

*The Problem of Slavery as History*

#### THE DAVID BRION DAVIS SERIES

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David W. Blight, Class of 1954 Professor of History at Yale University, and Director, Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition

JOSEPH C. MILLER

*The Problem of  
Slavery as History*

A GLOBAL APPROACH

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To Jan Vansina,

*for teaching me about history and about Africa*

*And in memory of*

Phil Curtin (1922–2009),

*for teaching me about the world and slaving, and*

*insisting that I try to write cogently about it all*

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## *Preface*

The chapters in this book express some of the historical insight that a recovering Africanist has gained over several decades spent learning to appreciate the epistemological core of a humanistic discipline, itself in a century-long recovery from its urgent pretensions to discern truths of a scientific, replicable order. They are therefore not an integrated global narrative of the history of slavery told in conventional terms of the “institution” that it is all-but-ubiquitously characterized as having been. Readers will find mentioned here only aspects of slaving relevant to understanding these practices as historical strategies rooted in times, places, cultural heritages, and momentary opportunism. With regard to slaving, the argument focuses on the recurring pattern of the principal slavers’ positions as marginal to the contexts in which they lived and competed. It thus adds the historical political dimension of slaving to the relatively familiar psychological, cultural, and economic aspects of the outcomes of these struggles. It stresses processes of creating slavery rather than examining features of an “institution” taken for granted. It emphasizes the experiences of the enslaved as isolated, betrayed, and vulnerable rather than the masters’ claims of absolute domination.

But the following chapters also represent, perhaps primarily, a reflection on history as process and on the experience and challenges of initiating change through time. I examine change of a particular historical sort, rooted in

human experiences and motivations rather than in abstractions as commonplace as the “slavery” and “freedom” that prevail in the literature. Nor do I here attempt to cover the vast historiography of this field as such, though I will attempt to problematize some of its emblematic works in relation to the precise epistemology of history that I will develop. So these chapters, as their titles indicate, problematize slavery not as a moral issue of social exclusion or as an economic anomaly but as an illustration of the problematic limitations of the significant structuralism in the recent practice of history. I am trying to historicize the conventional narrative.

I will also spend some time distinguishing an exact practice of slaving and the experience of enslavement from the strong rhetorical overtones of injustice, inhumanity, social and political exclusion, personal abuse, and inequality that the notion of slavery carries in modern culture. Thus I need to contrast slaving, as a historical strategy, from other means of mobilizing human effort for the benefit of others, sometimes compiled into a negative category of unfree labor to contrast with modern wage labor practices now taken as normative. “Slavery as an institution” has also been compared extensively with race, class, and gender, all abstracted modern forms of exclusion. These debates about abstract definitions explicitly do not enter a discussion aimed to historicize slaving and enslavement as particular contextualized strategies. Nonetheless, I will comment on what I regard as the logic of these structural alternatives, by way of contrasting my historical approach to slaving, as many readers will approach this book from intellectual and cultural backgrounds that do not draw the distinctions I hope to underline.

An even greater challenge for some readers may lie in my presuming a general familiarity with the world’s history. The small format of this volume severely limits my ability to provide narrative framing. So I cite widely ranging examples, though neglecting Asia and most of the Islamic world, in favor of concentrating on Africa, my own area of expertise, and the Americas, presumably the field in which most readers will have some background. The modern Americas, or rather, the antebellum United States, are the single source of the politicized epistemology of studies of slavery as an institution. I do not stop to gloss the historical contexts, and even less any sort of narrative, of the laws of slavery (or, as I argue, manumission) characterized as Roman. I sketch elements of the conventional histories of Africa and Brazil, but those do not reflect the historicized framework I want to develop here. The background necessary for readers new to these narratives would overwhelm this book’s central arguments about history itself and understanding slaving as a historical strategy as a significant alternative to thinking of slavery only as an institution. I hope that the epistemological argument will provide the

coherence that will be lacking as narrative history. Every chapter begins with an explication of the issues of conceptualization raised by the challenge of historicizing slaving in differing contexts chosen to highlight the patterns of slaving recurring through them all.

The final challenge lies in the invitation I am offering here to rethink a subject—slavery, as an institution—that looms so large in the immediate background of all of us in the modern world, though of course for some far more than others, or at least more than some of the others usually allow themselves to realize. Slavery is a politically loaded, emotional subject, and for important reasons in a modern world that is in so many ways a product of its recent practice, and in which practices arguably constituting slaving (even by my historical definition) still continue, and may be increasing. My hope is that historicizing slaving, as these chapters are intended to do, will suggest relevant strategies of moderating the circumstances that render some people vulnerable to enslavement and induce others to slave at their expense.

“The problem of slavery” that I have strung through the titles of the lectures in this book, of course, I take from the justly famed and seminal masterpiece of Professor David Brion Davis of Yale University and the founding director of the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University, where earlier versions of these chapters were given as the inaugural annual lectures named for him. I choose the title of this book not only to begin with suitable honors the series in which lecturers for years to come will surely continue to draw inspiration from the rich insight of Davis’s many works. It is not uncommon to commemorate a foundational thinker by providing a forum like this one for thinking further about the subjects to which that scholar’s life was dedicated, but it is rare to sense that thoughts of the honoree will remain the starting point for a vast range of ongoing research and reflection yet to come.

In Charlottesville, Virginia, where I have spent my professional career, we draw in this way on another foundational thinker, to whom we do not compare others lightly. However, I am struck by the similarities in commanding erudition and inspiring dedication to human welfare, and the nobility of the human spirit, between the founder of the University of Virginia—at his best—and our honoree. David Blight, thank you for making all of this possible. My sincere gratitude goes as well to Richard Gilder and Lewis Lehrman for recognizing the uniqueness of this man and making possible the ongoing commitment of the Gilder Lehrman Center at Yale University to bringing an utterly central element of the American experience out from the shadows of embarrassed denial, and—I will argue in this book—also a no-less-central aspect of human

history on the broadest imaginable scales. Davis's accomplished scholarship and dedicated social commitment present qualities all the more inspirational when one recalls all the other tones—apologetic, economic—in which it is possible to approach the somber complex of slavery and abolition to which he has devoted his professional life.

## *The Problem of Slavery as History*

Slavery was and is a tragedy. It provokes outrage among the modern heirs to its divisive damages, as it should. All of us, whether white or black or merely observers to its racialized polarities, are in that same agonized company. These modern legacies of the Atlantic slave trade in the Americas and in Europe remain an emotional field of battle in the culture wars of modern nations. For racially identified descendants of the enslaved in the present, slavery in the past provokes animated claims for justice, apologies, and financial reparations. The complementing heritage on the part of those who seem potential beneficiaries of the slaving past has long provoked equally intense denials, from descendants of planter families to citizens of former slaving ports like Nantes, Liverpool, and Warwick, Rhode Island, to insurance companies, banks, and universities, and to many communities in modern Africa. Only recently have families and institutions begun to acknowledge the intricate embrace of slavers and enslaved in the New World. Everyone in the slaveholding colonies and countries of the Americas, and in the slaving centers in Europe, in one way or another was implicated. It is also now becoming clearer how many people in Africa bear parallel legacies from their own slaving pasts.

Important as these neo-abolitionist politics may be today, their portrayals of “slavery as an institution” transcending time and space have frozen the dynamics of slaving in most parts of the world as a historical process. The

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prevailing concept of institutionalized slavery in fact primarily represents abolitionist depictions of the U.S. antebellum South, with the enslaved as one-dimensional victims of similarly one-dimensional brutal masters. The whip is the dominating symbol. In American English, Simon Legree is a trope for an abuser. Emblematic fictionalized mothers sacrifice infants to save them from these horrors.

Without diminishing the domineering excesses that the vulnerability of the enslaved encouraged—or the rapes, psychological abuses, maiming, and deaths—these stereotypes have also inhibited academic understandings of slaving as a subject of intellectual inquiry. It is the intellectual challenge of thinking about slavery outside the box of contemporary politicization that I want to introduce in this chapter. Then I will present three efforts to apply an alternative understanding of *slaving*, as a historical strategy, and *enslavement* as a human experience prior to the personal brutalities, to selected, illustrative aspects of the history of the world. The last of these applies this global approach to slaving to the familiar, seemingly paradigmatic slavery of the modern Americas, concluding with reasons why this unique North American warping of a practice of introducing outsiders into local fields of political competition led, for the first time, to its institutionalization, and thereby finally to its abolition.

To problematize slaving as a historical strategy asks readers to suspend the images of slavery conventional in modern popular culture—in the United States, essentially African-American men working in the cotton fields of the antebellum South; in England or France, African men toiling in canebrakes under a scorching Caribbean sun; and for others, perhaps girls and women secluded and seduced in exotic harems somewhere in a sexualized Muslim palace. The considerable company of scholars who think about the subject professionally will find similar challenges to their essentially sociological assumptions about “slavery as an institution,” “slave societies” or “societies with slaves,” “slave modes of production,” forms of “unfree labor,” “slave/creole cultures,” and “the idea (or ideology) of slavery.”<sup>1</sup> I am thus inviting my readers—scholars and others—to reconsider not only what we think about slavery but also the deep-seated assumptions that underlie *how* we can think most comprehendingly, and hence most productively, beyond existing understandings of slaving. In the parlance of the professional literature on slavery, I want to problematize the utility—even question the elemental accuracy—of the familiar, all-but-ubiquitous phrasing of slavery that historians study as an institution. Hence the play on the word “problem” in the title of this book, and in those of each of its chapters. I hope to problematize slavery as an institution by exploring slaving as a historical strategy.

“Problem” also references the occasion that prompted the present elaborated form of these essays. I presented them as the inaugural David Brion Davis Lectures at the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University, to honor David Brion Davis, its founding director. Davis is perhaps the defining thinker in the modern field, a writer for the public as well as for the most sophisticated of the professionals. His famous and foundational book, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (1966), set the standard for problematizing historical clichés.<sup>2</sup> *The Problem of Slavery* is a sweeping survey of the idea of slavery in Western culture over two millennia, from Greek antiquity to its abolition in the nineteenth century. To the amazement of most modern historians at the time, Davis revealed the continuity of slaving throughout the Christian European Middle Ages and Renaissance, as well as the resigned toleration of dehumanizing other human beings as things, from Aristotle to Aquinas to the sixteenth-century Spanish theologian Las Casas to political economists in seventeenth-century England and France. For him, the problem of slavery was why none of the great humanistic thinkers of Western civilization had developed their consistent unease about the institution toward the abolitionist impulses that finally burst forth in the North Atlantic in the eighteenth century, primarily in England and then in the United States. The capacious discourse of humane justice in which he framed the problem reflects popular discomfort with the very idea of slavery, and it is the framework within which scholars still discuss slavery productively.

In this opening chapter I hope to frame these important moral issues of enslavement in ways that are more capacious still, ways that I conceptualize as historical. The second chapter in this book applies the historical epistemology outlined in the first chapter to explain the contexts—political and ideological—that led discerning commentators (from Aristotle to Aquinas) to lament the personal failings of abusive masters but not to invoke public sanctions of the sort claimed by modern abolitionists. In effect, I add the political and intellectual contexts of slaving to the primarily economic analyses that have otherwise tended to prevail.

By training and experience I am a historian of Africa and a student of the overwhelming prominence of slaving in that continent’s recent history. My primary research focuses on Angola, one of the African regions most profoundly engaged in those tragic historical processes. But my studies of Africa—like those of many of my Africanist colleagues working on other parts of the continent—leave me with an acute awareness of the utter irrelevance there of the defining qualities of slavery “as an institution” that we read about, mostly in the Americas. The third of these chapters therefore presents slaving

as a historical process within the particular historical contexts of Africa, which include virtually none of what turn out to be quite a few unrecognized and no less particular assumptions underlying the thoroughly modern conception of slavery as an institution. Historians must escape the premises of their own times and places if they are to sense the motivations of people in the other places and times that they study, and so I offer a historical approach that I believe illuminates aspects of slaving in Africa not evident, or seemingly anomalous, to modern understandings.

If one grasps the possibility of seeing slaving in terms radically different from what we modern heirs to the Enlightenment have taken all too comfortably for granted, then one is prepared to look again at slavery in the Americas. Chapter 4 places some of the conventional issues of the large field of comparing New World slaveries—for example, in the United States and Brazil—in this historicized perspective, in a historical framework centered not on comparing geographical regions (or culture areas, or colonies or countries or other abstract entities) as relatively timeless contrasts. Instead, it suggests a historically coherent sequence of incremental developments from fifteenth-century circumstances in the Mediterranean region, and also slightly later in northwestern Europe, that were very different from the challenges that Europeans faced later in the Atlantic. Following this sequence—from sixteenth-century strategies in the Hispanic Americas to seventeenth-century extensions in Brazil and then to the Caribbean, through the distinctive circumstances in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century North America—historicizes slaving as a process resulting from changing strategies of people in consistent positions of marginality to the quite distinctive times and places in which they resorted to slaving to intrude on older, more established interests.

### *Perils of Presentism*

First, I will need to elaborate what I mean by historicize. As I use the term, it means a good deal more than merely looking at the past or even narrating events then in terms of changes. Here I use the term to emphasize the human meanings that have motivated people's actions (in the past) in contexts that are not only particular to their times and places but also include ephemerality—prominent, pervasive, dynamic, fleeting change itself. Beyond problematizing slaving as strategy, in contrast to slavery as an outcome, the book also problematizes thinking historically, in this specific way. The title of the book as a whole, *The Problem of Slavery as History*, is meant to emphasize as much. Introducing the problematic of thinking historically is the burden of this introductory chapter in particular. I want here to



consider explicitly what the best historians do instinctively to bring earlier times and other places alive for readers and viewers and listeners—all of us, including the historians—very much anchored in the here and now. Generally, we professionals tend to lumber on in the academic modes of abstraction and generalization that we favor, because they highlight orderly aspects of the disorder of human life and—not incidentally—make us look good for making some sense of the chaos. This tendency to favor selective sense in our understanding of slavery over existential ambiguities, I propose to problematize as sociological.

This inclination to find coherence, even if only the brutality of domination, in the essential uncontrollability of a life imagined as entirely subject to the whims of another, adds an emotional edge to the customary contemplation of slavery. The subject, in its academic formulations as well as in its politicized cultural ones, may derive some of its elemental intensity as a kind of distillation of the helplessness and isolation underlying the radical individualism of modern life, not least among scholars. We thus tend to draw curtains of the abstract concepts in common currency today around the exquisite particularities of the past. I will refer later, for examples beyond slavery, to the historical irrelevance of familiar, seemingly unproblematic contemporary notions like kingdoms or states or empires to understanding Africa, or—for that matter, as the second chapter will suggest—anywhere in the world's past. Historians of the ancient Mediterranean have recently become productively critical of their predecessors' tendencies to find straightforward origins of modern forms of democracy in Greece in the fifth century before the current era, an age claimed as classical; Athens in that era was in fact a place very different from both Philadelphia in the 1780s and nineteenth-century republican France.

Historians use the technical term “teleological” to refer to viewing the past significantly, and thereby distortingly, in terms of their own present—that is, painting the purposes of people in the past as though they had meant to invent prototypical versions of whatever we might today claim for ourselves. For readers for whom such technicalities might as well be Greek, this in-group jargon refers to historians' Cardinal Sin, a logical offense that negates the fundamental focus of the discipline on the past on its own terms rather than on ours. The word, which derives from Greek *telos* for “purpose,” means writing about the past as if it could hardly have led anywhere but to the present, however selectively we may understand ourselves here and now. Such arguments eliminate the contingency, indeterminacy, and sheer uncertainty of how everyone everywhere, caught in the flux of time, inevitably blunders along.

One teleological habit, all too common even among historians who claim to know better, is a quest for origins of later outcomes, often those of the

historian's own times. In this book I seek to avoid contemplating the problem of slavery in terms of what Robin Blackburn calls this "idol of origins": that is, looking for elements in the past, presumed known to actors then but in fact usually only imagined by the historian, then isolating those elements from their contexts to equate them with similarly selected parts of equally complex more recent practices.<sup>3</sup> It is one of the celebrated sins of the historical profession, at least in theory, because all celebrated sins are condemned so urgently precisely because they are so tempting, and so common. Such self-centeredness is not difficult to achieve, since our limited evidence from those times usually reveals so little about the fullness of lives back then. It is thus easy for the historian to notice, to select as analytically significant, only aspects of the past readily recognizable today; these seeming continuities are, by the standard of familiarity, the ones that seem to have led toward later times, and particularly our own. This myopic misrepresentation of others in the past is also called presentistic. To explain what happened historically, one instead relies on context analytically, rather than merely making passing mention of it, mostly for local color, in a logic subtly (and arrogantly enough) predicated on knowing how it has all turned out now.

Teleology is so tempting to historians, further, because history is inherently perspectival, in two senses. The historian therefore attempts to discern the multiple perspectives motivating the actors in every viably historicized context. But historians live in historical contexts of their own, and so they always add the perspective of the historian trying to make sense of them. Historians' own positionality requires them to write with reference to their own times, at least implicitly, if they hope to be intelligible. Although historians must therefore keep in touch with themselves and with their readers or audiences, they must do so without also imputing these necessary and appropriate presentistic referents onto people in the pasts that they study. Instead historians' reliance on contextualization of their subjects obligates them to distinguish the terms of those, back then, whose motivations alone can explain what they did. Being in the present does not preclude constructive engagement with the past; rather, the historian must merely avoid conflating the two. The historian's engagement with the past is constructive both in the sense that it is productive of understanding the past as well as acknowledging the mental world of the historian-observer. The two senses of "construction" are complementary rather than contradictory; in fact, they are mutually interdependent.

Years ago Moses Finley, the late, great historian of slavery in the ancient Mediterranean, famously showed how the emotionality of slavery as a political issue at the end of the nineteenth century, in the nationalistic aftermath of abolitionism in Europe and of the triumphalism of European imperialism at

the time, rendered slavery in the ancient Mediterranean past anything but dead for social and political theorists there. Rather, they resurrected antiquity by imagining classical Greece and Rome as fields of battle over slavery, primarily by analogy with then-recent, often Christian abolitionist formulations of the problem.<sup>4</sup> For some of them, ancient Christians had triumphed over the earlier slaving of Roman pagans and assorted barbarians. For others, the enslaved had rebelled against their miseries. The story attributed to ancient slaving at the end of the nineteenth century paralleled the simultaneous strategies that politicians in late nineteenth-century Europe, bent on justifying imperial conquests of “backward” regions around the globe as a civilizing mission, epitomized by eliminating the slaving of Muslims and “native” people there. This displacement of the present politics of slaving into the remote past paralleled the highly political abolition campaigns of late eighteenth-century England, when reformers had projected the social costs and amorality of growing capitalism onto slavery in politically safely remote West Indian colonies.<sup>5</sup> But reasoning by analogy is hopeless as history, since projecting even viable patterns from one time and place into any other violates the fundamental emphasis of history’s epistemology on setting the action in past times and other places in its own distinguishing circumstances. Instead, analogous reasoning, like the originary fallacy, selects easily recognizable aspects out of their historical contexts for their (alleged, usually only nominal or abstract or formal) similarities to political or ethical concerns of the present.

The temptations of teleology, at a slightly higher level of abstraction, and therefore also at a more basic level of the thinking processes of our modern era, explain why—and how—we tend to view the institution of slavery, as well as the rest of the world, so unproblematically through the modeling of the modern, progressive social sciences. These historically problematic concepts include notions as seemingly obvious as society itself, or even economics as a domain of monetized supply, demand, and exchange. In an instance of direct relevance to slaving, we think of ourselves as living amid abstract structures, as in “social structure,” or in the past with slavery as an institution. Even human rights, race, and the primacy of the individual—concepts that to us seem utterly obvious and beyond discussion—are ideological products of modern times, and the historian ought to be able to recognize them as such. All of these seemingly self-evident abstractions presume historical contexts of commercialization, individuation, and civic (national) governments that did not exist throughout most of the history of the world. In fact, in spite of our pretensions to universality, it is obvious that none of them work today around the globe as fully as their more zealous proponents tend to presume. However valid these ideals may be in principle, every day we read in the

media, or personally experience, behavior that by these standards appears anomalous, deficient, or outrageous.

For the historian, all of these structures—political, economic, or mental—are ideologies, or abstractions, strategic, normative, homogenizing statements of how things *should*—or, in the case of slavery as an institution, how they *should not*—work. They are not descriptions of the actual variability of human behaviors, as motivated strategies, that are the proper business of historians. In fact, they calculatedly deny or demonize most of the multiplicity. But historians focus on what people actually did, insofar as we have evidence to know about it. Historians do not contemplate what people in the past might or should have done, and so the stories we tell are not always pretty. Nor should historians attempt to animate these abstractions, to make religions or nations or slavery itself, into quasi-anthropomorphic actors. How many ahistorical sentences have historians written that place societies and kingdoms in the driver's seat of accounting for change, as if these states of mind could influence or spread or otherwise act on their own? For a historian, a single such sociological violation of the humanist way in which one must think historically would be one instance too many. All of these structural abstractions are outcomes, and not always or even often intended ones, of the strategies of interested historical parties to the struggles of their own times. For historians, they explain nothing in themselves; they are rather what historians must explain.<sup>6</sup>

The deceptively simple core of the humanistic definition of history that I will develop is how and why *people* actually behaved, however long ago or far away. Motivated human action, carefully contextualized, is thus the starting point for my understanding of *slaving*. I propose strategies of introducing outsiders for private local purposes that recurred in infinitely variable particulars throughout the history of the world. The precise sense in which I am historicizing *slaving*, then, is to explain human actions (though, of course, only the particular ones indicated in the body of random evidence from the past that we can now detect) as intentional and motivated by meanings that people derived from the contexts (of times, places, cultural heritages) in which they imagined themselves as being. The concluding phrase about “imagining themselves” is crucial, since they lived in times no less ideologically ordered than our own. But their ideologies were not ours; we cannot apply *our* modern, sociologically tending abstractions to attribute intent to whatever they did, often in much more personalized terms. Further, they didn't know all that historians can now reconstruct about their contemporary circumstances, any more than we now know all that much about the blur of experiences and impressions through which we blunder every day. Historians have to take imaginative leaps beyond their own cultures, including our social-science

modeling of the world. We must put ourselves in others' places, whether or not we like them or what they did.

### *Slavery as a Problem in Contemporary Culture*

Our strong moral aversion to slavery as an institution makes particularly difficult the challenge of avoiding the sociological tenor of modern structuring of the problem. The subject is deeply politicized, and hence inherently ideological—in a neo-abolitionist mode, to be precise—virtually by the genesis of the subject in the nineteenth-century aftermath—or, internationally, ongoing imperialist context—of abolition. The subject of slavery thrives on as a fascination of both scholarship and popular culture because we are still engaged significantly, if not primarily, in condemning its injustices. In a world in which human rights, as we rightly insist, ought to prevail, they do not. Just as mid-twentieth-century liberalism has gained ground in its battles against the racial consequences of modern slavery, new forms of slaving appear to be surging all around us in the contemporary world. The horrors that we attribute to slavery, ancient, nineteenth-century, or modern, seem to modulate contemporary concerns about other injustices closer to home, insofar as they confirm for us that the world could be worse than it is. Contemplating slavery as an abomination, and its abolition as having made the world a better place, gives liberals cause for hope now no less than in the nineteenth century.

But unless we make the effort to step far enough outside of our own lives to at least comprehend what all those slavers, and those whom they enslaved, were all about, we end up lamely lamenting the fates of the enslaved, or condemning the slavers as congenitally evil. We not only leave the enslaved as relatively passive victims but also condemn the slavers as motivated only by greed and sadistic needs to dominate. That retrospective judgment and—worse yet—leaving any human being helplessly inert or hopelessly driven contradicts the essence of thinking *historically*, that is, by understanding humans as meaningfully and coherently motivated. To invoke another Greek-derived philosophical term, judgmental approaches to the past violate the essence of history's *epistemology*. Epistemology is not what you think about a subject, for example slavery, but how you think about it; it is a thinker's logical "operating system" rather than the "application" that one launches to achieve a particular task. In a sentence: Thinking about slavery in an epistemologically historical way means tracking observable outcomes of human strategies of slaving, particularly as motivated and enabled in unsettling contexts of rapid change, and intended (by the slavers) to effect further

changes in their historical contexts. Slavers were motivated to dominate outsiders by their own sense of being dominated within historical contexts in which they found themselves marginalized. Details, nuances, and applications of this compressed declaration of method follow throughout these pages.

The continuing emotionality of the subject of slavery is so immediate a problem in contemporary American culture, and around the modern world, that we seldom pause to make this intuitive and historically necessary leap of imagination into the minds of other people in other times or, for that matter, in other places in the world. We do not perceive even the possibility of understanding how ordinary people like ourselves might have indulged in the exploitation that masters supervised or how the enslaved might have found meaningful lives even amidst what we perceive as severe deprivations. It is the essential genius of the historian, part of the craft about which the great French historian, Marc Bloch, wrote, to attempt to imagine our ways into the times and places of others very unlike ourselves.<sup>7</sup> Contrary to the hopes of many of the positivist founders of the modern discipline, history is not a science. It is essentially humanistic in its necessary reliance on the imaginative, even intuitive leap of the historian, to sense the motivations behind the observable outcomes of human actions.

But the prominent presence of historians themselves in what they think and convey about the past makes it all the more important to turn off the automatic pilots by which we fly through the mists of our own lives. Through awareness of ourselves, we can then discount what we draw from our presents to understand what *others* did, back then and out there. For slaving, the subject at hand, my objective is to present a historicized way of understanding how and why the slavers did what they did, in terms that comprehend, though not thereby condoning, their motivations. That I can understand does not mean that I endorse, or that I am making excuses for anyone or anything. Comprehension allows me, as a historian, to present the dilemmas of the past in ways that the moral philosophers might proceed to judge on bases informed by their training and experience. But to apply their training and experience, they need to draw on the historian's understandings, informed by knowledge of contexts and human intuition as to their meanings. The same historicized sort of understanding allows us also to respect the enslaved for what they managed to do, even under severe hardships of enslavement. Some of them suffered flesh flayed by the lash, but we need to see them more fully than as victims, or as mechanically resisting the lack of Freedom that the modern historian imagines as the primary privation that they endured.

## *Structures of Slavery Unproblematicized*

At this epistemological level, I cannot turn to the very rich literature on slavery for much insight. The scholars who have studied it have only begun to consider how slaving in Roman times, or in Africa, or even in seventeenth-century Virginia, might have differed from the way in which we have come to think about it now. Here at the outset, then, I want to guide readers through the thicket of challenges posed in attempting to escape present concerns about slavery to intuit the minds and meanings of others in the past. This challenge is difficult enough for modern Americans trying to think outside the popular image of Africans at Jamestown, for example, and it is all the more demanding when one tries to do so across the apparently yawning gulfs that separate the many cultures around the world.<sup>8</sup> That obstacle is one reason why my third chapter here focuses on slaving in Africa, since the continent from which so many of our ancestors came to the Americas, and elsewhere around the world, often labors under the metaphorical millstone of being made to stand for everything that “we” are not, or hope not to be.<sup>9</sup> However, we all learn most about ourselves when we can suspend the pressures of our day-to-day lives to sense how others think, including the ways in which we appear to them. Thus, thinking *how we think about slavery* forms the core of these lectures. In the end, understanding slavery *historically*, that is in others’ terms, as I propose, may open a window through which we can view ourselves in otherwise unexpected ways.<sup>10</sup> Historicizing, as I propose to pursue it through these essays, is humbling: it puts us, ourselves, in historical perspective.

David Brion Davis’s classic *Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* provided just such a surprising view on the persistence of slavery within the Western cultural tradition over a stunningly *longue durée* of more than two millennia. Why, he wondered in broadly historical terms paralleling the ones I propose here, had humanists, Christians and others, from the classical Greeks down to the eighteenth century, not been repelled by practices rife in antiquity, far from unknown in the Renaissance Mediterranean, and pervasive in the Spanish and Portuguese Americas? Why did eighteenth-century English abolitionists finally recognize its obvious inhumanity and only then launch the political campaigns that led to government-decreed bans of “slavery” in the monarchical domains of western Europe, then to ending Atlantic trading in slaves, and finally, in the nineteenth century, to emancipations of millions of Africans and their African-American children enslaved throughout the Americas?

This fundamental paradox that Davis phrased in such dramatically historical terms of change has framed nearly all subsequent work on modern slavery, including inspiring many Africanists. It is not a criticism to note that his