

redefining sexuality in general and black sexuality in particular, so as to push beyond the confines of academic discourse. As contemporary scholars refuse to ignore the lives and culture of nontraditional families, sex workers, transgender artists and activists, and queer folk alike, they remind us that black sexuality is lived, just as it is examined and talked about. An ongoing critical dialogic relationship is required, particularly during these times when the stakes are high in the struggle over black sexual knowledge and when the sexual domain continues to be a means through which epistemological, and literal, violence, oppression, and exclusion are inflicted on black people. Likewise, however, this meditation of the keyword and the discursive terrain out of which it emerges highlights the potential for sexuality to be a space of freedom to explore and experience agency and pleasure and to achieve at least a modicum of autonomy and bliss.

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Slavery

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"Slavery" describes the condition of a person or people in permanent servitude, dating back to practices of human bondage that began during ancient times. These practices have taken different forms in the evolutionary sprawl of societies from small kingdoms through the vast reach of European imperialism. Primarily due to geographic proximity, throughout most of world history, people have been enslaved by others who have been "racially" (in our modern sense) identical. It was not until the early modern history (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) that slavery assumed a racialized dimension, as the expansion of European empires accelerated with the Atlantic slave trade. New constructions of national, ethnic, and racial difference emerged as the concept of "race" developed as a crucial teleological justification for the enslavement of millions of Africans and their forced migration to the Americas. This point stresses the need for a substantive grasp of slavery and its central relationship within African American studies.

As part of the British Empire, American settler colonists embraced slavery as a normative part of society. Through America's independence and industrial rise, slavery was fundamental to the nation's legal, social, religious, economic, and cultural development. Inasmuch as slavery was woven into the fabric of the United States, no people's existence had been as inexorably shaped by it as African Americans. It is, therefore, no surprise that slavery is critical to the evolution and understanding of

African American studies. As a discipline, African American studies emerged out of sociopolitical struggles that demanded more than intellectual inclusion at colleges and universities. The field also offered a long-term vision of building a discipline with essential points of intellectual inquiry with important frameworks for the study of the black experience. Although scholarly writing on slavery did not begin with the founding of African American studies, its role remains the central diasporic foundation from and through which all other critical aspects of African American studies have been built over time.

While some of the oldest literature explored in African American studies includes autobiographies from formerly enslaved people, such as Frederick Douglass (1845) and Harriet Jacobs (1861), it was in 1896 that W. E. B. Du Bois published the first African American scholarly monograph on the slave trade, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade* (1896), based on his doctoral dissertation at Harvard. The book stood as the dominant narrative showing intellectual depth and grasp of the ending of a commercial enterprise founded on the buying and selling of black bodies. It proved especially instructive for many scholars, setting into motion the wheels of intellectual engagement through the exploration of slavery's many contours and scholarly debates on its critical themes. Du Bois's book framed the intellectual tone of inquiry, by exploring slavery's economic motives as a crucial basis for the racialized exploitation of African people. In the opening years of the twentieth century, these explorations of the past served dual purposes: (1) such discourses were critical in confronting and surviving the blatant racism in everyday life, and (2) their formulation allowed African Americans to develop an autonomous voice, value, and most of all, respect for the archival productions of black historical narratives. This work, of course, reflected all too well the

racial politics of intellectual history in the United States, which was often dismissive, if not hostile, to black assertions of humanity. Few white historians of slavery were as well known as Ulrich B. Phillips, most widely remembered for his 1918 publication *American Negro Slavery*. In his treatise, Phillips offered a deeply paternalistic view of the United States' "peculiar" institution, arguing that black people were not only happy as slaves but civilized by slavery. Slavery was, Phillips argued, a benign institution that transformed African savages into docile servants for whites. His work affirmed widespread perceptions of white racial superiority, while also stressing the glaring need for epistemic challenges that would disrupt ahistorical, racist, and myopic narratives of the black past.

While many white historians were less moved by Du Bois's view of slavery and the economic consequences of the U.S. slave-trading enterprise, his pioneering interpretations forged several shifts in the writing of slavery and the slave trade among other African American intellectuals. These heroic efforts to engage black history as a professional enterprise were led most diligently by Carter G. Woodson, who worked toward archiving black history and creating an intellectual space for the community to ensure a future for black historical and cultural studies. This was realized most profoundly through Woodson's establishment of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH, 1915) and the *Journal of Negro History*. Such empowering and institutionalizing efforts were deeply aligned with progressive and collective racial uplift endorsed by many black leaders of the early twentieth century. As a result, research-based rigorous productions of collective history, centering on slavery, emerged during this period. These included early works by Harvey Wish (1964), Raymond and Alice Bauer (1942), Herbert Aptheker (1943), Darold Wax (1967), and Lorenzo Green (1944), among

many others, who published books as well as scholarly articles in the *Journal of Negro History* (Dagbovie 2007, 2017).

As African American leaders battled slavery's many legacies, including codified forms of oppression and violence, a classic 1933 text by the Brazilian scholar Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves*, set yet another hostile racial tone for the study of plantation slavery. Many U.S. scholars were forced to refute the work, while attending to the distinct similarities and differences between U.S. and Brazilian forms of slavery (Wish 1937; Bauer and Bauer 1942; Wax 1967; L. Green 1944; H. Aptheker 1943). The more macro-global approach to uncovering slaving commerce expanded onward with Eric Williams's 1944 book *Capitalism and Slavery*, centering on the commercial rise of industries and wealth tied to the exploitation of enslaved bodies. This book in many ways signaled the end of a period and a scholarly shift that still focused deeply on the economic ramifications of capitalistic endeavors through slavery and its inhumanity to black others.

In the postwar period, the foci of slavery were ever shifting, and slave-trade scholarship soon delved into deeper economics and sophisticated data sets to uncover a slaving past at sea full of unimaginable horrors. Kenneth Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-bellum South* (1956) and Stanley Elkins's *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (1959) were two classic texts of the era. And while historian John Blassingame ([1972] 1979) rejected Elkins's thesis that slavery reduced many slaves into a "Sambo" or infantile state, Stampp's and Elkins's works gave slavery scholars an intellectual contrast to the mid-twentieth-century U.S. still grappling with realizing freedom and democracy.

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scholar-activists from many disciplines made important contributions to the histories through new questions of the archives and fragmented sources. Such revived engagement in slavery's racialized past expanded access to black history for many people—not only in the collegiate world but also among the black masses. This was most evinced through wide circulation of *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines, which often educated those who were unable to be in the university's halls of learning. The San Francisco State College conference of 1968 made hopeful an actively vibrant future of black studies. Simultaneously, there were shifts in scholarly methods across the country and worldwide, signaling new directions of the study of race and slavery. Increasingly, scholars shifted the gaze to the experiences of enslaved people, researching and writing to expand the humanization of those who were most dehumanized by enslavement.

Winthrop Jordan's 1968 seminal text *White over Black: American Attitudes towards the Negro, 1550–1812* was published the same year that black studies came into most tangible being, providing an important historical treatise on the foundational ideas around the history of race in the United States. The following year, another book with critical acclaim was published: *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census*, by Philip Curtin. It introduced a newer method of assessing the number of enslaved Africans through a more scientific evaluation. Even more critical to the future of slave-trade scholarship was Curtin's significantly lower numerical estimation of slavery's toll, which was revised downward to ten million from Du Bois's early estimation of fifteen million. This estimation, in turn, became the basis of scholarly debate for many people across the globe in history, political science, economics, and many other fields, which reflected the then-current influence of the rise of cliometrics.

While numbers were sensationalized by a multitude of scholars attempting to get closest to slavery's full

body count on ships and plantations, there remained a greater emphasis on religion, race, African culture, resistance, and the racial legacies of sickness and mortality in the world of slavery. Scholarship on the everyday life of slavery expanded through the impactful works of Eugene Genovese (1974), Todd Savitt (1976), Gerda Lerner (1972), and William D. Piersen (1977).

To be sure, the decade of the 1960s was framed by major epistemic upheavals. Amid the protests in pursuit of justice and peace, a key text on the transatlantic slave trade came with Daniel Mannix and Malcolm Cowley's 1962 *Black Cargo*. Three years later, Daniel Patrick Moynihan infamously penned his 1965 report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* and, consequently, precipitated vigorous debates about the role of black women, from slavery onward, as matriarchal figures in black families. Politically driven, the report spilled over into the production of scholarship on black women and their many histories. Theretofore, there was an acute lack of scholarship centered on black women, let alone focused on their traumas in bondage. This fundamental shift to examine the role of gender in slavery began to gain traction in African American studies in the 1970s.

Angela Davis in 1971 wrote her critically acclaimed article "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," which placed black women in the lexicon of memory and critical meaning of slavery for the first time, showing the myriad roles forced on them across conditions of enslavement. Although the article was written while Davis was infamously incarcerated, it served as a critical influential moment for a future of scholarship fully attentive to the range of black women and their diverse experiences in bondage. Subsequently, African American studies and history scholars such as Darlene Clark Hine (1986), Deborah Gray White ([1985] 1999), and Nell Painter (1997) emerged as

some of the most prominent scholars to explore gender and its complications more seriously.

The 1980s saw a rise in narratives of slavery based on resistance, death in slavery, and the ever-explosive writing on quantity and the slave trade. Vincent Harding's classic text poetically tracing the flow of slavery and beyond, *There Is a River*, was published in 1981. The study of black women—in slavery and freedom—continued to expand, even in fictional literature. Mildred D. Taylor's novel *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry*, published in 1976, and Octavia Butler's classic science-fiction novel *Kindred*, published in 1979, reimagined slavery in nuanced ways. Though works of fiction, these new approaches resonated with scholars of slavery in African American studies. For example, the exploration of slavery with historical nonfiction found fascinating complementary use with Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987). In fact, some of these novels on slavery became required reading in U.S. schools.

The 1990s represented a monumental turning point and an expansion of scholarship on slavery. With increased attention to various forms of racial inequities, bias, and abuses, there emerged a growing emphasis on black history and culture, which complemented the more visible expression of black political activism. Therefore, alongside Paula Giddings (1984), Saidiya Hartman (1997), David Barry Gaspar (1993), and Michael Gomez (1998), the study of slavery grew exponentially from historians and literary scholars. Additionally, many people also learned from notable public historians such as John Henrik Clarke (Bourne 1996), along with black psychologists, especially Na'im Akbar (1996). These popular scholars made connections between the contemporary conditions of people who have struggled through the psychological and cultural intergenerational legacies of enslavement. Various debates and theories invigorated the field. One theme

that has continued to generate considerable discussion in African American studies is the agentic nature of enslaved people. To what degree did enslaved Africans exert agency and resistance and cultivate and sustain identities separate from those imposed on them by their enslavers?

One leading voice in this debate is sociologist Orlando Patterson (1982), who has argued that slavery is a form of "social death," where the enslaved are rendered so powerless that they have no control of their own most basic human needs, including the ability to defend oneself from sexual assault or other forms of physical and mental abuse. Even the instinctive will to protect one's child is denied those who are in bondage. Their very identity has been shaped by the condition of slavery, erasing the critical features that make humans socially engaged within communities and societies. A person's worth as chattel is akin to the worth of an inanimate object or an animal. Other scholars, particularly historians, have disagreed with the notion of absolute social death for the enslaved. Sterling Stuckey (1987), Michael Gomez (1998), and other historians have explored African cultural retention as surreptitious forms of resistance, while Manisha Sinha (2016), Tera Hunter (2017), Erica Armstrong Dunbar (2017), and Richard J. M. Blackett (2018) have explored the curious ways that enslaved people have resisted via escape, sabotage, and rebellion, sometimes with black and white abolitionist collusion. Black people, enslaved or not, as these historians detail, managed to forge a strong cultural identity as partial respite from the horrors of their condition. They maintained and affirmed their sense of humanity, down to the impulses to create art, worship, and build communities—even in the state of slavery. Moreover, these communities became the foundation for the free African American social world that coalesced in the aftermath of the Civil War and end of slavery in 1865.

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The public gaze on history and its transmission continues to circulate beyond historians and other scholars toward musical artists, filmmakers, and visual artists such as Kara Walker, whose work depicts silhouettes and shadows of people embroiled in various slave-based settings. These artists are forging, albeit basic, understandings of African American studies, blackness, black history, and most of all the meanings, limits, relevance, and reinterpretations of a distant and not-too-distant past through their art. Various scholars have explored these works, evincing the continued expansion of how slavery is discursively studied, understood, interrogated, and positioned in the field (Mustakeem 2016).