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Legacies of Slavery

The legacies of slavery can be seen throughout American life and history, and especially in American ethnic literature. A huge part of American history, slavery “officially” began in the US in 1619 and was officially abolished by the federal government in 1863. Individual states ended slavery within their borders at varying times, with Vermont being the first in 1777 and Mississippi the last in 1995 with a delayed ratification of the 13th Amendment of the United States Constitution (National Geographic Society). Because of its long history and traumatic, dehumanizing nature, ethnic literature, especially African American ethnic literature, during the times of slavery and after up to this day often deals with the psychological, cultural, and economic ramifications of people owning other people. The legacies of slavery are inevitably intertwined with both power and narrative and especially racial hierarchy, for which slavery generally formed a base in the US.

Racial hierarchy especially can be seen to be present as a prolonged legacy, as even those against slavery often bought into the idea of black people as lower, more animalistic humans. An example of this thought process exists with Major-General Joshua Chamberlain, a distinct member of the abolitionist movement during the Civil War. A scholar and professor of languages before the war, Chamberlain was extremely learned and cultured for his time. He was the General to retrieve the confederate surrender on April 12, 1865 and often, during the war, readily

welcomed freed slaves into his army's ranks ("JOSHUA LAWRENCE CHAMBERLAIN (1828-1914)"). Despite his devout abolitionist views, in his book about the Civil War he wrote, "We found the negroes especially unruly. All restraints which had hitherto held them in check were set loose by the sudden collapse of rebel armies. The floodgates were opened to the rush of animal instinct. The only notion of freedom apparently entertained by these bewildered people was to do as they pleased" (Chamberlain). Though he does not disdain "the negroes" or wish them harm, he clearly pities them and casually views them as less, a sentiment which many whites echoed at that time and would continue to subscribe to for many years of history.

Slave narratives are some of the first examples of ethnic literature in the US, with the first slave narrative published in 1772. Hundreds were published before emancipation in the US with the aim of convincing people, especially Northerners, to support the abolitionist movement (National Geographic Society). These narratives tried to appeal to the reader's humanity by depicting the horrors endured by slaves in the South, with the dual aim of dispelling any myths Southern slave owners tried to perpetrate in order to defend their right to own slaves. A prime example of a slave narrative was written by the escaped slave Frederick Douglass in 1845. He wrote of his master that he "was not a humane slaveholder. It required extraordinary barbarity on the part of an overseer to affect him... He would at times seem to take great pleasure in whipping a slave" (Douglass 4-5). This is an example of Douglass attempting to dispel the image that all slave owners were humane in their treatment of slaves, and by his writing the book and making many speeches prove that black people were not idiots better off as slaves. This is especially important due to the relationship between power and narrative. If slaves didn't tell their own stories, the only information available would be mainly from Southern slaveholders all trying to

show slavery in a positive light. The attempt to regain power for themselves and tell their own stories is evidenced by the thousands of slave narratives recorded after emancipation in the 19th and 20th centuries (National Geographic Society). At this point, they were no longer trying to have slavery abolished, they were attempting to tell their own stories so others couldn't do it for them.

Kindred, by Octavia Butler, can be said to be a modern day fictional slave narrative. One of Butler's main goals with *Kindred* was to be able to present the horrors of slavery from a modern perspective by using the device of time travel to send a modern black woman back to a plantation during the time of slavery ("An Interview with Octavia E. Butler"). Through Dana, we see how easy it is to make people slaves and feel with her each new shock and horror she confronts. She comments to her husband, Kevin, "The ease. Us, the children...I never realized how easily people could be trained to accept slavery" (Butler 101), and we come to this realization with her.

Butler also wrote *Kindred* in part to hash out her feelings about her own mother, and in general to explore 1960s and 70s African American feelings of shame and anger towards their parents for not improving things faster ("An Interview with Octavia E. Butler"). She used Dana to confront the fact that slavery, and slave like-conditions, beat down on people and are very psychologically traumatizing. The "mammy" character, Sarah, starts off as a spitfire, and eventually we see her defeated, "doing the safe thing" and accepting a life of slavery after losing "all she could stand to lose" (Butler 145). Butler shows that it is not a lack of strength or character that caused people to keep their heads down and accept lower positions in society, but rather a relentless psychological conditioning and institutionalized system of slavery and then

racism. People did what they had to do to survive, even if it meant accepting a strict racial hierarchy even after slavery ended. Dana's adventure even ends with her losing her arm, because Butler "couldn't let her come back whole" because "Antebellum slavery didn't leave people quite whole" ("An Interview with Octavia E. Butler").

Though the end of slavery came with the end of the Civil War, racism and racial hierarchy did not disappear. Jim Crow laws, which suppressed the rights of many African Americans in many Southern US states were common; when freed, many former slaves found themselves in positions only marginally better than slavery (National Geographic Society). The 1960s Civil Rights movement was in itself a reaction to these legacies of slavery. There were two distinct camps during the Civil Rights movement, integrationists and separationists. Martin Luther King Jr. represents the core beliefs of the integrationists. He pushed for non-violent protest as a method to gain media coverage and then force the existing government to mend the system and integrate blacks and whites. Malcolm X represents the core beliefs of the separationists. He and his followers believed that they absolutely should fight back when attacked, and even forcefully take what was rightfully theirs. According to the separationists, the dominant white society was corrupt, and black people should just start a new system; complete racial integration was impossible and undesirable. James Baldwin represented a mix of both views. On the one hand, he did not think that he should have to be *more* noble and kind than white people, but on the other hand he did advocate for a certain kind of integration. Baldwin suggested that the notion of "white" and "black" as significant parts of people's identities should be got rid of as an antiquated remnant from slavery. He agreed that the dominant society's

system was corrupt, but rather than separate from it he wanted people to work together with love to build an entirely new society where race didn't matter at all (Pfeffer).

Baldwin explores the idea of race as an identity created only by the juxtaposition of “white” and “black” in an open letter to his nephew published in 1963 titled “My Dungeon Shook.” He tells his nephew at the end of the letter, “You know, and I know, that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon. We cannot be free until they are free” (Baldwin 1256). The “they” refers to white society, as Baldwin believes that white people are “trapped by a history they do not understand,” referring to slavery and how they created the “white” identity for themselves in order to justify such a horrendous institution and then in order to justify an oppressive racial hierarchy (Baldwin 1255). Because white society has not accepted their historic role as oppressors, they cannot move on from it and construct a new identity for themselves; this means that blacks cannot be fully free from their role as the oppressed, because to be an oppressor, one must have someone to oppress.

Baldwin also recognizes the psychological damage of racism and racial hierarchy in “My Dungeon Shook.” He says of his own father “He had a terrible life; he was defeated long before he died because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him” (Baldwin 1252). Baldwin repeatedly asserts that by accepting the racial hierarchy and believing what white society says about black people you become what white society expects of you, mediocre, lesser, and part of you dies because you believe this. Baldwin understands the insidious nature of the institutionalized racism which stemmed from slavery, and at every turn in his letter warned his nephew to be aware of and fight against the constant negative expectations because the consequences of not doing so were dire (Baldwin 1252-1255).

The episode of “We Come From People” which dug into the ancestry of several famous black people today reveals another interesting picture of the effects of slavery. All of the African Americans who were learning about their ancestry are very successful people in different ways, but they came originally from different socioeconomic classes. Valerie Jarrett, advisor to President Obama, came from a very successful family. Her 6th generation great grandmother had been freed when her slave owner and lover passed away, long before the Civil War. This allowed her and her children to gain an education, own property, and amass wealth over time. When blacks were given further rights, they were able to fully take advantage of the situation and become extremely successful financially and socially. Nas’s ancestors, on the other hand, weren’t freed until the Civil War ended, and had not been able to amass any wealth or gain an education before that point. Many fewer generations of Nas’s family enjoyed freedom compared to Jarrett’s family, and it showed. Hardship and poverty followed Nas’s family across generations, as they moved from the South into a ghetto in the North; Nas was the first member of his family to be financially successful (“We Come From People.”).

Nas has actually enjoyed an uncommon amount of success for someone from his socioeconomic and racial position. The legacies of slavery can be seen in the racial makeup of the poor and imprisoned today. Black Americans have the highest poverty rate of any race at 24%, with white Americans with the lowest rate at 9%. They also have a very low rate of recovering from poverty--of the black Americans under the poverty line in 2009, 62% remained impoverished in 2013 (“U.S. Poverty Statistics”). Furthermore, while blacks make up only 13% of the US population, they comprise 40% of the population in prisons (Wagner). This disparity speaks to an institutionalized system of racial inequality which keeps blacks poor, less likely to

succeed in life, and more likely to be imprisoned, firmly placing them below whites in a racial hierarchy perpetuated, not only by racism, but by economics. Though slavery has ended, its legacy remains today as a systemic problem of inequality.

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