

BRENDA E. STEVENSON

# What is Slavery?



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Brenda E. Stevenson

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# Introduction:

## What is Slavery?

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What is slavery? It seems a simple enough question. Most people believe slavery was the condition that black people in the United States lived in before the end of the Civil War. In my college classes, for example, celluloid images of *Gone with the Wind*, *Roots*, *Sankofa*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Quilombo*, *Amistad*, *Beloved*, *Burn!*, *Belle*, and the 2014 Oscar winner for best film *12 Years a Slave* mesh, mingle, and struggle for dominance as my students try to answer the question on the first day of lectures. What most of them do not know is that the institution of slavery is one of the most common in history *and* also one of the most diverse. Almost every civilization has had some form of slavery – whether it was in Europe, the Americas, Africa, Asia, or Australia. As such, almost every ethnic/racial group alive today has been touched, at least ancestrally or geospatially, by the institution. Moreover, slavery still exists in most places. Indeed, an estimated 20–30 million people worldwide are still considered enslaved – either as chattel, debt peons, sex slaves, or as forced laborers. These enslaved workers come from, and are enslaved in, both poor and wealthy nations, although certainly the poor and politically dispossessed make up the majority of the enslaved in contemporary society. So, too, do women and children. Keep also in mind that the legacies of past slavery regimes remain among us. Many of those enslaved during the eras of American “discovery,” colonization, and

## 2 Introduction: What is Slavery?

early nationhood have descendants alive today who are located on the margins of their societies, particularly economically, socially, culturally, and even politically; some who can even be counted among the millions still designated as slaves.

Despite the long history of the institution and its widespread use around the globe, most people in the United States associate slavery with the enslavement of Africans in this nation for good reason. While the area that became the United States did not import many Africans through the transatlantic trade (only about 4–5 percent of those Africans who actually came to the “New World”), the United States became the largest slave society in the Atlantic world in the mid-nineteenth century. No other colony, state, or nation in the Americas held more than four million black slaves at one time, as did the United States in the early 1860s.

Most scholars agree that the first Africans arrived as laborers in British North America sometime between 1607 and 1618. They were late arrivals to the New World since the Spanish and Portuguese had been importing slaves to their Central and South American colonies and to the Caribbean since the early sixteenth century. Slowly, their numbers increased in the British mainland colonies – at first in single or at most double digits per year – and then, as the seventeenth century entered its third quarter, as a steadily increasing flow. By the middle of the eighteenth century, thousands were arriving annually. Elsewhere on the continent, the Spanish and the French in Florida and other places along the Gulf of Mexico already had established colonies that included black, and indigenous, slave labor. The Africans’ presence, and their economic, political, social, cultural, legal, and psychological impacts on North America, were enormous.

This book chronicles this presence and its evolving influence through a detailed scrutiny of the lives of the slaves and the institution of chattel slavery that shaped them. The topics that garner special attention in *What is Slavery?* include: demography; legal structures; African cultural change, exchange, and resilience; material culture/material support; resistance and accommodation; marriage and family; labor and leisure; and abuse, punishment, and rewards. These topics are brought to light by weaving

together descriptive narratives that are placed within a broader context of the developing slave presence in the Atlantic Chesapeake, Lowcountry, southern Piedmont, Lower South and Southwest, as well as in the middle and northern seaboard before the Revolution. In these diverse colonial locales that became the United States, gender, generation, race/ethnicity, class, and political consciousness or moral ideologies all shaped the perspective of the enslaved, the slaveholder and the majority of North American residents who were neither.

The objectives of this book are ambitious, particularly so given its mandated brevity. It provides its reader with a sweeping description, synthetic in nature, of one of the most significant experiences in American history. It is not meant to be a research monograph with groundbreaking new analysis, although some of it has drawn on my research and analysis that have not been published previously. Instead, *What is Slavery?* has largely drawn on the published work of generations of slavery scholars, including my own, that has collectively taught us much about this mammoth topic. *What is Slavery?* is a chronologically and topically driven narrative. Still, there are some fundamental experiences of the American slave, and characteristics of the institution of slavery, that are emphasized throughout these pages and form the book's underlying themes.

Slavery for Africans and their descendants in the United States, as throughout the Americas, was brutal. Slavery fundamentally meant a loss of control over the vital aspects of one's life and the lives of one's loved ones. It often meant physical and psychological abuse. For slave women, and to a lesser extent men and children, it meant sexual abuse. By today's standards, the average slave was not treated humanely, or even humanly, by their owners or governmental powers. This inhumanity shadowed every aspect of the slave's life – marital and parental relations, labor regimens and working conditions, material support, medical treatment, privacy/intimacy, intellectual/cultural expression, punishment, and representation in law.

Slavery was a brutal exercise of exploitation by the individual and state of the bondsman and bondswoman, *and* it was extremely profitable. Even though popular ideas about

#### 4 *Introduction: What is Slavery?*

slavery in the United States today are framed by a belief of regional (southern) importance, slave-produced wealth shaped the economies, both directly and indirectly, of most of the original thirteen British colonies, as well as those of the Spanish and French territories that would become part of the United States in the nineteenth century.

Slavery's influence on the economic wellbeing of the new nation did not diminish over the decades before the Civil War. This wealth, which was concentrated in the hands of a small white elite, was of little benefit to the slave. Slaves received only the most menial and minimum material, medical, social, and psychological rewards for their labor. Indeed, America's free white society's regard for the slave hardly increased over time, despite the continued profitability derived from slave labor. Instead, there was an increase in popular, and even "scientific," notions of "racial" inferiority that justified both slavery and the slaves' brutal treatment. Few did not experience this racial prejudice and it was this prejudice that so distinguished New World slavery when compared to forms of bondage in earlier periods of time and in other places. Thomas Jefferson's 1781 "suspicion only that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind," became an accepted "truth."<sup>1</sup> Even President Abraham Lincoln, the "Great Emancipator," carefully explained to voters publicly in 1858 that: "There is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I, as much as any other man, am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race."<sup>2</sup> It was, indeed, this stigma of racial inferiority that colored the slaves' lives, followed blacks out of slavery, and frames their "freedom" even today. "Racial ideologies undergirded the terror and coercion fundamental to keeping slaves at work," historian Lisa Lindsay notes. "In every slave society, masters and overseers whipped, maimed, raped, humiliated, and deprived enslaved people – tortures they would have considered unthinkable for (most) fellow whites."<sup>3</sup>

Regardless of their brutal economic exploitation and denunciation as racial inferiors, enslaved Africans and their descendants managed to survive their enslavement physically, psychologically, culturally, spiritually, and intellectually. This "survival," to be certain, was not a perfect one. It was borne out of resistance as well as accommodation, acculturation and even, in some instances, assimilation. Even so, there were some who could not endure their harsh circumstances. "It's bad to belong to folks dat own you sol an' body," admitted Delia Garlic, who was enslaved in antebellum Virginia, Georgia, and Louisiana. "Dat can tie you up . . . , wid yo' face to de tree an' yo' arms fastened tight aroun' it; who take a long curlin' whip an' cut de blood [with] ever' lick."<sup>4</sup> Historian Nell Painter's brilliant thesis of the "soul murder" of the slave opens up our imagination and intellect to the question of lingering generational trauma among these persons and their descendants.<sup>5</sup> And there certainly were persons who did not survive at all. A significant minority of enslaved men and women committed suicide, suffered insanity, became demoralized and dehumanized, never recovered from physical abuse, badly treated or untreated illnesses, or were murdered by masters or agents of the "law," with the state's blessing. Still, the records of natural increase, long-term marital relations, vibrant cultural expression, unrelenting and diverse challenges to white authority, and creative and courageous acts that led to self and sometimes group emancipation document the slaves' determination to assert their agency<sup>6</sup> against tremendous odds in order to control important aspects of their private lives, working conditions, and human expression. Brutality, profitability, the evolution of a racist ideology on the one hand, and the slave's insistence on physical, psychological, and spiritual survival as manifest through family and community, resistance and cultural expression on the other, are the themes of this synthetic narrative.

The first chapter of *What is Slavery?* is meant to introduce the reader to the "history" of slavery. Certainly this work cannot describe, much less discuss, every example of slavery that we now know existed across time and place. Likewise, the remaining chapters take on no small feat in their attempt to describe the developing landscape of slavery in the United

## 6 Introduction: What is Slavery?

States and the lives of its ever-expanding bound laborers. *What is Slavery?* necessarily moves back and forth from the “macro” to the “micro,” or at least from the regional to the local. Readers are made aware of the broad design of US history, which is so shaped by this institution, and they may hear clearly the voices and stories across the generations of enslaved men, women, and children. The audience will be introduced to some of the scholarly sentiments about key elements of the slave’s life and the structures that shaped it. Not only have these opinions evolved over time, but many are just being incorporated into the bulging historiography that is slavery studies. The most important intellectual debates related to slavery in the United States, and the Atlantic world more generally, have centered on: methodological approach (what sources to use; what voices to hear; what questions to ask and answer), as well as interpretations of the slave’s relationship to Africa (cultural retention, extension, recovery, or loss); the slave’s relationship to his/her owner (paternalistic or antagonistic and resistant, expressions of dependency or agency); the relationship of legal and religious structures to the quality of slave life (Catholic vs Protestant; French and Spanish colonial legal codes that were relatively comprehensive vs the piecemeal laws of states and locales in the United States; and the extension of slave legal codes from the British Caribbean to North American colonies); stereotyped slave personality type(s), including Sambo, Jack, Nat, Mammy, and Jezebel; slave social organization as opposed to disorganization (slave community vs disunity and allegiances to masters); the nature of the institution (paternalistic vs economically driven; benign vs brutal); the nature of the black family (nuclear vs extended and abroad); and the economic ramifications of slavery (profitable vs unprofitable); Clearly, there is much – undoubtedly too much – to try to squeeze into this short book. Nonetheless, *What is Slavery?* attempts to provide its reader with a sound synthesis of this essential experience in American history.

# Slavery across Time and Place Before the Atlantic Slave Trade

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“From the first written records in ancient Sumeria, the concept of slavery has been a way of classifying the most debased social class.”

David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*<sup>1</sup>

Slavery has existed across time and place as one of the most enduring institutions and conditions found among peoples. Many of the examples of enslavement, bondage, unfree labor, debt peonage, concubinage, and so on that will be surveyed here, however, occurred in a society that one would not define as a *slave society* – that is, one in which the presence of slaves had a defining impact on one or more significant societal characteristics that influenced the lives of many, if not most, of its inhabitants. These affected societal traits typically protected the rights and privileges of slaveholders and others invested in the institution, not the slaves. As one will quickly conclude from perusing this chapter, the numerous forms of slavery found around the globe were, and still are, quite varied, not just between political boundaries, but within them as well. Slavery rarely has remained the same in any particular area. Its means of implementation, the characteristics of those who could be enslaved and those who could enslave, its influence on political, social, economic, and cultural structures and customs, the “rights” of the enslaved, the measure of state support, the ways in which the enslaved gained freedom and, indeed, what that



“freedom” meant for the emancipated and their descendants produced an impressively diverse institution. Still, the reader will also quickly come to understand that some characteristics of slave status carry across time and place, or at least often repeat themselves. Noted slavery scholar David Brion Davis is absolutely correct in his association of slavery with social “debasement.” The hierarchies that slavery helped to created, and operated within, situated the “slave” at the bottom, with rare exception. This is a fundamental similarity hereby persisted across an array of power relationships labeled as slavery. Other similarities include the means whereby persons came to acquire this status, the kinds of labor they performed, and the impact of slave ownership on a master’s status. The most singular characteristic of the slave in post-contact America was that he or she was “black”; therefore, a racialized basis for slavery was quite unique previous to the New World institution coming into its own. Before, persons were much more likely to be enslaved because they were impoverished, war captives, criminals, kidnap victims, or were of a specific religion than because they were “black” or African.

## Slavery in the Ancient World

In the ancient world, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, Palestine, Rome, and Asia had slaves. So too did early societies in the Americas, Europe, Africa, and the Pacific. There were slaves in Babylon as early as the eighteenth century BCE and in Mesopotamian cities by 6800 BCE. The Babylonian Code of Hammurabi (c. 1790 BCE), for example, contains numerous guidelines related specifically to slavery. Slaves in Mesopotamia typically originated as war captives, criminals, and debtors, and they worked in agriculture, construction, and as domestics. Slave ownership there reached its peak in the first century BCE.<sup>2</sup> Documentation of slavery in Greece indicates that it existed at least from 1500 BCE onward, but was particularly important during the Hellenistic period (332–330 BCE) and especially in Athens, Delos, and Delphi. Fifth-century BCE Athens had more enslaved residents than free