

## The 'Worlds Slaves Created'

**With reference to at least two slave narratives written between 1688 and 1800, discuss the slave experience of everyday life under the British Empire. What was the "world the slaves made" for themselves in the eighteenth century?**

The particulars of slaves' experiences under the British Empire between 1688 and 1800 were complex and diverse across Britain's many dominions and under the powers of different slavers. Despite this, it is clear that the overwhelming experience of both Africans transported into the Atlantic slave system and those born into slavery was incredibly oppressive and devastating. Studying the voices of slavery is a difficult undertaking the sources we have are generally of slaves who have been the most 'successful,' in that they are either literate (a rare privilege for a slave) or have a good enough relationship with a member of the 'ruling class' that they would record their story. Venture Smith's account focusing on his struggle to buy his and his family's freedom and to maintain it and James Gronniosaw's narrative of his treatment, are both verbally-dictated documents of domestic slaves. Although both are primarily of their lives in America, the accounts are printed in England for the British public and were most likely used for the recorders' agendas rather than that of the freed slaves. Nevertheless their stories fit into the wider academic discourse of slave experience and there is little reason to doubt their accuracy. I will use these documents to support the argument that slave experience was harsh and oppressive as well as look at their lives in terms of identity, culture and resistance to argue that perhaps a more appropriate way of looking at slave experience is considering it as involving the 'creation of many worlds,' rather than as a singular entity.

Stinchcombe argues that although laws differed according to location in regard to aspects such as marriage, manumission (release from slavery), land ownership and even trivial things such as singing, institutional law was rarely legally enforced and slave treatment had a lot more to do with the social norms of particular areas and the dispositions of individual slave owners.<sup>1</sup> Some slaves would have had physically 'easier' lives than others, such as: domestic, military, skilled and sexual slaves, but almost unanimously "coercion, rather than reward, dominated labour relations."<sup>2</sup> Even as slaves on the 'upper' end of the spectrum; both Venture and Gronniosaw describe the relentless suffering that constituted slave life. Gronniosaw talks about his "continual fear that the people I was with would murder me."<sup>3</sup> This same violence is represented in Ventures account which explains that "the very first salute I had from them [his first slavers] was a violent blow on the head with the fore part of a gun."<sup>4</sup> Venture was enslaved and performing labour intensive tasks from the mere age of 6; a very pertinent image of the horror of slave life. Both men were regarded as having no rights with any possessions they managed to acquire frequently stolen from them. Even after Gronniosaw was freed he recounts how a man "threatened to sell me.—Though I knew he had no right to do that, yet as I had no friend in the world to go to, it alarm'd me greatly."<sup>5</sup> Stinchcombe explains how there was no real way for slaves to call upon the law and as such they had no protection from this kind of treatment.<sup>6</sup> This is illustrative of predominant

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Stinchcombe (1994) 'Freedom and Oppression of Slaves in the Eighteenth-Century Caribbean' *American Sociological Review*, Vol.59, No.6, p.913

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.921

<sup>3</sup> Walter Shirley (1750) 'A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronnisaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself'. Bath: W.GYE, p.6

<sup>4</sup> C. Holt (1798) 'Of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa'. New-London: C. Holt, p.10

<sup>5</sup> Shirley, p.21

<sup>6</sup> Stinchcombe, p.912

perception at the time by the British of the slave as not attributed with the rights of being 'human' and slaves being 'justifiably' treated accordingly.

Although British perception of African-American identity appears relatively clear; the slaves' perception of themselves presents a far more complicated issue. Eltis presents the view that "initially, the terms Africa and Africans had meaning only to Europeans."<sup>7</sup> He argues that the people of Africa identified only with their individual tribes and that there were some cultural divides that "not even the traumatic experience of confinement on a slave ship could breach."<sup>8</sup> We can see this lack of cohesive identity in both Gronnisaw's account as he was sold into slavery by a rival tribe as the "King imagined that I was sent by my father as a spy,"<sup>9</sup> and Venture's narrative as he was captured by Africans working under direction of the British. This multiplicity of African identity did not just disappear under the levelling influence of collective slavery, although mutual suffering may have produced some form of kinship in individual situations. Both slave accounts are entirely focused on the culturally emancipated slave and their immediate family; not any wider connections. In fact, all three times Venture freed other 'negro' men during his latter days, they abused his charity by borrowing from him and fleeing; not representing any notion of a shared connection.

This question of identity is very relevant in investigating slave 'culture'. Young argues that "there was a single determination among the enslaved to create continuity."<sup>10</sup> In light of the disjuncture of 'Africanness' this is hard to support. Nevertheless any people with a shared situation of sorts are likely to have some overlap of experience and belief; the question is the

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<sup>7</sup> Eltis, p.224

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p.226

<sup>9</sup> Shirley, p.8

<sup>10</sup> Jason Young (2006) 'Through the Prism of Slave Art: History, Literature, Memory, and the Work of P. Sterling Stuckey' *The Journal of African American History*, Vol.91, No.4, p.391

nature of this and whether we can draw it together to identify a cohesive concept of 'slave culture.' Lovejoy argues passionately that African-American cultural traits involved the "transfer and adaptation of the contemporary world of Africa to the Americas and were NOT mere "survivals" of some diluted African past."<sup>11</sup> A realistic image of African-American identity during the time period is more complicated than either of these two views, incorporating a mix of traditional factors, Western influence and their experiences as slaves. One particularly interesting area to examine this is that of religion. Gronniosaw grew up in America as the slave of a religious minister and as such became very Christian. Although he still identified with his ethnicity, Western religion became embedded in his cultural identity. Alongside this, burial customs were of great importance to African-Americans and this seems to be a mix of holding onto the comfort of 'old traditions' of their burial mounds and adapting to their present circumstance with a 'new' idea that after death the spirit returns to their African homeland to be with their relations.<sup>12</sup> There is every chance that this too was affected by Christian understandings of heaven where one would be reunited with their loved ones. Lovejoy is adamant that these people "found ways to determine identities on their own terms."<sup>13</sup> This can be overstated in regard to a people that had very little control over many aspects of their lives. Extreme oppression and extensive separation are not circumstances conducive of artistic expression. Both Gronniosaw and Venture spent their lives simply fighting to survive; where freedom and sustenance were almost their sole drives. However it is of note, that both defied their situation enough to marry for love so it cannot be said that there was absolutely no self-creation.

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Lovejoy (1997) 'The African Diaspora: Revisionist Interpretations of Ethnicity, Culture and Religion under Slavery' *Studies in World History of Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation*, Vol.2, No.1, p.4

<sup>12</sup> Young, p.390

<sup>13</sup> Lovejoy, p.4

Forms of resistance are important factors of slave experience. Although a lack of a cohesive African identity prevented large-scale revolt and slavery was not over-turned through African-American revolution, this is not to say that resistance of oppression was not built into the 'worlds slaves made' for themselves. There were many instances of individual resistance as well as revolt of groups arising from particular locations. Venture tells us of how his father died fighting subjugation upon capture; defying their wishes he "despised all tortures which they inflicted until the continued exercise and increase of torment, obliged him to sink and expire."<sup>14</sup> Unlike Lovejoy I would not argue that slave resistance was a significant factor in the abolition movement, but that does not diminish its importance. Young argues that "the arts of the enslaved constituted the seedbed for black resistance to slavery."<sup>15</sup> Pierson particularly discusses musical satire as a primary implement of this. Although I cannot agree with Pierson's understanding of their musical satire as an expression that reflected the lack of understanding of violent revolution, as Africans demonstrated violent resistance both in Africa between themselves and in their unsuccessful revolts, I agree with the importance of these expressions. Both direct challenges to their slavery with revolutionary chants were employed, as were satirical mockery of English dance and manners.<sup>16</sup> These shows of resilience gave slaves a sense of their own humanity and gave hope so that "The soul would survive."<sup>17</sup> Venture portrays great shows of this spirit of resistance through 'playing the system' to take back control of his life. Venture not only intensively labours to buy his freedom, he also wins back his entire family and sets up a home with an estate of land despite constant British oppression and direct theft. After all Venture

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<sup>14</sup> Holt, p.10

<sup>15</sup> Young, p.390

<sup>16</sup> William Pierson (1993) 'Chapter 3- A Resistance Too Civilised to Notice' from *Black Legacy: America's Hidden Heritage*, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Press, p.63

<sup>17</sup> Pierson, p.73

experiences he still claims that “My freedom is a *privilege* which nothing else can equal.”<sup>18</sup> Amazing achievements such as this, point to the awe-inspiring strength of slaves to ‘create a world’ for themselves in the dark heart of British imperial ambition.

Slaves under the British Empire between 1688 and 1800 experienced extensive oppression and suffering. Despite this they managed to formulate beliefs, relationships and shows of resistance. There was not a single ‘world slaves created’ for themselves as such, as it is European classification that grouped Africans together, more than their own sense of identity. Rather, there was a multiplicity of ‘mini-cultures’ that in some cases may only have existed within a group as small as a plantation or a single family, but this does not devalue their significance. The life African-Americans made for themselves is impressive enough without post-colonial history attempting to entirely unify their experience for a neat and more sentimental view of history that supports the more cohesive sense of identity that their descendants share today.

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<sup>18</sup> Holt, p.31 (emphasis added)

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