

By MELVIN DRIMMER

# Thoughts on the Study of Slavery in the Americas and the Writing of Black History\*

## I

DURING THE DECADE of the 1960's, by far the most productive and exciting area of American historical writing was the study of slavery in the Americas.<sup>1</sup> Although the works of such now acknowledged masters as Gilberto Freyre and Frank Tannenbaum were known chiefly to specialists of the period, their findings were not incorporated into the general framework of North American history. The writings of Franklin Frazier, Melville Herskovits, and John Hope Franklin which attempted to relate the hemispheric history of blacks to the history of blacks in America were ignored by the writers of American history textbooks.<sup>2</sup> The remarkable opening chapters of Hubert Herring's *History of Latin America* with its acknowledgment of the African elements in Latin American culture and history had no influence on the writers of North American history.<sup>3</sup>

It would be fair to say that only with the publication of Carl Degler's *Out of Our Past* (New York, 1959) and Stanley Elkins' *Slavery* (Chicago, 1959) did American historians take serious notice of the hemispheric nature of New World slavery and attempt to incorporate it into the gen-

\*An earlier version of this paper was given in Philadelphia at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, October, 1970. The author would like to thank Dr. Donald Ramos of Cleveland State University for his comments and criticism of the paper.

<sup>1</sup>In 1965 I presented a paper on "Recent Historiography of American Negro Slavery" at the 50th anniversary meeting of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History meeting in Atlanta. I surveyed the then current state of the literature and forecast that the comparative approach to the study of American slavery would continue to be employed. However, I questioned the generalizations made by Elkins and others about the "personality" of the American slave, arguing that the explanation for the lack of major slave rebellions in North America had to be found in concrete factors such as demography, etc., rather than psychological factors. Not enough research had been done on black reactions to slavery, and I suggested that research move in that direction. This has yet to happen outside of a few studies. Until this is done, historians shall be no closer to an understanding of American slavery than we were then.

<sup>2</sup>See Franklin Frazier's *The Negro in the United States* (New York, 1949). G. Franklin Edwards has collected some of Frazier's writings in *E. Franklin Frazier on Race Relations* (Chicago, 1968), and it includes a sampling of Frazier's writings on comparative race relations. A bibliography of Frazier's writings shows over a dozen major pieces examining Latin American, Caribbean, Brazilian, and African race relations with that of America. See pp. 325-31 of Edward's edition. Melville Herskovits' works on New World Negroes are too numerous to mention here. Frances S. Herskovits has edited a selection of her husband's papers in *The New World Negro* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1966). Herskovits wrote major works on black people in Surinam, Trinidad, Haiti, the Caribbean, and Africa. His most popular work, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York, 1941) presents only one aspect of his interest in Afro-American studies. Herskovits left a body of writings on Negroes in the New World which has yet to be surpassed in its scholarship and range of interests. John Hope Franklin in *From Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1947) presented a number of chapters relating the history of blacks in Latin America and the Caribbean to that of North American history. See chaps. 4-6, 9, 11, 19-20. C. L. R. James' *Black Jacobins, Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York, 1938) and his recently reprinted *A History of Pan-African Revolt* (Washington, 1969) [Originally printed in England as *A History of Negro Revolt* (London, 1938)] makes a conscious effort to write the history of black peoples in historical perspective.

<sup>3</sup>Hubert Herring, *History of Latin America* (New York, 1955). See chapter 4, "The African Background," pp. 89-113.

eral problem of American racial history.<sup>4</sup>

The discovery of the hemispheric dimensions of slavery came at a time when the Negro revolution was becoming the major issue in American domestic life. The study of slavery in the hemisphere was looked on as a key to understanding the rigid pattern of American race relations. Frank Tannenbaum's small book, *Slave and Citizen* (New York, 1947) which developed out of a seminar on slavery which he and William L. Westermann gave at Columbia University in 1938-39 stimulated a number of younger historians to investigate more fully the workings of slavery in a New World setting. The discoveries of Degler and Elkins had produced by the middle and late Sixties a flourishing number of significant studies and fired a number of major historical controversies. Among the more significant works produced by American scholars were Marvin Harris' *Patterns of Race in the Americas* (New York, 1965), David Brion Davis' *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, 1966), which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, Herbert Klein's *Slavery in the Americas* (Chicago, 1966), Winthrop Jordan's *White Over Black* (Chapel Hill, 1968), which received the Bancroft and National Book Awards, Eugene Genovese's *The Political Economy of Slavery* (New York, 1965), *The World the Slaveholders Made* (New York, 1969), *In Red and Black: Marxian Explorations in Southern and Afro-American History* (New York, 1971), and Carl Degler's *Neither Black Nor White* (New York, 1971), which received the Bancroft and Pulitzer Prizes for 1972. In addition the literature has been enriched by the analytical essays of Arnold Sio, Sidney Mintz, and Moses I. Finley.<sup>5</sup>

An important by-product of American interest in comparative slavery was that historians were introduced to the works of non-American scholars who had been working for many years on the problem of slavery and race relations in the Caribbean and Latin America. Although few of these scholars alluded to the American racial situation, their works provided valuable material for the students of American racial history. Included in this international group of foreign scholars would be Magnus Mörner (Swedish), Charles Boxer (English), Harry Hoetink (Dutch), Charles Verlinden (Belgium), Gilberto Freyre and Florestan Fernandes (Brazilians), Elsa Goveia, Orlando Patterson, and Franklin Knight (Jamaicans).<sup>6</sup> By the end of the Sixties Latin American, Brazilian and Carib-

<sup>4</sup> An exception is Allan Nevins who in *The Emergence of Lincoln* (New York, 1951) pointed to the hemispheric movement against slavery in the nineteenth century. See Volume II, "Slavery in a World Setting," pp. 132-70.

<sup>5</sup> A good bibliography is presented in *Slavery in the New World, A Reader in Comparative History*, ed. Laura Foner and Eugene D. Genovese (Englewood Cliffs, 1969) pp. 262-68. A more complete bibliography is found in Magnus Mörner, *Race Mixture in the History of Latin America* (Boston, 1967), pp. 153-73.

<sup>6</sup> Mörner, *Ibid.* Charles Boxer, *Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire, 1415-1825* (New York, 1963) and *The Golden Age of Brazil* (Berkeley, 1964). Harry Hoetink, *The Two Variants in Caribbean Race Relations* (London, 1967). Charles Verlinden, *L'Esclavage dans l'Europe médiévale* (Bruges, 1955). Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves* (New York, 1948), *The Mansions and the Shanties* (New York, 1963), *New World in the Tropics* (New York, 1963). Florestan Fernandes, *The Negro in Brazilian Society* (New York, 1969). Elsa Goveia, *Slave Society in the British Leeward Island* (New Haven, 1965). Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery* (London, 1967). Franklin Knight, *Slave Society in Cuba During the Nineteenth Century* (Madison, 1970).

bean history were *au courant* at American universities and in historical circles. The debate over the question of slavery in the Americas, added to the interest in Latin America caused by the Castro revolution and the dynamics of Third World politics, opened up new and hopefully productive ways for scholars to assess the American experience. It has moved scholars away from the sterile debate over the profitability of slavery — around which older controversies centered — and into the question of race relations under slavery and freedom in the nations of the Americas. It has helped make American history part of New World history.

## II

This introduction is presented because I do not want the following remarks to indicate that I believe the study of comparative slavery is without value. But in retrospect, it appears that while the study of comparative slavery deals with blacks it has, so far, very little to do with Black or Afro-American history or even to our understanding of Nineteenth Century American history. The study of comparative slave systems has become divorced from the real topic at hand, which is Black history. From the works of the students of comparative slavery we are learning a good deal about the world which the slaveholders made (to use a phrase of Eugene Genovese) but very little of the world which black people and their abolitionist sympathizers made. Almost without exception, historians of comparative slavery, under the guise of writing about black people, have focused upon the institutions and slave systems of the European and American planters. Little attention is given to the lives or longings of the African population caught up in slavery and New World history. We learn a great deal of the ideology of the slaveowners but little of the history of black people.

And when historians do deal with black people they gave us the Sambo of Elkins and the Nat Turner of William Styron. We look in vain for real people. The older generation of historians, whether the Southerner Ulrich B. Phillips or the Yankee aristocrat, Samuel Eliot Morison, were unable to write objectively about the blacks. Morison had no occasion to change his 1930 assessment of them in later editions of his majestic textbook, *The Growth of the American Republic* (New York, 1930; 4th edition, 1956).

As for Sambo, whose wrongs moved the abolitionists to wrath and tears, there is some reason to believe that he suffered less than any other class in the South from its "peculiar institution." The majority of slaves were adequately fed, well cared for, and apparently happy. . . . Although brought to America by force, the incurably optimistic Negro soon became attached to the country, and devoted to his "white folks." Slave insurrections were planned — usually by the free Negroes — but invariably betrayed by some faithful black; and trained slaves obedience kept most slaves faithful throughout the Civil War.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Growth of the American Republic*, Volume I (New York, 1956), 537-38.

What we have gotten from contemporary writers is the Sambo of Phillips and Morison but now clothed in psychohistorical rather than overtly racist terms. Throughout much of the writings of comparative historians blacks are made the object, not the creators of history. They appear faceless and nameless, slaves or sambos, who dreamed of "catfish and watermelons" (Elkins) or the sexual pursuit of white women (Styron). In not one of the books yet produced by students of comparative slavery do we have so much as an inkling that black people in slavery behaved otherwise.

It is not as if records did not exist. There are in the library of Congress today over 10,000 unindexed pages representing over 2,000 individual interviews made with ex-slaves by the Federal Writers Project of the 1930's. These slave narratives have been available for many years and seldom used by historians. It has taken two sociologists, Norman Yetman and George Rawick, and a folklorist, Benjamin Botkin, to bring these valuable documents to the attention of historical scholars.<sup>8</sup> Why were they not used by Elkins, Genovese, Styron, and others?

The works of the comparative school have so far excluded blacks as makers of history. There is no serious attention to blacks other than as being slaves. Where is the Toussaint for whom Wordsworth wrote a sonnet and whom Comte placed on his new calendar as one of the modern saints? Where is Henri Christophe, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Andre Rigaud, or Vincent Oge of Haiti. Where are the likes of the insurrectionists David Walker, Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, or Nat Turner? Where is there mention of the important Pan-African visionaries, Edward Blyden of the West Indies, Martin Delany of North America, Samuel Crowther of West Africa? Nor is any mention made of the black church and community builders, Richard Allen, George Liele, Prince Hall, James Varick, Daniel Coker, Alexander Crummell, Robert Purvis, Henry Highland Garnet and Paul Cuffe. Nor of the abolitionists Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman. And what of the Black men who played important roles in eighteenth and nineteenth century Latin America: Antonio Francisco Lisboa, one of colonial Brazil's best architects and sculptors; Luis Gama, José de Patrocínio and André Rebouças, leaders of Brazilian abolition; Joaquim Machado de Assis, regarded as one of Brazil's best novelists, and João de Cruz e Sousa, the noted Brazilian symbolist poet; Francisco Javier Santa Cruz y Espejo, eighteenth century man of letters and precursor of Spanish American independence; and the famous Cuban revolutionary leader, hero of the 1868-1878 rebellion, Antonio Maceo, for whom Marcus Garvey named one of ships of the Black Star Line?<sup>9</sup> Comparative history has as yet only given us the one dimensional black

<sup>8</sup> Norman Yetman, *Life Under the "Peculiar Institution": Selections from the Slave Narrative Collection* (New York, 1970). George P. Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 19 volumes (Westport, Connecticut, 1972). Benjamin Botkin, ed., *Lay My Burden Down* (Chicago, 1945).

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Donald Ramos, specialist in Brazilian and Latin American history at Cleveland State University, aided me in selecting a representative sampling of Latin American Negroes.

man — the slave as Sambo. We await a more complete accounting.

From the work of the comparative historians we also get a static view of history. We read about slavery in a historical vacuum as if the planters, the blacks, and the institutions built around slavery lived in a timeless universe. Pick up any book on life under slavery and whether you come in at 1650 or 1750 or 1850, the narrative is the same. There is no reference to the French or American or Latin American revolutions. There is no acknowledgment of the industrial revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, the abolitionist movements which were everywhere in the hemisphere. There is no indication that black people ever knew what was happening in Haiti, or America, or Brazil, or Jamaica, or Africa. There is no tying together the black diaspora. There is no reference to Nat Turner ever having heard of Vesey or Gabriel or Toussaint or David Walker. There is no reference to the American black refugees of the Revolutionary War who settled in Sierra Leone in the 1790's or the free Negroes who opted to settle in Liberia rather than remain in America. There is no mention of the six hundred Haitian soldiers who fought on the side of the French in the American Revolution or that two of those soldiers, Henri Christophe and Andre Rigaud, subsequently led Haitian armies against their former masters. There really is no world beyond the "catfish and watermelon" of Elkins. In the world of the American historian Negroes were "childlike, improvident, humorous, prevaricating, and superstitious."<sup>10</sup> For him the Sambo did exist; and given this fact, historians found it difficult to conceive of black people existing in any world outside the confines of their ahistorical plantation.

In addition, the present comparative slavery approach to black history is oblivious to the black revolution which shook the nineteenth century. The great movers were not the George Fitzhughs, as Genovese would have us believe, but the Frederick Douglasses. It was the blacks in the hemisphere, not as sambos or statistics but as movers and shakers on which comparative history should be focusing. There has been no attempt by those writing to see black history in the New World as a whole. For example, while we have studies of slavery in various New World societies, we do not have a single study of comparative black rebellions or of the New World abolition movements. The movement for black freedom affected not only the United States but four continents — Europe, Africa, South and North America. DuBois' prophetic statement that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line" was built on his intimate knowledge of what the nineteenth century had started and left unfinished. The victory of the blacks in obtaining their freedom was in the long range the opening battles of the twentieth century against colonization, racism, and the exploitation of the metropolitan countries. The task of the comparative historian is to see this

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<sup>10</sup> Morison, *op. cit.*, 537.

movement in the light of black history. For it was the blacks of the hemisphere and the issues which their slavery engendered that helped undermine the government of Brazil, the stablist government in Latin America in the nineteenth century, that brought the great Napoleon to his knees in Haiti, that gave America the opportunity to buy Louisiana, that brought on the bloodiest war of the nineteenth century, the American Civil War, and freed millions. Martin Delany, in 1860, had called upon blacks, like "every people . . . [to] be the originators of their own designs, the projectors of their own schemes, and creators of the events that lead to their destiny . . ." <sup>11</sup> The events of the nineteenth century in the Americas gave testimony to Delany's prophetic words.

### III

The inability of comparative historians to see blacks first as men rather than as slaves has resulted in a very distorted picture of the nature of slave rebellions. This distortion is most evident in the work of Stanley Elkins, the most original and in many ways the progenitor of the current school of historians working in the area of comparative slavery. Elkins used the comparative approach and the works of Tannenbaum, Freyre, and others to speak to the question of American history and to specifically the question of why there were no great slave revolts in the United States. There is a valid question and Elkins made a major contribution by trying to develop a theoretical formulation to this problem.

His major error, however, was in accepting the Sambo stereotype given to blacks by Southern apologists and by U. B. Phillips. Elkins did not accept their racist explanation of the Sambo behavior and instead sought to find the cause in what we might call psychohistory. Elkins postulated that slaves in the United States with few exceptions were incapable of mounting a major attack upon slavery due to the rigid nature of American race relations. Black men were never given the chance of playing roles, of developing the personalities which would transform them into rebels.

The slave (in Brazil) could actually — to an extent quite unthinkable in the United States — conceive of himself as a rebel. Bloody slave revolts, actual wars, took place in Latin America; nothing of this order occurred in the United States.

Compared with the countless uprisings of the Brazilian Negroes, the slave revolts in our own country appear rather desperate and futile. Only three emerge as worthy of any note. . . . the Nat Turner Rebellion — was characterized by little more than aimless butchery. <sup>12</sup>

The American system did not allow slaves to develop the personality needed for successful slave insurrections. There were no significant others for them to emulate. Elkins has held to this point of view. In a

<sup>11</sup> Martin Delany, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (New York, 1969, reprint of 1852 edition), Appendix.

<sup>12</sup> Stanley Elkins, *Slavery* (Chicago, 1959), pp. 136-37.

recent critique of Carl Degler's study of Brazilian race relations, Elkins argued that the slaves in Brazil were able to find in the large number of free blacks models "telling him [the Brazilian slave] that his status was not necessarily permanent and that he could aspire to freedom and even to respectability. One would have looked in vain for any such set of cues anywhere in the American South, at any time."<sup>13</sup>

We would have to admit that in America, unlike Brazil, Jamaica, or Haiti, no major armed insurrection took place. Even those who look to Nat Turner's revolt must conclude that its significance was more in what it foretold than what it accomplished. Of the fifty-seven whites murdered by the rebels, forty-five were women and children and it did nothing to bring down the slave system of Virginia.<sup>14</sup>

But why did Elkins choose slave revolts as the criteria for black resistance to the system? Why not a great Civil War? Why not massive sabotage? Why not a mighty abolitionist movement that moved millions on both sides of the Atlantic and set an example for Latin America? Why not runaway slaves?

The evidence is there. The Coroner's Court Report from Cocordia Parish, Louisiana, in the 1850's tells us more about the black personality than the hypothesis which Elkins garnered from Hitler's concentration camps.

The Report, which is to be found in Joe Gray Taylor's *Negro Slavery in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, 1963), states the testimony of the overseer who has just killed a black man named Samuel:

On Tuesday morning the driver Bill came to me and states that Samuel had become unmanageable, was destroying cotton, that he had ordered Samuel down to be whipped, that Samuel then swore he could not be whipped. Bill then told him he would get the overseer. . . . I then asked Samuel if he had refused to get down for punishment when the driver ordered him, he answered at once, Yes, by God, I did and I am not going to be whipped by anybody, either black or white. I told him to stop, as I allowed no Negro to talk in that way and that he knew that. I then ordered him to throw down his hoe and get down, he swore God damn him if he would. . . . he turned and ran off. I kept my horse standing and called to the rest of the hands to catch that boy not one of them paid the least attention to me but kept on at their work. I then started after Samuel myself. . . . he wheeled around, with his raised hoe in both hands and struck at me with his full force . . . his hoe descending I think within one or two feet of my head. [I] pulled my horse up, and drew my pistol. Samuel was then standing with his hoe raised. I fired across my bridle arm when he fell.<sup>15</sup>

Or take the category of sabotage. Almost every commentator noted how blacks consciously sabotaged the system. Frederick L. Olmsted's

<sup>13</sup> Stanley Elkins, Review of *Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* by Carl N. Degler, *Journal of Negro History*, LVIII (January, 1973), 86-90.

<sup>14</sup> A useful collection of material on Nat Turner and the Turner controversy can be found in Eric Foner's *Nat Turner* (Englewood Cliffs), 1971.

<sup>15</sup> Joe Gray Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, 1963), pp. 202-03.

account is among the most widely quoted. In the 1850's he traveled extensively throughout the South. This is part of what he noted:

I saw . . . gates left open and bars left down, against standing orders; rails removed from fences by the Negroes, as was conjectured, to kindle their fires with; mules lamed, and implements broken, by careless usage; a flat-boat carelessly secured, going adrift on the river; men ordered to cart rails for a new fence, depositing them so that a double expense of labor would be required to lay them, more than would have been needed if they had been placed, as they might almost as easily have been, by a slight exercise of forethought; men, ordered to fill up holes made by alligators or crawfish in an important embankment, discovered to have merely patched over the outside, having taken pains only to make it appear that they had executed their task — not having been overlooked while doing it, by a driver; men, not having performed duties that were entrusted to them, making statement which their owner was obliged to receive as sufficient excuse, though, he told us, he felt assured they were false — all going to show habitual carelessness, indolence, and mere eye-service.<sup>16</sup>

The act of running away, one of the commonest of all acts of black resistance under slavery, might have easily been selected to show a very different kind of slave personality. Some sixty thousand American slaves decided to flee to the British lines during the American Revolution rather than continue to accept their status with the American planters. Southern newspapers were filled with notices of runaway slaves. The narratives of escaped slaves and the underground railroad, however overplayed, were not myths.<sup>17</sup> But the normal act of rebellion by running away was made by the individual when threatened or given the chance to successfully escape. "Never threaten a Negro, or he will run" was an accepted maxim of good plantation management.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, when escape was possible — as happened most notably during the American Revolution or Civil War — black men and women fled *en masse*. Thousands of contrabands fled into the Union lines whenever a Union army or raiding party was anywhere within a hundred miles. One of these contrabands, John Finnely, told his story to an interviewer for the Federal Writers Project in the 1930's. Finnely was then eighty-six years old but the memory of escape was still very vivid:

De War am started den for about a year, or somethin' like dat, and de Federals am north of us. I hears de niggers talk about it, and about runnin' away to freedom. I thinks and thinks about gettin' freedom, and I'se goin to run off. Den I thinks of de patterrollers and what happen if det catches me off deplace without de pass. . . . One night about ten niggers run away. De next day we'uns hear nothin', so I says to myself, 'De patterrollers don't catch dem.' Den I

<sup>16</sup> Frederick L. Olmstead, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* (New York, 1865), pp. 480 ff.

<sup>17</sup> For slave response during the American Revolution see Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1961), pp. 158-81. For a complete bibliography of slave narratives and other materials written by runaway slaves see George Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup*, Volume I, *The American Slave* (Westport, Connecticut, 1971), pp. 179-189.

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Morison, *op. cit.* p. 538.



makes up my mind to go and I leaves with de chunk of meat and corn bread and am on my way, half skeert to death I sure has de eyes open and de ears forward, watchin' for de patterrollers. I steps off de road in de night, at sight of anything, and in de day I takes to de woods. It takes me two days to make dat trip and just once de patters pass me by. . . .

De Yanks am camped near Bellfound and dere's where I get to imagine my 'sprise when I finds all de ten runaway niggers am dere too. Dat am on Sunday. And on de Monday de Yanks puts us on de freight train and we goes to Stevenson, in Alabama. Dere, us put to work buildin' breatworks. But after de few days, I gets sent to de headquarters at Nashville, in Tennessee.<sup>19</sup>

During the Civil War the Union Army was able to recruit over 125,000 men from the slave South. A large percentage of them were runaways like John Finnely. Joel Williamson and Robert Manson Myers are two careful students of Southern history who have in separate studies related that slaves, even the "most faithful," were given to running off when Union forces were nearby or coming.<sup>20</sup>

Certainly sabotage, running off, personal defiance might have been taken as categories of rebellion by common black people. Slave revolts — and Herbert Aptheker has documented a few hundred in *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, 1943) — is only one index of how black people responded to slavery. The Sambo mentality put forth by Elkins simply cannot be proved when historians take a close look at American slaves.

Orlando Patterson in his fine study of Jamaican slavery, *The Sociology of Slavery* (London, 1967), never falls back upon questionable analogies or psychohistory in explaining the causes of Jamaican slave revolts. He found the reasons for revolt in very concrete causes: 1) the ratio of masters to slaves; 2) the ratio of creoles to African slaves; 3) the very high percentage of slaves who were from the militaristic Akan peoples of the Gold Coast and were skilled in warfare; 4) the inefficiency of the Jamaican whites; 5) the excessive degree of absenteeism of white owners; 6) the mountainous interior of the country which made escape easy; and 7) the "impact of certain social, religious and political forces current at that time."<sup>21</sup> Patterson cites the American Revolution as playing a role in the Jamaican revolt of 1775, and the Haitian, French, and American revolutions in influencing the revolt of 1795. In the nineteenth century the abolitionist movements played a factor in the Jamaican revolts as well.

Yet with all these advantages, the Jamaican slaves failed to overthrow the planter class. Patterson found the answers again in concrete terms. The slaves were divided among themselves, with tribe versus tribe, and

<sup>19</sup> Yetman, *op. cit.*, pp. 125-26.

<sup>20</sup> Joel Williamson, *After Slavery* (Chapel Hill, 1965). Robert Manson Myers, *Children of Pride* (New Haven, 1972).

<sup>21</sup> Patterson, *op. cit.*, pp. 261-83.

creoles versus Africans, the whites had superior arms and strength, and most importantly, unlike Haiti, the planter class was not divided.

What held true in Jamaica bore a resemblance to some of the problems faced by black rebels in America. The time for greatest freedom was the Revolutionary period and the Civil War when white Americans were divided among themselves. [The same might be said parenthetically about the 1960's]. Overall the United States, unlike Brazil or Jamaica or Haiti, had the highest percentage by far of whites to blacks. The federal government in the United States was well organized and highly effective. For example, within hours after John Brown's men captured the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, hundreds of federal troops were on the march against his meagre force. The geography of North America offered less unpopulated and inhospitable places for blacks to escape. But even here, as Kenneth Porter has shown in his studies of the blacks and the Seminole Indians, countless slaves fled to the Indian lands in Florida, which Porter contends, set off the many Seminole Indian wars fought in the second, third, and fourth decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> It may be worthwhile to recall that John Brown's original plans called for guerilla bands to occupy sites in the Southern Appalachian mountains from which to strike upon the plantations in the valleys. The fact that these *quilombos* were not as prevalent in North America has to be explained in concrete terms and not through psychohistory.

But even if we accept Elkins' argument that the United States lacked great slave revolts because slaves here were never able to develop into rebels, what has he really proved? For all the brave Brazilian black leaders, characterized by Elkins for "their brilliance, gallantry, and warlike accomplishments," slave revolts had little to do with emancipating Brazilian slaves. For all their advantages over three hundred years, Brazilian slaves were unable to physically fight their way out of slavery. The Brazilian blacks, like the American blacks, used whatever methods were available or at hand to obtain freedom. In Brazil this meant running away to the *quilombos* in the mountains or to the cities. Brazilian blacks were aided in their struggle by important historical, economic, cultural, institutional, and demographic forces which were not found in America. Yet it took black men in Brazil a quarter of a century longer to obtain freedom than it took black men in North America. Slavery in the United States ended after a bloody Civil War in which more than a quarter of a million black men took up arms in defense of their freedom.

The fact that the Brazilian blacks never fought their way out of slavery through a civil war does not give the North American historians the right to label them as Sambos, indolent childlike creatures who internalized the infantile behavior required by the planters. Yet this is what Elkins

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth W. Porter, "Negroes and the Seminole War, 1835-1842," *Journal of Southern History*, XXX (November, 1964), 427-40; "Florida Slave and Free Negroes in Seminole War, 1835-1842," *Journal of Negro History*, XXVIII (July, 1943), 390-421. Herbert Aptheker, "Maroons Within the Present Limits of the United States," *Journal of Negro History*, XXIV (April, 1939), 167-84. Also Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, 1943).

has done for American slaves. Elkins gives us no proof outside of the analogy taken from Hitler's concentration camps and the writings of slaveholders and their apologists that the American slaves were Sambos. Elkins is unable to see that the slave was a man first, a black second, and only lastly a slave. The planters had nowhere near the total control over the lives of the slaves as Elkins would like us to believe. Masters controlled only part of the day of the slaves. As George Rawick has reminded us, there was a totally new existence which ran from Sundown to Sunup. If white men ruled the day, black men ruled the night. And when daylight came, black men put on their masks. This should not be a strange mode of behavior to the people of West Africa whose religion and rituals were surrounded by theatre, acting, pantomime, and masks. A people used to making masks in Africa should be adept in making new forms of masks in America. And whites seldom penetrated those masks.

"Lawrence," wrote Mary Boykin Chesnut of her husband's servant, "wears the same bronze mask with no sign of anything he may feel or think. . . . Lawrence sits at our door, as sleepy and as respectful and as profoundly indifferent. So are they all. They carry it too far. . . . And people talk before them as if they were chairs and tables, and they make no sign. Are they stolidly stupid," she wondered, "or wiser than we are, silent and strong, biding their time." But two months later she noted in her diary: "Yesterday, some of the Negro men on the plantation were found with pistols. I have never seen aught about any Negro to show that they knew we had a war on hand, in which they have an interest."<sup>23</sup> Behind the mask lay the reality which slaveowners knew existed.

The whites of the South lived in constant fear of insurrection by blacks. If proof of this is needed, one has only to consult the diaries and letters of the planters. Was there a slaveowner who had a sound night's sleep? Every gun, every knife, every kitchen utensil, every stable, every house had to be put under lock and key. Gangs of men patrolled the roads and highways, and the pass system, so infamous in South Africa today, was perfected in the slave South. Bloodhounds and other dogs were kept on ready hand. Every inkling of unrest, of revolt, of disturbance somewhere in the land reverberated throughout the strongest plantation. George Washington's niece, Mrs. Lawrence Lewis, filled with terror after the Nat Turner insurrection, wrote: "It [Virginia] is like a smothered volcano — we know not when, or where, the flame will burst forth, but we know that death in the most repulsive forms await us."<sup>24</sup> The history of the slave South is replete with such rumors and stories. And although the official mythology might like to believe that the blacks were Sambos, no planter who valued the life of his family or himself acted on that assumption. Planters, unlike historians, could not afford the luxury of being found wrong.

<sup>23</sup> Mary Boykin Chesnut, *A Diary from Dixie* (Boston, 1949), pp. 38, 64, 104.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People*, Vol. 2, (New York, 1972, paper edition), p. 262.

One of the supreme ironies in writing the history of comparative slavery has been that one of its leading exponents and a historian who has been labeled by no less an authority than Arthur Schlesinger Jr. as our foremost authority on slavery, Eugene Genovese, has made his reputation as the leading student of the mind and values of the Southern master class, the planters.<sup>25</sup> His principal concern has been, as the title of one of his books indicates, *The World the Slaveholders Made*. There is little of the world of the blacks in his work. Yet Genovese has been designated by the liberal establishment, which as a self-styled Marxist he purports to disdain, one of the main interpreters of the black experience, and there is hardly a major work on slavery or the ante-bellum South which Genovese does not review for the *New York Review of Books*, the chief arbiter of American liberal tastes.<sup>26</sup>

The main body of Genovese's work has been to study the mind of the planter and the apologists of slavery. In his first book, *The Political Economy of Slavery* (New York, 1965) he wrote intelligently and at times persuasively about the planter class and its ideology.<sup>27</sup> In *The World the Slaveholders Made* he resurrected George Fitzhugh, the leading pro-slavery philosopher who put forth the view that "slavery was a proper social system for all labor, not merely black labor." Fitzhugh's anti-democratic, anti-bourgeois, proto-fascist, and pro-slavery positions were simply, in Genovese's words, "the logical outcome of the slaveholder's philosophy."<sup>28</sup>

And Genovese has been the leading defender of Ulrich B. Phillips. Despite the racism which lay at the very foundation of Phillips' interpretation of slavery and the blacks, Genovese credited Phillips with coming as "close to greatness as a historian, perhaps as close as any historian this country has yet produced."<sup>29</sup> This is not the place to go into a critique of Phillips or Genovese. Certainly Genovese is entitled to his viewpoint. But to try to get a picture of American slavery through Phillips is a little too much like reading Hitler's *Mein Kampf* to get an understanding of Jews. Phillips, like Genovese, was concerned with the world of the master class and of that class' basis of power, the plantation system. In Phillips' major work, *American Negro Slavery*, he set out to tell the story of the plantation system; and as he made clear in the complete title of the book, it was to be a "Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime." Phillips succeeded in his task, for what emerged was the story of American slavery told from the viewpoint and the biases of the planter class. The blacks

<sup>25</sup> Schlesinger's remark made at the annual banquet of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, New York, 1968.

<sup>26</sup> Four of Genovese's *New York Review of Books* reviews are reprinted in *In Red and Black* (New York, 1971), pp. 102-28, 200-17, 299-314, 354-67.

<sup>27</sup> For my comments on this book see the *William and Mary Quarterly*, XXIV (January, 1967), 99-102.

<sup>28</sup> Eugene Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made* (New York, 1969), pp. 118 ff.

<sup>29</sup> Eugene Genovese, "Forward", *American Negro Slavery* by U. B. Phillips (Baton Rouge, 1966), p. vii.

who emerged from Phillip's study were in effect the Sambo which Elkins was to use as a model some forty years later. The Negroes of 1918, when Phillips wrote the introduction to his study, "show the same easy-going, amiable, serio-comic obedience... and the same love of laughter and rhythm, which distinguished their forbears." And they will follow their white lieutenants into battle. "It may be that the change of African nature by plantation slavery has been exaggerated," Phillips concluded. "At any rate a generation of freedom has wrought less transformation in the bulk of the blacks than might casually be supposed."<sup>30</sup>

This view of blacks distorted Phillips' work from beginning to end. Only Carter G. Woodson, almost alone among professional historians at the time, challenged Phillips' study of slavery. Writing in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* in 1919, Woodson charged Phillips with falsifying history, with so arranging the facts as to make the reader believe "that the Negroes were satisfied with it [slavery]." Unlike Phillips, who wrote that "slavery was in fact just what the bulk of the Negroes most needed... in an essentially slow process of transition from barbarism to civilization," Woodson clearly saw that whatever small side benefits slavery might have had, it was basically "a system of exploiting one man for the benefit of another."<sup>31</sup>

Genovese has admitted Phillips' racism but has minimized the extent to which it affected his work.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand Phillips' critics, whom Genovese has labeled "neo-abolitionists," have "not done better," giving us only "sermons on the guilt complexes and sadism inherent in slave-ownership" and telling no more than what is obvious. But Genovese does not see that Phillips' racism cannot be dismissed while the whole remains. For his view of the blacks distorted everything he wrote about slavery. Even Stanley Elkins, one of those who gained much from Phillips' work, had to admit that while Phillips was "deeply fond of Negroes as a people, it was just that he could not take them seriously as men and women."<sup>33</sup>

This is at the heart of the matter. When are historians going to take black people seriously as men and women? Until black people are made central to the writing of comparative history the comparative approach to the study of slavery will do little to further an understanding of black history and of the black diaspora. Only in Winthrop Jordan's *White Over Black*, the best work yet produced by students working in the field of comparative slavery and a monument to American historical scholarship, do we get some inkling of what was really happening to black people as a whole. In his chapter, "The Cancer of Revolution," Jordan comes closer than any of the current historians to writing black history.

<sup>30</sup> Phillips, *American Negro Slavery*, pp. viii, ix.

<sup>31</sup> Carter G. Woodson, *Review of American Negro Slavery* by U. B. Phillips, *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, V (March, 1919), 480-82.

<sup>32</sup> See Genovese's introduction to *American Negro Slavery*, pp. vii-xxi.

<sup>33</sup> Elkins, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

The history of blacks in the Americas is still to be written. Comparative slavery is only one aspect of the total history of black people in the diaspora. So far older American historians have written the history of slavery, rebellion, and abolition as if there had been no Haiti, no Sierra Leone, no international abolitionist movement, no relationship between Haiti and the Latin American revolutions and emancipation, no corresponding developments in Africa.<sup>34</sup> There is no concern or interest in the history of the West Indies, the cockpit of black nationalism, and there has been an almost criminal slurring of Haiti, whose survival as an independent state is a testimony to its courage. There is no mention of the great interest in American, West Indian, and Brazilian blacks in Africa. All we have as yet are slaves and the slaves as Sambos.

We still await the full story. The future of black history may lie less with historians and more with anthropologists, sociologists, and folklorists who, unlike historians, have been freer of cultural, racial, and nationalistic biases. A beginning might be made with a full appreciation of the creative work of Melville Herskovits, whose pioneer studies of black life in the Americas is the largest and best body of scholarship yet produced on the subject. The writings of Sidney Mintz of Yale make him the most perceptive American student of the Caribbean and comparative race relations.<sup>35</sup>

It may well be that the Caribbean will hold a key to the writing of multi-racial history. The oldest of New World societies has had, unlike the United States, to come to terms with their total experience. Recently published works in Caribbean history and society may set the example for future North American studies in black and American history.<sup>36</sup>

The history of the master class in the Americas has been written. It could be argued that this is the only kind of history which has been written. Blacks have been incidental to the writing of our history. Possibly it will take a black person to understand American history in all its dimensions. The great West Indian poet, Aime Cesaire of Martinique and one of the fathers of *negritude*, caught the comparative and trans-Atlantic dimensions of black history in the New World in his epic poem *Return to My Native Land* (1938):

He wrote of the total black experience:

<sup>34</sup> Of the older historians only Allan Nevins showed some understanding of the full international dimension of the problem of slavery. Morison, Oscar Handlin, Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Boorstin, Richard Morris, Edmund Morgan, to name a few, have never given slavery and race relations the central position it deserved in understanding American history. U. B. Phillips, made race the central theme of Southern history.

<sup>35</sup> Some of Mintz's writings on the Caribbean and slavery can be found in the bibliographies of Morner and Foner and Genovese, cited previously. A brilliant essay which integrates history anthropology, cultural history and economics is his "Puerto Rico: An Essay in the Definition of a National Culture," *Status of Puerto Rico: Selected Background Studies...* (Washington, 1966), pp. 339-434.

<sup>36</sup> See M. G. Smith's *The Plural Society in the British West Indies* (Berkeley, 1966), David Lowenthal's *West Indian Societies* (New York, 1972), Orlando Patterson's *Sociology of Slavery* (London, 1967), Harry Hoetink's *Two Variants in Caribbean Race Relations* (London, 1967), and Magnus Morner's *Race Mixture in the History of Latin America* (Boston, 1967).

Two studies by Americans may indicate a new trend. George Rawick's *From Sundown to Sunup*, *op. cit.*, and Gerald Mullin's *Flight and Rebellion; Slave Resistance in Eighteenth Century Virginia* (New York, 1972).

These are mine: these few gangrenous thousands who rattle in this calabash of an island. And this too is mine: this archipelago [the Caribbean] arched with anxiety as though to deny itself, as though she were a mother anxious to protect the tenuous delicacy with which her two Americas are joined; this archipelago whose flanks secrete for Europe the sweet liquid of the Gulf stream; this archipelago which is one side of the shining passage through which the Equator walks its tightrope to Africa.

My island, my non-enclosure; whose bright courage stands at the back of my polynesia; in front, guadeloupe split in two by its dorsal ridge and as wretched as we ourselves; Haiti where negritude rose to its feet for the first time and said it believed in its own humanity; and the comic little tail of Florida where they are just finishing strangling a Negro; and Africa gigantically caterpillaring as far as the Spanish foot of Europe; the nakedness of Africa where the scythe of Death swings wide.

My name is Bordeaux and Nantes and Liverpool and New York  
and San Francisco  
not a corner of this world but carries my thumb-print  
and my heel-mark on the backs of skyscrapers and my dirt  
in the glitter of jewels!

Who can boast of more than I?  
Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama.  
Monstrous putrefactions of revolts  
coming to nothing,  
putrid marshes of blood  
trumpets ridiculously blocked  
Red earth, blood earth, blood brother earth.

At the end of the small hours these countries whose  
past is uninscribed on any stone, these roads without memory,  
these winds without a log.  
Does that matter?  
We shall speak. We shall sing. We shall shout.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Aime Cesaire, *Return to My Native Land* (Baltimore, 1969), pp. 52-3, 54. First published in Paris in 1956 although written in 1938.

