IRA BERLIN, MANY THOUSANDS GONE: THE FIRST TWO CENTURIES OF SLAVERY IN NORTH AMERICA (CAMBRIDGE: HARVARD UP, 1998)

Epilogue

Making Race, Making Slavery

Slavery survived the Age of Revolution, but its course in mainland North America had been permanently altered. The twin legacies of the democratic revolutions—the demise of slavery in the North and its expansion in the South—transformed African-American society yet again. With that, race once more took on new meanings, as blackness and whiteness were redefined. If in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries transplanted Europeans denounced Atlantic creoles as audacious rogues and if in the eighteenth century the nascent planter class condemned the newly arrived Africans for their "gross bestiality and rudeness of their manners," nineteenth-century white Americans redefined blackness by endowing it with a new hard edge and confining people of African descent to a place of permanent inferiority. Just as slavery had continually redefined notions of race, so notions of race would inform a new servitude.

Slavery and race were reconfigured in the decades prior to the Civil War. The division of the American republic that followed the demise of slavery in the northern states created a base from which abolitionists, black and white, could attack slavery. But slavery died slowly in the so-called free states, as the various mechanisms of coercion that accompanied its death throes persisted. Well into the third decade of the nineteenth century, the North remained a society with slaves, undergoing an extended transition to freedom. Not until the remnants of the old regime had been liquidated and values associated with free labor—legal equality, social mobility, and political democracy—gained ascendancy did the assault on slavery begin in earnest. Beginning in the 1830s, however, antislavery activists found new friends among the proponents of free labor, who conveniently suppressed the North's long commitment to chattel bondage. Whether they marched under the banner of radical abolition, Free Soil, or Republicanism, the opponents of slavery turned on the slave South as representative

of everything they despised: ascribed status, unearned privilege, and rigid hierarchy.[1]

While the demise of slavery was transforming the North, its expansion was having an equally potent effect on the so-called slave states—another new entity. Emboldened by the power that national independence conferred, slaveholding planters transported their domain across the continent, glorifying the benefits of African slavery with each step. By the time northern abolitionists launched their assault, planters had encased the institution of slavery in an ideology that neither apologized for property-in-person nor conceded its eventual demise. At the same time, planters denounced free labor as a shabby excuse for the derogation of social responsibility. They celebrated the plantation as the model community in which masters fulfilled their historic obligations to their dependents—be they women, children, or slaves.[2] The "Old South" and its plantation ideal were as much the creation of the nineteenth century as were the "free states."

The emergence of the North–South dichotomy reshaped the lives of black people. On the eve of the Civil War, most black northerners lived in cities, the wellsprings of northern prosperity. But they gained little from their urban residence. Barred from the workshops and factories that enriched white northerners, black people seldom benefited from capitalism's expansive cornucopia. The mixing of white and black in the workshops and farms of the eighteenth century and the large role black people played in the colonial economy dissipated as they exited slavery. Competition from newly arrived immigrants further undermined the position of former slaves. Free black men and women sank to the base of northern society, marginalized, impoverished, and despised.[3]

On the eve of slavery's final destruction black southerners were anything but marginal to southern productivity and politics. By 1860 the locus of African-American society had been forcibly transported from the Chesapeake and the lowcountry to a band of rich prairie that stretched from Georgia to the Mississippi Valley and then through the Great Valley from Arkansas in the north to Louisiana in the south. The second great migration of blacks in America had dwarfed the first. More than a million men and women—almost double the number of Africans carried to mainland North America—had been carried from the seaboard states to the dark, loamy soil of the blackbelt.[4] There, slaves mastered the cultivation of short-staple cotton, a crop their seventeenth- and eighteenth-cen-

tury forebears hardly knew. The cotton revolution—like the earlier tobacco and rice revolutions—eroded the traditional constraints on the masters' power. Limitations on the slaveholders' authority achieved through years of arduous negotiations disappeared in an instant, as planters used the new demands of cotton cultivation to revoke long-established prerogatives, strip slaves of skills, and ratchet up the level of exploitation.[5]

In time, slaves reclaimed—and sometimes even enlarged—the rights they deemed customary. They reconstructed their families and communities, salvaging what they could from the wreckage of the cotton revolution. In the process, they created a host of new institutions. The most important of these, the African-American church, grew quickly as the small cadre of eighteenth-century converts found power in the promise of everlasting glory and the assurance that their children—if not themselves—would celebrate the Great Jubilee. Blackbelt residence, cotton cultivation, and African-American Christianity set antebellum slavery apart from the bondage suffered by the charter, plantation, and revolutionary generations. The novelty of the antebellum experience speaks to the re-creation of African-American slavery during its last half century.

The passage from the revolution of 1776 to the revolution of 1861 did not come easily. Only with consistent purpose and the application of great force could planters and their allies crush the hopes aroused in the Age of Revolution. Taking their place atop the republic's new state and federal governments, planters systematically sealed the exits from slavery. Throughout the southern states, legislators tightened restrictions on manumission that had been relaxed during the revolutionary era. In the North, where the progress toward emancipation slowed, slaveholders concocted new subterfuges to stay the final triumph of liberty. Throughout the nation, the courts turned away from judicial emancipation, often rewriting the rules of evidence to assure the failure of suits for freedom. In 1793 a new national fugitive slave law, mandated by the Constitution, required local authorities to return fugitives to their owners. The possibilities of escaping bondage declined, and in most places would not revive again until the crisis of union sent federal soldiers into the South.[6]

Men and women who secured their freedom by revolutionary wartime service, law, or judicial degree discovered the revolution's promised liberty to be circumscribed and stunted. State lawmakers welcomed black people to freedom with a hail of restrictive legislation that denied

black men the elemental rights of citizenship afforded to white men, including the right to vote, sit on juries, testify in court, and serve in the militia. Various states further shrank the bounds of freedom by prohibiting free people of color from traveling freely, requiring them to carry identification papers, and limiting their ability to hold property. The federal government added its weight to the degradation, prohibiting black men from entering the national militia or even delivering the mail. The constraints on legal freedom spilled into the most mundane aspects of everyday life. Law and practice excluded free people of color from many public places and segregated them in others.[7]

As the revolutionary hopes dissipated, the black people's friends disappeared. Prominent among those who had once opposed slavery and pumped for equality but who now disavowed their earlier stance were evangelical Christians. White Methodists and Baptists surrendered their waning abolitionist commitment and deprived black congregants of their place in previously biracial churches. "The degraded state of the minds of slaves render[s] them totally incompetent to the task of judging correctly the business of the church," declared one Virginia Baptist association in 1802, as it disfranchised its enslaved membership. The institutional bulwarks which separated spiritual and secular equality were put in place, so that God's common purpose for master and slave would not impede the function of slave society.[8]

Slaves and free blacks did not relinquish the promise of the Age of Revolution. Their hopes sparked bitter resistance to the new regime. Black people petitioned, paraded, and protested for their rights. In the process, they extended the egalitarian legacy of the Declaration of Independence and became its great champion.[9] Where they were denied redress, however, their frustration frequently boiled over into violent resistance. Much as the plantation revolution had sparked a wave of insurrection, the liquidation of the revolutionary ideals ignited new insurgencies.

Fires that smoldered in Charleston, New Orleans, and New York in the 1790s again burst into flames, as the conspiratorial and insurrectionary activity continued into the new century. In 1800 Virginia officials uncovered a wide-ranging conspiracy in their own capital. The execution of its prime movers, the blacksmith Gabriel and some dozen of his coconspirators, hardly ended the plotting. Within months, authorities discovered similar intrigues south of Richmond, and during the next decade

their successors unearthed more conspiracies in the slave states and territories. Cool heads dismissed many of these as the feverish reaction of alarmists, but an uprising by several hundred armed slaves upriver from New Orleans in the parishes of St. Charles and St. John the Baptist shook even the most confident. Led by one Charles Deslondes—a slave whose roots may have reached into Saint Domingue—the insurgents marched on New Orleans. When confronted by United States regulars, they did not break and run but "formed themselves in a line" and returned the fire.[10]

Eventually, American soldiers subdued the rebels and hanged and beheaded Deslondes and his confederates. Their mutilated remains hung in public as an object lesson to those who dared to challenge the slave regime. But the tremors Gabriel and Deslondes set in motion were not confined to the slave states. In 1801, when a New York slaveholder, herself a refugee from Saint Domingue, tried to evade the recently enacted emancipation law by removing her slaves south, black people took to the streets. Led by Marcelle Sam, Isaac Pierre, and Ceneall, they refused to countenance the reenslavement of refugees of Toussaint's revolution.[11]

Slave discontent continued into the second decade of the nineteenth century, especially as a second war with Britain increased the slaveholders' vulnerability. When the British invaded the Chesapeake and the lower Mississippi Valley in the War of 1812, they found slaves eager to ally with the enemy of their enemy. Scarlet-coated former slaves, hastily enlisted in the Colonial Marines, took part in the torching of Washington and assisted other fugitives in making their escape from bondage. When the British retreated, many of these men and women followed them to freedom in the Caribbean, Canada, and Sierra Leone.[12] In 1814 the Treaty of Ghent settled the Anglo-American conflict and reduced the risks of internal subversion, but echoes from the Age of Revolution continued into the third decade of the nineteenth century. In 1822 Denmark Vesey—a Charleston free black who could quote liberally from the Declaration of Independence, knew well the history of Saint Domingue, and planned his rebellion for July 14—joined urban free people of color and plantation slaves, creating the planters' greatest nightmare. Vesey met the same grim end as the other slave rebels.[13] Thereafter, conspirators and insurrectionists who drew their inspiration from the Age of Revolution went underground, only to surface again with the arrival of the Union army in 1861.[14]

In the period between the Age of Revolution and the American Civil War, blackness and whiteness gained new meaning, as masters and slaves renegotiated the terms of life and livelihood. Familiar struggles over the division of labor, the organization of work, the definition of the stint, and the nature of discipline, along with rights to gardens and provision grounds, to travel off the plantation, and to family security and cultural autonomy, were played out yet again. Whether those negotiations resulted in a more confining enslavement or eventual liberation, new representations of black people emerged.

Such representations rarely depicted black people in a favorable light. In the eyes of most white Americans, the standing of black people had fallen dramatically by the middle years of the nineteenth century. Many, perhaps most, believed that the inferiority of black people originated not in their circumstance—be it enslavement in the South or poverty in the North—but in their nature. In this view, people of African descent were not simply less privileged but were congenitally different from people of untainted European ancestry. Proponents of such beliefs bolstered their case with a hodge-podge of conflicting biblical and scientific interpretations of human origins. The tangled illogic of their arguments did little to shake the belief that peoples of color were in all meaningful ways inferior to whites, a notion that flowed as much from authoritative reasoning to popular opinion as the reverse. White supremacy manifested itself in every aspect of antebellum society, from the ballot box to the bedroom.[15]

Slaveholders discovered much of value in supremacist ideology. The inferiority of black people confirmed the necessity, if not the benevolence, of mastership. Planters elaborated such notions, sometimes endowing black men and women with a vicious savagery and sometimes with a docile imbecility. From either perspective, the vision of the natural inferiority of peoples of African descent became a mainstay of the defense of slavery and proof certain that the proper—and most humane—place for black people was under the watchful supervision of a white master.[16]

But white supremacy was not simply a production of slave societies. The limitations on black life grew along with the celebration of democracy in the free states as well. The rambunctious democratic order that elevated the "common man" to new heights also fostered the growth of racism. When the property-based suffrage fell before the forces of democratization, racial restrictions rose. Either through exclusion or segre-

gation, black people played a far smaller role in northern society in 1850 than they had in 1750.[17]

A new cult of whiteness affected even the opponents of black slavery. Although many, true to the Declaration of Independence, rejected demeaning representations of black peoples, others subscribed to the new racial ethos. Their objections to slavery rested not on the subordination of black people, which they accepted as inevitable, but on the unfortunate effects that this peculiar form of subordination had on the white citizenry. Slavery, in short, was wrong for what it did to white people, not for the injury inflicted on black men and women. Racism thus became embedded in the opposition to slavery as well as in its defense, giving it a life separate and apart from chattel bondage. Such racialist beliefs easily survived the destruction of slavery and gained new life in postemancipation society.[18]

Nineteenth-century racial thought was both ubiquitous and novel. Only rarely had such sentiment been articulated in the years prior to the cotton revolution. Although whites disparaged the charter, plantation, and revolutionary generations, they readily accepted a common humanity. Lowly status and miserable conditions were enough to account for the alleged indolence, stupidity, and libidinous heathenism of black people as seen through the eyes of whites. Behind the most vicious assaults on the character of people of African descent during the first two hundred years of American slavery stood a firm belief that, given an opportunity, black people would behave precisely like whites—which was what made African and African-American slaves at once so valuable and so dangerous.[19] The new racism rejected this logic.

Whether viewed from the perspective of the past or the future, the transformation of black society in the years that followed the Age of Revolution underscored the dynamic nature of slavery and its reciprocal relations to notions of race. Looking forward from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the era of the Civil War, slavery's changing character reveals how much of the antebellum experience was presaged in the first two centuries. The renegotiation of slavery would continue as black people marched across the blackbelt, learned the mysteries of cotton, and remade Christianity from remembered African cosmologies. However, looking backward from this same perspective, slavery's changing character suggests that the first two centuries of African-American captivity were no prolegomenon to an antebellum quintessence. Instead, the first two hundred years of African-American life embraced a distinctive experience which gave master and slave, black and white, unique definitions. Slavery's changing reality continually transformed race through the half-century prior to emancipation. The fresh representations of black and white that emerged in the blackbelt reflected the new circumstances, but they were also inescapably anchored in a past that reached back across the Atlantic. The history of the "many thousands gone" would guide slavery's last generation and would inform African-American life to the present day.