

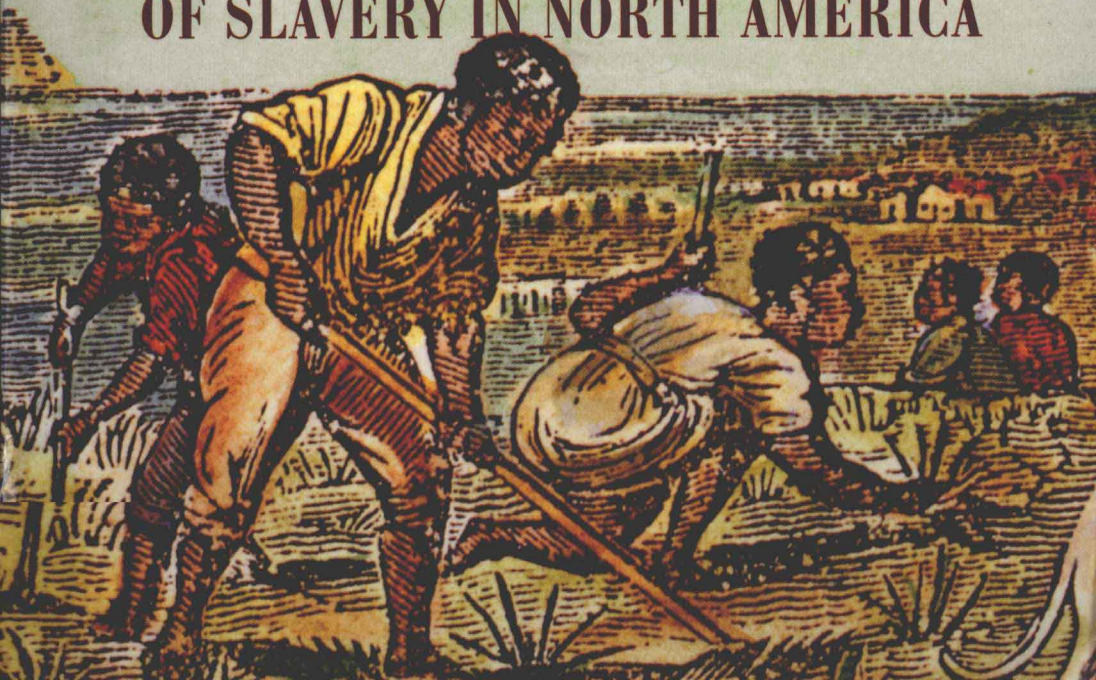
"A magisterial synthesis." —Edmund S. Morgan

IRA BERLIN



MANY THOUSANDS GONE

**THE FIRST TWO CENTURIES
OF SLAVERY IN NORTH AMERICA**



MANY
THOUSANDS
GONE



*The First Two
Centuries of Slavery
in North America*

IRA BERLIN

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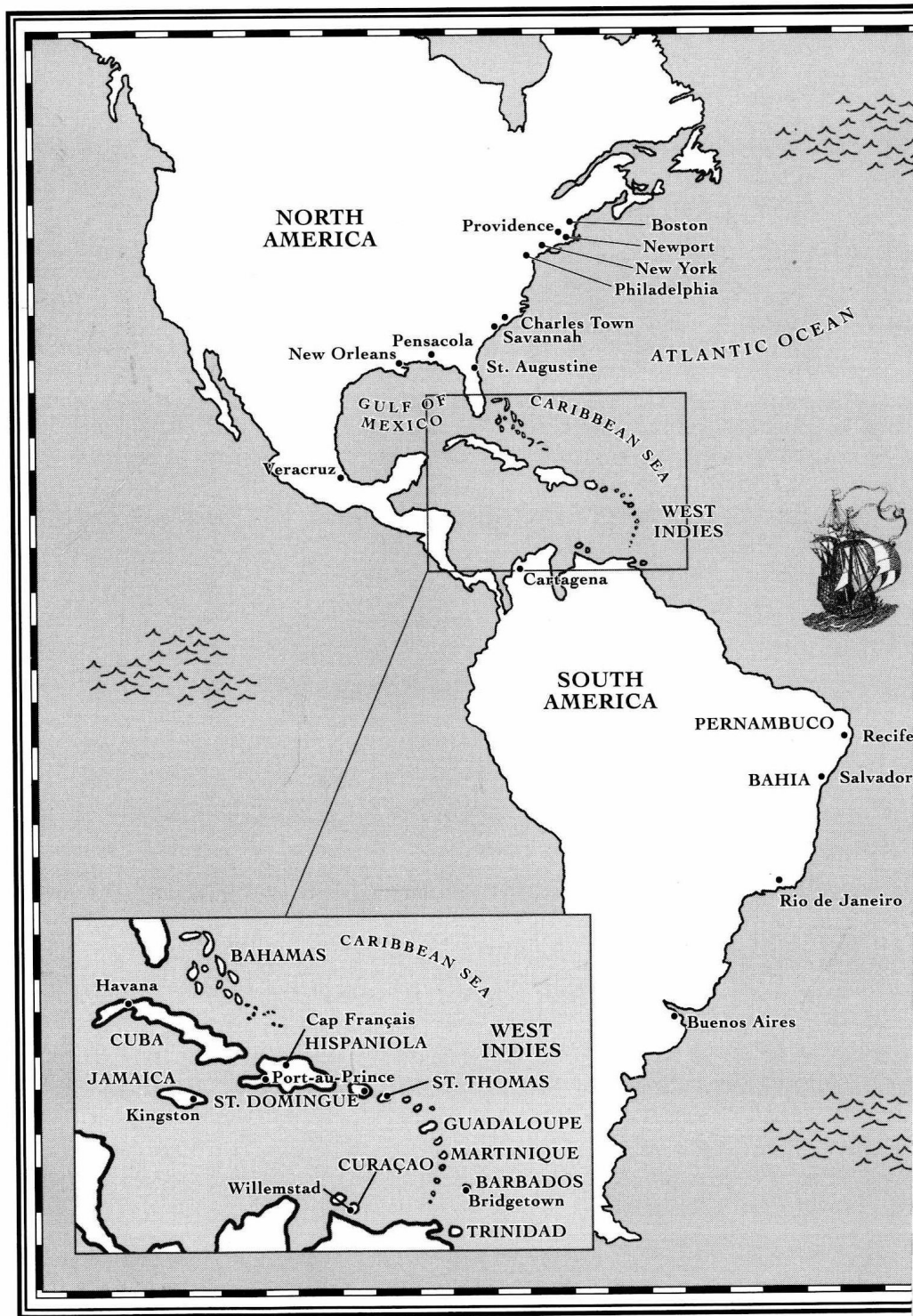
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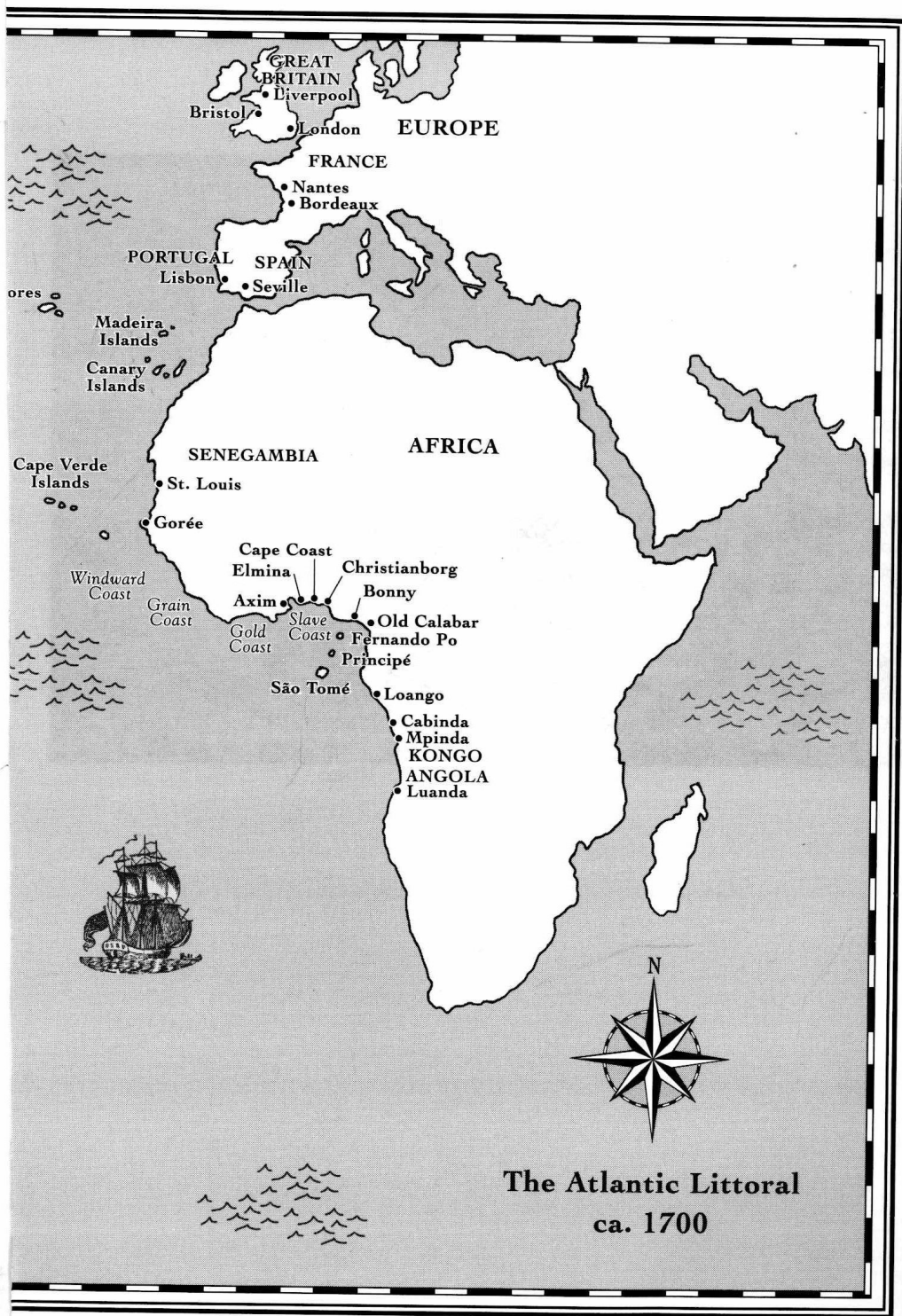
MANY THOUSANDS GONE

*The First Two Centuries
of Slavery in North America*



For Martha







MANY THOUSANDS GONE

*The First Two Centuries
of Slavery in North America*

*No more auction block for me,
No more, no more,
No more auction block for me,
Many thousands gone.*

*No more peck o'corn for me,
No more, no more,
No more peck o'corn for me,
Many thousands gone.*

*No more driver's lash for me,
No more, no more,
No more driver's lash for me,
Many thousands gone.*

*No more mistress call for me,
No more, no more,
No more mistress call for me,
Many thousands gone.
Many thousands gone.*

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Making Slavery, Making Race



Of late, it has become fashionable to declare that race is a social construction. In the academy, this precept has gained universal and even tiresome assent, as geneticists and physical anthropologists replace outmoded classifications of humanity with new ones drawn from recent explorations of the genome.¹ But while the belief that race is socially constructed has gained a privileged place in contemporary scholarly debates, it has won few practical battles. Few people believe it; fewer act on it. The new understanding of race has changed behavior little if at all.

Perhaps this is because the theory is not quite right. Race is not simply a social construction; it is a particular kind of social construction—a historical construction.² Indeed, like other historical constructions—the most famous of course being class—it cannot exist outside of time and place. To follow Edward Thompson’s celebrated discussion of class, race is also “a fluency which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and atomize its structure.” Race, no less than class, is the product of history, and it only exists on the contested social terrain in which men and women struggle to control their destinies.³

The reluctance to embrace the new understanding of race as socially constructed derives neither from a commitment to an older biological classification system, which in truth is no better understood than the newer genetics, nor from a refusal to acknowledge the reality of an ideological construct. Instead, it derives from the failure to demonstrate how race is continually redefined, who does the defining, and why. This book is in part an attempt to address that problem, first by recognizing the volatility of the experiences which collectively defined race, and then by suggesting how they shifted over the course of two centuries.

Many Thousands Gone is a history of African-American slavery in mainland North America during the first two centuries of European and African settlement. Like all history, it is a study of changing relationships. The emphasis on change is important. Philosophers, sociologists, anthro-

pologists, and even some historians have provided extraordinary insight into how property-in-person specified once and forever the character of a slave's standing, personality, and relationship with others and gave slavery a meaning that transcended history. From such a perspective, slavery was both a model and a metaphor for the most extreme forms of exploitation, otherness, and even social death. Its unique character rested upon the slave's physical and cultural uprooting. But slaves were never "absolute aliens," "genealogical isolates," "deracinated outsiders," or even unreflective "sambos" in any slave society.⁴ Knowing that a person was a slave does not tell everything about him or her. Put another way, slaveholders severely circumscribed the lives of enslaved people, but they never fully defined them. Slaves were neither extensions of their owners' will nor products of the market's demand. The slaves' history—like all human history—was made not only by what was done to them but also by what they did for themselves.

All of which is to say that slavery, though imposed and maintained by violence, was a negotiated relationship. To be sure, the struggle between master and slave never proceeded on the basis of equality and was always informed by the master's near monopoly of force. By definition, slaves had less choice than any other people, as slaveholders set the conditions upon which slaves worked and lived. Indeed, the relation between master and slave was so profoundly asymmetrical that many have concluded that the notion of negotiation—often freighted in our own society with the rhetoric of the level playing field—has no value to the study of slavery. Although the playing field was never level, the master-slave relationship was nevertheless subject to continual negotiation. The failure to recognize the ubiquity of those negotiations derives neither from an overestimation of the power of the master (which was awesome indeed), nor from an underestimation of the power of the slave (which rarely amounted to much), but from a misconstruing of the limitations humanity placed upon both master and slave.⁵ For while slaveowners held most of the good cards in this meanest of all contests, slaves held cards of their own. And even when their cards were reduced to near worthlessness, slaves still held that last card, which, as their owners well understood, they might play at any time.

A number of corollaries follow from a recognition that even in slavery's cramped quarters there was room for negotiation. First, even as they confronted one another, master and slave had to concede, however

grudgingly, a degree of legitimacy to the other. No matter how reluctantly it was given (or, more likely, extracted), such a concession was difficult for either party to acknowledge, for masters presumed their own absolute sovereignty and slaves never relinquished the right to control their own destiny. But no matter how adamant the denials, nearly every interaction of master and slave forced such recognition, for the web of interconnections between master and slave necessitated a coexistence that fostered cooperation as well as contestation.

Second, because the circumstances of such contestation and cooperation continually changed, slavery itself continually changed. The refusal of either party to concede the realities of master-slave relations meant that slavery was intrinsically unstable. No bargain could last for very long, for as power slipped from master to slave and back to master, the terms of slavery would again be renegotiated. Slavery was never made, but instead was continually remade, for power—no matter how great—was never absolute, but always contingent.

Thus, understanding that a person was a slave is not the end of the story but the beginning, for the slaves' history was derived from experiences that differed from place to place and time to time and not from some unchanging transhistorical verity. In some sense, this truism has become a staple of recent histories of all subordinate classes, not only slaves but also servants, serfs, and wage workers. Surely, it would come as no surprise to say that all wage workers at any particular moment had much in common, both in shared experiences and in opposition to their employers; but the lives of steel workers and cigar makers differed, as did their languages, institutions, and relationships with their employers, their fellow workers, and their families. If at times steel workers and cigar makers stood together against their employers on matters of compensation, working conditions, and political allegiance, few would expect their opposition to take precisely the same form. Yet, because slavery was such a powerful, all-encompassing relationship, scholars have often been transfixed by the commonalities that slavery produced, by the dynamics of the relationship between master and slave, and by the personality traits this most extreme form of domination appears to have generated.

Slavery's distinctiveness has been reinforced by its historic confrontation with free labor, a battle in which slavery—for good and ill—came to embody traditional society. The slave master's domination of the plantation order was seen as nothing less than monarchy writ small and patriar-

chy writ large. By extension, it represented hierarchy, discipline, and corporate control. Slaveholders understood their rule to be the incarnation of the well-ordered society, which mirrored the well-ordered family. By the same token, their slaves' interminable insubordination represented not only a loss of labor and a threat of insurrection but also a direct assault on order itself.

Such an interpretation has propelled the relationship between master and slave, generally in the guise of the question of paternalism (or sometimes patriarchalism or seigneurialism) to the center of the debate over slavery, and has given the history of slavery a significance that reaches beyond the bounds of the subject itself. The destruction of slavery and its corporate ethos—as a means of organizing society as well as a means of extracting labor—was a central event in the rise of capitalism and the triumph of liberalism, certainly in the West and in other parts of the world as well. Little wonder, then, that the discussions of the nature—and sometimes the existence—of paternalism has preoccupied historians during the last four decades.⁶

In contrasting the relations of slave labor to those of free labor, just as in contrasting republicanism to monarchism or the patriarchal family to the companionate one, historians have frozen their subject in time. While they have captured an essential aspect of chattel bondage, they have lost something of the dynamic that constantly made and remade the lives of slaves, changing them from time to time and place to place. The static model reified and reinforced the masters' vision of their hegemonic power and the slaves' willing acceptance by removing from public view the contingencies upon which power rested. The minuet between master and slave, when played to the contrapuntal music of paternalism, was a constant, as master and slave continually renegotiated the small space allotted them. But the stylized movements—the staccato gyrations, the seductive feints, the swift withdrawals, and the hateful embraces—represented just one of many dances of domination and subordination, resistance and accommodation. The essence of the slaves' history can be found in the ever-changing music to which slaves were forced to dance and in their ability to superimpose their own rhythms by ever so slight changes of cadence, accent, and beat.

As always, close examination of the particulars of the human condition subverts general ideas, for it exposes contradictions and unearths exceptions to the most powerful generalizations. The historicization of