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“I Found That There Were Puzzling Exceptions”

The Economic Foundations of Race during Slavery and Jim Crow

Slaves and free African Americans, both before and after emancipation, recognized that white supremacy, like slavery itself, was an issue whose origins were best understood in economic terms, and that race and racism had to be reckoned as consequences rather than causes of slavery. The same held true for many of their descendants who endured the post-Reconstruction nadir. Profiting through the theft of labor was the nucleus of enslavement. Were proslavery logic to be believed, slaves reasoned, no explanation existed for slaves to behave in anything other than docile, submissive, and imitative ways. But resistance to enslavement had a long and distinguished history in the slave quarters, from the creation of distinct cultures and independent ethical codes, to acts of everyday disobedience, and on to the organized rebellions that earlier antebellum generations had attempted.¹ By continually measuring slaveholders' gusty rhetoric against their own experience, slaves easily repudiated race and religion as primeval determinants of conduct or rank. Racism was obviously a learned rather than natural behavior, they concluded. One investigation into slave ideologies about whiteness found that slaves rarely ascribed racial characteristics to whites, but rather defined them as people with power and privilege, which were consequences of slavery rather than race.² Many flatly rejected a self-image of inferiority in favor of a belief in their own moral equality, if not superiority. Slaves and free African Americans were also adept at deciphering racial rhetoric, a process that reinforced democratic humanism and egalitarianism. Many

slaves also understood that the economic exploitation operating not only against them but among whites as well required racial ideologies. Thus, in no small part, racism's economic causation had to be cloaked from non-slaveholders to protect the planter class from challenges from lower-class whites. From slaves' perspectives, the countless contradictions and realities about race were hidden in plain view, demolishing slaveholder logic on a daily basis. Race failed to define who was and was not enslaved, or who was or was not a slaveholder. Racial ideology's obvious purpose was to control people's views in such a way as to defuse resistance—white as well as black.

Frederick Douglass scrutinized the doctrines of proslavery ideology as a young boy, shortly after he realized that he was a slave. "I found," he recalled, "that there were puzzling exceptions" to racial dogma. "I knew of blacks who were *not* slaves; I knew of whites who were *not* slaveholders; and I knew of persons who were *nearly* white, who were slaves." He could only conclude that "*Color . . . was a very unsatisfactory basis for slavery. . . . It was not color, but crime, not God, but man, that afforded the true explanation of the existence of slavery.*"³ When he acquired literacy, his first love was the *Columbian Orator*, where he read speeches about the rights of man that confirmed his childhood observations: "If I ever wavered under the consideration, that the Almighty, in some way, ordained slavery . . . I wavered no longer. I had now penetrated the secret of all slavery and oppression, and had ascertained their true foundation to be in the pride, the power and the avarice of man."⁴

By the 1830s, people who could potentially pass as white figured disproportionately among the total number of fugitives.⁵ Slaves often commented on the growing numbers among them who could pass for white, if not in daylight then in dark, or who were only barely "tinged." Everyone knew that slaveholders often sold their own children fathered with slave women, if they did not keep the children as their own slaves. It was common knowledge that "thousands are ushered into the world, annually, who—like myself—owe their existence to white fathers," Douglass observed, "and, most frequently, to their masters, and master's sons."⁶ Kidnapped or orphaned white, European, and Native American children were known to be among the enslaved.⁷ As Douglass sarcastically noted, "if the lineal descendants of Ham are only to be enslaved . . . slavery in this country will soon become an unscriptural institution." This state of affairs left slave girls and women "at

the mercy of the fathers, sons or brothers of . . . master[s]. The thoughtful know the rest.”⁸

“Slavery in America is not at all confined to persons of any particular complexion,” William Craft explained. This he knew only too well; his wife, Ellen, was fair enough to pass for white, a fact that was central to their escape plan. Ellen not only camouflaged herself as white, but as male and a slaveholder, with William acting as her slave accompanying his master on a search for medical care. “There are a very large number of slaves as white as any one,” Craft explained, “but as the evidence of a slave is not admitted in court against a free white person, it is almost impossible for a white child, after having been kidnapped and sold into or reduced to slavery, in a part of the country where it is not known (as often is the case), ever to recover its freedom. I have myself conversed with several slaves who told me that their parents were white and free; but that they were stolen away from them and sold when quite young. As they could not tell their address, and also as the parents did not know what had become of their lost and dear little ones, of course all traces of each other were gone.” He then told the story of two young German emigrants, Dorothea and Salome Muller, who were sold into slavery when their father died. Salome was not freed for twenty-five years. Moreover, Craft had known “worthless white people to sell their own free children into slavery; and, as there are good-for-nothing whites as well as coloured persons everywhere, no one, perhaps, will wonder at such inhuman transactions; particularly in the Southern States of America, where I believe there is a greater want of humanity and high principle amongst the whites, than among any other civilized people in the world.”⁹ Lewis Clarke, a Kentucky fugitive who could pass for white, “knew a slave that was *all* white” who had been “stolen from Virginia when he was a very little boy, and he had been kept in slavery ever since.”¹⁰

These mercurial links between race and status meant that slaves became adept at plumbing the actual content of a person’s character, and exercised caution about relying reflexively on race to judge someone’s integrity. Fugitives, in particular, had to be especially skeptical about facile connections between race and behavior. Race could be a useful parameter in taking the measure of character, and most slaves wisely lacked any trust whatsoever in whites, though not because they were white, but because of their collective historical reputation. Slavery had wrought that outcome, leaving

race as one factor among many to be taken into account when assessing behavior. Particularly when blacks were in danger and in an unfamiliar environment, color proved an unreliable indicator of loyalty often enough to warrant prudence.¹¹ The problem of black informants was a case in point. Runaways exercised due diligence about the reliability of unknown African Americans, sometimes especially those who were enslaved. Both free blacks and slaves were known to inform in order to collect rewards, with which many planned to purchase themselves or kin. Some became turncoats to save their own lives. In Louisiana, Solomon Northup knew the architect of a plan for mass escape to Mexico, Lew Cheney, who turned informer when the plan was uncovered. Cheney told his captors that the group had intended to “murder every white person along the bayou.” An “indiscriminate slaughter” of slaves ensued, and Cheney “was even rewarded for his treachery. He is still living, but his name is despised and execrated by all his race throughout the parishes of Rapides and Avoyelles.”¹²

Abolitionist David Walker was especially vexed by black informants and acidly addressed their immorality in the *Appeal* and in his speeches. He knew that race dissected from historical context furnished shallow water in which to float sweeping arguments about human nature. “We see, to our sorrow, in the very midst of us, a gang of villains, who, for the paltry sum of fifty or a hundred dollars, will kidnap and sell into perpetual slavery, their fellow creatures!” he reminded an 1828 Boston audience. “And, too, if one of their fellow sufferers, whose miseries are a little more enhanced by the scourges of a tyrant, should abscond from his pretended owner . . . to take a little recreation, and unfortunately fall in their way, he is gone! For they will sell him for a glass of whiskey! . . . shall we suffer such notorious villains to rest peaceably among us?”¹³ Walker seized upon an attempted escape by a gang of sixty slaves being marched from Maryland to Mississippi in 1829 to illustrate this point in his *Appeal*. Having killed two traders and left a third for dead, the fugitives took their money and fled. One of the women, however, helped the third trader onto his horse, enabling his escape. Walker drew attention to “the ignorant and deceitful actions of this coloured woman. . . . this servile woman helped him upon his horse. . . . what do you think of this? Was it the natural fine feelings of this woman, to save such a wretch alive? I know that the blacks . . . are more humane and merciful than the most enlightened and refined European that can be found in

all the earth. Let no one say that I assert this because I am prejudiced on the side of my colour, and against the whites or Europeans. . . . Natural observations have taught me these things; there is a solemn awe in the hearts of the blacks, as it respects *murdering* men: whereas the whites . . . where they have the advantage, or think that there are any prospects of getting it, they murder all before them, in order to subject men to wretchedness and degradation under them. This is the natural result of pride and avarice. But I declare, the actions of this black woman are really insupportable. . . . we must remember that *humanity, kindness* and the *fear of the Lord*, does not consist in protecting *devils*. . . . The black men acted like *blockheads*. Why did they not make sure of the wretch? He would have made sure of them, if he could."¹⁴

By the same token, being able to judge when a white person might reasonably be trusted was a skill long practiced in the community. In 1800, for example, a white shipmaster sheltered Virginia rebel leader Gabriel, and Gabriel likely recognized this man as one who, like many revolutionary-era tars, took his egalitarianism seriously. It was a free black intent upon the reward money who ultimately betrayed Gabriel.¹⁵ Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters president A. Philip Randolph's formerly enslaved father, James Randolph, made this issue about race and character clear for his sons. "You have no right to hate anybody because of his color," he taught them. Instead, analyze character based upon actions. "There are white men and women who have as deep a sense of Christianity as I have and your mother has or any Negro. Therefore they must be given support when issues arise that have social significance, meaning that the work that they do is of benefit to all Negroes."¹⁶

In making her protracted escape from slavery, Harriet Jacobs decided to rely on a slave mistress who had a close relationship with Jacobs's grandmother, Molly Horniblow, and whose slave Betty, a friend of Jacobs, vouched for the mistress's dependability. The mistress hid Jacobs in her Edenton, North Carolina, home for some time, and she and Betty carefully kept Jacobs's presence securely hidden from another slave, the unreliable Jenny. The mistress colluded in sending Jacobs's master, James Norcom, off Jacobs's trail. Norcom was certain that Jacobs was in New York, whence she had contrived to have a letter sent to him. When Norcom came to the home where Jacobs was hiding out, he did so not because he suspected Jacobs was