

3 Views of American Slavery

#1: Something very profound...would have had to intervene in order...to produce, on the American plantation, a society of helpless dependents. We may suppose that every African who became a slave underwent an experience whose crude psychic¹ impact must have been staggering and whose consequences superseded² anything that had ever previously happened to him.... Much of his past had been annihilated; nearly every prior connection had been severed.... [H]is family and kinship arrangements, his language, the tribal religion,...the name he had once borne, and so on...none of it any longer carried much meaning.... He could now look to none but his master, the one man to whom the system [of slavery] had committed his entire being: the man upon whose will depended his food, his shelter, his sexual connections, whatever moral instruction he might be offered, whatever “success” within the system, his very security—in short, everything.

Source: *Excerpt from Stanley Elkins, Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life (University of Chicago Press, 1959). In this groundbreaking book, Elkins argued that slavery in North America was a brutal, “closed” system that, much like Nazi concentration camps during World War II, stripped its victims of their culture, wrecked their social relations, and turned them into childlike “Sambos” whose personalities were mostly shaped by their masters’ demands.*

#2: Although denied the right to marry, [slaves] made families; denied the right to an independent religious life, they established churches; denied the right to hold property, they owned many things. Defined as property and condemned as little more than beasts, they refused to surrender their humanity.... For too long, scholars have taken the slaves’ legal status as...property and their social standing at the extreme of subordination³ as evidence that slaves stood outside history. [Scholars] [d]epicted [them] as socially dead...“absolute aliens,” “genealogical isolates,”...or unreflective “sambos” who were known for who they were rather than what they did. Appreciating the ongoing struggle between slaves and slaveowners gives the lie to such assumptions. Knowing that a person was a slave does not tell everything about him or her. Put another way, slaveholders severely circumscribed⁴ the lives of enslaved people, but they never fully defined them. 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.

Source: *Excerpt from Ira Berlin, Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).*

#3: The most tragic, indeed horrifying, aspect of slavery was its inhumanity. All enslaved people had memories, emotions, experiences, and thoughts. They saw their experiences in full color, felt the pain of the lash, the heat of the sun, and the heartbreak of loss, whether through death, betrayal, or sale. Communities developed on a shared sense of suffering, common work, and even family ties. Enslaved people communicated in the slave markets of the urban South and worked together to help their families, ease their loads, or simply frustrate their enslavers. Simple actions of resistance, such as breaking a hoe, running a wagon off the road, causing a delay in production due to injury, running away, or even pregnancy provided a language shared by nearly all enslaved laborers, a sense of unity that remained unsaid but was acted out daily.

Source: *Excerpt from Joseph L. Locke and Ben Wright, eds., The American Yawp: A Massively Collaborative Open U.S. History Textbook, Vol. 1: To 1877 (Stanford University Press, 2019).*

¹ mental

² surpassed

³ inferior status, lowliness, subservience

⁴ restricted