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The Whipping Man

By Matthew Lopez

Directed by Lou Bellamy

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Strangers in a Strange Land: The Making of an American Identity

"And the Lord spake unto Moses, go unto Pharaoh, and say unto him,
thus saith the Lord, Let my people go, that they may serve me."
Exodus 8:1

"Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves:
for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy,
and not with grief: for that [is] unprofitable for you."
Hebrews 13:17

"Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? To his own master he standeth or falleth.
Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand."
Romans 14:14

Introduction

The Whipping Man, by Matthew Lopez, revisits one of the most singularly important events in world history, the fall of the **American Confederacy** and the end of slavery in the United States. In the hours after the surrender of **General Robert E. Lee** at the **Appomattox**, the nation was at its knees, waiting with bated breath for the uncharted territory ahead. Given our reluctance to revisit the institution of slavery in this country, most contemporary Americans do not understand the intricacies of the four hundred year slave system in the US, its vastness and deep entrenchment in our culture and identity, from the birth of the nation to its restructure in the **post-bellum** period. To this day Americans struggle with the legacy of institutionalized racial slavery and the corrosive influences of racism that continue to plague us in the modern world. *The Whipping Man* gives audiences the opportunity to consider the complexities of the system in a most intimate way, through the story of one family on the brink of collapse in a new era for what is today the world's most influential superpower.

The Whipping Man brings to light several themes too large to fully explore here, and each reader will bring a different set of questions to the text, each member of the audience a different perspective and interpretation of the play. One might find that the play and the themes therein speak to biracial identity in contemporary America; one might use it to complement or complicate an exploration into Ethiopian Jewish identity, or even to differently situate the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. For the purposes of this guide, produced within the context of an African American theatre company, focus will be placed on exploring the experience of being both black and Jewish in America, and how fully each of these identities might be experienced at a very particular historical juncture. A bibliography of suggested reading follows the essay for those interested in exploring some of the themes not illuminated here.

A significant theme for contemporary American audiences is the relationship between African and Jewish Americans in the New World. In recent years, tension regarding the history of slavery in the United States complicated relations between black and Jewish Americans. The conflict that arose surrounding the 1991 book published by the Historical Research Department of the Nation of Islam entitled *The Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews* is exemplary. Eli Faber, a Jewish historian, takes issue with the way in which it “charged that Jews financed and dominated the slave trade, owned slaves well in excess of any other group, and inflicted cruelty with abandon on slaves.”¹ He then cites the remarks made in an address by the chairperson of the Black Studies Department at the City College CUNY positing that Jewish people have contributed to the continued suppression of African Americans and that “wealthy Jews had been instrumental in financing the slave trade.”² Faber’s main criticism of the book published by the Nation is that the “omission of comparative information about non-Jewish participants in the slave system implied that Jewish domination could simply be assumed; it did not have to be proved empirically.”³ The following year, Henry Louis Gates Jr., chair of Harvard University’s Afro-American Studies Department criticized the rise in anti-Semitism he noticed amongst African Americans, hoping to quell what he feared would become an increasingly popular idea: that Jewish people, a minority population during the antebellum period, were suspiciously over-implicated in the system of American slavery.

Most historians find that the Jewish involvement in the slave trade was not disproportionately high as had been suggested, but rather that Jews occupied similar roles within the system of racial slavery as other whites. There were Jewish slaveowners, traders and insurers just as there were non-Jewish slaveowners, traders and insurers. There were Jewish **abolitionists** just as there were non-Jewish abolitionists. Still, as horrific as the practice of slavery was, owning, buying and selling slaves was largely regarded as a rather mundane and commonplace practice. As white men outlined the rights of freedom, liberty and justice for American citizens, the majority of their families were being cared for by black slaves, their tobacco, cotton and sugar plantations maintained by slave labor. They saw no discrepancy in their philosophy, nor hypocrisy in their actions. The fact of the matter was that black slaves were not considered human beings, but rather property—commodities to be bought and sold on an international market as necessary. These are the foundations of global trade and capitalism.

The Whipping Man takes the conversation further, by illuminating the site of one Jewish home in which both the slaveholding and slave families practice Judaism. In Lopez’s exploration

¹ Faber, Eli. *Jews, Slaves and the Slave Trade: Setting the Record Straight*. (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998) p. 6.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, p. 8.

of this relatively unique situation, the correlations between Jewish enslavement in Egypt as documented by the Old Testament, and African American enslavement in the New World, offer powerful examples of the bonds black and Jewish Americans could choose to highlight as commonalities versus the divisive particularities of power and disenfranchisement in more recent history that prevent coalition and understanding. This is not to make the bondage and oppression experienced by black and Jewish peoples the same—it is critical to recognize the specificities of cultural, racial and spiritual differences. It is instead to offer insight into the complexities of these experiences, to realize the ways in which meaning is dispersed amongst different groups, and to explore the interpretations of historical events in a culturally specific way relevant to the experiences of the people implicated.

Life in the Antebellum South

Often it is hard for contemporary Americans to wrap their heads around the concept of American **chattel slavery**. How could one deny the humanity of another human being? How could anyone subjugate a child to bondage? How is it possible that families could live and work next to one another in the same households where one was master and the other slave?

First it is important to understand the concept of human “chattel.” This is a different conception of the slave than one might find in ancient Greek, Roman or Byzantine empires. Chattel slavery is built upon the notion of certain classes of people as non-beings, more closely related to beasts of burden than to human beings, born into generations of interminable servitude. Yet slaves were repeatedly required to demonstrate their humanity in various ways that confounded the notion of them as objects. The faculty of (many) language(s), their need to care for themselves and others, to nurse wounds, birth and care for children, bury and mourn their dead, recite their history of ownership and various skill sets, even to market themselves by feigning desirable characteristics, all the while being told they were nonhuman.

Under the system of chattel slavery, people are seen as commodities, items of value that increase based on age, ability, gender, form, function, skill, disposition and obedience. Once purchased, a master had all rights over a slave, from the very functions of and access to the body, to the labor that body could produce, to any skills the slave acquired and any offspring the slave conceived. In this system, the master had complete control over the life and living of the slave; “nothing was private: sexual relations and ‘marriage,’ children and childrearing, education, food and the rituals of eating, labour, leisure, everything could be watched and

controlled.”⁴ Yet as German philosopher Georg Hegel pointed out, this relationship, oppressive as it was for the slave, also affected the master in a curious way. The master, having entered into a contract of complete and perpetual servitude with another human being, would become totally reliant on that other human being, the slave, to exist himself. Simply put, without the slave, there is no master; the slave was a necessary and validating presence for the master and as such harbored a degree of power within this relationship of total domination. As sociologist Orlando Patterson puts it,

...the master-slave relationship was not a static one in which an active master constantly got his way against a wholly passive slave. In spite of the extreme power of the master, certain constraints were inherent in the very nature of this relationship. One was the self-interest of the master himself. The whole point of keeping slaves was to get them to serve him, in whatever capacity he chose, to the best of his ability. To achieve this objective, the master could use various combinations of punishments and rewards. Slavery was unusual in the extraordinary extent to which the slave could be punished for not serving—even to the extreme of murder. But a dead slave, or one incapacitated by brutalization, was a useless slave. This stark fact, plus the recognition that incentives usually work more effectively than punishment in inducing service, was enough to encourage most masters in all slaveholding societies to search for the best balance between reward and punishment.⁵

This paradox—the reliance of the master on the slave—allowed for certain compromise. When pushed to a limit, slaves could exact the small bit of power they held over their masters and mistresses. These were rare and dangerous occasions, but powerful when they worked. As he combed through the annals of American slave narratives, historian Walter Johnson came across the story of Moses Grandy, once owned by Bill Grandy, infamous for selling off his slaves to pay for his “entertainment.” A drinking man, this could have included gambling, prostitution, purchases made on flight of fancy, or any other such whimsical and irresponsible expenditure of the family resources he desired. As a child, Moses remembers the threat of being sold as constantly looming. Johnson writes,

though Grandy’s mother could not hope to carry eight children to freedom [along the Underground Railroad], she was for sometime able to keep them from getting sold. ‘I remember well,’ Grandy later wrote, ‘my mother often hid

⁴ Wood, Marcus. *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780-1865*. (New York and London: Routledge, 2000) p. 216.

⁵ Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1982) p. 205.

us in the woods to prevent master selling us.’ During that time the Grandy family lived on wild berries they found in the woods and potatoes and raw corn that could only have come from slaves who remained behind or lived nearby. Word that the slaveholding Grandy had relented came from the same quarter: ‘After a time, the master would send word to her to come in, promising her he would not sell us.’ By enlisting the support of other slaves in the neighborhood and withholding her labor and that of her children, Grandy’s mother repeatedly postponed their sale.⁶

The kind of rebellion such as Moses Grandy’s mother enacted against her master illustrates the codependency of the master-slave relationship. Rather than sell one or a few of the children and risk the rebellion or escape of the rest along with their mother, Bill Grandy allowed Moses’ mother an exertion of power in which she enforced her will to keep her family together. To think that the whole time the children were hiding in the woods, that their mother was receiving help from the network of slaves living nearby, is to signal the largesse of the bonds created between slaves to support one another, a dynamic that eventually led to the large scale secret exodus of runaways along the **Underground Railroad**. This same sense of community and kinship persisted as a continual and nagging threat amongst the ruling class, ever aware that slaves knew the land, the people, and the capabilities and the weaknesses of the master class, better than they. Thus to a degree the master lived in fear of the slave, as the slave lived in fear of the master. Still, as Patterson points out,

it is a mistake to characterize such a highly asymmetric interaction as one of “give-and-take”.... Husbands and wives give and take, sometimes; employers and wage earners, maybe; masters and slaves, never. What masters and slaves do is struggle: sometimes noisily, more often quietly; sometimes violently, more often surreptitiously; infrequently with arms, always with the weapons of the mind and soul.⁷

It is this struggle that *The Whipping Man* illuminates so profoundly.

The American Slave System: A Model Built for Durability

Racial slavery was a new concept that folded millions of culturally and ethnically diverse people into one lot by virtue of their race. With anywhere from nine to fifteen million

⁶ Johnson, Walter. *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*. (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999) p. 32. Johnson quotes from the narrative of Moses Grandy, a runaway who published his memoir in 1844; *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy, Late a Slave in the United States of America*. (Boston, 1844).

⁷ Patterson, p. 207.

people forcibly relocated from Africa to the New World, the trans-Atlantic slave trade changed the history of the world forever. In the New World a slave's destiny was predetermined, as was the fate of any children and their children's children *ad infinitum*.

In 1789, the year of the **Haitian Revolution** in which black African, mixed race slaves and free people of color unified to take control of the world's wealthiest plantation economy, the US Constitution incorporated a provision that led to a ban on the importation of African slaves after 1808,⁸ leaving a window of a few years for Americans to wean themselves off of the flow from the trans-Atlantic trade. Cautious about the rebellious behavior and violence exacted upon whites during the Revolution, American slaveowners were content to let the slave population reproduce itself "naturally," eliminating the need for importing and "**seasoning**" new slaves, a long and arduous process that slaveholders often likened to breaking wild horses for domesticity. Indeed, breaking the human spirit was part of transforming a person into a slave; the brutal process included torture, degradation and the enforcement of a new language and customs upon recent arrivals to the New World. The intent was not just to cut those men and women sent to replenish the slave economy off from their own culture, but to enforce the total domination of the white slaveowning class. This process of bringing in new slaves to revitalize the work force was regarded in Brazil and the Caribbean as fiscally responsible. There with the unyielding grind of massive plantation economies, it was economically more prudent to work a slave to death then purchase a new one, rather than wait for the labor force to reproduce itself. Under these extreme working conditions, and with a constant influx of Africans into the creole population, revolution was imminent.

Americans learned from the mistakes of this kind of economy and adjusted their practice accordingly. They realized that they did well to keep the slave labor force relatively content, allowing slaves a semblance of humanity by encouraging family and kinship networks, permitting slaves to practice Christianity and in some cases Judaism, and occasionally by setting aside a day of reprieve, usually on Sundays. These sanctions were not demonstrative of the goodly nature of white American slaveowners as they were recast in post-bellum arguments meant to exhibit the merit of slavery. Instead, these small concessions brought great gain to American slaveholders. Indeed the largest threat of punishment was the stripping away of these privileges, most powerfully the division of families. Wisely investing in the contentment of their labor force, American whites worked hard to avoid the large-scale revolution that had swept the Saint Domingue colony asunder. In fact, as the American slave economy progressed over its four hundred year reign, one might argue that the enforcement of slave status became less

⁸ See Johnson, *ibid.*, p. 4-5.

volatile and even “proper,” with slaveholders vying for a reputation of goodliness and benevolence in relation to their slaves. It would not be until the emancipation of black people that the terror of mob violence, lynching and rape that besieged African Americans was considered socially acceptable. Once supremely valuable commodities, after manumission in the eyes of white anti-abolitionists, “Negroes” were expendable.

The difference between the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the domestic slave trade in the US is often overlooked, or collapsed into one overarching concept of “the slave trade.” The fact is that these separate but interlocking enterprises had different functions and served different needs for those in control of them. The domestic slave trade in the US focused on moving black American slaves, many who had been born into bondage, from region to region within a domestic slave economy. Slaves were moved when hardships such as drought or debt from poor management fell upon plantations, when slaveowners died and bequeathed their property to family elsewhere, and very rarely where a slaveholder became swayed by the mounting abolitionist movement. Most frequently, slaves were relocated when problems occurred on plantations. The threat of being separated from one’s family, the ultimate evidence of one’s humanity and the pride of the American slave system, was constant and interminable.

For some, the sale into the trade was more than they could bear. Separated from the world that had given their lives meaning, some slaves were overwhelmed by the traders’ brutality, the numbing privatization of the slow southward march, and the terrifying contingency of lives put up for sale. To the social death experienced by those torn from their histories and identities and the physical death they faced in the killing fields of the lower South must be added the psychic deaths—the “soul murder”—that left many of the trade’s victims with little will to resist.⁹

Still, as the story of Moses Grandy illustrates, slaves often resisted their sale either by forcing slaveholders to recognize their limited power or “by refusing to accept their owner’s account of what was happening, by treating events that slaveholders described in the language of economic necessity or disciplinary exigency as human tragedy or personal betrayal.”¹⁰ This sentiment is illustrated in *The Whipping Man*, when Simon learns that De Leon has sold his wife and daughter. Simon feels a deep sense of disloyalty. The seduction of the mitzvah or promise for **manumission** money that has kept him thus far in check (and in some ways willfully blind to the hypocrisy of the slave system) is immediately lifted, the bonds of family greater than any security he could attain by staying to care for Caleb and the house. American slaveholders used

⁹ Johnson, p. 64.

¹⁰ Johnson, p. 52.

the tactic of relocation as an enactment of their absolute power over their slaves, quelling rebellious behavior, punishing disobedience, and often ridding themselves of the indiscretions of **miscegenation** by selling off the light-skinned offspring of illegal unions between white slaveowners and black slaves, as De Leon did when he learned his son Caleb had impregnated Sarah, and years prior his own son John.

As immense as the trans-Atlantic slave trade was, the domestic trade within the US rivaled its enormity relationally. “In the seven decades between the Constitution and the Civil War, approximately one million enslaved people were relocated from the upper South to the lower South according to the dictates of the slaveholders’ economy.”¹¹ This figure does not account for those slaves relocated domestically in the three hundred and thirty years prior.

This practice of relocating individuals, uprooting them from the only homes and families they knew to send them along threads of trade that connected the US, was a distinctive feature of enslavement in America—arguably the element of the system in which slaves most desperately experienced their bondage. In the overwhelming majority of slave narratives, this experience is mourned viscerally. Black slaves were often able to bear the beatings, infringement upon their privacy, the work, even the rape to which both men and women were subjected—but tearing them from their families was truly agonizing. It is not a coincidence that upon their emancipation, black Americans hit the roads and back-ways of the South to find their families. Reconnecting with those who had been sold away took precedence over anything else. Black people risked traveling alone on the open road, risked not eating or sleeping for weeks on end, risked their very lives, to find one another. Remarkably, many did. Through intricate networks of kinship and community word passed from person to person when someone was looking for her children, his wife, her grandparents. Piece-by-piece, black Americans rebuilt the families and communities that the domestic trade had deliberately disbanded. By many accounts, even with the terror of mounting racial hatred, it was a most joyful time.

Ironically, the sale of the grandchild De Leon made in *The Whipping Man* is illegal, as with the fall of the South slaves throughout the country had *de facto* been emancipated. While the **Emancipation Proclamation** is often considered the moment at which slaves were freed, only the **Fourteenth Amendment** to the Constitution officially liberated the slaves *de jure*. Still, exhibiting the reluctance of the former Confederacy to cede to the force of the Union, De Leon enacted two last performances of his power and authority. First he sells his female slaves to his neighbors, the Taylors, in an illegal exchange of contraband for money. Second, he sends John, a free man, to the Whipping Man because he had tried to stop De Leon from banishing Elizabeth

¹¹ Johnson, p. 5.

and Sarah. In this way, as so many slaveholders did, De Leon washed his hands of his burden. By getting rid of the evidence, so to speak, his life, money, and family would be unaccountable for profiting from the slave system.

While he was not the owner of a massive agricultural plantation, De Leon was wholly invested in the Confederacy and the right of Southern states to sovereignty. The play is set in Richmond, Virginia the capital city of the Confederate States of America, made up of the eleven states that ceded from the Union: South Carolina, North Carolina, West Virginia, Virginia, Tennessee, Louisiana, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Texas and Mississippi. Today, Richmond Virginia is still regarded by some with heartfelt nostalgia, and the Confederate monuments erected in 1887 to celebrate the ostensibly gallant, but fallen Confederate soldiers still stand, as does the White House of the Southern Confederacy.

Before the sixteenth president of the United States, **Abraham Lincoln**, was sworn into office, seven states had declared their independence from the Union. After the **Battle of Fort Sumter**, in which the Confederacy took control of the fort signaling the beginning of the Civil War, four more states followed. For four years between 1861 and 1865 the Confederate States of America regarded themselves as a sovereign nation. Bonded by their interest in preserving their right to hold slaves, the Confederacy elected its own president, slaveholder **Jefferson Davis**, and even printed its own money. Secession from the Union was illegal and the United States refused to recognize the authority of the newly created Confederacy. The election of a false president and the manufacture of counterfeit currency were regarded as treasonous crimes. After four years of struggle, in the spring of 1865 Union **General Ulysses S. Grant** forced Confederate General Robert E. Lee to abandon his post at Richmond. Nine days later on April 14, 1865 Lee surrendered his army at the Appomattox Court house, signaling the fall of the Confederacy and the end to American slavery. No longer secure the “sons and daughters of the South,” as they regarded themselves, quickly took flight leaving their wealth and property—including their slaves—behind. They left the handsome estates and plantations to the Union soldiers, the property-less whites and the black slaves they had fought so fiercely to retain. After years of hardship and war, hunger and fear, Richmond and its outlying plantations was severely looted. In a final gesture of conquest over the Confederate reign, many homes were set afire.

It is in this state that *The Whipping Man* begins, with the once grand home of the De Leon family, situated in the heart of the Confederate capital, disheveled and torn apart. Simon remains, waiting for the return of De Leon with his own wife and daughter. De Leon has left with President Davis and the rest of the cabinet, implying that he may in fact represent an official in the Confederate Party, many of whom fled immediately after the fall of Lee’s army,

fearing retribution for sedition. His son Caleb returns—the young master of the house—to find his world shattered beyond recognition. A defected soldier from the Confederate army, he is wounded both by his cowardice and a gangrenous bullet wound to the leg.

Unlike the story Caleb spins for Simon about his surrender and the callousness with which the Federal army treated the defeated Confederate soldiers, in actuality, the Union took great pains to let the South retreat with some pride intact, hoping for a restoration of the Union to its full capacity. Federal doctors busied themselves with caring for the sick and dying on both sides, sparing the lives of those who had been enemies only days before. Both Federal and Confederate officers would, however, hold a defective soldier, particularly a Captain responsible for troops, highly accountable for his actions. Caleb's premature withdrawal was a most dishonorable and deplorable act, and would cost him dearly should anyone discover his secret.

In a rather wretched state and fearing retribution, Caleb finds immediate solace in Simon's gentle presence. He is comforted by what he hopes is a return to life the way it was. Lopez deftly illustrates the density of slavery and the challenges of emancipation. Even as Caleb reflexively barks a series of orders at Simon, he trusts Simon's advice that his leg needs amputation. As evidenced in this exchange, the relationship between elder slaves and the adult children of a slaveholder was complicated. The white children of slaveowners often regarded the elder slaves who raised them as surrogate parents, yet the relationship—mediated by the contract of racial slavery—swings quickly from a kind of childish nostalgia to acts of strict domination as white children claim their birthright and begin to assert their power. As Caleb routinely commands various tasks, Simon carefully reminds him that times are different:

SIMON: Caleb?

CALEB: What?

SIMON: All these things you're telling me to do, by rights now you need to be asking me to do.¹²

It was this reflexive ability to treat black people as a servant class that the Southern plantocracy had such difficulty surrendering. Even poor whites, disenfranchised by their poverty, could exact a measure of power over black people because of their racial privilege, instilling in them a sense of self-worth to combat their degradation as a lower class. This kind of rapport is yet another incarnation of the master-slave relationship alluding to the magnitude of manumission. Emancipated slaves destroyed the master class. Without slaves to punctuate their privilege, whites were left with two ways of maintaining a sense of power over their former servant class,

¹² Lopez, Matthew. *The Whipping Man*. Reprinted by permission. (New York: The Gersh Agency, 2008) p. 11.

by using the twin pillars of race and class (and gender where appropriate) to support their elite status. These tactics often still mediate relationships between whites and people of color today.

Freedom with a Price: The Economics of Emancipation

In the spring of 1865 the stars and stripes raised over Fort Sumter, signaling the fall of the Confederacy. After four years of Civil War, the Southern stronghold of eleven states opposed to the abolition of slavery fell under the jurisdiction of the Union, freeing black people throughout the South. It was not until the post-bellum, the difficult period known to most Americans as the **Reconstruction** (a term that unlike “post-bellum” is not directly linked to slavery and so lends itself to the “reconstruction” of an American history without slavery), that the challenges of abolition became evident.

One of the major problems the post-bellum South faced was the transition from slave labor to wage labor. Orlando Patterson finds Karl Marx’s conception of this evolution in the *Grundrisse* useful in explaining the seminal differences in perception and action as this transition is made:

Commenting on the fact that...ex-slaves refused to work beyond what was necessary for their own subsistence, [Karl Marx] notes, ‘They have ceased to be slaves, ...not in order to become wage labourers, but, instead self-sustaining peasants working for their own consumption. As far as they are concerned, capital does not exist as capital, because autonomous wealth as such can exist only either on the basis of *direct* forced labour, slavery, or *indirect* forced labour, *wage labour*. Wealth confronts direct forced labour not as capital, but rather as *relation of domination*’.¹³

In a colonial environment in which the majority of production was focused on exportation, **subsistence** labor was tertiary. Agricultural production needed to sustain the slave labor forces was regarded as a fixed cost, or operating expense, that would be made up after the harvest and sale of plantation crops, often not directly useful to the population nurturing its growth. While slaves worked vast sugar, tobacco, coffee and cotton plantations, none of the products harvested could be used directly for human consumption. Instead, these products were known as **cash crops**, commodities to be traded on a larger market of supply and demand. The shift Marx and Patterson note in the behavior of liberated slaves is antithetical to the system of capitalist production, leaning more toward subsistence model of living in which one’s labor is exerted solely for one’s comfort and survival. In this new model, subsistence agriculture was the end to

¹³ Patterson, 2. Patterson is quoting Karl Marx’s *Grundrisse* (London: Penguin and New Left Books, 1973) pp. 325-326. Emphasis is original to text.

production, not a means to engender a larger outcome. Excess, the paramount principle to the colonial marketplace is unnecessary and undesirable. A philosophy and practice of subsistence living amongst the labor forces was therefore a cog in the capitalist machine that could grind the entire colonial enterprise of **mercantile capitalism**, worth billions of dollars, to a halt. Without enticing laborers to invest their energies in something sellable, the economy would be one of pure subsistence, a community working for its own continuity, needing no more than what was necessary for survival, no excess and no waste.

Since black people in America owned nothing upon their liberation save their own bodies and selves—a monumental achievement in relation to where they had been—in the American South plantation owners circumvented the creation of a subsistence model amongst the labor force which would have threatened the integrity of the capitalist economy by creating a system of debt and credit known as “**sharecropping**,” in which laborers could use a portion of the land to make a living in return for a share of the crop produced. As slavery did before it, the sharecropping system catered to the interests of the plantation owners. Laborers were lucky to break even and many sharecroppers actually found themselves in debt, even after fruitful harvests. The contract forced them to buy planting materials (seeds, tools, work animals) as well as food and clothing from the owner of the plantation. These purchases were made almost exclusively on credit. As part of the lease agreement to the land, plantation owners were permitted to buy a portion (sometimes over half) of the crop at a fixed rate set much lower than market price. Plantation owners were responsible for maintaining the books and they commonly falsified the records to ensure that sharecropping farmers made little to no profit. The planters would then fetch double or triple what they paid the sharecroppers when they sold the harvested crop at top market values. At the end of the season, sharecroppers were required to pay back their debt to plantation owners for the materials purchased during planting. With the small amount garnered from the remainder of their year’s harvest most could not pay and went into debt. As a result, many sharecroppers were essentially working for free—a system that undoubtedly felt much like slavery.

Why go to such lengths to keep black Americans from self-sustainability? The answer lies in how deeply entrenched the slave system is in the American economy. It can be measured by the tenacity with which the Confederates fought to preserve their right to hold slaves, by the hatred heaped upon emancipated African Americans, and by the institution of sharecropping, an economic system intended to keep the labor population in check. Perhaps most telling, though, is the financial mire in which the South found itself without the presence of slaves to mediate even their most practical and minute business exchanges:

The entire economy of the antebellum South was constructed upon the idea that the bodies of enslaved people had a measurable monetary value, whether they were ever actually sold or not. Slaves were regularly used as collateral in credit transactions; indeed, rather than giving an IOU when they borrowed money, many slaveholders simply wrote out a bill of sale for a slave who would actually be transferred only if they failed to pay their debt. The value attached to unsold slaves was much more useful to antebellum businessmen than that attached to land, for slaves were portable and the slave traders promised ready cash. In antebellum East Feliciana Parish, Louisiana, slave accounted for eighty percent of the security offered in recorded mortgages. Similarly, slaves were used as collateral by purchasers of shares in Louisiana's investment banks. ... Everyday, all over the antebellum South, slaveholders' relations to one another—their promises, obligations, and settlements—were backed by the idea of a market in slaves, the idea that people had a value that could be abstracted from their bodies and cashed in when the occasion arose.¹⁴

This is largely the evidence left of the slave trade: the financial docket, the account and log books, the insurance papers and bills of sale, the letters between slaveholders bemoaning the coming tides of abolition. An economic story of a dismantled institution, privatized, silenced and stored away. This is not for lack of alternative narratives.

There are hundreds of testimonies of freed slaves and fugitives who made their way north where abolitionists waited to cull their stories for vast circulation. These stories, though available to the keen researcher, were not made widely available to the American public. Walter Johnson calls this “one of the most durable paradoxes of white supremacy—the idea that those who are closest to an experience of oppression (in this case former slaves) are its least credible witnesses.”¹⁵ Even as recent examinations of American history try to incorporate these stories, Johnson cautions—as **William Wells Brown** did before him—that slave narratives are “incomplete accounts [derived from] the stories of the escapees and survivors of an institution that gave up very few of either.”¹⁶ He reminds us that the vast majority of black slaves died as they had lived—in bondage—and that those stories will never be told. Still, the stories that were preserved were circulated with a distinct purpose in mind:

White abolitionists, in turn, forced their own version of antislavery upon those who tried to tell their stories of slavery. “Give us the facts,” Frederick Douglas

¹⁴ Johnson, p. 26.

¹⁵ Johnson, p. 9.

¹⁶ Johnson, p. 10.

was told, “we will take care of the philosophy.” ...the narratives rarely enlarge upon the daily life, joys, and travails of enslaved communities. As stories of saved souls, they sometimes ignore the sufferings of enslaved bodies. As vehicles for supplying a moralistic bourgeois audience with the ideal slaves they demanded, the narratives often gloss over the anger, dissimulation, sexuality, and occasional brutality of real slaves’ daily lives.¹⁷

Add to this mixture the cultural and epistemological notion of a “freed slave” and the situation becomes more complicated still. As living commodities, black slaves had underscored every portion of antebellum society. Upon emancipation, the value housed in these bodies vanished. In a matter of minutes, an enterprise worth hundreds of millions of dollars went bankrupt. The financial shock was unlike any stock market crash experienced in the US. In the eyes of slaveholders, traders, insurers and outfitters, freedom for black people represented a debt that never paid.

As objects of value who owned nothing, slaves were in no position to buy their own freedom. Forced manumission, therefore, would always appear to owners as a direct loss to their net. If, as Orlando Patterson explains, another were to buy the freedom of a slave from a master, so settling the debt there, yet another individual would be out the value of the slave whose freedom he had just purchased. The balance would remain unpaid, a mark upon African Americans which would allow bitter whites to claim that they were leeching off of the system, taking unfair advantage of American munificence, getting something for nothing. These sentiments would be recycled decade after decade and are present today in arguments against affirmative action, welfare, and programs designed to ease the burden of poverty and racism amongst the nation’s most disenfranchised citizens. The massive wealth that whites accrued in generation after generation of slaveowning families, while profiting off four hundred years of slave labor, is not accountable according to this system of reckoning. Instead, white privilege is quietly dismissed and regurgitated as individual achievement as opposed to racial inheritance. Even those who did not own slaves were swept into the roiling economy that slavery generated. Whether they were related as attorneys who settled disputes between insurance companies and slave traders, or metalworkers fashioning shackles and chains out of iron, everyone was implicated in the business of American capitalism—and that business was built on slavery.

¹⁷ Johnson, p. 10.

Life in the De Leon House: Urban versus Plantation Slavery

As tremendous as the economic blow of emancipation was to **antebellum** society, the cultural and social remnants of slavery would be the most difficult to overcome. The delicacy with which people now had to relate meant that every word had to be chosen wisely, tone and demeanor would have to be checked. Fiercely protective of their hard-won rights, black Americans began to stand up from under the shadow of slavery, and day by day rebuild the pride of humanity that had been so thoroughly stripped from them.

As a newly freed man, Simon cannot abide by Caleb's treatment without reminding him that the dynamics of power between them have shifted. This newfound license toward self-determination allowed Simon to help the Confederate soldiers in hospital, return to the De Leon estate as the mistress asked and save their son from death's door. In this momentous exchange, Simon outlines his actions for the first time in his life as *choices*. Choices he can make or not, depending for once upon his own will, his own heart. Caleb retorts with "are you asking me to chop off my leg or are you telling me?" Simon replies that he is telling him. "Then I'm telling you," Caleb replies, "to go get the goddamned whiskey. If you're giving orders, I'm giving orders. That sound fair to you?" Simon agrees, "fair enough for now."¹⁸ Given the circumstances, Simon is willing to acquiesce, allowing Caleb a semblance of control over his manic fear. But Simon is precise. "For now," defines this exchange as temporary, something Simon is choosing to tolerate, a demeanor between them that must end.

The notion of choice is a powerful one, particularly in an environment in which people were stripped of any sense of choice at all. In American antebellum society choice—the right to it—was thorny. When Caleb defends his involvement with the Confederate army after Simon confronts him, he endorses his right—and the right of other whites—to choose to keep black people enslaved. The weight of this irony seems ludicrous to Simon:

SIMON: You fought to keep us slaved?
CALEB: I...
SIMON: Did you?
CALEB: I fought for the right to make that choice.
SIMON: Seems to me that choice wasn't yours to make.¹⁹

This is one of the more paradoxical elements of the American slave system, and illuminates the effect it had on whites. Rather than deal with the nature of the institution of slavery as oppression, they chose to regard forced abolition as oppressive. Fighting to keep human beings in bondage is not honorable; fighting for the choice to live one's life as one sees fit is. Yet and

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Lopez, p. 35.

still, it was the perception of black people as objects and the paternalism of slavery that justified denying this same choice to slaves. As long as one did not recognize the humanity in a slave, one could deny his or her own rights without impediment, without recognizing culpability for the theft of another's rights. This irreconcilable claim is part of what haunts white people today when dealing with the history of slavery. Until one assumes accountability for one's part in the process, including the inheritance of certain privileges, the psychic battle ignited by this paradox will never end.

The challenges of realizing emancipation also had an effect on freedmen and women. Triumphant as the advent of freedom was, it was uncharted territory. When John returns to the De Leon house, he tells Caleb that he has been in Richmond. Caleb asks of the news from the capital. "There is no news," John replies matter-of-factly. "War's over. You lost. We won."²⁰ The "we" in this statement demonstrates the complexity of the experience of freedom for former slaves. While the fall of the Confederacy does hail the release of black Americans throughout the South, for many the only life they had known was in and amongst those who held them captive. Born into the house in which he served, John's only conception of family resides in the De Leon household, where two families, black and white, servant and master, negotiated one another in a delicate balance of dominance and subordination. Now that this struggle has been lifted, the history of their interactions is recast and John is unsure how to relate to Caleb, Simon, and even himself.

There are particular implications that make life in this kind of a household unique versus a large-scale plantation household. The lifestyle of slaves, the expectations they faced, and the relationships they experienced with the ruling family, are different in a smaller domicile than they would be on a plantation housing up to a thousand slave men and women. When John expresses grief over his former captivity, Simon reminds John that he could have been sold southward to the plantations, that he is lucky he was given a place to stay, a family to raise him, a faith to guide him and a most precious gift—the ability to read. Yet John is a deeply disturbed and wounded young man, with the cancer of pain and bitterness eating away at his heart. His experience was unique in these ways, many slave children—especially those born from interracial unions, faced sale upon their coming of age rather than being incorporated into the paternalism of a particular family.

At anywhere from five to nine years old, children born to a plantation were often put to work in the big house as "pet servants," where they not only served to punctuate the wealth and power of the white family but were trained in various skills that would make them more valuable on the slave market. A young girl or boy who had learned the proper codes of his or

²⁰ Lopez, p. 14.

her gender, perfected the art of service and attendance to an upper class master or mistress, or could demonstrate skill as a cook or craftsperson, was worth a notable price. These children, born to slaves already bought and paid for, embodied a potentially huge return on a slaveowner's investment. With calculating precision, owners tallied births and decided whether it would be more lucrative to keep or sell a slave. House slaves were reserved for the well to do and only the very wealthy could afford to house a full team of attendants, cooks and servants. For those children given the "luxury" of working in the big house, each learned skill became yet another threat to his or her security. Chances were that learning how to serve properly meant a child was destined for the slave market.

With eloquence and detail, Walter Johnson describes the environment of what became the largest slave market in North America, located just blocks from the levee in New Orleans at the intersection of Charles Street and the Esplanade. New Orleans, a bustling port city that rivaled New York, was lively and industrious in the nineteenth century, with ships and barges docking to unload and reload goods such as guns, cotton, tobacco, sugar, wine cattle, hogs, corn and whiskey.²¹ Other markets sprang up in the region, in which competing firms fought for the attention of tourists, onlookers and buyers. The long passage excerpted below helps recreate the strange and spectacular quality of the American capitalist slave system, in which human beings were treated as commodities and the practice of buying and selling black people was commonplace, an important and lucrative facet of our American economy:

Between September and May—the months that bounded the trading season—the streets in front of the [slave] pens were lined with slaves dressed in blue suits and calico dresses. Sometimes the slaves paced back and forth, sometimes they stood atop a small footstand, visible over a crush of fascinated onlookers. As many as a hundred slaves might occupy a single block, overseen by a few slave traders whose business was advertised by the painted signs hanging overhead: "T. Hart, Slaves," "Charles Lamarque and Co., Negroes." ...

The walls surrounding the pens were so high—fifteen or twenty feet—that one New Orleans slave dealer thought they could keep out the wind. Inside those walls the air must have been thick with overcrowding, smoke and shit and lye, the smells of fifty or a hundred people forced to live in a space the size of a home lot. And the sounds that came over the walls from the street outside must have been muted and mixed—horses' hooves striking the stone-paved street, cart wheels and streetcars, fragments of conversation, laughter, shouting. Along the inside walls were privies, kitchens, dressing rooms and jails. The jails were

²¹ Johnson, p. 1.

sometimes as many as three stories high and built of brick. They looked like the slave quarters that can be seen today in the yards of many New Orleans houses: steep-backed, one room deep, and fronted with railed galleries. In the nineteenth-century slave pens, however, those galleries were lined with barred windows and doors that locked from the outside. Behind the doors were simple rooms with bare pine floors and plain plastered walls; measuring ten or twelve feet across, they were intended for multiple occupancy. On the ground floor of one of the jails or across the yard were offices and a showroom. The traders' offices were probably the type of spaces where nobody sat down—places for drinking, pacing, signing, and counting. The real business took place in the showrooms, which were large enough for a hundred slaves to be arrayed around their walls, questioned and examined. These rooms had finished floors and painted walls, a fireplace, a few chairs and doors all around—a door from the offices where the traders did their counting and signing, a door from the street where the buyers gathered before the pens opened, and a door from the yard where the slaves waited to be sold.²²

It was the wealth of the De Leon family, their need to keep airs as a prominent Confederate family, and by sheer luck, that John was afforded a stable place within the De Leon home. De Leon himself may also have wanted to be near to his son, John, even though the crime of his miscegenation could threaten his standing within the Confederate party. Common as it was for white slaveholders to impregnate their slaves, racial mixing was looked upon as degradation of the white race, its offenders having succumbed to a base and lascivious weakness. Whatever the motive behind John's return to the De Leon home at six years of age, his experience in an urban estate was very different from those slaves who worked the cotton, tobacco and sugar plantations elsewhere in the US.

In his brilliant analysis of the nature of slavery, Orlando Patterson illuminates the differences between large-scale plantation slavery and household slavery, more akin to what Lopez depicts in *The Whipping Man*. "Large farms" he explains, usually "meant a higher level of whippings, less contact with owners, fewer chances therefore to manipulate the political psychology of the relation, and more work."²³ The reputation of brutality in large-scale plantation slavery made it easy for urban slaveholders to believe that they were offering a more merciful brand of bondage by keeping their slaves from the fields, as Caleb believes.

²² Johnson, pp. 2-3.

²³ Patterson, p. 206.

CALEB: I saw how field hands lived. And I saw how you lived. And I know there was a world of difference between the two. How did you spend the last four years, John? Did you fight in this war? Did you break your back out in a field? I don't need a lesson from you about what this was. I saw it. I know what war is. I lived it. What did you see? What did you live? I was starving to death at Petersburg while you were here reading novels.²⁴

Even as Caleb argues his point, he cannot bring himself to call the enterprise by its name, to recognize the laborers as slaves, a denial that John forces both Caleb and Simon to revisit later as he questions their faith.

From a slave's perspective, while more contact with slaveowners in a smaller domain sometimes meant that they could exact a kind of personal relationship with owners built on nostalgia and sympathy,

proximity to the master also carried enormous risks and disadvantages. The slave was under the constant supervision of the master and therefore subjected to greater and more capricious punishment and humiliation than those housed elsewhere. This was particularly true of the female slave, who ran the additional risk of the jealousy and vengeance of the "free" women of the household, especially the master's senior wife. The famous adage should have run: hell has no fury like a free wife scorned in favor of a slave.²⁵

As the lower South (Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana) developed into large-scale plantation agriculture, the need for labor increased exponentially. It became quite lucrative to sell house and small farm slaves for the vast fields of the South. Johnson explains that three historic events contributed to the massive domestic relocation of American slaves from the North and East to the emerging lower South.

The invention of the **cotton gin** in 1793, the purchase of Louisiana in 1803, and the subjugation of southern Indians, finalized along the **Trail of Tears** in 1838, opened new regions of the South to cultivation and slavery. Slaveholders called it a "kingdom" for cotton, and they populated the new states of the emerging Southwest...with slaves brought from the East: 155,000 in the 1820s; 288,000 in the 1830s; 189,00 in the 1840s; 250,000 in the 1850s. As many as two thirds of these one million or so people were carried south by slave traders, whose

²⁴ Lopez, p. 34.

²⁵ Patterson, p. 175.

daily business resolved the diverging fortunes of the declining upper South and the expanding lower South into mutual benefit.²⁶

The reputation of the lower South was one of brutal, unyielding work in the sugar and cotton plantations made the threat of being sold into this region horrifying for slaves living in the upper South, where smaller farms were more common. Still, as Patterson points out, small farms such as these could often be just as treacherous:

Small farms, while physically less demanding, offering more opportunities to acquire skills, and allowing far more contact with (and manipulation of) the owner, had their own special horrors. More personal contact meant greater exposure to sexual exploitation for slave women, including the not infrequent experience of gang rape by adolescent kinsmen of the owner. The probabilities of family breakup as the result of such sexual exploitation, and of being sold away, were also greater on such farms.²⁷

How much money could be garnered for selling a slave during this economic boom? In the 1840s Johnson notes that the slave system was so entrenched with the economy of cotton production that

the price of slaves could be determined by multiplying the price of cotton by ten thousand (seven cents per pound for cotton yielding seven hundred dollars per slave). . . .As those people passed through the trade, representing something close to half a billion dollars in property, they spread wealth wherever they went. . . .The most recent estimate of the size of [the ancillary slave trade economy in which slaves were insured, clothed, fed, and cared for during their transport] is 13.5 percent of the price per person—tens of millions of dollars over the course of the antebellum period.²⁸

The profits garnered from this system made investment in the slave trade lucrative business and slave children were prized possessions for slaveholders. The American economy which stressed the “natural” reproduction of the slave labor force—often following the breeding dictates of owners—meant that childhood was rather charmed period in relation to puberty and adult life for slaves. Slaveowners did not wish to risk their investment and future income so small children were usually excused from all but simple daily chores.

As Walter Johnson points out, this charmed childhood was short-lived and usually brutally interrupted, as it was for John in *The Whipping Man*. One former slave, Henry Clay

²⁶ Johnson, pp. 5-6. Emphasis mine.

²⁷ Patterson, p. 206.

²⁸ Johnson, p. 6.

Bruce, remembers this transition keenly. Johnson notes that Bruce “nostalgically [remembers] his youth as an easy time when ‘slave children had nothing to do but eat, play, and grow, and physically speaking attain a good size and height.’”²⁹ Another former slave remembers the mistress of the house calling the children “up to the big house every morning [to] give us a dose of garlic and rue to keep us ‘wholesome,’ as she said and make us ‘grow likely for the market’.”³⁰ She also forced her young slaves to run laps, lashing them with a whip to make them “nimble,” and thus more desirable.³¹

As John tragically describes, the transition from a relatively “human” childhood to adolescent slave status was painful. Walter Johnson uncovered countless stories in the slave narratives of childhood being brutally interrupted by a cruel coming of age.

Henry was adjudged ‘right awkward’ and beaten by his mistress, who thought his arms too long and hands too aimless for work in her dining room. Ten-year-old Moses Grandy was flogged ‘naked with a severe whip’ because he ‘could not learn his [master’s] way of hilling corn.’ Thirteen-year-old Celestine was beaten until her back was marked and her clothes stained with blood because she could not find her way around the kitchen. Twelve-year-old Monday was whipped by his mistress because his lupus made his nose run on the dinner napkins.³²

Childhood relationships between slave children and the children of the master were also destroyed, like the friendship between John and Caleb. Playmates for awhile, the time would eventually come when, as De Leon did, owners would want their children “to learn the true relationship between a master and his slave.”³³ Children, innocent to the ways of the world, were often irreparably psychically damaged from this drastic shift in exchange between them. John’s bitterness and hurt at the destruction of his friendship is heartrendingly summed up in the story of his first visit to the Whipping Man:

JOHN: What happened first, Caleb? You remember?

CALEB: Please, John...

JOHN: The Whipping Man had me on my knees, didn’t he? He took off my shirt. He attached my hands to two leather straps. And I was whipped.

²⁹ Johnson, p. 20.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Lopez, p. 41.

[On “whipped,” JOHN stomps the floor with his foot then claps his hands afterwards. The sound he makes is a rhythmic “boom-smack.”]

And whipped.

(*Boom-smack!*).

And whipped.

(*Boom-smack!*).

And whipped.

(*Boom-smack!*).

Wasn't I, Caleb.

CALEB: Yes.

JOHN: Then in the middle of the whipping, I heard Caleb's voice. “Stop!” he yelled! “Stop!” I thought to myself, “Caleb is saving me. Caleb is rescuing me. Caleb cares about me.” And then I heard Caleb say, “I want to do it myself.” The Whipping Man handed Caleb the bullwhip. And Caleb whipped me. Didn't you, Caleb? You whipped me.

(*Boom-smack!*).

And whipped me.

(*Boom-smack!*).

And whipped me.

(*Boom-smack!*).

(*Boom-smack!*).

(*Boom-smack!*).

And that's when we stopped being as close as you remember, Simon.³⁴ While bringing to light the pain of realizing the master-slave relationship, this scene also viscerally illuminates the price exacted upon bodies in an economy of flesh. Whether subjected to beatings, mutilations or rape, slaves had no right to control access to their bodies—violently opened and put on display by the master class to punctuate their subordination. Robert E. Lee, a member of the Virginia aristocracy, reportedly had brine poured in the wounds of some of the 196 slaves he inherited upon his father's death, after subjecting them to severe whippings.³⁵ This sadistic

³⁴ Lopez, p. 41.

³⁵ See wikipedia.com: Wesley Norris himself discussed the incident after the war, in an 1866 interview printed in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. Norris stated that after they had been captured, and forced to return to Arlington, Lee told them that "he would teach us a lesson we would not soon forget." According to Norris, Lee then had the three of them tied to posts and whipped by the county constable, with fifty lashes for the men and twenty for Mary Norris (he made no claim that Lee had personally

behavior served to keep slaves living in fear for their lives. The true art of this kind of torture was exacted by bringing a slave as close to death as possible, without wounding him or her beyond repair. Thus the punishment, humiliation and pain would live on not just in the scars in their flesh, but in memory as well. It was often in the punishment, the beatings, and the rapes in which slaves most deeply felt their bondage. Runaway slaves were frequently rewarded with amputation of a limb upon their retrieval. Some masters took an ear, an arm or a foot—anything to remind the unruly that their disobedience would cost them. Reduced to pure flesh, having to send their minds and hearts elsewhere to survive the brutality to which they were subjected, slaves were split open with calculating cruelty.

It is ironic, then, that after the surrender of the Confederate forces, Caleb is subjected to an amputation at the hands of the former slave who raised him. Symbolically charged, this scene in which a slave takes the leg out from under his master, a Confederate captain no less, resituates the economy of flesh. In this opening passage, Caleb is likened to the dead horse he rode home, a work animal, a beast of burden. Simon strips both of their flesh stoically, without the aid of the whiskey that John and Caleb need to endure the gruesome situation. Simon's focus and precision is as calculating as it is calm, but rather than destroy lives with this sordid surgery, he saves them. On a larger scale, this grotesque scene represents the fall of the Confederate South (no longer able to stand on the pillar of slavery) and the purging of its sickness through the liberation of the slaves.

Slavery, Self and Religious Practice in the New World

Much has been made of the role of Christianity in preserving the faith and lives of black slaves in bondage. Less documented is the practice of Judaism amongst black slaves, though as Matthew Lopez elucidates, the correlations between Jewish religious scripture and the African American experience are strong.

The first Jewish congregation in Richmond, Virginia was **Kahal Kadosh Beth Shalom**. It was the sixth Jewish congregation organized in the United States. As early as 1822, members of the congregation erected the first synagogue built in the state of Virginia.³⁶ As Lopez elucidates by referencing the other Jewish families surrounding the De Leon house, Jewish people have long roots in Richmond. Being the capital city of the Confederacy, most of these families either endorsed, practiced or tolerated slavery. As the dominant tides of the country tolerated slavery, most whites benefited from the practice and abolitionists, Jewish or otherwise,

whipped Mary Norris). Norris claimed that Lee then had the overseer rub their lacerated backs with brine.

³⁶ See wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richmond,_Virginia.

were not regarded fondly. In fact, Jews who advocated the emancipation of black slaves may have borne the brunt of a more ferocious ostracization than their Christian counterparts. As Eli Faber illustrates, there were Jewish people on both sides of the issue; “Rabbi Morris Raphall of New York City preached in defense of slavery, counterbalanced by [abolitionist] Rabbi David Einhorn, an opponent of slavery in Baltimore who was forced to leave the city because of his views.”³⁷

It was not uncommon for slaves to follow the religious affiliations of their masters, and while Jews in colonial America were a minority, they were present and maintained close communities. Even as slaves preserved cultural elements from their African roots and incorporated these into the religious practices of their masters, many slaves found solace in what was preached, if not what was practiced. Faith was instrumental in helping many black slaves develop a sense self-awareness. It also gave them room for the covert activity that supports a rich tradition of African American activism and protest that became integral to the American **Civil Rights Movement** in the 1960s. Most importantly, it gave them the hope they needed to make it through another day of bondage.

Largely what appealed black slaves and drew them to practice were the stories of overcoming strife, a heaven or resting place in the afterlife—as life on earth was so unstable. The perk of a day of reprieve and the ability to congregate across plantations or homes should also not be overlooked.

While in some ways it was beneficial to the master class that black people practiced their religions—they could assure a better life in the hereafter, or encourage obedience and hard work by promising heavenly rewards—indoctrinating slaves into Christianity and Judaism presented serious ideological problems. In both realms it was impossible to perpetually enslave other believers, as chattel slavery in the US did. Rather than account for this hypocrisy, Christians for example ignored the dictates of their faith and situated black slaves outside of the purview of humanity to solve the quandary. Thus Africans and their American born children were relegated to an ambiguous and oxymoronic existence; they were not human, they were not exactly beasts, they were somewhere in between. Whatever they were, because of their race they were justly enslaved.³⁸ Christians even employed biblical references to the story of Noah and his son Ham, who uncovered his father’s nakedness and was thus cursed with a mark of impurity. This marking was then interpreted, in what Rabbi Joseph Edelheit rightly identifies as an eisegetical reading of the Bible to reinforce racist ideas with scriptural “proof” as to the cursed

³⁷ Faber, p. 6.

³⁸ For further reading see Robin Blackburn’s *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern 1492-1800*. (New York: Verso, 1997). The author provides a well tracked, trans-contiental analysis of the historical record as the colonies were established in the New World.

lot of black Africans.³⁹ This fundamental misreading of the scripture was then used to account for the mass enslavement of Africans in the New World. As Lopez situates it, the irreconcilable dissonance between the scripture and John's lived is the heart of the issue. The questions John raises are unanswerable, and even as Simon reminds him that Jews are encouraged to ask questions, "talk with God," and "wrestle with him," the problem John discovers is contradictory, shaking his faith and his sense of self to the very core.⁴⁰ Yet Edelheit, a reform rabbi aware that his voice—largely influenced by the roiling American 1960s Civil Rights Movement—cannot represent the myriad experience of Judaism, explains that though they may intend to practice Judaism, neither John nor Simon read the scripture as Jews; "no Jew would justify slavery by saying you can find it in the Bible."⁴¹ Instead they read the Bible in the same way that their pseudo-Christian, puritanical forbearers did, superficially, exacting a kind of predetermination over the words, to justify something they already believe. In this case it is that they have a right to freedom. John in particular uses his ability to read to go looking for it, a weapon he wields against the tyranny of slavery experienced in his own life. Still Rabbi Edelheit finds the implications of this reading that go back to the birth of the nation. He notes that the earliest settlers understood that even as the Exodus was employed as a motif that motivated and supported the founding of a sovereign nation, it also includes permission to hold other humans in bondage.⁴² This paradox is larger than John merely pitting bits of text against one another.

This simple yet powerful paradox, that an individual could be indoctrinated into a particular faith and held captive as a slave, harkens back to the origins of the slave trade and the role of European religions in the making of the New World. Early explorers and missionaries deemed it their divine mission to civilize the so-called heathen peoples of the world. This was known as **manifest destiny**.⁴³ Upon entering the New World, having encountered literally millions of indigenous people who, despite elaborate evidence of their spirituality, the early explorers deemed godless, the colonists set about a major effort to convert and thereby "save" the souls of the "heathen tribes." Even as colonists attempted to enslave the native peoples of the Caribbean, Mexico and South America, many Europeans wanted to Christianize the indigenous peoples.

Establishing a solid slave labor force amongst the native peoples of the Americas proved quite difficult for two reasons: one, native people were dying rapidly and *en masse*, having been

³⁹ Rabbi Joseph Edelheit. Personal interview. July 26, 2008. Minneapolis, MN.

⁴⁰ Lopez, p. 37.

⁴¹ Edelheit, *ibid.*

⁴² Edelheit, *ibid.*

⁴³ For a complex and detailed Freudian analysis on the idea of manifest destiny as it pertains to the New World, Anne see McClintock's *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1995). See especially the first chapter.

infected with the plagues of European disease brought to the New World. Various illnesses to which sailors had established relative immunity wreaked havoc on the fragile ecosystem of the New World. Colonists regarded these disastrous plagues a testament to their rightful ownership of the vast land in the New World. This is a powerful example of how religious ideology of the time merged with the imperial project in the New World: it was interpreted as a spiritual intervention, the manifestation of a divinely ordained right to the land and its riches. The other major complication the Europeans faced was that native people were well acquainted with the land and had the upper hand on the Europeans, both in terms of knowledge as to the terrain and navigational abilities in US coastal and Caribbean waters. In short, the few natives who survived the plagues simply would not stay put, much to the dismay of the colonials. Given the enormity of the project of developing the New World, a large-scale, dependable workforce was needed—and quickly.

It was at this juncture that Europe began an unparalleled effort to import what would eventually amount to an estimated nine to fifteen million Africans who would deforest, develop and work the lucrative plantations. European reasoning declared Africans a heartier bunch than the people indigenous to the area. Indeed, imported African populations withstood both European and tropical diseases comparatively well.

One of the most hotly contested issues in European philosophical and legal circles during this period revolved around the question of the African's soul. While early missionaries regarded the native people of the Americas as naïve children in need of protection and guidance, a trope of brutal bestiality was projected onto black African people. According to colloquial opinion, indigenous Americans were simple, trusting, in need of protection; they were salvageable. Upon realizing their value as a free labor force, however, indigenous Africans were described as a wholly brutish race, whose inherent tendencies toward disobedience, viciousness and even cannibalism, necessitated the order of slavery in order to save them from themselves. Eventually, however, the colonists realized the value in suspending their racism enough to allow Africans and their progeny to practice Christianity. The belief in a life hereafter and salvation upon death was a great motivating force for keeping people bereft of human rights alive and obedient. Religion also provided colonists with a forum for the orientation of new slaves, a primary stop along the trajectory of seasoning.⁴⁴ Still, government officials and land proprietors

⁴⁴ See Sue Peabody's "A Dangerous Zeal": Catholic Missions to Slaves in the French Antilles, 1635-1800." *French Historical Studies* 25:1 (2002) 53-90. The goals of the seasoning process were twofold: the first was to acclimate new slaves to their surroundings including basic language acquisition, lay of the land and laws to abide; the second goal was to break any rebellious spirit that would encourage newcomers to incite trouble amongst the senior populations. Seasoning was a brutal, confusing and critical feature of the slave system.

with a vested interest in the rich economy of the plantations were wary of the church and fought the indoctrination of black people into their faith. They did not want to surrender such a wildly lucrative project by recognizing their slaves as human beings with souls. Religion eventually established its custodial role as a trusted organization with the potential to assuage fear, enforce law, and keep track of developing allegiances between slaves. Once slaveowners recognized the value in religiosity, the debate as to the souls of slaves was swept under the rug as conversion proved its worth in keeping slave populations complacent and content.

Of course converted slaves in the New World were already imbued with their own ideologies about life, spirituality and the order of the world. As time went on and the “civilizing mission” gained momentum, these original African spiritual systems from various regions across the continent would blend covertly with proselytizing traditions, forming new comprehensions of faith and spirituality. In Haiti and Cuba, for example, African slaves began to underwrite the teachings of the Catholic priests and missionaries with their own interpretations of the word, of the saints and the stories as told by the scriptures. Imbued with centuries old **epistemological** knowledge, they began to make their own meaning out of what they were being taught.⁴⁵ Thus the religious houses of the master class, albeit entirely by accident, began to articulate, perambulate and sustain an underground, subversive culture that allowed for a sense of cultural cohesion, creativity, and autonomy that would threaten the very foundation of the colonial presence in the New World.⁴⁶

In the religious houses of the master class, black slaves came together to get news of loved ones on other plantations and from the Old World, both from Europe and Africa. They shared information about masters and slaveholding families, of how various plantations were run, who the sentries were and what habits they maintained. They got and spread word about the major ideological crises and shifts within Europe that would soon usher in the **French Revolution**.⁴⁷ They shared stories of uprisings, of protest, of revolution. Since the middle of the 16th century, religion was established as a space for refuge, community, spiritual sustenance, creativity, and strength for black people in the New World.

Indeed, it is the scripture itself that leads John to difficult and unanswerable questions about freedom and enslavement. His inability to reconcile the ideals of his faith with his own

⁴⁵ Still one of the most valuable analyses of Creole or New World systems of spirituality and religiosity is Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art & Philosophy*. (New York: Vintage, 1984).

⁴⁶ Carolyn Fick makes excellent use of the Creole systems of meaning-making that were established in the New World and nicely relates these frameworks to a growing revolutionary spirit. See her book *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990.

⁴⁷ For a more detailed account of the covert meetings at least pertaining to the francophone Caribbean, more specifically the colony of Saint Domingue, see Carolyn Fick's *The Making of Haiti*, *ibid*.

lived experience instigates a fracture so powerful John ultimately abandons his faith, and to a degree, his identity thus far. Thus the fall of the Confederate South represents more than an end to an era, but a moment of rebirth for so many black slaves born into bondage whose lives and sense of self was largely mediated in relation and often in varying degrees of opposition to slavery.

Black Jews: An Alternate Road to Freedom

An interesting element that *The Whipping Man* brings to the fore is how the experience of blackness and Jewishness complicate one another. John endures an irreconcilable internal struggle. What is fascinating is that his body literally becomes the site of conflict. His skin, hair and features betray African ancestry. His blood bequeaths both his birthright and his assignment to bondage. It is the occasion of the Seder in which this conflict is visually represented for the stage. In religious practice John's body and the American context of blackness and bondage inserts itself in a peculiar way into the Jewish ritual.

The Seder is a telling of the story of redemption, and as Rabbi Joseph Edelheit elucidates, it represents a resolution of the need to remember history and keep the moment of redemption sacred. The paradoxical question he raises is "how do you keep [the memory of the redemption] in the community, without reenacting it, because to reenact it is actually to make it ordinary?"⁴⁸ The answer lies in the telling of a story, a recitation of the Haggadah of Pesach, the story of Passover. The ritual begins with the youngest at the table asking a seminal question of the elders, *why is this night different from all other nights?* The question serves as an invocation. As the story of the liberation of the Jews from slavery in Egypt is told, the directive to tell the children about the redemption is fulfilled without falsifying the momentous occasion by performing it. Yet for an ethnically and spiritually oppressed people, the Seder presents a dubious situation; as with any important historical event Rabbi Edelheit wonders, "what happens when there is no one left who can say *I?*" How do you keep alive a memory when all who were there have passed on? This is a critical question not just for contemporary people of the Jewish faith, whose history includes enslavement, genocide and cultural and spiritual persecution, but also for contemporary black people in the New World whose identity is marked by slavery either through cultural memory or via its remnants of racism that deny access to and full participation in Western society. There are none left amongst us who can say *I* in relation to slavery. Faced with the directive to put the past away and "get over it already," many black Americans have succumb to a sense of shame in relation to enslavement, as if the vile practice

⁴⁸ Edelheit, *ibid.*

says something about them instead of its propagators. Thus history and cultural memory are complicated facets of the human condition, how we embody the experiences of our ancestors, both the gifts and the burdens we inherit through our blood, changes with shifting cultural contexts and new meanings applied over time. How we understand and “remember” slavery today is very different from those who lived the experience. In this way, the Jewish Seder that Caleb, Simon and John perform is specific to an American experience of bondage and liberation. On the cusp of the American emancipation, the story of the Exodus takes on a symbolic weight that is both unique to and different from the story of the liberation of the Jews from Egypt.

Rabbi Edelheit also underscores the prominence of the symbols in this truncated Seder as particular to the American experience. As Simon hopes to cope with stolen eggs, a shank bone from Caleb’s expired horse, collard greens in the stead of bitter herbs, whiskey in place of wine and soldier’s hardtack as a substitute for matzo, gathering these symbols together takes up a special importance. The replacements are symbolic of having to make do, and it seems that the figurative weight of gathering the items is more important than the ritual itself. Like the culturally relevant foodstuffs of traditional African American fare, the detritus from the master’s table such as chicken and pig feet, ribs, ox tail and chitterlings, these foods have cultural relevance that includes the symbolic weight of their use as a means of survival.

As was often the case, the slaves of the De Leon household had their own rituals and practices unbeknownst to the slaveowning family. Like the slaves in Haiti and Cuba who restructured Christianity to more adequately incorporate their own experiences and account for the hypocrisy of the ruling class, John, Simon and his family held a Seder of their own in the kitchen while the De Leon’s held theirs. In part to resituate the ritual to reflect their experiences and in part because they likely had to serve the De Leon family during their Passover meal, the Seder that the slaves held was shorter than that of their masters. Unlike Caleb’s family, or John who has the ability to read, Simon is illiterate and tells the spirit of the story detailed in the Haggadah given to him by Caleb’s grandfather from memory. Even in his deeply conflicted state, the power of the words and the magnitude of Simon’s ability to remember prompts John to participate in the Seder. John and Caleb fill in the words that Simon forgets and together they resituate the story of the redemption to commemorate the first Seder in America in which the slaves are unequivocally free.

Another important difference in this impromptu Seder is that Simon, the eldest amongst them, asks questions of Caleb and John. On one level this could be read as an attempt to keep the brothers from fighting over the special role of asking the questions. Read through an African American lens, Simon’s questions give him a sense of security when he hears that the

youngsters have answers for him—he is comforted by the fact that they will remember, that his life will not be lived in vain. As the adage goes, history forgotten is history repeated.

The Seder is interrupted, however, as the relevance of the words of generations of Jews being enslaved falls heavy upon Caleb's conscious. As he recounts the divine act of redemption that lifted the Jews from Egypt, thus sparing their children and their children's children the fate of bondage, Caleb feels compelled to tell Simon that his wife and daughter have been sold to the Taylors. Religion is thus positioned as alternately redemptive and enlightening and hypocritical and exclusionary. As John has lost his faith because of the scripture, Caleb finds its correlations to the current situation meaningful and allows himself to be changed by the words.

Rabbi Edelheit points out an important correlation between John's killing of the Whipping Man and the story of Moses who killed an Egyptian beating an Israelite. He notes that after Moses killed the whipping man, he walked amongst his peers who questioned his motives and asked if he would replace the whipping man and beat them.⁴⁹ Instead Moses led his people to freedom, and one wonders if John is not given to the same fate. His cowardice in the face of retribution within the American context makes him impotent, but he is not the only one. Caleb too has correlative elements to the Bible. Rabbi Edelheit explains that in Numbers Thirteen and Fourteen Caleb was one of two of the twelve scouts that Moses sent out into the Promised Land to bring news who argued that in spite of the intimidating presence of the walled cities, the people should press on. Yet this American reincarnation, Caleb is also rendered impotent by fear of retribution for desertion. Burdened by the magnitude of the history to which they are heir and the implications of their actions, at the end of the play the two men, black and white, brothers, are left alone still calling for the aide of their elder. Simon tells them they must help one another, that they need each other. It is a frustrating realization for both.

Conclusion

Through his exploration of the correlations between Jewish enslavement in Egypt as documented by the Old Testament, and African American enslavement in the New World, Matthew Lopez revisits one of the most important sites of global history with questions of agency, legacy and memory that further agitate and provide insight to what have become simple binaries between the black and white American experience.

While black and Jewish Americans share different and specific histories, our collective memory and the stories we use to retell those histories illuminate connections between us that are deep and unique. To this day, the Exodus remains a powerful influence on the creation of

⁴⁹ Edelheit, *ibid.* Edelheit also points out that John is the most anti-Semitic of the gospels.

African American spirituals, and black American renditions of “Go Down Moses (Let My People Go)” by the likes of Paul Robeson deeply stir the soul. There is something intangible and fundamentally human about our ability to relate through stories. This play offers American audiences the opportunity to do just that.

The damage done to the American psyche because of the “peculiar institution” of slavery is vast. The legacy of racism we have inherited, the anger, fear and guilt surrounding our mutual history, seems at times insurmountable. However, as Simon, John and Caleb find unique moments of recognition, concern for human welfare, and frustrating interdependence, so can we as modern Americans plumb the depths of our shared history to learn new and better ways of relating to one another with respect, compassion and courage.