

AFRICAN AMERICAN SUFFERING
AND SUICIDE UNDER SLAVERY

by

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ABSTRACT

While the suffering of slaves in the antebellum American South is common knowledge, what is not so commonly known is the suicide rate among those slaves. How did slaves respond to the suffering they were forced to undergo? While some slaves did choose suicide, the rates appear to be surprisingly low. This is consistent with suicide rates for Africa and for people of African descent living in other areas of the world, and further supports the theory that a low suicide rate is an element of African culture. The overwhelming majority of African-American slaves chose to deal with their suffering through a variety of means, including resistance, external compliance and spirituality. When slaves did resort to suicide, it was apparently often in response to a deterioration in their circumstances or unfulfilled expectations. When the slaves developed dialog to address their suffering on an ideological level, they frequently did so through religious channels.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

To experience humanity is to experience suffering, and to experience suffering engenders the pursuit to alleviate suffering. The pharmaceutical industry, insurance industry, mental health profession, legal field and social services agencies, among other various establishments, all work to decrease human suffering in a world where relationships are broken, dreams are shattered, wars are fought, crimes are committed, children are neglected and people die slow and painful deaths from diseases such as cancer. While humanity is striving to perfect the art of fleeing from suffering, it has become obvious that it is not possible to eradicate it entirely. There is a point in every society, and in every life, where it cannot be escaped and must be faced. How do humans respond when they are forced into suffering from which there is no apparent escape?

African American slaves lived through acute and prolonged suffering during the 250 year era they were legally held as human chattel. Slaves used many tactics to decrease or eliminate their suffering, such as escape, cooperation and distraction. When these were not successful and slaves faced suffering that they could not avoid, their responses varied from committing suicide to seeking revenge to accepting their pain. On an ideological level, when slaves pondered their suffering, they sometimes became consumed with hatred and anger and other times understood their suffering in spiritual terms and practiced thankfulness and forgiveness.

Their choices were both individualized and cultural. Slaves, as all human beings,

“differ[ed] remarkably in their individual reactions to pain and suffering.”¹ Their varied responses were not due to self-control or cultural mores but rather to perceptual modulation.² The crucial issue was the way slaves understood their situations, particularly the changes which occurred in their lives. This was demonstrated among slaves, since those within similar situations and cultural backgrounds handled suffering so differently. However, within their unique responses a culture was created, affected and passed on.

What exactly is suffering? Pain is not the same thing as suffering, although pain can, and for the slaves did, become a form of suffering. Webster's Dictionary defines pain as “hurt or strong discomfort in some part of the body” and suffering as “the bearing or undergoing of pain, distress or injury.”³ Pain is actually beneficial in most situations. As Dr. Paul Brand, an expert on leprosy, points out in his book, *Pain: the Gift Nobody Wants*,⁴ pain is imperative for a healthy body. Individuals who, through birth defect or diseases such as leprosy, lose their natural ability to feel pain, damage their bodies in myriads of ways that those who experience the sensation of pain do not. The pain, or discomfort, of dry eyes motivates blinking, the pain of fire keeps children out of it and the pain of overexerting muscles prevents it from happening. As Dr. Brand's research has demonstrated, people who do not feel pain unconsciously destroy their bodies. However, this gift of pain can be twisted to become a curse, as in the case of the slaves. A great deal of the pain suffered by slaves was not necessary for their health and safety, but rather

1 Asenath Petrie, *Individuality in Pain and Suffering* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 1.

2 Petrie, *Individuality in Pain*, 98.

3 Petrie, *Individuality in Pain*, 2.

4 Paul Brand, *Pain: The Gift Nobody Wants* (Pennsylvania: DIANE Publishing Company, 1999), 5.

was inflicted in a situation where the master was taking advantage of natural human sensations to keep the slave, through their avoidance of pain, under control. For slaves, suffering meant undergoing pain, distress *and* injury.

Suffering is also particularly challenging to accept when it is forced by the selfish decisions of others instead of either chosen or viewed as a normal part of the life cycle. Childbirth, raising children, attending college, intense physical exercise, self-denial of temporary pleasure for superior future gain and basic training in the military are all forms of suffering individuals consciously and regularly undergo in pursuit of a desired outcome. Even terminal illness can be viewed as a part of the cycle of life. Suffering inflicted by slaveholders for their personal economic benefit was neither chosen, nor was it a universal part of life, so it was especially frustrating and difficult to accept.

Slaves had a wide variety of responses to suffering, many of which have been carefully researched by scholars and are briefly discussed here. However, there are two particular areas of response which have received inadequate attention. One is suicide and the other is trust in God. These are both concepts which are fairly difficult to understand and explain, even by those who practice and those who study them. Psychiatrists struggle to delineate reasons why people take their own lives and theologians wrestle with faith in the midst of difficulties.

From the evidence that is available, it appears that suicide for slaves was very rare. However, when slaves did commit suicide, the act was very frequently assigned a motive that was connected with their condition of servitude, such as beatings and sale. From a

study of attempted suicides, evidence shows that when slaves did decide to commit suicide, their situation often had deteriorated below their expectations. These slaves did not necessarily have the most difficult circumstances. Suicidal slaves came to view the options available to them as unacceptable and death as more attractive. Their choices correspond with and support various theories in suicidology.

Suffering among the Christian slaves did not lead to a rejection of the idea of a God who was simultaneously sovereign and loving. Instead they interpreted their suffering according to their understanding of their God and his work in their lives. This ideology led them to see redeeming value in suffering and to view it as a small and temporary part of existence.

The following summary of chapters provides an outline for each chapter. First it states which problem or situation is evaluated in each chapter. Then it delineates the main arguments given for that particular situation. Lastly, it presents a summation of the conclusion drawn regarding the issue it confronts.

Chapter one provides an overview of slave suffering and establishes the universality of suffering inherent in the condition of servitude. It also includes an analysis of some of the well known and most common responses, such as escape, distraction, cooperation and revenge. Escape, distraction and cooperation were tactics which were used to decrease the suffering. Revenge sought instead to return the suffering to the master, and involved murder, assault, property damage and looking to God for eternal vengeance.

Due to the renewed interest by scholars on the subject of slavery, the suffering of slaves has become fairly common knowledge. Major J. Jones, in his book, *Black Awareness: A Theology of Hope*, provides an excellent definition of slave suffering.

Over three hundred years ago, and many years thereafter, black men, women and children were extracted from their native land of Africa, deliberately by plan stripped bare psychologically, physically and religiously, and transplanted in an alien land dominated by the white man. Within this new context, the black man was to occupy the most degraded of all human conditions: that of a slave- a mere piece of property, a nobody in the fullest sense of the word. The black family, by plan, was broken up, scattered, and sold from auction block to auction block all over America. The black male, for all practical purposes, was completely emasculated, and the black female was systematically exploited and vilely degraded.⁵

Each element of exploitation he lists has been thoroughly documented by historians. The issue this thesis confronts is how slaves understood and managed their suffering.

Chapter two evaluates theories of suicide in the context of the study of African American suicide. It includes a brief historiography of suicide in general, and a more detailed historiography of the study of slave suicides. After outlining major theories regarding suicide, it identifies which theories appear to have the most legitimacy for explaining slave suicide.

A limited amount of work has been done regarding suicides among African American slaves. A few major works refer very briefly to it, but other than an article and a chapter in one book, it has received scant attention from scholars. A comprehensive work on slave suicide does not yet exist. Even the history of suicide among African-Americans after emancipation has been slow to draw much attention, although more

5 Major J. Jones, *Black Awareness: A Theology of Hope* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1971), 18-19.

research has been done on the issue in the last twenty years. These works are mainly concerned with the increase in suicide among African Americans since emancipation, and particularly in the last half century, and do not mention slavery.

Scholars are faced with two dichotomous trends in African American suicide. It has been, and continues to be, well below the Euro-American suicide rate. It is also growing at a more rapid rate than white suicide. The greatest jump came between 1965, when the suicide rate for blacks was only twenty-five percent that of whites, and 1970, when it increased to half that of whites. Despite the increase, in 2000, the white male suicide rate of 19.1 per 100,000 almost doubled the black male suicide rate of 9.8. The white female suicide rate outstripped by the black female rate even further, with 1.8 black women to 4.5 white women.⁶

The black suicide rate in the United States has always been well below the white rate. In 1890, the suicide rate for black males was only 1.4 while for white males it was 8.0.⁷ In 1967 the black rate for both genders was 4.6 while the white rate was 11.3.⁸ While their rates may have increased more rapidly, African Americans consistently committed suicide with less frequency than Euro-Americans.

The first work to appear which was devoted exclusively to slave suicides was in 1977 in an article in the *Journal of Negro History* titled "White cannibals, black martyrs," written by W. D. Piersen. He argues that suicide was fairly high among the slaves

6 Donna Holland Barnes, Ph.D. And Carl C. Bell, MD, "Paradoxes of Black Suicide" *Preventing Suicide- The National Journal*, (January, 2003)

7 Lester, *Suicide in African Americans*, 32.

8 Warren Breed, "The Negro and Fatalistic Suicide" *Pacific Sociological Review*, 13, (Summer, 1970): 156.

immediately upon arrival in America, then decreased rapidly. He recounts several situations where slaves committed suicide upon arrival. Chapter two contains a thorough discussion of slave suicides in the first generation in the Western Hemisphere, including evaluation of Piersen's work.

Eugene Genovese devotes two pages of his 800-page volume, *Roll Jordan Roll*, to slave suicides. He concludes that “Most seem to have resorted to suicide to escape capture after having run away or to avoid punishment or sale. For the most part, however, the slaves clung to life tenaciously and sought other responses to their imposed misery.”⁹ His view that suicide did occur, but was rare, is shared by the overwhelming majority of other scholars who do on some level refer to the subject.¹⁰

Chapter three traces actual suicides from the Middle Passage through today, emphasizing specific, completed suicides which occurred during slavery. The focus is on the reason given for the suicides and also on the number of suicides. The majority of suicides were closely connected with punishment, sale and escape attempts, all conditions unique to slavery. The actual number of suicide cases were very low if the reference to suicide in narratives corresponds with the actual occurrences. This chapter also contains an evaluation of an indirect forms of suicide, defined as suicide by slaveholder.

For slaves, suicide was rare and was often used to avoid imminent, intense pain, when life turned out to be even more difficult than expected. The low rate of slave suicides demonstrates that it is not the amount of suffering, but the perception of it, which

9 Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 639.

10 David Lester, *Suicide in African Americans* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 1998), 5, 6, 37.

overwhelms individuals and compels them to suicide. However, when slaves did choose suicide, the reasons for it were almost always directly connected with their condition of servitude. Suicide was mentioned in slave narratives not because it occurred commonly, but rather as evidence that slavery was such a degrading and despicable institution that it occasionally drove slaves to suicide. We cannot know for certain, but it appears that African American suicide rates were higher during slavery than in the generations immediately after emancipation, so suicide was more appealing during slavery than after it.

The reasons given for many of the suicides discussed in narratives and interviews were directly related to the conditions of slavery. Traditionally, suicide has not been as viable an option for Africans and their descendants as it has been for other groups of people, although that has begun to change for African Americans in the United States during the last thirty years. The cultural inhibitions toward suicide are especially obvious among slaves. How and why they developed are questions yet to be answered.

In chapter four, several attempted suicides, described by those who partook in them, are evaluated in detail in an attempt to uncover the motives for suicide and the mental processes which accompanied the decision. Suicidology lives and dies by properly gathered, random statistics, which are not possible in this situation. Only an anthropological evaluation of slave suicide is possible, due to the select case histories that are available in the primary sources left by slaves, and that is the task which has been attempted here, using cases of suicide available in narratives. This study finds that those

slaves who attempted suicide had expectations that were not fulfilled, or lost a level of comfort and autonomy they were accustomed to. Suicide became an option for slaves when they determined that they were unwilling to exist under the only choices they could perceive, and when they saw only more pain in their future.

The most extensive work on slave suicide to date is a single chapter in David Lester's book, *Suicide in African Americans*, published in 1998. He accomplishes several things in thirteen pages: he makes the point that suicide was rare but did occur, he gives several examples of actual suicides among slaves, he argues convincingly for a high rate of suicide among the newly arrived enslaved and those involved in organized rebellion, he proposes the theory that suicide often follows punishment, and he gives several suggestions for future research.

Lester restates his main arguments and encourages further study in one of his final paragraphs, where he writes,

The most common precipitants of suicide appeared to be severe punishment and after rebellions. However, suicide was apparently rather rare in these cases, and the available documentation does not enable us to discover why occasional slaves killed themselves after beatings while others did not. Did they differ in childhood experiences, personality, interpersonal situation or the conditions of slavery? To answer this, we require more detailed life histories of slaves who killed themselves to compare with the life histories of those who did not do so.¹¹

Lester wondered if psychological pain was greater for the suicidal slaves. He also noted that “it would be useful to have more information about the lives of the slaves who committed suicide so that life experiences and personal characteristics which

¹¹ David Lester, *Suicide in African Americans*, 15.

differentiated between those rare few who committed suicide and those who did not do so could be identified.”¹² The challenge in accomplishing this lies in the fact that there are not very detailed life histories for those who did commit suicide. However, there are detailed life histories for some of those who *attempted* suicide. With Lester's challenge in mind, chapter four is devoted to attempted suicide and evaluates the life experiences and personal characteristics of slaves who attempted suicide. The case studies show that those slaves who attempted suicide were accustomed to, or expected, far less suffering than they were forced to undergo.

Chapter five examines the ideological beliefs slaves shared regarding their suffering. It confronts the paradox of Christian slaves who placed complete faith in an omnipotent, sovereign and loving God who could end their suffering but chose not to. When slaves stated that they were trusting in God, what did they mean? It evaluates the theories of forgiveness that slaves set forth and then the actual practice and outcome of forgiveness. It also traces how implicit faith in God was strengthened, even when their suffering increased instead of ending, and how their mental concepts of their situations broadened as a result and they found hope in the ultimate redemption of their situations while simultaneously striving to improve them.

Slaves continued to have faith in God because they believed that their relationship with the Supreme Being and their character growth was more important and often was best enhanced through difficult circumstances. Through this understanding of their world, they accepted and worked with their suffering, practicing thankfulness for what

¹² David Lester, *Suicide in African Americans*, 13.

they viewed as positive in their lives and forgiveness toward those who carried out the negative elements of their lives. Ultimately, it was not the suffering that controlled the choices slaves made, but rather the slaves themselves, and how they responded to suffering.

During the last twenty years, the study of slavery has moved from large, sweeping works to very specific, localized studies, such as this one. Scholars have found that “we now have a fuller sense of how slavery was many, often contradictory things at once and never quite the same thing for very long.”¹³ This is particularly true in the wide and varied responses which slaves gave to suffering, and especially within suicide and trust in God. Their choices were highly individual, and yet they molded a culture which rarely committed suicide and was known for its strong spirituality in the midst of difficulty.

This study also demonstrates the fact that even within a topic where extensive scholarship has been carried out, such as slavery, students who are interested in it can find new questions to ask and a new approach to contribute. In fact, the numerous secondary and primary resources available to draw from have greatly benefited this project as they provided foundational work to be built upon. It is not necessary for graduate students to seek out a topic that nobody has ever written about. With creativity, and the assistance of experts in the field, students can pursue original research even where massive research has already been done.¹⁴

13 Christopher Morris, “The Articulation of Two Worlds: The Master-Slave Relationship Reconsidered,” *The Journal of American history* 85, no.3 (Dec. 1998): 983

14 Credit in this situation must be given to Professor Billy Smith at Montana State University who first brought to my attention the lack of work in slave suicides and provided encouragement when it was most needed.

CHAPTER TWO

SLAVE SUFFERING AND COMMON RESPONSES

Anne Hawkins echoed the voices in a thousand other slave narratives when she said, “Our days was a constant misery to us.”¹⁵ Frequent beatings, long hours of forced labor, a lack of material resources and the resulting hunger and cold, sexual exploitation by white masters and dehumanizing treatment were common experiences of slaves. Robert Bums sarcastically observed that his master always carefully “limited de lashes to five hundred.”¹⁶ Family separation was a further trial, and as Calvin Moye, an ex-slave stated, “Plenty of dem didn't knows anything about der mothers and fathers.”¹⁷ These forms of suffering are clearly documented in thousands of sources, both primary and secondary.

Suffering was certainly not limited to situations where slaves had violent, sadistic masters. Even under the best of situations, suffering was an inherent element in slavery. Joe Rawls related how his parents had a particularly benevolent situation in regards to their marriage. First, his father received permission to go and visit the woman of his choice on a plantation 4 or 5 miles away. When the courtship culminated in marriage, the masters held a ceremony where the slaves jumped over a broom together. From that day forward, the master of Joe's mother rented Joe's father so the couple could live together on the same plantation. While other, more selfish considerations certainly may have

15 *Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember*, ed. James Mellon (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1988), 242.

16 *Bullwhip Days*, ed. Mellon, 241.

17 *Bullwhip Days*, ed. Mellon, 153.

motivated these owners, this was an unusually pleasant situation for the family. Instead of walking to see his wife on weekends, Joe's father was able to live with his family.

Interestingly, Joe finished his narrative by pointing out that for years his father worked for his mother's master, with the wages going to his father's master, "jis' like he's a hoss."¹⁸

The generosity which made this family situation far superior to that of many slaves was still overshadowed by the blatant economic exploitation. Even with the very best of masters, in the very best of situations, slaves were still slaves, and by very definition they suffered from stolen labor.

An overview of slave suffering is provided by Charles C. Jones, a large slaveholder who was also a missionary and pastor to blacks in Liberty County, Georgia, where he worked among the slaves as a self-appointed reliever of slave suffering. Historian Erskine Clarke believes that "his attempts to improve their physical conditions represented one of the most significant ways he sought to be a pastor to the blacks of Liberty County."¹⁹ He systematically identified six areas that he believed required reform if slaves were to have "just and equal" treatment. These included housing conditions, clothing, food, medical care, free time, and a place for themselves with means to make money. Jones was concerned about the poor housing conditions that caused a lack of privacy and modesty due to the fact that two or more families were crowded together. He felt that each family should have a house of its own. For food, he believed that "slaves should be provided with abundant food and that as wholesome and good and as

¹⁸ *Bullwhip Days*, ed. Mellon, 146.

¹⁹ Erskine Clarke, *Wrestlin's Jacob: A portrait of Religion in Antebellum Georgia and the Carolina Low Country* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), 69.

diversified as it can conveniently be made.”²⁰ He advocated that slaves should have “time to enjoy the comforts of life and do something for themselves.”²¹ Of course, he believed that slaves should take the Sabbath day off. He also argued that slaves “ought to have a place for themselves and a means to make money,” such as in small gardens.²² In addition, “Jones insisted that masters should not separate husband and wife, either by sale or purchase.”²³ The fact that this slave holder was so concerned about these physical areas does more to reveal the wretched conditions than it does to demonstrate his deep benevolence. If slaveholders were truly attempting to provide the best care for their “investments,” then such articulation and promotion undertaken by Jones would be unnecessary.

Even under the best conditions, the fact that the situation could change haunted the slaves. The death of a benevolent master might result in a far less benign new owner. It was not unusual for masters to free slaves in their wills, but nor was it unusual for heirs, who had hoped to benefit financially from an inheritance, to refuse to honor the request and divide up families in sales instead. No slave was safe from the possibility of, at any time, being sold away from his family. Ex-slave John Rudd said, “If you want to know what unhappiness means, just you stand on the slave block and hear the auctioneer's voice selling you away from the folks you love.”²⁴ For many enslaved children, their earliest

20 Clarke, *Wrestlin's Jacob*, 71.

21 Clarke, *Wrestlin's Jacob*, 73.

22 Clarke, *Wrestlin's Jacob*, 73.

23 Clarke, *Wrestlin's Jacob*, 76.

24 Ronald L. Baker, *Homeless, Friendless, Penniless: WPA Interviews with Former Slaves Living in Indiana* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000), 217.

childhood memories involved being sold away from their parents. If ever there was a group of people whose psychological needs were uniformly unmet, it would be slaves.

Sexual exploitation of black women produced a particularly sinister form of suffering. The high biracial population testifies to the sexual relationships between masters and their female slaves. Mary Boykin Chestnut's diary is well known for her comments about how Southern "men live in one house with their wives and concubines." She points out that the mulatto children seen in "every family" closely resemble the white children.²⁵ Peter Kolchin concludes that "no slave woman was safe from unwanted sexual advances," and that white men used "casual, emotionless sex on demand" that "caused anguish to black women."²⁶ At the most personal level the exploitive condition of slavery left the slaves vulnerable to suffering.

Masters who desired to increase their slave population as rapidly as possibly encouraged sexual exploitation among blacks, even in the form of child molestation. Ex-slaves testified that "some of them had children at the age of twelve and thirteen years old. Negro men six feet tall went to some of these children."²⁷ Cohabitation was encouraged by slaveholders who wished to increase their profits, regardless of the sentiments or relationships of the slaves. One woman was forced to become sexually involved with a man, while recognizing another man as her husband, and "finally, she had one child by him, but she got many a beating first."²⁸

25 *Mary Chestnut's Civil War*, ed. C. Vann Woodward (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 29.

26 Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery: 1619-1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 124-125.

27 *Bullwhip Days*, ed. Mellon, 147.

28 *Bullwhip Days*, ed. Mellon, 123.

The suffering from sexual exploitation sometimes resulted in a permanent abhorrence of marriage and sex. Rose Williams, who was forced to cohabit with a fellow slave named Rufus, in a well-known statement, related that, “I never marries, 'cause one 'sperience am 'nuf for dis [n]. After what I does for de Massa, I's never want no truck with any man. De Lawd forgive dis cullud woman, but he have to 'scuse me and look for some other for to 'plenish de earth.’”²⁹

Common Responses to Suffering

It is well known that some slaves attempted to escape when the suffering in their life became intolerable. Escape attempts have been heavily researched and analyzed, so the goal here is to establish that they were often a response to suffering. Running away was both an escape from suffering and an acceptance of the suffering inherent to the process of running away. Slaves risked severe punishment at the hands of their masters if they were apprehended, hunger and cold along the way, physical mutilation from bloodhounds and capture by anyone seeking a reward. In their minds, this suffering was worth the risk, and it was preferable to what they were already suffering at the hands of their masters.

Slaves often decided to make their escape in response to a certain, especially severe, incident of physical abuse. What they suffered was unacceptable to them and they would no longer remain in a position where they had to tolerate it. Thomas Cole said that, “I makes up mah mind right dar he wasn't going' ter gits no chance [to whip me],

²⁹ *Bullwhip Days*, ed. Mellon, 132.

'cause I's goin' ter runs off de first chance I gits.'"³⁰ Another example was Joe, who was a “noble specimen of a negro” and hired out for six years to a man for whom he worked as an overseer. This man found Joe “so absolutely necessary to him that he determined to buy him at any cost.” That cost turned out to be \$2,000. The first thing the master did after purchasing him was order him to strip for a whipping. Joe respectfully asked the master what complaint he had against him, and the master responded by stating, “No Joe; I've no complaint to make of you; you're a good [n] and you've always worked well; but the first lesson my [n] have to learn is that I am *master*...”³¹ Evidentially the master believed that if a slave could take an undeserved whipping without resistance, then he had truly conquered their spirit. After Joe's whipping, he decided “Dis is de last!” and told Harriet Tubman's father to let him know next time she came. Two weeks later he escaped with her and had an exciting and harrowing trip into Canada. One young woman was told that she was going to be beaten and placed in the stocks as soon as her master returned home. Her husband took her out in the woods and set her up with a stovepipe in a cave. She remained there for seven years, until freedom came, cooking food people slipped to her at night.³² When slaves were no longer willing to accept further suffering, escape was for some a viable alternative.

Sometimes the desire to escape was focused through legal means. Venture Smith was beaten unfairly several times, and when his wife was being beaten for a trivial offense

³⁰ *Bullwhip Days*, ed. Mellon, 62.

³¹ Sarah H. Bradfrod, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn: W.J. Moses, Printer, 1869), 28.

³² *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation*, eds. Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, Steven F. Miller (New York, The New Press, 1998), 23.

he encouraged her to apologize. He focused his efforts on purchasing himself.³³ His outward submission aided his goal of self-purchase. He accepted the suffering he had to endure in order to reach his final goal. He was eventually able to purchase himself, and then at a later date, he also purchased his wife's freedom.

Hope of improved conditions was another response to suffering. On some occasions the love of family members and the possibility of being reunited with them was enough to motivate slaves to endure suffering. When Solomon Northup was very ill with smallpox, after being kidnapped away from his family, he expressed a desire to live so that he could escape and return to his family. "I expected to die. Though there was little in the prospect before me worth living for, the near approach of death appalled me. I thought I could have been resigned to yield up my life in the bosom of my family, but to expire in the midst of strangers, under such circumstances, was a bitter reflection."³⁴

There were other, creative ways which slaves responded to suffering, such as teaching themselves to read! Some slaves focused on education to distract themselves from their suffering. Reflecting about a particularly difficult episode of his life, Austin Steward wrote that, "I never felt so bitterly these hardships and the cruelties of slavery as I did at that time; making a virtue of necessity, however, I turned my thoughts in another direction."³⁵ This direction was learning to read. The more his master attempted to prevent it from happening, the more diligently Austin strove to educate himself. Instead

33 *Five Black Lives*, ed. Arnn Bontemps (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1971).

34 Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (Auburn: Durby and Miller, 1853), 83.

35 Austin Steward, *Twenty-two years a Slave and Forty Years a Freeman; Embracing a Correspondence of Several Years, while President of the Wilberforce Colony, London, Canada West* (New York: Negro University Press, 1968), 82.

of allowing himself to become mentally and emotionally focused on his situation, he distracted himself by learning a highly advantageous skill which would assist him in escape. In another example, “Aunt” Grace was a slave who had been willed by her master to go free, but after he died his son sold her instead, and then later sold her husband away from her “in a *heart rendering scene*.” The son of her new master took the time to teach her to read and it became “a great consolation to her... [and she read] almost exclusively in the old family Bible.”³⁶

Some slaves just attempted to survive as best they could and did not appear to have any concerns or ambitions beyond avoiding punishment and securing as many resources as they could for themselves. Solomon wrote about

Mary, a tall, lithe girl, of a most jetty black, [who] was listless and apparently indifferent. Like many of the class, she scarcely knew there was such a word as freedom. Brought up in the ignorance of a brute, she possessed but little more than a brute's intelligence. She was one of those, and there are very many, who fear nothing but their master's lash, and know no further duty than to obey his voice.³⁷

Each slaves found and chose his or her preferred and available methods of minimizing, enduring and ending the suffering that was an inevitable part of their lives.

While some slaves chose to respond to their suffering with actions that would minimize it in some way, or just aid in their own survival, others responded with revenge through murder, violent attacks and property damage. After suffering at the hands of white slaveholders, many expressed a desire for revenge, and specifically for the suffering

³⁶ *American Slavery as it is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* ed. William Loren Katz (New York: Arno Press, 1968), 27, 52.

³⁷ Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 62.

of the whites. Most African Americans, even those who did not actually commit murder, focused whatever rage, frustration and hatred they experienced outward against the white slave holding community.

While this anger was directly almost exclusively outwardly against the white community and murder among slaves was extremely rare, slaves did on some occasions seek to murder each other. Thad Guttridge owned Cella, whom he kept as a mistress and housekeeper. She had a child with him, but afterward she lost her position as housekeeper and was reduced, in her perception, to being a field hand. Cella then brought some whiskey to the family who had replaced her in the house and poisoned them with it. They did not die, but were very sick for some time.³⁸ Slaves also occasionally reported the misdeeds of other slaves to masters and white authorities, or became very cruel drivers, earning them the vehement hatred of their fellow slaves, even if not murder at their hands. However, the high black-on-black homicide rate was certainly not born in slavery. One area of homicide which did occur during slavery involved a supposed desire to free one's offspring through death.

In the novel and film *Beloved*, Toni Morrison has popularized the murder of children by their enslaved mothers as a means of removing them from slavery. Morrison fictionalized the account of Morrison Sethe who killed her children when they were about to be captured and returned to slavery. Similar examples of this exist throughout slave narratives. In Tennessee, in 1831, a newspaper reported that a slave woman “destroyed three of her children by drowning; one a boy aged about seven years, and two girls, one an

38 *Five Black Lives*, ed. Arna Bontemps, 149.

infant at the breast. On the evening of that day she had been chastised by her master, the first time it is said, that he had ever corrected her.”³⁹ She was attempting to drown a fourth child when her husband came upon her and stopped her. This is, of course, a white newspaper, so it is entirely possible that her master was the individual who said this had been her first chastisement.

Historian Herbert Gutman wrote that

The Hancock County, Georgia physician E. M. Pendleton reported in 1849 that among his patients 'abortion and miscarriage' occurred more frequently among slaves than white free women. The cause was either 'slave labor (exposure, violent exercise, etc.)' or 'as the planters believe, the blacks are possessed of a secret by which they destroy the fetus at an early stage of gestation. All country practitioners,' he added, 'are aware of the frequent complaints of planters' about the 'unnatural tendency of the African female population to destroy her offspring. Whole families of women ... fail to have any children.’⁴⁰

Gutman also discussed a planter who kept between four and six slave women of childbearing age for 25 years, but only received two children. It was later discovered that these slaves had made a medicine to cause abortions.⁴¹

Lou Smith knew of a woman who had 7 children. When they reached a year or two of age, the master could sell them. “When her fourth baby was born and was about two months old... she said, 'I just decided I'm not going to let ol' master sell this baby; he just ain't going to do it.' She got up and gave it something out of a bottle and pretty soon it was dead.”⁴²

39 *American Negro Slavery*, ed. Michael Mullin, 187.

40 Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (Illinois: Vintage, 1977), 80-81.

41 Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family*, 81-82.

42 Julius Lester, *To be a Slave*, 40.

What emotional and intellectual processes occurred in the minds of women who murdered their children rather than leave them to a life of enslavement? Jennie Hill, who was interviewed at the age of 96 in 1933, did not kill any of her children, but her description of her thoughts give insight into the mindset of young, enslaved mothers. She said,

How well I remember how I would sit in my room with the little ones on my lap and the tears would roll down my cheeks as I would ponder the right or wrong of bringing them into the world. What was I brining them into the world for? To be slaves and go from morning to night. They couldn't be educated and maybe they couldn't even live with their families. They would just be slaves. All that time I wasn't even living with my husband. He belonged to another man. He had to stay on his farm and I on mine. That wasn't living- that was slavery.⁴³

Sometimes the child was clearly in a power struggle between the master and the slave. For example, in one instance an enslaved woman was told that she was going to be sold away from her baby. She took the baby by the feet, and swinging it upside down, she threatened to kill it before leaving it. She got to take the baby with her.⁴⁴ The authors who used this example, Hine and Wittenstein, argued that abortion, infanticide and preventing pregnancy were all ways that women fought against slavery.

Many times parents who would not actually murder their children, upon the death of those children, expressed that they were better off dead than alive in slavery. The mother of Little John, who was killed by hounds who were pursuing him after he ran away, shared this sentiment with James Williams, who was the black slave driver on the

⁴³ *Slave Testimony*, ed. John Blassingame, 592.

⁴⁴ Darlene Hine and Kate Wittenstein, "Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex," in *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, ed. Filomina Chimoa Steady (Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Co, Inc., 1971), 295.

plantation.⁴⁵

Certainly more common than the murder of children was the murder of whites. Ex-slaves who related their stories through narratives and interviews did not usually share that they had murdered a white person, but occasional stories were told which make it clear that masters did not entirely without reason fear their slaves. The close proximity, superior physical strength from heavy labor and ample motivation all contributed to opportunities for slaves to murder their masters and overseers.

Nat Turner is a well-known example of a violent rebel. His revolt was the most successful in the United States and killed more than 50 whites in Southampton county in Southern Virginia. Some historians view “Turner's revolt as a response to violence [since] the institution of slavery itself contained all sorts of violence.”⁴⁶ It appears logical that the violence in slavery would make violence appear more acceptable to slaves, but since the slave suicide and murder rate was relatively low, we do not have historical evidence that slaves were more violent than other people. Even Turner's motives were not about repaying violence with violence. He was not merely seeking revenge, but also perceived himself as a Messiah to the slaves. Turner was highly influenced by David Walker's *Appeal* and believed he was a deliverer who had no particular cause to complain of the personal treatment he lived under.⁴⁷

Turner's revolt contained a suicidal element, since success was unlikely and failure

⁴⁵ James Williams, *Narrative of James Williams*, 51.

⁴⁶ Henry J. Young, *Major Black Religious Leaders, 1755-1940* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977), 58.

⁴⁷ *African American Voices: The Life Cycle of Slavery*, ed. Steven Mintz (New York: Brandywine Press, 1996), 136.

certainly meant death. Turner and his followers did accept that liberty was more dear to them than life, and they were willing to face the overwhelming probability of their own death as a result of their revolt.

Some murders were carried out after emancipation and were clearly motivated by revenge and not freedom or protection from future abuse. John Blassingame recorded a story told by an ex-slave about his uncle's murder of an overseer which occurred years after freedom.

This overseer's name was John Ashby, and he had a terrible temper. One day us darkies were cuttin' cane and Ashby got mad at my uncle and gave him a flogging 'til the blood run down his back. My uncle said, 'Some day I will get free and some day I will get you for this, John Ashby.' Well, sir, years later me and my Uncle were free and we were a-settin' on the river bank talking. This same John Ashby came ridin' by on a horse and came over like he wanted to be friendly. My uncle didn't say a word, but he picked up John Ashby and threw him out in the river. Every time John Ashby would start to crawl upon the bank, my uncle would hit him on the head with a stick and throw him back in the river. Finally he drowned. It was kind of wicked, but I saw it with my own eyes.⁴⁸

Some slaves were caught and punished for killing masters. Abram, a slave in Virginia, was apprehended and executed for the murder of his master, John Patterson. He related that “in consequence of some punishment inflicted on me by my master for some misdemeanor of which I was guilty ... I ever after meditated [sic] his destruction.”⁴⁹ He eventually murdered his master by beating him with a hoe and throwing rocks at him.

Charles Ball related how two slaves on a neighboring plantation, conspired together and

48 *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letter, Speeches, Interviews and Autobiographies*, ed. John Blassingame (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1977), 600.

49 *American Negro Slavery: A Documentary History*, ed. Michael Mullin (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1976), 96.

shot their master in the back. They were both executed by hanging.⁵⁰ A slave named Celia was kept as a sexual slave for five years; she became filled with hatred and animosity toward her tormentor. David Brion Davis has pointed out that “there can be no doubts about Celia's own suffering, anguish and humiliation during the five years that Newsom kept her as his sexual slave.”⁵¹ Her response to her suffering was to murder her master. After falling in love with another slave, she resisted her master's wishes, knocked him down with a club and then proceeded to club him to death. After killing him, she burned his body in a fireplace, but was caught and hanged at the age of 19. In her final confession she said that after striking him, “The Devil got into me, and I struck him with the stick until he was dead.”⁵² When Celia realized that her master was within her power, she carried out complete vengeance on him.

While some slaves were executed for killing whites, others were not. One ex-slave told how his father, an excellent worker, was one day informed by an overseer that he was going to be beaten. When the slave attempted to argue and protest his innocence of any wrongdoing, the overseer informed him that he would be whipped in hopes of dissuading him from future misbehavior. After the first blow hit him, the slave grabbed a hoe and struck the overseer over the head with it, “knocking out his brains.”⁵³ As a result of this, the slave was sold without any further punishment. This particular master apparently

50 Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, etc.*, (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1837), 293.

51 David Brion Davis, *In the Image of God: Religion, Moral Values and Our Heritage of Slavery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 250.

52 Melton A. McLaurin, *Celia: A slave* (New York: Perennial, 1991) being reviewed in David Brion Davis, *In the Image of God: Religion, Moral Values and Our Heritage of Slavery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 282.

53 *Bullwhip Days*, ed. James Mellon, 246.

valued the income from the sale of the slave above any legal justice for the overseer's death.

Some murders were not completely intentional, but they exacted vengeance anyway. In a WPA interview, a former slave related a desperate response to the approach of a large group of paddy-rollers, which was the term slaves gave to white patrollers who were hired to find slaves out without passes. The slaves decided to tie grape vines in a dark place in order to trip the horses as they came galloping along. Their plan was so successful that three of the paddy rollers were killed and many others badly injured. The slaves did not hear of the paddy rollers for quite awhile after the incident.⁵⁴

Open violence, although rare and infinitely less common from slaves to masters than vice versa, was a path that some slaves chose. Ellen Craig's mother had to work at the loom so long that she fell asleep. Her mistress told her son to beat Ellen's mother for sleeping. When that happened, she awoke and "she took a pole out of the loom and beat him nearly to death with it. When he begged for mercy, she said, 'I'm goin' to kill you.'"⁵⁵ She pointed out that she had nursed him as a baby and if this was how he was repaying her, she was going to beat him. After the incident, Ellen's mother ran away from the plantation because she was afraid of being killed for beating this boy so much that he could not walk.

William Moore remembered how his master beat his mother, and when William screamed at his master to stop, his master turned and hit William with the whip. William

⁵⁴ Ronald L Baker, *Homeless, Friendless and Penniless*, 111.

⁵⁵ *Bullwhip Days*, ed. James Mellon, 237.

then got a rock “and I take it and I throw it and it ketches Marse Tom in the skull and he goes down like a poled ox.”⁵⁶ Both William and his mother decided that it was an opportune time to take a permanent leave of absence.

Sojourner Truth had a friend named Soan who related a story from her life in slavery. Soan's fellow slave had a child who suffered the abuse of being kicked around like a football by the master until it died. This master became ill, his reason fled, and Soan, who was embittered toward her master for the murder, was assigned the task of supporting him as he sat up in bed, by putting her arms around him and holding him up. Sojourner's narrator related that “it was then that she did her best to wreck her vengeance on him. She would clutch his feeble frame in her iron grasp, as in a vice, and when her mistress did not see, would give him a squeeze, shake, and lifting him up, would set him down again, as hard as possible.”⁵⁷ She continued this practice at each opportunity. When Sojourner asked her if she had any fear of this man's spirit coming back to haunt her, Soan said, “Oh no, he was so wicked, the devil will never let him out of hell long enough for that.”⁵⁸ She felt confident that the spiritual realm shared her feelings regarding the master.

Murder and assault were not the only ways slaves retaliated. Daily acts of revenge occurred on a wide scale. Sometimes the behavior was as simple as breaking a farm tool and other times it actually involved physical assault upon the whites.

56 *Bullwhip Days*, ed. James Mellon, 332.

57 Frances W. Titus, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth; A Bondswoman of Olden Time, Emancipated by the New York Legislature, etc.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 83-84.

58 Frances W. Titus, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 84.

Most slaves did not usually consider it wrong to consume property which legally belonged to their master. As they argued, since they belonged to the master and the food or items they were taking belonged to the master, the goods never left the master's possession. Even Josiah Henson ranked taking food which was forbidden him and giving it to slave women as among his most righteous deeds.

As property themselves, slaves were intimately connected with the master's property and could carry out revenge through the property. Masters were already highly sensitive to the possibilities of theft and beatings for alleged theft and property damage abound in slave narratives. Historians acknowledge that "Slaveholders like Thomas Jefferson understood that a people defined themselves as private property could hardly be expected to have much respect for the rules which told them what was theirs and what was 'massas's'."⁵⁹ Vandalism and arson were more clearly acts of revenge than was theft, since the personal gain that usually motivated theft was not present in vandalous acts that were simply destructive to the master. Occasionally slaves did "wreck vengeance openly and proudly,"⁶⁰ such as in the case of Toney, the slave of Walter Sharp in Rowan County, North Carolina. He burned down his master's house, admitted to it and was executed.

While some slaves carried out revenge, many more expressed a yearning to do so. At times, slaves had a great desire to change places with their masters and carry out the same behavior their masters had subjected them to as slaves. In speaking about her master, one ex-slave said, "he would whip me just for the fun of it. It was fun for him but

59 Roger Lane, *Roots of Violence in Black Philadelphia*, 96.

60 Alan D. Watson, "Impulse Towards Independence: Resistance and Rebellion Among North Carolina Slaves, 1750-1775" *Journal of Negro History* 63, no. 4 (October 1978): 320.

not for me. I hoped to whip him when I grew up.”⁶¹ Her desire was not just for the abuse to end, but to trade places with the abuser, which is the ultimate goal of revenge.

While Solomon Northup was in the slave trade pens awaiting his sale, he met a young woman named Lethe.

[She] continually gave utterance to the language of hatred and revenge. Her husband had been sold. She knew not where she was. An exchange of masters, she was sure, could not be for the worse. She cared not whither they might carry her. Pointing to the scars upon her face, the desperate creature wished that she might see the day when she could wipe them off in some man's blood.⁶²

A desire for vengeance, such as in this situation, was often the driving force behind the violence perpetuated by slaves. While slaves may have developed outwardly compliant attitudes, in their minds they were often thinking thoughts that were not nearly so submissive. William Grimes described one of the many severe floggings he unfairly received as a boy and said, “It seems as though I should not forget this flogging when I die; it grieved my soul beyond the power of time to cure, I should not have been alive now if I had remained a slave, for I would have resisted with my life when I became older, treatment ... such as I have received when a boy from overseers.”⁶³

While most slaves did not actually assault their masters, many carried deep anger and hatred toward them. This came out in particular regarding their beliefs about the eternal state of their masters. An ex-slave described the beatings he suffered at the hands of a mean overseer named Solomon, and then concluded by stating, “I know that

61 *Remembering Slavery*, eds., Ira Berlin, etc., 49.

62 Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 62-63.

63 *Five Black Lives*, ed. Arna Bontemps, 71.

Solomon is burnin' in hell today and it pleasures me to know it.”⁶⁴ Another ex-slave recalled pretending, along with the other slaves, to cry at the master's funeral, but afterward going outside and saying, “they going on to hell like a damn barrel full of nails.”⁶⁵ Statements such as these are found with consistent regularity in ex-slave narratives and interviews.

The desire to have the masters go to hell was a desire for revenge at the hands of one who could carry it out most fully. When Andy Anderson, who was beaten by his master Delbridge so much that he laid in his bunk for days, “gittin' over it in de body but not de heart. No, suh, I has dat in de heart till dis day.”⁶⁶ His wounded heart came out in the assessment about Delbridge. “He half starve us niggers and he want mo' work and he start de whippin's... I guess dat Delbridge go to hell when he died, but I don't see how de debbil could stand him.”⁶⁷

The devil often came up in the discussion regarding the master's eternal punishment. Sometimes the devil was the one who had control over the person, such as when Ella Wilson described the beatings and abuses she had suffered and said of her mistress, “Ugly old thing! The devil's got her right now.”⁶⁸ The devil was not only a connection with hell, but a metaphor for the master or mistress. Henrietta King's mistress whipped her for taking a peppermint stick, and to hold onto her, she put Henrietta's face under a rocking chair while she was doing it, permanently disfiguring her. The damage to

64 *Bullwhip Days*, ed. James Mellon, 19.

65 *Bullwhip Days*, ed. James Mellon, 301.

66 *Remembering Slavery*, eds. Ira Berlin, et al., 218.

67 *Remembering Slavery*, eds. Ira Berlin, et al., 217.

68 *Remembering Slavery*, eds. Ira Berlin, et al., 102.

her face was so thorough that she had to live off of liquids for the rest of her life. In conclusion, Henrietta stated, “An' it was a debbil dat done it – a she-debbil what's burnin' and twistin' in hell.”⁶⁹ Her mistress was not only connected with the devil, she *was* the devil.

Even for slaves who did not particularly wish to see their masters in hell, heaven for masters was often beyond their imagination. One ex-slave shared, “I was settin here thinking the other night 'bout the talk of them kind of white folks going to heaven... they'd turn the Heaven wrong side out and have the angels working to make something they could take away from them.”⁷⁰ The perfection of heaven would be nullified if the patterns of behavior from slaveholding were present. The very essence of evil was embodied in the selfishness of slaveholders and their choices.

The desire for revenge was occasionally couched in religious terms. Mrs. Minnie Folkes talked about how outrageous she perceived the persecution from the paddyrollers and other whites was toward slaves in regards to their religious beliefs. She called God the Righteous Judge of these situations and felt very justified in her desire for vengeance.⁷¹

Slaves suffered in nearly every way that human being can suffer, physically mentally, sexually and emotionally. There was no part of their lives untouched by pain and exploitation. In response, they attempted to escape, worked extremely hard for years to purchase themselves, distracted themselves and sought other ways to minimize their

69 *Remembering Slavery*, eds. Ira Berlin, et al., 21.

70 *Bullwhip Days*, ed. James Mellon, 116.

71 *Weevils in the Wheat*, eds. Charles L Perdue, Jr., et al., 93.

suffering. They also took part in vengeance, through three levels. The first was actual murder or physical assault, the second was property destruction and the third was a desire for divine vengeance. Far less common, and also less documented, suicide was also a response to suffering.

CHAPTER THREE

SUICIDE

A small minority of slaves apparently responded to their suffering with suicide. However, before we can evaluate why some African slaves in America committed suicide, we must turn our attention to suicide in general, and to modern theories on suicide and how they apply to slave suicides. Then the information available regarding suicides and attempted suicides of slaves will be contextualized within the current psychological and sociological theories regarding suicide. To begin evaluating slave suicides, it is necessary to examine two points; what constitutes a suicidal act, and why do people choose to end their lives.

The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines suicide as “the act or an instance of intentionally killing oneself.”⁷² Emile Durkheim, the father of the sociological study of suicide, defined suicide as a term “applied to any death which is the direct or indirect result of a positive or negative act accomplished by the victim himself.”⁷³ Accordingly, this chapter will focus on situations where slaves directly or indirectly took or attempted to take their own lives through a positive or negative act.

It is necessary to divide the suicide of slaves into two categories. The first includes only situations in which slaves directly take their own lives, and with their own hands carry out the means of death through a positive or negative act. The second

⁷² *American Heritage Dictionary* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985)

⁷³ Emile Durkheim, translated by John A. Spaulding and George Simpson, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (New York: The Free Press, 1951) , 42.

category involves situations where slaves put themselves indirectly in a position where white masters are more likely to carry out murder. These two together encompass Durkheim's definition.

The latter category, which could be defined as “suicide by slaveholder,” coined after the modern term “suicide by cop,” is impossible to identify without testimony from the slaves themselves. When were the slaves consciously placing themselves in a situation with the hope that it would lead to their death, and when were the slaves simply choosing to rebel or unable to comply? It is important to acknowledge the difference between desiring death and being willing to risk death to rebel. Only the first situation is truly suicidal. There is no concise way to answer that question, but some slaves openly defied murderous masters and overseers in what was possibly a direct suicide attempt. A discussion on this type of suicide is included in chapter three, after the more overt suicides are covered. The focus here is examining those behaviors which are definitely suicide.

Drawing from dozens of theories which have been proposed by experts to explain suicidal behavior, I have divided the elements which contribute to suicide into two categories, the internal and the external. The internal element is the thinking process of the suicidal person and their choice to terminate their existence. This involves the personality of the individual, their responses to their life experiences and their desires. The external element is the situation in which individuals find themselves, and the particular problems or pressures in their lives at the time of their suicidal decision. The

internal clearly is more pivotal since so many slaves share the external.

The reasons for an internal decision of suicide are difficult to pinpoint since the suicidal themselves do not always understand them. Psychologically, the motives of suicide are diffuse, deep-seated and difficult to express.⁷⁴ Why an individual reaches a point where suicide is an option is the question that is difficult to answer. Why does anyone commit suicide? “In almost every case, suicide is caused by pain- a certain kind of pain- *psychological* pain... in other words, suicide is chiefly a drama of the mind.”⁷⁵ The issue that is difficult to isolate and answer is why, for a particular individual, the drama in their minds led them to perceive their situation as containing an overwhelming amount of psychological pain.

From among the many theories on suicide, I have chosen one as the most supported and helpful in understanding slave suicide. This is the escape option, which is where a suicidal person sees their current options as unacceptable and the pain as unbearable and chooses to escape life through death. Three other theories are briefly discussed, due to their widespread popularity. The first is inward directed rage. This involves hopelessness and anger turned inward instead of outward, as it is in a homicide. The second is the chemical imbalance theory which suggests that people become severely depressed and choose to end their lives based on a lack of certain neurotransmitters in their brain. The third is psychiatric disorders.

The flight option is the one most obviously involved in slave suicides. At a

74 *African Homicide and Suicide*, ed. Paul Bohannon (New York: Atheneum, 1967), 26.

75 Edwin S. Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4.

fundamental level, suicide occurs when a person initially makes the conscious decision that suicide is a viable option and then determines it is the best or only choice in their current circumstances. Edwin Schneidman, an expert on suicide, writes that “suicide is the result of an interior dialog. The mind scans its options; the topic of suicide comes up, the mind rejects it, scans again; there is suicide, it is rejected again, and then finally the mind accepts suicide as a solution, then plans it, and fixes it as the only answer.”⁷⁶ The thinking individual must first begin to see suicide as an option, and then as the best option. Schneidman also points out that “the suicidal person's thinking pattern has constricted: often it is dichotomous with only two possibilities: yes, or no, life as I want it or death, my way or nothing, greatness or annihilation – the desperation of only seeing two alternatives and not three or more choices as we do in ordinary life.”⁷⁷ The issue of narrowed options is clearly a deciding element in slave suicides. In attempted and contemplated suicides, the plan of suicide is often discarded as the individual realizes and accepts new options. This idea is expanded upon in chapter four, which is on attempted suicides.

What is critical in each situation is the individual's unwillingness to endure further pain. As psychologist Robert Litman said, “People commit suicide because they cannot accept their pain, because the pain does not fit in with their concept of themselves, with their personal ideal.”⁷⁸ The pain reaches a point where it seems unendurable and the person no longer wishes to continue dealing with it. Suicide is viewed as a way to end

⁷⁶ Edwin S. Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind*, 15.

⁷⁷ Edwin S. Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind*, 61.

⁷⁸ Edwin S. Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind*, 160.

the pain.

A suicidal person has a desire for life a certain way and is unwilling to live with the other available options. Two individuals, both within the same culture, can experience similar difficulties and as a result one will consider or attempt suicide while the other does not. In the mind of the suicidal, death becomes a viable option. At a point they define within themselves, they are simply not willing to accept life on the terms they are facing. This is validated from the available information on slave suicides.

Obviously, suicidal individuals wish to escape their situation. In contrast to the fight response, suicide is the flight response, but to an extreme. The individual wishes to flee from not only the immediate danger, but from life itself. The individual is fleeing from all the other options they have available. This holds very true in regards to slave suicides. Many suicides are attempted or carried out in times of physical flight from slavery. The individual has determined to flee their particular situation and when physical flight is obstructed, death becomes the only form of flight available.

The second internal theory is that instead of the avoidance of pain being the main motivator, aggression and anger are the driving forces behind suicide. George Minois explains that “one of the time-honored psychological explanations for suicide is that in the majority of cases individuals turn against themselves aggressive impulse that could not be directed at others in civilized societies.”⁷⁹ Suicide is often viewed as aggressive anger turned inward. Instead of attacking others, the rage, hopelessness and/or isolation

⁷⁹ George Minois, translated by Lydia G. Cochrane, *History of Suicide and Voluntary Death in Western Culture* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 10.

are turned inward and the individual destroys themselves. Schneidman asserts that “in some angry people suicide is the alternative to murder.”⁸⁰ In these situations, the individual finds the situation unbearable, and instead of removing the other person, removes themselves. Pouissant also suggests that today's high black on black homicide rate may at some level be a suicidal behavior since anger is being turned inward toward black culture. This idea of anger and aggression focused inward could certainly be the case in some slave suicides and attempted suicides, although they overwhelmingly tend to be focused on avoiding a horrific situation and not on expressing anger. The individuals from whom we do have testimony, who attempted suicide, discussed avoiding pain and not expressing rage. Slaves had definite, physical enemies of whom they had opportunities to levy revenge on, at least prior to if not in lieu of taking their own lives. These enemies were so dangerous and politically powerful that to murder them was a suicidal act. While aggression and anger may have been the motive behind some suicides, evidence does not exist for it.

A third, and new but widely accepted, theory for suicide is that biological factors occur within the human body that cause severe depressive disorders which in turn lead to suicide for some individuals. These biological factors are genetics and corresponding chemical imbalances. This theory is popular among some researchers of African American suicide, particularly those who are searching for present-day solutions.⁸¹ In correlation with this theory, antidepressant drugs are frequently prescribed to attempt to

80 Edwin S. Schneidman, *The Suicidal Mind*, 118.

81 Alvin F. Poussaint and Amy Alexander, *Lay My Burden Down: Unraveling Suicide and the Mental Health Crisis Among African Americans* (Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2000), 141.

solve the problem. At this point in the development of the chemical imbalance theory, the main idea is that the body develops certain neurotransmitters, which carry communication throughout the brain, and at times certain transmitters become low in numbers, resulting in a certain change in behavior. Some researchers believe that people in stressful situations use up their serotonin, which is a neurotransmitter, and as a result can become very depressed and potentially suicidal.⁸²

Low levels of chemicals in the brain are identified through behavioral symptoms, so technically if slaves listed physical symptoms they could be diagnosed. However, the narratives of those attempting suicides which are evaluated in chapter four do not describe typical symptoms of depression such as difficulty sleeping, excessive sleep, lack of appetite, bouts of crying and lack of interest in others and relationships. Instead, as in other narratives, they focus on their circumstances and their concerns about their situations. Sometimes slaves did describe what appears to be depression where they, or other slaves, are consumed by their own sorrow, but without listing physical symptoms. Diagnosing chemical imbalances positively from narratives appears impossible.

This theory is still controversial, with some psychologists arguing vehemently against its overuse.⁸³ Chemicals certainly have physical, emotional and mental effects on people. However, even the very latest research concludes that suicidal behaviors are a “complex interaction between genes, environment and personality factors.”⁸⁴ Suicide is

82 David G. Meyers, *Exploring Psychology* (Michigan: Worth Publishers, 1993), 436.

83 David Kaiser, “Against Biologic Psychiatry,” *Psychiatric Times*, Vol. 13, no. 12, (1996), 144.

84 Philippe Courtet, M.D., Ph.D., “The Genetic Basis for Suicidal Behavior” *Psychiatric Times*, Vol. XXII, no. 9. (August, 2005), 26.

obviously a very, very difficult issue to understand.

Lester notes that “suicide is typically associated with psychiatric illness” which involves situations of hallucinations and illogical thinking.⁸⁵ Today, with carefully measured suicide rates and causes, “90% of people who commit suicide suffered from a psychiatric disorder, mostly a mood disorder.”⁸⁶ Among slaves it is impossible officially to measure the rate of psychiatric disorders since slaves were not admitted to institutions. Southern psychiatric hospitals refused to admit blacks with symptoms of psychiatric disorder, rather they were jailed or put in poorhouses.⁸⁷ The 1840 census claims that 1 in 1558 slaves were “insane,” but even scholars in the 1840s criticized this and other conclusions stated in this census as containing blatant inaccuracies.⁸⁸ After the war, when blacks were admitted to mental institutions, suicide was extremely rare. The *North Carolina Medical Journal* asserted that “mania is the prevailing form of mental derangement” among the recently freed slaves, but at the same time, a doctor reported that among blacks “suicide is rare. I have seen but one well defined case of suicidal melancholia in the Eastern North Carolina Hospital for nine years.”⁸⁹

Writers in narratives did occasionally refer to individuals who were clearly depressed or even hallucinating. Solomon Northup commented that Eliza only seemed happy when she was hallucinating and believed that her children were still present with

85 David Lester, *Why People Kill Themselves: A 1990's Summary of Research Findings on Suicidal Behavior*. 3rd Edition (Illinois: Charles C Thomas, 1992), 419.

86 Philippe Courtet, “The Genetic Basis for Suicidal Behavior” 26.

87 David Lester, *Suicide in African Americans*, 12.

88 W. D. Postell, “Mental Health Among the Slave Populations on Southern Plantations,” *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 110 (1953): 52-54.

89 John Fulenwider Miller, “The Effects of Emancipation Upon the Mental and Physical Health of the Negro of the South.” *North Carolina Medical Journal* (1896) 9.

her.⁹⁰ According to his layman's description, her mental health seriously deteriorated. It appears that she chose to escape reality because it had become too painful for her. Lewis Hayden's mother was apparently emotionally disturbed after being sold to a man who attempted to force her into a sexual relationship and then had her flogged and imprisoned when she refused. She attempted suicide several times and once even tried to kill Lewis, screaming at him, "I'll fix you so they never get you."⁹¹ Others intervened to rescue him. After his mother was able to live with his father, she "almost recovered her mind."⁹² While she is recognized by Lewis as being mentally unstable, her goal was to get herself, and then her son, out of slavery through the only option that appeared available to her. However, from the information available on slaves who committed suicide and suicide attempts, they appear mentally sane and able to accurately comprehend their circumstances. Among the internal causes of suicide, psychiatric disorders appears to have little more legitimacy in defining slave suicides than chemical imbalances or displaced rage. The flight theory definitely fits slave suicides the best.

External elements, the circumstances in life which people exist in when they commit or attempt suicide, are also difficult to pinpoint. The main challenge in this theory is that large numbers of slaves shared similar external circumstances, yet only a few, almost certainly less than one percent, opted for suicide. The real differences between the suicidal and nonsuicidal were much more than external, environmental elements, but rather internal elements, so the internal will be more contributory in this

90 Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 88.

91 *Slave Testimony*, ed. John Blassingame, 696.

92 *Slave Testimony*, ed. John Blassingame, 696.

research project. However, the study of suicide, including African American suicide, heavily emphasizes the external, so those theories will be evaluated as well. They certainly could have played a role in increasing the attraction of suicide for some slaves.

In *African Homicide and Suicide*, Paul Bohannon comments on Durkheim's 1897 *Suicide*, stating that "it is after sixty years still the most vital book on the subject."⁹³

Today, his work is actually over one hundred years old, but it is still frequently quoted in major works on suicide. It has provided the basis from which modern ideas have sprung.

Kevin Early, a sociologist and scholar of African American suicide, believes that "all modern American sociological theories and studies of suicide have been heavily influenced by Durkheim."⁹⁴ Durkheim presented four basic categories to classify the causes of suicide.

The first is egoistic, which involves a loss of social ties or social integration. Many later studies view this as a main cause. Durkheim operated from the standpoint that humans are selfish and require cultural regulation to prevent antisocial behavior. When the social ties are lost, their behavior is no longer regulated and suicide is more likely to occur. As Durkheim wrote, "collective force is one of the obstacles best calculated to restrain suicide, its weakening involves a development of suicide."⁹⁵ Suicidal people are often isolated from interpersonal relationships and also the goals of collective society. This is supported by the fact that married people are uniformly less likely to attempt or

93 *African Homicide and Suicide*, ed. Paul Bohannon, 6.

94 Kevin Early, *Religion and Suicide in the African American Community* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992), 8.

95 Emile Durkheim, *Suicide*, 209.

complete suicide than single, especially divorced, people. Later sociologists used this theory to attribute suicide to the weakened social norms which occurred with growing urbanization and the subsequent breakdown of social ties.⁹⁶ This could certainly play a role in slave suicides since those who attempted and committed suicide were often physically and socially isolated from the support of the slave community at the time.

The second category is altruistic, where an individual commits suicide for what they perceive as the good of the group. This is usually the suicide of older people, who believe their usefulness has expired and it is their duty to society to remove themselves. Sati among Indian widows is an example of altruistic suicide. However, this is not common in American or African society and does not appear to play a role among slave suicides.

The third category is anomic, which is the deregulation of desires and passions. This can involve pursuing unobtainable goals, or simply exciting appetites that cannot be satisfied. As wealth increases, this problem grows since people desire more and have less self-control. Durkheim points out that in this case, “poverty may even be considered a protection” against suicide.⁹⁷ Affluent nations have higher suicide rates than nations with more material poverty. In this category, an individual's expectations outstrip actual achievements. This is sometimes called the strain theory by later sociologists labeling the frustrated individuals who were denied opportunities they expected to be able to enjoy. This theory has some validity for African-American suicide today, since although both

⁹⁶ Kevin Early, *Religion and Suicide*, 12-13.

⁹⁷ Emile Durkheim, *Suicide*, 245.

suicidal and non suicidal slaves were individuals with highly regulated desires and passions, frustrated expectations contributed to many slave suicides. Even within their despicable circumstances, they became frustrated when particular expectations were not met. This is demonstrated in the case studies of attempted suicide, which are found in chapter four.

Several other scholars have suggested that the first and third categories, the egotistic and anomic, are actually two different names for the same concept.⁹⁸ They believe that being well integrated into a social collective is a source of moral regulation, and that when there is a lack of integration into social networks, then there is a deregulation of desires and passions. This idea does not generally hold true for slaves, since the source of the egotistic category is the slave community and the source of the anomic category is the slaveholder and overseer. The former relationship can be hampered, but as long as they are a slave, the latter relationship is in place. However, occasionally a runaway slave who has left both the influence of the black community and is not under the immediate power of the white community, would fit into both of these categories.

Also, modern psychologists and sociologists tend to disagree with Durkheim's assumption that people need socialization to produce acceptable behavior and instead function from the premise that society is a corrupting influence on human nature. Some believe “a strong case could be made for viewing suicide as a learned behavior.”⁹⁹

98 Kevin Early, *Religion and Suicide*, 7.

99 David Lester, *Why People Kill Themselves*, 418.

However, they still consider and take seriously his basic categories.

The fourth category is fatalistic. Just as altruistic suicide is the opposite of egotistic, so fatalistic is the opposite of anomic. Durkheim calls it, “the suicide deriving from excessive regulation, that of persons with futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline.”¹⁰⁰ In his book, the other three categories each have a lengthy chapter devoted to them, but this one only has a footnote at the end of the chapter on anomic suicides. In the footnote, he suggests that the suicide of slaves belongs to this type. Consequently, nearly every mention of the suicide of slaves in text includes a reference to Durkheim's footnote on fatalistic suicide.

Durkheim's fourth category of fatalism reinforces modern psychology, which teaches that suicide comes from thwarted psychological needs. It can certainly be argued that excessive regulation and oppressive discipline caused thwarted psychological needs in slaves. Under this theory, there are five categories where people can become frustrated and experience psychological pain on a potentially suicidal level. The first occurs where love, belonging and acceptance needs are thwarted. The second results from fractured control, predictability and arrangement. This includes frustrated needs for achievement, autonomy, order and understanding. The third is to avoid shame, humiliation, defeat and disgrace. The fourth comes from ruptured key relationships and the grief suffered with them. The last is from excessive anger, rage and hostility. It is aggression and dominance that does not have an opportunity to be expressed elsewhere.¹⁰¹ Obviously, nearly every

¹⁰⁰ Emile Durkheim, *Suicide*, 276.

¹⁰¹ Edwin S. Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind*, 25.

slave experienced these thwarted psychological needs, and most were able to build lives, families, communities and a culture. This fact renders the theory of frustrated psychological needs useless as an explanation for slave suicide. It contributes nothing to answering the question of why some slaves committed suicide and others did not.

Psychological needs, such as the need to avoid shame, are not to be confused with physical needs since people are able to exist and function without them. Food and water are needs in the fullest sense of the word. These psychological needs are elements of life that people are very uncomfortable without, to a differing degree depending on each individual. These frustrated psychological needs result in psychological pain. In the vast, overwhelming majority of people, the pain does not result in suicide. Edwin Shneidman, the same scholar who delineated the five categories which lead to psychological pain, also stated that, “suicide is preventable by changing our perception of the situation, and by redefining what is unbearable. Perceiving that there are other possible ways of seeing things, redefining the impossible, bearing the unbearable, swallowing the indigestible bolus of shame or guilt...”¹⁰² Most slaves were able to define what they suffered as bearable even if extremely undesirable. Those slaves who did commit suicide did not change their perceptions and bear the unbearable. In fact, the conditions of slavery and the lives slaves forged challenge the use of the term “psychological needs.” Perhaps a more accurate term would be “psychological desires or yearnings” or “ideal psychological conditions.” Millions of slaves survived without them.

None of these external elements are the crucial factors of suicides, since infinitely

¹⁰² Edwin S. Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind*, 165.

more people experience them and do not broach suicide than people who experience them and do commit or attempt suicide. Even among the highest risk groups, “most individuals never attempt suicide.”¹⁰³ Rather, for those people who pursue a suicidal path, these are perpetuating factors. They are elements which overwhelm certain individuals while most others continue to function within them. However, they have been used by many scholars in the suicidology of African Americans to explain rising suicidal rates.

In 1970 the *Pacific Sociological Review* included an article by Warren Breed entitled “The Negro and Fatalistic Suicide.” In it, he considers young, black, lower-class suicide rates in the 20th century as frequently fatalistic in cause. He argues that blacks are more likely to become injured at work, due to the nature of the blue collar positions they fill, and therefore are affected by economic oppression. He also emphasizes the fear of police that blacks often experience, due to the “destructive form of social relationship that has been institutionalized” between law enforcement and blacks.¹⁰⁴ He notes that several black males who committed suicide had told others that they would kill themselves before returning to jail. Breed argues that unjust and arbitrary authority for blacks exist beyond just law enforcement as they often view government agencies in general as excessively regulative.¹⁰⁵

One factor that Breed did not consider is that suicide among blacks is increasing in a situation where excessive regulation is decreasing and expectations are increasing.

¹⁰³ Philippe Courtet, “The Genetic Basis for Suicidal Behavior,” 26.

¹⁰⁴ Warren Breed, “The Negro and Fatalistic Suicide,” 158.

¹⁰⁵ It is interesting to note that Poussaint and Alexander, in Lay My Burden Down, written 30 years later, emphasize the fear and aversion that blacks, particularly males, have in seeking help from mental health professionals.

Suicide was very low after Reconstruction, when blacks faced their worst oppression since slavery, and then after the Civil Rights movement, black suicides grew. The suicides which did occur during slavery can possibly be traced to fatalism, and certainly more easily than the growing suicide rate of the 1960s. If African American suicides have fatalistic roots, why is it suddenly growing now, when futures are less pitilessly blocked for blacks and more are moving into the middle class? Rising expectations seem to play a key role. Scholars are still struggling with answers in regards to black suicide today, and some refer to the anomic theory and the expectations of the rising middle class of black Americans.

Lay My Burden Down: Unraveling Suicide and the Mental Health Crisis among African-Americans is a full length work written by Alvin F. Poussaint, M.D. and Amy Alexander, which seeks to draw interest to this alarming trend. They argue that the “persistent presence of racism ... has created a psychological risk for black people ... specifically, a culture of oppression, the byproduct of this nation's development, has taken a tremendous toll on the mind and bodies of black people.”¹⁰⁶ The rise in suicides among a people who have traditionally had a low suicide rate is attracting interest and is clearly not going to be quickly or easily understood.

For slave suicides, fatalism and thwarted psychological needs to not appear to play a role. Rather, the two theories of suicide which have the greatest legitimacy in regards to slaves are the anomic, which occurs when expectations are not fulfilled, and the flight choice, where a suicidal person is willing to accept only the two options of either a

¹⁰⁶ Alvin F Pouissant and Amy Alexander, *Lay My Burden Down*, 15.

particular change in circumstances or else death. Options for slaves were already very narrow and changing their external circumstances was frequently impossible. Very few choices, and sometimes none, would need to be discarded to get their options down to two.

Consistent with the anomic theory, a wider knowledge of how much better life could be was a cause for distress among slaves. As Solomon Northup states regarding Eliza, a slave who had lived as her master's mistress and thought she and her children would be freed upon his death,

She was no common slave ... To a large share of natural intelligence which she possessed, was added a general knowledge and information on most subjects. She had enjoyed opportunities such as are afforded to very few of her oppressed class. She had been lifted up into the regions of a higher life. Freedom—freedom for herself and for her offspring, for many years had been her cloud by day, her pillar of fire by night.¹⁰⁷

Her increased understanding of the world offered her only more pain in the contrast between what she knew to be possible and what she was suffering under, and eventually she lost the will to live and died at a young age. The issue at stake was not simply knowing and understanding options, but her human will. Each individual slave was able to decide which circumstances they were willing to live under and which were, in their minds, intolerable. Suicide came when all other available options were considered unacceptable, and sometimes a more thorough knowledge of the positive possibilities in life rendered suffering more unacceptable. Slaves, like all people, had certain aspirations and hopes for life, and when those were crushed, some were unwilling to accept the

¹⁰⁷ Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 88.

painful and humiliating alternatives which were left.

CHAPTER FOUR

ACTUAL SUICIDES

Suicide has been part of the African American experience from the Middle Passage to the 21st century. From available written records, the number appear to have been relatively high during transit to American shores and upon arrival, then decreased during and after slavery, and spiked after the 1960's. "Before 1865, the suicide rate among blacks was one quarter that of whites. After 1970, suicide rates among blacks had escalated to half that of whites."¹⁰⁸ While references to suicides in slave narratives argued for the atrocity of slavery, suicide numbers apparently remained amazingly low. Suicide had simply not been common in African culture, and today Africa is the continent with the lowest suicide rate, which is less than a fourth of the rate for Europe.¹⁰⁹ This transmitted to African American culture, which prides itself on strength in the face of adversity. Suicide has traditionally been much lower for blacks than for whites. The black suicide rate has increased, but even now the suicide rates of whites "are typically a little over twice that of blacks."¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, some slaves did choose to deal with their suffering by taking their lives.

108 Donna Holland Barnes, PhD. And Carl C. Bell, MD, "Paradoxes of Black Suicide" *Preventing Suicide-the National Journal* (January 2003), 3.

109 Africa has as suicide rate of 7.6 males per 100,000 while Europe has 30. Taken from www.uni-wuerzburg.de/IASR/suicide-table1.htm, June 2005.

110 Ronald W. Maris, Alan L. Berman, Morton M. Silverman, *Comprehensive Textbook on Suicidology* (New York: Guilford Press, 2000), 8.

Highest Suicide Rates: First Generation and Rebellion

The suicide rate among African Americans temporarily peaked on the Middle Passage and soon after arrival. For the first generation, “suicide was the result of a preference for death over slavery ... or undeserved punishment.”¹¹¹ The suicide rate apparently dropped by the second generation. David Lester argues that changing suicide rates for slaves cannot be measured through empirical studies and statistics, yet the fact that suicide rates were high for Jews during the rounding up and transportation to concentration camps, but low during time at the camp, provides evidence that this phenomenon may very likely have occurred with slaves as well.¹¹² While there are definite limitations to comparing the two different situations, his basic logic is that humans react more in times of stressful change than later when the same situation has become more familiar to them.

Suicides on the Middle Passage included sick slaves who refused treatment, slaves who refused to eat even after repeated beatings¹¹³ and slaves who jumped overboard, getting through the netting which was placed around ships for the very purpose of preventing suicides. The journal of a slave ship named *Mary* records for June 6, 1796, “This morning one meagre man slave... jumped overboard. Several rope was hove him but he endeavored to drown himself having been delirious sometime.”¹¹⁴ Slaves were

111 William D. Piersen, “White Cannibals, Black Martyrs: Fear, Depression, and Religious Faith as Causes of Suicide among New Slaves,” *Journal of Negro History* 62, no. 2 (April, 1977): 152.

112 David Lester, *Suicide in African Americans*, 10.

113 Julius Lester, *To be a Slave* (New York: Dial Press, Inc., 1968), 26.

114 William D. Piersen, “White Cannibals, Black Martyrs,” 147-159.

often chained together on the Middle Passage with the express purpose of preventing suicides. However, this did not always serve the desired purpose since occasionally slaves jumped overboard together.¹¹⁵

Suicides on the way to the Americas were sometimes committed because of family relationships. Charles Ball told the story of an African brought to America. When slave traders threw the children of some mothers overboard, “two of the women leaped after their children.”¹¹⁶ One was rescued, but was later able again to throw herself overboard. Her goal clearly was not the rescue of her children, but a desire to follow them in death.

Suicides continued after arrival in the New World. In 1737 the boat *Prince of Orange* docked in St. Christopher. Local slaves jokingly told Africans on board that they were to be eaten after their eyes were put out. One hundred men jumped overboard to commit suicide. Most were recovered, but thirty-three lost their lives.¹¹⁷ The captain of the slaver *Hannibal*, a man named Thomas Phillips, published his journal in 1732. He noted that slaves often stayed under water and then drowned, and related that “we had about 12 Negroes did willfully drown themselves and others starved themselves to death.”¹¹⁸ Even group suicides occurred, such as one incident in which an owner attempted to chastise a young man who was known to his comrades as a prince. He led

115 Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (Leeds: James Nichols, 1814), 36.

116 James Lester, *To be a Slave*, 25.

117 James Pope-Hennessy, *Sins of the Fathers*, (New York: Sphere, 1967), 105-106.

118 William D. Piersen, “White Cannibals, Black Martyrs”

eight fellow slaves to attempt to hang themselves; two succeeded.¹¹⁹

Slaves who were new arrivals occasionally announced to others that they were going home, and then they committed suicide.¹²⁰ This frustrated the owners to no small degree, and some went to extraordinary lengths to eradicate from among their slaves the belief that death meant a return to Africa. For example, Colonel Walrond, a 17th century slaveholder from Barbados, put the head of a dead slave who had successfully carried out a suicide on a pole and had the other slaves walk around it to persuade them that the slave did not return to his own country.¹²¹ The plan may have worked since while four individuals had committed suicide before the mandatory pole circling, none were recorded as having committed suicide afterward. Owners would also mutilate corpses to convince slaves that their bodies would not be usable back in Africa.

Several conclusions can be drawn about the suicide rates of slaves during transportation and upon arrival. A disproportionate amount appear to be higher status Africans. Since Africans often believed that upon death they would return to their own countries, suicide in these circumstances was not socially unacceptable. However, “once the suicides aimed at returning to Africa were gone, the general suicide rate of the slave appears to have fallen below that of the corresponding white population.”¹²² Suicides of newly arrived Africans can be traced to their desire to return to their continent of origin and their fear of the horrors of the future in the appalling and unfamiliar situation they

119 William D. Piersen, “White Cannibals, Black Martyrs”

120 William D. Piersen, “White Cannibals, Black Martyrs”

121 William D. Piersen, “White Cannibals, Black Martyrs”

122 William D. Piersen, “White Cannibals, Black Martyrs,” 155.

found themselves placed in, as part of the largest forced migration in history.

Family connections also played a role in the suicidal decisions upon arrival in the New World. As with the women who followed their children into the water, sometimes the loss of individual family members was the precipitating factor in suicides. A man named Ignatius Sancho was born on a slave ship, and his father was also present, so they arrived as a complete family unit. However, his mother died from disease soon after their arrival in the West Indies. Although Ignatius was still living, his father committed suicide.¹²³

Slaves involved in rebellions had a fairly high rate of suicide after capture or when capture became inevitable. In April 1712, in New York City, thirty slaves set fire to a building, then killed nine whites who approached. When soldiers came to capture them, one of the slaves shot his wife and then himself and five other slaves also committed suicide. During Gabriel's rebellion in 1800 in Virginia, one of the captured slaves hanged himself in prison. In 1840, leaders of two separate attempted revolts committed suicide.¹²⁴ For these particular slaves, death was clearly preferable to slavery since they were already risking their lives by revolting. It was not a great deviation in their present course of thinking when they decided to end their own lives instead of being executed and possibly tortured by their captors. In the New York situation, 23% of the slaves involved in the rebellion committed suicide (or were put to death through assisted suicide) so the percentage was extremely high, although still a minority.

¹²³ Ignatius Sancho, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African*. (London: J. Nichols, 1782), 6.

¹²⁴ David Lester, *Suicide in African Americans*, 8-9.

The Use of Suicides in Slave Narratives

Several writers of slave narratives mention that suicide occurred, or even that it was frequent, sometimes without giving specific examples. The goal of these writers appears to be to excite the sympathy of the reader. One primary function of slave narratives was to serve as abolitionist propaganda. Suicides were portrayed as a crisis that proved the debilitating affect of slavery. As John Joseph wrote in his introduction, whites treated blacks “like beasts of burden ... goad[ing] them on to destruction; aye, even to suicide itself.”¹²⁵ Phineas Smith also stated that “the sufferings of the slave not unfrequently drive him to despair and suicide. At a plantation on the San Bernard, where there were but five slaves, two during the same year committed suicide by drowning.”¹²⁶ James Williams simply remarked that in regards to the sale of slaves, he had known “some of them to die of grief, and others to commit suicide, on account of it.”¹²⁷ These statements were clearly used in the context of presenting persuasive arguments against slavery.

The fact that fictional slave narratives had an excessive number of suicides provides further evidence that suicide was intentionally used in narratives as an example of the horrors of slavery. The *Autobiography of a Female Slave*, which was a fictional account published in 1857, contains two very vivid suicide accounts of people close to the

125 John Joseph, *The Life and Sufferings of John Joseph, etc.* (Wellington: J. Greedy, 1848), 8.

126 *American Slavery as it is*, ed. William Loren Katz, 102.

127 James Williams, *Narrative of James Williams, an American Slave, Who Was for Several Years a Driver on a Cotton Plantation in Alabama* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1838), 32.

main character.¹²⁸ First a female slave hangs herself while being punished for stealing two silver spoons which were actually misplaced by the mistress, and then a young male slave who has purchased his freedom but discovers that his master has sold him anyway, cuts his throat. Suicide is clearly being used here to excite sympathy in the reader and draw an even more gruesome picture of slavery. It is probably safe to assume that when writers knew about suicides, they included them in their narrative, and certainly that they would have been encouraged to do so by abolitionist editors.

Completed Suicides

Most specific suicides that are mentioned in slave narratives do not have much detail. They usually include a brief description of the individual, how they committed suicide and why the writer believes they chose suicide. However, they can be categorized and certain clear trends drawn from the information provided. The following tables break down the information gathered from twenty-seven specific, completed suicides found in slave narratives and interviews.¹²⁹ Seventeen, or 63%, of the suicides were male, while ten, or 37%, were female. This corresponds well with the males and females percentages from Lester's numbers of suicides among slaves in the 1850s, where 69% were males and

128 Martha Griffith Browne, *Autobiography of a Female Slave* (New York: Redfield, 1857)

129 The source for these statistics are narratives and interviews that I read or completed a word search on during the course of the research for this thesis. They are a random sample from among the thousands of available interviews, although not completely random since ease of accessibility played a role in which were selected. My goal was not to gather statistics on all the suicides mentioned in slave narratives, but rather to compile what I did find and search for the trends among those suicides. Tables three and four, which come later in this chapter, do involve all the suicides in a particular body of narratives, which is the UNC online collection. Information from those tables are included in this collection of data, since this involves every suicide I could locate.

31% females.¹³⁰

Table 1. Reasons for suicides from slave narratives and interviews

Avoiding punishment	7	25.93%
After punishment	7	25.93%
Escape appearing unsuccessful	5	18.52%
Being sold south	3	11.11%
Unknown cause	1	3.70%
Death of family member	2	7.41%
Cheated out of purchase of self	1	3.70%
Unwed pregnancy	1	3.70%
Total	27	100.00%

Table 2. Methods used for suicides in slave narratives and interviews

Drowning	7	25.93%
Unknown method	6	22.22%
Cutting	3	11.11%
Poison	1	3.70%
Jumped into sugar mill	1	3.70%
Jumped off cliff	1	3.70%
Total	27	100.00%

¹³⁰ David Lester, *Suicide in African Americans*, 19.

Description of Suicides by Cause

Half of the suicides were directly connected with punishment, twenty-five percent to avoid punishment and another twenty-five percent occurring just after punishment. Just as David Lester argued, several slaves did commit suicide because they were afraid of punishment. He mentions three in his book. Two are young girls, one who hanged herself to avoid a whipping and the other who drowned herself rather than be caught and punished for going to a dance. The third was a man named London who drowned himself rather than get a whipping and whose master left his body to rot on the riverbank.¹³¹ There are also records of other slaves who committed suicide when punishment was imminent. Elizabeth Keckley wrote that one of her uncles lost a pair of plow lines, and when his master gave him a new pair he informed Elizabeth's uncle that he would be punished if he lost those lines. In a few weeks the second pair was stolen and her uncle "hung himself rather than meet the displeasure of his master [and be] punished the way Colonel Burwell punished his servants."¹³² Jacob Green had a girlfriend named Mary who rejected him for Dan, another slave. One day Dan came upon the master's son William attempting to rape Mary. Dan drove a pitchfork through William, killing him. When Mary tried to tell the slave-holding family what happened, they did not believe her. She disappeared during the course of the investigation and that night her body was found. She had drowned herself. Dan had run away to the swamp, where he was found several months later and burned to death. In each of these situations, the individual was not

¹³¹ David Lester, *Suicide in African Americans*, 8.

¹³² Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (Salem, New Hampshire: Ayer Company Publishers, Inc., 1868), 30.

willing to suffer the punishment which appeared imminent.

Two of the cases that involved slaves who were facing punishment were actually murder suicides. A slave mentioned in North Carolina legal records was arrested on suspicion of attempting to poison his mistress and poisoned himself on his way to jail.¹³³ Bicente was another slave accused of stealing corn meal and threatened with 100 lashes. The overseer rode off to get more men and Bicente disappeared. Later, the overseer's horse returned without the overseer. The overseer's body was found "bearing the marks of death on [it]" and Bicente was found where he had hung himself in a tree.¹³⁴ It seems unusual that the murder-suicide rate is so low among slaves, since it would appear that they would have more motivation for such a choice than other groups of people.¹³⁵

Records exist for at least seven slaves who killed themselves after a severe punishment. Their motivations could possibly include avoiding a repeat of such experiences in the future. John Homrn described a slave who was disfigured by disease. He was required to work in the sugar mill. When he made "a representation to the overseer as to his inability" he received twenty-five lashes each day for three days and "at the end he requested the man in charge to stir up the fires, then jumped in and was crushed to death."¹³⁶ John Rudd was an ex-slave who told about Shell Moore, who was a kind slave and made John toys. One day Shell was severely beaten, and he came to John and informed him that "you'll never see Shellie alive after today." Three days later they

133 Alan D. Watson, "Impulse Toward Independence," 320.

134 *Slave Testimony*, ed. John Blassingame, 258.

135 I have a notecard with another murder-suicide where a blacksmith was to be whipped by several men, but murdered them and killed himself. However, I cannot re-locate the source.

136 *Slave Testimony*, ed., John Blassingame, 257.

found his body hanging from a corncrib.¹³⁷ Henry Clay, known politically as the “Great Pacificator,”¹³⁸ was possibly not as talented at peacemaking on his home plantation. He had a slave named Tom, who was a shoemaker. Tom fought with the overseer, and the overseer and Henry beat Tom very severely. After this incident, Tom committed suicide.¹³⁹ David Lester also documented two female slaves who killed themselves following punishment. One was an elderly slave who slit her stomach after being whipped. When the doctor informed the mistress that she could still be whipped, the woman hanged herself that night. The other was a younger woman who committed suicide after her owner, with whom she was having a sexual relationship, beat her.¹⁴⁰ Ex-slave Mrs. Fanny Berry recalled that her Aunt Nellie was whipped once by paddyrollers and told Fannie that she was going to kill herself. Mrs. Berry stated that “she climbed top of a hill an' rolled down,” so it appears that she jumped off some kind of cliff.¹⁴¹ Bonifacio was a slave who had to wear a collar around his neck with a heavy log attached to it with a chain. He suffered other punishment as well and killed himself.¹⁴²

Five slaves killed themselves because their escape attempts were not working. A slave interviewed in Alabama claimed that, “one time dat I hear of a slave had 'scaped and when dey tried to ketch him he jumped in de creek an' drown hisse'f.”¹⁴³ James Williams

137 Ronald L Baker, *Homeless, Friendless and Penniless*, 218.

138 *Out of Many: History of the American People*, eds., John Mack Faragher, Mari Jo Buhle, Daniel Czitrom, Susan H. Armitage (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1997), 167.

139 *Slave Testimony*, ed., John Blassingame, 165.

140 David Lester, *Suicide in African Americans*, 8.

141 *Weevils in the Wheat*, eds. Charles L. Perdue, Jr., etc., 34.

142 *Slave Testimony*, ed., John Blassingame, 37.

143 George Rawick, *The American Slave: A composite Autobiography, Volume 1: From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972), 103.

related how two slaves from a neighboring plantation ran away together, and “despairing of being able to effect their escape, resolved to put an end to their existence and slavery together.”¹⁴⁴ They attempted to hang themselves and the one who went first only died after a long struggle, so the other decided not to try it and was subsequently captured. Charles Ball encountered a runaway slave who was wearing an iron collar and an arch that extended three feet above his head and had bells hanging onto it. It appeared that he had been wearing it for some time. Charles offered to bring a vise back and remove it on the next Sunday. When he came to the place in the woods, he found the man hanging from a tree.¹⁴⁵ Apparently the slave was very discouraged and simply gave up hope that he would be free. Hounds could also motivate a quick suicide. James Curry told about a slave who attempted to run away when he was threatened with punishment, and when the hounds caught up to him they drove him to a mill pond “where there was no turning to the right or left. He had never learned to swim, but the hounds were behind him and he plunged in, swam to the middle of the pond and sank to rise no more.”¹⁴⁶ Another runaway slave cut his throat when he heard the hounds catching up to him.¹⁴⁷ For these runaways, the only options were freedom or death, and when freedom was not forthcoming, they hastened their own demise.

Several slaves committed suicide when their fear of being sold south was realized.

Lemuel Sapington, the son of a slaveholder, told of a slave who “was sold to go farther

144 James Williams, *Narrative of James Williams*, 61.

145 Julius Lester, *To be a Slave*, 126.

146 *Slave Testimony*, ed. John Blassingame, 139.

147 David Lester, *Suicide in African Americans*, 8.

south, and was handcuffed for the purpose of keeping him secure. But choosing death rather than slavery, he jumped overboard and was drowned.”¹⁴⁸ The other situation involved an entire family. They were locked up and destined to be sold south. They “did by mutual agreement send the souls of their children to heaven rather than have them descend to the hell of slavery, and then both parents committed suicide.”¹⁴⁹

In two cases the writer did not know or give the cause. Both of these cases involved female slaves. One was a newspaper account of an elderly woman who hanged herself dressed in her best clothes, and for an unknown reason.¹⁵⁰ The other situation was the mother of Martin Jackson, who in an ex-slave interview shared that his mother had drowned herself in the river when he was very young. He said, “I never knew the reason behind it, but it was said that she started to lose her mind and preferred death to that.”¹⁵¹

Sometimes the death of a family member precipitated suicide. Ignatius Sancho's father committed suicide after his mother died. Joseph Allen, who was an ex-slave in prison, killed himself when he heard about the death of his daughter. He had already been depressed and claimed “he would die before he would be made a slave in his old age.”¹⁵²

The final two reasons were from being cheated out of purchasing oneself and illegitimate pregnancy. Sampson was a male slave who saved \$1200 to buy himself, but

¹⁴⁸ *American Slavery as it is*, ed. William Loren Katz, 50.

¹⁴⁹ Henry J. Young, *Major Black Religious Leaders: 1755-1940*, 417.

¹⁵⁰ Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 128.

¹⁵¹ *Bullwhip Days*, ed. James Mellon, 227.

¹⁵² William Walker, *Buried Alive: (Behind Prison Walls) For a Quarter of a Century* (Michigan: Friedman & Hynan, 1892), 123-124.

the person whom he had banked the money with spent it.¹⁵³ In the situation of the pregnancy, a family was reputed to have exceptional “moral worth and character” and when the nineteen year old daughter discovered that she was pregnant, “she decided that death was preferable in her case to disgrace” and drowned herself.¹⁵⁴ As in many of these cases, the motive was assigned by an outsider who apparently had no contact with the suicidal individual, so it is only a guess, subject to the bias of the guesser.

Several general conclusions can be drawn from this examination of actual suicides. Over fifty percent were apparently connected with punishment, occurring either right after it or when it was threatened. This supports David Lester's theory that suicide in slaves was often due to punishment.¹⁵⁵ Hanging is the most common means, and drowning second, which correlate with suicide methods most common among Africans in more recent history.¹⁵⁶

It is more difficult to draw evidence from these accounts for the various reasons why these particular slaves chose suicide since very little information is given about the person and their life circumstances. Clearly, most of these situations could not be considered egoistic, since the slaves do not appear to have any breakdown of interpersonal relationships. Also, the anomic theory cannot be applied, nor can it be ruled out, because there is not enough information available about their life experiences and expectations. Their conditions in slavery are not more grievous than that of many

153 Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 128.

154 H. C. Bruce, *The New Man: Twenty-nine Years a Slave. Twenty-nine years a Free Man*. (Pennsylvania: P. Anstadt & Sons, 1895), 75.

155 David Lester, *Suicide in African Americans*, 7-8.

156 *African Homicide and Suicide*, ed. Paul Bohannon, 75.

other slaves. The detail necessary to ascertain the reasoning of the suicidal is only found in accounts of attempted suicide in the next chapter.

Suicide by Slaveholder

What modern psychologists refer to as “suicide by cop” occurs when an individual appears to goad law enforcement officials into killing them since they are suicidal but desire to have somebody else actually carry out the killing.¹⁵⁷ For slaves, similar scenarios could be termed “suicide by slaveholder” with the slaveholder referring to either the owner or his representative, the overseer. It is very possible that many slaves who were suicidal intentionally placed themselves in positions where they knew they would probably be shot, particularly by gun toting whites who had a history of violence. Victim precipitated homicides are very difficult to differentiate from situations where slaves were willing to risk death to defy masters, but they certainly appear to exist.

While it is not possible to determine how frequently this phenomenon occurred, there are a couple facts which support its presence. First, the murder of slaves by whites was very common, and the slaves were well aware of this. Second, several slaves made it clear that either they or fellow slaves preferred death to compliance in certain situations.

Proof is provided for the first factor from the fact that white men frequently killed slaves with impunity. Hind Stuart, a slave owner, related the following incident to Eleazar Powell, Jr. His overseer decided to whip a woman, but her husband, the driver, said that she would not be whipped. The overseer wanted to whip the driver instead, but

¹⁵⁷ Alvin F. Poussaint and Amy Alexander, *Lay My Burden Down*, 114.

he resisted with a hoe, so the overseer shot the slave. No action was taken against the overseer, although Stuart said that the slave was worth more than \$2000.¹⁵⁸ An ex-slave named Katie Rowe said that her uncle Sandy had been taken out in the woods by an overseer who had found a “likker jug” on Sandy's doorstep. They heard Sandy shouting, but soon the overseer returned alone, and told the family, “He gwine come in hungry purty soon. You better make him a extra hoe cake” and then laughed.¹⁵⁹ They found that Sandy had been killed and thrown into the pond, and the overseer was never punished.

Although the majority of black deaths were not brought to any legal court, occasionally a white man was even deposed for killing a slave, providing us with evidence in white sources. For example, an overseer named Albert Foster was deposed before the Coroner's Inquest, on July 5, 1857. A black driver ordered a slave named Samuel to be whipped. Samuel refused to get down, so the driver got Albert, the overseer. Samuel told Albert, “ I am not going to be whipped by anyone, either black or white.”¹⁶⁰ Samuel ran from Albert and when Albert caught up with him on horseback, Samuel swung his hoe at him. Albert drew his pistol and shot Samuel dead.

Murdering a slave was a great act of intimidation toward the other slaves as well.

Allen Sidney, an ex-slave, shared an experience he had while working in the fields.

About 400 were hoeing ... one slave [fell] behind exhausted several times and the colored driver pushed him up with his bull whip. The slave got angry and struck at the colored driver with his hoe. 'Take him down,' cried the white overseer, riding up. The colored driver made him fall on the ground on his stomach and the white overseer

¹⁵⁸*American Slavery as it is*, ed. William Loren Katz, 100.

¹⁵⁹*Bullwhip Days*, ed Mellon, 29.

¹⁶⁰*American Negro Slavery: A Documentary History*, ed. Michael Mullin, 246.

rode up and shot him as he lay. None of the other slaves said a word or turned their heads. They went on hoeing as if nothing had happened.¹⁶¹

Reverend William Scales related that in an area where he believed slavery to be especially humane, “the radius of fifteen miles and in about one year, three, and I think four, slaves have been murdered, within that circle, under circumstances of horrid cruelty. - What must have been the amount of murder in the whole slave territory?”¹⁶² Frederick Law Olmstead, in his famous account *A Journey in the Back Country*, published in 1860, commented on the murder of slaves. When questioning an overseer on the punishment of slaves, the overseer replied, “Why sir, I wouldn't mind killing a [n] any more than I would a dog.”¹⁶³ Another overseer told him, “Some Negroes are determined never to let a white man whip them, and will resist you, when you attempt it; of course you must kill them in that case.”¹⁶⁴ These slaves did on occasion suffer such a fate.

The murder of slaves was carried out even when it would have an obvious financial cost to the master. A.T. Jones, interviewed in Canada in 1863, shared a ominous account of a slave murder. “There was a near neighbor of ours, named Duncan, who whipped a slave to death. I knew about it myself; it was only a half mile from our place. No notice at all was taken of it, I suppose it was scarcely his intention to kill the man, because it was the only man he had; but he got into a passion.”¹⁶⁵

The reasons for being whipped or beaten to death were many and varied.

¹⁶¹*Slave Testimony*, ed. John Blassingame, 524.

¹⁶²*American Slavery as it is*, ed. William Loren Katz, 101.

¹⁶³*American Negro Slavery: A Documentary History*, ed. Michael Mullin, 183.

¹⁶⁴*American Negro Slavery: A Documentary History*, ed. Michael Mullin, 183.

¹⁶⁵*Slave Testimony*, ed. John Blassingame, 430-1.

Reverend W. B. Allen related that, “I have personally known a few slaves that were beaten to death for one or more of the following offenses: leaving home without a pass, talking back to- “sassing” - a white person, hitting another Negro, fussing, fighting and ruckussing in the quarters, lying, loitering on their work, taking things- the whites called it stealing.”¹⁶⁶ Robert Farmer explained how his brother Peter was told that he had to keep up with his big sister. He could not, so the master beat him until he died, falling down dead in the field.¹⁶⁷ John Sella Martin told of a fellow slave named Flanders who refused to be whipped, so after he overslept one morning the master was able to subdue him in a physical struggle and tie him up, where he then beat him to death.¹⁶⁸ Such stories of murders are very common.

In this area, their situation is comparable to that of a soldier in battle, who knows that his or her life may possibly be lost at any time to others who are seeking it. George Minois writes, “It is known that the suicide rate declines sharply in times of war, when group cohesion is reinforced and a sense of solidarity, shared emotions and a desire for victory give life purpose and enhance a taste for existence.”¹⁶⁹ Using his description, we can compare slavery to wartime. Group cohesion was reinforced as slaves faced a common enemy in the slaveholders, emotions were shared and a desire for freedom was a powerful unifier. These elements could certainly have contributed to a low suicide rate.

This comparison does have some weaknesses. In contrast to nations at war, slaves

166 *Bullwhip Days*, ed. James Mellon, 240.

167 *Bullwhip Days*, ed. James Mellon, 239.

168 *Slave Testimony*, ed. John Blassingame, 718.

169 George Minois, *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture*, 10.

were much more isolated than armies and civilians working together, and the desire for emancipation was a hidden desire instead of the openly acknowledged objective of defeating a military opponent. Slavery was essentially an extremely long war that could not be fought or discussed openly. It would also need to be compared to situations of drafted soldiers who did not have any desire to fight in the war they found themselves in.

Regardless of whether or not the slaves preferred death, there was a life and death struggle occurring, making the potential for being murdered an ever-present threat in their lives. Master and overseers killed their slaves with enough regularity that historians can honestly relate the event as frequent. It occurred both from beatings that resulted, possibly unintentionally, in death to shootings with a clear and obvious intention to murder. There was no doubt that to many a master, the slave's life had no value, beyond enriching the master. Slaves had every reason to fear for their lives. Whether from anger or a desire to make an example, overseers and masters were willing to kill. The threat of being murdered was very real and familiar to slaves, some of whom made it clear that they preferred death to punishment.

Maintaining self-respect was an important step in resisting the degradation inherent in being a slave. An ex-slave wrote about these men who would refuse to a submission of the spirit and invoked the wrath of slaveholders.

On almost every plantation at the South you may find one or more individuals whose look and air show that they have preserved their self-respect as *men*; - that with them the power of the tyrant ends with the coercion of the body - that the soul is free, and the inner man retaining the original uprightness of the image of God. You may know them by the stern sobriety of their countenances, and the contempt with which

they regard the jests and pastimes of their miserable and degraded companions, who, like Samson, make sport for the keepers of their prison-house. These men are always feared as well as hated by their task-masters.¹⁷⁰

When slaves like these were determined to keep their manhood at all costs, that cost could occasionally be death. James Curry said that, “as the strokes fell on my back, I firmly resolved that I would no longer be a slave. I would now escape or die in the attempt. They might shoot me down if they chose, but I would not live a slave.”¹⁷¹ James, of course, was able to successfully escape and later write about it. Even Frederick Douglass made a decision that he would never be whipped, and although he was not suicidal, he was accepting death as preferable to physical assault. His decision was part of his new found manhood, and he was able to keep it in relative safety. Others were not so fortunate.

Some slaves were not simply willing to face death if necessary, but were actually seeking and hoping for death. Olmstead had a conversation with a slave about runaways who kept running even when seen and pursued. When whites called out to them to stop and they did not, they would shoot and kill them. The slave telling the story simply added, “But some of them would rather be shot than be took, sir.”¹⁷² Occasionally masters outlawed their runaway slaves if they stayed in the local area but could not be caught. In these cases, “slaves were placed beyond the law and their destruction encouraged.”¹⁷³ The only difference between these slaves and other slaves is that the

170 James Williams, *Narrative of James Williams*, 54.

171 *Slave Testimony*, ed. John Blassingame, 141.

172 Julius Lester, *To Be a Slave*, 122.

173 Alan D. Watson, “Impulse Toward Independence,” 323.

master was not going to pursue any kind of retribution upon the death of the slaves.

According to witnesses, in these cases the slaves often committed suicide.

There were also situations where slaves were shot point blank after provoking the attack. Fanny Cannady remembered a slave named Leonard Allen who insulted the master's son, a Confederate soldier, and then stood sneering at the master when he was aiming his gun at him.¹⁷⁴ His master shot him dead. Leonard was a strong and very valuable slave, so he possibly did not believe the master would carry through, or he simply was not concerned about dying.

Some slaves openly chose death at the hands of their masters, but lived through it because their masters did not choose to kill them. Richard Johnson's father ran away, and when he was caught up in a tree and ordered to come down or be shot, he informed his master, "Go ahead and shoot. You be de loser."¹⁷⁵ His master did not shoot him, but rather promised that if he came down he would be spared the regular whipping. A slave named Jake informed his master, "Just come to tell you, Massa, that I've labored for you for forty years now. And I done earned my keep. You can sell me, lash me, or kill me. I ain't caring which, but you can't make me work no more."¹⁷⁶ Jake was not a physically abused slave, but simply weary of being a slave. Jake's master decided to retire him, but informed him to not share that with the other slaves. In these two situations, the total acceptance of death resulted in improved conditions for these slaves.

174 *Bullwhip Days*, ed. Mellon, 80.

175 *Bullwhip Days*, ed. Mellon, 301.

176 Julius Lester, *To Be a Slave*, 126-7.

Frequency of Suicides

In studying slave suicides, it can clearly be established that suicide attempts and completions occurred and that many were attributed to the conditions inherent in slavery. The difficulty lies in determining how frequently they occurred. How do their suicide rates compare with other groups and other time periods? Suicides among slaves were possibly higher than they were for Africans but since this cannot be definitely established, there is no way to be certain that the conditions of slavery caused the suicide rate to increase. It does appear that the rate, if it did increase, did so only minimally and suicides among slaves were still amazingly low.

Compiling accurate statistics regarding the suicide rate of slaves is impossible because there are no available records of numbers and no way to obtain them since the numbers we do have are from a sample that is not necessarily representative of the entire slave community. Occasionally suicides are mentioned in white sources, such as in the arrest records of slaves in North Carolina where a slave was arrested on suspicion of attempting to poison his mistress, and poisoned himself on his way to jail.¹⁷⁷ This situation slipped into the records only because the slave had already been arrested. In general, white sources from the antebellum period cannot be trusted to report black suicides on a regular basis, because white owners had no motive for reporting or commenting on suicide among their slaves. It would look shameful to them and it was a loss they had no recourse to amend. We cannot trust their records. Silence from them says more about their unwillingness to discuss the suicides publically than the lack of

¹⁷⁷ Alan D. Watson, "Impulse Toward Independence," 320.

their occurrence. George Minois notes in his study of the history of suicide that during the 1700-1800s “power [sought] to prevent and conceal suicide.”¹⁷⁸ While he is not referring only to slavery, this is even more valid among slaveholders than among the other leaders of society. Slaveholders who were actively seeking to convince themselves and the world that slaves were happy would have a difficult time explaining suicides.

Most scholars who have mentioned the topic in their writing hold the belief that “while there are some early recorded instances of suicide by African slaves, it appears that the act of taking one's life was a relatively rare occurrence.”¹⁷⁹ While suicide was unusual enough to demonstrate that it did not correspond directly with the amount of suffering that the slaves underwent, it does appear in interviews and narratives often enough to sidestep the term “rare.”

There are a few sources that provide numbers. Lester includes a table of suicide rates calculated from the 1850 census.¹⁸⁰ According to this, slaves in 1850 had a suicide rate of .72 per 100,000 while whites had a rate of 2.37 and freed slaves a rate of 1.15. P. D. Escott searched Federal Writer's Project Slave Narratives and documented resistance. In his list, which included a total of 413 incidents of resistance, there were seven incidents of suicide. This leaves suicide to account for 1.2% of incidents of resistance.¹⁸¹

My attempt to develop a percentage comes from an accumulation of numbers of suicides which were gathered from the collection of slave narratives available on the

178 George Minois, *History of Suicide*, 303.

179 _____, “Review: The Alarming rise in Black Suicides,” *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 31, (Spring, 2001): 136.

180 David Lester, *Suicide in African Americans*, 19.

181 Escott, Paul D., *Slavery Remembered* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1979), 82.

Internet from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.¹⁸² A word search of 327 complete narratives revealed that 21 of them referred to suicide. The tables below break down the actual findings. According to these statistics, 6.4% of narratives mentioned suicide in some capacity, either as a specific event or just sharing that it did occasionally occur. Only eight narratives, or 2.4%, refer to specific, completed suicides, and only six, or 1.8% of those are slaves in the American South. This means that from the sample that was taken, 1.8% of narratives refer to an specific, completed slave suicide. It is important to note that it is not necessarily a truly random sample, so it does not necessarily accurately represent the whole of slave narratives, let alone the slave experience in general. Assuming that narratives did mention suicide whenever the author knew of them, for the purpose of arousing sympathy for the antislavery cause, this low percentage further supports the theory that the suicide rate among slaves was very low.

¹⁸² These narratives can be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/texts.html>. They were searched in May of 2005. Some are entered more than once, under each author in cases of multiple authors, and in those cases, the suicides were only counted once.

Table 3. Attempted and completed suicides of slaves and ex-slaves in UNC narratives.

Completed suicide	
Male	3
Female	2
Unknown	1
Attempted suicide	
Male	4
Mentioned that suicides occurred	5
Considered suicide, no attempt	3
Mass suicide of 30 slaves in Hati	1
Unknown race of successful suicide	1
Placed in goal to prevent suicide	1
Total	21

Table 4. Reasons given for Suicides in UNC Narratives.

Death of spouse	2	Military life overwhelming	1
Shame of unwed pregnancy	1	Escaping brutal master	1
Ex-slave in Prison, daughter died	1	About to be caught when escaping	1
Fear of Punishment	1	Rejected by potential lover	1
Unknown	1		

Reasons for the low numbers

Why was suicide not more frequent? Several theories have been proposed that hang on Christianity. Individuals have made arguments such as “There was a strong belief among blacks that suicide was a sin that would prevent one's soul from entering heaven. A difficult life on earth was seen as penance for a pass through the pearly gates and eternal bliss in the afterlife. As a result, suicide rates for blacks have always been far

below the rates for whites.”¹⁸³ There are several problems with this theory. First, spiritual beliefs regarding heaven were not notably different between blacks and whites, except that blacks were often more vivid in describing heaven and more likely to claim to have seen a vision of heaven. Secondly, not all slaves shared Christian spiritual beliefs, and at this time Christianity was not firmly enough ingrained in the African American culture to affect something as personal as suicide rates. Third, penance and the belief that sins would prevent salvation were not Protestant teachings, but Roman Catholic teachings that had been rejected by the Reformation and subsequently by those denominations arising from the Reformation and most widespread among the slaves, such as Baptist, Presbyterian, Anglican, and to some extent Methodist. Protestant churches vary, some believing that it does result in a loss of salvation. Catholic areas usually have much lower suicide rates, often half that of other religious persuasions. This is possibly due to the fact that some suicides are relabeled because “the Catholic church unconditionally condemns suicide as a mortal sin for which there is no forgiveness.”¹⁸⁴ Narratives do not discuss the loss of salvation through suicide, so the rejection of suicide appears to be from African culture and not Christianity.

However, today there are some black churches which teach that suicide is an unredeemable act. This teaching appears to have developed after Reconstruction but was very likely affected by attitudes toward suicide that trace back to slavery. In the early 1990s, Kevin Early conducted a sociological survey among black churches in Gainesville,

183 _____. “Review: The Alarming rise in Black Suicides,” 136.

184 Frederick L Hoffman, *Suicide Problems*, (New Jersey: Prudential Press, 1927), 58.

Florida, and established that black pastors tend to view suicide as an unredeemable act.

“The overall condemnation of suicide as sin remains clear. Terminal or painful disease is no excuse for giving up. It merely enhances the quality of life through struggle. After all, struggling is inherently part of the black experience.”¹⁸⁵ Early establishes that while pastors condemn both suicide and criminal behavior, they tend to label individuals involved in typical property and violent crimes, including homicide, as victims of their environment. They argue that parents were too hard on children, society did not offer them the same benefits as white families, and they did not have good economic or educational opportunities.¹⁸⁶ In contrast, when they discussed suicide, it was uniformly condemned as “sinful” and the belief was proposed that “adversity can be overcome without resorting to suicide.”¹⁸⁷ Blacks described themselves as “able to endure more hardship without succumbing to the despair and despondency that lead to suicide.”¹⁸⁸ Along that same idea, “African Americans view themselves as being more religious, more spiritual than their white counterparts, and more able to endure hardship.”¹⁸⁹ Early's conclusion is that the church has influenced African Americans to have a lower suicide rate by condemning suicide even above homicide. It is important to note that the majority of the churches Early examined were Methodist or Pentecostal, both with roots in the holiness movement, which unlike the Reformed tradition of most Baptist churches, were more likely to emphasize negative repercussions to behavior and teach that salvation

185 Kevin Early, *Religion and Suicide in the African American Community*, 49-50.

186 Kevin Early, *Religion and Suicide in the African American Community*, 64.

187 Kevin Early, *Religion and Suicide in the African American Community*, 64.

188 Kevin Early, *Religion and Suicide in the African American Community*, 45.

189 Kevin Early, *Religion and Suicide in the African American Community*, 52.

could be lost through specific sins.

Most importantly, what Early does not consider is the possibility that his theory actually works in reverse. It is very possible that African American churches have developed a more radical condemnation of suicide because suicide was low among African Americans. None of the pastors Early interviewed knew anyone who had attempted or committed suicide, but they all knew many people who were involved in criminal activity. This is not to deny the powerful influence that the church has had upon the black community, but rather to suggest that the influence works both ways. The condemnation of suicide appears to have cultural roots more than Christian roots. While the Bible relates several stories of suicide, such as Samson pulling down a pagan temple, Judas hanging himself after betraying Christ and King Saul falling upon his sword when he hears a message of defeat,¹⁹⁰ it does not specifically address the behavior, but it does vehemently and repeatedly condemn murder. This is in direct contrast to the attitude of the black pastors that Early interviewed, so the Bible is clearly not the source for the strong condemnation of suicide by black leaders. Also, the pastors did not quote or refer to the Bible in their condemnation.

At the same time that the attitude toward suicide has become less tolerant in black culture, it has become more tolerant in white culture. Western culture has generally carried a negative attitude toward suicide, but this has changed over the last several centuries. In his evaluation of the history of suicide in Western Civilization, George Minois has written, “Refusing God's gift and the company of our fellows at the banquet

¹⁹⁰ Judges 16, Acts 1 and 1 Samuel 21 respectively

of life is a dual offense that the agents of religion, who dispense divine largess, and those of politics, who organize the social banquet, find intolerable.”¹⁹¹ However, during the Enlightenment the attitude toward suicide softened, particularly in literature. Suicide is not condemned as severely as murder and instead of condemning suicidal individuals, modern western culture seeks to assist them in escaping from their suicidal mindset.

Suicides in general, as well as those among slaves, are not couched in religious terms. Shneidman writes, “But most suicides – as is clear from reading a large number of suicide notes – are disappointingly secular. The destination (or concern) is not to go anywhere, except away In suicide the goal is to achieve a peace of mindlessness.”¹⁹² They just wish to escape pain, and are not usually thinking about an eternal state. One exception is Mrs. Fanny Berry's Aunt Nellie, who told Fannie, “Fannie, I don' had my las' whippin'. I'm gwine to God.”¹⁹³ Her concern appears to be more with her desire to escape from whippings than going to God, which is possibly just a way to refer to death. Otherwise, suicidal slaves are not recorded as having a religious frame of reference for their death.

The strongest reason for the low suicide rate is cultural. African cultures have historically had low suicide, and today Africa has the lowest suicide rate of any continent.¹⁹⁴ African Americans tend to condemn suicide and African cultures view it

191 George Minois, *History of Suicide*, 3.

192 Edwin S. Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind*, 158.

193 *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, eds. Charles L. Perdve, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 34.

194 “World Health Statistics: Suicide rates of different countries,” [<http://www.uni-wuerzburg.de/IASR/suicide-table1.htm>] 6/02/2005

negatively as well. The question of why African cultures have practiced suicide less and condemned it more still remains to be answered. It could be connected with the violent struggles for survival that the tribes and nations on the continent have undergone during the last 500 years, after the slave trade took root. It could come from an attitude of confronting problems and a pride in being strong in the face of adversity. A considerable amount of research would need to be done to accurately answer this complex question.

One interesting fact is that African American culture, particularly during slavery, had a very open attitude toward death. For many slaves, “Death was not an enemy from which one attempted to flee; it was a reality firmly established in the context of human existence.”¹⁹⁵ Slaves frequently commented on death as their release from slavery. This was not a morbid, suicidal attitude, but just one which acknowledged that death would be the ultimate release from a life of suffering. They were not just happy that their deceased loved ones were in a better place, but happy for them that they had discontinued their existence as slaves. Slave spirituals were filled with references to death, with songs such as “Shall I die,” “Almost over,” “Blow your trumpet Gabriel” and “Lay this body down.” In fact, in a collection of slave spirituals collected and published in 1867, over 75% of the songs dealt directly with death.¹⁹⁶ Death had an advantage over sale for the survivors since it removed the uncertainty of what the loved one was suffering as a slave.

Slaves could be very accepting, even desirous of death, without actually being

¹⁹⁵David Emmanuel Goatley, *Were You There? Godforsakenness in Slave Religion* (New York: Orbis Book, 1996), 58.

¹⁹⁶William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, Lucky MacKim Garrison and Ronald L. Baker, *Slave Songs of the United States* (Maryland: Clearview Company, Inc., 1992) originally published in 1867, evaluation of the contents of the entire book.

suicidal. John Sella Martin's mother refused to run away with him and said,

I have borne a great deal in my life, so much that my spirit is crushed and all courage is gone from me, and my body is worn out with labor and the lash. It will not be long, therefore, before I shall be ... in the cold grave ... And God knows, my dear boy, I don't care how soon the time comes for me to lie there ... the sooner I start on my journey to heaven the sooner will my misery from our separation and slavery cease.¹⁹⁷

She did not commit suicide, and did not appear to be considering it, but she did welcome death.

Slaves also believed that their bodies became weak with sorrow and were therefore more susceptible to disease and death.¹⁹⁸ They believed that some slaves simply lost their will to live. When Lydia's child died and was buried in a traditional African burial ceremony, she “was rejoiced that her child was dead, and out of a world in which slavery and wretchedness must have been its only portion. I am now, said she, ready to follow my child, and the sooner I go the better for me.”¹⁹⁹ Within a few months she died of illness. She was not necessarily suicidal, but viewed death as a positive condition for her child as well as herself.

Death as the release of suffering was a common theme. Austin Steward wrote,

Oh, you who have hearts to feel, you who have kind friends around you, in sickness and in sorrow, think of the sufferings of the helpless, destitute and down trodden slave. Has sickness laid its withering hand upon you, or disappointment blasted your fairest earthly prospects, still the outgoings of an affectionate heart are not denied you, and you may look forward with hope to a bright future. Such a hope seldom animates the heart of the poor slave. He toils on, in his unrequited

¹⁹⁷*Slave Testimony*, ed. John Blassingame, 718-719.

¹⁹⁸Arna Bontemps, *Five Black Lives*, 154-155.

¹⁹⁹Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States*, 199.

labor, *looking only to the grave* to find a quiet resting place, where he will be free from the oppressor.²⁰⁰ (italics added)

Mary Gaffney described slave funerals by saying, “We would not even shed a tear, because he was gone where there would not be any more slaves. That was all the slaves thought about, then: not being a slave. Because slavery time was hell.”²⁰¹ Certainly slaves often missed those who died, but death was the ultimate release from enslavement. The masters' power halted at that point, and slaves were well aware of that.

Suicide since Slavery

Statistics and anthropological studies clearly support the fact that historically the African-American suicide rate has been significantly lower than the Euro-American rate. In 1890, the suicide rate for blacks was 1.1 per 100,000 and for whites it was 5.0.²⁰² In New York City, from 1885 to 1890, the black rate was 1.9 while the white annual rate was 4.2.²⁰³ From 1909 to 1913, the rate for black Americans was 3.3 while for white Americans it was 11.3. In the year 1924, the black annual suicide rate was 3.6 while the white rate was 13.0.²⁰⁴ In 1940 the black rate was 4.0 and the white was 15.5.²⁰⁵ By 1992, the black rate was 6.8 and the white rate was 13.0.²⁰⁶ Although both black and white suicide rates have grown fairly steadily since the 1960s, the black rate has remained consistently lower.

200 Austin Steward, *Twenty-two Years a Slave*, 19.

201 *Bullwhip Days*, ed. Mellon, 41.

202 David Lester, *Suicide in African Americans*, 32.

203 Frederick L. Hoffman, *Suicide Problems*, 83.

204 Frederick L. Hoffman, *Suicide Problems*, 15.

205 Eugene D. Geneovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 639.

206 David Lester, *Suicide in African Americans*, 60.

The lower suicide rate among those of African descent is true worldwide. In the 1990s, the continent of Africa had a considerably lower suicide rate than Europe and North America. The average male suicide rate in Africa was 7.6 per 100,000, while in North America it was 20.7 and in Europe it was 30.0.²⁰⁷ Jamaica has an extremely low suicide rate, between 2.0 and .5, and it consists almost completely of African descendants. Cuba has a suicide rate of 15.0 for blacks, but they are usually highly mixed with people from other cultural backgrounds.²⁰⁸

Studies have been completed on the views of suicide among several Africans today. Bantu-speaking tribes share cultural and social ties with each other and occupy large sections of central and southern Africa. They originally lived in west Africa and have migrated out from there. Among the many Bantu groups, “suicide is an act of utter irresponsibility, a foolish discarding – again perhaps as a result of a momentary passion – of that which reasonable men consider most worth preserving.”²⁰⁹ Among the Gisu people, the spirit of the people who committed suicide are considered evil.²¹⁰ The Nyoro “adhor the idea of suicide and express strong moral disapproval of it,” and burn a tree or house where a suicide occurred.²¹¹ It is “characteristically African that suicide is ... considered an irrational act.”²¹² African cultural prohibitions against suicide are undeniable. It is clearly more acceptable to focus violence outward in the form of

207 “World Health Statistics: Suicide rates of different countries,” [<http://www.uniwuerzburg.de/IASR/suicide-table1.htm>] 6/02/2005

208 Frederick Hoffman, *Suicide Problems*, 181.

209 *African homicide and suicide*, ed. Paul Bohannon, 69.

210 *African homicide and suicide*, ed. Paul Bohannon, 113.

211 *African homicide and suicide*, ed. Paul Bohannon, 142.

212 *African homicide and suicide*, ed. Paul Bohannon, 263.

homicide than inward in the form of suicide. This has been historically accurate for blacks in America as well.²¹³

In a very compatible vein, Early's research found that black pastors express "a deep sense of the incompatibility of suicide with the black experience."²¹⁴ In reviewing his work, Katy Ryan believes that "resistance to the word suicide generally proceeds from a reluctance to identify oneself or one's community with victimization, powerlessnesses, hopelessness."²¹⁵ Early's work agrees with research conducted in African communities in condemning suicide as a "white thing" which blacks do not and should not practice. As African Americans have become more acculturated into Euro-American society, their suicide rates have increased.

Scholars are confronted with simultaneously locating reasons for a lower suicide rate among blacks in contrast with whites and a growing suicide rate among blacks. This is particularly challenging since theories that tend to support one side, such as that blacks focus violence outward instead of inward, only confuse the issue in regard to the other side.

Nevertheless, the suicide rate among African Americans is steadily increasing. Between 1980 and 1996, the suicide rate of young black males between fifteen and nineteen years of age had increased 56%. Today it is the third leading cause of death for fifteen to twenty-four year olds, with homicide and accidents first and second,

213 Roger Lane, *Roots of Violence in Black Philadelphia: 1860-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 142.

214 Katy Ryan, "Revolutionary Suicide in Toni Morrison's Fiction," *African American Review*, 34, no. 3 (Autumn 2000): 389-412.

215 Katy Ryan, "Revolutionary Suicide in Toni Morrison's Fiction" : 391.

respectively.²¹⁶ While suicide has been increasing regularly ever since Emancipation, since the 1960's it has been increasing much more rapidly than it has in the past. Many theories have been proposed, including the entrance into the middle class, post traumatic slave syndrome, the psychological effects of prolonged racism, assimilation into Euro-American culture and its inward focused anger, increased drug use, weak family structure, increase in violence in general and decreasing religious influence, among other ideas. Several scholars have done extensive work in an attempt to confront the growing suicide problem in the African American community. Fortunately it is not necessary to establish a solution to the modern concerns in order to evaluate slave suicides.

Gender trends also have some similarities and some changes between slavery and today. Black men tend to complete suicide far more often than women, just as they appear to have done during slavery. The reason psychologists give for this is that women have superior networks of family ties and more religious affiliation and both are influences which decrease the suicide rate.²¹⁷ After all, suffering is half pain and half being alone with that pain.²¹⁸ Black women also are more likely to seek professional help than black men. However, it is important to note that black women attempt suicide more often than men, without completing the act. This is a similar trend to white women, who also attempt suicide more often than white men. Many of these suicides appear to be motivated more by a call for assistance or a desire to manipulate a relationship than an

²¹⁶Alvin F. Poussaint and Amy Alexander, *Lay My Burden Down*, 12.

²¹⁷ _____. "Review: The Alarming rise in Black Suicides," *Journal of Blacks in higher education*, no. 31, (Spring, 2001): 136-137.

²¹⁸ Edwin S. Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind*, 119.

actual desire to die.²¹⁹ However, in slave interviews and narratives, there are more male suicide attempts than female attempts. So, female slavery attempts have increased proportionately since slavery.

The history of African American suicide, from the Middle Passage to today, offers several points of interest for the study of suicide. Specifically, slave suicides challenge the theory that the foundation of suicide is laid in early childhood, with a lack of happiness, such as the idea that, “The root causes of being unable to withstand those adult assaults lie in the deepest recesses of personality that are laid down in rather early childhood.”²²⁰ However, the “vandalized” childhood that this author discusses occurred to nearly every slave. Slaves who said, “I never seen nothing but work and tribulation,” are numerous.²²¹ Since nearly all slaves share similar external circumstances, with the loss of parents and other relatives, physical abuse, inability to pursue personal ambitions, cold and hunger, a lack of education and forced labor from an early age, differences regarding suicides cannot be drawn from them. Psychological pain was as commonplace to a slave as physical pain, and a slave whose psychological needs were met was as rare as an unracist paddyroller.

219 David Lester, *Why People Kill Themselves*, 75.

220 Edwin S. Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind*, 163.

221 *Bullwhip Days*, ed. James Mellon, 24.

CHAPTER FIVE

ATTEMPTED SUICIDES

Attempted and Contemplated Suicides in Detail

We are lacking the empirical data regarding slave suicides that is relatively abundant in modern suicides, particularly for suicides committed by individuals who were psychiatric patients. Such data is required for a statistically supported conclusion. However, there are narratives written by slaves who attempted suicide or seriously considered it and who describe their experiences and emotions in detail. By evaluating these attempted suicides, this study has become anthropological in nature since it seeks to explain a culture based on limited experiences which have been communicated and made available, and not on verifiable statistics. Scholars use this model when nothing else is available.²²² These narratives provide the best opportunities to gain insight into the mental, emotional and intellectual process involved in the slaves' decisions both to take their own lives as well as to abandon the plan.

Each of the five male, African American slaves evaluated in the case studies in this chapter eventually gained their freedom and achieved a level of literacy that enabled them to write about their adventures. This prevents them from being an accurate representation of the slave community. They each have greater than average intelligence, determination, opportunity and education. They are all male, as were 80% of slaves who

²²² Paul Bohannon, *African Homicide and Suicide*, 14.

escaped.²²³ Their experiences cannot be taken as a random survey, but rather a small, select window into the viewpoint of some slaves.

The first two are clear suicide attempts, and in both cases the slave actually gets in the water with the desire to be drowned. The last three are serious contemplations of suicide, but do not involve an actual attempt. The value of these three lies in the fact that they still detail the intellectual process that leads both to and from suicide in the mind of the slave.

Suicide attempts fall into two categories. Some are genuine suicide attempts which are unsuccessful. This is the case in both of the actual attempts evaluated here. In these cases, the individual apparently truly attempts to take his or her life, even if only for a short period of time. Either they change their mind, which occurred in both of the situations, or else the method fails and they are unable to replace it due to injury or intervention. Many suicide attempts, however, do not necessarily include a genuine attempt to end one's life, but rather they are “more often a way of communicating to and manipulating significant others.”²²⁴ That is clearly not the reasoning in any of these five situations, since very few relationships that could be communicated in or manipulated are present and in none of the situations does the writer share a desire to change or affect the behavior of someone else.

The five accounts demonstrate that truly “each suicidal drama occurs in the *mind* of a unique individual.”²²⁵ These suicidal dramas occur amidst incredible suffering and

223 Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 648.

224 David Lester, *Why People Kill Themselves*, 75.

225 Edwin S. Schneidman, *The Suicidal Mind*, 5.

repeated events of torture and hopelessness. The pivotal point is that for a certain period of time, they choose to flee from their situation and are not willing to accept life on the terms it holds. For these five men, suicidal thinking was very temporary. For only a short period of time they had the dichotomous thinking of a suicidal individual, “with only two possibilities; yes or no, life as I want it or death, my way or nothing ... the desperation of only seeing two alternatives and not three or more.”²²⁶

Each narrative is evaluated for the possibility of rage and anger turned inward instead of outward, as well as the egoistic and anomic motives identified by Durkheim. Also, an evaluation is made of their childhood experiences, personality, interpersonal situations and conditions in slavery for comparison with each other. This is a response to Lester's challenge, as explained in the introduction, to evaluate slave suicides in light of the individual's life conditions.

James Williams

James Williams was the black slave driver on an isolated plantation in Alabama where he had been taken and left by his master, after having been tricked into thinking he would soon be returned to Virginia and his family. At the time of his suicide, he was grieving his separation from his wife and children and despairing of ever seeing them again.

Williams experienced a fairly positive childhood for a slave. His young master began to teach him to read and was usually kind to him. In William's own words, the

²²⁶ Edwin S. Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind*, 61.

“early years of my childhood went by pleasantly.”²²⁷ He was married with a wedding ceremony and he and his wife were allowed several weeks to themselves before returning to work, which was an unusual privilege for a slave. His relatively good master married a cruel woman and it was in the process of moving slaves to her plantation further south that Williams was deceived by the master he trusted. This master had been careful to not split up other families, but ended up separating Williams, his most valuable slave, from his family.

Williams was obviously of high intelligence, and his narrative is filled with creative plans, successfully carried out. This same intelligence which eventually served to play a pivotal role in his escape did not evade the notice of his owner. He was given a great deal of responsibility. He also had a high level of integrity, and did what he believed was right, even when an opposing action would have resulted in more personal gain.

Williams was required to whip slaves, and exerted his best effort to decrease the pain when he inflicted punishments, while simultaneously satisfying the sadistic overseer. At times, he struck the tree instead of the slave, while the slave screamed as though he or she were actually being beaten. However, he frequently had to inflict genuine pain on his fellow slaves in order to pacify the overseer, and at times became the object of their anger and frustration.

As much as Williams asserted that he despised his life and particularly his role on the plantation, the event that precipitated his escape and subsequent suicide attempt was a

²²⁷ James Williams, *Narrative of James Williams*, 29.

threat that he would be whipped. Two white neighbors came over to help capture and beat a runaway named John. Williams was required to take part in the beating, and then the white men consulted together and made a sudden irrational decision to give Williams 250 lashes next since he “was partial to the 'Virginia ladies' and didn't whip them” enough.²²⁸ Williams was sent to the house to get hot water with salt and pepper for his back after his whipping, and while there, made a desperate decision to escape.

This was not a premeditated decision, and it appears that psychologically Williams was simply unwilling to take this unexpected abuse. He was already bearing a great deal of pressure from both the overseer, who expected him to keep the slaves under control and take part in physical punishment, as well as the slave community, which often resented his role. Also, only a few months prior to this, the overseer had been injured when he fallen off his horse while drunk, and Williams had nursed him back to health, which did not endear him to the slaves who had thrown a celebration, sadly cut short, when they mistakenly believed the overseer to be dead. Williams had striven diligently to please the overseer in every way, at great cost to himself and the entire plantation of slaves, and now to be whipped simply because of the goading of a few white men who came over to take part in another whipping, was adding insult to injury to an unbearable degree. Williams did not discuss the logic of his decision in detail in his narrative, but it appears that since he was going to be beaten anyway, he decided to take his chances at getting away first.

His actual suicide attempt occurred after he made it several miles and heard the

228 James Williams, *Narrative of James Williams*, 82.

hounds behind him. He was afraid that he would be torn up by them, and die a slow and painful death, just as another slave on the plantation had some time before. Again, his fear of physical pain motivated him to act. Most people can be classified as either reducers or augmenters in their response to physical pain. Reducers tolerate pain because they diminish the perception of the pain, which makes confinement and isolation more intolerable for them since they are already perceiving stimulation in reduced amounts. They tend to dislike monotony, and would be the most angry over situations where rights are deprived. Augments on the other hand, dread beatings and physical pain and are the most likely to cooperate to avoid physical pain.²²⁹ James clearly appears to be an augmenter by these definitions. Threats of physical pain motivated him to do all within his power for self-protection, which is probably at least part of the reason why the overseer was able to control him for as long as he did.

His actual account of the suicide attempt is as follows.

The dogs seemed close at hand, and by the loud barking I felt persuaded that Crop's hounds were with them. I thought of the fate of Little John, who had been torn in pieces by the hounds, and of the scarcely less dreadful condition of those who had escaped the dogs only to fall into the hands of the overseer. The yell of the dogs grew louder. Escape seemed impossible. I ran down the creek with a determination to drown myself. I plunged into the water and went down to the bottom, but the dreadful strangling sensation compelled me to struggle up to the surface. Again I heard the yell of the bloodhounds, and again desperately plunged down into the water. As I went down I opened my mouth, and, choked and gasping, found myself once more struggling upward. As I rose to the top of the water and caught a glimpse of the sunshine and the trees, the love of life revived in me. I swam to the other side of the creek, and forced my way through the reeds to a large bass-wood tree, and stood under one of its

229 Asenath Petrie, *Individuality in Pain and Suffering*, 27.

lowest limbs, ready, in case of necessity, to spring up into it.²³⁰

He chose the pain of the potential whipping over the pain of the dogs since his position in the tree would protect him from the dogs but keep him confined until the overseer could reach him. In a fascinating turn of events, the first dogs to come up were those Williams had often cared for, and they gathered around him in a peaceful manner. They protected him from the unfamiliar dogs until they too accepted him. He took them all with him and continued his escape, and when he felt it best to leave them behind, he got them started on the scent of a deer and never saw them again. He escaped successfully, and was eventually sent to England by antislavery societies which were seeking to protect him after his master attempted to recover him in New York.

In Williams' narrative, he states that the love of life was revived in him by the sight of the sunshine and trees, however, the “dreadful strangling sensation compelled” him to rise up twice, so again his avoidance of pain as an augmenter motivated him to abandon his suicidal plan, and contributed to the fact that life, with all its risks, appeared more attractive and less painful at the moment. It was a logical decision of his will to abandon the suicide attempt.

It is crucial to note that at the instant he made the decision to drown himself, his choices were narrowed in his mind. He felt that the dogs would be upon him any moment, and he knew what was waiting for him if the overseer caught up with him. He was unwilling to go through the pain that his overseer intended to inflict upon him and dreaded the pain of the dogs, so he was left with suicide as the presumably least painful

²³⁰ James Williams, *Narrative of James William*, 85-86.

option. However, he had temporarily failed to consider the option which he eventually carried out, and that of using his established relationship with the dogs to protect himself from them.

William's suicide attempt can also be evaluated externally. It could probably not be classified as an egoistic suicide, since even though he is not currently with members of his family, he is still under the influence of the socialization of the slave community. While some slaves resented him, others like old Solomon had good, close relationships with him, regularly encouraging him.

There is an anomic element to the suicide attempt, because Williams does have a change in circumstances that causes the actual events to fall far short of his expectations for his life. He had been accustomed to a fairly good situation, which he lost, along with his family. This was certainly a precipitating factor in his despair. Slaves who escaped often did so under similar circumstances, where expectations were not met and something they were subjected to did not fit their idea of what was just and fair in slavery. This of course brings the issue back to the intellectual functions of Williams. His perception of the situation was not simply based on what had occurred, but on what he would have preferred to occur and had at one time truly believed would occur.

James Lindsay Smith

James Smith provides a good contrast with James Williams since the two men are different in many ways. Smith appears a reducer instead of an augments, and undergoes much more physical punishment. William is obviously more concerned about absolute

honesty than Smith, who attempts clear deception of his master when he believes it will be beneficial in some way. Smith does not have the responsibility and trust of his master that Williams does. Smith is also younger.

Smith also had a relatively positive childhood. While he was able to live with his parents, it appears that both his parents died before his teen years. He had ten siblings, so socially he was certainly not egoistic. He suffered from a leg which was damaged in early childhood, caused a great deal of pain, was infected and was rebroken several times. Until he was rented to the sea captain for two years, Smith had very little physical punishment.

This sea captain was very brutal and Smith suffered excessive punishment under his authority. In Smith's description of his suicide attempt, he emphasized the impulsiveness of his actions as well as the punishments he was suffering at the time.

When they had nearly finished their meal the captain asked me for more tea; I told him it was all out; he wanted to know why I did not make more tea; I told him I thought there was a plenty, it was as much as I generally made. He challenged me for daring to think; he told me to go forward and divest myself of every article of clothing, and wait till he came. When he did come he put my head between his legs, and while I was in this position I thought my last days had come; I thought while he was using the cat-o'-nine-tails to my naked back, and hearing the whizzing of the rope, that if ever I got away I would throw myself overboard and put an end to my life. The captain had punished me so much that I was tired of life, for it became a burden to me. The cat-o'-nine-tails had no rest, for so dearly did he love its music that a day seldom passed on which he could find no occasion for its use. On the impulse of the moment, I gave a sudden spring, and struck the water some distance from the vessel, and as I could not swim I began to sink. I found that unless I was helped soon I would drown. I began to repent of what I had done, and wished that I had not committed such a rash act. When I attempted to bring myself up to the surface of the water with

success, I looked towards the vessel to see if the captain was coming to help me, and at this moment of my peril, instead of rendering any assistance he sat perfectly at ease, or composed on the deck looking at me, but making no effort to help me. I said to myself, I wonder if that old devil intends to let me drown, and not try to save me. All that I could do I was not able to keep myself on the surface of the water. Before I was out of reach and began to sink for the last time, I felt something grasp me; I found that it was the captain, who finally consented to draw me up to the surface of the water and throw me in the boat. I was so exhausted that I could neither stand up or sit down, but was obliged to lay on the bottom of the boat. While I was lying down he commenced beating me with the cat-o-nine-tails very unmercifully; the more he beat me, the more the water poured out of my mouth. The mate told me afterwards that the water flowing out of my mouth reminded him of a whale spouting water.²³¹

Smith does not specify whether he realized the captain was very near at hand when he decided to attempt suicide. If his master would have been near, this could possibly have been a manipulation attempt, except that Smith describes himself as “tired of life” and wishing to end it. While the actual event occurred on “the impulse of the moment,” it was certainly premeditated.

Smith was experienced at using deception and manipulation as resistance. After this event, when in the hands of a new master, he pretended to have broken his good leg and kept the pretense up for several weeks in order to avoid work. By the time he escaped and wrote this narrative, he was forthcoming about many cases of his past resistance, so there is no reason to doubt his testimony that his suicide attempt was genuine and not just manipulation.

Like Williams, Smith was placed in a new situation which was much more

²³¹ James Lindsay Smith, *Autobiography of James L. Smith, etc.* (Norwich, CT: The Bulletin, 1881), 19-20.

difficult for him than anything he had previously experienced. His expectations of what life would be like were disappointed although not as severely as Williams. Also, he was on a boat, where there was no escape, and where he was constantly in close quarters with the dreaded captain. As he said, life no longer appeared appealing to him and each day there was punishment to dread.

Smith was also separated from his family and the slave community. He did not have the support system of ten siblings which he was accustomed to and during crucial teen years he found himself suddenly lacking the support and influence of his community. In this sense, his suicide could be classified as egoistic. His suicide attempt was also anomic since life was suddenly so much more difficult than what he had been accustomed to.

Henry Bibb

Henry Bibb was a young man who was separated from his mother at a young age, never knew his father, and in his own words, “learned the art of running away to perfection.”²³² Henry tried to escape many times and finally succeeded in making it to Ohio and living as a free man. He was working as a laborer and attempting to save the money to purchase his wife and child when he was betrayed by two men claiming to be abolitionists, captured and hauled back to slavery.

After he was captured, Henry Bibb demonstrated desperation. He attempted to jump over a fence even though a man with a loaded gun was guarding him. This only

²³² Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: Author, 1849), 66

succeeded in getting him a place in jail until several men came to transport him across the river. In describing his transport back to enslavement, he included a description of suicidal thoughts.

After the boat had got fairly under way, with these vile men standing around me on the upper deck of the boat, and she under full speed carrying me back into a land of torment, I could see no possible way of escape. Yet, while I was permitted to gaze on the beauties of nature, on free soil, as I passed down the river, things looked to me uncommonly pleasant: The green trees and wild flowers of the forest; the ripening harvest fields waving with the gentle breezes of Heaven; and the honest farmers tilling their soil and living by their own toil. These things seem to light upon my vision with a peculiar charm. I was conscious of what must be my fate; a wretched victim for Slavery without limit; to be sold like an ox, into hopeless bondage, and to be worked under the flesh devouring lash during life, without wages. This was to me an awful thought; every time the boat run near the shore, I was tempted to leap from the deck, down into the water, with a hope of making my escape. Such was then my feeling. But on a moment's reflection, reason with her warning voice overcame this passion by pointing out the dreadful consequences of one's committing suicide. And this I thought would have a very striking resemblance to the act, and I declined putting into practice this dangerous experiment, though the temptation was great.²³³

Like James Williams and James Smith, Bibb is in a position where his situation has deteriorated. He had finally made it to freedom, and now he was being forced back into bondage. His despair was undoubtedly connected to this element of his situation. He was considering his future and the fact that his “fate” appeared to be just what he had sacrificed a great deal to escape. A lifetime of bondage was clearly something he was willing to risk all to escape. Like the other two men, he did not wish to accept what he was facing.

What actually stopped him in this case was his realization that trying to escape

233 Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 66.

with all these men guarding him would basically be a suicide attempt. He did not want the “dreadful consequences of one's committing suicide.” He did not specify what those consequences were, so he could have been referring to simply death or he could have been making a reference to Christian teachings against suicide. If the latter is his motive, he would provide evidence for Kevin Early's study on religion and suicide among African Americans. If slaves already had a strong spiritual condemnation of suicide, then that is possibly what affected the low numbers, instead of the low numbers leading to a stronger condemnation, and I suggested earlier. However, we cannot emphatically know what his meaning was, and it is very possibly just that as he realizes the act of jumping in the water would be suicide, he decides that he does not wish to do something so extreme and final.

Charles Ball

Charles Ball was a slave in Maryland in the early nineteenth century. He did not actually carry out a suicide attempt, but only seriously considered it, even to the point of having a method in mind. He also had a childhood with some positive and some negative elements. His father was able to successfully run away after his mother was sold when Charles was four. Charles had contact with his grandfather, who had been of royal birth in Africa. He had a relatively good master until he was twelve, at which time he was placed with a more severe master who did not feed him adequately. He was able to marry the woman of his choice and he saw her conditions improve. He was then sold to another undesirable master, and he sold Charles away from his family without even the opportunity to bid them farewell. It was just after this incident that Charles related his

suicidal thoughts.

I was now a slave in South Carolina, and had no hope of ever again seeing my wife and children. I had at times serious thoughts of suicide so great was my anguish. If I could have got a rope I should have hanged myself at Lancaster. The thought of my wife and children I had been torn from in Maryland, and the dreadful undefined future which was before me, came near driving me mad. It was long after midnight before I fell asleep, but the most pleasant dream, succeeded to these sorrowful forebodings. I thought I had escaped my master, and through great difficulties made my way back to Maryland, and was again in my wife's cabin with my little children on my lap. Every object was so vividly impressed on my mind in this dream, that when I awoke, a firm conviction settled upon my mind, that by some means, at present incomprehensible to me, I should yet again embrace my wife, and caress my children in their humble dwelling.²³⁴

In Charles's mind, life without his family was not worth living. The dream that moved him out of the suicidal thinking pattern was the possibility of seeing his family again. His situation firmly supports the idea that “suicide is preventable by changing our perception of the situation, and by redefining what is unbearable. Perceiving that there are other possible ways of seeing things, redefining the impossible, bearing the unbearable.”²³⁵ Even in this situation with very little hope, Charles opened his mind to the possibility of an option beyond those that were readily apparent, and that option was escaping and attempting to be reunited with his family.

Later, when Charles was in the process of escaping, he had to cross an icy river on a very cold morning and found that “There were three alternatives before me, one of which I knew must quickly be adopted. The one was to obtain a fire, by which I could dry and warm my stiffened limbs; the second was to die, without the fire; the third, to go to

234 Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States*, 35.

235 Edwin S. Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind*, 165.

the first house, if I could reach one, and surrender myself as a runaway slave.”²³⁶ His options were narrow, but he chose the fire.

John Joseph

John Joseph was a slave from New Orleans in the early nineteenth century. He was suicidal on his third escape attempt. This amazing young man had been the son of an African chief, so he shares a heritage similar to Charles Ball, but Joseph himself was brought over from Africa on the Middle Passage, although it appears that he was brought illegally. He was bold enough to speak out and challenge the auctioneer selling him. He was severely punished, even having three teeth knocked out. He was captured after his first two escape attempts and severely beaten. During this third attempt he was tired and hungry, and his nerves were affected from fear of recapture when he related the following incident.

I then traveled on till I came to the Mississippi river, and when I saw the river I was afraid; I walked along the bank towards its mouth, despairing of making my escape, and thinking of the sufferings I should have to undergo if I were again taken. In despair I was almost ready to cast myself into the river, and thus put an end to my existence, when I caught sight of a boat tied to a tree, which I gladly loosened and in it let myself float down the river, trusting in him who is able to preserve them that put their trust in him, as well on the mighty deep as on the land, even he who rules the sea, and whose will the winds obey, who also has declared that they that put their trust in him shall never be forsaken.²³⁷

John had clearly decided that the life of a slave was not for him and was risking his life and safety to escape once again. When escape did not appear to be an option,

²³⁶ Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States*, 369.

²³⁷ John Joseph, *The Life and Sufferings of John Joseph*, 7.

suicide became his next contemplation. He was unwilling to live as a slave and was choosing between means of escape. His situation involved the fleeing response in motion.

This narrative has an interesting combination of suicide and trust in God. For a short time, John did not believe that he had any options other than being caught or killing himself. When he saw the boat then a third option presented itself to him. Before he saw the boat, he made no mention of God. Once he saw another option, he made a choice to trust his fate to God. His situation demonstrates that while the two attitudes may be in contrast, a person can experience both and in a very short period of time.

Like the other men, John had been accustomed to a different life and was disappointed in his condition. Once again, expectations were not met and the options available were unacceptable to the slave. Also, as a first generation slave, John belonged to a group that appears to have had a higher suicide rate.

Overview of Suicide Attempts

Several commonalities existed among these slaves. The first and most obvious is that their expectations about what their lives would consist of were disappointed and their hopes for the future appeared to have been destroyed. Each of these men had come to expect something better than they were receiving at the time. For each of them, their current situation was unacceptable. Their options were narrowed, or appeared narrowed, to either taking a great deal of abuse or ending their lives. Charles Ball is the only one

who was not at the time of his suicidal thoughts in the position of expecting great physical pain if he did not escape or die in the attempt, and the suffering that was excruciating to him was the separation from his family.

In each situation, other options either presented themselves or began to appear more appealing. Henry Bibb was the only possible exception since his motive may have been a fear of sinning through suicide. For Williams, the pain of a lack of oxygen in his lungs drove him up, and for Smith it was a sudden realization of the finality of his act. In both cases, death did not appear attractive any more, and other options became viable.

The issue does not appear to be that psychological needs are not being met in these slaves more than in other slaves. Rather, the issue is that the psychological needs the slave most desired were not met. The slaves have been led to hope and believe that circumstances would be better than they were. They felt they were in completely unjust situations.

These situations could be classified as fatalistic suicides. These men became overwhelmed in their attempts to escape an oppressive culture of slavery which they found unacceptable. It appears that these men would not have been suicidal in different situations, simply because their reasons for ending their lives were so closely tied with their circumstances. However, why these men made the choice, while many others in similar situations did not, requires an internal explanation. For them, death appeared more attractive.

Other Attempted Suicides Mentioned by Ex-slaves

There have been other suicide attempts mentioned in narratives of people whom the narrator knew. Far less is known about the details of the lives of these individuals, but like the slaves already discussed, they did not necessarily suffer worse abuse, but found their abuse unacceptable.

A woman was “put in gaol to prevent her committing suicide”²³⁸ She was being sold as a slave for sexual purposes, and it appears that for her, that was unacceptable. Another ex-slave testified about a slave he knew who had been treated with extreme cruelty, being forced to run over rough stumps behind a horse, and whipped whenever he fell, “that he twice attempted to drown himself, to get out of [the master's] power.”²³⁹ It would be interesting to know why these drowning attempts did not succeed. Lewis Clarke had to live with Mrs. Betsy Banton, a particularly cruel mistress. Before his term with her, a girl named Phillis was on loan to Mrs. Banton from her parents. Lewis related that, “in six months, [Phillis] had suffered so severely, under the hand of this monster woman, that she made an attempt to kill herself, and was taken home by the parents of Mrs. Banton.”²⁴⁰ The suicide attempt horrified Mrs. Banton's parents, Phillis's original owners, and they withdrew Phillis, which resulted in a family feud. Phillis was a young girl, separated from her family, but so was Lewis, and he did not attempt suicide.

Two African sisters were smuggled into the United States after slave trade was

238 John Passmore Edward and Frederick Douglass, *Uncle Tom's Companion Or Facts Stranger than Fiction: A Supplement to Uncle Tom's Cabin: Being Startling Incidents in the Lives of Celebrated Fugitive Slaves* (London: Edwards and Company, 1852), 106.

239 *American Slavery as it is*, ed. William Loren Katz, 85.

240 *I was Born a Slave: a Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Yuval Taylor, 2 vols. (Illinois: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 1:609.

outlawed. They were very proud of their tattoos, which they said indicated their royal status. One girl stated that, “My father rides and an army moves at his back. He wears a sword and is a king; we are mighty warrior's daughters.”²⁴¹ One girl attempted suicide by cutting open her veins and the other threw herself out of a second story window. Both failed in their attempts. According to the white woman who was reporting this, who remarked on their intelligence and beauty, the girls tried to kill themselves because one of them was going to become a mother and they felt the disgrace of it very keenly. However, premarital sex and an accompanying pregnancy was usually acceptable both in African tribes and among African American slaves. It seems far more likely that the situation that motivated these girls toward suicide had little or nothing to do with the pregnancy and a great deal to do with sexual exploitation they were possibly undergoing and the conditions of enslavement they were definitely living under. But once again, that did not drive most women to suicide.

It is interesting to note that Charles Ball, James Joseph and these two girls all claim to be descendants of African royalty. As historians have argued, those with royal blood had a higher suicide rate than those without. This study certainly reinforces that theory. This would also be connected with expectations since they were accustomed to far superior treatment.

241 Elizabeth Lyle Saxon, *A Southern Woman's War Time Reminiscences* (Tennessee, Pilcher Printing Company, 1905), 30-31.

The Threat of Suicide

Suicide threats were used by slaves on occasion to manipulate their situations, but none of their threats appear to have been totally empty. Delicia Patterson, a 15 year old slave girl, was being auctioned on the block. When Judge Miller, who was reputed to be a mean and cruel man, began to bid for her, Delicia interrupted the proceedings to proclaim, “Old Judge Miller don't you bid for me, 'cause if you do, I would not live on your plantation. I will take a knife and cut my own throat from ear to ear before I would be owned by you.”²⁴² Judge Miller appears to have taken the threat seriously since he stopped bidding at that point.

Reverend G. W. Offley remembered a situation when he was a child where his free father was attempting to purchase him and his siblings. His mother, at that time, had separate owners, who also expressed interest in purchasing the children. Offley's mother told her owners, “they might buy them and welcome, but you had better throw your money in the fire, for if you buy one of my children I will cut all three of their throats while they are asleep and your money will do you no good.”²⁴³ Offley, one of the throats in question, felt that his mother had no intention of carrying out the deed. However, the threat was possibly taken seriously by the master, who decided against purchasing the children. Both of the previous examples, with Delila and Offley, occurred at the point of a sale, where potential masters were still making decisions. This was possibly a point in time where a threat from a slave could carry more power and become a determining factor

²⁴² *Remembering Slavery*, eds. Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, Steven F. Miller, 43.

²⁴³ *Five Black Lives*, ed. Arna Bontemps, 131.

in whether or not the master would make the purchase.

A slaveholder from Savannah came to Hartfield, Connecticut with his slave, Nancy. While there, she attempted to secure her freedom with the assistance of several abolitionists. The case went through the courts and Nancy was eventually freed. Nancy told others later that “when she went into the courthouse on the last day she had two large pills of opium; had she been sentenced to go back, she would have swallowed both of them before she left the court-house.”²⁴⁴ She was in a situation where she was only willing to accept freedom or death as options.

The threat of suicide was an option that slaves creatively applied in a number of ways. While the suicide attempts appear to be genuine and not manipulation tactics, threats gave them power over their masters in the commodity of their own bodies, even if that power was limited or temporary.

²⁴⁴ *Five Black Lives*, ed. Arna Bontemps, 56.

CHAPTER SIX

TRUST IN GOD

When slaves made the decision to commit suicide it was because they were unwilling to accept life, with its suffering, and did not believe that their existence contained a redeemable value which was equal to or greater than the current pain. A very small minority of slaves followed this suicidal reasoning and thus ended their lives at their own hands, but the vast majority chose instead to embrace life, or at the very least to endure it.

For slaves, their religious beliefs played a crucial role in confronting and understanding their suffering. Through these beliefs many slaves mentally transcended their current situations and actively wrestled with their suffering on an ideological level. This did not provide them with an escape, but with a philosophy of hope which they used to reengage their world.

Religions, which strive to answer the greater questions in life, must all confront the issue of suffering. The religions of the world have long wrestled with suffering, particularly the distribution of suffering, and the question, “Why should some suffer more than others?”²⁴⁵ Or, one could ask, why should certain events cause suffering in some and not in others? Suffering is like death, in that it is in most situations pronounced as evil to intentionally inflict it upon another, but yet it comes to all. Answers for the question of “why” vary between religious persuasions from the displeasure of capricious gods, evil

²⁴⁵ John Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 9.

deeds done in a past life, sins in the current life, to the spiritual good of the sufferer.

One of the main tasks immediately imparted to Christianity among the slaves was to deal with the suffering of the slaves. It was certainly not a topic that could be avoided. As slaves came to see the work of God in every event of their lives, they articulated their acceptance of suffering based on their enduring belief that a great and perfect God would ultimately end it, and until that imminent event, was bringing good out of it. Trust in God is a particular area where slaves broadened their conceptualization of their situation and developed tools which they used to confront and define their suffering.

Suffering, ultimately, comes as an interaction between an individual's perceptions and ideas of how things should be and the actual events and conflicts of his or her life. When the two do not coincide, frustration, disappointment and suffering result. Even within the same person, an event can at a certain time overwhelm them, and at an earlier or later date a very similar event can result in far less personal pain. Suffering is clearly a complex relationship between each person's thoughts and his or her world, even when that world is as horrific as that to which most slaves belonged.

What slaves thought about their suffering was just as important as what occurred to them. How did they explain their understanding of the “why” behind their suffering? Through their own words the slaves who embraced faith in God expressed the challenges it posed and the provision it made. This chapter contains extensive direct quotes since it is attempting to reconstruct their mode of understanding, explaining and managing suffering.

Secondary Work

While limited, there has been some secondary work attempting to examine slave theology in the area of trusting God in the midst of immense suffering. The majority of scholarship on slave religion focuses on the actions of slaves as they built religious communities and fashioned a distinctly African-American Christian church. Other, more theoretical works examine the collective thinking process of slaves as they sought to interpret and understand their world. There is not much work attempting to reconstruct the thinking process of slaves in regard to the role of God in their suffering although there are several excellent texts which do tackle certain elements of the problem. Riggins R. Earl Jr.'s *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self and Community in the Slave Mind* is an in depth evaluation of the theological viewpoints of slaves and David Emmanuel Goatley's *Were You There? Godforsakenness in Slave Religion* confronts the theoretical problem in slave religion of the existence of both suffering and a sovereign God.

Earle's book is an outstanding work which examines the ideology and theology of slaves. He delineates slave responses to their masters' attempts to falsely define the anthropological nature of the slaves themselves by creating subhuman categories to label their slaves. Portions of the master class developed a theology that postulated slaves as soulless bodies. Earle's main focus is on how slaves responded intellectually and defined themselves and their situations. His work is especially helpful in developing the inner transformation slaves underwent, often through religious conversion, which enabled them

to develop a liberated consciousness of themselves and their lives.

Earle's argument centers around conversions, where he argues that “converted slaves believed that their status of new being in Jesus interiorly distanced them from the psychological abuse of slavery. It gave them the needed transcendent means of getting a critical perspective of both their masters and themselves.”²⁴⁶ As they brought the work of the omnipotent God into their mental processes, their horizons expanded outwardly and allowed new conceptions of their situations. The inner self-transformation which Earle focuses on was a crucial tool which can also be applied to their confrontation with suffering. It gave slaves the “critical perspective of double consciousness”²⁴⁷ which expanded their thinking and opened avenues of perspective on their lives. They viewed themselves as deeply loved by a powerful Creator who had eternal plans for them. This obviously rendered suffering more bearable and less psychologically damaging.

The secular/sacred division, which has become deeply ingrained in the Euro-American consciousness, was not part of African religion and did not become an element of slave religion in the American South. While the inner, spiritual transformation occurred in a realm over which the master had no control, the slave did not see a division between that realm and the physical. Their spiritual beliefs were immediately viewed as applicable to their physical situations and the physical situations were under the power of the spiritual realm.

Goatley's text, *Were You There? Godforsakenness in Slave Religion*, attempts to

²⁴⁶ Riggins R. Earle, Jr., *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs*, 46.

²⁴⁷ Riggins R. Earle, Jr., *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs*, 54.

deal with the theological conflict slaves faced in believing in an omnipotent, perfect God who allowed slavery and all its suffering. He introduces his book by pointing out that “The coexistence of pervasive suffering around the world and belief in a providential God of love is difficult to reconcile.”²⁴⁸ After delineating the various types of suffering that Christian slaves underwent, he writes, “Christian slaves professed faith in the God of Jesus, but in light of their existential experiences of extreme human suffering, was God present? Had God forsaken these African-American people?”²⁴⁹ Goatley includes present day suffering of African Americans, and argues that they are a people with a peculiarly large amount of suffering in both the past and present. He defines the term godforsakenness from his title as representing “the extremities of human suffering,”²⁵⁰ which he applies to African Americans.

In answering his question, Goatley looks to the presence and absence of God in the situations of the slaves, and relates it to the presence and absence in Jesus' relationship with his disciples and then with his Father. He concludes that while God appears absent in the suffering, he is present in many other areas, such as in the strong role of African American women in the Christian Church. He also argues that God is present in the suffering of the oppressed, even while appearing to be absent, but he does not expand on the elements of that presence and only argues that it exists. He demonstrates that African American spirituals realize that

amid the extremities of abject human suffering, God is both present and

248 David Emmanuel Goatley, *Were You There? Godforsakenness in Slave Religion*, xii.

249 David Emmanuel Goatley, *Were You There? Godforsakenness in Slave Religion*, 39.

250 David Emmanuel Goatley, *Were You There? Godforsakenness in Slave Religion*, 12.

absent. This is how God was to Jesus at the crucifixion. This is how God is with humanity in the extremities of human suffering ... [the] reality for Christians is that while God is sometimes present and sometimes absent to us (from our perspective), the larger context is that God is ever present with us. One's current experiences of the extremities of human suffering may overcome the capacity to confirm this concept at given moments of calamity.²⁵¹

Goatley examines the Biblical gospel of Mark in detail, particularly the statement of Jesus on the cross where he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This image of God, through Jesus, suffered and felt the same abandonment that humans do. Goatley argues that from the perspective of the slaves, "Jesus was forsaken and God did suffer."²⁵²

Goatley is answering a question which appears to be more his own than that of the slaves themselves. For those slaves who embraced Christianity, they left few written accounts of lengthy turmoil in regards to questioning God and his reasons for allowing suffering.²⁵³ Even Goatley has no quotes from slaves who questioned God's goodness and only one from a black man who was not a slave. Quotes do exist which he did not include. Some slaves, like Charles Ball, had moments where they felt abandoned by God and said, "I could not pray, for the measure of my woes seemed to be full, and I felt as if there was no mercy in heaven... for a man who was born a slave."²⁵⁴ These statements of doubt did not lead to a rejection of God but were rather expressions which occurred during moments of crushing internal agony which slaves certainly experienced at times.

251 David Emmanuel Goatley, *Were You There? Godforsakenness in Slave Religion*, 87.

252 David Emmanuel Goatley, *Were You There? Godforsakenness in Slave Religion*, 74.

253 Those slaves who rejected Christianity outright sometimes gave as their reason for doing so, the suffering they underwent as slaves. Those who did become Christians usually did not question the suffering.

254 Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States*, 39.

While Goatley examines the theological challenge presented by suffering, he does not conclude it with a strong resolution, nor does he answer it from the perspective of the slaves. His chapter on theological speculations from the gospel of Mark does not include words of slaves, but rather quotes from modern theologians. He is approaching the issue from the perspective of a theologian more than an historian. His search is for answers to satisfy modern readers rather than uncover the answers the slaves had for their own situations, which is where we will turn our attention to here.

Intellectual Response to Suffering

Slaves were interested in understanding the causes and consequences of their suffering. Reverend G. W. Offley, himself a slave preacher, looked in depth at the issue of degradation. He acknowledged that blacks were viewed as a degraded people, as a result of the degrading acts done to them, both in the Americas and in Africa. He expressed the viewpoint that the suffering slaves underwent did not degrade them.

Then the moral guilt rests on the oppressor and not on the oppressed. We must not feel that we are degraded. The true meaning of the word degrade is to be low, mean contemptible, willing to do a mean act that we know is displeasing in the sight of God and man. Therefore we may be oppressed by man, but never morally degraded, only as we are made willing subjects to do sinful acts against what we know or have the power to know is wrong in the sight of God and man.²⁵⁵

Interestingly, Offley's concern is with how he believed God viewed him and his sufferings, as well as how fellow humans viewed him. As a result, in his explanation, the degradation lies in the one inflicting the suffering, not the one suffering. From many

²⁵⁵*Five Black Lives*, ed. Arnn Bontemps, 136-137.

similar comments, we know that the intellectual African American community, which included men like Richard Allen and Nathaniel Paul, shared Offley's viewpoint that being mistreated by others did not affect one's standing before God.

When slaves discussed their theology, they gave a presentation of an omnipresent, omnipotent, sovereign, righteous, just, holy and loving God. Such a God was worthy of their complete trust, and was not like the gods of ancient Rome who could be manipulated through sacrifices and prayers. God was the one calling the shots, and determining the ultimate outcomes. Scholars have attempted to reconstruct the view of a loving and just God which slaves held. They have developed summaries such as, "God is Just; He is love; He is no respecter of persons; He is a God of peace; from one blood or species God made all mankind; God is on the side of the righteous and the oppressed; and God will eventually bring to judgment those who continue to violate His laws."²⁵⁶

Another historian wrote, "They believed in God, a god of love, who cared for each one of his children, even the suffering slave. But this God was also a god of justice and vengeance who hated evil and oppression and who in time would destroy oppression, slavery and evildoers."²⁵⁷

The idea of the sovereignty of God was not totally new to slaves brought to America. A missionary for the Society of the Propagation of the Gospel, which was the missionary arm of the Anglican Church, reported in 1724, "I find that our Negro Pagans

²⁵⁶ Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1938), 126.

²⁵⁷ Harry V. Richardson, *Dark Salvation: The Story of Methodism as it Developed Among Blacks in America* (New York: Anchor-Press/Doubleday, 1976), 28.

have a notion of God ... of a God that disposes absolutely of all things; for asking one day a Negro-Pagan woman how she hapen'd to be made a slave, reply'd that God wou'd have it so and she could not help it. I heard another saying the same thing on the account of the death of her husband.”²⁵⁸ African religion already taught about a powerful, sovereign Most High God.

In slave theology God's sovereignty was embraced with contentment, even amidst suffering. Maria Stewart wrote, “let not a repining thought enter my heart, nor a murmuring sigh heave from my bosom. But may I cheerfully bear all the trials of life... May we realize that promotion cometh not from the East nor from the West, but that it is God that putteth up one and setteth down another.”²⁵⁹ To the Christian slave, nothing happened outside of God's control, including suffering. Their response to this sovereign God was not accusation, doubt or even concern, but trust.

Slave narratives are saturated with comments regarding “trust in God.” While the phrase undoubtedly did not have an identical meaning to each person who used it, there appears to be a common understanding of it. “Trust in God” always referred to involving God in the situation, and expanding it to include the speaker's perspective of God. Within this framework there were many varying options, including trust that God would end slavery, would protect them physically, would grant them eternal life, could be trusted in everything that happened on earth, did love them, was working everything together for their good and did have reasons for what he allowed that were simply beyond their

258 *American Negro Slavery*, ed. Michael Mullin, 220.

259 James Melvin Washington, *Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African-Americans* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), 26.

knowledge and comprehension.

Due to this wide variety of definitions, Christian slaves sometimes vehemently disagreed with each other regarding how trust in God was to be carried out in their lives. This was particularly true in the area of seeking their own freedom. Their convictions varied from believing they should trust that God would deliver them with no assistance from themselves to the idea that God would take care of them as they actively sought their own freedom. Frederick Douglass wrote that, “I have met many religious colored people, at the South, who are under the delusion that God requires them to submit to slavery, and to wear their chains with meekness and humility. I could entertain no such nonsense as this; and I almost lost my patience when I found any colored man weak enough to believe such stuff.”²⁶⁰ This concern about wearing chains with meekness and humility was a genuine struggle for many slaves. William Grimes shared that after devoting a good portion of his early life to failed escape attempts, he finally succeeded in running away without the regular prompt recapture and return to slavery. He experienced a religious conversion and his conscience began to bother him that perhaps God would consider his escape as disobedience. He prayed about it, and decided that it was God, and not “my own artfulness and cunning, which had enabled me to escape: therefore if we trust in God, we need have no fear of the greatest trials; and though my heart has been pierced with sufferings keen as death, and drank from the cup of slavery, the bitterest dregs ever mingled in it; yet under the consolations of religion, my fortitude

²⁶⁰ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, (New York: Miller, Orton and Mulligan, 1855), 158-9.

never left me.”²⁶¹ His consolations of religion, by his own statements, appear to be that he believed God had orchestrated his delivery and through his suffering enabled him to keep his fortitude.

Charles Thompson was one of Douglass's “weak colored men.” After escaping and hiding out in the woods for three weeks, he decided to return to his master. “God, for his own good purpose, had placed me in bondage, and in his own good time he would relieve me either by death or emancipation.”²⁶² When his master forgave him and did not punish him, he felt that it was an affirmation that he had done the right thing. Others shared Charles sentiments, even if just temporarily. Josiah Henson traveled through free territory in charge of slaves and even after being urged to do so by others, refused to seek freedom. He felt that trusting and obeying God involved waiting until a means outside of himself brought freedom. He later changed his mind and did run away successfully, but only after attempting to purchase himself and being cheated out of the money.

Some slaves strove to simultaneously do all they could for themselves and their freedom, but also be content in whatever situation ultimately resulted for them. If their efforts were not successful, then it was to be accepted as God's will. Spotswood Rice, a Black soldier from Missouri during the Civil War, wrote to his daughters who were still in slavery and informed them, “My dear children, I want you to be contented with whatever may be your lots.”²⁶³ He went on to encourage them to have confidence in God.

261 William Grimes, *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: Published by the Author, 1825), 29.

262 Charles Thompson, *Biography of a Slave, etc.* (Ohio: United Brethren Publishing House, 1875), 78.

263 *Free at Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom and the Civil War*, eds. Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Steven F. Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie S. Rowland (New York: The New Press, 1992), 481.

At this point Douglass would have been disappointed in him. However, at the same time he wrote to the daughter's mistress and told her that he did not believe she had any right to keep his daughters in bondage. He told her, “the longer you keep my child from me the longer you will have to burn in hell.”²⁶⁴ Spotswood obviously desired a rapid freedom for his daughters, and he used all the persuasion at his command in an attempt to bring about that freedom, but the perspective that he shared with his daughters was that if that freedom did not happen, he desired them to be contented with accepting slavery for the time and trust in God.

While there were many times that slaves referred to trusting God to end their suffering, and end slavery in particular, there were also many situations where slaves were in the midst of suffering, anticipated continual suffering, and still talked about trusting God. What did they mean by this? If they did not necessarily believe that God would bring a quick end to their pain, what did they trust him to do? This level of faith took on an eternal perspective. First it was a trust that they would be gifted with an eternal existence with God upon death. In light of that, the second purpose they often saw in their suffering was that it was improving their relationship with Jesus, and through that their own character. Spirituals, which expressed the soul life of the people as they endured suffering and survived, taught the belief that “God transforms character.”²⁶⁵ Without an eternal perspective, character growth would have had little value for a slave forced to serve out their existence in a Georgia cotton field.

²⁶⁴ *Free at Last*, eds. Ira Berlin, et al., 480.

²⁶⁵ Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God*, 20 & 29.

Religious slaves certainly shared a trust that God would provide eternal life.

However, to classify that as a “pie in the sky” dream for slaves who were suffering in this life and consequently easily persuaded to hope for a better future after death is to grossly misrepresent them. The idea of an afterlife without the injustices and sufferings of this life is shared by the vast majority of people, which include those from a wide variety of times, places, religious persuasions and situations. The afterlife in general is believed to bring justice to the injustices and completion to the other incoherent aspects of this life.²⁶⁶ Also, for slaves, eternal life was only part of their trust in God. They were also trusting him with this life.

For many slaves, when they said they trusted in God, they were acknowledging that their current situation was not out of God's control and was only a small part of a much greater picture. This form of trust enabled slaves mentally to remove themselves from the intensity of their emotional responses to their situations and reengage in it with a new perspective. This physical bondage was only one level of existence, and a temporary one at that. Instead of experiencing narrowing possibilities, such as in situations of suicide, it infinitely broadened the possibilities. Slaves had a “critical perspective of double consciousness that originated from a spiritual encounter with God... [and] affirmed God's absolute freedom and power to act in their lives” in whatever timing and manner he chose.²⁶⁷ Trust in God was an affirmation and exaltation of God's sovereignty for both this life and eternity.

²⁶⁶ John Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World*, 28.

²⁶⁷ Riggins R. Earle, Jr., *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self and Community in the Slave Mind* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 54.

Trust in God to End Slavery

One belief which assisted slaves in enduring the suffering was a shared conviction that slavery was not going to last long, and that a termination, orchestrated ultimately by God, was imminent. Most did not see it as their role to actively pursue a political end to their enslavement but regarded their activity to be prayer. Those who did obtain their freedom and became black abolitionists, such as Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, certainly contributed tireless effort to the cause, but in general those in the enslaved condition were not able to become part of a political movement. The option was not open to them, since any kind of organizing or potential rebellion led to severe persecution and even outright slaughter. Slaves usually did not have the theoretical framework or opportunity to construct a plan to work towards emancipation. Many were not educated enough in regards to the world around them to have the confidence to pursue an unaccompanied escape. Instead, they viewed their God as the force that would bring about the end of slavery. Jacob Stroyer heard the same words from his father that many other young children growing up in slavery heard when they complained to their parents about the many injustices they were finding in life: “I can do nothing more than to pray to the Lord to hasten the time when these things shall be done away; that is all I can do.”²⁶⁸ Action on their part meant action to pray and beseech an omnipotent God to alter the situation.

African American slaves shared the faith that their slavery would end. As one

²⁶⁸ *African American Voices: The Life Cycle of Slavery*, ed. Steven Mintz, 89.

slave wrote,

...among themselves, [freedom] is their constant theme. No slaves think they were made to be slaves... I have heard some of the most ignorant I ever saw, say, 'it will not always be so, God *will* bring them to an account.' I used to wonder why it was that our people were kept in slavery. I would look at the birds as they flew over my head or sung their free songs upon the trees, and think it strange, that, of all God's creatures, the poor negro only was held in bondage.²⁶⁹

His condition of servitude did not logically fit with his concept of God so he expressed confidence that slavery had to end. A female slave named Polly told her mistress that, "We poor creatures have need to believe in God, for if God Almighty will not be good to us some day, why were we born? When I hear of his delivering his people from bondage I know it means the poor Africans."²⁷⁰ It was too dangerous and useless for them to petition the people in power to free them, but they could petition God.

For some African Americans, the abolition of slavery was a crucial element of their trust in God. They were trusting God specifically to end slavery. Nathaniel Paul, on the 1827 abolition of slavery in New York, delivered an address as a Baptist pastor in Albany.

Did I believe that [slavery] would always continue, that man to the end of time would be permitted with impunity to usurp the same undue authority over his fellow... I would deny the superintending power of divine providence in the affairs of this life; I would ridicule the religion of the Savior of the world, and treat as the worst of men the ministers of the everlasting gospel; I would consider my Bible as a book of false and delusive fables, and commit it to the flames; nay I would still go farther; I would at once confess myself an atheist and deny the existence of a holy

269 *Slave Testimony*, ed. John Blassingame, 135.

270 Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, "Diary entry of 12 December 1857," in *An American Diary 1857-58* ed. Joseph W. Reed, Jr. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 65.

God.²⁷¹

While this passage could be interpreted as a faith in God that would only hold up if slavery was abolished, Paul, as a theological spokesman for the black community, is more likely expressing his unwavering trust in a God who is only tolerating slavery for a season and that as the sovereign king of the universe, he would end slavery and other things that were completely incompatible with his holy nature. The evidence for this includes the facts that his words were spoken at a celebration of emancipation, but even more when taken into context with his sermon. During the same sermon, he also prayed and stated,

And, oh thou immaculate God, be not angry with us, while we come into this thy sanctuary, and make the bold inquiry in this thy holy temple, why it was that thou didst look on with the calm indifference of an unconcerned spectator, when thy holy law was violated, thy divine authority despised and a portion of thine own creatures reduced to a state of mere vassalage and misery? Hark! While he answers from on high: hear him proclaiming from the skies- Be still, and know that I am God! Clouds and darkness are round about me; yet righteousness and judgment are the habitation of my throne. I do my will and pleasure in the heavens above, and in the earth beneath; it is my sovereign prerogative to bring good out of evil, and cause the wrath of man to praise me, and the remainder of that wrath I will restrain.²⁷²

He questions God, and with the same breath answered the questions with passages from the Bible. He acknowledged God as one who could not be manipulated, and who did his will and pleasure, asking men to be still and know that he is God. This God could not be controlled, or even completely understood, but he could be trusted because of his righteousness.

Some narratives express this reverence of the God who would do things according

271 *Negro Protest Pamphlets*, ed. Dorothy Porter (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 16-17.

272 *Negro Protest Pamphlets*, ed. Dorothy Porter, 11. This passage contains extensive Biblical quotations.

to his own timetable but who could nevertheless be completely trusted. In speaking of a cruel overseer, James Williams said, “He used to mock, and in every possible way interrupt the poor slaves, who, after the toil of the day, knelt in their lowly cabins to offer their prayers and supplications to Him whose ear is open to the sorrowful sighing of the prisoner, and who hath promised *in his own time* to come down and deliver.”²⁷³ (italics added) In defining God as the deliverer, Williams also clarified that God was sovereign and trustworthy.

This trust that God would end slavery, even on his timetable, could lead to a great deal of personal encouragement. Fannie Moore said that her mother suffered extraordinarily as a slave because she regularly attempted to protect her twelve children from the overseer. One day she told her kids that “she was saved. And then she said, ‘Now I know de Lord will show me de way. I ain’t gwine a grieve no more. No matter how much yo’ all done beat me an’ my chillun de Lawd will show me de way. An’ some day we nevah be slaves.’”²⁷⁴ She did not know when the deliverance would come, so it is significant that she said she was not going to grieve any more. The hope of deliverance was a powerful force which made the days more bearable for many slaves.

Deliverance was not limited to just deliverance from slavery as a whole, but it could be deliverance in any and all situations. Slaves were quick to give their own trust in God credit for the positive activities that they were able to take part in accomplishing. When Harriet Tubman was asked how she could keep going back to the South, even with

273 James Williams, *Narrative of James Williams*, 72.

274 *Remembering Slavery*, eds. Ira Berlin, et al., 134.

a great price on her head, she said, “Why, don't I tell you, Missus, t'wasn't *me*, 'twas *de Lord*! I always *tole* him, 'I trust to you, I don't know where to go or what to do, but I expect you to lead me', an' he always did.”²⁷⁵ Like many ex-slaves after emancipation, Mingo White had been separated from his birth parents, but years later was reunited with his mother and stated, “My mammy never would of seen me no mo' if de Lawd hadn't a been in de plan.”²⁷⁶ Even when just making brief statements regarding their situations, they took the time to give God the credit.

William Grimes reported that his master told his overseer to take him down to the stable and beat him.

I thought that if the order was put into execution, I could not endure it, but must die in the operation ... I looked up to heaven and prayed fervently to God to hear my prayer, and grant me relief in this hour of adversity; expecting every moment to be whipped until I could not stand; and blessed be to God that he turned their hearts before they arrived at the place of destination; for, on arriving there, I was acquitted. God delivered me from the power of the adversary... in the time of going down to the stable, I did not make a feeble attempt to induce my master not to flog me; but put my trust, and offered my prayers to my heavenly Father, who heard and answered them.²⁷⁷

Since William said nothing to his master, he gave God all the credit for the deliverance and proclaimed him as the one to call upon in the time of trouble; he was the one who could deliver.

Sojourner Truth's mother sat under the stars in the evenings with those of her children who had not yet been sold, and told them, “My children, there is a God, who

275 Sarah H. Bradfrod, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, 35.

276 *Remembering Slavery*, eds. Ira Berlin, et al., 164.

277 *Five Black Lives*, ed. Arna Bontemps, 73-74.

hears and sees you... and when you are beaten, or cruelly treated, or fall into any trouble, you must ask help of him, and he will always hear and help you.”²⁷⁸

In times of deliverance, God received the credit even when a human agent played a role. An interviewed slave remembered how his mother led a prayer meeting in a trader yard, and the next morning the slave trader came into the yard with a cat-o'-nine-tails. He ordered everyone involved in the prayer meeting to step forward. The mother stepped forward alone. The trader then commended her for her honesty and told her he would try to keep her family together, which he was able to do. “Mama jes' fell on her knees and thanked the good Lord right in front of the [man].”²⁷⁹ Their God was a God of deliverance and a God who would work justice in a world of unjust people.

Trust When Prayers Were Not Answered

Physical deliverance from specific suffering obviously did not come to all slaves who prayed for it. Trust in God took on new meaning in difficult situations where prayers were not answered to the satisfaction of the petitioner. Fascinatingly, according to the testimony given in narratives and interviews, these situations strengthened rather than weakened the faith of most individuals, even if there was a time of doubt and depression.

In examining this greater picture over which God had control, slaves did not attempt to delineate what God's exact reasons and motives could be for the events which occurred. He was their God and they were his creation, so they were answerable to him, not vice versa. Their lack of understanding did not weaken God's power or perfection.

²⁷⁸ Frances W. Titus, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 17.

²⁷⁹ *Bullwhip Days*, ed. James Mellon, 290.

Trying times resulted in growing faith instead of doubting faith. Louis Hughes' wife had twin babies, and her mistress forced her to work so much that she was unable to care for or feed her children properly so she had to labor endlessly in a losing struggle to simultaneously please her mistress and nourish her children. Louis wrote of her, "My wife was a Christian and had learned to know the worth of prayer, so would always speak consolingly, 'God will help us,' she said, 'let us try and be patient.'"²⁸⁰ Her children died six months after a failed escape attempt and she and her husband were eventually freed by running away during the Civil War.

Bishop Daniel A. Payne was a black man who opened a school for slaves in Charleston. He had to close it in 1835 because the South Carolina legislature passed a bill against teaching slaves to read. His anguish at the event was strong. He wrote, "Sometimes it seemed as though some wild beast had plunged his fangs into my heart, and was squeezing out its life-blood. Then I began to question the existence of God, and to say: 'If he does exist, is he just? If so, why does he suffer one race to oppress and enslave another...'"²⁸¹ Payne went on to express a temporary desire which he had for violent revenge against the perpetrators of slaveholding. He decided to turn away from that line of thinking, and continued his dialog by saying,

Again said I: 'Is there not God?' But then there came into my mind those solemn words: 'With God one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day. Trust in him, and he will bring slavery and all its outrages to an end.' These words from the spirit world acted on my troubled soul like water on a burning fire, and my aching heart was

280 Louis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave: From Bondage to Freedom* (Montgomery: New South, Inc., 2002), 76.

281 Benjamin J. Mays, *The Negro's God*, 49.

soothed and relieved from its burden of woes.²⁸²

Of course, Payne's hope was realized thirty years later and his desire to educate blacks received the blessing of the federal government.

While Payne was trusting the dynamics of his disrupted ambition to God, he exhibited extraordinary fortitude in dealing with race relations. He moved north and became a bishop over several pastors. At one point he kept a pastor from renewing his appointment because the pastor had allowed the black women of his church to expel a white woman because her race was incompatible with their desire to have an all black church. Payne wrote, "I believe that any pastor who would turn away from God's sanctuary any human being on account of color was not fit to have charge of a gang of dogs."²⁸³ Through his decision to trust in God, Payne moved internally from a desire for vengeance to a genuine non-racist position.

Occasionally trust in God did not even involve a hope for freedom, but rather an acceptance that there probably would not be a deliverance. This form of trust was centered around a faith that God would give strength to endure whatever occurred. Delila Garlic wrote that when she was being sold away from her mother at a young age, her mother's last words were, "Be good an' trus' in de Lawd."²⁸⁴ What did her mother mean when she encouraged her to trust in the Lord? Delila described it on the next page. "Trustin' was de only hope of de pore black critters in dem days. Us jest prayed for strength to endure it to de end. We didn't 'spect nothin' but to stay in bondage 'till we

282 Benjamin J. Mays, *The Negro's God*, 49.

283 Benjamin J. Mays, *The Negro's God*, 49, 52.

284 *Remembering Slavery*, eds. Ira Berlin, et al., 10.

died.”²⁸⁵ Her concern was about enduring and not about hastening liberation.

“And yet, not my will, but your will be done”

Slaves frequently shared the idea that whatever they were going through was God's will. If they believed in a sovereign, omnipotent God, this was their only logical choice. When God was allowing something that was undesirable to them, which was a universal phenomenon among slaves, they had an important decision to make. They could doubt God's power or even existence, they could deny his goodness, or they could accept what was happening as ultimately good. One possible reason why slaves overwhelmingly chose the last option is because when they went through their religious conversions they were already in a state of suffering. The other slaves who were telling them about Christianity were themselves suffering. If they had not been willing to simultaneously accept the doctrine of God's power and the idea that he was going to allow their suffering to continue for a time, they would not have converted to Christianity in the first place.

When it came to responding to suffering they did not wish for and could not understand, it appears that Christian slaves were familiar with the words of Jesus on the night of his betrayal, when he prayed and asked for deliverance from his coming suffering, but ended his prayer with, “Not my will, but yours be done.” They echoed his words when they were confronted with unanswered prayer. Peter Williams, Jr. prayed in 1817, “O Lord! We presume not to arraign thy counsels. Thou knowest what is best.

²⁸⁵ *Remembering Slavery*, eds. Ira Berlin, et al., 11.

Though clouds and darkness are around thee, justice and judgments are the habitation of thy seat. Teach us, O heavenly father, teach us resignation to thy will, and we shall find it all to be right in the end.”²⁸⁶ He made it very clear that he did not know the details regarding how it was going to be made right.

The words of a contraband slave in Beaufort, South Carolina reveal a faith that held up under intense fire.

O Missus! I could not hab libbed had not been for de Lord- neber! Work so late, and so early; work so hard, when side ache so. Chil'en sold; old man gone. All visitors, and company in big house; all cooking and washing all on me, and neber done enough. Missus neber satisfied – no hope, Noting, noting but Jesus, I look up. Oh Lord! How long? Give me patience! Patience! O Lord! Only Jesus know how bad I feel; adrsnt tell any body, else get flogged. Darsn't call upon de Lord; darsn't tell when sick. But ... I said Jesus, if it *your will*, I bear it.²⁸⁷ (italics added)

Her situation is by no means unique, either through the trials she suffered or her response.

William Grimes shared her decision when he found his new master intolerable to live with. He formulated a plan to break his own leg with an ax so he would be left behind when his master moved. He decided to abandon this plan, and recorded his thoughts. “... Thy will not mine be done... God had not left me in my sixth trouble, and would be with me in the seventh. Accordingly I tried no more to destroy myself. I then prayed to God, that if it was his will that I should go, that I might willingly...”²⁸⁸

Slaves often accepted that the will of God was not something that they could always alter, even through prayer. Bettie Jones said that, “What God wills must happen to

286 James Melvin Washington, *Conversations with God*, 17.

287 Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 310.

288 *Five Black Lives*, ed. Arna Bontemps, 78.

us.”²⁸⁹ An acceptance of God's will meant that the slaves trusted that God's greater purposes were more important than their temporary comfort. While God could bring about their immediate comfort, he chose not to, for reasons that only he knew, but that they could trust to be right and good.

Sometimes that reason was so that they could learn about Christianity. While slaves scoffed at slaveholders who justified slavery under the pretensions that at least they had brought the gospel to the slaves by bringing them over from Africa, and argued in return that God would have been perfectly capable of bringing them the gospel by another, less brutal means, they sometimes commented that one of the good things brought out of slavery was their spiritual salvation. Phillis Wheatley famous poem, “On Being Brought From Africa to America” states, “’Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land, Taught my benighted heart to understand, That there's a God--that there's a Savior too...” Daniel Coker, at the end of protest pamphlet he wrote, quoted the Bible to say of “Ethiopia's sons in the United States of America” that they were “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood and a holy nation... that should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light: which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.”²⁹⁰ He was protesting slavery in his pamphlet and that was his whole purpose in writing it, but he also was simultaneously praising God for the spiritual situation of the African American people.

²⁸⁹ Ronald L. Baker, *Homeless, Friendless and Penniless*, 34.

²⁹⁰ *Negro Protest Pamphlets*, ed. Dorothy Porter, 39-40.

Phillis, Daniel, and the thousands of slaves who felt like they did, believed slavery was an evil that God would eventually eliminate. They thought it had been caused by the sin and greed of fallen mankind, but which God had allowed to happen even though he could have stopped it, and which he was using for his glory and the spiritual growth of the Christian slaves. This explains how they could both term their enslavement “mercy,” and detest that enslavement, praying for and desiring its end.

In the midst of the trials that God allowed, they felt they could trust him to give them the ability to endure whatever difficulties they faced. Louis Hughes said that, “God only knows what I suffered under it all, and He alone gave me strength to endure it.”²⁹¹ Enduring without losing hope was no small challenge for a slave.

Suffering of -and for- Jesus

Slaves called Jesus “the rock that is higher than I” which identified him and his work as something bigger and greater than themselves and their lives.²⁹² However, he certainly was not viewed as out of reach for them, particularly because of the events of his life. Faith in God was strengthened for the slaves by their understanding of the crucifixion and death of Christ. Harry Richardson pointed out that “the fact that Jesus was a *suffering* Savior was especially appropriate for the slaves.”²⁹³ They believed that Jesus had suffered, and consequently he understood their suffering. They felt like they had a powerful and compassionate friend in Jesus. Peter Randolph wrote in his narrative

291 Louis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 71.

292 *American Negro Songs and Spirituals*, ed. John W. Work (New York: Bonanza Books, 1940), 75.

293 Harry V. Richardson, *Dark Salvation*, 47.

that “the slaves talk much of the sufferings of Christ; and oftentimes, when they are called to suffer at the hands of their cruel overseers, they think of what he endured, and derive patience and consolation from his example.”²⁹⁴ If their God endured suffering, he could sustain them to be able to do the same.²⁹⁵

While many slaves looked to the suffering of Jesus, a few suffered for Jesus. David Walker discussed slaves who were beaten for their faith and concluded that “the persistence of some blacks, despite the beatings, in practicing Christianity invested [them] with qualities of martyrdom.”²⁹⁶ Many masters did not appreciate the religion of their slaves and forbid meetings, possibly for political reasons more than spiritual ones. The overturned pot was not always enough to keep the meeting from being broken up by an angry overseer or vicious paddy-rollers. On a smaller scale, some slaves were specifically forbidden from praying or preaching and suffered the lash for any infringements on their master's wishes.

A slave named George in Georgia was ordered to stop preaching. He was threatened with 500 lashes if he continued. After he was discovered preaching again, he ran away. He was caught and burned to death “in the presence of an immense assemblage of slaves, which had been gathered together to witness the horrid spectacle from a distance of 20 miles in extent.”²⁹⁷

294 Peter Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life: Or, Illustrations of the 'Peculiar Institution'* (Boston: James H Earle, 1855), 34.

295 Hebrews 2:10 states that Jesus was made perfect through suffering. I was not able to locate any quotes where slaves used that passage to develop an analogy to their own suffering, but it certainly contains a great deal of potential with this subject.

296 Sterling Suckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 112.

297 *Slave Testimony*, ed. John Blassingame, 25.

Sarah Grimke, one of the famous Grimke sister abolitionists from South Carolina, told a story concerning a neighboring plantation. Two masters got into an argument over the religion of slaves. One man said that it was all hypocrisy, and the other claimed he had a slave who would rather die than renounce his faith. The master then sent for his slave and “ordered him to deny his belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. The slave pleaded to be excused, constantly affirming that he would rather die than deny the Redeemer, whose blood was shed for him.” The slave was severely whipped. “The fortitude of the sufferer was not to be shaken; he nobly rejected the offer of exemption from further chastisement, at the expense of destroying his soul and... died in consequence of this severe affliction.”²⁹⁸

Sometimes the persecution simply involved withholding privileges, such as when Charles Thompson was told many times that “if I would quiet preaching and talking to the slaves on religious subjects, I should be advanced and my life made easy and comfortable.”²⁹⁹ Stories of martyred and persecuted slaves had the twofold purpose of exalting the slave and condemning the system they suffered in.

Trials for Spiritual Growth

In viewing existence on an eternal scale, the slave's relationship with Jesus was their primary concern. Lucy, a slave of Charles C. Jones in Savannah, wrote a letter wherein she poured out her heart and said,

I have become an entirely afflicted woman, but I leave all things in the

²⁹⁸ *American Slavery as it is*, ed. William Loren Katz, 24.

²⁹⁹ Charles Thompson, *Biography of a Slave*, 51.

hands of Providence. When I became afflicted I was much troubled with my husband and afflictions, but Oh! Thankful as the Almighty directed it has all happened for the best. Before I understood I often heard that trials and afflictions were the means of driving you near your savior, that saying has been verified in my case. How thankful I am for the feelings which now occupy my heart in regard to my Savior.³⁰⁰

She was thankful for suffering since it strengthened her relationship with Jesus. That was obviously of greater value to her than her comfort.

William Douglass, preaching in a black church in the 1850s, said, “There is no such thing as chance in the history of God's people. Every event of their life, however afflicted in its character, is a link in that golden chain, which is to raise them progressively from earth to heaven.”³⁰¹ Reformation theology, which the Baptist and Methodist churches both existed under, did not teach that salvation could be earned, but rather was by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone, so Douglass is probably not referring to earning salvation step by step. His concern appears to be with the character development of the individual who is being more prepared for an eternal state, and that individual's relationship with God.

Difficulties were often described as “trials.” The term indicates a testing, or a work to develop some kind of improvement in the one going through the trial. The spiritual growth idea tended to have a twofold meaning. First and foremost, it drew the one who was suffering into a closer relationship with Jesus as they learned to depend upon him more. At the same time, the strengthening of this crucial relationship through an increase in faith was believed to strengthen the slave as a person. An observer wrote

300 *Slave Testimony*, ed. John Blassingame, 90.

301 Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God*, 54.

of Reuben Madison and his wife Betsy, when they faced a separation by sale, “They appear to put their trust and confidence in God, and express their entire belief that all their trials are designed for their good.”³⁰²

Solomon Bayley was a slave who wrote out his inmost thoughts in regard to his internal struggles about his suffering. He believed that, “The greater the trial, the greater the benefit, *if* the mind be but staid on that everlasting arm of power, whom the winds and waves obey.”³⁰³(italics added) He believed that when his mind was focused on God, the benefit increased as he went through the trial. After being sold away from his wife and child, he felt past all hope, but he said that then “[God] sent a strengthening thought into my heart, which was this: that he made the heavens and the earth.”³⁰⁴ Again, he focused back on God's creative power in his process of reassuring himself about the benefits of his suffering. He also wrote that,

My understanding was opened to see for what purpose this last trial had happened unto me; and it was impressed on my mind that I had come through difficulties and troubles, in order that my faith and confidence might be tried; and that I might be made strong in the faith to believe that so high and holy a one, who had thus marvelously preserved me, would hereafter help so poor an object as me, out of his great mercy and condescension, and that I might be afraid to sin against his majesty, who had suffered me to be thus sorely tried, that I might see the greatness of my past transgressions, and his boundless loving-kindness and mercy.³⁰⁵

302 *Slave Testimony*, ed. John Blassingame, 188.

303 Solomon Bayley, *A Narrative of some Remarkable Incidents in the Life of Solomon Bayley, etc.* (London: Harvey and Darton, 1825), 8.

304 Solomon Bayley, *A Narrative*, 2.

305 Solomon Bayley, *A Narrative*, 14-15.

He believed that the trial had revealed his faith as genuine, and he was hopeful that they would lead to less sin in his life and a greater appreciation and reverence for his God.

For slaves, their relationship with Jesus could be an encouragement as they entered the insecurities of old age. As their usefulness in labor declined, they could expect to be treated with even more neglect by their masters. Maria Stewart looked at the old age that was coming upon her and prayed, “O, continue thy lovingkindness even unto the end; and when health and strength begin to decay, and I, as it were, draw nigh unto the grave, O then afford me thy heart cheering presence and enable me to rely entirely upon thee. Never leave me nor forsake me, but have mercy upon me for thy great name's sake.”³⁰⁶ It is very interesting that this elderly woman concludes her prayer by asking God to be merciful towards her “for [his] great name's sake.” She is echoing the words of Psalm 23, where it states that “[God] restores my soul for his name's sake.” The idea it appears to hold is that the reputation and honor of God is the ultimate goal of his protective actions, and for Maria, this was her ultimate goal as well.

The outcome of these trials could be seen in “Granny,” a slave interviewed by Mary White Orlington in 1910. Mary interviewed several other family members before getting to Granny, and described her as a very old lady with no teeth but a pleasant smile, and spoken of highly by both blacks and whites. When interviewed, Granny gave a description of her life under slavery that included repeated rape, having children sold away from her, whippings and hard labor. Orlington asked, “Granny... how did you bear it all, how did you live?” Granny answered, “I couldn't 'er done it, dear, widout Master

³⁰⁶ James Melvin Washington, *Conversations with God*, 27.

Jesus. He's held me up. I 'd'er died long ago widout him.”³⁰⁷ An ex-slave, Sister Kelly, stated in an interview that “you got to know something 'bout the Lord to git along anywhere.”³⁰⁸ These elderly ladies were looking back over their lives and giving credit to Jesus for their mental health and very survival. Others who observed slaves also credited whatever joy and satisfaction they had to a relationship with Jesus. Freeborn Garrettson was a white Methodist traveling preacher to slaves and he wrote that their “sufferings...drove them near to the Lord, and many of them were amazingly happy.”³⁰⁹

For some slaves, the good that came out of their faith in God through trials was the ability to do good to their fellow humans. James Mars wrote that one of the outcomes of his trust in God was “so that I may do good to my fellow man.”³¹⁰ Love for one's neighbor was an important part of the “effort to counteract the destructive effects of the conditions in which American slavery and prejudice were forcing black people to live.”³¹¹ Slaves believed that God both required that love as well as providing the strength to have it. The spirituals had lines such as “Lord, make me more loving” or patient, or holy, or peaceful.³¹² Sin was something they wished to avoid and righteousness something they wanted to gain in a focus directed more toward inward character than toward outward socio-economic condition.

307 *Slave Testimony*, ed. John Blassingame, 541.

308 *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in Slave Narratives*, eds. Dwight N. Hopkins, George Cummings (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 125.

309 Harry V. Richardson, *Dark Salvation*, 46.

310 *Five Black Lives*, ed. Arna Bontemps, 57.

311 Harry V. Richardson, *Dark Salvation*, 184.

312 William Francis Allen, etc., *Slave Songs of the United States*, 52.

Sin: The Real Culprit

Slaves went beyond just believing that God would bring good out of suffering, and with the concept of sin explained why the suffering occurred in the first place. When slaves adopted the Biblical concept of sin they had a terminology and also an ideological framework for understanding the cause of their suffering. Slavery was a condition which allowed masters a great deal of freedom and self-expression in how they handled their slaves. The relationship between the slave, who was classified as chattel property, and the master did not have the same legal constraints that other human relationships function under. Many lived in isolated areas which increased their freedom of action. In this situation, slaves viewed what they termed the depravity of mankind. Among the thousands of narratives and interviews that I have read in full or in part, I have not found one which contains a slave who alludes to any of the modern concerns against Christianity on the basis of its view of the human condition. Instead, slaves rejected Christianity because some masters were both cruel and simultaneously professed Christianity. Slaves suffered from no delusions about the innate goodness of mankind after observing slaveholders eagerly and thoroughly embracing an abusive system. While living a life of suffering through beatings, family separations, sexual assault, forced labor and degraded condition, all systematically inflicted by other human beings, many slaves accepted the teaching that man is a sinner in desperate need of a savior, without whom he will enter into the judgment of a just God. As Nathaniel Paul said in his speech presented in New York at the abolition of slavery, slavery is “one of the most pernicious and

abominable of all enterprises, in which the depravity of human nature ever led man to engage.”³¹³ This depravity of human nature was not only the root cause of slavery, but was by itself a much greater problem to the slaves than slavery.

Slaves did not limit their rhetoric regarding sin to their masters. They often expressed sorrow and even internal suffering because of their sense of their own sin. When Reuben Madison's wife and child were secretly sold away from him in a situation where he had no opportunity to bid them farewell, he described the situation as, “the severest trial of my life, a sense of sin only excepted. I mourned and cried and would not be comforted.”³¹⁴ His wording indicates that his mourning, crying and refusal to be comforted was even greater when he realized his sinfulness. George Anderson described his religious conversion, which occurred years before emancipation, and said, “I did not cast off the chains of slavery at the time of surrender, they fell off at that camp meeting.”³¹⁵ His freedom from sin was more significant in his mind than his freedom from slavery.

Jupiter Hammon encouraged his fellow slaves in a “Address to the Negroes in the State of New York” in 1787 with the following words. “Let me beg of you ... think very little of your bondage in this life; for your thinking of it will do you no good. If God designs to set us free, he will do it in his own time and way, but think of your bondage to sin and Satan and do not rest until you are delivered from it.”³¹⁶ He does encourage slaves

313 *Negro Protest Pamphlets*, ed. Dorothy Porter, 4.

314 *Slave Testimony*, ed. John Blassingame, 185.

315 *Slave Testimony*, ed. John Blassingame, 569.

316 Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God*, 49.

to seek liberty, and even calls it a great thing, so his emphasis is not on avoiding liberty but on focusing on the more serious matter which, in his view, was slavery to sin.

Even wrongdoing specific to slavery was not limited to the white race. According to the testimony of William Grimes, “This being so often the case, the negro drivers and indeed the slaves, show much less humanity in punishment, than the masters themselves.”³¹⁷ He also expressed that “the disposition to tyrannize over those under us, is universal; and there is no one who will not occasionally do it.”³¹⁸ Slaves sometimes “mercilessly inflicted pain on other slaves.”³¹⁹ To the slaves, sin was the cause of their suffering on this planet and their hope lay in a future world without either their own sin or that inflicted by others.

Thankfulness and Forgiveness

Another response to suffering that amazingly became an element of slave life was thankfulness. Having an attitude of thankfulness toward God was very important to slaves. When becoming part of the church “folkses testified den 'bout de goodness of de Lord and His many blessin's what he give.”³²⁰ Slaves were also sometimes noticeably more thankful than their masters. Abel Stevens, a Methodist historian, wrote about Henry D Gough, a wealthy slaveholder who was rendered very uncomfortable by the thankful attitude of slaves.

Riding to one of his plantations, he heard the voice of prayer and praise in

317 William Grimes, *The Life of William Grimes*, 18.

318 William Grimes, *The Life of William Grimes*, 20.

319 David Emmanuel Goatley, *Were You There? Godforsakenness in Slave Religion*, 30

320 *Bullwhip Days*, ed. James Mellon, 363.

a cabin, and listening, discovered that a negro from a neighboring estate was leading the devotions of his own slaves, and offering fervent thanksgivings for the blessings of their depressed lot. His heart touched and with emotions he exclaimed, 'Alas, O Lord, I have my thousands and tens of thousands, and yet, ungrateful wretch that I am, I never thanked thee, as this poor slave does, who has scarcely clothes to put on or food to satisfy his hunger.'³²¹

Charles Thompson shared how he led many a prayer meeting during slavery where the slaves earnestly thanked God for their many blessings. Anticipating that his readers may wonder what those “many blessings” consisted of, he went on to define them.

Then what had we, poor wretches, to thank God for? For everything we enjoyed, --for life, for the blessed plan of salvation, for our senses of seeing, hearing and feeling, for our hearts with which to love him, for our humanity, for the great gifts of sunshine, rain, regulated seasons, the moon, the stars, the earth, the trees, the brooks, the rivers, --everything truly enjoyable we thanked God for. We thanked him for health and strength to do his work. Then we had a great deal to thank Almighty God for, although slaves.³²²

Phillis Wheatley, who certainly had a situation superior to that of many slaves, wrote in an address to God, “Grant me to live a life of gratitude to thee for thy innumerable benefits.”³²³

Slaves also encouraged their masters to be thankful and trust in God when they were on cordial enough terms for such intimate communications. Hannah, a slave of Thomas Jefferson, wrote a letter to him which said,

I was sorry to hear that you are so unwell you could not come it grieve me many time but I hope as you have been so blessed in this that you considered it was God that done it and no one other We all ought to be thankful for what he has done for us we ought to serve and obey his

321 Harry V. Richardson, *Dark Salvation*, 45.

322 Charles Thompson, *Biography of a Slave*, 55.

323 James Melvin Washington, *Conversations with God*, 7.

commandments that you may set to win the prize and after glory run.³²⁴

Whether their abuse came directly as a consequence of their Christianity or just in the general course of slavery, slaves had a decision to make regarding their own responses. They could seek revenge overtly or covertly, or they could choose to forgive the whites who abused them. Since their interactions were daily and often intense, the internal response that slaves gave to their abuse were key in the formation of the slaves character, and subsequently their way of handling all situations in their lives.

There are many obvious problems with revenge. Acts of revenge between parties alienate those parties from each other. Counter revenge keeps the cycle going. The character of an individual is affected by dwelling on thoughts of revenge, anger and hatred. The anger can take a wide variety of paths and end out targeting someone who was completely innocent in the original transgression. Revenge rarely satisfies anyone's sense of justice since the wrong cannot possibly be totally erased and all repercussions removed. Mary Armstrong's nine month old little sister was beaten to death by a slaveholder named Polly. One day Mary, who had a different owner, carried out revenge on Polly by throwing a rock at her and "busting her eyeball." Even that action was not sufficient for vengeance in Mary's mind, for she said that, "Old Polly was mean.. till she die, and I hope [she] is burnin' in torment now."³²⁵

In regards to dealing with the anger and frustration that resulted from being abused, slaves had four options. They could seek revenge themselves or just desire it if

324 *Slave Testimony*, ed. John Blassingame, 15.

325 *Voices from Slavery: 100 Authentic Slave Narratives*, ed. Norman R. Yetman (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2000), 19.

they were fearful of actually seeking it, hope that God would carry out vengeance, forgive the person, or separate themselves from the person as much as possible. Frequently, during slavery this last option was not possible, so a choice had to be made from among the other three. Those slaves who were forced to remain in abusive situations had to regularly confront their own emotional responses.

When slaves forgave their masters, their decisions and actions were truly superhuman. The severity of the offenses, the consistency and the overwhelming number of them all made the situation of slavery truly a most paramount example of human suffering inflicted by another human. In this context, the possibilities of forgiveness are clearly demonstrated by the slaves.

Religious slaves developed a reputation for practicing forgiveness which included praying for their persecutors and hoping the very best for them. In recalling slavery, Louis Hughes stated, "It mattered not what their troubles had been during the week... the prayer meeting on Saturday evening never failed to be held. Their faith was tried and true ... It was pathetic to hear them pray, from the depths of their hearts, for them who 'despitefully used them and persecuted them.' This injunction of our Savior was strictly adhered to."³²⁶ Reverend J. W. C. Pennington said, referring to blacks, "Yes, I have shown you a people who are practicing, more faithfully than any other, the true Christian law of moral power. I mean the law of forgiveness and endurance of wrong."³²⁷ He went on to say that such a people would never be crushed.

³²⁶ Louis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 47.

³²⁷ Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God*, 53-54.

Forgiveness is deeply rooted in Christianity. Forgiveness did not mean accepting the behavior as right, but rather trusting that vengeance did not belong to them and that their role was to do good to those who hurt them. Jesus taught that his followers were not simply to love those who love them, but to love their enemies, including those who persecuted them.³²⁸ He set the example by verbalizing forgiveness for those who crucified him.

Black spiritual leaders, the theologians of the religious community, also had a great deal to say about forgiveness and against revenge. William Whipper, “a noted anti-slavery worker and agent of the underground railroad” wrote:

If amid these difficulties [slavery and prejudice] we can but possess our souls in patience we shall finally triumph over our enemies. But among the various duties that devolve on us, not the least is that which relates to ourselves. We must learn on all occasions to rebuke the spirit of violence, both in sentiment and practice. God has said, 'vengeance is mine, I will repay.' Therefore, let us ... obliterate from our minds the idea of revenge, and from our hearts all wicked intentions toward each other and the world and we shall be able through the blessing of Almighty God to do much to establish the principles of universal peace.³²⁹

While some slaves eagerly looked to the possibility of hell for their masters as a perfect form of vengeance, others actually appear to have reached a point where they truly desired the best for their masters. Of course, this included a change of heart for the master that would lead them away from their current behavior as well as keep them out of hell!

An example of such complete forgiveness was David Walker, a black preacher in

³²⁸ Matthew 5:44

³²⁹ Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God*, 114.

the early 19th century, who was free himself although very troubled about slavery. He encouraged both slave and free blacks to do all they could to bring slavery to an end. He believed that God was good and just and would punish slaveholders and end slavery. Even though he died in 1830, he, like many others, predicted the Civil War. He referred to God's punishment of the Egyptians and believed "God would disrupt America and free the slaves through physical force" and also "that God would destroy many whites."³³⁰ However, he said, "I would like to see the whites repent peradventure God may have mercy on them."³³¹

Daniel Alexander Payne was a black teacher who "persistently hated slavery but hoped for the conversion of the slaveholders."³³² His attitude showed a willingness toward forgiveness and reconciliation. He believed, "The source capable of establishing true liberation and reconciliation among blacks and whites was Jesus Christ."³³³

The spiritual leadership of Harriet Tubman is unquestioned. It would be difficult to find a higher title than "Moses of her people" for any African American slave. Moses, who led Hebrew slaves out of bondage, was the favorite Bible character for slaves, excepting only Jesus. Her greatest compliment from the slaveholding establishment was a \$40,000 reward offered for her capture. Her extraordinary mental health, despite a head injury, played a crucial role in her planning and execution of dozens of escapes.

Harriet Tubman has been eulogized as an example of ideal forgiveness. She was

330 Henry J. Young, *Major Black Religious Leaders*, 49.

331 Henry J. Young, *Major Black Religious Leaders*, 49.

332 Henry J. Young, *Major Black Religious Leaders*, 68.

333 Henry J. Young, *Major Black Religious Leaders*, 69.

hired out to a cruel, abusive woman who continually whipped her, and required her to sit up at night to care for a baby. Then she was hired out to a man who inflicted a lifelong injury on her, “by breaking her skull with a weight from the scales” which were hurtled at another slave and struck her instead.³³⁴ After suffering numerous abuses at the hands of her master and other whites her master rented her out to, she said that from Christmas until March, “I worked as I could and I *prayed* all the long nights – I groaned and prayed for ole master: 'Oh lord, convert Master!' 'Oh Lord, change dat man's heart!' 'Pears like I prayed all de time.’”³³⁵

The internal change that she was praying would occur in her master was also what she was requesting for herself. Her prayers involved asking God to wash her own heart, wipe her clean, and sweep sin out of her heart, often corresponding with whatever task she was carrying out at the moment. Clearly, her own spiritual state was the main emphasis for her as she was dealing with her attitude toward her master. A drama was carried out within Harriet's own mind. How was she going to handle her relationship with her master, as well as all the effects it was having on her life and health?

After praying for her master for what appears to be months, one day, “I changed my prayer. Fust of March I began to pray, 'Oh lord, If you ant nebber gwine to change dat man's heart, kill him, Lord, an' take him out ob de way.’”³³⁶ Was her desire for revenge? Her prayer seems to be saying that if the master will never have a spiritual, internal change, then she could not see any purpose in the continuation of his existence. Her

334 Sarah H. Bradfrod, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, 13.

335 Sarah H. Bradfrod, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, 14.

336 Sarah H. Bradfrod, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, 14-15.

master died shortly afterward, and she said, “Oh, then, it 'peared like I'd give all de world full ob gold, if I had it, to bring dat poor soul back. But I couldn't pray for him no longer.”³³⁷ She seems to have experienced genuine, sincere sorrow at the fact that her master never underwent a spiritual change and died the same cruel man he had always been in her experience. This compassion was not limited to those who had never wronged her, but included people like her cruel master as well.

Harriet's forgiveness shaped her character and led to her compassionate, self-sacrificing work to rescue slaves. Her compassion was not sloppy sentimentality. She often said that she would shoot any man who fell behind since someone too weak to keep up would be weak enough to turn them all in. She once came to the brink of carrying this threat out, when the man about to be shot decided he could find the strength to continue on after all.

This spirit of forgiveness served her well in her personal life. After her own escape, she worked hard and saved money for two years, and then returned to her former town to get her husband. By that time, her husband had taken a new wife for himself, and did not wish to join her. After going through a stage of grief and anger, she determined that she could do without her husband, and “he dropped out of her heart.”³³⁸ She then devoted herself to helping other people escape, even taking her elderly parents out in a wagon.

As one biographer wrote of her,

337 Sarah H. Bradfrod, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, 15.

338 *African American Voices: The Life Cycle of Slavery*, ed. Steven Mintz, 150.

Harriet's charity for the human race is unbounded. It embraces even the slaveholders... she said, "I tink dar's many a slaveholder'll git to Heaven. Dey don't know no better. Dey acts up to de light dey hab. You take dat sweet little child (pointing to a lonely baby) – 'pears more like an angel dan anyting else – take her down dere, let her nebber now nothing 'bout niggers but they was made to be whipped, an' she'll grow up to use the whip on 'em jus' like de rest. No Missus, its because dey don't know no better."³³⁹

Harriet serves as an example of an individual who experienced great suffering and within it practiced forgiveness and compassion. After suffering so much herself, and forgiving those who inflicted it, she became zealous and useful in alleviating the sufferings of others. Not only did she help other slaves escape bondage, but during the Civil War she worked among diseased soldiers, often risking illness herself. Her focus was outward, on helping others.

Forgiveness is a deeply personal, internal decision that may not be immediately apparent but can have long term results. It lifts the giver from a focus on their pain, frustration and anger to a broader picture which includes the good of everyone involved. When he was accused of stealing a bottle of wine that he had not taken, William Grime wrote, "I forgave my master in my own heart for all this, and prayed to God to forgive him and turn his heart."³⁴⁰ Like Harriet, he was concerned about the "heart" of his Master.

A desire for revenge sometimes was replaced with forgiveness. Lucretia Alexander shared how her mother was beaten by a mistress named Phipps. "I aimed to get old Phipps for that. But then I got religion and I couldn't do it. Religion makes you

³³⁹ Sarah H. Bradfrod, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, 112-113.

³⁴⁰ *Five Black Lives*, ed. Arna Bontemps, 99.

forget a heap of things.”³⁴¹ James Mar wrote that after suffering under the lash, which his master was so fond of using, “I thought so then and made up my mind if I ever was the strongest I would pay back some of it.”³⁴² However, later this master joined a church, and then James joined the same church. James obtained his freedom and headed out west, but when he returned he visited the family. James was present at the final sickness and death of both his ex-master and one of the daughters and even cared for his ailing ex-master for some time before he died. The warmth in the relationship was not based on paternity through slavery, but rather on a relationship that was possible only because James gave up the idea of paying his master back, forgave him and allowed a genuine friendship to grow between them after the slave-master relationship ended.

Forgiveness did not necessarily come easily to the slaves. Solomon Bayley found that he was able to forgive the man who sold his wife and daughter, but he classified it as impossible without spiritual intervention, and said, “I should have fainted, if I had not looked to Jesus, the author of my faith.”³⁴³

Forgiveness was not always possible for slaves who did believe that it was the right thing to do. Charlie Moss said that, “I know it ain't right to have hate in the heart, but God Almighty – it's hard to be forgivin' when I think of old man Rankin.” In discussing Rankin, he stated the conclusion that, “The God Almighty has condemned him to eternal fiah. Of that I is certain.”³⁴⁴

341 *Voices from Slavery: 100 Authentic Slave Narratives*, ed. Norman R. Yetman, 13.

342 *Five Black Lives*, ed. Arna Bontemps, 48.

343 Solomon Bayley, *A narrative*, 26.

344 *Bullwhip Days*, ed. James Mellon, 180 & 178, respectively.

Trust in God could truly be many, sometimes apparently contradictory, things at once. Its basic concepts were widespread among slaves and played a clear role in their management of suffering. Richard Allen summarized the meaning of faith in God for slaves as he confronted the suffering of the slaves unwaveringly, yet affirmed God's goodness in the midst of it, and his absolute confidence of an eternal existence.

O, precious blood of my dear Redeemer! ...Who can contemplate the sufferings of God incarnate, and not raise his hope, and not put his trust in Him? What, though my body be crumbled into dust, and that dust blown over the face of the earth, yet I undoubtedly know my Redeemer lives, and shall raise me up at the last day; whether I am comforted or left desolate; whether I enjoy peace or am afflicted with temptations; whether I am healthy or sickly, succored or abandoned by the good things of this life, I will always hope in thee, O, my chiefest, infinite good. Although [life contains loss and suffering], yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. What, though I mourn and am afflicted here, and sigh under the miseries of this world for a time, I am sure that my tears shall one day be turned into joy, and that joy none shall take from me.³⁴⁵

He faced the possibility of future suffering, and yet expressed both joy in the next life, as well as in this life, springing from his trust in God.

Trust in God is not the antithesis of suicide, and some individuals, such as John Joseph, whose suicide contemplation is discussed in chapter four, experienced both in a very short period of time. However, suicide and trust in God are very different responses to suffering. In situations of suicide, no redemptive value is placed on the slave's situation. He or she does not view any advantage in continuing their existence. In contrast, trust in God involved accepting the suffering and viewing it as part of a larger plan that would ultimately work for good. One involved turning from the pain and the

³⁴⁵ James Melvin Washington, *Conversations with God*, 10.

other required facing it. Both were options available to slaves and the trust in God choice appears to have been considerably more widespread.

The result of this experience was an African American culture that upheld faith and strength under pressure and condemned suicide. Their suffering was not to end with slavery, so nor could their responses to it. As long as the reality of suffering exists, people will search for and implement their own ways of managing it.

CONCLUSION

According to the comments of Abraham Lincoln, Josiah Henson played a pivotal role in starting the civil war. Josiah wrote his life story, and then three years later was interviewed by Harriet Beecher Stowe, who was inspired by his autobiography to write a fictional account, known to the world as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Josiah was a deeply religious slave who became an itinerant preacher and attempted to purchase himself from his master through his own labor and the gifts of others who hoped he could devote himself to full time spiritual leadership in the African American community. When his master cheated Josiah out of the money he had given for his purchase, Josiah wrote, “I... set about my work again, with as quiet a mind as I could command, resolved to trust in God, and never despair.”³⁴⁶ This resolve continued until he found himself heading south, on a ship with his master's son and three other white men, destined by his master to be sold away from his family and friends in the New Orleans slave markets. On this trip Josiah had a great deal of time to think, and he “changed... from a... pleasant-tempered fellow into a savage, morose, dangerous slave [determined that he] was going not at all as a lamb unto the slaughter, but... became more and more agitated with an almost uncontrollable fury.”³⁴⁷ Since he was required to steer the boat, and developed a skill at navigating it, in his “savage” and “dangerous” state he decided that he could kill his four companions and take the boat north by himself. He took an axe one night to where his companions lay sleeping.

346 Josiah Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave* (Boston: Arthur D. Phelps, 1849), 48.

347 Josiah Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave*, 53.

I raised it to strike the fatal blow,- when suddenly the thought came to me, “What! Commit murder! And you a Christian?” I had not called it murder before. It was self-defense, - it was preventing others from murdering me,- it was justifiable, it was even praiseworthy. But now, all at once, the truth burst upon me that it was a crime. I was going to kill a young man who had done nothing to injure me, but obey commands which he could not resist; I was about to lose the fruit of all my efforts at self-improvement, the character I had acquired, and the peace of mind which had never deserted me... I... laid down the axe... and thanked God, as I have done every day since, that I had not committed murder... nothing brought composure to my mind, but the solemn resolution I then made to resign myself to the will of God, and take with thankfulness, if I could, but with submission, at all events, whatever he might decide should be my lot. I reflected that if my life were reduced to a brief term, I should have less to suffer, and that it was better to die with a Christian's hope, and a quiet conscience, than to live with the incessant recollection of a crime that would destroy the value of life, and under the weight of a secret that would crush out the satisfaction that might be expected from freedom and every other blessing.³⁴⁸

Just as in the situations of suicide, the real drama was what was going on in Josiah's mind. He turned from his path of murder when he decided to trust God with his circumstances. His self-improvement, character, and perhaps most importantly, his peace of mind were the internal verifications he had of God's goodness and work in his life, and Josiah chose a life from which he could still take satisfaction, even if that life was to be short and contain suffering. Perchance the slaves were willing to embrace a sovereign and loving God who allowed them to suffer because of the very changes they had felt within their own character.

Regardless of the intensity of suffering, living with it is a battle of the mind and the will. It is viewed through the lenses of experience, expectation and faith. For those who see redemptive value in their suffering, it can become part of their character and

³⁴⁸ Josiah Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave*, 55-56.

spiritual development. For many slaves, this is exactly what suffering became.

The fact that so few slaves despaired of life to the point of suicide, and so many slaves expressed faith, thankfulness and forgiveness within the context of their suffering, demonstrates the success of the slave community, culture and religion in providing meaning for the lives of the slaves. As far back as 1972, Blassingame argued that within the slave community, “relative freedom of thought and action helped the slave to preserve his personal autonomy and create a culture which has contributed a great deal to American life and thought.”³⁴⁹ Thirty-three years and thousands of books and articles later, this hypothesis has been solidified into an indisputable fact. Through their creative response to enslavement the slaves provide a model which all people can learn from when determining how they will handle their suffering.

349 John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), viii.

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