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Review

The Big American Crime

By Edmund S. Morgan

Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America

by Ira Berlin

Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 497 pp., \$29.95

Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry

by Philip D. Morgan

University of North Carolina Press, 736 pp., \$21.95 (paper)

Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation

a book and audiotape set, translated by Ira Berlin, by Marc Favreau, by Steven F. Miller

The New Press, 416, with two 60-minute cassettes pp., \$49.95

Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery

produced by WGBH

4 videocassettes, 90 minutes each pp., \$59.95

Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery

by Charles Johnson, by Patricia Smith. the WGBH Research Team

Harcourt Brace, 494 pp., \$30.00

the WGBH Research Team

It has been a long time since anyone has argued that slavery was a good thing, but just how bad it was has become a pregnant question. It is not in doubt that slaves suffered injustice and cruelty, that slave plantations, whether producing rice or tobacco, cotton or sugar, rested on systematic brutality and violence. The question is what the experience did to the people violated, especially in North America, where they were almost all black, the ancestors of present-day black Americans. Or should we say of African-Americans? The choice of a name is itself a way of taking sides, like the older one between Negro and black (or Black?), a choice between stressing national unity or ethnic diversity, between affirming racial equality or black pride. Historical investigation of what slavery did to slaves is charged with presentist implications that shadow every fact found, and consciously or unconsciously shape every interpretation.

The subject took on a new kind of sensitivity early in this century after anthropologists,

under the leadership of Franz Boas, began examining the complexity and sophistication of African cultures (the plural is important). Melville Herskovits, a student of Boas, studied the cultures not only of Africans in a part of Africa (Dahomey) but also of descendants of Africans in Haiti, Suriname, and most significantly the United States. In *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941)¹ he argued that much in African cultures had survived the trauma of slavery and persisted among the descendants of slaves. In Brazil and Suriname and to a somewhat lesser extent in the United States he found survivals of African music and dancing, African styles of humor and modes of address, African patterns of family relationship and social structure, African attitudes toward the elderly, toward children, toward the dead. White ignorance or denial of such cultural survivals in the United States, Herskovits argued, was "one of the principal supports of race prejudice in this country," because it left the Negro "a man without a past," unworthy of the respect that other ethnic groups inherited from identification with their progenitors.

Although it was not his intention, Herskovits seemed to imply that slavery could not have been as totally repressive as, say, the abolitionists had made it out to be. He had discovered an African past in the black communities of his own day. If remnants of African cultures had survived until then, they could not have been obliterated by slavery. Slaves must have been able to sustain a degree of cultural autonomy under the restraints of a regime that claimed the power to order their every waking hour. Of course the more power exerted over them, the greater their achievement in setting limits to it. But in any case, if Herskovits was right, slavery was not a one-way street in which slave owners dictated every movement. The history of slavery could be understood only as an interchange between two parties, the one not as wholly subdued to the other as had been generally supposed.

The challenge for historians was to retrieve from past records the elements and extent of slave autonomy, to show what kinds of lives slave men and women had been able to carve out for themselves despite the odds against them. Historians were slow in rising to the challenge. It was not until the late Sixties and early Seventies that studies in depth of slave life began to appear, prompted perhaps by the rising consciousness of race prejudice exemplified by the civil rights movement. The roots of the civil rights movement were doubtless complex, but its objectives may have depended more on a reassessment of black history than was always evident at the time. Once the study of slave life began, it quickly became a major area of historical research and has now furnished black Americans with a past even richer in its autonomy than Herskovits had envisaged. New books by Philip E. Morgan (no relation to the reviewer) and Ira Berlin evince the maturity that the study has attained.

Berlin, who has already contributed significantly to the literature, here brings together in a magisterial synthesis much of what has now been learned about slave life during its first two centuries within the present United States. Slavery, he insists at the outset, was always a "negotiated relationship" and an "intrinsically unstable" one, the terms of which varied from time to time and from place to place.

The negotiations were not conducted across a table or on anything like a level playing field. Rather they were embedded in the daily transactions between master and slave, mainly in the work place. Work was always at the center of them and "informed all other conflicts between master and slave," including conflicts of culture. Berlin sees the cultural autonomy expressed both in the continuation of African patterns of behavior (braided hair and filing teeth in the

traditional manner, clandestinely performing African rites at births and burials) and the creation of new ones as deliberate and purposeful. While the contours of slave life might vary as negotiations shifted, the beliefs, attitudes, and activities that slaves nurtured among themselves always had an "oppositional content," even if concealed in the mimicry of dance or later in the metaphors of a folk tale. In places where the body of slaves had come directly from Africa, as in eighteenth-century South Carolina, they often carried so deep an attachment to old customs that "the conflict over work and over culture became one."

With the masters' determination to dominate and the slaves' resilient resistance as constants, a variety of circumstances affected the outcome of their negotiations. Were the slaves at a given time and place from one African region (and culture) or another or from many different ones? How long ago had they left Africa and what had happened to them since? Did they grow tobacco or rice or sugar or cotton in the country or did they build houses, caulk ships, or shoe horses in the city? Did their work determine a region's whole economy ("slave societies," as in most of the South) or was it merely a convenience ("societies with slaves," as in the North)?

Berlin's achievement is to order the resulting variety by identifying four different regions with four different economies (the Chesapeake, the eastern tidewater from South Carolina to Florida, the Mississippi Valley, and the North) and by dividing the social developments of two centuries in each region into three periods, which he designates as the charter generations, the plantation generations, and the Revolutionary generations, stopping short of the heyday of slavery in the antebellum decades of the nineteenth century.

The contrasts of slave life in different places and at different times can be appreciated in Berlin's depiction of the two regions that held most of the country's slaves before the nineteenth century, the regions studied in greater detail by Morgan, on whose previous research Berlin frequently relies (the two have collaborated in earlier works). The Chesapeake enjoyed the relatively favorable conditions of the charter generations from the beginning of slavery there in 1619 until the last two decades of the century. Before then the Virginia labor force was mainly white, and Africans joining it enjoyed more rights and had a better chance of becoming free than those who came after them in much greater numbers. Most of the charter generations had left Africa some time earlier. Many were what Berlin calls Atlantic creoles, slaves who had been born and raised in the great trading centers of the Atlantic, in Spain, Portugal, West Africa, and the Caribbean. They were often of mixed European and African descent, already familiar with European cultures, and thus "did not arrive as deracinated chattel, stripped of their past and without resources to meet the future." In consequence they blended into the existing society, sometimes gained freedom, and developed only a thin autonomous culture of their own.

But they were not assimilated or fully accepted as equals, and a flood of coerced immigrants from Africa in the half-century after 1680 coincided, not accidentally, with a legal elimination of whatever privileges they had originally enjoyed. Race and slavery were deliberately identified. Yet the Africanization of the Chesapeake labor force apparently did not create a durable African culture. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the fertility of the black population produced a majority of Chesapeake slaves who had never seen Africa. "Slaves with teeth filed, hair plaited, or skin scarred in the ritual manner disappeared from the countryside." By the time of the American Revolution, with tobacco fields exhausted, Chesapeake planters found themselves with a surplus of slaves, mostly native born. That fact,

along with the ideology of freedom that accompanied the Revolution, produced an increasing number of manumissions and regained for Chesapeake slaves, at least temporarily, some of the benefits of the charter generation.

The history of South Carolina slave society is one of both greater oppression and greater autonomy. The colony began with a charter generation of Atlantic creoles who worked beside their masters in mixed agriculture and stock raising. Slaves mistreated could easily take to the woods. Swamps deep in the interior harbored "maroon" settlements of successful runaways, whose continuing presence furnished a refuge, for those who dared risk it, from the rigors that arrived with rice culture at the end of the seventeenth century. Rice required heavy, unhealthful, and exhausting labor. The death rate among slaves was so high that the labor force could be maintained only by a continuous influx of new slaves, especially as rice cultivation generated ever larger plantations. The result, combined with the possibility of escape to the maroons and the absence of any close relationship with masters (who frequently preferred the comforts of Charleston to the steaming heat of the plantation), was the creation of an African culture more autonomous than any other in North America. Slaves were able to negotiate a task system of labor whereby instead of working as a gang, everyone was given a specific task for the day, a number of plants to plant or rows to hoe, however long it took. With their daily stint completed, slaves could work for themselves, even growing their own crops of rice on patches of land assigned them.

Since they came from different regions of Africa, often with different languages, it was their common plight and a recognition of their common origins in another continent that brought them together. Consequently, as Berlin notes, with implications for the present that are hard to assess, "The construction of an African identity proceeded on the western, not the eastern, side of the Atlantic." At the same time, South Carolina planters, who became familiar with the character of the peoples from different parts of Africa, sometimes gathered their forces from a particular region, so that it became possible for "specific African cultures to reconstitute themselves within the plantation setting."

One would like to know more about the African identity constructed in America and about the content of African cultures reconstituted here. How was their oppositional character manifested? Admittedly the distinguishing marks of different slave cultures, varying so widely, are difficult to retrieve from the existing sources. The words and acts of slaves in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries survive mainly in the unsympathetic and uncomprehending notation of them in the diaries, letters, and travel accounts of whites, and in testimony by and about slaves and free blacks on the rare occasions when their activities came under notice of the courts. It is perhaps a little too easy to ascribe African origins or oppositional purposes to actions or customs about which we still know so little. The great virtue of Berlin's work is to furnish a frame and vocabulary for more detailed studies of the different slave cultures that he identifies.

Philip Morgan's work is confined to eighteenth-century slavery in the two regions just noticed. Morgan's closer examination, the closest yet made of slave life anywhere before the nineteenth century, yields not only more of the content of slave cultures but a somewhat different interpretation of them. It is difficult to convey here the complexity and subtlety of his analysis. In general, like Berlin, Morgan finds the relationship of masters and slaves in the Chesapeake to have been less harsh, less adversarial than in the low country of South

Carolina and Georgia. Slaves in the Chesapeake not only enjoyed more material comforts in food, clothing, and housing, but also more intimate daily contact with their masters. Chesapeake slavery was more paternalistic and grew more so during the century.

In South Carolina, he agrees, the isolation of slaves from their masters on much larger plantations than in the Chesapeake made possible the much greater development of independent slave cultures: "Material conditions and communal autonomy appear to have been inversely related." But Morgan sees few signs of direct African influence as a source of autonomy, even in the low country. African familiarity with rice cultivation, which earlier historians have credited with introducing the crop, seems actually to have had little effect on the way it was produced in South Carolina or on the lives of those who produced it. The task system, which Morgan was the first to describe and which helped to make Carolina slaves more autonomous than their Chesapeake counterparts, developed independently of African influence.

Morgan finds the oppositional content of slave cultures in both regions to lie not in any specific elements but rather in the very existence of these cultures. Divisions among slaves, readily exploited by whites, made the creation of autonomous cultures among them the more difficult: Igbos were arrayed against Angolans, Creoles against "salt-water Africans," Africans against Indians, slaves of one master against those of another. The cultures they created in overcoming these divisions have to be understood more as a triumph of humanity than as survivals of an African past. Morgan traces the distinctive features of family life, language, music, dance, humor, and religion in both regions, stressing the imaginative creativity found in them. For example, no single African language survived, but slaves in different regions put together distinctive adaptations of English, varying in phonology, grammar, and vocabulary, sometimes unintelligible to masters but used in speaking to one another. Forbidden to use drums (which whites feared for their emotional effect and signalling capacity), they substituted hand-clapping and developed the banjo from an original African instrument into a new American one.

Supplied with the plainest rough clothing, they dyed it with the bark of local trees and decorated it and themselves with ornaments and fancy hair styles and headgear, so that the very drabness imposed on them "helped create a people keenly interested in fashion, intensely aware of personal style, and fervently committed to expressiveness in their everyday life." Morgan's account is exhaustive, and sometimes exhausting, in its detail, but it is more than a recovery of hard-to-find facts. It is informed throughout by Morgan's recognition that slavery, as an extreme form of domination, resonates with the ambiguities present in all human relations. He wisely resists the temptation to draw out the implications for present-day race relations, for the implications are uncertain and unpredictable.

The recognition of a Negro past that Herskovits called for as a prerequisite for eliminating prejudice is now abundantly documented in these two books and in many others. But it is not quite the African past Herskovits envisaged, and its impact on racial prejudice may not be quite what he expected. While Berlin sees a larger element of African survival than Morgan, both would probably agree that the significance of slave cultures for race relations at the time lay more in their affirmation of autonomy than in their origins. And here begin the ambiguities. Where slavery was less oppressive and race relations the more "pliable" (Morgan's term), as in the Chesapeake, slaves were unable to develop a healthy culture of their own as a base from which to carry on the negotiations that Berlin sees as

determining their status. Yet, superficially at least, their status in the Chesapeake was better than in the low country. Where slavery was more oppressive, as in South Carolina, slave culture was stronger, more African, more autonomous, more oppositional. But, as Morgan points out, while the formation of their own culture was in itself *the* most significant act of resistance" by slaves, yet "by creating an autonomous culture, slaves also eased the torments of slavery, and, in that respect, their cultural creativity created accommodation." Autonomy could thus help to perpetuate the torments of subjection.

The implications for the present carry a similar ambiguity. It does not impeach the scholarly integrity of these and other deeply researched studies of slave culture to recognize that they do send messages to the present of which the authors can scarcely have been unaware. The effect, and surely in some measure the intention, of all these studies must be to induce a greater respect by whites for the "Negro Past" and a greater pride in it on the part of blacks. Herskovits, while continually emphasizing the scientific character of his anthropological study, had made plain at the beginning that his scientific rigor was aimed against race prejudice. Historians, including Berlin and Morgan, generally leave such an intention implicit. But if slave culture was a mode of opposing slavery, the study of it is surely a mode of opposing racism.

Race prejudice, however, is a protean animal, not necessarily vulnerable to demonstrations of scientific or historical fact—even without the muddying of the waters by critical racial studies and the current "postmodern" refusal to distinguish fact from fiction. The result of serious historical reconstruction of slave culture, whatever the intent of the authors, may be a greater feeling of guilt on the part of whites for what their ancestors did to so creative and independent a people. And the posthumous assumption of ancestral guilt can paradoxically offer support to present-day racism, just as the severity of slavery did to slavery's persistence. George Rawick, in a pioneering study of slave culture, recognized the danger and warned that "only those who feel themselves innately superior can feel such guilt about the conditions of others."¹² Whites who assume ancestral guilt to themselves cannot dissociate it entirely from the ancestral assumption of racial superiority that produced whatever there is to feel guilty about. Moreover, what neither white nor black historians seem to understand and none of our authors addresses is the nature of the guilt feeling that supports white racism. Slavery now seems too horrendous a crime to fasten wholly on its beneficiaries. Whatever guilt we may feel for slavery stops short of repudiating our national heroes because of their role in oppressing a whole race. Their sins have to be attributed to a system in which everybody was involved, including the slaves, whose necessary participation was an embarrassment to men like Washington and Jefferson. Guilt feelings are a continuation of that embarrassment, and racism is a way of exorcising it by blaming the victims and their descendants.

This may seem a perverse line of reasoning. Surely the blame ought to go in the other direction. But "ought to" has not governed the history of oppression. Oppressors commonly blame the oppressed, and if they or their descendants feel guilt they blame that too on the oppressed. Benjamin Franklin, who understood human relations as well as anyone ever has, recognized the phenomenon not in the tyranny of master over slave but in the lesser tyranny of Britain over the American colonists. He thought that Britain, by not giving the colonists the same rights as Englishmen and by trying to subdue them by force, was truly oppressing them, indeed threatening them, with the same slavery they themselves exercised on their rice and sugar plantations. By the time the colonists declared independence, the breach with Britain was beyond repair, he said, because "Great Britain has injured us too much ever to

forgive us." He explained himself more fully in answer to an overture for reconciliation. Even if it were possible, he said, for Americans to forget and forgive what the British had done to them, "it is not possible for *you* (I mean the British Nation) to forgive the People you have so heavily injured; you can never confide again in those as Fellow Subjects, and permit them to enjoy equal Freedom, to whom you know you have given such just Cause of lasting Enmity."¹⁴ As no good deed goes unpunished, bad ones are seldom forgotten or forgiven by those responsible for them.

Franklin's reasoning was close to that of Thomas Jefferson in thinking that whites could never admit blacks to freedom and equality in the United States. Not merely "Deep-rooted prejudices entertained by the whites," and not merely the racial differences he believed to be real, but "ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained" would "produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of one or the other race."¹⁵ Jefferson's observation was not as acute as Franklin's, for he did not admit the difficulty he and his friends would have as oppressors in "forgiving" the people they oppressed. But he himself exemplified the difficulty by his belief in white superiority and by his conviction that emancipation could be acceptable only if the freed slaves went somewhere else. Jefferson's feelings of guilt for slavery went hand in hand with a contempt for its victims and a fear of them that made forgiveness impossible. Franklin's observation about Britain was never put to the test. The Americans, of course, did not rejoin the British Empire and so did not have to look for equal freedom under British rule. But the slaves who were freed in 1865 and their children and their children's children remained in the United States. The convulsions that Jefferson feared have not materialized, but neither side has fully forgiven the other. Blacks have been given equality under the law. But they have never quite been confided in as fellow subjects, have never quite been forgiven for the embarrassment of their ancestors' sufferings.

Those sufferings, like the admittedly much lesser ones that the British dealt the American colonists, were accompanied by a profound contempt and would have been unthinkable without it. Franklin had personally endured British contempt at the hands of officials whom he had tried unsuccessfully to dissuade from the measures that alienated his countrymen. Slaves endured a more withering contempt every day of their lives from masters who considered them barely human, their ideas and customs beneath notice, fit only to be driven like cattle. The resuscitation of slave culture by anthropologists and historians should ultimately gain its exponents the respect that slave owners could not grant. But that respect requires the sophisticated understanding that only books like Morgan's and Berlin's can supply. Understanding requires a recognition, not easily admitted, that slavery was a negotiated relationship and that both masters and slaves remained human beings throughout the negotiations. It is much easier to view them as tyrants and victims, and to displace contempt by a condescending feeling of guilt that secretly blames the victims. Victims often earn pity and inspire feelings of guilt for what was done to them, but seldom respect.

George Rawick, whose strictures on guilt we have already quoted, reminds us continually that the existence and continuance of slave culture is itself proof that American slavery was a workable and durable human relationship, continued from generation to generation, and to be studied as such regardless of its horrors. Rawick's own understanding of slave culture (and now the singular is important) rested on a unique source: interviews with former slaves conducted in the 1920s and 1930s, mainly by the Federal Writers Project. The slaves interviewed were all in their eighties or older. The culture they remembered from

their childhood in the decade or two before the Civil War was an amalgam of earlier cultures, homogenized by two powerful forces: cotton and Christianity. Rice and tobacco had given way to cotton throughout the South in the nineteenth century as plantations spread westward; and slaves had found in evangelical Christianity a religion that could be molded to contain their different beliefs, unify their different cultures, and lend support in and against their adversity, which did not diminish with the switch to cotton.

Rawick published the interviews on which he drew in forty-one volumes. ²³ Readers can now find a sample of them in *Remembering Slavery*, which Berlin has selected and edited with two colleagues. They are arranged in five chapters to focus on the former slaves' memories of their masters, their work, their family ties, their culture (music, dance, religion), and their emancipation. Any reader can extract from these rambling recollections a good deal of what is now known about slave culture in its final form. Unfortunately what people who had been free for sixty or seventy years remembered most vividly about slavery was not the degree of autonomy they were able to negotiate. What stands out in all these interviews in grim monotony is the unrelenting dominance of masters, maintained by regular whipping and torture, sometimes by exemplary murder.

What former slaves remembered about their work after so many years was the lash that set the pace for it: "Dey did'n cah how ole o' how young yo' wah, yo' nebbah too big t'git de lash." What they remembered about their family structure was the whippings they had to watch one another endure: "Many a day my ole mama has stood by an' watched massa beat her chillin 'till dey bled an' she couldn' open her mouf. Dey didn' only beat us, but they useta strap my mama to a bench or box an' beat her wid a wooden paddle while she was naked." What they remembered about their prayer meetings was the need to keep them secret from their masters, because if they were caught, the patrols hired to catch blacks who strayed would "whip all caught in attendance."

Readers in search of a guilt trip will have no trouble finding it here, abetted by the scrupulous attempt to reproduce in print the pronunciation and dialect of the speakers. The very quaintness of the language in which we hear of unspeakable tortures, casually related as they were casually given, serves to aggravate the horror. It is hard to read this book without anger, shame, pity—or guilt. Such feelings are even more keenly induced by an accompanying audiocassette broadcast on public radio in October, in which a few rare voice recordings made at the time of the interviews have been enhanced by modern technology, while others are read aloud skillfully and movingly by well-known black actors and actresses reproducing the old dialect.

Only toward the end are we brought to our senses, and to an awareness of the racist connotations of guilt, by the extraordinary words of one ex-slave, not recorded in any interview but recalled by John Henry Faulk, who conducted many of the interviews. He remembered chatting with an ancient man to whom he had been explaining his own view that blacks were entitled to more rights than they currently enjoyed:

And uh, I remember him looking at me, very sadly and kind of sweetly, and condescendingly and saying, "You know, you still got the disease, honey. I know you think you're cured, but you're not cured. You talking now you sitting there talking and I know it's nice and I know you a good man. Talking about giving me this and giving me that right. You talking about giving me something I was born with just like you was born with it. You can't give me the right to be a

human being. I was born with that right. Now you can keep me from having that if you've got all the policemen and all the jobs on your side you can deprive me of it, but you can't give it to me, cause I was born with it just like you was."

That quotation redeems the book and carries us back from guilt to simple respect. And if we can read the interviews themselves the way Rawick did, with a consciousness that the people who wielded the lash as well as those who felt it were engaged in a continuing human relationship, we may gain a better perspective on the significance of slave cultures. That slaves were able to build lives of their own may show that slavery was not quite as bad as it theoretically could have been, but the survivors tell us that it was actually as bad as a human relationship can get. As slave owners pushed that relationship to its limits and beyond, slaves could sustain it only by developing the countercultures in which they accommodated to the horrors and at the same time resisted them. The interviews are a testimony not only of human endurance but of the endurance of humanity under conditions that tested the limits of both.

How difficult it is to see slavery as a negotiated relationship will be apparent to viewers of a new PBS series, *Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery*. The series, in four ninety-minute episodes, follows the history of slavery in America from its tentative beginnings in seventeenth-century Virginia to its abolition during the Civil War. As the horrors of the institution dominated the later recollections of those freed from it, they overshadow everything else in this depiction of early American history as the history of slavery. The small triumphs of autonomous slave cultures pale here beside the ruthless subjection of slave to master. Patterns of speech and dress, of music and dance, play no role in the long fight for freedom and its ultimate success. The story is not one of what slaves did as slaves but of what was done to them, until the violence of civil war overcame the violence of slavery.

The series faces the same problems as other attempts to bring the past to the screen through visual images that have to be either static or irrelevant. We have shots of plantation mansions, slave quarters, prison bars, portraits, engravings, cartoons, and documents, animated only by the camera's roving lens. These are interspersed among action shots of ships at sea, rivers flowing, trees against the sky, birds flying (usually egrets), bare feet shuffling (a favorite), and a few reenactments in dim light and dim focus, the faces obscure, of people tormented and struggling.

What drives the series and holds it together is not sight but sound, a spoken narrative to which the images are no more than background, like the subdued music that accompanies them. It is an eloquent narrative, recited in voiceover, but continually shifting to pertinent and incisive quotations, in different voices, from people of the time: slave traders, freed slaves, planters, sailors, abolitionists, statesmen. The most effective quotations are passages from the autobiographies of a few slaves who made it to freedom and left a record of their experiences. In a couple of episodes they figure as protagonists, their lives lending drama to the record of human misery.

Taken by itself, the narrative is a grim and accurate piece of historical instruction. The grimness is relieved a little by the pictorial accompaniment but more surprisingly by the explanatory commentaries from a large battery of talking heads, who bring more life to the screen than historical artifacts and scenic vistas can. They are mostly historians, including too briefly John Hope Franklin, the dean of black historians. One of the few non-historians is

Colin Powell, who appears for a brief discussion of Jefferson and again in a perceptive comment on the way service in the Continental Army (reluctantly allowed by Washington) gave new dimensions to the lives of blacks who enlisted.

All in all it is fair to say that the talking heads save the show. None of them has a good word to say for slavery, and none of them talks about slave culture. But they give an interpretive depth to the series that makes it much more than a recital of horrors. They are particularly good at placing slavery within the larger context of American history. Without indulging in the righteous indignation that the subject invites, they do their best to make the actions of both slaves and slaveholders intelligible as part of national history. It is unfortunate and a little surprising that neither they nor the show's designers thought that the autonomy of slave culture was worth the kind of attention that other historians and anthropologists have given it, for that culture's later transformations are the one positive heritage of slavery. But the commentators, by their obvious respect for their subject, do give direction to the show and save it from being simply an exercise in pity or guilt.

How much they do for it is obvious when one reads the book prepared as a "companion" to the series by Patricia Smith and Charles Johnson. Johnson's contribution is a set of fictional vignettes, not used in the series, that take us imaginatively inside the minds of slaves and slave owners, including Martha Washington. They break into the narrative written by Smith as human-interest episodes, but they are completely independent of it. While quite moving in themselves, they do not serve the explanatory function that the commentators did in the series. Instead they magnify the feeling of outrage that the book seems designed to induce. Smith's narrative follows the script of the series closely, employing the same quotations and giving the same facts, often in the same words, but with an interpretive slant that is more polemical than instructive.

It does not take much to turn a straight history of slavery into a polemic. Smith does not distort the facts, but without the independent commentaries of the series the facts become a bill of indictment. In the series Washington appears always as a slaveholder with little else to his credit, but the picture of him is placed in context when his biographer, John Ferling, explains that "his parents owned slaves, his grandparents were slave owners, his older brothers were slave owners. Slaveowning was common in the Northern Neck of Virginia where Washington grew up. It was just an accustomed part of life." Well, it was not really just that, and it only requires a few words from Smith to twist the knife. While she never implies that slavery was not an accustomed part of life for the Washingtons, she leaves us with a damning, if justifiable, view of the first president when she says that he "had decided to live comfortably, and he could not continue to live that way without his slaves."

Jefferson appears as often as Washington in the series, and in an equally unflattering light. The contradiction between his declaration of human equality and his lifelong dependence on slave labor has often been pointed out before, as it is again here. General Powell states it plainly: "Thomas Jefferson kept slaves but Thomas Jefferson nevertheless wrote those remarkable words and he understood the inconsistency." Smith, too, stresses the contradiction, but for her the remarkable words do not weigh much in the balance against the facts of slaveholding: Jefferson's "egalitarian veneer barely disguised the spirit of a Negrophobic southern planter whose solution to the country's most pressing problem was avoidance."

That is certainly a defensible judgment. Smith states the facts of American history as a history of slaveholding, and she states them simply and unequivocally. We learn how white Americans created their union at the expense of blacks. They did, in the protections for slavery in the Constitution, without which the South would not have accepted it. We learn how the Missouri Compromise of 1820 preserved the union "but did nothing to resolve the problem of an immoral system in a society that stressed its morality." Can anyone deny it?

In a history of Africans in America before the Civil War, there is some justice in emphasizing the immorality, injustice, and hypocrisy of the slaveholders who dominated the government as they dominated their slaves. Where masters are unmitigated tyrants, slaves have to be victims. But the relentless simplicity of this theme, when unrelieved by the complexities that emerge from the series commentators, is symptomatic of a crippling condescension that afflicts both the book and the series. They both victimize the slaves. Smith depicts white abolitionists as patronizing their black co-workers. But this history of slavery patronizes the slaves.

The study of slave culture, from Herskovits's discovery of the Negro Past to Berlin's insistence on a negotiated relationship, rests on a recognition that slavery could not have been quite as repressive as the abolitionists believed it to be and as slaveholders may have wished it to be. In ignoring that recognition and depicting slavery only as an evil that is now safely past, both the book, and to a lesser extent the series, fit slaves into a stereotype and devalue the humanity whose expression in slave culture has occupied a generation of historians and anthropologists. The commentators may save the program from the worst effects of this condescension, but both the book and the program are likely to produce less understanding than pity, less respect for slaves than guilt. If the study of slave culture can help to erode racism, the story of slavery crushing its victims can only make us congratulate ourselves that it's over. We may feel shame that it was not over sooner, but it *is* over. And since it is over, polemics against it are exercises in sentimentality.

What is not over is racism, and what is also not over is the cultural heritage whose beginnings Morgan and Berlin have delineated so well. It is a heritage that slaves bequeathed not only to their offspring, but to the nation which slaves and slave owners built together. Respect for that heritage can be as powerful an antidote to racism as slave culture was to slavery itself. As Berlin has noted in another context, "We continue to benefit from the language, cuisine, folklore, music and religion that slaves created. It is difficult to imagine how impoverished American culture would be without this legacy."^[1] When black and white Americans can both acknowledge the legacy at full value, they may be able to forgive each other for what the Founding Fathers did to the other founding fathers and mothers they held in bondage.

Notes

[1] With a new introduction by Sidney W. Mintz (Beacon Press, 1990).

[2] *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Greenwood, 1972), p. 102.

[3] William B. Willcox, et al., editors, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (Yale University Press), Vol. 23 (1983), p. 283; Vol. 22 (1982), p. 519.

▣ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, William Peden, editor (Norton, 1954, 1982), p. 138.

▣ *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 41 volumes (Greenwood, 1972-1979).

▣ "Before We Apologize, We Should Learn What Slavery Means," *The Washington Post*, June 29, 1997, pp. C1, C5.

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