

Selling Themselves: Slavery, Survival, and the Path of Least Resistance

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If a single theme might be said to unify modern studies of slavery in America, it would be resistance. As a point of departure and as a destination, the presumption that the enslaved resisted their captors at each and every turn has established a view of the African American past in which individuals and communities asserted themselves despite their oppression, and neatly positions the experience of enslavement as prologue to the struggle for Civil Rights and racial equality in the twentieth century. The resultant resistance paradigm shapes interpretations of such diverse subjects as the sources and strength of African American culture, the importance of family and community, the significance of literacy, or the ways in which enslaved women responded to the exploitation of their fertility and sexual vulnerability. Within the paradigm, each of these (and many more) aspects of enslaved life and culture are read as defiant assertions of self and communal worth, values which were effectively denied enslaved African Americans via slaveholders' brutal practices of domination and exploitation. This historiographical orthodoxy follows the ex-slave narratives in constructing a picture of the enslaved as fixated upon the ultimate goal of obtaining freedom, only making do with covert acts of "day to day resistance" where overt acts would lead to self-destruction, an approach that stands as a necessary corrective to the romantic image of moonlight and magnolia it has supplanted.¹

Yet as commendable and necessary as this refocusing of historiographical attention may be, overemphasising resistance risks constructing an essentialist history in which the enslaved remain no less dehumanised than they were in the racist accounts we have justly consigned to the historical dustbin. The narrative of defiance all too often renders the enslaved as superhuman, somehow impervious to the psychological and social damage their subordination would wreak on lesser souls. By the same token, slaveholders are all too easily written off as subhuman, so arrogant (or perhaps just so stupid), that they failed to realise when they were being

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manipulated; so concerned that their chattels acknowledge the justice of “black” subjugation and “white” dominance as to have been incapable of recognising their own brutality. In short, it is as if a generation of historians have collectively forgotten that the Hegelian master/slave dialectic ought not to be taken literally. The result of this misstep, argues Nell Irvin Painter, is that the enslaved have too often “emerged from historians’ pages in the pose of lofty transcendence over racist adversity.” And as she goes on to say:

Rejecting that reasoning is imperative, because denying slaves psychological personhood impoverishes the study of everyone in slave-holding society.²

Such historiographical critiques are fuelling an emergent counter-revisionist insurgency that is more or less united around the feeling that “the emphasis on slave agency – in the family, in gardens, in the ‘infrapolitics’ of master-slave negotiation – is making us forget the raw realities of slavery: the system was about making black people work for white people, and the whites had all the guns.”³ Thus David Brion Davis typifies the obsession with resistance as history written “in the shadow of ‘what should have happened’” and suggests that in consequence it has become “virtually impossible to explain why slavery could be so economically productive and successful over long periods of time, why slave prices in the South continued to rise through the 1850s and well into the Civil War, and how two or three adult white males could control one hundred or two hundred slaves on an isolated ... Southern plantation.”⁴ Walter Johnson takes this further, suggesting that the long shadow cast by debates over the equal humanity of the enslaved (to which Elkins, Moynihan, Blassingame and Gutman simply added new chapters), have left us with a discourse so insistent on evincing enslaved agency and resistance as to “unwittingly reproduce the incised terms and analytical limits of a field of contest (black humanity: for or against) framed by the white-supremacist assumptions which made it possible to ask such a question in the first place.”⁵

Edward E. Baptist takes a slightly different tack but one which adds a further dimension to this critique. The problem with resistance, implies Baptist, lies not in the attempt to tell the history of “what should have been,” but rather in the fact that valorising resistance effectively devalues survival and brands those that simply endured their enslavement as inadequate, tragically implicated in the very mechanisms of social control and racial objectification that sustained their bondage. This is a point of view that is of course most closely associated with Genovese’s *Roll*,

Jordan, Roll, though it might equally well be linked to such influential historians of American slavery as Philip Morgan, Bertram Wyatt-Brown or Peter Kolchin, to name but a few.⁶ As Baptist avers, however, such an analysis demonstrates not the failure of the enslaved but the failure of the model, a model which is gendered in its insistence on a masculine ideal of heroic violence, and epistemologically far from neutral in its implied reference to *Le Resistance*.⁷

And indeed what of those who did not resist? Are they to be viewed as failures, or, worse still, collaborators? While few contemporary historians would be willing to identify their own histories with Malcolm X's "house Negro"/"field Negro" dichotomy, this has all too often been implied by the resistance paradigm.⁸ Moreover, this is an implication which, when it informs the history of "what should have been," tends to rule out, or at least profoundly (mis)shape, the study of those men and women whose choices resistance can only construct as failure or collaboration: the study of defiance often seems rather more attractive, exciting and ideologically satisfying than a study of compliance, and the very best the non-resistor can hope for in such histories is a supporting role as Uncle Tom. A recent discussion on *h-slavery* saw this binary approach taken to its logical conclusion: "if we are unable to acknowledge that some slaves were actually vile and dreadful human beings," argued Professor Anthony Lee, "we will also be unable to see that some others were heroic and selfless. You simply cannot have one without the other."⁹ Perhaps so, but this surely highlights the redundancy of a monochromatic representation: either extreme, the collaborator or the resistor, the vile and dreadful or the heroic and selfless, were just that, the extremes of enslaved personality; a history of slavery which is no more than the study of extreme behaviour must be inadequate at best, a caricature at worst.

One way to sidestep such problems whilst at the same time avoiding the denigration of those who relied upon subtle means to endure and normalise lives lived in situations that seem to us to be unendurable, is a return to Bauer and Bauer's "day to day resistance." This is essentially the approach used by Philip Morgan in the introduction to his excellent monograph, *Slave Counterpoint*. Here he argues that "in work and in play, in public and in private, violently and quietly, slaves struggled against masters," an analysis that provides the excuse by which he justifies his omission of a chapter on resistance, pleading that as a study of enslaved culture, the "whole book is a study of resistance."¹⁰ It is also apparent in Christopher Morris' attempt to restore the dignity of resistance to the accommodationist argument by putting a new spin on the failures of Genovese's slaves via the concept of an everyday

enslaved resistance that “in certain circumstances” articulated with slaveholder domination, allowing each to use the other “for their own distinct purposes.”¹¹

Yet subtle and nuanced as they may be, such approaches seem to me to be far too elastic: deploying the resistance paradigm in order to give meaning to almost every aspect of enslaved behaviour that did not conform to the wishes of slaveowners reduces the concept to nebulous insignificance; if everything from the “black” economy to enslaved medicinal practice, from playing dumb to committing infanticide is to be understood as a form of resistance, then what use does the concept actually have as an analytical category? Indeed, as has already been implied by the observation that we can only truly appreciate the heroism of resistance by contrasting it with the villainy of collaboration, the reasoning behind such a discursive framework is at least as ideological as it is historical.

Not that this should deter us from historicising enslaved defiance, and my purpose here is not to deny that resistance took place nor to repudiate the work of decades of scholarship on the subject as no more than ideological clap-trap; it is far from this, and if I have overstated my case, it is only to highlight the problem rather than to construct a straw man. Instead, the intention of this essay is to problematise the resistance paradigm by qualifying it with the concept of a socially-sanctioned and culturally-transmitted set of survival strategies that included, but were not limited to, defiance and compliance, or to stick within the parameters of the established epistemology, both resistance and collaboration. I therefore examine instances in which the enslaved attempted to deal with their owners and propose readings of these exchanges that are sensitive to the fact that in order to achieve their own ends, slaves often had to comply with slaveholder demands, struck bargains where they could, and otherwise presented themselves in ways that consistently required more than mere role-play. To put this another way, while I am not seeking to revivify long-dead stereotypes of infantilised slaves who were unwittingly complicit in their own enslavement, I am arguing that the conduct of such exchanges suggests that many African Americans knew that they had little choice but to accept their fate and were thus attempting to shape liveable lives within the constraints of slavery. If that process must, in and of itself, be construed as resistance then one ends up, in the case of enslaved trustees (be they overseers or drivers, house or field slaves, quasi-free artisans or even their masters’ “concubines”), with the paradox of collaboration *as* resistance, or else with the pathos of individual and communal acts of defiance “inadvertently contribut[ing] to the very system” of bondage.¹²

My analysis also recognises the important shift in slaveholding practice brought about by the market and transport revolutions of the antebellum era and situates enslaved survival tactics within a disciplinary system that was underpinned less by physical violence (actual or withheld) than by means of psychological and sociological terrorism. By this I mean to highlight the disciplinary effects of two institutions, the interstate trade and the enslaved family, for it was in the tension between the rewards of the latter and the threat of the former that certain slaveholders discovered a most potent means of maintaining discipline. In an era which saw more than a million individuals sold away from the “exporting” states of the Seaboard South, and perhaps twice as many moved about locally through trade, slaveholder relocation, and hire, it is hard to exaggerate the destruction that enforced migration wrought on individual, familial and communal life; it is nonetheless obvious why this threat became the ultimate disciplinary strategy by which some such slaveholders kept their “troublesome property” in line.¹³

In the face of such a psychologically brutal system, the development of socio-culturally mandated and transmitted survival strategies was a necessity, and training started early in the short childhood of the enslaved. Indeed, just as has been argued for tactics of resistance, tried and tested stratagems would surely have been carefully inculcated into the young through recognisable means of cultural transmission such as role-play and folklore. This point is emphasised by Wilma King who argues that enslaved parents sought “to teach fundamental survival skills at early ages ... socializ[ing] their offspring to endure slavery by paying deference to whites while maintaining self respect.” Despite emphasising survival and endurance, however, King’s interpretation of such practices remains rooted in the discourse of resistance, as she makes clear in the very next sentence: “This embodied a major act of resistance and equipped children to defend themselves on the psychological battlefield.”¹⁴

Whether such childrearing practices were themselves resistant (whether, for that matter, they taught resistance), or whether both might be better understood in terms of tactics for survival, as is strongly implied by the concept of “socialization,” it is worth keeping in mind that the young learn by experience as much as by example. And the experience of growing up in bondage provided enslaved children with many opportunities to learn lessons other than those their parents might have taught. In particular, as Marie Jenkins Schwartz has shown, that antebellum slaveholders, who

typically disguised their mastery by utilising the language of family and domesticity, presented young slaves with multiple parental figures who competed for their loyalty and affection:

Children had to learn how to negotiate a dangerous world, which entailed pleasing two sets of adults with different expectations. Their dependence encouraged them to respect whatever adults looked out for their interests, but children in the early years had difficulty determining who had their best interests at heart. An owner's special treat or favor could serve as evidence of love, in a young child's estimation, but boys and girls were fearful of the slaveholder's power to separate them from loved ones and of the punishments regularly inflicted on slaves. Consequently, owners found themselves competing with parents for the children's loyalty by mitigating slavery's brutality.¹⁵

Given such circumstances, enslaved children also discovered that these were situations they could exploit, thus learning a valuable lesson in how to survive and endure slavery which would stand them in good stead in their later years.

Such tactics are a commonplace in the letters victims of forced migration wrote to potential purchasers who might buy a loved one and prevent them being "sold down the river," or to the very men and women that had actually elected to sell or hire them away from their family and kin, a range of correspondence which shows enslaved men and women routinely attempting to flatter one master by comparing them favourably to another. This is not to suggest their stratagems be read as examples of infantilisation but rather that they might be understood as instances in which childhood socialisation equipped enslaved adults to respond tactically to situations in which, like children, they were virtually but not completely powerless. For instance, in 1854 Rice C. Ballard, a slave trader turned planter, received a letter from Delia, an enslaved woman who worked in his townhouse in Louisville, Kentucky. She wrote to ask him to buy her husband, Henry, whose own master had sold him to a speculator named Miller who planned to transport him to the Deep South. Whereas both Miller and her husband's master had, according to Delia, dealt with her and Henry dishonourably, she felt sure that Ballard, as an honourable man and as a husband and father himself, would surely intercede on her behalf. Signing herself "Your exceedingly humble servant," Delia therefore pleaded with Ballard, appealing to his humanity as she endeavoured to get to him to recognise hers:

I hope you will think for a moment how hard it is. my husband is take away from me I never expect to see him again in this world mo. Master please bye him I have don all tha I can if you dont bye him please get som body to bye him that will let him com & see me.¹⁶

Yet we should also be aware that correspondents such as Delia wrote from a position of absolute dependence and that all they had to offer beyond the labour that would be taken from them in any case was the promise that they would be dutiful. Letters written by correspondents who were seeking to save themselves or members of their family from being sold or hired away are therefore replete with promises to work harder, to be dutiful and reliable, to be, in short, as slavish as their masters expected a slave to be. For example, a year before he received the letter from Delia, another enslaved woman wrote to Ballard. Named Virginia, she had been the “concubine” of Ballard’s business partner, Samuel Boyd, bearing two of his children and pregnant with a third, yet she and her small family now faced being separated at the auction block after Boyd’s wife had prevailed upon her husband and Ballard to have them sold. Pleading with him to relent, or at the very least not to part them (requests Ballard would refuse out of hand), Virginia employed a similar stratagem to Delia, contrasting Ballard’s honour and his ability to “sympathise with those in distress” with Samuel Boyd’s dishonourable conduct. Moreover, she also promised to be a good slave if only he would afford her the opportunity: “All I require or ask” she wrote, “is for an agent to be afforded hear to see to me and time to Earn the money, honestly to buy my children. If I have to work my finger ends off I will earn evry dime.”¹⁷

For both these women, the only recourse they had in their attempts to save their families from destruction was an appeal to their owner. In this instance the sad irony was that their master was in fact a man who had made his money from the interstate slave trade, and whose business correspondence reveals that he and his trading partners routinely shared jokes about raping young enslaved women before selling them as “fancy maids.”¹⁸ Whether Delia or Virginia knew the details of his past or not, it seems unlikely that Ballard had completely transformed himself into the kind and generous soul they flatteringly described. Even if he had, attempting to appeal to the better nature of a man who still had a significant interest in the trade was surely a sign of each woman’s desperation.¹⁹

Of course it might be argued that these correspondents, and the many other slaves who composed similar letters and made similar appeals and promises, were

merely playing a role and that their self-presentations as dutiful and humble slaves were no more than performances that they could shrug off when they no longer served their purposes. Perhaps so, yet I would suggest that when the enslaved explicitly placed themselves at the mercy of slaveholders who already claimed absolute power over them, the cost in terms of self-esteem and self-worth must have been considerable: to have nothing to offer that could not be taken by force except for one's subservience was surely a difficult cross to bear, especially when even this bargain had to be struck from a pose of profound subordination.

In any case, such strategies failed more often than they succeeded, and so enslaved people who were forcibly parted now faced a new challenge: how to reassert and/or maintain connections to those they left behind and thus retain some possibility of reunification. For most this was virtually impossible, but a few managed to write letters, or have letters written, back to the people who had originally sold them. One such correspondent was an enslaved woman named Vilet Lester who, in August 1857 wrote to her former mistress, Patsey Patterson, of Randolph County, North Carolina.²⁰ From the content of the letter it is apparent that Vilet and Patsey had grown up together – Vilet signs herself as “your long loved and well wishing play mate” – but in 1852 she been sold away from the Patterson family, leaving behind both her mother and daughter. By the time she wrote to Patsey, Vilet was living more than three hundred miles away, in Bullock County, Georgia, as the property of James B. Lester, and one of the interesting features of this text is Vilet's description of her passage from hand to hand as she was sold and resold, and thus transported away from her family and friends by the mechanisms of the slave trade.

Vilet wrote with two distinct purposes: first, she sought to re-establish a connection with the family and friends she left behind in North Carolina, and perhaps even to find someone who would purchase her and bring her back there; second, she wanted to ascertain the whereabouts of her daughter, “my Presus little girl,” who Lester had offered to purchase. To achieve these ends Vilet needed Patsey's cooperation. Only Patsey was in a position to serve as a conduit for Vilet's sentimental messages to her mother, while it appears that she was also the only person that Vilet felt she could depend upon to locate her daughter and to put Lester's offer to whoever now owned the child. As such, the ways in which Vilet appealed to her connection to Patsey and her family, not only reminiscing about their childhood friendship but also suggesting that she found it hard to distinguish her love for her own mother from her love for her former owners, were affective tactics which she

surely hoped would encourage Patsey to do her utmost on behalf of her former slave.²¹ Whether they were effective or not is unclear, but whatever the outcome, I find it hard to imagine that addressing the person who was responsible for selling her and parting her from her family as her “long loved and well wishing play mate” was a comfortable position to adopt. Indeed, I would like to suggest that this kind of self-abasement, however necessary, was surely not without consequences for an individual’s “psychological personhood.”

Yet whatever the cost of such exchanges, there is also the problem of how to fit them into the discourse of resistance. Can we really describe slaves who offered their owners their willing subordination and self-abnegation in exchange for keeping themselves out of the slave trade or facilitating reunions as resisting enslavement? Does not the context of such exchanges render the concept meaningless? Analysing their tactical purpose and effect, on the other hand, provides a more epistemologically open approach, because while such stratagems were sometimes successful insofar as they worked to keep individuals and families from the auction block, or else to ameliorate the worst effects of being parted, they in no way threatened to undermine the smooth functioning of either the institution of slavery or the slave trade that underpinned it. Moreover, each African American that somehow negotiated their own way off the auction block was replaced with another: coffles did not go South half-empty.

These kinds of tactics therefore had consequences for that other supposed mainstay of resistance, the community. Emphasising this point is not to deny the existence or the importance of enslaved communities, for whether enslaved African Americans lived and worked in rural or urban settings, in large gangs or individual workshops, they formed relationships that extended beyond the boundaries of individual slaveholdings, creating social networks that provided their members with significant sources of emotional and practical support. What I am suggesting is that we should not assume that communal solidarity always trumped individual need or that the values of resistance and mutual defence that such networks no doubt fostered outweighed the importance of personal survival. If we acknowledge that enslaved life was lived in the shadow of the auction block, therefore, we also need to recognise how African American’s tactical responses to this threat often operated at an individual and familial level rather than at a communal one and must have at times undermined any sense of community within enslaved neighbourhoods and networks.

An example of how this tension between communal and individual interest might have functioned is to be found in an interesting series of letters received by a wealthy planter named James Cathcart Johnston, the owner of a number of substantial North Carolinian plantations. Johnston travelled a great deal, but when he was at home he resided in the great plantation house he had had built on the grandest of his estates, Hayes, near Edenton, leaving the management of Poplar Plains, the largest of his three Pasquotank County plantations, to an enslaved trustee named Peter. As “superintendent” of Poplar Plains, Peter’s role combined those of farm manager and overseer, duties which he “performed ... in exemplary fashion” over the course of twelve years of service.²² He in turn was supervised by Mr. Hallowell, a neighbouring smallholder upon whom Johnston relied to administer punishment as and when Peter saw fit and whose dependability was rewarded when the unmarried Johnston left him all three Pasquotank plantations in his will. It should be noted, however, that Peter himself was answerable directly to Johnston and the two corresponded on a regular basis, the master requiring his slave to write him regular reports on the behaviour of the Poplar Plains slaves and the progress of work there.

In the summer of 1850 this arrangement was complicated by the arrival of James Sawyer, Johnston’s younger cousin, whose exact role is unclear but who nonetheless lived at Poplar Plains and seems to have overseen much of the work that year, at least in the other two plantations of Salem and Body. Like Peter, Sawyer wrote Johnston weekly reports, “diary letters” as he himself described them, and it is through a comparison of Peter and Sawyer’s correspondence with Johnston that the disciplinary problems at Poplar Plains begin to become apparent. In a series of letters the two wrote to Johnston in the first weeks of October 1850 one encounters differential descriptions of a confrontation between Johnston’s cousin and his trustee over the punishment of another slave named Josiah, with Hallowell appearing as a bit player who was either bullish and brutal, according to Sawyer, or else, as Peter would have it, driven to distraction by Sawyer’s naïve interference in matters he didn’t properly understand.

The details of the incident that sparked the confrontation between the two were themselves a matter of disagreement. According to Peter, his argument with Josiah began when the latter responded to being reprimanded for sloppy workmanship by threatening Peter with an axe. Peter responded by sending for Hallowell to punish him, at which point Josiah ran off to Body plantation to find Sawyer. Peter’s description of what happened next is as follows:

Mr Sawyer... took Josiah's part and said Mr Hallowell shall not give him one lick whiles he was within five miles of hear... and [he] cursed me and Mr Hallowell because I said Mr Hallowell was to whip him... he wanted to whip him his own self. I told him he need not give one lick for me. he said he never shall believe that Josiah done or said any thing. I tryed to reason with him and told him it would not doe for me and him to be tieing up and whipping that it was against your orders. So before he let him be whiped he made him run away and he is out now.²³

Sawyer's story was very different. In a letter which opened with the disparaging comment that he was "sorry that nearly every letter must contain something wrong about the Plantation," Sawyer explained that it was in fact Peter who began the confrontation by raising a handspike to Josiah causing the latter to reach for an axe to defend himself. He then described Peter's response: "Peter told him that he would blow his brains out, and come to the house to get the gun. Josiah said that he did not want Peter to shoot him and he had run away."²⁴ Sawyer then went on to describe his own intercession and the argument over who should whip Josiah, making it clear that Peter was not only unreasonable but also disrespectful, and concluding his letter by explaining that it was Peter's intransigence and brutality rather than anything that Sawyer himself had said or done that had led to Josiah running away.

Though not beyond the bounds of possibility, the idea that Peter actually threatened to shoot Josiah does seem unlikely, and it is even less likely that had he made such a threat he would actually have followed through: these are hardly measures that even the most brutal slaveholder would have sanctioned, and simply would not have been tolerated by a self-proclaimed progressive such as Johnston. Reading between the lines I would therefore suggest that it was actually Sawyer's presence that was the real problem in that it created a cleavage in the power structure which slaves such as Josiah could exploit – another example of the kinds of tactics highlighted above. Yet Sawyer's own response to this was effectively to try to get Peter fired by accusing him of the most serious breach of discipline possible: the intent to murder one of Johnston's slaves. If we keep in mind that the threat of being sold into the slave trade served as the backdrop to plantation discipline in the Antebellum south, then Sawyer's bid to discredit Peter had extremely serious implications. Had Johnston accepted his cousin's account it is unlikely that he would have been satisfied by simply demoting his trustee and sending him back to the fields:

failed overseers/drivers threatened the good order of a plantation in that their presence tended to undermine the authority of their replacements, and slaveowners were apt to get rid of them if they proved to be unreliable.²⁵ Considered in this light, Peter's responses to Sawyer's interventions might be seen as rather more than a spat over who was the ultimate arbiter of Johnston's authority:²⁶ were Peter to have failed to convince his master that he was in the right and remained Johnston's dutiful servant, then he might have quickly found himself as just another slave on the auction block. It is thus quite understandable that Peter should have described Sawyer as "the greatest enemy that I have" since his interference threatened to undermine not only his situation but also his security.²⁷ It is equally important to recognise that in his attempts to re-secure his position and counter Sawyer's accusations, Peter had to undermine another slave, Josiah (just as Josiah had sought to undermine him), and thus expose him to the self-same dangers Peter sought to evade; at the very least, Peter's resistance to Sawyer's interference ultimately resulted in Josiah receiving a severe whipping from Hallowell.

Nor is this an isolated example. In a series of letters written to the Reverend Charles Colcock Jones by a man named Catoe, an enslaved trustee who supervised work at Montevideo (one of the three rice plantations Jones owned in Liberty County, Georgia), Catoe was careful to highlight his own moral rectitude and dedicated service by contrasting this with the bad behaviour of other slaves. A particular focus in this propaganda war was his brother Cash and his wife Phoebe, herself Catoe's wife Marcia's half-sister. Whilst it is difficult to be sure why he singled them out, it is likely that this was in part because Cash was a potential competitor for Catoe's position, and although there were certainly other issues that contributed to Jones' eventual decision to sell Cash's entire family, Catoe's campaign against them was without doubt a major contributory factor. An example may be found in a letter from 1851 in which Catoe reports on the pair's defiant behaviour:

Cash... has given himself up to the old boy, for Since his wife has been with him he appears more petulant and has not only given up going to prayers, but I have several times heard him make use of bad words Whenever he was displeased, & have shamed and talked to him so often, that I have felt it my duty to report him... Phoebe and I get along So, So. So far as yet, She does her work very well, but there is a strong notion now and then to break out but She knows well Enough how it will be if She does, and I am in hopes she will let her better judgement rule her passions.²⁸

Were Peter and Catoe “vile and dreadful human beings,” collaborators who are somehow unworthy of historical attention because they betrayed their race and class? They may have been, though even if they were, we nonetheless need to include them in the history. Such judgements on their likeability aside, however, I am in any case tempted to offer a different conclusion, one which acknowledges the contingencies and vicissitudes of their own lived experiences. For in their own ways each was simply enduring their enslavement, using tactics that sometimes even cost them the respect of their community, although it is worth noting that many slaveholders’ trustees emerged from slavery as community leaders rather than pariahs.²⁹ Moreover, as the experiences of Cash, Phoebe and their family attest, resistance was by no means always the surest route to familial survival; their eldest daughter died of pneumonia on the way from Colcock Jones’ Georgia plantation to the slave market in New Orleans where the rest of the family, like so many other black families, disappears from the records, though it is more likely that they were each sold to different masters than that they had the good fortune to remain together.³⁰ By this measure, it would seem that Catoe and Peter, whose immediate families were not destroyed by slavery, were more successful at shielding themselves and their loved ones from this kind of suffering than their more defiant fellows.

Yet we should not forget that such “victories” came at a cost, for even as we recognise that a good many enslaved African Americans may have sought out the power, privileges and protections slaveholders’ trustees often enjoyed, we must also recognise the trauma such acts of compliance inflicted on them. Peter Randolph, the son of an enslaved driver, described the trustee’s plight as follows:

When they first commence to lash the backs of their fellows, they are like soldiers when they first go to the battle-field; they dread and fear the contest, until they hear the roaring of the cannon, and smell the powder, and mark the whizzing ball; then they rush into the battle, forgetful of all human sympathy while in the fight. So it is with the slave-drivers. After receiving the instructions of their owners, they must forget even their own wives and children, and do all they can for ‘Master.’ If they do not do this, they must receive all that would be given the others. In this manner, their hearts and consciences are hardened, and they become educated to whipping, and lose all human feeling.³¹

While one cannot help but be moved by this empathetic description of the way in which drivers forced to whip their “fellows, until the blood ran down to the ground” were effectively dehumanised by the reflexive psychological impact of their own

brutality, it is nonetheless wanting in one respect: he fails to recognise the advantages that his father's role as driver likely afforded him and his family. Unfortunately, probably because his father died when Peter was only 10 years old, Randolph's narrative does not provide enough detail for the reader to do more than guess at what these may have been, although it does seem that his father may have had visiting privileges (he and his wife were owned by different masters and lived on adjoining plantations) and protections for his family that were not universally enjoyed by the men and women he was required to whip and scorn.³²

The testimony of Nancy Williams, interviewed in 1937 about her recollections of growing up enslaved, can be used to cast some light on what may be missing from Peter Randolph's narrative. Like him, she was the child of an enslaved trustee, and she vividly remembered her father as a cruel man, describing one occasion when he tied her in a sack in the smoke house and smoked her for a time before beating her "somepin awful."³³ His brutality notwithstanding, her father's rank also had its advantages and her testimony reveals just how valuable an enslaved trustee's relationship with their master could be in that after the death of her owner, her father's loss of status resulted in the sudden removal of his ability to secure privileges and protections for his own family. Whereas before this calamity she had lived in relative comfort and enjoyed such advantages as receiving enough pocket money, provided by her father, to buy material for quilting and clothes which she had in turn sold, she now found herself without an income or independence. Worse still, she was to be hired out, with all the humiliation and trauma this involved:

Den come dem hirin' days. De young marsa hired you out for a year.
When dey put me on de block to 'cry me off' all de po' white bacy-
chewin' devils stanin' 'roun waitin' to get me. Den I yealls loud's I
could, 'I don' wan' no po' white man git me! Ain' wanna wuk for no
po' white man!' As de devil would have it, one got me.³⁴

Thus, although Nancy was never sold, her father's loss of status nevertheless brought her to an auction block, the symbolic cornerstone of the African American Diaspora. With her horror at this experience in mind, we might reconsider her father's choices and reflect that his brutality should not be understood in the essentialist terms she proposes – she describes him as a “mean man, a big strong half Injun”³⁵ – but rather as signifying the trauma and shell shock experienced by an enslaved trustee forced into forgetting at least a fraction of “human sympathy” so as to protect and preserve his family.

These speculations return us to the question of performance versus internalisation. While it may be tempting to read the kinds of exchanges discussed above as no more than instances of role-playing in which enslaved correspondents offered slaveholders appropriate assertions of subordination or else played the authoritarian parts they were given (as I myself have argued elsewhere),³⁶ they are also amenable to alternative interpretations. These become most apparent when one compares appeals made at the point of sale or in response to actual separations with letters that enslaved correspondents wrote their masters under other, apparently less stressful, circumstances.³⁷ Where the former understandably read as desperate, self-abnegating attempts at flattery by which an individual sought to keep themselves or members of their family from being sold away or else to be reunited with loved ones, so too do the latter to the extent that they read as instances of self-promotion in which enslaved correspondents attempted to display their slavishness to the best of their ability in order to avoid ever coming to the crisis of standing on the auction block. To put this another way, if enslaved lives in antebellum America were lived in the shadow of an enforced African American Diaspora, then this surely provided strong incentives for bondspeople to engage in an almost perpetual round of self-marketing and self-promotion in order to avoid the very real threat of the market, a process that cannot have been psychologically inconsequential.

At this point, therefore, the false dichotomy of role-play versus internalisation seems to break down entirely, revealing survival to have often been more important than resistance, self-preservation frequently more significant than communal solidarity. Such a rupture should also have profound implications for the historiography. Yet if this is to move on then we need to cease requiring virtually every aspect of enslaved life and culture to accommodate our need to locate practices of resistance the subjects of our historical inquiry may themselves have found incomprehensible. The consequence of changing tack will include facing up to difficult questions with unsatisfying, incomplete answers, but it is surely time we freed the history of the enslaved from our own ideological needs, contemporary expectations, and qualitative judgements and endeavoured instead to comprehend them on their own terms.

Endnotes

This paper has been through a variety of permutations and reconsiderations since it was first delivered at Nottingham University's *New Perspectives on the American Nineteenth Century* conference in October 2008. For their generous insights and comments at that conference I would like to thank the various participants who attended my presentation, whilst other discussions at subsequent seminars and workshops have helped me hone the final product; my thanks to all who asked the pertinent and tough questions that have forced me to think and think again. I would also like to thank a number of colleagues by name for their ongoing support for, interest in, and hearty criticism of my scholarship. In particular I am indebted to Trevor Burnard, Frank Cogliano, Rebecca Fraser, Brooke N. Newman, Diana Paton, Calvin J. Schermerhorn, Gregory D. Smithers, and Tom Webster. Finally my gratitude is due to the editors at *49th Parallel*, who have tolerated my last minute corrections and addenda; you well deserve both my thanks and my apologies.

¹ It is indicative of the pervasiveness of this discourse that the phrase "day to day resistance" has become so normalised as to rarely merit either quotes, a citation, or even significant discussion. It should of course be attributed to two students of Melville Herskovits, Raymond and Alice Bauer, whose 1942 article, "Day to Day Resistance to Slavery" may be seen as a precursor to much of the resistance historiography which was to blossom in the Civil Rights and post-Civil Rights eras, not least for its interdisciplinarity, its dependence upon African American memory, and its assertion of the socio-cultural/communal basis of resistance. Raymond A. Bauer & Alice H. Bauer, "Day to Day Resistance to Slavery," *Journal of Negro History* 27.4 (1942): 388-419.

² Nell Irvin Painter, "Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting," in *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, ed. Linda Kerber & Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 131.

³ Dylan Penningroth, 'My People, My People: The Dynamics of Community in Southern Slavery', in *New Studies in American Slavery*, ed. Edward E. Baptist & Stephanie M. H. Camp (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 167.

⁴ David Brion Davis, "The Culmination of Racial Polarities and Prejudice," *Journal of the Early Republic* 19.4: Special Issue on Racial Consciousness and Nation-Building in the Early Republic (1999): 760.

⁵ Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37.1 (2003): 114. Cf. Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959); Lee Rainwater & William L. Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy, including the full text of "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" by Daniel Patrick Moynihan* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1967); John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972); Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

⁶ Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974); Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Mask of Obedience: Male Slave Psychology in the Antebellum South," *American Historical Review* 43 (1988): 1228-52; all cited in Edward E. Baptist, "'Better than my present situation': An enslaved African-American woman commands planter ideology," Organization for American Historians Annual Conference, Washington, D.C., 12 April 2002.

⁷ In terms of the gendering of resistance, Baptist's argument that "'resistance' has often served as a code word for manhood" again highlights the continuity of slave history, suggesting that historians such as Blassingame and Wyatt-Brown took their cues from African American male writers of the nineteenth-century such as David Walker, Lewis Clarke and Frederick Douglass, men who in their turn performed masculinity for an audience that had particular expectations of men as heroic and independent individuals who should be prepared to die for their freedom rather than live in bondage. Edward E. Baptist, "The Absent Subject: African American Masculinity and Forced Migration to the Antebellum Plantation Frontier," in *Southern Manhood: Perspectives on Masculinity in the Old South*, ed. Craig Thompson Friend & Lorri Glover (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 139. The reference to the French Resistance is drawn from Baptist, "Better than my present situation."

⁸ Malcolm X, Speech to SNCC Organisers, 4 February, 1965, Selma, AL, cited in Dean E. Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 40. The connection from Malcolm X's thought to historical scholarship is no mere whimsy, and I would suggest that his presence may actually be felt quite strongly in certain accounts. For instance, compare the following descriptions of enslaved letter writers who corresponded with slaveowners with Malcolm X's description of the "house Negro" who "loved their master more than the master loved himself" and "identified himself with his master." According to John Blassingame, enslaved correspondents were "mostly ... those who were relatively satisfied with their status, *identified with their masters' interests*, and considered their masters kindhearted men," thus rendering their letters of dubious value given his declared aim of knowing "the hearts and secret thoughts of slaves." For Robert Starobin, these same correspondents were typified as constituting the "upper crust" of enslaved society, a cadre of "privileged slaves" for whom "religion, status, rewards, authority, pride and paternalism all served to regulate their behavior and promote their *identification with their masters' interests*." John Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), xiv, emphasis added; Robert Starobin, "Privileged Bondsmen and the Process of Accommodation: The Role of Houseservants and Drivers as Seen in Their Own Letters," *Journal of Social History* 5.1 (1971): 52, emphasis added.

⁹ Anthony A. Lee, "Re: Tool-breaking as day-to-day resistance: a re-examination of evidence," *h-slavery* 10 November 2008. In taking this short quotation from my discussion with Professor Lee, I do not wish to misrepresent what was actually a rather more complex, subtle and nuanced debate, and I hope he will excuse what may appear to be my caricaturing of his argument for the purposes of furthering my own.

¹⁰ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, xxii.

¹¹ Morris uses the Marxian concept of articulation to complicate the idea of reciprocity, a central theme in Eugene Genovese's analysis of the ways in which slaves accommodated themselves to paternalist self-constructions. Articulation describes a dialectical relationship between domination and resistance by which the subordinate use that which is imposed for the purposes of exploitation (in Morris' example, incentives to bear children) to achieve something that is valuable on its own merits (in this case the emotional reward of parenthood). As such, he suggests that we should understand the relationship between slaveholder and enslaved as "reciprocal, if unbalanced" but also as a "structure that confined and channelled and the behavior" of both, making it possible to excavate stories of resistance from the most unlikely examples. Christopher Morris, "The Articulation of Two Worlds: The Master-Slave Relationship Reconsidered," *Journal of American History* 85.3 (1998): 985.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1007.

¹³ Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 189-221; Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American*

Slaves (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), 161. The phrase “troublesome property” remains an apt description of how many slaveholders saw the enslaved, and is drawn from the correspondence of the North Carolinian slaveholder William S. Pettigrew and cited in Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Knopf, 1956), 96.

¹⁴ Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 67-68.

¹⁵ Marie Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 78.

¹⁶ Delia to Rice C. Ballard, 20 October 1854, Ballard Papers, Manuscripts Department, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Cf. Alfred to Mary Steel, 17 November 1835, John Steele Papers; Isabella to Mary Henderson, 29 April 1857/59?, Henderson Papers, both in Manuscripts Department, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

¹⁷ Virginia Boyd to Rice C. Ballard, 6 May 1853, Ballard Papers, Manuscripts Department, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. As Ed Baptist and I have both argued in slightly different ways, it is important to note that this declaration of Virginia Boyd’s intent to serve her master to the best of her abilities comes within a letter which vacillates from this kind of desperate self-abasement to prideful and defiant statements about the injustice that has been done to her and her children, and which concludes with Virginia explicitly threatening to unmask Boyd and Ballard’s dishonourable conduct. Yet such a context does not invalidate the observation that her tactics included the promise of obedience and slavishness; it merely emphasises that a single paradigm – resistance or collaboration, heroism or humility – is insufficient to encapsulate even one individual’s reaction to a specific set of circumstances, let alone that of the many millions of African Americans who experience enslavement in America. For our respective, independent discussions of the letter and its significance see Baptist, “‘Better than my present situation,’” *passim.*; Ben Schiller, “Self and Other in Black and White: Slave Letters and the Epistolary Cultures of American Slavery,” *diss.*, University of Edinburgh, 2008, 153-188. Cf. Phil Troutman, “Correspondences in Black and White: Sentiment and the Slave Market Revolution,” in *New Studies in the History of American Slavery*, ed. Edward E. Baptist & Stephanie M. H. Camp (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 223.

¹⁸ For an extended discussion of the correspondence between Ballard and his partners see Edward E. Baptist, “‘Cuffy,’ ‘Fancy Maids,’ and ‘One-Eyed Men’: Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States,” *American Historical Review* 106:5 (2001): 1619-1650.

¹⁹ With regard to Ballard’s ongoing involvement in the trade, it is worth noting that he gave specific instructions to an agent, C. M. Rutherford, regarding the sale of the Boyd family, selling Virginia and her youngest child as a single lot and keeping back the elder daughter to be sold separately. Whether this was, as Virginia understood the whole business, “for spite”, or whether it was because the elder child was a potential “fancy maid” and thus would achieve a better price if separated from her mother, we cannot be sure, although given Ballard’s past involvement in the fancy trade, the latter is significant possibility. Either way, the destruction of Boyd’s family only serves to re-emphasise how critical such negotiations were, though we should not imagine that ‘success’ would necessarily have spared Virginia or her daughter from rape or sexual exploitation at the hands of another master. For details of this transaction see C. M. Rutherford to Rice C. Ballard, 8 August 1853, Ballard Papers, Manuscripts Department, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

²⁰ Vilet Lester to Patsey Padison [Patterson], 29 August 1857, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

²¹ Troutman, "Correspondences in Black and White," 220-221.

²² William Kauffman Scarborough, *Masters of the Big House: Elite Slaveholders of the Mid-Nineteenth-Century South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 166.

²³ Peter to James Cathcart Johnston, 6 October 1850, Hayes Collection, Manuscripts Department, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

²⁴ James Sawyer to James Cathcart Johnston, 6 October 1850, Hayes Collection, Manuscripts Department, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

²⁵ For instance, in 1851, after a series of disappointments and second chances, John Hartwell Cocke removed a trustee named George Skipwith from his position as driver on Cocke's Hopewell plantation in the Alabama black country (he had already been demoted from being overseer in early 1848), and relocated him to a Mississippi plantation owned by Cocke's agent, Robert Powell, precisely to prevent him from disrupting the good order Cocke was attempting to establish and maintain at Hopewell. Randall M. Miller, ed., *"Dear Master": Letters of a Slave Family* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 147-152.

²⁶ While Peter revisits the issue in his next letter, dated 11 October, Sawyer is silent on the matter when he writes to Johnston two days later on 13 October; indeed, this letter does not mention Peter at all. Peter to James Cathcart Johnston, 11 October 1850; James Sawyer to James Cathcart Johnston, 13 October 1850, both in Hayes Collection, Manuscripts Department, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

²⁷ Peter to James Cathcart Johnston, 6 October 1850, Hayes Collection, Manuscripts Department, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

²⁸ Catoe to Charles Colcock Jones, 3 March 1851. Robert S. Starobin, ed., *Blacks in Bondage: Letters of African Slaves*, 1st Markus Wiener edition, with a new foreword by Ira Berlin (New York: M. Wiener, 1988), 53-55.

²⁹ For a description of Catoe's albeit brief post-emancipation leadership of the freedpeople of Montevideo see Erskine Clarke, *Dwelling Place: A Plantation Epic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 445-447. Cf. Lucy Skipwith to John Hartwell Cocke, 6 December 1865. Miller, ed., *"Dear Master"*, 262-263.

³⁰ Clarke offers a fuller analysis of the relationship between Catoe and Colcock Jones, and their dealings with Cash and Phoebe, in Clarke, *Dwelling Place*, 345-361. Cf. Starobin, *Blacks in Bondage*, 42-58.

³¹ Peter Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life: Or, Illustrations of the 'Peculiar Institution'*. (Boston: 1855), 12.

³² It is notable that however vague he is on the detail, Randolph does appear to identify the death of his father as the beginning of his mother's problems in providing for their five children. *Ibid.*, 33-34.

³³ Nancy Williams, interviewed May 18, 1937, Norfolk, Virginia by Emmy Wilson and Claude W. Anderson, in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, ed. Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas Barden & Robert K. Phillips (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1976), 317. Randolph also thought his father a cruel man, and it is notable (and indeed somewhat ironic in the light of the extensive historiographical emphasis on enslaved agency), that Randolph was only able to forgive him his cruelty by denying him his agency: “All his days he had to follow this dreadful employment of flogging men, women and children, being placed in this helpless condition by the tyranny of his master. I used to think very hard of my father, and that he was a very cruel man; but when I knew that he could not help himself, I could not but alter my views and feelings in regard to his conduct.” Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life*, 34.

³⁴ Williams, in Perdue et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, 318. Given the extent to which her experience of enslavement depended upon the relationship her father forged with her master, it is a little surprising that Nancy Williams should have been made a particular focus for an essay on resistance by Stephanie Camp. Speaking of the “pleasures of resistance” Camp highlights Nancy’s enjoyment of “illicit parties”, enjoyment that was intimately connected with the bodily aspects of performance and adornment. As Camp puts it, “[L]ike the other women in attendance, Williams took pride in her outfits ... and took great trouble to make them. She adorned one dress with ruffles and dyed others yellow or red.” Yet as Williams’ testimony reveals, such finery cost money, money that her father accumulated only by paying the price of becoming the “mean man” his owner required him to be. Her “resistance” thus co-existed, and was even facilitated, by his “collaboration.” Such an insight does not deny the value of Camp’s analysis; indeed, her essay provides an excellent insight into the ways in which the enslaved body was itself a site of contested power. It does, however, suggest the liminality of such contests when set in context of the profoundly asymmetrical power structure of slavery. Stephanie M. H. Camp, “The Pleasures of Resistance: Enslaved Women and Body Politics in the Plantation South, 1830-1861,” *Journal of Southern History* 68:3 (2002): 533-534.

³⁵ Williams, in Perdue et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, 317.

³⁶ Schiller, “Self and Other in Black and White,” 271-282.

³⁷ Cf. Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 17-18.

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