

I'm Sick to Death of Florida's Racism

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Before the Florida Department of Education issued its curriculum directive that slavery in the United States did, after all, produce “personal benefits” for the enslaved in the form of a well-stocked resumé of trades, useful after Emancipation in 1863, the board members might have consulted a seminal document in the literature of the oppressed—Angela Davis’s 1971 essay, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves.”

These days we’ve rightly exchanged the conditional designation, “slave,” for enslaved person. Fifty years ago, Davis prophesized this nominative shift; she cataloged the means by which Black women resisted the shackles. Among the first scholars to gather the evidence, Davis argued that a woman (daughter, mother, wife) was equal to a man in attacking bondage, surreptitiously and openly, at her peril. “If she was burned, hanged, broken on the wheel, her head paraded on poles before her brothers and sisters, she must have also felt the wedge of this counter-insurgency as a fact of her daily existence.”

Where did the woman’s skill in improvising defiance with her wiles and deceit come from? Obviously, such resistance wasn’t taught by any master or wife and was not covered in the *McGuffey Reader* in a chapter on treachery. Her refusal to kowtow lies in the organic ingenuity and duplicity oppressed people adopt. Any “personal benefit” was invented on the spot by and for the enslaved.

According to Davis, here’s some of the devious tactics women parlayed against the master and his mistress: poisoning food and medicine with subtle folk remedies; fawning praise and obsequy to earn and undermine trust; caretaking children with moral instruction and compassion; disrupting schedules and household tasks; pilfering, breaking tools, overcooking oatmeal, fouling crops,

slowing work details, exercising indolence, and exacting all sorts of domestic sabotage.

Some women outright rebelled—and, if caught, paid the price. They started fires in homes and outbuildings as payback or as cover for revolts. They hid runaways and staffed escape routes. They helped children feign illnesses. And some even killed their babies rather than have them live a life of forced labor.

She would ferociously attack and brawl if the master tried to “take” her. Much written and oral testimony backs this up, the violence waged against sexual conquest, the mental strain Black mothers faced, trapped between raising children (mulatto, maroon) and seeking retribution with the “fathers.” This managing of her choiceless condition was often met by cruelty from a slaveholder’s wife who may have slaveholder’s wife herself been raped.

A few historians before Davis (Herbert Aptheker was one) wrote of the skills at insurgency developed by U.S. slaves. Today, we recognize how resistance was practiced by women, their opportunities perhaps more available than the men’s—in the field, in the house, on the underground railroad, and in the domestic survival of an enslaved family.

But these things are hardly what the Florida educators mean by “personal benefits.” No, this is authoritarian conservatism, the dictates of white nationalists, fashioning policy. They are speaking to parents of the state’s blank slates who believe “fairmindedness” is in order when teaching American slavery, that, after years of bad press, they need to rehabilitate the slavers and the cause of the South.

If you like, here’s another way: African adults were forced into bondage in the Atlantic trade only to have their offspring, mercilessly, born into it, separated from their parents, sold, and worked to death as a matter of course.

The implication of Florida’s directive is as clear as a desert sky. Some contemporary white apologists seek to redefine slavery as an “issue” of a well-meaning rabble of their forebears, who designed the practice so as not to be *that* bad or even *all* bad. Human slavers must have some back-pocket redemption built into their patronage. Surely, there were kind masters here and there, a doting mistress of home and hearth, either of whom taught an enslaved woman to read, to ride a horse, to decorate a supper table, to treasure keepsakes, to sew nightgowns, and to speak the King’s English. Surely.

Didn’t such benevolence accrue later goodness? Eventually, Africans took on the Christian faith and were saved. Freed Africans were given tenant farming as compensation. And, most astonishing, Africans gave birth to a world-renowned artistic child—blues, jazz, gospel, R&B, soul—which we now regard as the core of American music. Surely all these things are plusses.

Logic that enables and excuses suffering is fuzzy and full of holes.

I’m sure the pedophile priest was nice to his altar boy at first. I’m sure a kind hangman granted a last sumptuous meal to the leader of a slave rebellion. I know that Primo Levi’s captors in Auschwitz used him as a chemist in an on-site lab producing synthetic rubber but, alas, his fate was not extended to the 1.1 million who were murdered. I doubt poets and proletarians chained to walls in gulags during Stalin’s Great Terror from 1936 to 1937 said to themselves, “Now, Dmitri, what can you learn about your survival skills during this unfortunate detention?”

To end on a serious note: We can never say that slavery is essential to the idea of a redeemed, and redeemable, American identity. Some sins are unforgivable. The world that both compelled slavery into existence and the world that came out of the horrid institution is characterized succinctly by

Toni Morrison: "The desire for freedom is preceded by oppression; a yearning for God's law is born of the detestation of human license and corruption; the glamor of riches is in thrall to poverty, hunger, and debt."

Which is to say it's the psychological and physical damage endured by captured Africans, child laborers, the disabled, the uneducated, over generations, that engenders the by-any-means-necessary call to liberation. Slavery's historic crime cannot be scrubbed or blunted by the canard that suffering produces a good work ethic, solid training from which future employers will profit.

The American value, "the desire for freedom," was not abetted by the masters' munificence, their sunup-to-sundown classes in ditch-digging and cotton-picking, but by the collective human resourcefulness of those who opposed, in all aspects of their daily lives, what Angela Davis defines as "male supremacist structures." Look to "the perpetual assault on slavery" by Black women, she writes, to find the true story of how the personal begat the political.