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# COMING OF AGE: THE TRANSFORMATION OF AFRO- AMERICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Robert L. Harris, Jr.\*

As a field of inquiry with its own conceptual and methodological concerns, Afro-American historiography came of age during the past two decades. Prior to the 1960s, the writing of Afro-American History was dominated by an effort to achieve the notice and respect of White America. It was bound in Jay Saunders Redding's words to "...the angle of vision, the perceptions, the insights, and the interpretations- once all too frequently questionable - of white historians and chroniclers."<sup>1</sup> White historians generally ignored black people in their treatment of American History. When they did consider them, the work was usually impaired by white supremacy.<sup>2</sup> Black historians, therefore, wrote Afro-American History primarily to correct the errors, omissions, and distortions that had been generated about black people.<sup>3</sup> Because of the drive to make the Black experience an integral part of the American saga, Afro-American historiography did not have a framework or approach of its own.

Three major developments converged during the 1960s to intensify interest in the Afro-American past and to change dramatically the writing of Afro-American History. The civil rights struggle, urban uprisings, and the Black consciousness movement forced a reassessment of the Black experience in America. The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders reported in 1968 that "most Americans know little of the origins of the racial schism separating our white and Negro Citizens."<sup>4</sup> There had been previous studies of the race problem in America, most notably the Myrdal Report during the Second World War when the Afro-American plight became more national in scope for the first time due to massive migration from the South.<sup>5</sup> But these earlier studies did not stimulate the type of response that appeared during the late 1960s. In many respects, the media, which had become such an important element in shaping American popular culture, triggered interest in the Afro-American past.

Americans were anxious to know why black people, apparently passive before, were now demanding equality. The Columbia Broadcasting System televised an excellent seven-part series "Of Black America" with its first segment "Black History: Lost, Stolen, or Strayed." Public Television stations aired a thirty-part lecture series, designed by Edgar A. Toppin "Americans From Africa: A History."<sup>6</sup> John Hope Franklin developed four weekly installments for *Life Magazine*, "Search for a Black Past." In his introduction to the essays, Roger Butterfield wrote that "...when

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Independence was won, black Americans had to start their own separate struggle for freedom and equality." He continued that Americans, however, "... know too little about it. Today, when the struggle has become the critical social issue of our time, there is an urgent attempt to understand its background."<sup>7</sup>

This groundswell of interest in the Afro-American past permeated practically every sector of American society. Government on both national and state levels, and generally at the insistence of an aroused black public, sought to create greater awareness of the black historical experience. The National Endowment for the Humanities, in August, 1968, sponsored seven workshops on college campuses across the country to discuss materials for courses on Afro-Americans and their contributions to American culture.<sup>8</sup> Several states, among them California, Connecticut, Michigan, New Jersey, and Oklahoma, required public school instruction in Afro-American History.<sup>9</sup> United States Senate and House sub-committees held hearings on an ill-fated bill to establish a national commission on Negro History and Culture. The hearings broadened familiarity with the significance of Afro-American History. The sub-committees also sensitized federal agencies to the importance of including material on black historical contributions in their programs.<sup>10</sup>

Book publishers recognized this trend and printed or reissued hundreds of volumes on Afro-American History. Textbook houses, in particular, revised their works to reflect the Black presence in America. Frances FitzGerald has noted that "By the early seventies, most of the (school) books had been rewritten to include the history of blacks in America."<sup>11</sup> This departure from omission to the inclusion of black people in the writing of American History reflected the issues raised by the civil rights struggle and urban unrest more than the Black Consciousness Movement. Most of the books that appeared during the late 1960s and early 1970s explored the status of black people in American society, the nature of white racism in determining that status, and the role that Afro-Americans played in the drive for freedom and equality.<sup>12</sup> These works were written in the main by white scholars for whom the presence of black people in the United States was a means to greater understanding of American society. Black historians, with few exceptions, were still wed to interpreting the black past as a theme in American History.

One volume stood apart from the rest and foreshadowed some of the lines of inquiry that would propel Afro-American historiography into its own during the mid and late 1970s. That was Harold Cruse's *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. Cruse recognized the centrality of Afro-American culture for understanding the contours of Afro-American History.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it was the Black Consciousness Movement, with Malcolm X as its most symbolic proponent, that broke with the traditional interpretation of Afro-American History which had sought entry into the mainstream of American History. Malcolm X stressed identification with Africa and ascendant "peoples of color" throughout the world. He questioned the desirability of Afro-Americans trying to adopt the standards of a society that had historically rejected their worth as human beings. He proposed a different perspective whereby Afro-Americans conceived themselves as part of a strong world majority with more compassionate values rather than as a weak minority that could only imitate bankrupt American values.<sup>14</sup>

The Black Consciousness Movement generated considerable tension within the historical profession. White historians, who were still the gatekeepers in graduate training, research funding, and publication, sought to defend the discipline from what they saw as the danger of Black Nationalism. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., for example, dismissed Black Nationalism as emotionalism with no place in the rational discipline of history. He opined that "...as we proceed to widen our range and bring the neglected variety and grandeur of our national life into the forefront of historical understanding, we historians will do everything we can to preserve the integrity of the historical discipline."<sup>15</sup> In a similar but more indirect vein, C. Vann Woodward cautioned against creating myths, exaggerating the past, or celebrating the obscure for contemporary purposes.<sup>16</sup> These reservations seemed to emanate more from the fear of losing hegemony over Afro-American historiography than from a real understanding of Black Nationalism.

The Black Consciousness Movement, especially as it influenced the wave of young black historians who received their graduate education during the late 1960s, helped to extricate Afro-American historiography from the mainstream of American History. Many white historians also became sensitive to new directions for writing Afro-American History. August Meier has recently observed that a different paradigm for Afro-American historiography developed during the 1960s. It did not emphasize black contributions to the general course of American History nor overly concern itself with black and white relations.<sup>17</sup> Afro-American historiography after the 1960s was no longer an appendage to the main currents of American History. It expressed a distinctiveness that would not be overwhelmed by or submerged to the American saga.

The recognition, growing out of the Black Consciousness Movement, that Afro-Americans had created and sustained a viable culture undergirded the new approach to Afro-American History. Many scholars, both black and white, had heretofore denied the existence of a concrete Afro-American culture, or they reluctantly acknowledged the possibility that a sub-culture might exist which was at best an aberration of the dominant American culture. They had rejected the idea of cultural transmission from Africa. Moreover, they had not seen anything significant enough in the African background to assist transplanted Africans in their adjustment to American society. The passage of time, acculturation, and the dynamics of racial oppression, in their estimation, had obliterated any traces of African culture and prevented the emergence of an Afro-American culture.<sup>18</sup> This conceptualization of the Afro-American past ignored the focus of cultural interaction, excluded any African component, or dismissed cultural retention without the identical material base that originally fostered it.

Most black historians approached the Afro-American past as inextricably bound with the growth of American society. They did not criticize the structure of American society except in its exclusion of black people. As Vincent Harding has noted, they did not analyze the systemic barriers to black equality or incisively critique a racist America.<sup>19</sup> John Hope Franklin, for example, in his preface to the first edition of *From Slavery To Freedom*, the standard survey of Afro-American History, explained that "the task here [is] to tell the story of the process by which the Negro has sought to cast his lot with an evolving American civilization."<sup>20</sup> With the major exception of W. E. B. DuBois, few black historians sought the lineaments of an AfroAmerican culture,

its origin, trajectory, and importance.

To understand the content, methodology, and interpretation of Afro-American History for the post-1960s, it is necessary to survey the prior concerns and approaches of black historians. Three broad topics have dominated Afro-American historiography and heretofore preoccupied black historians. The African background, Slavery, and Reconstruction have been the primary areas of investigation. The interpretation of those topics has been through revisionist, hidden-hand, contributionist, cyclical, and liberal methodologies. Revisionism has been the overarching mode of writing about Afro-Americans to correct the misconceptions of Americans in general and white historians in particular. The hidden-hand was basically the approach of pre-twentieth century black historians to discern the work of God in human affairs. Contributionism has been a way to demonstrate black participation in the development of America. The cyclical approach to the black experience has sought to explain successes and failures as similar to the rhythm of nature. Liberalism on the other hand has been a more linear means of examining the Afro-American past as a march almost without detour to freedom and equality.

James W. C. Pennington, who published the first general work on Afro-American History in 1841, challenged prevailing theories of racial inferiority. He used the Bible as his major source to prove that black people belonged to the human family and to refute the alleged curses of Cain and Ham. Cain's descendants perished in the Flood and therefore could not sustain a curse. And the Biblical injunction against Ham, according to Pennington, applied only to Ham's son Canaan. Ethiopians, defined broadly as black people, were the progeny of Ham's son Cush. With that matter settled, Pennington exalted the history of ancient Egypt and Ethiopia as lands of black people. He explained the slave trade and slavery in America as a result of divine displeasure with Africans for adopting polytheistic beliefs. Slavery, he argued, grew out of the American colonists' need for labor rather than from racial inferiority.<sup>21</sup> Pennington had sought to revise popular notions about black people and to discover God's plan in transplanting Africans to America.

Other early black historians wrote in a similar vein to Pennington, but with greater emphasis on what black people had given to civilization as a means of proving their equality. Robert Benjamin Lewis used the Bible and classical sources to describe Egyptian contributions to world progress in literature, music, science, architecture, and mathematics. He also singled out famous men in world history who had African ancestry...<sup>22</sup> William Wells Brown employed biographical portraits to show what black people could accomplish when given the opportunity.<sup>23</sup> The example of black participation in the Revolutionary War was William C. Nell's way to affirm the ability of black men to become loyal citizens.<sup>24</sup> These early writers of Afro-American History stressed accomplishment in Africa, throughout the known world, and in America. By demonstrating black achievement, they hoped to change American attitudes about black people. Moreover, their work might also inspire Afro-Americans to lead exemplary lives and therefore eliminate any grounds for criticism by their enemies. Their historiography was limited by selection of sources and by the frameworks within which they studied the past.

But even George Washington Williams, whom John Hope Franklin has designated the father of modern Afro-American historiography, suffered from a comparable

limitation. To his credit, Williams revolutionized Afro-American historiography through the systematic use of source materials. He employed newspapers, black organizational records, statistics, archival materials, and interviews.<sup>25</sup> Despite introducing a more scientific approach to the Afro-American past, Williams concluded his impressive two-volume work with these words: "In the interpretation of *History* the plans of God must be discerned. . . ."<sup>26</sup>

In a much neglected work, W. E. B. DuBois came closer than any other black historian to defining the essential content of Afro-American History. He sought, in the *Gift of Black Folk*, the fundamental meaning of the Afro-American past. In an incomparable manner, he waxed poetic while reciting the material, cultural, and spiritual landmarks that Afro-Americans created as slaves, freemen, and citizens. Vastly ahead of his time, he wrote about the liberation of women, their struggle for equality, and the role of black women in such a movement. He capsulized the Afro-American experience with these lines: "...the slave became master, the bond servant became free and the meek not only inherited the earth but made that heritage a thing of questing for eternal youth, of fruitful labor, of joy and music, of the free spirit and of the ministering hand, of wide and poignant sympathy with men in their struggle to live and love which is, after all, the end of being."<sup>27</sup>

DuBois sketched areas of research about Afro-Americans that might have changed the course of Afro-American historiography as much or even more than Williams' systematic use of sources. But, DuBois also worked within a revisionist context and could not escape the pressure to emphasize black contributions to American life. For him as for other black historians, the race problem existed primarily because whites did not know the important contributions made by Afro-Americans. Knowledge was, therefore, the best instrument to eliminate racial inequality. Carter G. Woodson institutionalized this approach to the Afro-American past and established a foundation for popularizing Afro-American History.

There had been other efforts before Woodson, but they were generally local in scope. Afro-Americans in Philadelphia organized the Banneker Institute in the 1850s and the Negro Historical Society in 1892. The American Negro Academy of Washington, D.C., 1897, and New York's Negro Society for Historical Research, 1911, were two other examples of earlier attempts to preserve and to propagate knowledge about the Afro-American past.<sup>28</sup> Arthur A. Schomburg, spearhead of the latter group, appealed for a "...course of study in Negro history and achievements. . . ." He asked: "Where is our historian to give us our side view and our chair of Negro history to teach our people our own history?"<sup>29</sup> The Association for the Study of Afro-American (formerly Negro) Life and History [ASALH] that Woodson and several other black men formed in 1915 became the closest answer to Schomburg's question. Through *The Journal of Negro History* started in 1916; the national observance of Negro History Week, begun in 1924; sponsorship of numerous monographs, and publication of the *Negro History Bulletin* in 1933, the ASALH became the central organization for stimulating interest in the Afro-American past. It, however, was steeped in Woodson's approach to Afro-American historiography as expressed in the first edition of his *The Negro In Our History*. He wrote that the purpose of his book was "...to demonstrate how the Negro has been influenced by contact with the caucasian and to emphasize what the former has contributed to civilization."<sup>30</sup>

At the ASALH's 1936 annual meeting, Lawrence D. Reddick urged a new approach to Afro-American historiography. He identified the prevailing principle as "liberalism," faith in human progress by dint of individual application, endurance, and piety.<sup>31</sup> Reddick sought a broader frame of reference, attention to the common folk, and recognition of the interplay of economic forces, especially capitalist development and expansion. He called for a more materialist conception of Afro-American History that would examine the concrete experiences of black people and their relationship to the production and distribution of wealth. The traditional approach to the Afro-American past was more idealistic in considering the legal and ideological bases for racial inequality. As C. Vann Woodward wrote in the mid-1960s, "The first half-century of Negro freedom in America happened to coincide with the dominance of racism in Western thought generally and in American social theory in particular."<sup>32</sup>

In Reddick's words, race relations was the paradigm and "practically a synonym for Afro-American history."<sup>33</sup> Prior to the 1960s, black historians have been preoccupied with racist thought and unsympathetic race relations as barriers to equality. They have written for a white audience to convince it of a worthy Afro-American past and hopefully of accepting black people into American society. Concomitantly, they have also appealed to a black audience, to promote pride its heritage and to inspire the will to struggle for equality.

Standing in the way of that objective was the prevalent interpretation of Reconstruction. Many white historians characterized the period as a "Tragic Era".<sup>34</sup> They depicted black people as having been rushed into freedom and hastily involved in politics as Republican officeholders, whose supposed ignorance, corruption, and misfeasance in state and local offices practically crippled the South with huge debts. White Democrats therefore had to seize control of southern government, disfranchise the freedmen, and segregate them in most areas of public life to rescue the South. Reconstruction became the compelling arena of historical investigation for black historians during the first half of the twentieth century, much as the African background had been a dominant theme before the Civil War. Black historians had to expose misconceptions about Reconstruction to remove the props for disfranchisement and segregation.

W. E. B. DuBois, in his classic book, *Black Reconstruction*, refuted the three major myths about black people during the era. In school textbooks especially, the nation's youth learned that all black people were "ignorant", "lazy, dishonest, and extravagant", and "responsible for bad government during Reconstruction". DuBois' chapter "The Propaganda of History" revealed how American History had been abused to oppress black people. He wrote that "The treatment of the period of Reconstruction reflects small credit upon American historians as scientists. We have too often a deliberate attempt so as to change the facts of history that the story will make pleasant reading for Americans."<sup>35</sup> Since DuBois' work, there has been a gradual change in the interpretation of Reconstruction. Franklin's *Reconstruction: After the Civil War* marked the triumphant shift begun by DuBois, Alrutheus A. Taylor, and other black historians.<sup>36</sup>

Many black historians approached the Reconstruction myths indirectly by studying those blacks who were free before the Civil War. If black people could care for themselves, acquire education, and accumulate property before the Reconstruction

era, there were certainly capable black men to function effectively in post-emancipation politics. Moreover, Afro-Americans even when free before the Civil War lived under handicaps. Their accomplishment was all the more impressive and therefore disproved the traditional image of blacks after slavery, when they had greater opportunity.<sup>37</sup>

The African background and Reconstruction received more attention than slavery, except as written from what Okon E. Uya has labeled a catastrophic perspective.<sup>38</sup> This approach focused almost exclusively on black suffering under slavery. It described black people as being stripped of their African culture, brutalized on the plantations, and reduced in self-esteem. It emphasized what slavery did to Afro-Americans and rarely traced how slaves sought to preserve their integrity as a people. There was little effort to understand the internal lives of the slaves. Afro-Americans in bondage were actors only in the narrow range of slave uprisings and flight from slavery. In many respects, the fugitive slave became the prototype for studying bondage. This was probably because the narratives and autobiographies of former slaves who had escaped formed the major sources for probing the topic. Even when these sources were employed, the story was one of infinite horror and final flight from bondage. Miles Mark Fisher made one of the few departures in analyzing slave songs, but his work also existed in the context of oppression and the desire to be free.<sup>39</sup>

Slavery took on greater proportion as a topic of inquiry after Stanley M. Elkins' *Slavery* appeared in 1959. As white scholars progressively eschewed theories of racial inferiority to explain Afro-American inequality, they turned increasingly to the legacy of slavery interpretation. In the *Mark of Oppression*, Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey hypothesized that Afro-Americans emerged from slavery without a culture, with "...no intrapsychic defenses — no pride, no group solidarity, no tradition." They concluded that "The marks of his previous status were still upon him — socially, psychologically, and emotionally. And from these he has never since freed himself."<sup>40</sup> Elkins elaborated this hypothesis by using the analogy of infantilization as derived from the behavior of Nazi concentration camp inmates. He suggested that slavery produced a dominant personality type "Sambo", who was childish, lazy, irresponsible, and dependent. "Sambos" were made, not born, through the process of shock in their initial capture, detachment from their homeland and culture, and infantilization in attachment to the absolute authority of the slavemaster, their most "significant other". The slavemaster, as primary role model, held their destiny in his hands. He was the patriarch and they his children, not merely in role playing but in reality over time as they internalized this behavior and instilled it in their progeny.<sup>41</sup>

Elkins' analysis became all the more insidious as white social scientists, in particular, tried to explain the persistence of black inequality. Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan attributed Afro-American status to the absence of middle-class values and norms among black people in general.<sup>42</sup> Moynihan later wrote that "Three centuries of injustice have brought about deep-seated structural distortions in the life of the Negro American." "At this point," he continued, "the present tangle of pathology is capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world. The cycle can be broken only if these distortions are set right."<sup>43</sup> Edward C. Banfield boldly mused that "If there is something about Jewish culture that makes Jews tend to be upwardly mobile, there may be something about Negro culture that makes the Negro tend not to be."<sup>44</sup>



As the African background was acutely important for black historians before the Civil War and Reconstruction dominated the early twentieth century, Slavery became the central issue during the 1960s. The work of black historians was again primarily revisionist as white historians in the main had defined the topic. Kenneth Stampp, in one of the sounder interpretations of slavery nevertheless opened his work with the statement that "...innately Negroes are, after all, only white men with black skins, nothing more, nothing less."<sup>45</sup> Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman attempted a statistical analysis to prove that slaves, indeed, shared middle-class values of duty, hard work, and upward mobility.<sup>46</sup> They erred, however, by subjecting slave behavior to rational economic motivation within a coercive system. Eugene Genovese tried to strip Ulrich B. Phillips' idea of paternalism from its racism to describe the "world the slaves made".<sup>47</sup> His model of paternalism, however, still viewed slavery through the slavemasters' lens. It did not adequately define the contours of Afro-American culture as it emanated from the slave quarters. Too many white historians have been absorbed in building historical models that ultimately provide greater insight into white society. John W. Blassingame has noted that "Traditionally, white scholars have studied the Negro only to amplify their knowledge of white men and white institutions."<sup>48</sup> The work of black historians such as Blassingame, Vincent Harding, Nathan I. Huggins, Leslie H. Owens, Albert Raboteau, and Sterling Stuckey, together with white historians Herbert G. Gutman, Lawrence Levine, Thomas L. Webber, and Peter Wood, has begun to penetrate the interior lives of the slaves and to outline a distinct Afro-American culture.<sup>49</sup>

These historians have undercut the legacy of slavery argument as the prime explanation of black inequality. Their studies have demonstrated how black people produced a viable culture to cope with slavery and to retain their integrity. Afro-Americans developed a concrete culture with African antecedents in their family ties, institutional life, religious values, and worldview.

The legacy of slavery and the persistence of Afro-American oppression are now being examined against a backdrop of the South's political economy. Economic historians, in particular, have recently studied the South's underdevelopment, its plantation economy, and its repressive political system that represented the interests of large white landholders.<sup>50</sup> Black people, of whom 86.6% lived in rural sections of twelve southern states in 1860 and 83.3% in 1910,<sup>51</sup> were caught in a lattice of socio-economic and political circumstances that prevented the broad capital formation, property-holding, political participation, and skill acquisition that might have enabled them to rise above the status they occupied as slaves.

For the post 1960s era, the African background, Slavery, and Reconstruction will probably not loom as large as specific topics in Afro-American historiography. The hidden-hand, revisionist, contributionist, cyclical, and liberal interpretations have lost their urgency. The hidden-hand approach has basically been discarded as a historical methodology. Revisionism has receded especially as black historians themselves increasingly define the terrain of Afro-American historiography. There will probably always be a need to correct myths, distortions, and omissions about black people, but hopefully it will no longer preoccupy Afro-American historians. Revisionism is a confining methodology because it operates within a paradigm established by others. They pose the questions, determine the issues, and in large measure define the

framework for debate. Revisionists react to premises that often dictate the line of argument. Toni Cade Bambara, in a passage from her novel *The Salt Eaters*, graphically elucidates this danger. One of her characters reasons that "... the Negro people were *fours* (emphasis added) and so long as they paid more attention to folks trying to pen them in, hem them in, box them in on all four sides thinking they had them in prison than to the work at hand, why then they would never get a spare moment to look up at the sun and build."<sup>52</sup>

The contributionist approach no longer retains its saliency, especially in proving that black people have been an integral part of the American landscape. This approach has generally concentrated on individual rather than group dynamics. It has neglected the interaction of different forces that have affected the black historical experience. Benjamin Quarles has reminded us, however, that Afro-American history benefits a number of publics. It addresses the black masses to provide a sense of heritage, pride in the past, and challenge for the future. The emphasis here, in large measure, is on the great personality, although with some attention to group achievement. In its exploration of past problems and solutions, Afro-American History offers background information for black activists. It serves black academicians, and for them, it has "... a reflective, judicial tone, taking its cue from the careful winnowing and sifting that preceded it." Finally, it informs a white audience about the real nature of this country's past.<sup>53</sup>

These four publics present an awesome challenge to Afro-American historians. It will take exceptional individuals to speak to them all simultaneously. There will probably have to be some division of labor among Afro-American historians. Many will engage in primary research, the miners, seeking new information and ways to interpret the past. Others, the refiners, will relate this knowledge to broader audiences. Ideally, the same practitioners might function in different arenas, i.e. scholarly publications, the popular media, and public forums. Afro-American historians, above all, can not cloister themselves in ivory towers and become minutiae experts, so withdrawn from reality that they can only converse with other specialists in the field. Afro-American historiography must be more utilitarian than aesthetic, as the Afro-American historian's purpose should be to examine the past as it relates specifically to black people for greater understanding of the present and for informed decisions about the future.

There will probably continue to be a place for contributionism especially for black youth. They need didactic symbols for growth and development. The masses, moreover, are more apt to gain insight into the Afro-American past through biography. Too much has been made of the dangers that Afro-American historiography might fall into myth making and hero worship. C. Vann Woodward, in his 1969 Organization of American Historians' presidential address, warned against exaggeration or celebration of the obscure.<sup>54</sup> Nathan I. Huggins cautioned against creating a fantasy of the impossible by imagining invincible black heroes. He opined that "it is far better for blacks to understand their past realistically, so that they will know where they stand in relation to power and be able to judge the probable effects of their action."<sup>55</sup> It depends on whose vantage is used to determine their position. For too long, it was the oppressor's point of view that made black struggle and victory seem impossible. Black youngsters do require heroic images to lift their sights beyond their

immediate environment. There are more than enough examples of black struggle, failure and achievement for this purpose. They do not have to be invented.

Black historians, in the main, have abandoned liberalism in their writing. They do not perceive the Afro-American past as an inexorable procession toward freedom and equality. Moreover, the notion of an American melting pot wherein different peoples have become an ideal type has lost its worth as a means of examining the past. There is a greater tendency to criticize the American socio-political and economic system not solely for its exclusion of black people but also for its structural imperfections that have allowed racism and class oppression to thrive. Mary F. Berry and A. Leon Higginbotham have indicted the American legal system for its conscious abuse of black people.<sup>56</sup> Huggins, with the type of insight that black historians can not avoid as they read the record, has now concluded that America was born in tyranny.<sup>57</sup> Lerone Bennett Jr., has systematically explored the structural and functional barriers to black equality in the emerging American nation.<sup>58</sup> Many black historians have heeded Sterling Stuckey's injunction that "It is the system itself which needs to be investigated, the system whose jails and prisons are almost bursting at the seams with black prisoners. . . ." He suggested that "It is not the victim who is most in need of study — it is the executioner."<sup>59</sup>

Shorn of its reliance on divine providence, the cyclical interpretation of the Afro-American past has some heuristic value. Historical events do not flow in a forward unbroken line. Nor, do they ever return to the same point. A spiralling or coiling configuration might be a more appropriate analogy. The civil rights era, for example, has often been labeled the "Second Reconstruction" in comparison with the Reconstruction epoch from 1865 to 1877.<sup>60</sup> Both periods were times of intense efforts to incorporate Afro-Americans into American society. Each also became fragmented as the nation turned to other issues such as the economy, women's rights, Indian claims, and foreign affairs to mention a few. Afro-Americans during the twentieth century, moreover, have enjoyed higher rates of employment when the nation is at war, only to be pushed out of the primary labor market when peace is restored. In each of these instances, there has been the rhythm of gain, consolidation, and loss. The events have not been identical although the processes have been similar. Black people have never returned to the same position as in the rotation of an object around a set path. There has been absolute change in their status, although relative change has been muted by the advances of the society as a whole.

The post-1960s challenge for Afro-American historiography is how to balance what Bennett has called the dialectical tension between the inner detail and the whole, the internal and external variables that have influenced the black historical experience.<sup>61</sup> Afro-American history has taken place within the context of American history, but it should not be overwhelmed by that fact. It is much broader than the activities of the American nation. Events on the African continent and in the African diaspora have profoundly affected Afro-American thought and action. The Haitian Revolution and British abolition of slavery in the Caribbean touched Afro-Americans more substantially than Jacksonian Democracy. While Andrew Jackson broadened political participation for white Americans, the Haitian Revolt gave courage to Afro-Americans. They constantly invoked this example of black people rising up, throwing off their bondage, and demonstrating their capacity for self-government. Martin R. Delany,

the antebellum black nationalist, named one of his sons after the famed Haitian leader, Toussaint L'Ouverture, as did other Afro-American parents.<sup>62</sup> The Haitian precedent inspired Denmark Vesey's plans for the 1822 aborted revolt in Charleston, South Carolina.<sup>63</sup>

Throughout the North, early Afro-Americans observed August 1st, the date of West Indian emancipation, as a special day. July 4th held little significance for them.<sup>64</sup> There has been a mutual relationship with Africa from Paul Cuffe's early voyage with thirty-eight emigrants, through the antebellum emigration movement, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner's and the Black Church's activities, the Pan-African Congresses, Marcus Garvey, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, and African liberation. It has been reciprocal with Africans and Afro-Americans influencing each other over time.<sup>65</sup> As African independence, beginning with Ghana in 1957, inspired the Black Consciousness Movement, it in turn activated black people in the Caribbean and in Southern Africa.

The web of Afro-American history radiates beyond the United States' borders. It exists within the core of two intersecting circles, one this country and the other the African world. Pivotal points for examining the Afro-American past can not, therefore, be confined to the standard divisions of American history, e.g. territorial expansion, wars, presidential administrations, or reform movements. A more sound appraisal of the Afro-American past must look specifically at migration and urbanization to understand the internal dynamics of the Afro-American historical experience without losing sight of its external dimensions. Migration from Africa to America, from upper South to lower South, from predominantly white to predominantly black counties, from rural to urban settings in both South and North, and from South to North and West (and in some instances South again) provides a conceptual framework to analyze the process by which Africans became Afro-Americans, Afro-American culture emerged and developed, the status of black people became fixed in American society, black labor was exploited, black people coped and survived, and current problems surfaced.

Earl E. Thorpe has reflected that "Each generation, depending on its problems and needs, must select and arrange the specific facts which form the best system for its own inspiration and guidance." He has suggested further that "It is because the past is a guide with roads pointing in many directions that each generation and epoch must make its own studies of history."<sup>66</sup> The writing of Afro-American History has evolved to the point that we are now able to sketch the conceptual and methodological issues that give it a coherence of its own. Moreover, the place of Afro-Americans in American society and in a global context differs dramatically from beforehand and therefore dictates a fresh appraisal. As the presence of a viable Afro-American culture has become essential to understanding our past, we need to give greater attention to its content during different eras and in different locations.

Although Harold Cruse has correctly criticized the failure of black intellectuals to appreciate the dimensions of Afro-American culture, he has also noted that "... black social development of real historical consequence has been urban development (whether North or South)."<sup>67</sup> This is a noteworthy concept, especially for the mid-twentieth century, but it ignores the rural base of Afro-American social development that prevailed much longer than the more contemporary urban setting. Ira Berlin has

recently explored the complexities and diversities of black life before the nineteenth century in different times and places.<sup>68</sup> He reveals the dynamic interactions as Africans coalesced into Afro-Americans. The various disruptions of the black population provided the opportunity for shaping, modifying, and consolidating shared values and practices. A conceptualization of Afro-American History as an area of inquiry with its own concerns emphasizes this process. It examines the Afro-American past from the inside out, with the black population, its thought and actions, as the independent variable. The intervening variable are those events within the United States and the African diaspora. And the dependent variable is the manner in which those two vectors converge.

Nell Painter has applied this approach with excellent results in the *Exodusters*,<sup>69</sup> while Leon Litwack in *Been in the Storm So Long* has expertly probed the contradictions between the freedmen's desires and the planters' expectations after the Civil War.<sup>70</sup> These prototypical works which reflect the maturation of Afro-American historiography employ a conceptualization whose starting point is the black population. They demand a methodology that is sensitive to the thoughts and actions of Afro-Americans. This means examining the records of the masses of black people as well as what Painter has called the "representative men of color." The imprints that the masses have left upon the past take a variety of forms, both literary and nonliterary. It is therefore essential to be familiar with Afro-American music and folklore and to understand the temperament of the black masses.

Afro-American historiography, with its own conceptual and methodological concerns, is now poised to illuminate the Afro-American past in a manner that will broaden and deepen our knowledge of black people in this country. The writing of Afro-American History is no longer undertaken principally to revise the work of wrongheaded white historians, to discern divine providence, to show black participation in the nation's growth and development, to prove the inevitability of black equality, or to demonstrate the inexorable progress made by Afro-Americans. It is conducted as a distinct area of inquiry, within the discipline of history, with black people as its primary focus to reveal their thought and activities over time and place.

<sup>1</sup>Jay Saunders Redding, "The Negro in American History: As Scholar, As Subject," in Michael Kammen, ed., *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the U.S.* (Ithaca, New York, 1980), p. 290. For an examination of Black History's quest for respectability, see Earl E. Thorpe, *The Uses of Black History* (Raleigh, North Carolina, 1980), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>John W. Blassingame, "The Afro-Americans: From Mythology to Reality," in William H. Cartwright and Richard L. Watson, Jr., ed., *The Reinterpretation of American History and Culture* (Washington, D. C., 1973), pp. 53-54 & 72.

<sup>3</sup>John Hope Franklin, "The Future of Negro American History," First Annual Martin Luther King Jr., Memorial Lecture, New School for Social Research, New York City, 1969.

<sup>4</sup>*Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York, 1968), p. 207.

<sup>5</sup>Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, 2 vols. (New York, 1944). This work set the tone in large measure for the "race relations" approach to Afro-American History.

<sup>6</sup>*Negro History Bulletin*, 33: 1 (January, 1970), p. 20.

<sup>7</sup>*Life Magazine*, 65:21 (November 22, 1968), p. 91.

<sup>8</sup>Herbert McArthur, "National Endowment for the Humanities Workshops in the Materials of Negro History and Culture," *Wilson Library Bulletin*, 43:4 (December, 1968), p. 353.

<sup>9</sup>*Negro History Bulletin*, 32: 5 (May, 1969), pp. 21-22.

<sup>10</sup>"To establish a National Commission on Negro History and Culture," Hearings Before the Select Sub-Committee on Labor of the Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives, Ninetieth Congress, Second Session, On House Resolution 12962, Hearing Held in New York City, March 18, 1968 (Washington, D. C., 1968) and "Commission on Negro History and Culture," Hearing Before the Special Sub-Committee on Arts and Humanities of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, United States Senate, Ninetieth Congress, Second Session, on Senate Bill 2979, July 23, 1968 (Washington, D. C., 1968).

<sup>11</sup>Frances FitzGerald, *America Revised; History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (Boston, 1979), pp. 40 & 84.

<sup>12</sup>The following represent the types of work that were written during the period. Carl N. Degler, *Neither Black Nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* (New York, 1971); George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind; The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York, 1971); Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black; American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*. (Chapel Hill, 1968); Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* (New York, 1966); Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York, 1969); Edwin S. Redkey, *Black Exodus: Black Nationalist and Back-to-Africa Movements, 1890-1910* (New Haven, 1969); Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago, 1967); V. Jacque Voegeli, *Free But Not Equal: The Midwest and the Negro During the Civil War* (Chicago, 1967), and Forrest G. Wood, *Black Scare; The Racist Response to Emancipation and Reconstruction* (Berkeley, 1968).

<sup>13</sup>Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York, 1967).

<sup>14</sup>*Malcolm X On Afro-American History* (New York, 1967).

<sup>15</sup>Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Nationalism and History," *The Journal of Negro History*, 54:1 (January, 1969), pp. 21 & 29-30.

<sup>16</sup>C. Vann Woodward, "Clio With Soul," *The Journal of American History*, 56:1 (June, 1969), p. 18.

<sup>17</sup>August Meier, "Benjamin Quarles and the Historiography of Black America," *Civil War History*, 26:2 (June, 1980), p. 115.

<sup>18</sup>E. Franklin Frazier was the foremost Black proponent of this viewpoint. See his *The Negro in the United States* (New York, 1949).

<sup>19</sup>Vincent Harding, "Beyond Chaos: Black History and the Search for a New Land," in John A. Williams and Charles Harris, eds., *Amistad I* (New York, 1970), pp. 267-92.

<sup>20</sup>John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of American Negroes* (New York, 1947).

<sup>21</sup>James W.C. Pennington, *A Textbook of the Origin and History etc. of the Colored People* (Hartford, Connecticut, 1841).

<sup>22</sup>Robert Benjamin Lewis, *Light and Truth: Collected from the Bible and Ancient and Modern History, Containing the Universal History of the Colored Man and Indian Race, from the Creation of the World to the Present Time* (Boston, 1844).

<sup>23</sup>William Wells Brown, *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (Boston, 1863).

<sup>24</sup>William C. Nell, *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (Boston, 1855).

<sup>25</sup>John Hope Franklin, "George Washington Williams and the Beginnings of Afro-American Historiography," *Critical Inquiry*, 4:4 (Summer, 1978), pp. 657-72.

<sup>26</sup>George Washington Williams, *History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880* (New York, 1883).

<sup>27</sup>W.E.B. DuBois, *The Gift of Black Folk: The Negroes in the Making of America* (Boston, 1924).

<sup>28</sup>Charles H. Wesley, "Creating and Maintaining An Historical Tradition," *The Journal of Negro History*, 49:1 (January, 1964), pp. 13-33.

<sup>29</sup>Arthur A. Schomburg, "Racial Integrity: A Plea for the Establishment of a Chair of Negro History in Our Schools and Colleges," *Negro Society for Historical Research Occasional Paper 3*, 1913.

<sup>30</sup>Carter G. Woodson, *The Negro In Our History* (Washington, D. C. 1922).

<sup>31</sup>Lawrence D. Reddick, "A New Interpretation for Negro History," *The Journal of Negro History*, 22:1 (January, 1937), pp. 17-28.

<sup>32</sup>C. Vann Woodward, "Flight From History: The Heritage of the Negro," *The Nation*, 201:8 (September 20, 1965), p. 143.

<sup>33</sup> Redding, "The Negro In American History . . .", p. 291.

<sup>34</sup> The prototypical work was Claude G. Bowers, *The Tragic Era: The Revolution After Lincoln* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1929).

<sup>35</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction* (New York, 1935), pp. 711-13.

<sup>36</sup> Alrutheus A. Taylor, *The Negro in South Carolina During Reconstruction* (Washington, D. C., 1924), *The Negro in the Reconstruction of Virginia* (Washington, D. C. 1926), and *The Negro in Tennessee, 1865-1880* (Washington, D.C. 1941). John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction: After the Civil War* (Chicago, 1961).

<sup>37</sup> John Hope Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860* (Chapel Hill, 1943); Luther Porter Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Propertyholding in Virginia, 1830-1860* (New York, 1942), and Richard R. Wright, Jr., *The Negro in Pennsylvania: A Study in Economic History* (Philadelphia, 1912).

<sup>38</sup> Okon E. Uya, "An Afro-Centric Perspective on the Afro-American Past," in his *African History: Some Problems in Methodology and Perspectives* (Ithaca, New York, 1974), p. 21.

<sup>39</sup> Miles Mark Fisher, *Negro Slave Songs in the United States* (Ithaca, New York, 1953).

<sup>40</sup> Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey, *The Mark of Oppression: A Psychosocial Study of the American Negro* (New York, 1951), pp. 384-87.

<sup>41</sup> Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago, 1959), pp. 1-26 & 81-139.

<sup>42</sup> Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1963).

<sup>43</sup> United States Department of Labor: Office of Planning Policy and Research, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, D. C., 1965), p. 47.

<sup>44</sup> Edward C. Banfield, *The Unheavenly City: The Nature and Future of Our Urban Crisis* (Boston, 1970), pp. 73 & 245-48.

<sup>45</sup> Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1956).

<sup>46</sup> Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman. *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston, 1974).

<sup>47</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World The Slaves Made* (New York, 1974). For an incisive critique on Genovese's work, see James D. Anderson, "Aunt Jemima in Dialectics: Genovese on Slave Culture," *The Journal of Negro History*, 61:1 (January, 1976), pp. 99-114.

<sup>48</sup> John W. Blassingame, "Black Studies and the Role of the Historian," in his *New Perspectives on Black Studies* (Urbana, 1971), p. 217.

<sup>49</sup> John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1972); Vincent Harding, "Religion and Resistance Among Antebellum Negroes, 1800-1860," in August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, eds., *The Making of Black America: Essays in Negro Life and History* (New York, 1969), pp. 179-200; Nathan I. Huggins, *Black Odyssey: The Afro-American Ordeal in Slavery* (New York, 1977); Leslie H. Owens *This Species of Property: Slave Life & Culture in the Old South* (New York, 1976); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1978); Sterling Stuckey, "Through the Prism of Folklore: The Black Ethos in Slavery," *The Massachusetts Review* 9:3 (Summer, 1968), pp. 417-37; Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York, 1977); Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977); Thomas L. Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community, 1831-1865* (New York, 1978), and Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 Through the Stono Rebellion* (New York, 1974).

<sup>50</sup> For a provocative review of recent literature, see Jonathan M. Weiner, "Class Structure and Economic Development in the American South, 1865-1955," *American Historical Review*, 84:4 (October, 1979), pp. 970-1006.

<sup>51</sup> T. Lynn Smith, "The Redistribution of the Negro Population of the United States, 1910-1960," *The Journal of Negro History*, 51:3 (July, 1966), pp. 156-57.

<sup>52</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*, (New York, 1980), p. 77.

<sup>53</sup> Benjamin Quarles, "Black History's Diversified Clientele," Second Annual Rayford W. Logan Lecture (Washington, D. C., Howard University History Department, 1971).

<sup>54</sup> C. Vann Woodward, "Clio With Soul," p. 18.

<sup>55</sup> Nathan I. Huggins, "Afro-American History: Myths, Heroes and Reality," pp. 15-16, in his *Key Issues in the Afro-American Experience*, vol. 1 (New York, 1971).

<sup>56</sup> Mary F. Berry, *Black Resistance, White Law: A History of Constitutional Racism in America* (New York, 1971), and A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., *In The Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process* (New York, 1978).

<sup>57</sup> Huggins, *Black Odyssey*, pp. 92-114.

<sup>58</sup> Lerone Bennett, Jr., *The Shaping of Black America* (Chicago, 1974).

<sup>59</sup> Sterling Stuckey, "Twilight of Our Past: Reflections on the Origins of Black History," in John A. Williams and Charles Harris, eds., *Amistad II* (New York, 1971), p. 282.

<sup>60</sup> Carl M. Brauer, *John F. Kennedy and the Second Reconstruction* (New York, 1977), George S. Burson, Jr., "The Second Reconstruction: A Historiographical Essay on Recent Works," *The Journal of Negro History*, 59:4 (October, 1974), pp. 322-36; Rayford W. Logan, "Second Reconstruction Era — Has It Come To An End," *Journal of Religious Thought*, 31 (Spring/Summer, 1974), pp. 5-11, and August Meier, "Negroes in the First and Second Reconstructions," *Civil War History*, 13:2 (June, 1967), pp. 114-30.

<sup>61</sup> Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Wade in the Water: Great Moments in Black History* (Chicago, 1979).

<sup>62</sup> Benjamin Quarles, "Black History's Antebellum Origins," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 89:1 (April, 1979), pp. 104-7.

<sup>63</sup> John O. Killens, ed., *The Trial Record of Denmark Vesey* (Boston, 1970).

<sup>64</sup> Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York, 1969), pp. 123-29.

<sup>65</sup> Okon E. Uya, ed., *Black Brotherhood: Afro-Americans and Africa* (Lexington, Massachusetts, 1971).

<sup>66</sup> Earl E. Thorpe, "Philosophy of History: Sources, Truths, and Limitations," *Quarterly Review of Higher Education Among Negroes*, 25:3 (July, 1957), p. 183.

<sup>67</sup> Harold Cruse, "Black Studies: Interpretation, Methodology, and the Relationship to Social Movements," *Afro-American Studies*, 2 (1971), p. 24.

<sup>68</sup> Ira Berlin, "Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society on British Mainland North America," *American Historical Review*, 85:1 (February, 1980), pp. 44-78.

<sup>69</sup> Nell I. Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction* (New York, 1977).

<sup>70</sup> Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York, 1979).