



BLACK & WHITE

*Cultural Interaction
in the Antebellum South*

Edited by Ted Ownby

With essays and commentaries by

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Introduction

The study of slavery and slaveholding has been one of the most intellectually controversial, morally compelling, and emotionally charged topics among American historians in the past thirty years. The Porter L. Fortune, Jr. Chancellor's Symposium on Southern History at the University of Mississippi studied the subject by examining how whites and enslaved blacks affected the culture—the beliefs, habits, and expectations about what made life worthwhile—of each other. Each participant in the Symposium was asked to consider what historian T.H. Breen has called “cultural conversations” between whites and enslaved blacks in the American South in the antebellum period.¹ To what degree was there interaction, with members of each group seeing and participating in the cultural lives of the other? To what degree was there interchange, with either group adopting aspects of the other's culture or adapting them for their own purposes? These questions are crucial for understanding both white and black southerners, and for understanding if we should think of the region as having one dominant culture, one shared culture, or two separate cultures.

Responding both to the intellectual challenge of Stanley Elkins' 1959 argument that the particular harshness of American slavery had reduced slaves to servile samboes² and more importantly to the moral challenge of the civil rights movement and ensuing protests, historians from the 1960s into the 1980s depicted the culture of enslaved blacks with great respect for its resiliency and creativity. Numerous sophisticated scholarly works emphasized the strength of the slave personality, the slave family, and—the most popular topic—the slave community. Those works concentrated on the creativity of slaves in developing both overt methods of resistance to their condition through work slowdowns, destruc-

tion of property and minor and major revolts, and also more subtle forms of resistance to cultural domination through a rich and supportive community life. Analyses of enslaved blacks' religion, stories, music, and dance argued for a great deal of continuity between African and African-American culture and, and in doing so, argued that enslaved blacks were able to maintain considerable autonomy over their own lives away from the fields. Related analyses of subjects such as food, medicine, dress and decoration, housing, and family life argued for a healthy degree of African influence in American life.

The Afro-centric movement continues to inspire significant works of scholarship. In *Slave Culture*, Sterling Stuckey provides one of the most recent expressions of the African community argument and extends it farther than most by depicting a Pan-African nationalism with implications continuing into the twentieth century.³

Some recent scholars have questioned the completeness and even the accuracy of the interpretation that stresses creativity, community, and ties to African tradition. Could life under slavery have been as satisfying as some historians have portrayed it? Have some historians, in their effort to reveal enslaved blacks as creative men and women worthy of respect, romanticized the lives and communities of those black men and women? A small but growing group of historians suggest this may be the case. Bertram Wyatt-Brown wrote in 1988 that "in the last few years, the darker side of slave life has regained scholars' notice."⁴ Foremost among those is Peter Kolchin, who has argued strongly that despite their substantial achievements, many historians of slavery "have tended to push the argument too far by replacing the Sambo myth with one equally untenable—that of the idyllic slave community." In his book, *Unfree Labor*, and in an influential 1983 article, Kolchin discussed several features of nineteenth-century southern slavery that worked against the autonomy of slave communities: the presence of most owners on the farms and plantations, the relatively small size of most farms and plantations, slaves' lack of economic

self-sufficiency and consequent dependence on their owners, and the lack of large numbers of newly imported Africans in the 1800s that might have enhanced ties to African traditions and loyalties.⁵

It is very unlikely that historians will ever again portray slaves as servile and incapable of independent thought or resistance to oppression. It is equally unlikely that they will portray them as being cut off from their African pasts. But if what has come to be the widely accepted interpretation of the slave community is now undergoing serious criticism, what interpretations are emerging to replace or modify it? Serious consideration of the issues of cultural interaction and interchange between whites and enslaved blacks should make a significant contribution to the study of the antebellum South. The approach should be one way to retain the focus on enslaved blacks as active participants in southern culture as well as the focus on African traditions while at the same time meeting some of the recent criticisms of the slave community thesis. Analyzing what was new and what was old in African-American culture, what was modified by contact with whites and what was lost completely in that contact, and how the process of change took place, should enhance an already strong field of study.

The key issue concerns the degree to which interaction and interchange were possible between dominant and dominated groups. As two of the commentators in this volume suggest, giving too much attention to the process of interaction may have the unintended effect of diverting attention from the fact that one group owned the other. "Cultural conversations" could not take place freely between oppressors and the oppressed, so scholars will have to take care in discussing the contexts of those conversations.

Of course past historians of slavery have recognized the significance of interaction. In his extensive study of African-American culture, Lawrence Levine urged in 1977 that "We must be sensitive to the ways in which the African world view interacted with that of the European world into which it was carried and the extent to which an Afro-American perspective was created." John

Blassingame made a similar point in *The Slave Community* in 1972.⁶ Despite these points, most historians who have studied slave culture in the past thirty years have placed most of their emphasis on the African and autonomous sides of the slaves' lives. In too many of those works, white men and women appear infrequently—certainly far less frequently than they did in the lives of those slaves.

Just as the study of interaction and interchange should contribute to a more complete understanding of the lives of black southerners, so too should it contribute to the study of white southerners. The idea that blacks influenced whites is nothing new. In *The Mind of the South*, W.J. Cash argued that "the relationship between the two groups was, by the second generation at least, nothing less than organic. Negro entered white man as profoundly as white man entered Negro—subtly influencing every gesture, every word, every emotion and idea, every attitude."⁷ A growing number of scholars have tried to fill in the details of Cash's suggestion, arguing that whites learned lessons from blacks about agricultural techniques, hot-weather housing, medicine, and diet. Most importantly, a few scholars have argued that African religious practices had a strong impact on the development of evangelical religion among white southerners. Donald Mathews' 1977 volume, *Religion in the Old South*, was among the first to argue that the expressive nature of many African religious rituals contributed to a new style of worship among many white churchgoers. More recently, Symposium participant Mechal Sobel's book, significantly entitled *The World They Made Together*, argued that African notions of the afterlife as a "homecoming" for a family of spirits became, with some modifications, commonplace among whites. Essays in a recent volume entitled *Africanisms in American Culture* share the thesis that African elements not only pervaded the culture of the slaves but also had substantial influence on the culture of the slaveowners.⁸

Today's social historians face the considerable challenge of analyzing both power and meaning. The extraordinary popularity of

the triple themes of race, class, and gender has led many historians to study issues of power without studying as well how people interpreted their own behavior. Those historians tend to concentrate on law, politics and government, labor, wealth, and the material conditions of life, sometimes without going on to analyze how people interpreted their lives to themselves. At its worst, this can be history that counts who wins and who loses without telling us the object of the game. No matter how important power may have been in structuring southern social relations, we should always want to know about people's internal lives. On the other hand, historians who study the meaning of social life and their expressions without studying as well the power relationships in society may be missing too much. The issue is often one of emphasis. If we emphasize that the slaves were practicing voodoo, playing the banjo, doing the ring shout, growing and eating okra, and decorating trees with ritual bottles and graves with ritual pottery, we may not do enough to emphasize the brutal realities of life as a slave. We should be wary of any interpretation of slavery that warms our hearts. If slaves were dancing in their chains, we should look at their chains at least as much as their dances. The need to address issues of both power and meaning provides much of the challenge for the historians in this volume. Such an approach can reveal culture not as a combination of traits, or habits, or backgrounds, or ideas, but as a process that involves both centuries-old traditions and immediate realities.

Charles Joyner begins the volume's lead article with the assertion that "The central theme of southern history has been racial integration." What once seemed a fantastic statement, he writes, has now become the accepted wisdom. He lays out the debates between scholars who emphasize the influence Europeans have had over the culture of African-Americans and those who emphasize the African origins of that culture. Rather than siding with one or the other, Joyner stresses the need to view language, music, religion and the rest of southern culture as a creative process in which all African and European ethnic and national groups

learned from each other and adapted what they found to be useful. Stressing the creolization of cultures, he argues that basic structures of Africans' communication and beliefs changed dramatically in America, but that we should see those changes as examples of creativity and not of loss. Thus, in Joyner's interpretation, life in the South has been characterized by a lively variety, vivid musical and spoken traditions, and an ability to learn and change. These add up to what he calls "the extraordinary richness of southern culture."

Beginning with the work of Melville Herskovits, the subject of religion has drawn the most attention of scholars investigating interaction between antebellum blacks and whites. Sylvia R. Frey's paper builds on work by Herskovits, Donald Matthews, Albert Raboteau and Symposium participants Mechal Sobel and John Scott Strickland by tracing the issues of interaction in revivalism, the conversion experience, ideas about the millennium, and the nature of worship from the early 1700s into the 1800s. Slaves generally rejected early Anglican efforts to convert them to Christianity. Revival movements in the mid-1700s offered slaves both the idea of the coming millennium and enthusiastic forms of worship that slaves could synthesize with African religious practices. Concentrating on the Methodists, Frey argues that the whole nature of southern religion gained much from the slaves, especially in the ways that their trances and spirit possession experiences influenced the nature of revival meetings. One of Frey's greatest contributions is to show the step-by-step dialectic in which interaction took place.

In his critique, Robert L. Hall praises Frey's dialectical approach and her stress on the creativity slaves showed in adapting aspects of Protestantism for their own purposes. Like Frey, he stresses the significance of the eighteenth century as the time when American culture—with African-American culture as a crucial part of it—became unique. He stresses the tensions between a religion that stressed equality under God while simultaneously supporting the existence of slavery. Hall casts doubt on the argu-

ments of some recent historians that antebellum blacks and whites shared a sense of belonging because they attended the same churches. The variety of segregating practices within the churches always made clear who was in power and set the stage for the rapid exodus the freedpeople made from the churches. Hall concludes that by the 1800s slaves belonged to two churches—their own “subterranean” forms of worship and the established churches.

Mechal Sobel has become the most aggressive proponent of the notion of interaction between southerners of African and European ancestries. Virtually all of the historians at the Symposium referred to her work, and one footnote claims that *The World They Made Together* takes the interaction argument about as far as it can go. In this volume she addresses the murky issue of how interaction operated in the notions southerners had about personal ethics. Many whites and blacks shared childhood experiences, and it was during childhood that southerners—as all people—made crucial and lasting decisions about basic personal issues of everyday right and wrong. Through an analysis of several obscure autobiographies, Sobel argues that blacks and whites had considerable influence on how each other developed their most basic notions about personal morality. One of Sobel’s most intriguing points concerns the divergent responses different slaves made to Christianity. Most historians have emphasized either the ways slaves adapted Christianity to their needs or the ways they retained many African traditions within the basic structure of Christianity. Sobel sees Christianity as presenting slaves a choice. They could either adopt it, or they could use it as a foil—a belief system and code of morality against which they consciously rebelled. In either case, it was crucial in the way individuals developed their moral beliefs. Sobel also addresses the personal side of one of the most powerful tensions in the post-revolutionary South—the question of how people who claimed to believe in the equality of all men could own slaves. Growing up with slave companions and with slave women as mother figures, she argues, contributed to feelings of guilt among white southerners over slavery as they

grew up and confronted notions of race relations that conflicted with those they knew as children.

While finding Sobel's paper stimulating, Elliott J. Gorn questions several of her conclusions. First, he questions Sobel's argument that some Southern slaveowners considered slavery to be immoral, and he doubts that we can claim that society has made moral progress. He likes the tension Sobel develops between the supposed absolutes of racial differences and the individual cases that called those absolutes into question, but he wonders if some of the questions white southerners raised about their absolute beliefs had a palliative effect on the slave society, rather than a subversive one. Above all, Gorn suggests that interpreters of culture must always consider issues of power, and that studying interaction is a tricky business unless we remember that one of the groups in question kept the other as slaves.

John Michael Vlach begins his paper by questioning the general perception that slave houses in the antebellum period tended to be uniformly small and uncomfortable. Distinctions in housing, he writes, were a powerful way for "masters to signal and enforce the subordinate status of their bondsmen and women." But within that subordination was the possibility for slaves to improve their homes and to exercise more control over the nature of their housing. He stresses the diversity of slaves' housing, and argues that a paternalist movement in the late antebellum period led plantation owners to enlarge and improve the homes of their slaves. One of Vlach's many intriguing points is that by training some slaves as carpenters to build or improve the homes of both whites and blacks, slaveowners allowed those slaves "an experience through which captive blacks could increase their inventory of productive abilities." Mastering these construction methods ultimately prepared a substantial force of slaves to assume skilled positions upon gaining their freedom. But Vlach stresses that by the mid-1800s, African-Americans showed little interest in continuing African styles of building.

In her comments, Brenda Stevenson commends Vlach for the

panoramic view he creates of the varieties of slave housing and for viewing those homes as settings of struggle between slaveowners and slaves. She questions, however, Vlach's contention that housing for slaves was improving in the late antebellum period. She stresses how crowded and unhealthy slave homes tended to be, and how little control slaves had over their own family lives. Stevenson's own research on antebellum Virginia suggests that family structures were so unstable that it must have been difficult for enslaved men and women to view their houses as homes.

Lawrence T. McDonnell energetically tackles the difficult issue of interaction within the antebellum systems of free and slave labor. He argues that too many historians have left labor out of their descriptions of slavery—an oddity, given the extraordinary popularity of labor history in recent years. His thesis revolves around “a growing convergence of white work experience with an upward movement by blacks.” He details the growing variety of forms of slave labor, especially in the cities, which offered slaves new outlets for their abilities, and the growing use of the task system, which allowed agricultural slaves control over their time. At the same time, increasing numbers of white workers were losing control over their land, households, and time and working as tenants, day laborers, and menial factory hands. For both groups, work was changing “from community to individualism,” as the meager economic returns of wage labor replaced personal independence for whites and as the hope for more material comforts gave blacks incentive for new forms of labor. McDonnell argues that rising expectations led individual slaves to identify their interests more closely with those of their owners. He concludes by analyzing the growing fears of the planters that the individualistic workers—black and white—posed a threat to their power and by analyzing what he calls “the failed methods of rebellion which left them within the planters' power.”

The commentator on McDonnell's paper, John Scott Strickland, declined to submit his paper for publication.

As the leading historian of southern music, Bill Malone provides

a useful warning against rushing to conclusions about interaction based on limited evidence. His piece on the issue of musical interaction begins with the difficulty of studying music made before the era of recording. With that limitation he focuses on the context of music as much as the music itself. Analyzing the variety of settings in which music was made, he concludes that considerable interaction took place in a region that made few distinctions between high and low culture. One of the most intriguing issues in southern music concerns how an instrument of African origin—the banjo—became the primary instrument in Appalachia, where blacks' presence was minimal. Malone suggests that perhaps professional minstrel show performers appropriated some African-American musical elements and then spread them to largely white sections of the South.

In bringing the symposium to its conclusion, Leslie Howard Owens had the opportunity to address all of the papers. Owens cautions that historians who have suggested a symbiosis between Americans of European and African descent—meaning a close and mutually beneficial relationship—should consider that under slavery the relationship may have been one of antibiosis—one that was harmful to at least one of the groups. He reemphasizes Charles Joyner's call to study not "survivals" of African and European cultural forms but to study how culture worked within everyday social life. He offers a reminder that some of the most lasting and dramatic forms of cultural interaction occurred among people of different African nationalities, who had to learn to live together despite enormous cultural differences. He cautions scholars who may be quick to see interaction in the areas of religion and morality that African-Americans drew the ways they interpreted and expressed their anger over their oppression from African, rather than European, folk traditions. He argues that slaves could easily believe in the Christian God while continuing to believe in other deities as well. He doubts that African-Americans learned much from Euro-Americans' music, questions whether childhood friendships between whites and blacks had

lasting significance, and wonders whether revivals were really responsible for helping keep African-rooted religious rituals alive. More than any of the other participants at the symposium, Owens stresses a powerful Pan-African consciousness that allowed slaves to resist the effects of slavery. Owens suggests that one of the most important things the slaves adopted from the whites was a language of freedom they heard during the American Revolution and applied to their own situation.

T. O.

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