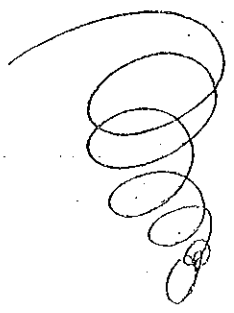


These comments reveal much about the nature—and limits—of slave-owner paternalism. To men like Cobb, it was the slaves' very powerlessness that accentuated the need to look after them; protection represented the flip side of total slave-dependence. Even as they sought to promote that dependence, many pro-slavery ideologists were troubled by the arbitrary power of master over slave that it entailed, for as good republicans they well knew the potential for abuse that lay in such power. But for most of them, it was the potential rather than the actual misuse of power that was problematic; they were convinced that the system—and most slave owners—was good, and that abuses under it were rare.

The slaves' view was very different. If the possibility of arbitrary treatment of slaves proved troubling to articulate defenders of slavery, it was the incessant reality of such treatment that impressed the slaves. The slaves were profoundly influenced by slave-owner paternalism, and as we shall see in the next chapter, they expressed toward the masters some of the same ambivalent feelings the masters held toward them. Ultimately, however, the slaves had a very different perspective on master-slave relations from that of their owners. That difference underlay much of daily life in the slave quarters.



Kolchin, Peter. *American Slavery*
 1619-1877. New York: Hill
 and Wang, 1993

5

Antebellum Slavery:

Slave Life

1

MASTERS NEVER ACHIEVED the total domination they sought over their slaves. Despite the efforts of slave owners to regulate all their activities, the slaves lived in a world that was influenced but by no means totally controlled by the slaveholders' regime. Because paternalistic Southern masters interfered in the daily lives of their "people" more than masters typically did in the Caribbean, Brazil, or Russia, the independence of slave life was unusually restricted in the antebellum South. Nevertheless, the slaves managed to develop their own semi-autonomous way of life, to interact with one another on a basis that reflected shared values and customs. Slaves at work were closely regulated, but away from work, they lived and loved, played and prayed, in a world largely unknown to the masters.

Until recently, it was also a world largely unknown to historians. During the past two decades, however, as historians in general have abandoned an almost exclusive focus on the rich, famous, and powerful to pay attention to the lives of ordinary Americans—women, blacks, immigrants, laborers, farmers, families—students of slavery have probed with increasing sophistication the world of the slaves. Considering slaves as subjects in their own right rather than merely as objects of white action, historians have striven to reconstruct their

"internal" lives, including their families, religion, social organization, folkways, values, and resistance to oppression, and have in the process dramatically revised our understanding of the peculiar institution.

II

A BRIEF AND SIMPLIFIED historiographical survey provides a useful introduction to this development. Until fairly recently, most historians of slavery paid far more attention to the behavior of the masters than to that of the slaves; slaves, the vast majority of whom were illiterate and therefore left no written records, appeared in their works—primarily as objects of white action. Scholars differed in many of their evaluations of slavery—some portrayed it as benign, whereas others depicted it as harshly exploitative—but with the partial exception of a tiny number of black and Marxist scholars, they focused far more on what slavery did to the slaves than what the slaves did themselves.

During the first half of the twentieth century, a major component of this approach was often simple racism; manifest in the belief that blacks were, at best, imitative of whites. Thus Ulrich B. Phillips, the era's most celebrated and influential expert on slavery, combined a sophisticated portrait of the white planters' life and behavior with crude passing generalizations about the life and behavior of their black slaves. Noting that "the planters had a saying . . . that a negro was what a white man made him," Phillips portrayed the plantation as a "school constantly training and controlling pupils who were in a backward state of civilization"; through this educational process the slaves "became largely standardized into the predominant plantation type." He proceeded to list "the traits which prevailed" as "an eagerness for society, music and merriment, a fondness for display . . . , a not flagrant sensuality, a receptiveness toward any religion whose exercises were exhilarating, a proneness to superstition, a courteous acceptance of subordination, an avidity for praise, a readiness for loyalty of a feudal sort, and last but not least, a healthy human repugnance toward overwork." Content with asserting such traits rather than demonstrating them, Phillips devoted most of his attention to the way planters managed their slaves, not to the slaves themselves.¹

Although such overt expressions of racism became less prevalent in the 1930s and 1940s and downright unfashionable in the 1950s, the tendency to treat slaves as objects persisted. As this persistence became a commitment to racial equality could be just as compatible with objectifying the slaves as was belief in white superiority. Indeed, because stressing the cruelties of slavery usually led to focusing on the injuries done to slaves, it could easily reinforce rather than subvert a historical model in which white slave owners and their agents acted and black slaves were acted upon. Thus, although Kenneth M. Stampp's "neo-abolitionist" book *The Peculiar Institution* (1956) differed sharply from Ulrich B. Phillips's *American Negro Slavery* (1918) in its overall evaluation of slavery, its main subject remained the treatment—now the mistreatment—of slaves. Stampp took the slaves far more seriously than did Phillips, but the sources that Stampp relied upon—plantation records, letters and diaries of slave owners, travel accounts written by Northern and European visitors, who almost invariably stayed with white hosts—revealed more about the behavior and thought of the masters than of the slaves, whom he portrayed as "culturally rootless people."²

The depiction of antebellum slaves as victims reached its peak in Stanley M. Elkins's 1959 volume, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, one of those rare historical works that not only arouse intense controversy but also promote sharp reversals of historical interpretation. Noting the absence of slave rebellions in the American South equal in size or duration to those in Brazil and the Caribbean islands, Elkins argued that the unusually harsh conditions faced by Southern slaves produced a "closed" environment that stripped them of their native African culture, prevented the emergence among them of any meaningful social relations, and turned them into childlike "Sambos" who almost completely internalized the values of their masters. Unlike the monarchy and the established Church in Latin America, both of which supposedly protected slaves from the worst abuses of bondage, nothing came between master and slave in the South; slavery there was, like the Nazi concentration camp, a "total" institution that rendered its victims psychologically defenseless. The Southern slave who, "for his very psychic security, had to picture his master in some way as the 'good father,'" was transformed into an emasculated, docile Sambo who came to identify with that very master.³

Despite its ingenuity, the Elkins thesis soon came under withering

attack from critics who blasted it as contrived, illogical, and unsupported by empirical evidence. Historians of Latin American slavery disputed the notion that the Church and Crown always mitigated the severity of slavery, and comparative historians pointed to the superior health and unique natural population growth of American slaves to rebut the argument that the conditions they endured were far harsher than those in the rest of the Americas. Other scholars disputed the utility of Elkins's concentration-camp analogy, suggested that apparent Sambo-like behavior was explicable without recourse to theories of slave infantilization (as a result of role-playing, for example), and noted that after the Civil War the actions of emancipated blacks were hardly childish or docile. Research by scholars seeking to test the Elkins thesis provided increasing evidence that antebellum slaves lived not in a totally closed environment but rather in one that permitted the emergence of enormous variety and allowed slaves to pursue important relationships with persons other than their masters, including those to be found in their families, churches, and communities. By the 1970s, although historians such as Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman had borrowed Elkins's idea that the slaves internalized their owners' ideals (the Protestant work ethic, according to Fogel and Engerman), the Sambo thesis lay in tatters.

Ironically, however, that thesis—and the controversy it provoked—played a major role in redirecting historical scholarship on slavery. As historians sought to rebut Elkins's assertion of slave docility, they found it necessary to focus far more than they previously had on the slaves as subjects in their own right rather than as objects of white treatment. The effort to test the Sambo thesis thus combined with the new historical interest in the lives of ordinary people to bring the slaves themselves to center stage in the drama of slavery. This new focus came to full fruition during the 1970s, as historians produced an avalanche of works seeking to rediscover the slave experience. For the first time, that experience became the major (although by no means the only) focus of historical research on antebellum Southern slavery.

As the focus of historical attention shifted increasingly to the slaves, historians found themselves forced to exploit "new" kinds of historical sources, which had previously been little used, to shed light on the slaves' world. Scholars probed archaeological remains, analyzed black folklore, and toiled over statistical data culled from

census reports and plantation records, but in their efforts to explore slave thought and behavior they found two kinds of sources especially useful: autobiographies of former slaves (some written after escape to the North and some after emancipation) and interviews with former slaves, the most extensive collection of which was taken under the auspices of the Federal Writers' Project during the 1930s. It is largely on the basis of these sources that historians have redirected their attention to the slaves, a redirection that has been more productive for the antebellum South than anywhere else because historical records that illuminate slavery from the slaves' vantage point are far more abundant for the slave South than for any other slave society.

Using slave sources to explore the slaves' "consciousness"—their thought, ideology, values, and identification—is a task of enormous difficulty, because these sources, although highly revealing, are also often highly problematical. Because most of them illustrate the late antebellum period, they encourage scholars either to focus on that period or to generalize from it about earlier times, in the process losing sight of significant changes that occurred over time. Equally serious are problems associated with interpreting autobiographies that were often written as deliberate acts of abolitionist propaganda and interpreting recollections of very old men and women about their youth three-quarters of a century earlier, especially when most of those recollections were elicited in interviews conducted by white Southerners in an era of black racial subordination. Historians have at times been too eager to take slave autobiographies and interviews at face value—an inappropriate approach with any historical document—and to construct on their basis an idealized version of slave behavior.

Nevertheless, when used with proper caution and sensitivity, and supplemented with additional evidence (including inferences drawn from actual behavior), autobiographies and interviews constitute an extremely important window on the minds of the slaves and have enabled scholars of the 1970s and 1980s to revise radically our understanding of American slavery. Although these scholars do not agree with one another in all particulars, the great majority of them have abandoned the victimization model in favor of an emphasis on the slaves' resiliency and autonomy. As I suggest below, I believe that some of these arguments for slave autonomy have been overstated and eventually will be modified on the basis of future evi-

dence. It is clear, however, that whatever such modifications may occur, we have in a relatively short time learned an enormous amount about the lives of those who were for too long ignored in the study of slavery: the slaves. Those lives are the subject of this chapter.

III

HISTORIANS EXAMINING the lives and behavior of antebellum slaves have disagreed on numerous points, but they have been virtually unanimous in finding that Elkins erred in depicting a world in which slaves had no "meaningful others" aside from their masters. Of course, slaves lived under widely varying conditions, and some may have experienced the totally controlled, "closed" system described by Elkins. For the vast majority, however, slavery never provided such a hermetically sealed environment; beings who were in theory totally dependent on their masters were able in practice to forge a semi-autonomous world, based on a multiplicity of social relationships, which accentuated their own distinctive customs and values. In this endeavor, they looked for support most of all to their families and their religion.

Families provided a crucial if fragile buffer, shielding slaves from the worst rigors of slavery. Although the transatlantic slave trade, exceptionally high mortality rates, and the excess of men over women among newly imported slaves decimated African families, the emergence of a predominantly creole slave population created the basic preconditions for family re-creation. A new African-American family structure took root in the eighteenth century and spread throughout the South, along with slavery, in the nineteenth. Those families were not, of course, untouched by slavery. Even under the best of circumstances, slave families lacked the institutional and legal support enjoyed by those that were free, and in extreme cases masters could not only hinder but prevent the development of normal family relations; Frederick Douglass, taken from his mother as an infant, recalled it as "a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age."⁴ But historians now know that in the South as a whole, separation of young children from their mothers was relatively unusual. Antebellum slaves lived in families, legally recognized or not, and the majority of slave children gr

up with their mothers and—somewhat less often—their fathers.

Slave owners were usually aware of, and considered themselves strong supporters of, slave families. Motivated by both a paternalistic concern for the well-being of their "people" and a calculating regard for their own economic interest, slave owners paid increasing attention to the family lives of their slaves. Antebellum masters usually assigned one slave family (much less often two) to a cabin, grouped slaves according to families in plantation censuses, and promoted "family morality" among their people in a variety of ways, including punishing adultery and divorce, insisting on early marriage, allowing (or not allowing) marriage "abroad," and less often purchasing spouses of favored servants. The actions of the masters were in many ways contradictory: they not only supported slave families but also disrupted them, through forced separations and forced sex. Still, their actions as supporters served to some extent to limit the impact of their actions as disrupters, and to make possible, despite the hostile environment, a family life among slaves that was vital if constantly at risk. Indeed, historians Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman have gone so far as to attribute the strength of antebellum slave families primarily to the support they received from slave owners.

Most other historians have stressed the actions of the slaves themselves in building and defending their families, often against overwhelming odds. As a result of research by Herbert G. Gutman and other scholars, we now know a great deal about the structure of slave families. Like most other Americans and Western Europeans (but unlike many Eastern Europeans, Asians, and Africans), Southern slaves usually lived in nuclear (or "simple") households: father, mother, and children. In the most recent study of slave families, Ann Paton Malone, who examined a sample of 19,329 slaves in Louisiana between 1810 and 1864, found that 73 percent of these slaves lived in simple households composed either of married couples with or without children or of single parents with children, and an additional 18.3 percent lived alone; only 8.7 percent of the slaves lived in more complex "multiple," "extended," or "non-nuclear" households. Throughout the South, families were large, with the average woman giving birth to about seven children over the course of her childbearing years and the typical slave cabin containing four to seven residents at any given time. Marriages, unless broken by sale, were usually long-lasting. Families constituted a fundamental

about 5 percent of slaves (two-thirds of them male) interviewed by the Federal Writers' Project recollected being taught to read under slavery, most often by sympathetic whites. (Other slaves, however, learned to read on their own or with the help of other blacks, in spite of the strenuous efforts of their owners to keep them illiterate.)

Slave children learned at an early age that they had to conform to the wishes of two sets of authorities—their parents and their owners—both of whom were involved in their upbringing. Such competing claims on their loyalty could be confusing. Evidence of the masters' authority was readily apparent in their dealings with adult slaves; children who saw their parents verbally or physically abused without resisting could not fail to draw the appropriate lesson about where real power lay. At the same time, parents struggled to provide their children with love and attention and passed on family lore as well as customs and values. With the help of friends and relatives, parents sang to their children, told them stories, exposed them to their version of Christianity, and brought them up to be extremely careful of what they said in front of whites. As children aged, they became increasingly aware of their unfree status, sometimes gradually through incremental discoveries, sometimes at once through a traumatic event—a whipping, a comment by a white playmate, sale of a loved one—that brought home the reality of their situation.

Although families provided slaves with a basic refuge from the horrors of slavery, this refuge was always insecure. Masters who preached the importance of family life subverted their own message by constantly interfering with their people's families: they sold, raped, and whipped, and even under the best of circumstances they insisted on their right, as paternalistic guardians, to direct the upbringing of children. Slaves struggled valiantly to lead "normal" lives, and in doing so they relied most heavily on their families, but their lack of power vis-à-vis their masters rendered those families extremely vulnerable. Although we have learned a great deal about the structure of slave families, we have learned much less about their inner dynamics—how slaves actually interacted with one another at home—and it is a mistake to assume, on the basis of widespread stereotypical assertions in slave narratives, that those families were always loving. Pointing to "overzealousness in revising earlier misconceptions concerning the compositions of the slave family and community," Ann Malone has recently warned against the current

scholarly tendency to see the slave family as "the cozy American family unit of mom, dad, and the kids."⁸ Her warning is pertinent. Slaves had their own households, in which they were husbands, wives, parents, children, friends, and lovers, but as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has forcefully argued in her recent book *Within the Plantation Household*, those same slaves were also members of their masters' households and could never totally escape their dependence on their masters. Slave families thus reflected simultaneously both the determined efforts of their members to achieve a measure of autonomy and the fragility of that autonomy.

IV

LIKE SLAVE FAMILIES, slave religion exhibited fragile autonomy and evolution over time. During most of the colonial period, white efforts to proselytize among blacks were sporadic, and first- or second-generation African-Americans were at best indifferent to the Christian message; the second half of the eighteenth century saw widespread conversion of blacks to Christianity, a process that accelerated in the religious revivals of the early nineteenth century; by the late antebellum period, evangelical Christianity had emerged throughout the South as a central feature of slave life. The slaves' exposure to Christianity was uneven: some lived in isolated areas without ready access to religious services; and others were subject to the arbitrary whim of masters who prevented them from attending church. But antebellum slaves increasingly experienced a number of overlapping—sometimes competing—religious influences, from paternalistic masters who prayed and read the Bible with their "people," from white religious denominations that mounted a "mission to the slaves," and from the "invisible church" that operated quasi-secretly among the slaves themselves. Most mid-nineteenth-century slaves, unlike their ancestors a century earlier, were devoutly Christian.

Like slave families, the "invisible church" possessed a number of distinctive features that reveal how blacks adapted white forms to their own needs. Slaves who assembled in the quarters, in open-air "hush arbors," and in space sometimes provided by white churches spurned the lectures they received elsewhere on obedience to authority as a central tenet of Christianity in favor of a religion of the oppressed that promised them deliverance from their earthly

survival mechanism, enabling the slaves to resist the kind of dehumanization that Elkins believed they underwent. Slaves may have owed their masters instantaneous and unquestioned obedience, but in the bosoms of their families they loved, laughed, quarreled, schemed, sang, and endured, much as free people did.

Slave families exhibited a number of features that differentiated them from prevailing norms among white Southerners and revealed the degree to which those families were created by the slaves themselves. Slaves used naming practices to solidify family ties threatened with rupture, naming children after fathers and grandfathers especially frequently because male relatives were more likely than female to be sold away. Although whites did not acknowledge (or often even know of) the practice, many slaves took surnames, for the sake of family unity as well as family dignity; as former slave Robert Smalls testified in 1863, although "among themselves they use their titles [surnames] . . . before their masters they do not speak of their titles at all."⁵

The slaves' marital standards differed in significant ways from those of their owners. Although slaves expected each other to be faithful in marriage, they did not put much stock in the prevailing Victorian notion of premarital sexual abstinence; sexual experimentation before marriage (not always with the ultimate spouse) was widespread and aroused little stigma among them. Unlike Southern planters, however, slaves strictly adhered to marital exogamy, shunning marriage with first cousins. As this practice indicates, living in nuclear families did not preclude the existence of extended kinship networks among slaves, who often exhibited impressive awareness of and attachments to more distant familial relations.

The role and status of women in slave families were also distinctive. Recent research has dispelled the once common stereotype of a prevalent slave "matriarchy," predicated on weak ties of affection between slave men and their families. Still, for at least two reasons, slave families were less male-dominated than free families typically were in the nineteenth century. First, slave men lacked the legal authority over their wives that free men possessed. When free women married, they lost a variety of rights, including the right to own and dispose of property, and became legally subordinated to their husbands. Because slave families lacked legal status, however, women who married were not automatically subjected to legal debasement; slave husbands had no more property rights than did their

owners, who maintained "equal or near equal status with their husbands."⁶ Second, slave women were more likely than their husbands to be "home." They ran away, were sold off, and were hired out less often than men; in marriages abroad, it was the husbands rather than the wives who typically traveled to visit their families on weekends. For these reasons, mother-headed households, although not the norm, were relatively common; Malone found that about one-third of the nuclear households in Louisiana were headed by a single parent, in the vast majority of cases the mother. In short, slave women provided basic continuity to families—and communities—faced with disruption.

Children growing up as slaves faced contradictory experiences that reveal both the importance and the fragility of family life under slavery. Young children often enjoyed substantially greater freedom than their elders. Although very large plantations sometimes had nurseries, most children received relatively little supervision; with their parents and older siblings at work, they spent much of their time playing among themselves—and often with local white children. "The first seven or eight years of the slave-boy's life are about as full of sweet content as those of the most favored and petted white children of the slaveholder," recalled Frederick Douglass, noting that "he literally runs wild." Douglass portrayed the "slave-boy" as "a spirited, joyous, uproarious, and happy boy, upon whom troubles fall only like water on a duck's back."⁷ Some black autobiographers and interviewees later remembered that as children they were literally unaware of being slaves. (The relative freedom afforded many slave children is one reason that the Federal Writers' Project interviews must be used with extreme caution in reconstructing the lives of adults; two-thirds of those interviewed were born after 1850 and were thus ten years old or younger at the outbreak of the Civil War.)

Still, children were hardly untouched by slavery. In a variety of ways, masters interfered extensively in their lives, bringing some to the "big house" to serve as domestics and assigning others "light" chores that became increasingly onerous until they were put to regular field work, usually between the ages of eight and twelve. Slave owners insisted on naming some slave children, against the wishes of (and sometimes competing with names awarded by) their parents, and exposed children to their version of Christianity. Slave owners also sometimes taught household "pets" how to read and write:

troubles. White ministers from staid denominations that appealed primarily to upper-class parishioners had special difficulty in attracting slaves: Presbyterian minister Charles C. Jones noted that when he lectured a group of slaves in Liberty County, Georgia, on the Christian virtue of obedience, "one half of my audience deliberately rose up and walked off with themselves, and those that remained looked anything but satisfied." Similarly, Harriet Jacobs recalled how when an Episcopal clergyman began holding separate services for blacks in Edenton, North Carolina, "his colored members were very few, and also very respectable"; soon after, displeased with the injunction that "if you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master," "the slaves left, and went to enjoy a Methodist shout." White Methodists and Baptists had far more success with the slaves than did Presbyterians and Episcopalians, but they, too, often found blacks teary of what they heard. "Dat ole white preacher jest was telling us slaves to be good to our masters," recalled former slave Cornelius Garner. "We ain't keer'd a bit 'bout dat stuff he was telling us 'cause we wanted to sing, pray, and serve God in our own way."⁹

The religious services of the slaves differed appreciably from those provided for them by whites. Accounts of Moses leading his people out of bondage replaced injunctions to obey authority. Although self-called black preachers, often illiterate and almost always ignorant of the fine points of theology, stressed the importance of virtuous behavior, they ignored the traditional Protestant emphasis on human depravity; the slaves' Christianity was a religion of the heart in which they could lose themselves in ecstatic joy, their God a redeemer and friend with whom they could communicate on a personal basis. A high level of emotional fervor characterized Southern evangelical Protestantism, whether white or black, but black Baptists and Methodists took this "enthusiasm" to a level that often shocked white observers—especially those of "genteel" backgrounds, whose religious behavior was likely to be more restrained—and denied white Christianity as stuffy and bloodless. Presbyterian minister R. Q. Mallard opined that a black revival meeting he witnessed in 1859 lacked any true religion, for it consisted of "one loud monotonous strain, interrupted by . . . groans and screams and clapping of hands," but many slaves believed their masters lacked true religious feelings: "You see," one explained later,

region needs a little motion—specially if you gwine feel de spirit."¹⁰

Despite the distinctive features of the black Christianity that emerged in the slave quarters, that Christianity was marked by pervasive white influence and indeed was itself a sign of the degree to which the masters impinged on the lives of their slaves. Differences between black and white religious practices were significant because those differences reveal the slaves as subjects whose behavior helped shape their own lives rather than merely as passive victims of white action, but from a broad view those differences must be regarded as relatively minor. Not only did the slaves adopt the general religion of their masters—Christianity—but they also adhered to the same specific (usually Protestant) denominations. Antebellum Southern blacks were, like antebellum Southern whites, most often Baptists and Methodists, with much smaller numbers of Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Catholics, and members of other sects. There were differences between black and white Baptists and between black and white Methodists, but there were also differences between black Baptists and black Methodists, or for that matter between white Baptists and white Presbyterians. American Christianity constituted an amorphous and highly heterogeneous religion, within which slaves found it easy to develop their own variants while remaining part of the mainstream.

Equally important, the shared religious heritage of white and black Southerners provided important bases of contact between them. Much of this contact occurred within the confines of slave-owner paternalism, as masters increasingly embraced the "mission to the slaves." Much of it, however, transcended the master-slave relationship and thrust blacks and whites together as believers in an environment that at least temporarily subverted consciousness of class and race. If the religious exposure of some slaves consisted primarily of slave owners reading the Bible to them, praying with them, and arranging for special services where they heard of Christian duty to obey their masters, that of others included attending interracial revival meetings as well as services that exhibited a high level of Christian fellowship. Several recent historians have emphasized the degree to which many white and black Southerners shared not just similar religious views but common religious experiences. "[T]he normative worship experience of blacks in the antebellum

South was in a biracial church," suggested John B. Botes: although slaves usually sat in segregated slave galleries, "black and white co-worshippers heard the same sermons, were baptized and took communion together, and upon death were buried in the same cemeteries."¹¹

Whether slaves worshipped separately or with whites, historians have recently been so impressed by the force of slave religion that they have may well have exaggerated its universality and slighted some of its contradictory implications. Many slaves lacked access to regular religious services, either because they lived in remote areas or because they had owners who regarded their religious aspirations with distaste. Bennet H. Barrow's plantation diary (1836-46), for example, is filled with expressions of disgust at the religious enthusiasm of both whites and blacks; he frequently forbade his slaves to attend nearby religious meetings, and when sixteen slaves temporarily ran away from a neighboring plantation he blamed the flight on their owners: "having them preached to for 4 or 5 years past," an action that constituted the "greatest piece of foolishness any one [was] ever guilty of." Other slaves were simply uninterested in religion, and, in the words of slave autobiographer Henry Bibb, "resorted to the woods in large numbers on [Sundays] to gamble, fight, get drunk, and break the Sabbath." Although Bibb expressed typical nineteenth-century outrage at such desecration of the Sabbath, many slaves eagerly looked forward to their day "off" as a time to work on their garden plots, spend time with their families, and simply relax.¹²

Christianity had to compete for the slaves' time and attention not only with secular concerns but also with a host of pre-Christian beliefs and practices that persisted even among ardent Baptists and Methodists. Slaves commonly resorted to potions, concoctions, charms, and rituals to ward off evil, cure sickness, harm enemies, and produce amorous behavior. Delfie Lewis, interviewed in the 1930s for the Federal Writers' Project, described some of the magic tricks she had learned from her midwife grandmother, tricks that included both folk remedies such as prescribing cloves and whiskey to ease the pain of childbirth and magic rituals such as putting a fresh egg at the door of a sick person to prevent anyone from entering the room. "If you is anxious fo' yo' sweetheart to come back f'um a trip," she added, "put a pin in de groun' wid de point up an' den

put a pig on de point. When all de insides runs outen de aig yo' sweetheart will return."¹³

Although educated whites derided such "superstition" and slave autobiographers seeking to appeal to "enlightened" nineteenth-century sensibilities wrote of it with extreme embarrassment, magic, conjuring, and folk medicine continued to exercise a powerful hold over most antebellum slaves—at the same time that those slaves also considered themselves practicing Christians. Indeed, it was not uncommon for slaves to develop practices that fused Christian and non-Christian elements, as in the method described by autobiographer Jacob Stroyer of watching how a Bible turned when hung by a string to determine whether an accused person was guilty of stealing. One reason slaves were so easily able to combine belief in Christianity with belief in conjurers, witches, and spirits is that many apparently saw little difference between the two; noting that his father was a root doctor who could cure the sick, George White explained that he, too, knew "all de roots" and could "cure most anything," but he added that "you have got to talk wid God an' ask him to help out."¹⁴

The particular combination of Christian and pre-Christian religion that coexisted in the slave quarters originated, of course, in the contact and interaction of African and European cultures and was one component of the new, African-American culture that resulted from the enslavement of blacks in America. This combination bore striking resemblance, however, to the mixture of Christian and pre-Christian beliefs embraced by many of the European immigrants to America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when, as historians such as Jon Butler have recently stressed, adherence to Christian theology constituted a thin veneer beneath which flourished widespread belief in magic and the occult. The similarity between the pre-modern worldviews held by whites and blacks in the South facilitated the continuing interaction between them in the antebellum period, in both Christian and non-Christian manifestations. It was by no means unknown for lower-class whites to consult black conjurers.

Slave magic and slave Christianity coexisted, but appropriated different spheres. Magic was most often directed at a concrete and immediate goal: to cure an illness, punish a rival suitor, prevent an overseer from applying the lash. Christianity was inevitably more

and jubilees," remarked ex-slave Abraham Chambers in a typical recollection. "Some clap and some play de fiddle, and, man, dey danced most all night."¹⁵ Christmas, harvesttime, corn shucking, and hog killing provided occasions for celebrations that slaves eagerly anticipated and long remembered.

Away from the immediate control of white authorities, slaves developed their own traditions and customs that reflected shared values. Forged out of varying combinations of African and European cultural practices, these customs differed over time and space. In southern Louisiana, voodoo, a syncretic, highly ritualized religion based on African beliefs fused with elements of French Catholicism, flourished, but it was unknown in most of the South; in the low country of South Carolina and Georgia, Gullah, reinforced by geographic isolation and a huge slave majority, fostered a distinctive slave culture; for, as historian Charles Joyner has pointed out, "speech communities, to an even greater extent than political communities, imply a shared culture and world view."¹⁷

Nevertheless, common experiences—and the domestic slave trade—shaped a shared cultural mainstream in much of the slave South. Slaves dressed up for church on Sundays, favoring bright colors to distinguish their appearance from the normal workaday attire. They sang spirituals and work songs, often using an antiphonal, call-and-response pattern of African origin. They told stories that, like folktales elsewhere, were filled with ghosts, spirits, talking animals, and didactic lessons for the young. They put great emphasis on proper wedding and funeral ceremonies, which, as in traditional peasant cultures, provided occasions for marking key points of transition in the human experience and assumed enormous symbolic importance. In many of these ways, the slaves approached a kind of peasant autonomy, developing their own folkways even while under conditions of severe economic and political dependence.

It is important, however, to keep in mind the limitations to this slave autonomy. What is at issue is not whether slaves developed their own customs and cultural activities but the nature of those customs and activities: the degree to which they were able to operate free from white influence and the degree to which they indicated communal values and behavior. Because historians for many years paid little attention to the slaves' internal lives, accentuating the strength of the "slave community" served as a much needed historical corrective in the 1970s and 1980s. In their efforts to dispel

the stereotype of slave passivity, however, many scholars lurched to the other extreme, lacing their writings with an evocative language of celebration in which terms like "community," "culture," "kinship ties," "solidarity," and "human dignity" replaced those suggesting victimization, and presenting such a felicitous portrait of life in the quarters that slavery itself seemed to fade into the background. "To understand the nature of education in the slave quarter community is to come to grips with the paradox of the 'free slave,' . . ." wrote historian Thomas L. Webber in 1978. "By passing their unique set of cultural themes from generation to generation, the members of the quarter community were able to resist most of white teaching, set themselves apart from white society, and mold their own cultural norms and group identity. While still legally slaves, the black men, women, and children of the quarter community successfully protected their psychological freedom and celebrated their human dignity."¹⁸ I believe that an even-handed appraisal must not only incorporate the important revisionist work of the past two decades but also come to grips with the insecurity of slave life, the limits to slave autonomy, and the particular character that "community" assumed among the slaves. These stemmed both from the inherent realities of slavery in general and from the specific characteristics of Southern slavery in particular.

The nature of slave life in the South changed significantly over two and a half centuries. Some of the most emphasized communal features of that life—for example, the central role of slave Christianity—developed relatively late and were dominant characteristics only during the last years of the slave regime. Others—most notably African cultural influences—were strongest early, when the arrival of new slaves from Africa perpetuated knowledge of traditional ways, but gradually weakened in most of the South among slaves who were second-, third-, and fourth-generation Americans. By ignoring these changes over time, telescoping the slave past can distort the reality of slave life at any specific moment and suggest the existence of a generalized communal culture whose constituent parts did not always coexist.

A comparative perspective makes clear some of the particular limitations to both slave autonomy and slave communality in the antebellum South. Some of these limitations were demographic. The relatively small size of most Southern holdings, together with the high population ratio of whites to blacks, meant that most South-

abstract, more long-term in orientation: the rewards it promised were not in this world but in the next. As such, it exercised diverse and contradictory influences. It provided enormous comfort to an oppressed people, but in doing so it offered them an escape that could temper their real-world response to oppression. Why struggle to improve conditions in this world when the virtuous would receive everlasting happiness in the next?

Although slave owners had long disagreed over the likely impact of Christianity on their slaves, by the late antebellum years the vast majority had concluded that religion would make them more docile and obedient rather than more troublesome. Although the evidence is mixed, they may well have been correct. At times, Christianity could produce the fervor of a Nat Turner determined to wreak vengeance on the wicked. It could also create a culture of collaboration, one that emphasized rendering unto Caesar what was Caesar's. More often than either of these, however, it appears to have fostered in the slaves both a sense of short-term resignation and fatalism and a belief in eventual freedom. Under existing conditions, deliverance was something to be prayed for and awaited, not worked for and created. Under different conditions, however, that deliverance could certainly be helped along.

V

THE SLAVE COMMUNITY has become one of the central—albeit least well defined—concerns of recent historians of slavery. Eager to rebut images of slave passivity and docility, many of these historians have elevated the slave community to an all-embracing agency that gave order to the slaves' lives, expressed their deepest aspirations, and prevented their complete victimization. In the process, they have offered a real corrective to previous, one-sided interpretations that treated slaves largely as objects of white action rather than as subjects in their own right. At the same time, however, they have often reified "slave community," a slippery and emotionally laden term unused in antebellum years and used with varying (often unspecified) meanings today; "as the word is currently used. . . ." Clarence E. Walker has recently suggested, "[community] is a romantic construct that obscures more than it reveals."¹⁵ They have also come dangerously close to replacing a mythical world in which slaves were

objects of total control with an equally mythical world in which slaves were hardly slaves at all.

Any evaluation of the problem of "community" must come to grips with two partially distinct but interrelated questions, those of autonomy and communality. The first of these involves the degree to which the slaves were able to secure control of their own lives, while the second involves the degree to which, in doing so, they acted on the basis of mutuality and collective interests. Resolving these questions is difficult, because levels of slave autonomy and communality were by no means synonymous (substantial autonomy did not necessarily imply substantial communality), because neither was constant over time or space, and because behavior, sharply limited by physical constraints, was closely linked to but never entirely a function of thought. The historian needs to distinguish between the elusive bundle of mental processes that represented the way slaves thought—"consciousness," "worldview," "ideology," "mentality"—and the behavioral patterns that represented the way they acted.

As the existence of slave families and slave religion indicates, large numbers of slaves throughout the antebellum South were able to forge ties other than the master-slave relationship that was central to slavery, in the process creating social and cultural formations that were essentially peripheral to that relationship even though they operated within its overall context. For the majority of slaves who lived on or near plantations, it was the slave quarters that provided the setting and the opportunity for leading lives partially free from white supervision. Composed of cabins grouped together to form a slave "village," the quarters was typically set a considerable distance from the master's "big house," to shield planter families from the intrusive presence of a large slave population. This isolation of the quarters, although primarily for the convenience of the masters, provided an important measure of privacy to the slaves, affording them a real if insecure refuge from the outside world.

Within the quarters, slaves engaged in a myriad of "leisure" activities that belied their condition as human property. When the master's work was done, they ate, sang, prayed, played, talked, quarreled, made love, hunted, fished, named babies, cleaned house, tended their garden plots, and rested. They strove to fill their lives with pleasurable activities that would enable them to transcend their status as slaves. "Whooppe, didn' us have good Sa'd'd'y night frolics

ern slaves came in contact with whites far more often than did those in Jamaica or Saint Domingue. Reinforcing these demographic realities was the paternalistic meddling of resident masters who, as we have seen, strove to order virtually every element of their slaves' lives. Southern slaves persistently endeavored to augment their social autonomy, taking advantage of every opportunity provided them to manage their own affairs in their own ways, but in their efforts to maximize their day-to-day independence they faced unusually severe limitations, even for slaves. Slaves in Saint Domingue and Jamaica lived in a world that was overwhelmingly black, a world in which European planters felt intensely uncomfortable and from which they frequently retreated; serfs in Russia lived in a world that was even more overwhelmingly peasant, one alien to and usually avoided by their noble masters. Southern slaves, by contrast, lived in, and had to adjust to, the world of their masters.

The slaves' status as societal outsiders impeded their ability to care for themselves the kind of autonomy typically enjoyed by dependent peasants. Even where the dependence of such peasants was most extreme—as in Russia, where serfs were in many ways indistinguishable from slaves—peasants were typically regarded as constituting the lowest element of society, and enjoyed certain clearly delineated rights (either by law or custom), including the right to marry, hold land, and form communal organizations. Students of peasant life in diverse areas of the world have recently emphasized "community" as an organizing principle of rural life. Communities had geographic, economic, and political bases; they were marked by intense attachment to place, a corresponding distrust of outsiders, a sense of collective interests (often centered on property rights), and the formation of institutions designed to protect those interests. Above all, a village community was composed geographically, by people living in one locality and having a sense of a shared past and mutual responsibility. "To belong to a rural community," sociologist Victor V. Magagna has stated, "was to belong to a specific place with a particular history."¹⁹

Slaves, by contrast, generally lacked the economic and institutional bases for "community," as well as the local attachments that accompanied them. They did not constitute the bottom level of society so much as outsiders to it; that society provided no formal recognition of what tradition sanctified as theirs by right. It is for this reason that historian James Oakes insists that slavery was "a

qualitatively distinct form of subordination" that left its victims far less control over their lives than other forms of unfree and quasi-free labor.²⁰ In short, slaves did not really form communities in the sense that peasants did. As I will suggest in section VII, however, they did develop a common identification that substituted for—and has often been confused with—a sense of community.

If slaves in general were unable to achieve the kind of folk autonomy typically enjoyed by dependent peasants, *American* slaves faced obstacles that in important respects made their struggle for independence especially difficult. In much of the Caribbean, and to a lesser extent in Brazil, slaves approached a "proto-peasant" status based on a substantial degree of economic independence. Assigned "provision grounds" in much the same way that Russian serfs were allotted land, slaves cultivated their "own" land, providing their own sustenance and selling the surplus in flourishing local markets; in the process, they acquired their "own" property as well as a strong sense of their rights and privileges. Southern slave owners, however, rarely allowed their slaves this kind of economic independence. Historians such as Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan have recently explored the development of an internal slave economy in the South, noting the widespread existence of garden plots—which slaves came to regard as theirs by right—as well as the buying, selling, and bartering by slaves that ensued. But the internal economy faced severe limitations in the antebellum South, where, as we have seen, slave owners assiduously strove to keep their people in a state of complete dependence. Commercial activity on the part of slaves was most highly developed in the low country of South Carolina and Georgia, where the task system and widespread owner absenteeism created particularly favorable conditions, but even there it was on a modest scale by Caribbean standards. In most of the South, although masters often allowed their slaves to have garden plots, those masters usually kept control of slave provision, took pains to limit garden plots to at best a supplementary role, and imposed severe restrictions on any commercial activity on the part of the slaves.

Economic dependence did not, of course, totally preclude the development of social and cultural autonomy among the slaves; even under the most adverse of circumstances, slaves strove in countless small ways to wrest as much control of their lives from their masters as they could. The conditions under which they lived, however,

subjected them to unusually pervasive outside influence as paternalistic masters strove to control their every action. Those conditions also impeded collective action on their part and fostered an ethos in which individuals struggled to find their niche and make the best of a bad situation.

Slave folktales offer suggestive if sometimes elusive clues to the consciousness of the quarters. Through stories of talking animals, ghosts, and magic as well as those offering semi-realistic depictions of plantation relations, slaves entertained one another, expressed fears and longings, and presented their children with didactic lessons on how to get along in a dog-eat-dog world. A number of scholarly debates have swirled over the origins, transcription, and interpretation of these tales, but researchers have properly seen their very existence as strong evidence of autonomous slave behavior and consciousness. Animal trickster tales, in which small but smart animals typically outsmart those that are large and dumb, as well as stories centered on persistent rivalry between "Old Master" and his slave John or Jack, provided only thinly disguised reference to surrounding social relations and enabled the slaves to poke vicarious fun at their masters, themselves, and the world in which they lived.

But in addition to pointing to slave autonomy, those tales also offer revealing hints concerning the slaves' mentality and suggest the limits to their communal consciousness. Notably absent from Southern slave folklore are stories depicting heroic behavior—stories of dragon slayers, popular liberators, or people who sacrificed themselves for the good of the whole. Rather, the dominant themes are trickery, subterfuge, and securing as much as possible of a desired item (often food) for oneself. Justice, fair play, and compassion for one's rivals rarely emerge as desirable characteristics. In short, surviving in a heartless world assumes overriding importance; as historian Michael Flusche perceptively argued, "The recurring themes of these stories suggest that slavery tended to engender an atomistic, individualistic world view among the slaves and that the slaves' sense of community was more complicated than simple unity in the face of white oppression."²¹

The existence of antisocial behavior in slave folktales should not be surprising; such behavior is present in the folktales of many peoples and does not necessarily indicate an acceptance of antisocial values. (The slaves' Christianity did emphasize idealism and heroic figures such as Moses.) The highly competitive and aggressive be-

havior featured in so many slave stories, however, should serve to alert us to a notable fact: the grubby reality of day-to-day social relations in the quarters—with all the conflicts and jealousies that inevitably exist in human relations even under the best of circumstances—has been almost totally unexplored by historians interested in demonstrating the vitality of the slave community. Slaves struggled against overwhelming odds to build decent lives for themselves and took pleasure when they could in their friends and families. They were also human beings, however, and exhibited the full panoply of human failings, including their share of theft, violence, jealousy, deceit, wife beating, and child abuse. Slaves successfully resisted being turned into docile, obedient creatures of their masters' will; they did not turn the "slave community" into utopia.

V I

AN EXAMINATION of the ways in which Southern slaves resisted their thralldom and struggled to improve their condition helps clarify the nature of their social outlook as well as their social relations. Conducting such an examination is tricky, because it must rely heavily on behavior—frequently reconstructed on the basis of fragmentary evidence—to explore thought, while at the same time avoiding the tendency to inflate every minor expression of pique into a sign of covert revolutionary activity. Perhaps in part for this reason, there has been remarkably little good historical work done on the resistance of Southern slaves. Nevertheless, because the very act of resisting authority involved expressing sentiments that were normally unvoiced, that resistance—its forms and frequency as well as its character and consequences—can provide revealing insights into the worldview of the slaves.

Concrete political realities (that is, power relationships) shaped the specific patterns of resistance in the slave South. The high ratio of whites to blacks, the relatively small size and dispersed nature of slaveholdings, the presence of well-armed resident masters who took an active interest in local affairs, and—with the important exceptions of the War for Independence and the Civil War—the region's political stability combined to create conditions that were extremely unfavorable for armed rebellion. It is hardly surprising,

a boat to Philadelphia, all the time worrying that the considerable contrast between his friend's description and his own appearance would lead to his detection. Henry Box-Brown had himself shipped in a crate from Richmond to Philadelphia. Some runaways received food and shelter from sympathetic blacks and whites—the fabled "Underground Railroad"—on their trek to freedom, and others were fortunate enough to have the guidance of a "conductor" such as Harriet Tubman, who, following her own escape from bondage, returned repeatedly to Maryland's Eastern Shore to shepherd others to freedom.

Most fugitives to the North, however, made the journey alone, on foot, traveling by night and resting by day and taking care to avoid blacks as well as whites because, as William Wells Brown later put it, "twenty-one years in slavery had taught me that there were traitors even among colored people."²³ Perhaps one thousand runaways per year managed to reach the North during the late antebellum years, the great majority young males from the upper-South states of Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, and Missouri; many more attempted the feat but suffered capture (and return home) in the process. Despite conditions that rendered escape to the North extraordinarily difficult, tens of thousands of slaves showed their hatred of slavery by "voicing with their feet" for freedom.

An even larger number of fugitives remained in the South. As in the colonial period, most runaway slaves hid out within a few miles of their homes. A few managed to elude capture for prolonged periods, either on their own—by holing up in caves and other rural retreats or by making their way to cities and merging with the free black population—or in groups of escaped slaves known as maroons that found refuge on the frontier and in unsettled internal areas such as the Great Dismal Swamp along the border between Virginia and North Carolina. But long-term survival on the loose was relatively rare in the antebellum South: the increasing density of settlement, improved communication, and the local hegemony of resident masters facilitated the capture of fugitives, and maroon colonies in the South never rivaled those in Brazil, Surinam, or Jamaica in numbers, size, or durability.

The vast majority of fugitives were temporary runaways. Most large plantations and many smaller holdings as well suffered from persistent truancy, as dissatisfied slaves "cook off," lurking in the

woods, visiting friends and relatives, or sometimes concealing themselves in outbuildings on their owners' plantations. Some such vagrants returned home on their own, tired and hungry, after a few days of uneasy freedom; others were eventually tracked down by irritated masters and overseers or turned in by loyal slaves hoping for a reward; still others proved more elusive. "I am sorry to hear of your having so many runaways from the plantation," wrote a member of a prominent South Carolina planting family to his brother, describing his own unsuccessful attempt, accompanied by "a parcel of overseers and professional negro hunters with nine dogs," to find fugitives who were hiding out in an area "known to be safe and unmolested refuge for runaways." Advising his brother to use dogs to track down his truants, the letter writer warned that "the utmost secrecy and caution should be observed, as it is extremely difficult to prevent the runaways from being informed of a search after them being in preparation."²⁴

Slave owners complained vociferously about the "thoughtlessness" and "ingratitude" of truants, but many masters and overseers took temporary flight as a virtual given, a routine annoyance that went with the job of slave manager and underlined the need for constant vigilance. Slave owners rarely bothered to advertise for slaves thought to be in the vicinity (the way they did for those headed North), or to hire slave catchers to track them down. Although slaves who repeatedly absconded and those whose prolonged absence caused their masters unusual aggravation and expense could expect to be severely punished, runaways who returned home quickly on their own sometimes received little more than verbal harangues or "light" whippings.

More threatening, although less common, was a second form of intermediate resistance, through which slaves directly confronted masters and their assistants by force. Slave owners, embarrassed by such blatant challenge to their authority, rarely described these confrontations in detail, and their precise frequency is impossible to gauge. Nevertheless, ex-slave interviews and autobiographies, as well as judicial records and oblique references in planter journals, point to a surprisingly widespread pattern of small-scale confrontations in which slaves offered physical resistance to owners, overseers, and hirers. At times, such resistance resulted in the death of the assaulted white authority, but murder was rarely the goal of these

then, that American slaves engaged in few such rebellions, and that those few were by international standards small and easily suppressed. Some of the most noted "conspiracies," including those led by Gabriel Prosser in Virginia in 1800 and by Denmark Vesey in South Carolina in 1822, were nipped in the bud before any outbreak of violence by a combination of white vigilance and black informers; others, such as that in New York City in 1741, may have existed only in the minds of panicked whites.

The handful of insurrections that actually came off were invariably local outbreaks that were quickly crushed with a minimum of armed force; none lasted more than a couple of days, threatened more than local havoc, or overcame the repressive efforts of local authorities. These revolts included the Stono rebellion of 1739, in which several dozen slaves near Charleston killed a number of whites but were routed the same day by armed planters; a larger but more obscure effort in 1811 in which some two hundred slaves tried to march on New Orleans before meeting the same fate; and, most famous of all, the Turner insurrection of 1831, which for two days produced panic—and fifty-nine deaths—among whites of Southampton County, Virginia, before local residents succeeded in capturing or killing most of the seventy-odd rebels. (Their charismatic leader, Nat Turner, managed to hide out in the woods eluding his pursuers for more than two months before being seized, tried, and hanged.)

Although these and other outbreaks sowed fear in the hearts of slaveholders and served as sources of inspiration for slaves (and generations of their descendants), they never came close to threatening the security of the slave regime. Nothing in the South remotely resembled the Haitian insurrection in which the slaves took advantage of the French Revolution to wage a triumphant revolutionary war of their own, or the massive "peasant wars" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in which hundreds of thousands of Russian serfs joined other downtrodden peasants, cossacks, and town dwellers in protracted although ultimately unsuccessful assaults on established authority. In contrast to Russia and Haiti (and, to a lesser extent, much of the Caribbean and Brazil), the South had a balance of forces that was profoundly inhospitable to massive collective resistance. The waves of repression that followed each insurrection, conspiracy, and rumored conspiracy simply reinforced what was obvious to most slaves: under existing conditions, armed revolt was folly.

Absence of massive rebellion, however, hardly indicated passive acceptance of slavery. In a wide variety of ways, slaves expressed their dissatisfaction with the conditions they were forced to endure. Most common, but also most difficult to isolate, was a collection of acts that historians have labeled "silent sabotage" or "day-to-day resistance," acts through which slaves, without threatening the security of the slave regime, caused considerable aggravation to individual slave owners. Throughout the South, slaves dragged their feet, pretended to misunderstand orders, feigned illness, "accidentally" broke agricultural implements, and stole covered items (especially food) from their owners, viewing such appropriation as "taking" what rightfully belonged to them. In noting that the slaves commonly adhered to "the agrarian notion . . . that the result of labour belongs of right to the labourer," Frederick Law Olmsted drew attention to a fact widely recognized by slaves and slave owners alike; as former slave Charles Ball put it, "I was never acquainted with a slave who believed, that he violated any rule of morality by appropriating to himself any thing that belonged to his master, if it was necessary to his comfort."²²

Silent sabotage had ambiguous implications. It provided an accessible outlet through which slaves could express their frustrations with relatively little risk, but it also served to foster patterns of behavior that accentuated dissembling and shirking, and to reinforce among whites the notion that blacks were by nature lazy, foolish, and thieving. A pervasive irritant to masters, it represented a borderline form of resistance that did not directly challenge authority and that merged imperceptibly with the impulse common among slaves and non-slaves alike to get away with something.

Far more clear-cut were two intermediate forms of resistance that, unlike rebellion, occurred with great frequency and, unlike silent sabotage, represented direct challenges to slave owners and their employees. Of these, running away was by far the most common. In the antebellum period, unlike the colonial, the existence of free states to the north served as a powerful magnet to those who dreamed of escaping bondage. Reaching the North could be a task of almost herculean proportions requiring endurance, evasion of slave catchers, and deception of suspicious whites. Fugitives resorted to a variety of imaginative devices to achieve their goals. Frederick Douglass borrowed the identification papers of a free black sailor and took a train from Baltimore to Wilmington, Delaware, and then

slaves who assaulted white authorities; slaves occasionally conspired either individually or with comrades, to do away with hated whites—poison, arson, and "accidents" were the preferred methods—but the far more numerous direct confrontations were usually opportunistic encounters involving less planning than impulsive response to intolerable provocation. Confrontations were often followed by flight as resisters, pondering the likely consequences of their actions, opted to give their enraged targets a chance to cool off.

Although slave confrontations had numerous scenarios, they typically occurred when bondsmen, and less often bondswomen, felt that they were being pushed too far and determined to resist. In Alabama, a slave named Abram claimed to be sick and "moved off slowly" when ordered to work by the overseer, who for good measure gave him a lash with his whip; the enraged Abram grabbed the whip and a gun from the overseer, knocked him to the ground, bit off a piece of his ear, and in turn received a knife wound as they struggled. Virginian William Lee got tired of the beatings he suffered from his mistress, who would hold his head between her knees and "whack away" on his back, so he grabbed her legs and "bodily carried ole missus out an' thro' her on de ground jes' as hard as I could." Frederick Douglass, hired for a year to an abusive "slave breaker" named Edward Covey, suffered mistreatment in silence for six months before finally refusing to submit to more and resisting when Covey attempted to whip him; the two men struggled with each other for a prolonged period before Douglass's adversary "gave up the contest." Although Covey chided the recalcitrant slave, proclaiming, "I would not have whipped you half so much as I have had you not resisted," Douglass noted in his autobiography that "the fact was, *he had not whipped me at all.*"²⁵

If it is impossible to determine exactly how often slaves took part in the kind of confrontation with which Douglass challenged Covey, it is clear that such action, together with the flight in which Douglass also engaged, represented by far the most characteristic, and significant, forms of direct slave protest. Indeed, these two forms of resistance occurred so often, and with such consistency, that they may be regarded as pervasive features of antebellum slavery, features that clearly give the lie to assertions of general slave contentment. They also provide significant clues to understanding the worldview as well as the world of the bondspople.

VII

LIKE SLAVE FOLKLORE, slave resistance can tell us much about autonomy and communality in the antebellum South. One of the most striking characteristics of that resistance—aside from its very existence—is that it was largely the work of individuals. If collective forms of resistance such as rebellion and marronage were minor features of Southern society, the types of resistance that *were* widespread featured slaves who acted alone or in very small groups rather than as communal representatives. Slaves learned by experience that such individual resistance—although by no means risk-free—had the greatest chance of success.

This was true of both confrontations and flight. Physical confrontation initiated by a large group of slaves was indistinguishable from revolt in the eyes of most slave owners, and invariably called forth swift and merciless response. Slaves who challenged a group of whites also faced almost certain repression, because the nature of the conflict transformed it from a struggle between two individuals into an affront to the honor of those challenged; however they might respond in private, masters could not tolerate public assaults on their authority. Slaves who ran away found that they could travel most safely in a white-dominated world either alone or in pairs; larger groups of fugitives inevitably risked attracting attention and lost mobility. In short, the particular conditions under which Southern slaves lived permitted a significant degree of individual resistance but severely discouraged collective protest.

This should not be taken to imply an absence of cooperation among slaves resisting authority. Slaves joined together to pilfer their masters' larders, as well as, less often, to burn their barns and poison their food. Despite the existence of slave informers, many bondspople protected those accused of criminal behavior if that behavior was directed at whites rather than at other slaves, and slave owners trying to identify the perpetrators of vandalism or theft often ran into a wall of silence when they questioned their people. Fugitives rightly feared being betrayed by slaves seeking to curry favor with authorities, but some runaways received food, shelter, and guidance from sympathetic blacks, both slave and free; Harriet Jacobs hid for seven years in the attic of her grandmother, a respected free black woman who kept her secret and eventually helped her escape to the North.

But although there was extensive cooperation among slaves resisting authority, this cooperation was almost always that of individuals. Slaves lacked any kind of institutional body like the Russian peasant commune, which represented a whole village or estate and made decisions on behalf of all peasants. Decisions to flee or confront authorities were not reached communally, through collective deliberation, but individually, through private deliberation; indeed, slaves planning to escape usually took care not to inform others and thus risk their chance at freedom. Although occasionally a large group of slaves, unexpectedly caught by a slave patrol in a forbidden nighttime revelry, might put up spirited if futile resistance, virtually never in the antebellum South did all the slaves on a plantation decide collectively to go on strike or run away, as serfs often did in Russia. The pattern of slave resistance in the antebellum South thus points to a complex environment that permitted extensive cooperation among slaves but at the same time severely limited the kinds of communal behavior that were possible.

Examining when and why slaves resisted yields equally significant observations. The trigger for slave flight and confrontations almost always consisted of a violation by white authorities of commonly accepted standards of behavior. No matter how much they detested slavery, the balance of forces—and the need to get on with their lives, even under harsh conditions—prevented slaves from engaging in constant struggle against it; resistance was by no means random, or constant across time and space. Certain actions by slave owners and their agents, however, were clearly intolerable. These included most notably excessive or unjustified punishment—that is, punishment that exceeded “normal” parameters or that was meted out for misdeeds not actually committed—but also a host of other breaches of civilized treatment, including separation of family members, sexual assaults, and arbitrary or erratic management. The death of an owner was also a particularly stressful time for slaves, because no one could be sure what would follow; estates were often broken up to pay off debts or satisfy claims of heirs; and at the very least the slaves would have to adjust to a new owner, who would want to establish his or her own authority and would be likely to have new ideas of how things should be done. It is not surprising, then, that such death occasioned heightened concern on the part of slaves, concern that could manifest itself in real (if ambivalent) grief as well as flight and resistance to new rules and regulations.

Although there were variations in the circumstances surrounding decisions to run away or confront whites—confrontations and temporary flight were frequently impulsive acts, immediate responses to unacceptable behavior, whereas flight to the North more often came after considerable thought and even preparation—these decisions almost always rested on specific grievances that triggered the determination to act. In their autobiographies, fugitive slaves typically combined assertion of what Henry Bibb called “a longing desire to be free” with reference to some catalyst, most often involving punishment, that caused them to act on that desire; Bibb decided to flee in 1835, when his Kentucky mistress began abusing him physically, “every day flogging me, boxing, pulling my ears, and scolding.” As this example suggests, abuse of a slave accustomed to relatively lenient treatment was especially likely to provoke resistance. Frederick Douglass found his Covey’s abuse especially hard to take because he had been used to the privileged life of a house servant in Baltimore; Isaac Throgmorton, sold to Louisiana after enjoying considerable freedom as a barber in Kentucky, found “all the privileges were taken from me” and decided to escape to the North.²⁶ But virtually any substantial change was unsettling and therefore conducive to resistance, both because it threatened established procedures and because it reminded slaves that those procedures were by no means immutable.

In short, although a general hatred of slavery and yearning for freedom underlay slave resistance, particular circumstances provoked individual decisions to resist. Despite their bitter detestation of bondage, on a day-to-day level most slaves came to terms with their conditions—because they had little choice—striving all the while to maximize their autonomy and preserve as “rights” the little privileges they were allowed to enjoy. When those rights were violated, however, slaves were likely to respond. Their resistance thus points both to a shared if never precisely defined understanding of what was acceptable and what was unacceptable within the general framework of a hated system, and to a conservative mentality under which slaves for the most part grudgingly made their peace with an oppressive reality but, when pushed too far, resisted behavior that violated that understanding.

If most slave resistance represented specific responses by individuals to intolerable situations rather than revolutionary efforts to overthrow the system, the consequences were nevertheless often

far-reaching. Unlike armed revolt, which invariably called forth severe repression, flight and confrontation produced highly variable—indeed, unpredictable—results. Slaves who struck whites or ran away too often could find themselves brutally whipped, sold down the river, or even killed, and most could expect to receive at least some physical punishment for their insolence. Many, however, were decidedly more fortunate. Some fugitives reached the North, and others remained on the loose for protracted periods in the South. Still others, together with slaves who confronted white authorities, gained ameliorated treatment for themselves even under slavery. Every slave owner, overseer, and hiree had to consider, on a daily basis, how individual slaves would respond to specific treatment and whether a particular action—a whipping or a new rule—was worth the risk of the response it might provoke. Slaves who gained a reputation for standing up to authority often gained a measure of respect and tolerance from white authorities and secured for themselves greater freedom of action.

This was true both of “ungovernable” slaves—the proverbial “bad niggers” who made it clear that they would not let anyone touch them without trouble—and of those who lashed out at or ran away from tormentors after meekly submitting to their oppression. It was common knowledge among both whites and blacks that there were a few slaves who were so “mean” that it was not worth messing with them; although whites sometimes made special efforts to “tame” such recalcitrants, many masters and overseers decided that discretion was the better part of valor and gave free rein to those who did not make too much trouble. But as Frederick Douglass and numerous other slaves showed, under the right circumstances previously tractable slaves could also prove remarkably resistant; what is more, their resistance could have equally beneficial results. During the six months that Douglass remained with Covey after their fight, Covey never again tried to whip him. Douglass drew the appropriate lesson, generalizing that “he is whipped oftenest, who is whipped easiest.”¹²⁷

By standing up to and running away from their masters, then, individual slaves helped set limits to their own oppression. They also helped set limits to the oppression of their fellow slaves, for no slave owner or overseer could ever be entirely sure in which apparently compliant soul there secretly lurked the heart of a “bad nigger,” and rather than find out the hard way, it did not hurt to give

slaves an occasional benefit of the doubt. Slave resistance never seriously threatened the security of the regime, but such resistance constituted an important part of the slaves' efforts to shape their own lives.

Patterns of slave resistance, like slave folklore and recollections, thus point to the complex, even contradictory, nature of the consciousness that developed in the quarters as the slaves managed to carve for themselves a partially autonomous world even while subjected to extensive white controls. Intense individualism coexisted with widespread cooperation among individuals. Associative behavior was pervasive as slaves interacted with one another in their families and churches, as well as through friendships and self-help networks. At the same time those slaves lacked the communal institutions—and loyalties—that typically united peasant villagers throughout much of the world.

Of course, antebellum Southern slaves, like people everywhere, felt diverse, overlapping attachments: to self, family, friends, locality, class, and ethnicity. But evidence suggests that they usually identified most strongly at the two extremes, as individual and family members on the one side and as slaves—or even blacks—on the other, with relatively weak intermediate ties to local “communities.” Plantation residents lacked, for example, the intense sense of oneness with each other that Russian serf villagers exhibited, a sense of oneness that often produced equally intense suspicion of and even hostility to all outsiders, including serfs from neighboring villages.

Except in isolated areas, the slaves' geographic mobility combined with their lack of institutional autonomy to reduce local distinctions and attachments and create instead a common slave culture with which residents of widely scattered farms and plantations could identify. Just as the slaves' attenuated occupational differentiation reduced status conflict on given holdings, so, too, did the absence of sharp geographic-based differences make it easier for slaves to see themselves as one with other slaves, and indeed with other blacks in general, whether slave or free.

Racial identification among slaves drew strength from several sources. Because slaves constituted an overwhelming majority of the black population in most of the South, the line separating white from black approximated that separating free from slave, and it was easy for slaves, and their masters, to confuse race with class. Slaves

and slave owners alike commonly used racial terminology: if a man spoke of "my negroes" (or "my niggers") to refer to his or her slaves, those slaves also called each other "niggers" or "colored folk" and looked upon whites in general as their oppressors. "White folks" naturally different from darkies," explained one ex-slave. "We're different in color, in talk and in 'igion and beliefs. We's different in every way and can never be spected to think or live alike." Such views drew support from the virulent white racism of many non-slaveholding whites, as well as from the close ties—including at times, those of kinship—that existed in much of the South between slaves and free blacks.

Substituting for a communal identification with one's local group, then, was a generalized racial consciousness that at times approached but never quite merged into class consciousness. The use of "brother," "sister," "aunt," and "uncle" as terms of endearment commonly applied to blacks whether physically related or not suggests an outlook that incorporated all blacks as members of a kind of giant extended family, or community of the whole. So, too, do the patterns of slave resistance, which, despite their individual manifestation, showed such consistency in form and origin that they clearly reflected shared values that existed among blacks across the South.

VIII

THE COMPLEXITY of slave identification in the antebellum South reflected a world full of contradictions and ambiguities. In describing this world, historians have largely swung away from a model of victimization to one of autonomy, from a view of slaves as objects acted upon to one of independent beings defying the theory of slavery by leading their own lives. A balanced appraisal must recognize the validity as well as the exaggeration of both these models: slaves were subjects who strove with considerable success to carve for themselves areas of partial autonomy within a system designed to exploit their labor, but they were also victims of that system and the power relations that went with it. If the slaves helped make their own world, they nevertheless remained slaves, and the "internal" lives they forged in the quarters operated within the confines of the political, economic, and social hegemony of white slave owners

who interfered in the daily lives of their "people" far more extensively than most masters did elsewhere.

The complexity of this world and of the social relations it engendered is suggested not just in the self-identity of the slaves but also in their judgments—as expressed in subsequent autobiographies and oral interviews—of their owners. Slavery itself they remembered as a barbaric institution, and most had bitter memories of particular instances they had endured. "I kin tell you things about slavery dat would make yo' blood bile, but dey's too terrible. I jus' can't no more to forgit," Amy Chapman told an interviewer. After describing scenes of tortures, she abruptly stopped, declaring, "I ain't never no more to nobody all dis an' ain't gwine tell you no mo'." Della Garlic's memories were equally painful: "Dem days was hell," she recalled bluntly.²⁹

But many former slaves tempered their overall condemnation of slavery with fond recollections of particular experiences and sympathetic portrayals of particular owners, and testified to the pervasive nature of slave-owner paternalism. "Slavery did its best to make me wretched," wrote Josiah Henson, "but along with memories of misery and pain, I have memories of joy and hope. I remember, as I have said, that I was frosted feet, weary toil under the blazing sun, curses and blows, there flock in others, of jolly Christmas times, dances before old massa's door for the first drink of egg-nog, extra meat at holiday times; midnight-visits to apple-orchards, broiling stray chickens; and first-rate tricks to dodge work." Like numerous other autobiographers, Charles Ball distinguished sharply among his various owners, naming one of three masters he had in Maryland "an unfeeling man" but praising the other two and declaring that "my mistresses, in Maryland, were all good women"; although his Georgia master once gave him a brutal whipping—for no reason except that he had not received one since childhood—Ball recalled that he "really loved" that master; and when he died "I felt that I had lost the only friend I had in the world."³⁰

A remarkably common pattern in the recollections of former slaves juxtaposed benign judgments of their own masters with harsh denunciations of the cruelties of neighboring slave owners and of slavery in general. Mandy McCullough Cosby of Alabama was typical of many ex-slaves in contrasting her owner, who was "good to his black folks" and rarely resorted to the lash, with other masters: "on some places close to us," she remembered, "they whipped until blood run down." Lillian Clarke of Virginia told a similar story:

although her parents received kind treatment from their owners, the master on the adjoining plantation was "mighty mean to his slaves."³¹ The pattern was by no means universal: some ex-slaves had nothing good to say of their masters, and others presented a best mixed portrait. It was widespread enough, however, to be highly significant, as well as to be recognized by a number of ex-slaves themselves, who commented, frequently with some embarrassment, on the vicarious pride that many bondsmen took in the wealth, power, and benevolence of their masters. As Frederick Douglass noted, it was common for slaves to fight over who had the best owner, for "they seemed to think that the greatness of their masters was transferable to themselves."³²

This juxtaposition of general condemnation of slavery with expressions of affection for particular slaveholders is subject to a variety of interpretations, most of which cannot be explored here. In some cases, blacks who sang the praises of their owners were no doubt protecting themselves against possible trouble: one could never be sure when criticism of a white might be considered rude or uppity, and prudent discretion dictated extreme caution when discussing slavery and slave owners in front of whites. But the pattern is evident in such a broad array of ex-slave testimony, encompassing such a variety of genres—antebellum autobiographies left by fugitives who escaped to the North as well as those written after the Civil War by blacks who remained in the South, narratives dating from the 1860s and those dating from the 1930s, interviews conducted by whites, and those conducted by blacks—that it is impossible to attribute it exclusively to dissembling.

Slavery as a system was intrinsically exploitative, brutal, and unjust, and on a general level virtually all slaves detested it and longed for the day when they would be free. On an individual, personal, and day-to-day level, however, many slaves experienced pleasure as well as pain, and had contacts with whites that extended far beyond the exploitation of labor. The American version of this exploitative, brutal, and unjust system developed under conditions that at the same time left the slaves room to develop their own vital but fragile subculture and produced particularly intense, and contradictory, relations between masters and slaves, relations that were marked by affection and intimacy as well as by fear, brute force, and calculation of self-interest.

6

The White South: Society, Economy, Ideology

1

SLAVERY AFFECTED the whole South, not just the slaves. Because the antebellum South was part of the United States, Southerners inevitably had much in common with other Americans, including shared history, language, religions, and political institutions. But Southerners, both white and black, also differed from other Americans. Because the antebellum South was a slave society, not merely a society in which some people were slaves, few areas of life there escaped the touch of the peculiar institution. What is more, the centrality of slavery to the South became increasingly pronounced during the half century preceding the Civil War.

During the past two decades, scholars have probed with new sophistication the pervasive impact of slavery on the antebellum South. Slavery undergirded the Southern economy, Southern politics, and, increasingly, Southern literary expression. Slavery also buttressed the religious orthodoxy that set the South apart from the North, undermined the growth of a variety of reform movements, and helped shape virtually every facet of social relations, from the law and schooling to the position of women. By the eve of the Civil War, slavery virtually defined the South to both Southerners and