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TOWARD AN ENVIRONMENTAL PERSPEC-
TIVE ON SLAVERY: FIRST THOUGHTS

BY

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Understanding of slavery in the Americas greatly increased over the course of the 1970s, but more recently has bogged down in the debate over whether to believe the slaveholder or his slaves. In this admittedly exploratory paper, an attempt is made to shift the focus of study from the slaveowner or his slave to that of the environment within which they met. The paper begins with a brief overview of the literature on slavery in the 1970s, moves to a discussion of the role of land and the environment in traditional West African thought, then explores the extent to which blacks were able to gain control over the spaces they occupied in the New World. As the paper is an exploratory one, conclusions reached should be regarded as most tentative. The author welcomes comments and suggestions--bibliographic and otherwise--not only from historians but from psychologists, architects, sociologists, designers, choreographers, anthropologists, geographers, and others who have an interest in the impact of environment on black folk.

The Study of Slavery

Knowledge of black slavery in the ante-bellum South has advanced tremendously over the course of the 1970s. For much of the period between the end of slavery in the United States and the seventies the interpretation of slavery in general, and the impact of the peculiar institution on black folk in particular, was provided by members of what Jones (1972) termed the Southern school of slavery. For reasons that lie beyond the scope of this small paper white southerners became the arbitrators of scholarly works in black history and society. It was as though the Nazis had lost the Second World War, but were allowed to evaluate all studies of Jews

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from the point of view of their peculiar prejudices. Not surprisingly, this veto power over the study of the black past produced only distorted knowledge of the evolving Afro-American culture under slavery.

Blacks were treated as one-dimensional creatures who had no separate lives apart from that of their masters. Slaves were assumed to have Sambo-like personalities with scarcely a thought in their heads aside from eating, drinking, dancing, singing, and fornicating. In the Southern school of history, slaves had no social institutions and no culture save that they clumsily borrowed from their masters. Bondsmen were believed so totally under the control of the slaveholder that they had no opportunity either to maintain their African culture or to develop one of their own. The slaves, the Southern school of history concluded, were pretty much what slaveholders wanted them to be.

Near the end of the 1960s a different interpretation of slavery emerged. Nichols (1969) revealed, by drawing on accounts provided by the slaves themselves, a perspective on slavery far different from that of the Southern school by showing human beings behind the Sambo masks imposed on them by scholars. Osofsky (1969) took Nichols work a step farther by suggesting that slaves sometimes voluntarily assumed the mask of Sambo while "Puttin on Ole Massa." Rawick (1972) elaborated on Osofsky's theme of the hidden nature of the slave organizations. In his book Rawick returned to the old issue of African survivals in the New World, but not to the old debate as he argued not whether all of African culture survived in the New World or none of it did, but rather demonstrated how bondsmen creatively adapted African culture to their Euro-American environment. Blassingame (1972) not only sketched the development of slave society but systematically contrasted it with the image of slaves held by white Americans.

With the publication of Blassingame and Rawick it appeared as if the Southern school had been closed forever, but developments in the rest of the decade suggested otherwise. First, along came a curious book by two reputable scholars (Fogel and Engerman, 1974) who sought by means of con-

structs and techniques borrowed from Economics to demonstrate that, far from putting on the slaveholder, the slaves had wholeheartedly joined him. Although their book claimed otherwise, they emerged as defenders of slavery. In their Epilogue, Fogel and Engerman (1974: 258) say as much:

During the past decade we frequently presented papers to scholarly conferences or to faculty colloquia, both in the United States and abroad, on various aspects of our research into the economics of slavery. Sometimes, after the end of a discussion, one of our colleagues would come up and, with a nervous smile, ask, 'What are you guys trying to do? Sell Slavery?' We answered: 'No. And even if we were, you wouldn't buy it. No one would buy it.'

As it happened no one (or almost no one) did. David (1976) and his co-authors systematically discredited the book on a number of levels and Van Deburg (1979) demonstrated that far from serving as agents of the planter class, black overseers sided with the slave community.

But before Van Deburg reached print a number of other books had appeared which extended the thesis originally developed by Blassingame and Rawick demonstrating in the process that slaves had considerable control over their lives. Among the most massive of these was Genovese (1976), who in a book subtitled "The World the Slaves Made," explored the limits of black power under slavery. Genovese uncovered a rich, complex life among the slaves but found their successes paradoxically made it ever more difficult for them to challenge the slaveholder's hegemony. He (Genovese 1976: 594) wrote:

Meeting necessity with their own creativity, the slaves built an Afro-American community life in the interstices of the system and laid the foundations for their future as a people. But their very strategy for survival enmeshed them in a web of paternalistic relationships which sustained the slaveholders' regime despite the deep antagonisms it engendered.

Gutman (1977) celebrated the triumph of the blacks over the divisive forces of slavery by demonstrating that far from being destroyed by the

peculiar institution the black family flourished. What Gutman did for the family Levine (1977) did for Afro-American culture as he traced the evolution of black thought and normative patterns through the slave era. Owens (1977) bridged the gap between the economics of slavery to which Fogel and Engerman had given so much time and the non-economic institutions which preoccupied Gutman and Levine. He also provided much new information on the day to day lives of bondsmen. Miller (1978) drew on letters written by a family of slaves to demonstrate that "Puttin on ole Massa" was far different from the simple process envisioned by Osofsky nearly a decade earlier.

While this discussion has been confined to book-length works for the sake of space, a parallel development of the study of slavery had taken place in the periodical literature. Somewhere in the midst of all this print the Southern school of slavery began to reassert itself in a subtle way. The original Southern school insisted that the planters were basically benevolent, and that the institution of slavery provided a social environment within which bondsmen lived comfortable lives. Despite this environment, and because of their own biologically determined racial shortcomings, the slaves were unable to develop personalities which--in character, complexity, or intelligence--were the equal of whites. It therefore followed that bondsmen would be unable to create much in the way of culture. For the most part the literature of the 1970s addressed itself to the last of these contentions by demonstrating that Afro-Americans had created a rich, innovative culture. It therefore followed--and documentary evidence soon demonstrated--that slave personalities were vigorous, intelligent, balanced and innovative. But the seventies said comparatively little about the social milieu within which slaves lived. With the exception of historians such as Jones (1978), the cruel side of slavery received little systematic treatment. Stamp's (1956) pivotal chapter, "To Make Them Stand in Fear," was forgotten. Most historians seemed almost embarrassed by the brutal mistreatment of slaves and declared, in effect, that some masters were kind and others cruel, and that whether a slaveholder was one or the other turned on personality.

These arguments paved the way for reopening the doors of the Southern school. If the slave's personality and the culture the slaves created were so healthy, innovative, and fulfilling, did it not therefore follow that the institution within which they flourished could not have been very brutal? One of the likely debates among historians in the 1980s will be the extent to which slavery was cruel. This debate will turn on sources (Is one to believe the slaveholder or his slave?); evaluation of sources (How does one determine a slave narrative has been doctored?); and on the interpretation of sources (What does it mean when a slave says he was well treated?).

As the debate continues it therefore seems useful to shift the perspective from that of the slaveholder or his slave to the many places in which they encountered one another. When disagreements over data interpretation seem fated to go unresolved, it is often possible to advance beyond them by simply subjecting the data to a different form of analysis. To explore slave society in general, and the cruelty to which slaves were subjected from the vantage point of the environment may prove rewarding.

The Environment in Traditional West African Thought

Given the expanded knowledge of traditional West African thought that characterized the 1970s it is surprising that comparatively few scholars have attempted to develop an environmental perspective on West Africa or its Afro-American cultural varieties. Land was of central importance in the philosophy and world-view of most West Africans. The land was the basis of political hegemony, the focus of all culture, and the center of family life. The ancestral gods dwelt on the land. Throughout West Africa there was little conception of supernatural forces apart from those located in a particular place. The family, the land on which it lived, and the family's gods were all tied together in a close, intense relationship. The slaves wept during the middle passage not only for the people left behind, but for the land itself. The West African environment was host to the living dead (the ancestral spirits), and yet unborn. These three spirits were bound together not only by ties of kin, but by having

shared a common living space throughout known time. As such the land, in most West African societies, could not belong to an individual, but rather was the property of those who--linked together by blood--lived on it. The living had only the use of it during their lifetimes, as they had received the land from their ancestors they were expected to pass it on to their children.

The tie between the environment and the people who lived in it was emphasized by their labor and religious ritual. The people worked the land not as individuals but as cooperative units, groups of persons bound together by blood and by residence in a common territory. Similarly, the fruits of their labor were shared out according to the ties of kinship. The shrines and holy places for a group of people were located on their land, and the rituals held in honor of the living dead and other supernatural forces took place in the same environment. In transporting West Africans across the Atlantic Europeans broke a deep and meaningful tie between black folk and the space within which they lived. It should therefore come as no surprise that in many parts of the New World West Africans came to believe that upon death they would return to their homeland. This belief, which sprang up in different parts of the colonial Americas, was a clear response to the religious dilemma in which bondsmen found themselves. In the traditional West African conception of the supernatural illfortune could result from a failure to meet one's obligations to the ancestral spirits. Most of those who found themselves on slaveships probably believed they had angered one of the living dead. Traditional West African cosmology also provided rituals to soothe an angered ancestor, but these had to be performed in places where the ancestors had long lived. The supernatural powers of the living dead extended only so far as the boundaries of the territory on which they and their living descendants dwelt.

Upon arrival in the New World West Africans found themselves in a position unique in their history. They had been punished so severely that they had no way--while alive--to appease their ancestors. Moreover, some probably feared that each year that passed without their having made

the proper offerings further angered the ancestor who had caused them to be sold into slavery in the first place. Millions of Africans looked forward to a death which would enable them to return to their homeland, to confront their ancestors, and set matters aright.

Others sought to get in touch with the ancestral spirits of the New World in which they found themselves, but the first Africans were largely transported to the Caribbean, a region where the Spanish invasion led to the death of the Arawak and Carib. Deren (1972) makes a good case for the synthesis of traditional West African religion and that of Native Americans in Haiti, but it is clear that in much of the Caribbean the slaves lacked a living Indian population to put them in touch with the ancestral spirits of the land.

In places where the Indians were more numerous a number of scholars (Willis, 1972; Palmer, 1975; Rout, 1975; Jones, 1977) demonstrate that the colonists went to extraordinary attempts to prevent Native Americans and blacks from coming together. While they were largely unsuccessful in North America, Native Americans and Africans did succeed in creating Afro-Indian societies (Young, 1795; Southey, 1827; Bridges, 1828; Davidson, 1966; Gonzales, 1969; Mellafe, 1975) in many parts of the New World. In these places the slaves were able to work out an accommodation with the Indian ancestral spirits who controlled the land.

For Africans on both sides of the Atlantic the land on which they lived was important. For those who remained behind it was an integral part of their lives, for those who had been torn from West African soil it could not be replaced. Ibiti (1970: 35) explains:

Africans are particularly tied to the land... The land provides them with the roots of existence, as well as binding them mystically to their departed. People walk on the graves of their forefathers, and it is feared that anything separating them from these ties will bring disaster to family and community life. To remove Africans by force from their land is an act of such great injustice that no foreigner can fathom it.

The land was for traditional West Africans a particular place in which one encountered one's ancestors not, as Abraham (1962: 63) makes clear, with feelings "of self-abasement and self-negation on the part of the living," but rather in a spirit of comfortable family solidarity and in the sure knowledge that the living and the living dead were tied together for eternity. While the land was the site of mystical rites, the location of gateways to vast transnatural powers, it was at the same time a comfortable place for most West Africans. In contrast to the European or Euro-American child Maquet (1972: 56) observes the African youngster has:

only to take a few steps in his village to visit several people who can substitute for his father, mother, brothers and sisters, and they will treat him accordingly. Thus the child has many homes in his village, and he is simultaneously giver and receiver of widespread attention.

A child growing up in a traditional West African environment was at ease with himself and hence with the people around him.

The child's feeling of comfort with the people in his environment made him in a kind of circular fashion, at ease with the land itself. The study of traditional West African philosophy and psychology is in its infancy, but has advanced sufficiently far to make it clear that one of the strengths of West African people was their sense of being as one with themselves, their family and their land.

This sense of comfort with the land produced the great West African confederations--Ghana, Mali, Songhay--which so often turn up in studies of the region. The basis for each of these states, and for the others which came into existence in the region was economic: they were mercantile entities founded and maintained by entrepreneurs who erected a political superstructure to facilitate the pursuit of profit. The very fact that their basis was economic, and not political or religious, prevented their ruler from consolidating the confederations and transforming them into true, unitary states. Even where these great West African confederations did

not hold sway, the marketplaces on which they rested were important in the lives of the people. Everywhere in West Africa persons met to exchange their work. Farmers, herders, fisherfolk, artists, woodcarvers, ironsmiths, entertainers, miners and others bartered goods and services in the marketplace that were the hallmark of economic West Africa. In their encounters--carefully timed to prevent local, regional, and supra-regional markets from conflicting with one another--they drove shrewd bargains and regaled one another with tales of economic wizardry. Supported by their families, convinced that the way in which they made their living had the approval of the ancestral spirits, and was a legitimate use of the products of the land, West African entrepreneurs enjoyed their work.

Even scholars unsympathetic to the black adventure in the Americas have conceded the economic achievements of West Africa. The Bridenbaughs (1972: 231) for example point out that these were ancient societies, "advanced, complex, and highly organized." It was just these traits scholars (Herskovits, 1958: 293; Carlisle, 1972: 18-19) have observed that made West Africans suitable slaves. Foner (1975: 29) puts it this way, "It is one of the tragic ironies of Afro-American history that Africans were imported to the New World because their level of culture and economic skill made them better slave laborers than the Indians." West Africans were able to achieve such economic heights precisely because they were in harmony with the environment in which they worked.

The Environment in Afro-American Reality

The land was a comfortable, familiar place to most West Africans, a place in which they made fortunes, expanded polities, worshipped gods, and communed with their kin, unborn, living, and dead. Because their gods occupied a particular environment West Africans tended to be very conscious of the place in which they lived. On this side of the Atlantic West African consciousness of space was heightened by their participation in the construction of a New World. The Americas were literally built and West Africans were among the most prominent builders. As Native

Americans were enslaved, killed off, and driven from their lands the Africans and Europeans who replaced them literally created a new environment. Not only were whites and blacks engaged in the physical reconstruction of space as they built towns, trails, churches, schools, jails, bridges, forts, homes, courthouses, and much more, they also rebuilt the cultural environment as they replaced the ancient customs of Native Americans with their own ways.

Both races were aware of what they were about. As a result, both Afro-Americans and Euro-Americans were self-conscious. The first settlers and their slaves were very much aware of the fact that they were altering the environment, that they were making it something very different from what it had been under its native population. Much has been written of the European perspective on the New World. Some colonists regarded it as an opportunity to make a fortune, and were interested in the place only insofar as it promised the discovery of gold, the exploitation of cheap Native American labor, or the growing of crops--rice, tobacco, sugar, cotton, coffee--likely to create riches. Others sought no such goals, but rather sought to build in this hemisphere a simple extension of the societies they had left behind in Europe. They hoped the social order would remain much the same, but their own place in it would be improved. Still others sought to better Europe by constructing new societies in which persons would be free to realize their vision of a just society. At the time the Americas were colonized these visions were for the most part religious, so that while those who settled New York sought simply to extend England to America, and those who settled New Spain sought to make a fortune, those who settled Massachusetts sought to make a new and more Christian world.

Scholars (Cox, 1959; Hoetink, 1967; Klein, 1967; Knight, 1978) differ in how they sort out the different patterns of European settlement, but most acknowledge the colonists not only devoted considerable thought to their settlements, but also reflected on them once they were in place and working. While comparatively little attention has been given to the slaves who were a part of many of these early settlements,

there is no reason to believe that they were any the less reflective. A number of scholars (Kaplan, 1973; Jones, 1975) have demonstrated that Afro-Americans were particularly adept at turning the ideology of Euro-American revolutionaries against slaveholders. So successful were black Americans in this respect that the evolution of racist thought was considerably hastened. Blacks such as David Walker demanded to know how slavery could continue to exist among a people who proclaimed themselves committed to liberty, equality, and freedom? In defense slaveholders and their sympathizers were forced to take the position that blacks were not persons and hence not entitled to liberty. Morgan (1975) has shown that the need to wall blacks off into a separate category of inferior being emerged as early as seventeenth century Virginia, but the world in which blacks were inferior creatures was made, it was constructed by the settlers and maintained--with embellishments to be sure--by their creole descendants.

The slaves went about making their world as well, and like their white overlords devoted much reflective thought to its construction. But--to continue the metaphor--they were not allowed to work in certain places, and as a consequence bondsmen and their descendants lived in an ill-proportioned, uncomfortable building. Unlike their African forefathers they did not fully control the environment in which they lived and hence were ill at ease. In West Africa, politics, economics, religion and family were intertwined in a particular space. The West Africans controlled all four and grew comfortable with them and with the space in which they operated. But in the New World, the political and economic realms were closed to slaves. Black folk might learn of political constructs from whites, adapt them to the needs of Afro-Americans, and even hurl them at Euro-Americans, but they were not permitted to participate in the political process. Slaves had no legal persona, and in many colonies could not testify in court against whites. They could, of course, bring a great deal of political sophistication to the study of government in the New World. Many bondsmen, for example, demonstrated an understanding of what the shift to democratic ideology at

the end of the eighteenth century in the Americas meant for black Americans, but slaves were not permitted to become political actors.

Freedmen fared little better. At best they were given some limited control over their place of residence. In Buenos Aires, Rout (1976: 148) points out freedmen were confined to suburban districts which they were allowed to govern themselves, provided they agreed not to encroach on white residential areas. In the capital of colonial Costa Rica, Rout (1976: 149) goes on to demonstrate a "special section" was set aside for blacks and persons of mixed blood. There they were allowed a measure of self-government but city officials could override any of their decisions. In Spanish Florida a similar situation prevailed. The Spaniards had created a number of towns populated by blacks, many of them former slaves who had escaped from the British controlled Carolinas and Georgia. These towns were intended to serve as a buffer zone between the large number of English settlers, and the small number of Spaniards resident in Florida. So long as the ex-slaves served this purpose they were pretty much left alone. According to Sharp (1974: 92) blacks who purchased their freedom in the nineteenth century Choco region of Colombia sought to escape Spanish control by establishing homes in isolated regions of the jungle. To make such a move assured the freedman increased control over his own life, but effectively removed him from the political arena. Where freedmen would not voluntarily remove themselves from Euro-American political life they were rigorously excluded. In the United States, free blacks were not only deprived of the right to vote and to hold public office throughout the southern states, but lost basic civil rights in such northern states as Pennsylvania and Rhode Island as well.

Maroons were provided the most leeway in exercising control over their political lives. In the many places in the New World where the colonists were forced to sue their former slaves for peace (Young, 1795: 91; Southey, 1827: II, ell; Herskovits, 1958: 93; Davidson, 1966: 250; Bastide, 1971: 50; Carlisle, 1972: 42; Foner, 1975: 145; Rout, 1976: 109-110) the whites almost always provided the maroons with a territory

of their own. In this space maroons were permitted to govern themselves. Even the maroons, however, were subjected to certain controls. In Columbia, Rout (1976: 109-110) points out the authorities declared a general amnesty for the rebels on the condition that they accept no additional runaway slaves. The Spanish authorities promised the maroons who had terrorized the hinterland of Vera Cruz freedom and control over their own government, if they would agree to track down runaway slaves. In Surinam the various treaties signed with the many maroon bodies by the Dutch required the rebels to close their communities to fugitive slaves, to aid the authorities in tracking down runaways, and to join whites in putting down slave revolts. Even the independent maroon states were constrained by the larger Euro-American political units within which they operated. Maroons were permitted considerable leeway on their homeground, but still had to cope with the political hegemony of whites.

Nevertheless, these black separatists most closely--of all New World black peoples--achieved the harmony of man and environment enjoyed by their West African ancestors. The maroons occupied a territory, and within the space they controlled were free to live their lives much as they wished. Even so, they had little opportunity to engage in large-scale economic activities, so that unlike their African forefathers they were unable to build fully satisfying societies. In her visit to the Accompong town maroons Dunham (1946) pointed out that the pull of Kingston and the larger Jamaican society which it represented was as much economic as cultural. But maroon economic activities in Jamaica and elsewhere were severely circumscribed as whites, having already discovered the black rebels were formidable military foes, were not about to concede them an economic base as well. To engage in commercial activities, to move out into the mainstream of economic life, maroons--according to every treaty signed--were compelled to give up their identity as maroons, and leave maroon controlled lands.

If the maroons, who were able to bring more pressure to bear on whites than any other black folk in Americas, were not able to force their way into the economic arena it is not surprising that other blacks

fares even less well. In the ill-constructed house Afro-Americans were allowed to build in the New World, the economic room was as small and cramped as the political one. West Africans were above all an economic people, their greatest confederations were but frameworks within which entrepreneurs could be about their work. In one of history's many ironies, a people who were traditionally preoccupied with trade, and commerce were forbidden to practice their skills in the New World. These prohibitions did not, of course, prevent black folk from operating on the fringes of economic activities in the Americas. The greater the number of blacks in a given area the more successful they were in penetrating the economic space white folk sought to reserve for themselves. In colonies such as Rhode Island, blacks were effectively barred from large scale economic activity and although they engaged in a variety of occupations, blacks seldom amassed sizable amounts of property. At the other end of the spectrum, in places such as Saint Domingue, a few mulattos were able to amass considerable wealth; some became wealthy plantation owners in the western part of the French colony. An even smaller number of "brown people" were equally successful in Jamaica.

But in most places blacks were not able to win significant economic power. In many of the warmer lands, their own knowledge of climate, land use, storage, and the foods that would grow in warm, moist soil should have given them an advantage over white settlers. But while the colonists were willing enough to make use of black knowledge, they were careful enough to prevent Africans from converting their expertise to economic advantage. Levine (1978: 61-62) points out that Africans were so much more familiar with the environment presented by colonial South Carolina than the English, that the colonists looked to them for advice. But blacks were permitted to advise, not rule. Fogel and Engerman (1974) made perhaps the best case for the participation of slaves in the economic evolution of the New World, but even they presented them as subalterns. Data collected by Patterson (1967) and more recently Van Deburg (1979) while demonstrating that black overseers were essential to the workings of plantation societies, clearly indicate that they were ill-prepared to serve as managers and marketeers.

Lebensraum for Black Folk

The comfortable harmony of West Africans and their environment was disrupted by the Atlantic slave trade. On this side of the Atlantic, blacks were hampered by their inability to assume control of spaces routinely controlled in the homeland. The axis of the world Euro-Americans were about making was economic and political, and it was these realms from which they were most careful to bar black folk. Left to West Africans and their children were the telling of tales, the carving of images, the making music, the movement of dance, and the environments within which these took place.

Religious spaces were also set aside for blacks. In places such as Saint Domingue, Trinidad, Brazil, and Cuba West Africans had to be baptized into the Catholic Church, but were then permitted to go somewhat separate ways and to construct synthesis that fused Catholic tradition and the customs of West Africa. In Surinam, and Jamaica, West Africans were pretty much allowed to go their own religious way without even being baptized. In all these colonies, religious space belonged to the slaves. In Jamaica, obeah flourished unchallenged for most of the eighteenth century, and while blacks in Saint Domingue were forced to work out voodoo as a compromise between the demands of Catholicism and those of Dahomey, they retained some control over their religious lives and the places in which they worshipped. Things were different in North America. Anglo-Jamaicans did not discover the link between the religious spaces they had turned over to their slaves and the large number of slave revolts on the island until the 1760s. Obeah men and women they learned, frequently led slave revolts. But in Anglo-North America whites were more shrewd, or more numerous, or both, and early monitored black religious activities. Genovese (1976: 236) points out that the slaves sought to meet for religious services apart from whites whenever possible. In these meetings Levine (1978: 42) shows, the slaves worked to prevent the sound of their worship from reaching white folk. Some blacks showed two religious faces. Gullah Jack, one of the leaders in the Denmark Vesey conspiracy, had considerable reputation among the

slaves as an Africanist shaman, but at the same time was a member of good standing in a Christian church (Scherer, 1975: 148). Black folk made good use of the religious spaces whites left to them. Into these environments they crammed not only their gods--old and new, African and European--but many of the other activities white folk would not allow them to undertake in the Americas. The Afro-American church whether called voodoo, obeah, shango, candomble, or A.M.E., was the center of black American life, and within its confines blacks found living space.

Because religious space was among the few places in the New World where blacks were allowed to exercise some control over their lives, Afro-American religious practitioners were much more powerful than their West African counterparts. In the motherland, religious leaders shared their control of space with political and economic leaders. Moreover, West African political, religious and economic elites tended to be the same persons. A chief, for example, would ordinarily not only govern, but play an important role in the religious life of the community as well. But on this side of the Atlantic, whites reserved the most important political and economic positions for themselves. Blacks were relegated to the outskirts of both government and commerce and, whether slave or free, had no significant spaces they could use to regulate their lives or pursue a fortune. Because religious places were largely left to black control religious leaders came to dominate Afro-American life. In West Africa, religious functionaries had to share power with other leaders, but New World slavery removed both black political and economic elites and the spaces they controlled. Left behind were religious leaders and their places of worship. Whether called minister, obeahwoman, conjureman, or voodoo witchdoctor, the Afro-American religious leaders was a powerful figure in the lives of black folk. He alone possessed sufficient control over the place within which he worked to meet the needs of his people.

As a consequence of the control over space exercised by black religious functionaries in the Americas, Afro-American life has a religiosity missing in traditional West African life. West Africans were

a religious people, but their lives were balanced ones in which all the major social institutions and the cultural patterns of behavior associated with them found a place. Afro-American life was distorted as black people naturally oriented their lives around the religious spaces they could control. For Afro-Americans control of religious space was both a strength and a weakness. On the one hand, so long as they remained preoccupied with events in these spaces, they offered no effective challenge to white hegemony, but on the other the "hush-harbors" described by Levine (1978: 4) in which the slaves conducted their secret religious ceremonies provided places in which slaves could meet to conduct ceremonies that were far from religious. Rebellions were planned in places set aside for worship. And under the guise of religion slaves were able to create a rich, satisfying culture.

Insofar as it could, the black church attempted to meet the needs of black people in the New World to govern themselves. The basic problem in the slave quarters was the inability of bondsmen to regulate one another's behavior. The slaveholders could not permit the growth of a government controlled by slaves. In the few places where slaves and free blacks were permitted some limited control over their lives, such political structures as they were able to construct were always subject to disruption by the more powerful white political forces. The slaveowners well understood that to permit blacks to establish political institutions of their own was to allow them to discipline one another. As long as they were slaves, Afro-Americans were not permitted to exercise political control over the communities within which they resided. Put in slightly different terms, the slaves were not permitted to have a state, an organization that would publicly discipline and punish persons whose actions were detrimental to the black community. At best, slaves were able to bring informal pressures to bear on one another, to use gossip, shame, and physical attacks in an attempt to force their fellows to be respectful of the community as a whole. The forces of government--police, militia, army--were all in the hands of white folk. Nowhere was the inability of blacks to discipline one another made more clear than in the many

failed slave rebellions. Most slave revolts in the Americas failed, not for lack of planning or for want of courage, but because they were betrayed. The longer the revolt was in the making, the larger its aims, and the greater the number of slaves brought into its planning, the more likely was it to be betrayed. Those who revealed planned revolts had little to fear from a slave community lacking both the symbols and substance of power. Indeed, they had much to gain as they were often rewarded with their freedom, land, monies, medals, clothing, and various badges of merit.

Lacking control of the spaces in which they lived, blacks throughout the hemisphere attempted to use religious power to serve political ends. They sought to use the space they controlled to exercise some influence over the places they did not control. Their attempts had to be subtle and indirect for two reasons. First, the slaveholders would not permit overt attempts to use religion in political ways. A preacher who used his pulpit to preach against white oppression in Virginia was likely to occupy it only about as long as an obeahman who advocated rebellion in Jamaica would escape being sold off the plantation. Black religious leaders became skilled in the art of cloaking political statements in so many religious clothes that it was difficult to prove they were political in the first place. Second, religious leaders feared their congregations. Some blacks were as willing to betray a conjure man who spoke out against white folk, as a slave who urged rebellion. Other blacks simply felt that political statements had no place in a religious gathering.

This policy of indirection and subtlety produced a sophisticated Afro-American culture within which persons were able to make political statements without having to take a stance that was identifiably political. The call and response pattern of the sermon and the spiritual provide excellent examples of the exercise of politics in a religious space. In his sermon, the preacher makes a statement to which members of the congregation may strongly agree and affirm their belief with shouts, offer a tepid endorsement of what he has said with a few amens, or simply remain silent, thereby signifying disagreement (or indifference). The same

latitude existed for those who participated in the call and response pattern of the spiritual. A participant could loudly and enthusiastically echo the words of the lead singer, merely hum them, or remain silent. In both cases Afro-Americans were able to take a political stance--assuming for the moment that the sermon or spiritual had a political message, not all of them did--without having to directly confront other members of the slave community. Given the absence of polity in the quarters, confrontations had to be avoided since they could not be controlled. The call and response pattern of sermon and spiritual enabled bondsmen to outwit the slaveowner's ubiquitous spies, as even when they enthusiastically endorsed a political statement, slaves could always pretend they had not understood the political commentary but were responding only to the religious message. At the same time Afro-Americans could avoid head-on clashes with one another by the indirect methods used to respond to political statements.

While these subtle and indirect methods enabled blacks to employ the religious places they controlled to exchange political messages, the system itself was weak and inefficient. Or put in a slightly different way, with some few exceptions in the hemisphere, slaves were not able to use the control they had over places of worship to challenge the political hegemony of slaveholders. Those who sought to use the Church to convey political ideas had to be so indirect, circumspect, and subtle that no effective call to action could be communicated. This fact calls into question the extent to which blacks actually controlled their religious spaces. If, even in the places white folk had seemingly left to them, Afro-Americans had to be leery of spies and traitors, there is real reason to question the extent to which blacks actually controlled these spaces. Or put in a still different way, if black folk had to be cautious and indirect within the religious structures that white folk were inclined to leave to them, how great was the black control over the aspects of the environment that scholars have long assumed to be in the black domain? Most scholars have assumed bondsmen were pretty much left to themselves to sing, dance, tell tales, and make up music, but perhaps

the living space allowed black people in these areas was smaller than much scholarship would suggest.

Conclusion

In this admittedly explorative paper an attempt has been made to demonstrate that an environmental perspective on American slavery can be as valid as one that takes the perspective on the slave or his/her master. It has been suggested that with the debate over the cruelty of slavery bogged down on the issue of whether to believe the slaveholder or his slave, it might prove useful to shift the study of slavery to the spaces for which they contended. This paper shows that the environment was particularly important in West African psychology and philosophy in large part because the people of the region were at one with the land on which they lived. On the other hand, the paper shows the land was not so comfortable for West Africans transported to the Americas, nor were American slaves as fully in harmony with their environment as their ancestors. Slavery in the New World meant that black folk were barred--almost without exception--from those places within which important economic and political affairs were conducted. Cruelty was important in the sense that blacks were subjected to psychological brutality as they were not permitted to develop certain aspects of their lives. Afro-Americans were denied the right to become political actors and entrepreneurs, forbidden--whether slave or free--to enter into market places or political forums. The Americas lacked the restrictive traditions of Europe and Africa, colonial settlements were comparatively open. Whites who were of little account in Europe wielded great fortunes in the New World. But black folk were almost everywhere barred from important economic and political events.

An environmental perspective suggests that simply by blocking black entry into the places in which the exciting economic and political activities took place, whites were guilty of psychological cruelty. To be sure the extent to which blacks were barred from participation in economics and politics varied from place to place, from time to time

within the same place, and in a number of places according to the number of non-African ancestors they possessed. As a number of scholars (Harris, 1964; Hoetink, 1967; Dealer, 1971) have demonstrated mulattos were often admitted to political and economic environments closed to blacks. But everywhere in the New World, blacks were held at a distance and forced from those places that Americans defined as most significant. When they sought to gain full entry into the environments whites had reserved for themselves, black folk were subjected to physical as well as psychological cruelties. Freedmen, for example, who sought to exercise the franchise were often beaten, mutilated, or imprisoned.

While whites exercised physical and psychological pressures to keep blacks out of places reserved for white folk, they also used their superior position in the New World to intrude in those places historians ordinarily regard as set aside for blacks. While space has not permitted a systematic exploration of these places, a brief overview of the religious spaces under the control of black folk suggests they were far less dominated by black folk than recent scholarship suggests. In short, the environmental approach taken in this exploratory paper indicates whites in the New World in general and the ante-bellum south in particular were determined to reserve the most important economic and political arenas for themselves. In light of the importance of land in West Africa, and the crucial role the environment placed for the operation of political and economic activities, it seems reasonable to conclude that blacks on this side of the Atlantic sought to penetrate the spaces in which these took place. To keep them out, whites resorted to cruelties and were so successful that black participation in significant economic and political activities was virtually nil for the colonial period and for much of the nineteenth century as well.

Two other conclusions are suggested by an overview of slavery from an environmental perspective. First, not only did whites in the Americas use their power to prevent blacks from gaining access to the more important arenas in the New World, but they also used this same power to penetrate black space as well. Most scholars have regarded

places of religious worship as dominated by blacks, but this paper suggests that even these places may have been less under black control than many students of Afro-Americana have assumed. In the ante-bellum south, and in many other parts of the Americas whites were able--often by means of black spies--to penetrate religious space to such an extent that the attempt of some Afro-Americans to use church controlled terrain for political activities was frustrated. If the church was so vulnerable, it might be useful to raise questions concerning the extent to which other areas, ordinarily thought to be under the full control of black folk, were in fact subjected to white penetration. Had black Americans lebensraum in the New World at all?

Second, an environmental perspective suggests that the ante-bellum South was less different from the rest of the Americas in the treatment of slave than much scholarship implies. From Tannenbaum (1946) on historians, anthropologists, and other scholars have debated the extent to which slaves in Ibero-America were treated better than those in areas of the New World colonized by the French, English, Dutch, and Danes. Genovese (1971) argued blacks in the ante-bellum South had the worst of all possible worlds as they had to cope with a tradition hostile to black folk and an economic system indifferent to human needs. But an environmental perspective suggests the ante-bellum South was not very different from northeast Brazil, Jamaica, or Haiti, in the determination of white folk to exclude blacks from political and economic places. From the vantage point of space, it seems clear the colonists and their creole children not only successfully denied blacks access to significant economic and political places, but managed to penetrate black religious spaces as well. From this point of view the absence of a mulatto caste in the ante-bellum South, the large Afro-American population--in contrast to the largely African born population in much of the Caribbean--religion, economic structures, nationality of the colonizer, and even the West African ethnic origin of the slaves in a given area seem to be irrelevant, or at the least, less significant than most persons interested in the comparative study of slavery in the Americas have believed.

While these conclusions are most tentative, they demonstrate that exploring slavery from the perspective of space can advance our knowledge of the peculiar institution and the black folk who lived within it.

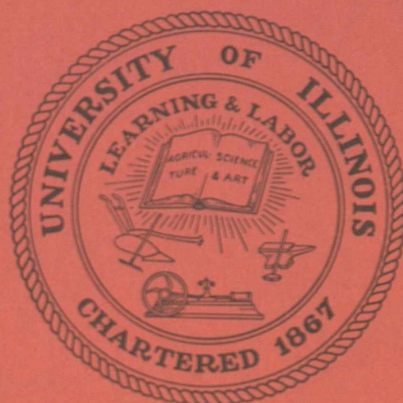
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