of this hesitancy amongst educators arose from their general ignorance of the African-American experience, and from an unwillingness to grant the “possibility that there are things worth teaching of which even (they) may be unaware.”²²⁶ At the opening session of a 1969 Yale symposium on “Black Studies in the University,” one professor raised eyebrows when he posed for discussion a remarkably naive set of questions that most audience members and participant knew had long been settled. “Is the special study of the black experience,” he queried, “intellectually valid? Is it educationally responsible? And, is it socially constructive for both blacks and whites?”²²⁷ There was also a very poor understanding of the urgency with which many Black students felt their concerns needed to be addressed. Henry Rosovsky, a member of Harvard’s Committee on African and Afro-American Studies, typified the nonchalance of many liberals who failed to fully grasp many of the compelling arguments for Black Studies. In reflecting upon the subject, he seemed to think that the movement was driven merely because throughout the ages, the social sciences and humanities had “treated the Negro in rather offhand fashion...To put it another way, the traditional disciplines have not provided an atmosphere in which the subject matter directly related to black Americans has flourished.”²²⁸

Then again, some white educators may have been correct to point out that such proposed courses as “The Selection and Preparation of Soul Food” and “Relevant Recreation in the Ghetto” were not likely to produce skills or knowledge that would carry much social currency outside of the classroom. In other instances, African-American students insisted on “open admissions” policies which would

²²⁶ Robinson, Armstead, ed., Black Studies in the University: A Symposium (Yale University Press, 1969) viii.

²²⁷ Ibid., 3.

²²⁸ Rosovsky, Henry, “Black Studies at Harvard: Personal Reflections Concerning Recent Events,” *Dissent* (Autumn, 1969) 564.

inevitably have led to even more abysmal rates of retention. Ironically enough, those administrators who resisted some of the student demands may have also been those who were most sincere in their desire to fulfill their obligation to see that Black students were well-trained in a field that required careful investigation and analysis. In many cases, at universities where students seemed most intemperate and confrontational, frightened campus officials were quick to approve hastily constructed and poorly planned programs. Often, these departments received little in the way of university funding, and rather were built upon shaky support from outside foundations. In so quickly capitulating to student demands that were possibly unreasonable and destructive, administrators seemed to betray the same tendencies towards racism or benevolent paternalism that students were reacting against in the first place. As Blassingame said at the time, "It is clear that in many cases predominately white schools have deliberately organized ill-conceived programs because they are intended solely for Negro students...Some professors at one of the leading universities in the country will approve, without question, any proposal for black studies because they say 'It's only for the niggers'." ²²⁹

Likewise, Sowell claimed that "When Black Studies are a pay-off to prevent campus disruption, however it may be disguised by liberal rhetoric, it is not going to be an honest effort to seek out the whole truth at all costs." ²³⁰

Insofar as one can treat the drive for Black Studies as an adjunct to the Black Power Movement, it should not be surprising that many Black and white scholars and activists spent much time talking past one another, rather than communicating in a meaningful dialogue. Simply put, race relations in this era were so fluid, fraught with tension, and highly visible, that one British historian who had just returned from a tour of American universities reported that his trip had

²²⁹ Blassingame, *New Perspectives*, 153.

²³⁰ Rustin, Bayard, ed., *Black Studies: Myths and Realities* (A. Phillip Randolph Educational Fund, 1969) 35.

a “curiously benumbing” effect upon his psyche. “Every spokesman was indulgent in spokesmanship, every apologist in apologias, every militant in militance...Visually, one feels the same strain: white facial muscles ache with nervous smiling, black ones with intimidating scowls.”²³¹

Such campus turmoil, widely reported in the media and in learned journals alike, effected not only students and campus officials, but also historians of American and Afro-American history. As Woodward would write, by the late 1960’s, professors in these fields could not have helped but been aware “of the demand for more attention to the part that Negro people have played. It may come quietly from a distressed college dean, or it may come peremptorily and noisily from militant student protest. In any case, the demand is insistent that we move over and make room.” Though this adjustment was “often awkward and sometimes frantic,” Woodward further noted that “American institutions are responding, each in its own fashion.”²³²

Scholars of slavery, of course, played a particularly important role in re-fashioning the relationship between the American historical profession, and its treatment of African-Americans in various monographs and textbooks. As one historian remarked, in seeking “to understand the origins of racial inequality in the United States, (scholars) inevitably turned back to the era when inequality was most blatantly institutionalized and oppressive.”²³³ Much of this work was further driven by a large demand for African-American and slave scholarship. According to a February, 1969 article in the *New York Times*, “Virtually every title remotely connected with aspects of Afro-American culture soared in sales last year. The appearance of the word ‘Black’ on the cover appeared to have assured some success, and even those books using outmoded terms such as *Negro*, remained

²³¹ Cunliffe, Marcus, “Black Culture and White America,” *Encounter* (January, 1970) 99.

²³² Woodward, C. Vann, “Clio With Soul,” 5.

²³³ Dew, Charles, “The Slavery Experience,” 121.

curiously in the, ah, black.”²³⁴ Another scholar remarked that over the course of the 1960’s, it had become clear that the African-American experience was the hottest field within all of American historiography. “The proliferation of published works in Negro history and thought,” he wrote, “is nothing less than phenomenal.”²³⁵

As a result of the heightened visibility of slave scholarship, as well as the fact that this body of work held rather obvious ramifications for the political present, one can imagine that a number of major players within the profession beginning to scrutinize - for the very first time - the work of Black historians. At the same time, African-American scholars, responding to Black Power’s demand for a cultural heritage upon which a Black revolution could be built, began to seriously challenge (as we have seen in chapter three) the legitimacy of white authored interpretations of their past. Stuckey, speaking for a number of Black nationalists of the era, was quite candid in his admission that “white historians as a group are about as unpopular amongst black people as white policemen.”²³⁶

II

The collision between the scholar’s inclination to allow for expressions of politics and ideology on one hand, and the necessity of retaining a large degree of objectivity on the other, has always been a sort of leitmotif in American history.²³⁷ Conversations along these lines, however, carried even greater weight during the 1960’s, particularly with regard to the field of African-American history. Like many historians, Bob Starobin wrestled with what David Brion Davis once

²³⁴ “Black is Marketable,” *New York Times* (February 3, 1969) 3.

²³⁵ Goldman, Martin S., “Black Arrival in American History: A Historiographical Look at the Sixties,” *Social Studies* (October, 1971) 209.

²³⁶ Stuckey, Sterling, “Twilight of the Past: Reflections of the Origins of Black History,” in *Amistad 2*, (1971) 291.

²³⁷ This point has been raised by Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge University Press, 1988) and, more explicitly, by Linda Rennie Forcey *Personality in Politics: The Commitment of a Suicide* (Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1978). Forcey’s work, which is something of a biography of Robert Starobin, provides the great bulk of the background information to follow.

described as a seemingly endless struggle “to retain the essential quality of ivory towerism, the sense of detachment necessary for true critical thought, while living with an obsessive feeling of social responsibility.”²³⁸ However, given his rigorous academic training, his radical background, and the salience of his commitment towards the Black liberation movement, Starobin seems to have had an especially difficult time managing the horns of this dilemma. Certainly the complex interplay between his scholarship and the cultural politics of the age in which he lived is a prominent theme in Linda Rennie Forcey’s unpublished biography of Starobin, “Personality in Politics: The Commitment of a Suicide” (1978).

Born in New York in 1940, Starobin had the somewhat unusual childhood experience of being a “red diaper baby”. His father, Joseph Starobin, had been on the editorial staff of the *Daily Worker*, and both his parents maintained an association with the American Communist Party until 1954. As Forcey describes, he had always had mixed feelings over his young involvement with the Old Left, and at the time of his death in February, 1971, he had already received an advance for a book he was going to write on the subsequent social and political activities of the so-called “Kommie Kids” who grew up in the U.S. during the heyday of the American Communist Party, between about 1930 and 1950. On one hand, this made for a particularly stressful childhood experience. During the years 1951-1954, his father had to live abroad, and yet the rest of the Starobin family were denied the passports they needed in order to join him. He was also a young teenager during the witch hunts of the McCarthy era, and one of his uncles had a close personal association with the Rosenberg’s. Yet Starobin also held fond memories of the camaraderie and the intellectually rich milieu in which he spent his formative years. In Greenwich Village and Manhattan he attended excellent schools

²³⁸ Davis, David Brion, in Black Studies in the University 222.

as well as progressive summer camps and retreats, rallies, marches, and folk music concerts.

Graduating near the top of his high school class, Starobin began attending Cornell as an undergraduate in 1958, helping to edit the student newspaper and continuing to explore various leftist traditions in the United States. One particular editorial from September, 1960, seems to reveal a good deal about the general optimism he shared with many other students from this era who would later play important roles in the development of the New Left. The prospects for meaningful social change in the decade ahead, he argued, were profound. As Forcey describes:

the Southern sit-in movement had barely begun, but (Starobin) saw that it was clearly mushrooming into a strategic, tactical, massive passive movement for equal rights for American blacks. He felt confident that other sorts of political activity were developing too. In New York and California, thousands were demonstrating for peace and a sane nuclear policy. Pacifists and scientists were leading picket lines at missile bases and atomic radiation laboratories. Several states were forming anti-capital punishment committees. There were forward strides in the areas of academic freedom. The House Un-American Activities Committee and the Senate Internal Committee had suffered major setbacks. "And wait 'til next year," Bob exclaimed. Clearly, good times (were) ahead.²³⁹

Beyond a bit of leafleting and several more cogent analyses in the *Cornell Sun-Bulletin* on what he impishly referred to as the burgeoning student "motion" of the era, Starobin had little organizing experience. At age twenty-one, however, he turned down a chance to enroll in Cornell's history department with funding in order to attend Berkeley - the so-called "Mother of the New Left" - without financial support. Though Starobin participated in peace demonstrations and was an active

²³⁹ Forcey, *Personality in Politics* 84.

member of the campus chapter of Friends of SNCC, he was said to have “cut his political teeth in the Free Speech movement.”²⁴⁰

There was, of course, a great deal of vigorous political activity in Berkeley during Starobin’s graduate student years. It has often been contended, however, that the Free Speech Movement was of particular importance as a symbolic or prophetic turning point in the development of 1960’s student activism. Moreover, Nathan Glazer, Mario Savio, and Doug McAdam have all drawn connections between this event and the Black liberation movement.²⁴¹ According to one of Starobin’s peers, “Bob was on the inside,” of the student revolt at Berkeley, participating “behind the scenes,” in countless strategy meetings, and “thinking and doing politics practically full time.”²⁴²

Starobin’s main accomplishments involved helping to coordinate a campus-wide strike amongst teaching assistants, mobilizing graduate students, and persuading faculty members in the History department to support the movement. At the same time, however, he took seriously his responsibilities as a student. So much so, in fact, that his graduate advisor, Kenneth Stampp, was unaware of the full depth of Starobin’s political activity and never once felt that it hampered his academic performance. In the seminar, Starobin was said to have been “a dead earnest professional historian.” Others have made similar remarks, tending to suggest that very early in his graduate career Starobin had made a sharp distinction between his commitments towards political activity and scholarship.

Indeed, as Alex Lichtenstein has remarked, Starobin’s Ph.D. dissertation, later published in book form in 1970 as Industrial Slavery in the Old South, demonstrates an “astonishing breadth of research.” Aided by a generous traveling

²⁴⁰ Lichtenstein, Alex, “Industrial Slavery and the Tragedy of Robert Starobin,” *Reviews in American History* (December, 1991) 604.

²⁴¹ Glazer, Nathan, Remembering the Answers: Essays on the American Student Revolt (Basic Books, 1970); Savio, Mario, “The Free Speech Movement and the Negro Revolution,” *News and Letters* (1965); McAdam, Doug, Freedom Summer (Oxford University Press, 1988).

²⁴² Forcey, Personality in Politics 92.

fellowship, Starobin temporarily relocated in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, visiting 38 archives and consulting “nearly every significant holding in the South.” Moreover, “His bibliography lists almost 300 manuscript collections. Even reviewers doubtful about some of his cruder calculations, or who quibbled with his conclusions expressed admiration for his formidable research.”²⁴³ Other historians have praised the book as “a calm and thorough investigation,” which was “almost universally well-received as ‘an excellent study’.”²⁴⁴

Though it is well known that Starobin had a strained intellectual and personal relationship with Stamppp throughout his graduate career, he had a great deal of respect for his mentors scholarship, and Stamppp’s influence is easily identifiable in the pages of Industrial Slavery. In fact, the very task of the book seems to have been to document support for Stamppp’s assertion in The Peculiar Institution that “it is doubtful...that slavery in any decisive way retarded the industrialization of the South.”²⁴⁵ Starobin’s work also closely mirrored the theoretical framework Stamppp had used, investigating in sequence the slaves labor, their living conditions, the means by which they were “disciplined”, their twin responses of accommodation and resistance, and finally, the ways in which industrial slavery shaped political developments leading to the Civil War. “In short,” Lichtenstein notes, Starobin’s contention was that “slavery provided a viable, profitable, and above all, flexible labor force for Southern industry, particularly when compared to the available options.” Though the long term effect of industrial slavery upon the southern economy and labor market was positive, his Marxian analysis led him to conclude that “slavery and full industrialization were

²⁴³ Lichtenstein, 606.

²⁴⁴ See, for example, Parish, Peter, Slavery: History and Historians (Harper and Row, 1989) 180; Boney, F.N., review in *American Historical Review* (December, 1970) 2117-19; Friedel, Frank, *Radical America* 5 (1970) 92; Lichtenstein, 610.

²⁴⁵ Lichtenstein, 606.

ultimately incompatible.” In other words, “the point of contradiction had not been reached during the antebellum period.”²⁴⁶

Starobin successfully defended his dissertation in 1968, and the following year it was accepted for publication by the highly regarded Oxford University Press. Since 1966, however, he had been teaching at the University of Wisconsin, which was widely held at the time to be one of the premier history departments in the nation. Again, his peers noticed that he very much aspired to be the quintessential, professional historian in the classroom. Forcey, who knew him briefly before his suicide, described him as “ambitious” - in addition to fashioning himself as a “detached, reputable scholar,” she added that he also wanted to “make it” in the profession, “and ‘making it’ meant becoming a full professor at some prestigious university.” In several departmental memos, Starobin spoke eloquently on behalf of the craft of the historian, demanding that his students strive to approach their inquiries “in a scientific manner by understanding their own biases and framing their questions accordingly.” There was “still something to be said for history-as-truth,” he once wrote, “as opposed to history-as-propaganda.” When one student turned in a poorly reasoned paper meant to express his leftist political commitments, Starobin responded that “Your historical radicalism is no substitute for coherence, and your explosive methods of presentation are perhaps fit for a rally, but not for a paper, at least one read by me - even though I might agree with your historical analysis.”²⁴⁷

This is all notable for the fact that by the late 1960’s, New Left historians found themselves very much in the same position as Black scholars of slavery. Such radicals as Jesse Lemisch, Staughton Lynd, and Christopher Lasch argued that so-called “mainstream” historians had long been producing historical interpretations that clearly expressed their political beliefs, and yet if New Left

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 610-611.

²⁴⁷ Forcey, 121-22.

historians ever revealed a bias or hoped that their work might inspire social change, they were denounced as “strident, shrill, excessive, and even hysterical.” As one scholar protested, there seemed to be a clear double standard at work: “That which reflects acceptable values is spirited, while that which offends is rabid, emotional, or off the wall.”²⁴⁸ Meanwhile, they argued amongst themselves over their own roles in the academy, leading one writer to complain in the *New Republic* that it wasn’t clear whether certain radicals found the historical profession “wanting by standards of neutrality,” or if they meant to repudiate the standard altogether.²⁴⁹ Others wondered aloud how they could ever reconcile their politics with their scholarship. Genovese bluntly declared that one must make a choice: “The great problem” facing many young, radical professors was to decide “whether to commit themselves to full-time study and engage in politics as time and circumstances will allow, or to commit themselves to full-time political work and to study history as time and circumstances will allow.” Those who try to devote equal energy to both tasks “invariably fail”.²⁵⁰ Jesse Lemisch captured this dilemma even more succinctly with the title of a paper he wrote in 1969: “Who Will Write A Left History Of Art While We Are All Putting Our Balls on the Line?”²⁵¹ Starobin’s answer had much in common with Lemisch’s. He rejected calls for work that held immediate political relevance, and instead placed a premium on notions of objective validity in history, in “trying to come a little closer to finding out how things actually were.”²⁵²

This is not to suggest, however, that Starobin ever made the choice between scholarship and activism that Genovese felt was necessary. Rather, at Wisconsin,

²⁴⁸ Schofield, Thomas, Introduction to Lemisch, Jesse, *On Active Service in Peace and War* (New Hogtown Press, 1969, 1975) 7.

²⁴⁹ Featherstone, Joseph, “Scholars and Society,” *New Republic* (January 17, 1970) 7-8.

²⁵⁰ Genovese, Eugene, *In Red and Black* 7.

²⁵¹ Lemisch, Jesse, “Who Will Write a Left History of Art While We Are All Putting Our Balls on the Line?” (New England Free Press, 1969); later re-published in the *Journal of American History* (September, 1989) 485-86.

²⁵² Lemisch, Jesse, *On Active Service* 117.

and later at the State University of New York at Binghamton, he simply maintained his belief that a bright line should separate the two. He attended civil rights and anti-Vietnam rallies, counseled student radicals, lobbied for a Black Studies Program, and actively supported a 1969 strike amongst African-American students against the university. In a short eulogy for Starobin that was printed in the Journal *Radical America*, an editor there wrote that “He *identified* with students rather than with the university administration or his more-conservative colleagues, and it was that identification, and the various questions it raised about his ‘departmental citizenship,’ that lay behind his failure to obtain tenure.”²⁵³

Yet Starobin’s foremost political affiliation was with the Black Panther Party, whom he felt had raised the American revolutionary struggle to a new and higher level. He seemed especially enamored with Huey Newton, one of the party’s founding leaders, and was one of several hundred spirited supporters to greet him upon his release from jail in August, 1970. To Julius Lester, a prominent Black nationalist, Starobin wrote that though he had once been somewhat suspicious over Newton’s reported genius, the way he’d conducted himself upon his release was “better than the mythical image”.²⁵⁴ Robert Abzug, a history professor who knew Starobin in the years before his death, offered a revealing anecdote:

One night, a bunch of us, (including) Leon Litwack and his wife...were waiting for Bob at Leon’s. We were going to go to San Francisco for dinner. About an hour and a half late, Bob finally showed up in a manic madness and proudly announced that he had just shaken the hand of Huey Newton (or was it Bobby Seale?), held up his hand, and also announced that he was never going to wash it again. Clearly, he was as capable of being as depressive in the deep winter of Binghamton as he was manic on the occasion in Berkeley.²⁵⁵

²⁵³ *Radical America* 5, (March-April, 1971) 92.

²⁵⁴ Starobin to Julius Lester, 8/21/70; cited in Forcey, 137.

²⁵⁵ Abzug, Robert. E-mail correspondence with author, January 10, 1997.

Starobin was also active in a local chapter of the Committee to Defend the Black Panthers, and in 1970, he attended a Black Panther Constitutional Convention that was to be held in Washington, D.C. When Howard University decided at the last minute to withdraw their offer of the use of their facilities, the convention quickly fell into disarray. As Forcey describes, "Bob was clearly badly shaken," by this, wandering aimlessly about the city streets and generally refusing to communicate with anyone.²⁵⁶

Perhaps more immediately instructive for the purposes of this study, however, are those of Starobin's experiences which relate directly to his role as a white scholar of southern slavery. As has been suggested above, Starobin was only one of a large number of liberal, white scholars who had great difficulty coming to terms with the fact that rapidly changing social developments had led toward their becoming "blacklisted" by certain segments of the African-American intellectual community.

According to Forcey, the courses Starobin taught at Wisconsin - "Sectionalism and the Civil War", "Reconstruction and the Origins of the Civil Rights Movement," and "Black History" - all sought to expatiate on his belief that only until very recently had the historical profession begun to recognize the importance of the Black experience in American history.

"Racist historians," Starobin once wrote:

held in brief that blacks were of little consequence to the American experience, as they were basically unequal to whites. Liberal historians, on the other hand, held that Negroes have made many important contributions to the American heritage and should be included in the study of the "great melting pot". Within the last decade, however, a group of younger scholars has challenged both these views, so that the study of black history and of white racism has now begun to undergo a radical re-interpretation. For the newer

²⁵⁶ Forcey, 141-42.

studies stress the persistence of racism and the centrality of institutions like slavery to long periods of American history; they view the oppression of blacks as a key to the meaning of the American experience.²⁵⁷

The Black History course did not come to fruition until the fall of 1968, in the wake of heightened student demands, both in Madison and across the country, which followed the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Before teaching it in a lecture hall, however, he followed the advice of his department chairperson and taught it for one semester as a colloquium. Despite Starobin's enthusiasm and a great deal of effort he put into organizing the class, there were early indications that things would not run smoothly. As Forcey explains, the very first weeks of the course "brought increasing tension."

The black students felt that the assigned readings were either inadequate or irrelevant. They felt they were not receiving from Bob what they had hoped for...(and) that they were being "ripped off," taken again. These feelings were expressed in terms of hostility toward the white students...The white students were, from the beginning, overly eager to show off their intellectual ability to Bob and the black students.

In addition, several vocal Black students, who also happened to be active in campus politics, held that "they could not accept any research or interpretation by a white." When Starobin and many other whites in the classroom tried to resist this notion, the situation became even more strained, leading to "overt personal hostilities". Just before the situation reached its boiling point, he began to hold what he called "sensitivity sessions," in which both he and his students temporarily put their books aside and tried to talk earnestly about their backgrounds and beliefs. Though most of the Black students refused to discuss their political programs on the grounds that whites could not be trusted with such information, the sessions

²⁵⁷ Starobin, Robert S., "Racism and the American Experience," *Radical America* 5, (March-April, 1971) 93.

proved helpful, and the course progressed much smoother from this point forward.²⁵⁸

The Black History lecture course the following spring was, in one sense, “a blockbuster,” as over seven hundred students had signed up. Early in the course, Starobin must have felt a sense of validation as Black students across the campus went on strike, demanding an Afro-American culture center and more regularly offered Black History classes. Given his knowledge in the field and his organizing experience in the Free Speech Movement, Starobin was asked to chair at least one student meeting, and during the week of the strike he was said to have spoken eloquently “at sit-ins, teach-ins, stand-ins, and faculty-ins,” and he refused to hold classes, pinning a note on his door that read “I cannot hold this class so long as legitimate Black student proposals are being ignored and the campus remains an armed garrison.”²⁵⁹

And yet on the other hand, Forcey is well on the mark with her characterization of “The black struggle in the universities across the country” as a power confrontation that “quickly became a no-mans land for white radicals.”

Bob was able to maintain a respectable academic stance in the classroom that semester, his last at Wisconsin, but at a price. The tensions he had felt in the small black history colloquium were magnified tenfold in the lecture course. Many black students resented him, felt that the color of his skin disqualified him from teaching the course. They often heckled, jeered, or walked out while Bob lectured. There were days when he felt the pressure was almost unbearable, when he was tempted to yell “fuck it - I can’t stand the hassle another minute.” Aloud, he never did. A friend noted that Bob, more than anyone else he knew in black studies, seemed to take the insults personally. Bob, never thick skinned, was in a rough business. After that spring of 1969, Bob never wanted to teach Black history again.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁸ Forcey, 127-129.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 131.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 133.

Starobin encountered more significant pitfalls as he tried to present his work to some of his African-American peers within the academy. Of particular interest to scholars of slavery was his analysis of slave resistance. As we have seen, since at least the early part of the 1960's, questions along these lines had proved to be highly volatile, as they held immediate political ramifications. As opposed to the widespread dehumanization in slave life that Elkins had posited, Black scholars began to offer a polar interpretation, focusing upon evidence suggesting that slaves led rich cultural lives, and that they found ingenious means of refusing to accommodate to the wills of their owners. Thus, in reflecting upon, and in drawing inspiration from their past, Black scholars sought to highlight examples of a viable tradition of slave resistance (or, as Elkins would later argue, "upon culture itself *as a form of resistance*"). One's position on this issue, then, tended to betray a fair amount about his or her political affiliations.²⁶¹ as Forcey argues, "The more resistant white historians found slaves to be, the more acceptable black nationalists found white historians to be." Significantly, "It was on this question of the impact of slavery upon the personality of the slaves as defined in terms of accommodating to versus resisting owners' authority that Bob's historical scholarship collided with his political commitment."²⁶²

Starobin shared with many Black scholars the belief that his colleagues in African-American history needed to pay more attention to history's protagonists - in this case, the voice of Black slaves. Accordingly, he began to give careful

²⁶¹ As Meier and Rudwick point out, Genovese made few friends at a 1966 Socialist Scholars Conference when he dismissed the nature of slave resistance in the United States as little more than "individual and essentially nihilistic thrashing about." Dialogues with Geroge Rawick and Sterling Stuckey, however, led him to explore more deeply the ways in which slave culture "enabled the bondsmen to resist the system." Such an analysis would become much more fully developed in Genovese's *magnum opus*, Roll, Jordan Roll - a work that was widely acclaimed, and yet also criticized by some whites as "shamelessly beholden to the dream of Black Power." In any case, it seems worthy of remark that whereas Genovese had "raised hackles among Black Power militants," early in his career, his work became much more well received by Black scholars once he shifted his position on this issue.

²⁶² Forcy, 158.

consideration to a number of letters he had uncovered that slave drivers, managers, and domestic servants had written to their owners, as well as correspondence between slaves. Though he was aware of the inherent difficulties that such materials presented to the historian, he nevertheless held that, when treated with care, one could surmise from the letters that privileged slaves often identified with their masters' interests, and that owners were sometimes successful in making use of a variety of clever means by which they created accommodating slaves. "Some house slaves," he argued, "acquiesced in their master's religious precepts and were dependent on whites for direction."²⁶³ At another point, he contended that while some slave drivers may have tried to curry favor with their owners by posturing themselves as content in their bondage, the evidence he found "seems to point more in the direction of loyalty by drivers to their masters than toward deception." Altogether, "there was great diversity in the slave response. Recalcitrance need not surprise us, nor should accommodation."²⁶⁴

Starobin presented his findings at a convocation on *The Black Man in America, 350 Years: 1619-1969*, at Wayne State University on May 5, 1969. His paper, "Privileged Bondsmen and the Process of Accommodation: The Role of House Servants and Drivers as Seen in Their Own Letters," was presented on a panel that also seated Genovese, Stuckey, and a second prominent Black nationalist, Julius Lester. As Novick has remarked, the events of this day rank as "amongst the most dramatic" of a number of occasions, at various professional conferences, where white involvement in the history of slavery came under sharp attack.

Vincent Harding, well known at the time as a spokesperson for Black Studies, offered the first signal that this particular meeting would be intense when

²⁶³ Starobin, Robert, "Privileged Bondsmen and the Process of Accommodation: The Role of House Servants and Drivers as Seen in Their Own Letters," *Journal of Social History* (Fall, 1971) 57.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 67 and 70.

he got up from his seat in the audience and “ostentatiously” left the room in the middle of Starobin’s presentation. Genovese would later remark that he found it highly unlikely that Starobin didn’t notice Harding’s abrupt departure.

Genovese was the first to respond to Starobin’s paper, and though he criticized it at some length for its simple understanding of the processes of acculturation and accommodation, by Forcey’s account, his comments were also “serious, useful, (and) within the bounds of conventional criticism.” Stuckey generally agreed with Genovese, but seems to have been rather unsparing in his critique. “Bob’s approach,” he is said to have remarked, “is nothing less than a new version of the Sambo thesis.” He then ridiculed Starobin’s understanding of the letters by reading them aloud again, except in a Black dialect. To many members of the audience, they became very different letters as a result. In Genovese’s recollection, Stuckey’s analysis was “devastating,” “a brilliant execution,” and among the most damaging attacks upon another scholars work that he had witnessed.

Lester was the third to comment, and by his own admission, he had little to say about the paper’s methodology, evidence, or analysis. Rather, without the aid of any notes, he launched into a full-blown, *ad hominem* assault on Starobin’s lack of intellectual authority to even explore the subject of slavery. In other words, his message was simply that Starobin “could never be of any use to the Black Liberation movement”. When he was finished, both he and Stuckey walked out of the room to loud applause, effectively denying Starobin his scheduled opportunity to offer a rebuttal. In a poignant eulogy that Lester wrote only a few months after Starobin’s suicide, he explained himself:

It was one of those situations that are unavoidable when blacks and whites come together in post-Black Power America, a situation in which people are not individuals, but historical entities, playing out a drama whose beginnings are now so submerged that we will never

find them. And, in these days, any white man who devotes himself to teaching and writing about black history must have the fortitude and strength of a bull elephant, because blacks will let him know that his presence is unwanted and undesirable. Whether this attitude is just or unjust is scarcely a question. In absolute terms, it is obviously unjust. Historically, it is the present reality, and, that day at Wayne State University my heart ached for Bob, though I didn't know him, but I knew what I had to do to him. He had to be attacked and so I did so, employing every forensic skill which two generations of ministers in my family had bequeathed to me. I bowed to the demands of history that day and will loathe myself forever for having done so. History makes its demands, but one does not have to accede to them....History demanded that day that I treat another human being as a category and I, not without hurting inside, acceded.²⁶⁵

By all accounts, Starobin was personally devastated. While he had taken detailed notes in response to the comments from Genovese and Stuckey, during Lester's stormy response, he simply doodled, drawing small boxes within small boxes on a pad of paper in front of him. "One psychologist, shown the doodles without any additional information, commented that they were those of an extremely intense, controlled, angry person expressing boxed-in feelings, no way out."²⁶⁶ Later, Starobin wrote the organizer of the conference, remarking that he "loathed intellectual criticism which resorted to personal vilification," and which "smacked of Old Left tactics and dogmatism" that was "crippling to a movement." Genovese later remarked that while at the time he felt Starobin had put on a "gutsy performance," over the course of subsequent conversations, he began to believe that he was actually very thin-skinned, especially in response to Lester's comments. He was also somewhat concerned. "This was a period," he explained:

in which any white working in black history had to take a lot of crap. Now, we all felt it, but my attitude was "I'm not going to take

²⁶⁵ Lester, Julius, "Suicide of a Revolutionary," *Liberation* (Spring, 1971) 64. Also re-printed in Lester, Julius, *All Is Well* (William Morrow and Company, 1976) 279-280.

²⁶⁶ Forcey, 162.

the crap.”²⁶⁷ After a while I didn’t get very much because I quickly developed a reputation for being quite savage. One of these guys would get up and run at the mouth about who are you to write about black people and I’d look him straight in the eye and say, “You’re an idiot,” and proceed from there. I didn’t enjoy it but the point was I didn’t know how else to handle this. Either you do that or you retreat. There was no way to deal with it with dignity. I didn’t expect Bob to respond the way I did necessarily but I was amazed at how...(he was) deeply personally hurt. I mean that was the death formula. You could get slaughtered in that period.²⁶⁸

It is an open question, however, as to how Starobin’s professional encounters with militant Black separatism might have effected his subsequent scholarship, for he produced little between the Wayne State convocation and his death on February 15, 1971. An uncle of Starobin’s, however, was surprised when he later came across a paper that Bob had been preparing for publication. It was a marked departure from his previous work, he said, in that it was filled with “an enormous amount of pseudo-revolutionary bullshit.”²⁶⁹

²⁶⁷ Merton Dillon has echoed Genovese here, arguing in 1970 that regardless of one’s knowledge, or their sympathies “toward the grievances and aspirations” of African-Americans, “he probably will still encounter so much skepticism and thinly veiled hostility as to make his task unpleasant and difficult, if not impossible.” (Dillon, 476) Another scholar remembers a 1969 ASNLH (Association for the Study of Negro Life and History) convention where both he and Herbert Gutman had been shouted down. “I remember how shattered he was,” pleading “I’m honest and I am extremely supportive of the black liberation movement - if people would forget that I am white and hear what I am saying. Actually, what I am saying would lend support to the black liberation movement.” (in Meier and Rudwick, 292-93)

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 165-166. It is not my intention, in this paper, to directly link the harsh treatment meted out to Starobin with his decision to commit suicide, though these events did seem to loom large in his psychology and ought not be discounted, either. Forcey’s analysis, from which this chapter has drawn a great amount of information, holds that a confluence of factors beared upon this fateful act, and that there was a “complicated interplay” between his personality and his “socio-political environment”. Near the time of his death, he was indeed feeling politically isolated. Yet many friends and family members had long suspected that Starobin might have suffered from mild schizophrenia, bi-polar depression, or some other clinical disorder. Robert Abzug, a friend during Starobin’s last years, suspects that “much of the suicidal energy had to do with an extremely angry relation with his father, (which) expressed itself through New Left/Old Left sorts of battles.” Other factors that he thinks may have been at work include the facts that Starobin had suffered through a divorce, was lonely for his child, and was bothered “by the unremitting bleakness of the Binghampton winters.” (E-mail correspondence, January 10, 1997). These are points that Forcey also touches upon. For a good deal of insight into the process by which one’s psychological pain might drive them to commit suicide, I suggest William Styron’s memoir, Darkness Visible.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 233.

As Lichtenstein has remarked, the tragedy of Robert Starobin will continue to reverberate “As historians begin the process of evaluating the sixties, and the impact of the era on U.S. history, the historical profession,” and the personal lives of those who were involved. “Certainly historians still struggle,” he continued, “with the unresolved issues of scholarship and race raised by Starobin’s antagonists at Wayne State...But as the renewed and more mature debates about identity, intellectual authority, and difference illustrate, it is well worth asking how personal experience shapes historical writing, and how selfhood shapes historical consciousness. Essays in a recently published anthology, Historians and Race: Autobiography and the Writing of History, lends support to these remarks. As editors Cimbala and Himmelberg suggest, in collecting a series of intellectual biographies from such major scholars as Darlene Clark Hine, Eric Foner, and Leon Litwack, they were specifically interested in “how their personal experiences might have influenced their approach to scholarship. The contributors were delighted to have an opportunity to address our questions, especially those who candidly admitted that they had never thought much about why they did what they did or what purpose their work might have beyond the usual scholarly ends. As David Levering Lewis notes in his essay, “A curious deficit of introspection is common amongst professional historians.”²⁷⁰

As has been noted, academics have expressed reservations over the quality of much of the “overtly political” and “propagandistic” scholarship that seemed to arise out of the exigencies of Black Power. Yet in a historiographical essay, one professor pointedly argued that this does not mean that students of history are free from an obligation to try and come to an understanding of how this sort of work came about. Writing in 1971, he remarked:

²⁷⁰ Cimbala and Himmelberg, eds., Historians and Race: Autobiography and the Writing of History (University of Indiana Press) xii.

It has become apparent within the last decade that as the fabric of our society has been disrupted, the demand placed upon scholarship has clearly undergone a drastic change. Black history is no longer used to show whites that black men are merely "white men with black skins," as Kenneth M. Stampp asserted in 1955 (sic). Just as in the 1950's liberal historians wrote their history as an honest response to the times in which they lived, scholars of the 1960's have reacted in a like manner...as more and more black scholars search for a usable past in order to improve their people's present and future.²⁷¹

Though there's some insight in these remarks, one wonders if, with the advantage of hindsight, the author might not be so quick to disparage the historiographical legacy of this era. As was noted early in this study, the work on slavery during this period, by Black and white scholars alike, was so incredibly dense, rich, and subtly brilliant as to transform completely the way we presently understand the subject. Whereas social history was once slighted by respected professors as "pots and pans" history, slave scholars proved to be at the very forefront of a movement which John Hingham has compared to an earthquake that "split the dam and released a flood of waters across the entire terrain of scholarship." In the early 1970's, university presses put out a remarkable body of slave scholarship that clearly bore the imprint of the 1960's. A list of some of the more prominent examples might include George Frederickson, The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914; John W. Blassingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (1972); George P. Rawick, From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community (1972); Eugene Genovese, Roll, Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made (1974); Winthrop Jordan, The White Man's Burden (An abridged version of his 1968 work White Over Black American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812); Leslie H. Owens, This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the

²⁷¹ Goldman, Martin, 217.

Old South (1976); Herbert Gutman, The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925 (1976); Lawrence W. Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom (1976); and Leon Litwack, Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery (1979).

Certainly there is much in these works that is flawed. Peter Kolchin argued in 1983, for example, that in their emphasis on “slave culture and community,” a large number of the revisionist works from the 1970’s may have tended to argue beyond their evidence. Though scholars “performed an extremely valuable service in destroying the myth that slaves were depersonalized Samboes and in focusing on slaves as actors who helped shape their own world,” Kolchin contends that “there are grounds for believing that some of the recent studies of antebellum slavery present an exaggerated picture of the strength and cohesion of the slave community.”²⁷² Moreover, even in spite of this massive effort to reconstruct the slaves world, from a variety of perspectives and angles, the historical profession has always run in cycles. Just as Thomas Kuhn has reflected upon shifting paradigms that occasionally throw the scientific community into upheaval, one can be sure that, in the years ahead, new evidence will be uncovered, and new histories will be written, out of new schools of thought. And one can be equally sure that changes that lay ahead in the social and political fabric of our society, however inevitable or arbitrary they may seem, will have a great deal to do with how we understand the past.

²⁷² Kolchin, Peter, “Reevaluationg the Antebellum Slave Community: A Comparative Perspective,” *Journal of American History* (December, 1983) 581.

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