

# Self-Emancipation and Slavery: An Examination of the African American's Quest for Literacy and Freedom

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## Abstract

The courageous effort of enslaved Africans to acquire English literacy is an often-ignored story that deserves frequent telling. It is also a political saga that recounts White America's legalization of the enslavement, dehumanization, and cultural domination of African Americans. In the southern United States, repressive laws sought to control every aspect of the relationship between Europeans and Africans. Despite these legal sanctions, Africans devised creative methods to learn to read and write as an essential first step toward freedom. The *Federal Writers' Project* undertaken from 1936-1938 contains over 2,000 first-person narratives of the last stage of antebellum slavery. These accounts reveal African ingenuity and heroism in the face of their subjugation; they also disclose the devastating psychological and sociological affects of slavery on the African American's self-identity and cultural orientation. This paper traces the historical origins of American slavery, particularly in the southern United States. Ultimately, it examines the African American's epic quest for freedom in a nation constructed on White supremacy racism. Finally, it closes with a brief analysis of 20<sup>th</sup> century developments in the Black American liberation struggle.

## Introduction

*"The bare name of educating the coloured people, scares our cruel oppressors...."*

This declaration in *David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, written in the nineteenth-century, represents one of the first, if not the first, Africentric/Pan Africanist critique of White nationalism in the United States. The *Appeal*, published in 1830, by David Walker boldly attacked the institution of American slavery. Walker, as one of the precursors of Black nationalism, defiantly called for free and enslaved Africans to rise up against their European oppressors.

Walker's prophetic and liberatory language was a forerunner of other nineteenth-century freedom fighters like Sojourner Truth, Henry Highland Garnet, and Frederick Douglass who also used their mastery of the English language to challenge the political and moral constructs of American slavery. These early figures in the African American intellectual tradition challenged Africans in the United States to use language as a weapon in the struggle for their liberation.

It has been estimated that during the 400 years of the European Slave Trade, forty to one-hundred million Africans were captured and transported to the Americas (Rodney, 1974). This is perhaps a conservative figure. Richards (1980) and Ani (1994) suggest that understanding the *maafa* (Kiswahili word that describes a period of great disaster and tragedy) requires extensive study and analysis of the European world's global efforts to enslave, trade and exploit Africans in the Western Diaspora. In the United States, enslaved Africans, particularly in the South, lived in a cruel and inhumane society that sought to strip them of all elements of their African heritage, ethnic identity, and culture (family, kinships, languages, religions, traditions, and customs).

These *maafa* experiences occurred across several centuries. During this period, the development of systemic methods of enslavement and exploitation, and legalization of slavery created a racist and oppressive American society. Van Sertima (1976) documented that Africans arrived in the Americas as explorers and traders centuries before Europeans. However, in English North America, the enslavement of Africans evolved out of the widely practiced indentured servitude system that covered immigrants from England (Rose, 1976). Thus, with the arrival of twenty Africans to Jamestown, Virginia in 1619, the beginnings of four centuries of European control over the lives and aspirations of Africans began. Today, the totality of the African *maafa* in the United States remains largely unknown to most Americans, including African Americans. Nonetheless, the enslaved African's struggle to acquire literacy, notably in the American South, is an important field of African American historiography.

## **De-Africanization and Racial Domination in the United States**

Under American slavery, the slave holder's ideology shaped Southern life. Thus, owning "slaves" was the goal of every European male, rich or poor. Jacob and Landau (1971) suggest that historians generally categorize the personalities and behaviors of enslaved Africans into three types: 1) militant and rebellious, 2) docile, passive, and accepting, and 3) limited resistance due to constant terror of beatings, deprivation, and separation from families (p.100). Asante and Matteson (1992) found that the slaveholder's perceived need to control every aspect of the African life motivated their development of an interlocking system of exploitation and cultural domination. In this brutal, inhumane system, laws, statutes and codes sanctioned chattel slavery. Ironically, the earliest statutes punished Europeans for "immoral" relations with Africans. Then, in the 1640s, statutes in the developing colonies singled-out Africans for distinct treatment, and by the end of the eighteenth-century, anti-African laws characterized the relationships between Europeans and Africans in the Southern colonies.

Kenneth Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution* examined the development of plantation ideology and suggests that antebellum slavery was a "practical" economic system created by European landowners to control an increasing African labor force. In this work, Stampp (1956) suggests: 1) Southern slavery was essentially an economic system that developed gradually over two centuries, and 2) although it (slavery) was economically successful, it was eventually a failure because so few enslaved Africans adapted successfully to lifelong servitude. Thus, as a political and moral dilemma for the South, this strange way of life eventually became too emotionally stressful for planters to maintain. In essence, Southerners became victims of their own 'peculiar' system (Stampp, 1956).

Aptheker (1963), Franklin (1967), and Meir and Rudwick (1976) found that during antebellum slavery, African revolts were a constant threat. Therefore, for the slaveholder, the perpetuation and maintenance of slavery required developing "slave mentalities," i.e., controllable personalities and submissive traits in Africans. These methods, though many and varied, and applied differently throughout the upper, border, and deep regions in the South, institutionalized the psychological enslavement of Africans. Consequently, by the nineteenth-century, rigorous methods of slave management were so widely practiced by planters that agricultural periodicals and other established publications regularly listed articles under the heading of "slave management" (Stampp, 1956).

According to Stampp (1956), the slaveholder's methods for "seasoning" (making slaves out of captured Africans), and developing slave mentalities from birth to the grave included six interdependent elements:

1. The establishment of strict discipline over the captive African population in the United States;
2. The development within African people personal inferiority in relation to skin color and facial and bodily features;
3. The development of raw fear and awe in the power of the master;
4. The establishment within the enslaved African's psyche a sense of affiliation with the master's welfare;
5. The creation of a willingness among African captives and their descendants to accept the slaveholder's standards of conduct as their own; and
6. The development within the captive people total dependence upon those persons who claimed to be their masters.

Thus, American slavery provided Europeans, regardless of rank or social class, with the absolute power to physically and psychologically control Africans. In the South, the planter's seasoning methods eventually reduced most Africans into a maligned "slave/negro" people. For instance, after the first and second generations of African captives were denied practice of their traditional culture, their descendants became more vulnerable to European methods of cultural domination.

Thus, lacking knowledge of their African past, Africans in the United States were en masse “deAfricanized” (stripped of their historical memory, identity and culture). In the Southern colonies, whites gained unlimited authority over African humanity by enacting repressive laws to support the political, economic, and social interests of the planter pseudo-aristocracy that emerged in the eighteenth-century.

Goodell (1852) examined the ethical, moral questions of American slavery and stated:

The question of slavery or emancipation is not a question of cruel treatment or of kind treatment - of starvation or of full feeding. It is a question whether a man is to be recognized as a man, or a brute – a person or a thing – a spiritual, a moral being, or a mere lump of matter – a being gifted with volition and clothed with responsibility, or a mere piece of machinery – a being with, or without, RIGHTS, which the laws should PROTECT. (p. 378)

Goodell’s (1852, pp. 378-379) in-depth analysis of the slave-making system found 11 integral elements that evolved over two centuries:

1. The unlimited authority of the slave-master or owner.
2. The abrogation of marriage, and the family relation, among slaves.
3. The power to enforce labor without wages.
4. The incapacity of the slave to acquire or hold property.
5. His incapacity to make contracts or bargains.
6. His incapacity to enjoy civil, domestic or political rights.
7. The liability of the slave to be sold, like other chattels, and separated from relatives.  
The authorized prosecution of the SLAVE TRADE!
8. The absence of any adequate legal protection for the slave.
9. The power of the master to forbid education and social religious worship, at his discretion.
10. The power of the legislatures of slave states to prohibit education, even by masters, and to prohibit or restrict free social worship.
11. The power of the legislatures of slave states to abolish freedom of speech and of the press, in general.

Thus, inspired by the pursuit of wealth and power, Europeans set aside their religious and moral convictions to enact laws that sanctioned slavery as a powerful political, socio-economic institution in the American South. Despite the emergence of abolitionists, anti-slavery groups, and several movements demanding anti-slavery legislation, the South’s affluent, politically-active slave-holding aristocracy effectively leveraged their regional economic power to influence the national government (Jenkins, 1960). Hence, by the close of the seventeenth-century, the enslavement of Africans was institutionalized in the American South.

## **The Legalization of Slavery in the United States**

With the coming of Europeans in the fifteenth century, and English-led peopling of North America starting in the seventeenth-century, Africans in the United States are the only Americans to become citizens by legislative amendments. The 13<sup>th</sup> amendment outlawed slavery (1865); the 14<sup>th</sup> provided citizenship to African Americans (1868); the 15<sup>th</sup> opened voting to men regardless of race, color, or previous servitude (1870). Here it should be noted that women did not receive voting rights until 1920 with the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment. Thus, in the course of establishing a new European world in the United States, the ignoble practices of racism and sexism contradict the American ideals of freedom and justice for all. In early America, xenophobic European beliefs about the Amerindian and African set in motion the creation of a white supremacist, ethnocentric nation. Virginia, as one of the early English settlements, also became the most influential colony in molding slavery into a race-based, economic and social institution. The Northern colonies of Massachusetts (1641) and Connecticut (1650) first recognized institutional slavery. Following Massachusetts and Connecticut in 1659, Virginia became the third colony to enact laws legalizing the enslavement of Africans (Rose, 1976). Over the next century, Maryland, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, and Georgia would enact similar laws.

The transition from indentured servitude to chattel slavery in colonial America occurred across four decades. During this period (1619-1659), very little is known about the lives and experiences of the first generation of Africans. It is generally acknowledged that most were indentured servants and many experienced similar conditions of servitude as newly arriving European immigrants. However, in the 1630s and 1640s differences in the terms of servitude of Africans developed, noticeably around the issues of race, color, and culture. Rose (1976) questioned the distinct treatment of Africans and stated:

At what point did the runaway servant, black, become subject to different and more degrading punishments than the runaway servant white? It is plain that whether the laws were endorsements of current practice, or designed to change practice, they were ever more heavily marking the line between white, black, servant and slave. (p.16)

Asante and Mattson (1992) suggest that Europeans, reacting to their self-created myths and fears of Africans as inferior, uncivilized beings, sought on one hand to limit and control racial interactions, and, on the other, to develop more efficient systems of economic exploitation. Hence, whites passed restrictive laws in the colonies to justify and define the political, social, and economic status of Africans. Harding (1981) found these laws generally prohibited: black-white marriage, ownership of property, political rights, education, assembly, ownership of weapons, and self-defense. In essence, these punitive laws reduced Africans to the mere status of property to be bought and sold.

Welsing (1991) asserts European fears of “genetic annihilation” informed their efforts to maintain Caucasian racial purity. Consequently, whites were obsessed with maintaining racial purity in colonial America. Therefore, interracial relations or “miscegenation” (the act of intermarriage and sex among members of opposite races) was strictly prohibited in the colonies (Myrdal, 1944; Stampp, 1956; Klein, 1967; Rose; 1976). This global, European color phobia fueled the enactment of the “one-drop” rule, which decreed that regardless of the degree of “whiteness,” just one African ancestor made that individual a Negro or “mulatto” (Spanish word that describes the first generation offspring of a black or white person). Consequently, in 1630, the prevailing anti-African climate in English America resulted in punishment and public humiliation of Europeans caught engaging in sexual relations with Africans (Klein, 1967).

In the seventeenth-century, William Walter Hening (1809), a legal writer from Virginia, edited the thirteen volume collection printed by Samuel Pleasants, Jr., that documented Virginia statutes that focused on inter-racial relations. A statute from 1630 stated:

September 17th, 1630. Hugh Davis to be soundly whipped before an assembly of Negroes and others for abusing himself to the dishonor of God and shame of Christians, by defiling his body in lying with a Negroe; which fault he is to acknowledge next Sabbath day. (Statutes 1:146).

In addition to European distaste for race-mixing, the issue of who should be a servant or slave emerged among the English landowners, which inspired their development of punitive laws to define the social status of lowly Europeans, Amerindians, and Africans. Although somewhat problematic in the colonial period, Klein (1967) suggests that, “The planter had little scruple about reducing anyone to an enslaved status” (p.43). Thus, in colonial America, Amerindians, Africans, and whites were all reduced at some point to servitude. However, by 1640, court cases in Virginia had begun to recognize the “lifetime” servitude of Africans, and by 1662, the legislative and statutory structure of African servitude in Virginia evolved into more repressive statutes and codes (Klein, 1967). For example, the first mention of the word “slave” appeared in 1655 in the Virginian assembly and referred to exempting Indians from bondage. The first uses of the phrase “Negro slave” occurred in 1659. And in 1660 the term can be found in a legislative act designed to encourage Dutch importation of Africans into perpetual bondage (Klein, 1967).

The refinement of a legal system to support slavery required creating laws to establish its perpetuation, specifically its transference across generations. Klein (1967) documents that in December of 1662; the Virginia assembly ruled that the descent of bondage followed the status of the mother. Therefore, since race-mixing was primarily an act between European men and enslaved African women, the mixed-race offspring of this union would be bonded into slavery for life.

Religion was another problematic issue and on October 3, 1670, the Virginia assembly ruled that, “all servants not being Christians imported into this country shall be slaves for life” (Hening, 1809, p.283). However, since Africans were becoming Christians through exposure to Catholicism in the West Indies, in 1682, this ruling was ratified to exclude Christianity as criteria for exemption. Thus, by the end of the seventeenth-century, American slavery was based solely on racial affiliation.

Virginia, as the leading political and economic colony in the American South, led the way in developing pro-slavery laws. An abbreviated and chronological review of the *Virginia Slave Codes* is listed below:

### **Virginia Slave Codes**

- 1661 Whites found fornicating with blacks fined and whipped...
- 1662 Condition of the mother determined status of the child...
- 1667 Denial of baptism...
- 1668 Denial of legal right to self-preservation...
- 1670 All non-Christian servants into country by shipping are slaves for life...
- 1680 The black slave was denied: (1) the right to carry arms or any weapons, (2) the right to leave the master without a certificate, and (3) the right to lift a hand in opposition against any christian...
- 1682 All imported Negroes are presumed to be slaves...
- 1682 Free movement of slaves restricted... (Note: They could not remain on another plantation over four hours)
- 1687 Slaves denied the right to gather for funerals...
- 1691 Slaves and mulattos denied freedom unless person(s) paying for their freedom could provide exportation within six months
- 1691 The children of free English women by a black or mulatto sold into bondage for thirty years while the English woman pays a heavy fine and becomes an indentured servant...
- 1692 Slaves denied juries for capitol offenses...
- 1692 Slaves denied the possession of property, i.e., horses, cattle, hogs or other animals...
- 1705 Redefined the code of 1682 regarding who should be a slave...

*Education restrictions.* In the eighteenth-century, Deep South states, like South Carolina and Georgia, enacted laws to deny Africans access to education. In 1740, South Carolina passed a code restricting the education of enslaved Africans. Goodell (1853) states:

Whereas having slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attended with great inconveniences; be it therefore enacted by the authority aforesaid, that all and every person or persons whatever, who shall hereafter teach, or cause a slave to be taught, to write...every person and person, shall, for every offences, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds current money. (319)

Reacting to African insurrections and runaways, legislation increasingly addressed the desire of Africans to acquire literacy. In the nineteenth century, the rise of abolitionist literature also created increased concern among Southerners. Hence, more restrictive codes were passed to prohibit all forms of education (Klein, 1967); these codes also prohibited planters from teaching Africans Christianity. These codes included:

- 1804 Prohibited all nighttime religious meetings; all blacks, free or slaves denied right to hear ‘colored’ preachers or ministers...
- 1819 Prohibited slaves and freedmen from meeting for educational purposes...
- 1831 Prohibited unlawful assembly at any school, house, church meetinghouse or other places for the purpose of reading, writing in the day or night...

Genovese (1972) and Whiteaker (1990) suggest that white reactions to African revolts, especially the Nat Turner Rebellion of 1831, in which 60 whites were killed and the increase in abolitionist literature led to more anti-Black literacy laws throughout the South. Georgia passed laws prohibiting African education in 1830, and, in 1835, North Carolina outlawed all public instruction of Africans; and, in 1847, Missouri passed laws making it illegal to teach Blacks (Whiteaker, 1990). According to Genovese (1972), in some states, local ordinances prohibiting Black education surpassed state laws.

Given this inhumane political and social context, efforts of enslaved Africans to acquire education took place daily under extremely restrictive and punitive conditions. Further, the South’s economic and moral rationale for slavery was uncompromising as success for planters meant owning docile, cooperative slaves. Perhaps, the most evident symbol of the nation’s conscious and active support of slavery was the Constitutional decision of 1787 that deemed Africans 3/5 human and granted Southerners twenty more years to import Africans.



In addition, the “Missouri Compromise” of 1820 prohibited slavery north of Missouri, and the Supreme Court’s 1857 decision in the Dred Scott case, which decreed that both free and enslaved Africans could not become citizens of the United States, were other legal decisions that advanced White supremacy nationalism. Consequently, it was in this legally sanctioned and exploitive environment that African Americans faced for centuries in the United States.

## **Self-Emancipation Struggles in the American South**

The African’s resistance to enslavement in the United States has been studied by numerous historians, most notably W.E.B. DuBois, John Hope Franklin, Herbert Aptheker, William Katz, and Lerone Bennett, Jr. Although most students of U.S. history are familiar with the Stono uprising in 1739, Nat Turner’s rebellion of 1831, Cinque’s *Amistad* revolt (1839), and the failed uprisings by Denmark Vesey in 1822 and Gabriel Prosser in 1800, fewer are familiar with the day-to-day struggles of enslaved Africans. It should be noted that due to limited information, the exact number of African revolts in the United States may never be known. Aptheker (1963), however, documented over 250 uprisings.

Blassingame (1972) and Jacob and Landau (1971) found that African survival during slavery required developing different types of personality traits and skills. Black survival also necessitated learning a number of craft skills and trades. For the enslaved African, learning to read and write was highly desired and from most existing accounts, difficult for most to achieve. Yet for many, learning to read and write was the first step toward self-emancipation. DuBois (1962) estimated that only five percent of enslaved Africans could read by the end of the Civil War. This figure is very low, perhaps debatable, but does suggest that anti-African public opinion and laws were effective at curtailing Black literacy in the antebellum South.

The African’s quest for freedom from American slavery is a largely under-recognized, yet heroic story of the undeniable power of the human spirit. The slave codes and courts cases provide descriptions of the brutally harsh political and social conditions faced by Africans. Plantation records, bibles, newspapers, letters, and travel accounts are also helpful. However, perhaps the most authentic evidence comes from the autobiographical accounts of former “captives” and slaveholders who lived during the last generation of slavery.

Blassingame (1972) suggests that few captives left letters or diaries, and in most cases, plantation records and letters are usually one-dimensional accounts dominated by the racist perspectives of the slaveholder. However, given this reality, slave narratives or autobiographies may still provide the best sources for reconstructing the experiences of enslaved Africans. These accounts dramatically reveal Africans and their descendants eventually became “inferiorized” and misoriented in relation to their African identity and culture. Nonetheless, their recollections of American slavery provide instructive, but often painful insights into the maafa experience of Africans in the United States.

The *Slave Narrative Collection*, available in the Rare Books Division of the Library of Congress provides exhaustive documentation of the lives of African Americans who lived during the era of African enslavement. Compiled in seventeen states during the years 1936-1938, the *Collection* contains over 2,000 interviews with former captives. Careful reading and analysis of these accounts reveal lucid insights into the horrendous crimes, pains, and traumas of American slavery. The narratives also convey how African Americans resisted captivity and used their ingenuity to self-emancipate and gain freedom.

The autobiographies or narratives of Frederick Douglass, Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, and Solomon Northup are generally considered among the best first-hand accounts of American slavery (Osofsky, 1969). In each of these acclaimed narratives, Douglass, Bibb, Brown, and Northup eloquently articulate the evils of slavery. Primarily revealing insights from a “protest perspective,” their accounts may not bring to light the “ordinary” day-to-day struggles of the masses. Thus, accounts from “less heroic” autobiographies and narratives provide a deeper insights into American slavery (Blassingame, 1972; Genovese, 1972; Webber, 1978). For example, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* edited by Maria Child, describe the horrors of slavery as experienced by African women (Brent, 1973). According to Brent (1973, p.ix), “Slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women.” In retrospect, the stories of women, their victimization and brutalization, as well as their triumphs and achievements deserve more research.

Fogel and Engerman (1974) found that only a small fraction of enslaved Africans lived in towns and cities in the antebellum South, while Genovese (1972) asserts that urban trading centers were more favorable places for Africans to live than rural regions. Therefore, the developing cities along the Mississippi River often provided vestiges of safe harbors and upward mobility for some Africans and Amerindians. However, despite these “less hostile” places, blatant anti-African public opinion ruled, as the threat of attack or sudden death was always a constant reality for any African, free, fugitive, or enslaved.

Osofsky (1969) suggests that most narratives were accounts of enslaved Africans who were lived close to free territory or border states as opposed to the deep south (Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, etc.) where slavery was much harsher and more difficult to escape to the North. However, given these realities, none of these generalities hold true as Africans used creative and bold ways to rebel against and overcome their oppression. In fact, numerous stories of how Africans liberated themselves and others offer powerful insights into the resilience, courage and determination of African Americans during the period of their enslavement.

Genovese (1972) suggests that Africans often possessed a greater desire to acquire literacy than poor whites. According to Genovese (1972) and Webber (1978), enslaved Africans were often aided by: 1) masters, mistresses, and children (Note: Whites often taught their favorite captives and mixed-race children, who often became domesticated house servants), 2) Africans taught themselves and instructed others, and 3) Africans established “Sabbath schools” to increase clandestine literacy efforts.

Enslave Africans who labored as field hands usually experienced much harsher treatment and rigid segregation, particularly on larger plantations in the Deep South. In the twentieth century, Malcolm X analyzed the “house versus field slave” condition and suggested that the brutal and inhumane treatment of “field Africans” contributed to their militant, defiant, and aggressive attitude towards whites (X, 1964). In comparison, Stamp (1956) and Harding (1981) found that Africans were usually segregated and appropriated by occupations and trades. Nevertheless, separating Africans by house and field designations was most likely a slave management method.

Africans who could read often taught others using whatever means and opportunities available. Inter-generational education also occurred as father and mother taught son or daughter, who in turn taught others, young and old. Some Africans taught themselves to read and write by observing whites. In many instances this process involved great ingenuity and courage as getting caught usually resulted in severe punishment or death. Genovese (1972) states: “Sometimes a literate slave taught others with his master’s permission, more often without it” (p.564).

Some whites ignored the law to teach Africans, which was either an act of benevolence or simply self-serving. White children and mistresses, more often than masters, taught servants and playmates. White children played an interesting role in the efforts of enslaved Africans to achieve literacy. On many plantations, children were usually not segregated according to parents’ status. Consequently, the interactions of children as playmates and servants often enabled Black children to learn the rudiments of reading and writing, and they then taught others. According to Genovese (1972), “... Slave children who carried books of white children to school would sit outside, listen, and try to keep up with their lessons” (p.564). In many instances, white children simply disobeyed their parents’ orders and taught their Black playmates and servants. Efforts to become literate fueled the establishment of Sabbath schools. Usually operating at night and under the pretense of a social function, the establishment of secret schools illustrates the will and determination of enslaved Africans to overcome prevailing public opinion and oppressive laws. In fact, Frederick Douglass, who learned to read from hearing his master’s mistress read the bible, established a Sabbath school (Genovese, 1972).

Harsh penalties were frequently dealt to Africans seeking education. Penalties varied from loss of privileges, confinement, whippings, and beatings to mutilation and death. Consequently, due to the climate of overt violence, many African did not aspire to read or write for fear of sudden death and/or limited prospects for freedom. Nonetheless, the heroism and courage of those who did deserves special recognition. In retrospect, the number of Africans who lost their lives striving for literacy, as well as the number of Africans who learned to read and write will never be fully known. However, what is known is that slaveholders generally reacted with cruel punishment and swift violence directed at those who strove for literacy.

Some were informed on by children and plantation workers, while others were discovered by their owners (Whiteaker, 1990). Mistresses often made life miserable for literate Africans, and often resorted to violence against them, as Webber (1978) notes, "Still another slave found that his learning to spell was so upsetting to his mistress that she threatened to kill him" (p.134). Yet, it appears that the more restrictive, debasing and violent the treatment, the more rebellious and imaginative the African. Osofsky (1969) documents evidence of this reality:

Austin Stewart vowed to teach himself letters after his master destroyed his spelling book and whipped him for having it. Peter Still maneuvered his way into a Sabbath school in Lexington despite his owner's opposition to "getting learning." Northup, who knew how to write, contrived a pen from old duck feathers and ink from the bark of a maple tree. James W. Sumpter had his books in a hayloft and came there on Sundays. Leonard Black bought a book and his master found him with it and burned it. "You black son of a bitch, if I ever know you to have a book again, I will whip you half to death." Black quoted the owner as saying. He went right out and acquired another. (p.40)

These stories illustrate the determination, creativity and courage of Africans to outwit their brutal captors by using deception and defiance. Harding (1981) suggests that it was this very slave-making system that Africans resisted most directly. In these efforts, tactics such as pretense, malingering, and thieving were common responses to unjust treatment or punishment (Osofsky, 1969). Sabotage and destroying machinery were other acts of resistance, while concealing intelligence, cunningness, and developing secret communication codes and networks were common liberatory practices on most plantations.

DuBois theorized that only a small number (five percent) of African learned to read and write during slavery, which seems realistic given that illiteracy rates among Black adults were estimated at 75 percent by the close of the nineteenth-century (Ransom & Sutch, 1977). Thus, accounts of literacy liberation efforts in the *Slave Narrative Collection* appear to support DuBois's assertion. A few passages excerpted from the *Collection* are included here to illustrate the oppressive conditions that existed under American slavery. Narratives from *Voices From Slavery*, edited by Norman Yetman (1970), provide selections from the *Collection*. Informant's name, age, place of birth or plantation, if available, is indicated.

**Andrew Boone**, age 90, Northampton County, North Carolina

I can't read and write but they learned us to count. They learned us to count dis way. "Ought is ought, and a figger is a figger, all for de white man an' nothing for de nigger. (p.33)

**W.L. Bost**, age 88, Newton, North Carolina

Us poor niggers never allowed to learn anything. All the readin' they ever hear was when they was carried through the big Bible. The massa say that keep the slaves in they places. They was one nigger boy in Newton who was terrible smart. He learn to read and write. He take other colored children out in the fields and teach'em about the Bible, but they forget it before the next Sunday...Us niggers never have a chance to go to Sunday school and church. The white folks feared for niggers to get any religion and education. (p.36-37)

**Jacob Branch**, age 86, Double Bayou Settlement, near Houston, Texas

Dere school for de white chillen in Double Bayou and I used to go meet chillen comin' home and dey stop 'longside de way and teach me my ABC. Dey done carry me as far as Baker in de book when Old Missy find it out and make dem stop. De War comin' on den and us darsn't even pick up a piece of paper. De white folks didn't want us to learn to read for fear us find out things. (p.41)

**Charles Davenport**, age, about 100, Mississippi

I weren't learnt' nothin' in no book. Don't think I'd a-took to it, nowhow. Dey learnt de house servants to read. Us field hands never knowed nothin' 'cept weather and dirt and to weigh cotton. Us was learnt to figger a little, but dat's all. (p.73)

**Mary Ella Grandberry**, age 90, Barton, Alabama

De white folks didn't allow us to even look at a book. Dey would scold and sometimes whip us iffey dey caught us with our head in a book. Dat is one thing I surely want to do an dat was to learn to read and write. Massa Jim promised to teach us to read and write, but he never had de time (p.145).

**Sarah Gudger**, age 121, North Carolina

Dey was very few schools back in dat day and time, very few. We darkies didn't dare look at no book, not even to pick it up. Ole Missie, dat is, my first ole missie, she was a good ole woman. She read to the niggers and to de white chillun...(p. 152)

**Abram Harris**, age 93, near Greenville, South Carolina

Dere weren't none of de white folks in dem slavery times what would let dey niggers have any learnin'. You sure better not be cotch a-tryin' to learn no readin' or writin'. Our marster even never allowed dat. Iffen a nigger was to be found what could write, den right straight dey would chop his forefinger offen dat hand what he write with. Dere weren't no such thing as no schools for de niggers till after de surrender. (p.161)

**Ferebe Rogers**, age 100+, Brier Creek, Baldwin County, Georgia

Young marster was fixin' to marry us, but he got cold feet, and a nigger by name o' Enoch Golden married us. He was what we called a "double-headed nigger" – he could read and write, and he knowed so much. On his dyin' bed he said he been de death o' many a nigger 'cause he taught so many to read and write. (p.257)

**Lizzie Williams**, age 90, Selma, (Billy Johnson Plantation), Alabama

De niggers never know nothin' about learnin', just work all dey's fit for. De only thing I ever do with a book is just to dust it off. I mind two little niggers whose missy teach dem to read... (p. 317)

These stirring passages clearly reveal the sufferings and triumphs of African Americans during antebellum slavery. Their lives and recollections also reveal the horrendous crimes committed against their humanity. Perhaps, the terrifying horror and brutality of slavery on the psyche of enslaved Africans is illustrated by the experience of Frank Bell, age 86+, who recounted a terrible ordeal in his enslavement in New Orleans:

When I'm about seventeen I marries a gal while Master on a drunk spell. Master he runs her off, and I slips off at night to see her, but he finds out. He takes a big, long knife and cuts her head plumb off, and ties a great, heavy weight to her and makes me throw her in the river. Then he puts me in chains and every night he come give me a whippin' for a long time. (p.22)

Bell's tragedy illustrates the brutally violent, dehumanizing and traumatizing nature of slavery. Even so, and despite the *maafa*, African Americans have continuously struggled for freedom in an overtly racist, oppressive, and violent society. Their antebellum literacy efforts tell this story. Therefore, slavery remains one of this nation's most significant historical events, yet it is a neglected subject of the American past.

### **Slavery's Aftermath: Freedom Don't Make You Free!**

When the symbols, rituals, and rites of one's culture lose their legitimacy and power to compel thought and action, then disruption occurs within the cultural orientation and reflects itself as pathology in people belonging to that culture. (Nobles, et al., 1987)

American slavery dislocated and robbed the African of culture and traditions, including over 100 languages. Consequently, the psychological and sociological effects of centuries of slavery and racism are evidenced in the writings, records, and testimonies of participants, in particular, in the memories and "English" of former captives. Their recollections reveal the degradation and dehumanization that slavery, European/White American nationalism, and racism extracted on their racial identity, self-esteem, and self-image. Perhaps, the prophetic wisdom of Patsy Mitchner in the *Slave Narratives*, spoken in the Ebonics of a *maafa* captive, powerfully illuminates the lingering, complex "dualities," and cultural misorientation caused by chattel slavery on the African American psyche:

Slavery wus a bad thing, an' freedom, of de kin' we got, wid nothin' to live on wus bad. Two snakes full of pisen. One lyin' wit his head pintin' north, de other wid his head pintin' south. Dere names wus slavery an' freedom. De snake called slavery lay wit his head pinted south, an' de snake called freedom lay wid his head pinted north. Both bit de nigger, an' dey both wus bad. (p.123)

Mitchner's analysis is instructive. In fact, which road of any previously envisioned will lead the U.S. African community to complete freedom in a nation that remains pervasively racist and oppressive to African Americans? The term "nigger" used by these former victims as a form of self-identification demonstrates the pervasive "negative" psycho-social affects of centuries of European/White American cultural domination. Sadly, modern-day African Americans of all ages and classes endearingly refer to themselves as niggers or "niggas" ... and other slavery-bred terms (dog, bitch, ho, etc.) proving that "Freedom don't make you free!" Nobles (1986) identifies this unhealthy vernacular as an expression of "conceptual incarceration," while the renowned psychologist, Na'im Akbar describes this delimiting thinking as the "ghosts of the plantation" (Akbar, 1984).

Joy DeGruy Leary's (2005) claim that African Americans suffer from anti-Black socialization evidenced by continued acceptance of deprecating language and images in the media and the arts. DeGruy Leary labels this multigenerational maladaptive behavior Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), which might also explain the preference of many young African Americans for limiting educational aspirations and lower ambitions in the larger American society. Thus, despite slavery's lingering negative effects, the effort of enslaved Africans to obtain literacy is a remarkable feat. This tumultuous journey would explode into powerful freedom movements in the twentieth-century.

## **Twentieth Century Freedom Roads: New Directions in the African Liberation Struggle**

English...as the "official" language of the United States, it represents the preeminent political, economic, military and commercial (i.e., entertainment) voice (power) presently on this earth. ...This is why oppressed people communicating in English must conquer it and proceed with deliberate speed and accuracy to carve out their own territory of self-expression and visions of a bright tomorrow. Language is a code. Learn to use it, or be used by it. (Madhubuti, 1994, p.37)

The African American freedom struggle took new intellectual and ideological directions in the twentieth-century. The desire for formal education at the beginning of the last century occurred gradually. As the century began, W.E.B. DuBois, perhaps the greatest African American intellectual of the twentieth-century, advocated *social integration* into the American mainstream, while Marcus Garvey, the brilliant, defiant Black nationalist - Pan Africanist called for a return to Africa. Later, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X/El Hajj Malik El Shabazz also differed ideologically in relation to the language and path to Black freedom. For Brother Malcolm, Dr. King's integrationist racial equality (*civil rights*) dream would not avail full freedom and sovereignty to African Americans.

However, in the 1960s, brilliant voices rose in the struggle against racism and second-class citizenship. Inspired by Garvey and Malcolm and using provocative language, dynamic young leaders evolved out of grassroots urban communities and civil rights organizations, such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). During this turbulent period, uplifting slogans such as "Black Power," "Black is Beautiful" and "Nation-time" emerged. The birth of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPPSD) in 1966 and the defiant voices of scores of young activists-intellectuals advocated a return to African identity, Black pride, and Black consciousness. Consequently, by the beginning of the 1970s, this progressive "Black Consciousness" trend had inspired national and international movements of Africans worldwide for freedom and liberation.



The Black Power/Black Consciousness generation rejected the notion that assimilating into the oppressor's culture, i.e., language, religion, education, traditions, customs, etc., is sufficient for complete freedom and self-determination (Hotep & Hotep, 2004). Thus, spawned by dynamic activists such as Stokely Carmichael (aka Kwame Ture), Huey Newton, H. Rap Brown, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez and intellectuals such as Nathan Hare, Maulana Karenga, Molefi Asante, Wade Nobles, Na'im Akbar, Leonard Jeffries, Linda James Myers, and Marimba Ani to name a few, reconnections to African cultural practices emerged. This "cultural revolution" reclaimed African cultures (Swahili, Yoruba, Akan, and Dogon) whose linguistic, ethical, and moral teachings provided the "armor" of self-definition, self-determination, and cultural reaffirmation for millions of African Americans.

Karenga's development of the *Nguzo Saba* (a seven part African centered value system) and creation of *Kwanzaa*, an African American cultural holiday; Hare's establishment of the first Black Studies Program at San Francisco State College; Asante's construction of the theoretical philosophy of *Afrocentricity* (a method for interpreting African reality and phenomena), and the emergence of a generation of Africentric scholars in the fields of sociology, education, and psychology challenged and redefined African American self-awareness. Today, Black consciousness and Afrocentric thought have inspired millions of African Americans to *Sankofa*, a powerful Akan (Ghanaian) concept and symbol that means to return or "learn from the past to go forward." In this reclamation journey, rediscovering positive language consciousness (self-expression/values) appears to be an essential step toward personal and collective liberation.

Although some of these movements have waned, enormous health, socio-economic, and political problems continue to persist in the United States. Hence, Aharone's (2003) brilliant work, *Pawned Sovereignty* suggests that "sovereignty" (not civil rights) is the only possible solution for African Americans. So is *sovereignty*, i.e., independent wealth creation and institution building via political, social, and economic unification capable of empowering African people in the United States? Given the African American's continuing orientation to Americanization, Madhubuti's assertion that African Americans decode and conquer English makes sense, yet appears problematic.

Today, the traditional languages of the Yoruba, Akan, and Dogon peoples of West Africa, as well as Kiswahili all provide excellent pathways for African Americans to embrace liberational human thought and culture (ethical and moral wisdom). Examining language consciousness (ideas, words, speech, symbols) further from an African-centered context, Jedi Shemsu Jehewty (aka Jacob H. Carruthers) suggests that in the African worldview, speech is the foundation of deep thinking. In fact, among the ancient Egyptians, speech was revered as a gift of God to humanity. Their language was called, *Medew Netcher* or "divine speech," which cultivated wisdom, ethical, and profound transmission of traditions and culture (Jehewty, 1995, 1999). Consider this passage from *The Teachings of Ptahotep*, the oldest book in the world:

...Ptahotep, instructs the ignorant in the knowledge and in the standards of good speech. A man teaches as he acts...The wise person feeds the soul with what endures, so that it is happy with that person on earth. The wise is known by his good actions. The heart of the wise matches his or her tongue and his or her lips are straight when he or she speaks. The wise have ears that are made to hear what will profit the offspring. The wise is a person who acts with MAAT (truth, justice, order, balance, harmony, righteousness, and reciprocity) and is free of falsehood and disorder.

Ptahhotep, 2350 B.C.E.

Therefore, as elucidated by Jehewty, the African American and African World Community will surely benefit from rediscovering the healing and affirming powers inherent in ancestral wisdom ... for it is only in our thoughts, speech, and authentic relationships with each other that we can rescue ourselves from the ongoing maafa's nightmare ... and evolve consciously toward the light of Maat (truth).

## Summary

The African experience in America has been a maafa of epic proportions. During slavery, legalized dehumanization deconstructed African languages and culture, while suppressing the African's desire to acquire English literacy. The Ebonic voices of twentieth-century maafa victims reveal the internalized self-hatred and culturally destructive aftermath of slavery's nightmare on African Americans. Today, the pervasive use of negative, degrading self-referents by African Americans validates the ongoing psychological and sociological affects of a culturally misorienting historical experience. To fully appreciate the socio-political and economic implications of this traumatic legacy requires greater study and analysis. It also requires that African Americans recommit themselves to rediscovering thousands of years of recorded deep thought and human excellence embedded in African societies. Building on the progress made in recent decades by scholars Jehewty calls "intellectual maroons", there is an urgent need to research, discover, and reclaim the wisdom inherent in the traditions, languages, and texts of our classical African societies. Today, this mission looks promising for future generations ... and is Sankofa work!

DeGruy Leary's theory that slavery and racism has produced PTSS behaviors in African Americans raises serious implications for national and international reparations and healthcare redresses, while Aharone's call for worldwide African sovereignty warrants immediate discussion and action by our leaders. Finally, in relation to assessing the functional and transformational role of language in liberation movements, perhaps, an extensive study of the self-identity, self-expressions, themes, slogans, songs, political literature, poetry, art, etc. in the U.S. and Azanian (South African) freedom movements could provide an excellent Pan-African critique for the entire African world.

*Aluta Continua...the Struggle Continues!*

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