

Chapter 1

Erased from History

If there is no struggle, there is no progress.

—Frederick Douglass (1857)

In May 2006, students in Michael Pezone's twelfth-grade United States Government and Politics class were discussing the conflict over slavery in the early years of the Republic, the history of enslavement in New York City, and the involvement of local merchants in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. They were an especially knowledgeable group of young people, as many had participated in field-testing lessons from the award-winning *New York and Slavery: Complicity and Resistance* curriculum guide (Nanji, 2005; Evans, 2005).

The students decided they wanted to take a walking tour of the sites they learned about in Lower Manhattan. The difficulty was that other than the colonial-era African American Burial Ground, which was uncovered during excavations for a federal office building in 1991, these sites, and slavery in New York in general, have been erased from historical memory. There is not even a historical marker at the South Street Seaport in the financial district of Manhattan where enslaved Africans were traded in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and where illegal slaving expeditions were planned and financed up until the time of the American Civil War.

New York City has eighty-five museums listed on a popular Web site for tourists (<http://www.ny.com>). They celebrate art, science, culture, and history, including the histories of numerous ethnic groups. But other than a recently completed exhibit and monument at the burial ground site, there are no museums or permanent exhibits on slavery in New York City or the city's role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The more I began to dig into the past as I edited the *New York Slavery: Complicity and Resistance* curriculum and prepared this book, the more I realized the extent to which historical knowledge about New York's involvement with

slavery and the trans-Atlantic slave trade has been erased from our memory. In January 1895, an article by Thomas A. Janvier appeared in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (pp. 293–305) describing “New York Slave Traders” during the colonial era. What is most striking about the article is its tone. It is a matter-of-fact, almost cavalier, account of the history of slavery in the city. While it can provide teachers, students, and historians with some useful information, and it is the source of a much replicated drawing of the Wall Street slave market, its greatest value is as an indicator of White insensitivity towards racial issues at the end of the nineteenth century.

According to Janvier, and remember, this article was written for an educated, but general readership, “[f]rom the very foundation of the New Netherland colony slavery was part and parcel of its economic organization” because “[a] colonial establishment of that period, to be well equipped, required slaves in just the same way that it required horses and cows” (293). It is as if greater awareness about the problems of race in the United States, and the need to be politically sensitive to the demands of a large and increasingly activist minority group, has led to the suppression of the true history of the city, state, and nation.

In June 2007, the Democratic Party dominated New York State Assembly finally approved a symbolic resolution (A00273B) “acknowledging that the institution of slavery was an appalling tragedy,” apologizing for the state’s role, and establishing a “commemorative day in tribute to persons enslaved in New York.” However, Republicans blocked the legislation in the State Senate, concerned that it might be used to support a campaign for reparations (Associated Press, 2007).

Michael and I met with the students and as a group we decided that the problem of this missing history was largely political rather than historical or educational. An op-ed piece by *New York Times* columnist David Brooks had just declared “The Death of Multiculturalism” (Brooks, 2006, p. A27), partly, he claimed, because “civil rights groups” had “become stale and uninteresting.”

As a response to the article and the absence of historical markers, we suggested a bit of guerrilla theater that would combine the study of history with political action. With our help, the students mapped out the walking tour and designed poster-size placards including information about the “Slave Market” on Wall Street, the bank that financed the slave trade, the meeting house where “blackbirders” (slave traders) planned their voyages, and sites of Black insurrections in 1712 and 1741. The students wrote a press release, invited local politicians to join them, and then visited the sites and posted their own historical markers. At each site they passed out literature explaining to office workers and tourists why they were there (Pezone and Singer, 2006, pp. 32–35).

Black History Is American History

In 1903, W. E. B. DuBois began *The Souls of Black Folk* (1961) with “The Forethought,” a letter to his audience in which he explained the issues he

hoped to clarify. He asked each “Gentle Reader” to “receive my little book in all charity, studying my words with me, forgiving mistake and foible for the sake of the faith and passion that is in me, and seeking the grain of truth hidden there.” Unlike Dr. DuBois, I am a White man and not “bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh” of those subject to the harshness of American slavery and racism. I will need the forbearance of both “gentle” and not-so-gentle readers as I present an approach to teaching American history centered on the institution of slavery and racism and the roles they played in shaping the country and world we live in today.

In the spring of 2006 I was teaching demonstration lessons in a Brownsville, Brooklyn middle school as part of a federal Teaching American History grant. Every student in the school was African American, Caribbean American, or Hispanic, as were most of the teachers and administrators. After one lesson, a twelve-year-old Black girl in a seventh-grade class came up and thanked me for “teaching us about our history.” She also asked me why as a White person I had decided to focus on Black history. It was a good question that merited a thoughtful answer. I explained that my field of study was the history of the United States rather than Black history, but that I did not believe you could understand this country in the past or present without focusing on the African American experience. Black history is American history.

Readers have a right to ask why a book on the subject of teaching about slavery in the United States focuses on Northern complicity with slavery in the United States, particularly New York’s relationship with slavery and participation in the trans-Atlantic slave trade over one-hundred and fifty years ago. Part of the answer lies in the subtitle of this book, *Time to Teach the Truth*.

In *The Discovery of India*, Jawaharlal Nehru (1946), a future Prime Minister of India, wrote, “History is almost always written by the victors and conquerors and gives their viewpoint.” Similar quotes have been attributed to Napoleon, Joseph Stalin, and Winston Churchill. The victor’s history is a distorted history. It is time to teach the truth about slavery and the settlement of what would become New York and the United States so we can finally understand what happened in the past and the way these events reverberated through time and shape the present.

Discovering the “truth” about the past can be exceedingly difficult. The issue is not just whether the information historians report is correct, but whether the assembled narrative, the historical story, accurately portrays and explains events.

Too often the public or “official” version of history follows one of three fundamentally unreliable and predictable models. There is the uncritical patriotism presented at national monuments such as the Alamo or Mount Vernon, which has been documented by James Loewen in his book *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* (Touchstone, 2000). The “truth” is that at the Alamo, slaveholders from the American South fought for the right to own other human beings in violation of Mexican law. At Mount Vernon, the work

of the plantation, and the profit that made it possible for George Washington to evade the British army for five years, were provided by enslaved Africans. At the end of the war, Washington had the nerve to petition the British to return the human “property” that had escaped to freedom. Later, as President of the United States and a resident of Philadelphia, he circumvented a Pennsylvania gradual abolition act by rotating enslaved Africans back to his plantation in Virginia every six months (Koppel, 2007: p. A10).

The “Disney” version of history roughly draws on the past as a starting point to present entertaining and marketable stories that tells little about actual events or people. One of its most egregious “historical” movies is *Songs of the South* (1946), an early blending of live action and animation where enslaved Black people express happiness with their condition by periodically breaking out into joyous songs. The “truth” is that music played a major role in African American work, religion, and community, but it never celebrated racism and slavery.

Meanwhile, for the so-called History Channel, history is most often reduced to blood and gore, a whirlwind of war, natural disasters, and other kinds of mayhem. In this version, which markets the past, the American Civil War is about weapons and battlefields, not union, nation building, the triumph of Northern capital, or the end of human enslavement.

Because of such sanitized, biased, or commercialized versions of “history,” many secondary school students I work with, especially students from inner-city African American, Caribbean, and Hispanic communities, are deeply skeptical about what they learn in school. They generally want to believe what they read or hear about the past or current events, but it just doesn’t seem “true” to them. They react against what James Loewen (1995) describes in the title to another one of his books as *Lies My Teacher Told Me*.

Another problem that teachers face when teaching about a topic such as slavery is that the word “history” has multiple meanings. What the general public commonly refers to as history are events from the past. But history also means the process of gathering and organizing information, explanations about the relationships between events, and broader explanations or “theories” about how and why change takes place. History is the past, the study of the past, and explanations about the past. To be historically literate, to be practicing historians rather than consumers of prepackaged propaganda, teachers and students must commit themselves to constantly formulate and reformulate their own explanations as they learn more and more about events. Knowing the “truth” about slavery means figuring out why things happened and considering the impact of these events on the future.

Of course there are other problems with history as well. Sometimes not enough information is available to effectively tell the story. On other occasions, either consciously or unconsciously, important information is ignored because it does not fit the theses, or explanations, about the past that the narrators and their stories are trying to present. And far too often, in classrooms and works of history, the essential kernel of meaning is buried in an avalanche

of data, quotes, and footnotes intended for specialists. When this happens—and unfortunately it happened more and more as the Bush administration pushed for increased content testing for students and teachers—history becomes inaccessible to public viewing.

Yet despite all of these drawbacks, the study of history is a powerful force for human understanding and social change. Franz Fanon, who wrote about the Algerian War for Independence, described “the plunge into the chasm of the past” as both the “condition and source of freedom” (Williams & Harris, 1970, p. 266).

Slavery was a national system, and conflict over its abolition eventually led to disunion and Civil War. However, to both sharpen our focus and correct misconceptions about the history of slavery in the United States and the Northern states, most of the examples cited in this book are from the history of New York State. New England abandoned slavery and the slave trade earlier than in New York; the slave system was never as developed in Pennsylvania; New Jersey was much smaller; and slavery was banned by the Ordinance of 1787 in the Northern states that entered the Union as European American settlement spread westward. The focus of this book is on people and events in the City of New York and the surrounding downstate region during the period leading up to the end of slavery in New York State in 1827. However, with the movement of people west along the Erie Canal from the 1820s onward, resistance to slavery increasingly became a statewide phenomenon. Kerri Creegan, one of the high school teachers who assisted in the development of the *New York and Slavery: Complicity and Resistance* curriculum guide, concluded, “New York was really a microcosm of the debate engulfing the nation and leading to civil war” (Creegan, 2007, p. 62). Most historical research involves relatively narrow case studies that provide insight into broader historical forces. By looking at the microcosm, it is easier to see and understand what took place in the past.

This book and the curriculum guide it draws from are rich in historical detail because without supporting evidence, we are stuck with mere opinion. At the same time, without historical opinions we have information without explanation. Historians, teachers, and students have an obligation, to themselves and to each other, to both test their theories and to make them explicit so that others can examine them. This intellectual obligation is most directly discussed in chapter 8, “Profiting from Human Misery,” which explores how merchants and bankers and their political allies profited from human misery. In the nineteenth century, New York City merchants and bankers financed the illegal trans-Atlantic slave trade and trafficked in goods produced by human beings living and working under dire circumstances in the South and the Caribbean. They were not innocents tricked into complicity with an evil force. They knew exactly what they were doing. Chapter 8 presses teachers, students, and general readers to think about slavery and racism as global systems shaping the world and creating the powerful institutions that govern today. It challenges them to

consider their own underlying explanations or theories of history. Was slavery a tragic mistake or an underlying pillar of capitalist industrial development?

Historical Explanation

My approach to history came be placed within a tradition that is identified with Karl Marx, a nineteenth-century philosopher, economist, historian, and radical political commentator. Historical explanation, from this perspective, must focus on the ways that societies are organized to produce and distribute goods and services, including the food, clothing, and shelter that people need to survive. This does not mean that every cultural practice or institution in a society is determined solely by economic concerns, or that individual decisions are always motivated by money or greed. It does mean that social systems that are unable to satisfy the basic needs of their populations, adjust to changing technologies and environmental conditions, or fall behind the productive capacities of their neighbors or competitors face serious crises.

In addition, the ways societies are organized to produce and distribute goods and services generate conflict between competing social, political, and economic groups. These conflicts are the dynamic force propelling social change. They are both constructive and destructive. They build powerful supporting institutions and promote massive resistance. In the Hindu religion, this unity of creation and destruction are identified with the goddess Shiva.

Few realize that Karl Marx was a European correspondent for the *New York Tribune* and wrote regularly about the American Civil War for the *Tribune* and the Austrian newspaper *Die Presse*. From the start of the war, Marx argued that it was fundamentally about slavery, not union.

Marx first commented on the economic role of slavery in the American and world economies in the 1840s. In *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), he argued, “slavery is just as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits, etc. Without slavery you have not cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery . . . and it is world trade that is the pre-condition of large-scale industry . . . Wipe slavery off the map of the world, and you will have . . . the complete decay of modern civilization and commerce” (Easton & Guddat, 1967, p. 482).

As an historian working within a Marxian tradition, I focus on slavery as an economic system that generated enormous wealth at the expense of people denied basic human rights. Wealth was created by the forced labor of enslaved people who built the physical infrastructure of colonial America and produced agricultural products on its plantations. In this slave-based economic system, shippers, boatbuilders, bankers, and insurance houses made huge profits from the trade in human beings and by the resale of slave-produced commodities as raw materials and finished goods.

The impact of slavery, however, was actually much greater. The enslavement of Africans provided work for White textile workers, barrel-makers, and

sailors, and opened markets for a wide assortment of products produced by free labor. Profits generated by the slave system supplied money or capital for clearing marshland in Holland, building canals in England, creating global trade networks and empires, financing the Industrial Revolution, and for the development of New York City as an international financial center. Social and political institutions and cultural practices developed in order to maintain this slave system. These included oppressive laws and racist practices, as well as an ideology that justified dehumanization and death and the transformation of people into commodities in the name of profit.

This book includes tales of heroic resistance, because the same society that prospered from human misery also generated opposition to it. Black resistance to oppression played a fundamental role in contributing to abolition in New York and the Northern states, and to the movement to abolish slavery in the country as a whole. Within White society, political and religious turmoil in a revolutionary era lent support to the struggle against slavery, as did the rapid growth in free White immigrant labor in the North, the emergence of more democratic political institutions, and conflicts between different sectors of the nation's economic elite.

The trans-Atlantic slave trade transformed human beings into commodities to be bought and sold for profit. Even after it was declared illegal, and involvement in the trade was made a crime punishable by death, business interests continued to participate. They shifted the trans-Atlantic slave trade's center of operation from Bristol and Liverpool in the United Kingdom to New York City, where they employed euphemism, legal loopholes, and financial manipulation to avoid prosecution.

Essential Questions

As a social studies teacher, I use a methodology in my classroom designed to engage students as historians and help them explore events from the past in an effort to answer essential questions about humanity and history. It is an approach directly concerned with ideas and issues being discussed today. For example, among the essential questions that need to be considered by citizens, as well as historians, are: What was the nature of capitalist economic development in the nineteenth century, and how does this system operate today? and Was slavery peripheral to American economic, social, and political development, or was it central?

A study of New York City's involvement in the trans-Atlantic slave trade forces us to consider other questions as well: Can unfettered capitalist production for profit be trusted to protect human rights and meet human needs (or are we doomed to a continuing series of environmental and social disasters like the hurricane relief fiasco in New Orleans in September, 2005, and mega-electrical power failures such as plagued California in the last decade)? And, if it was profitable, as I argue, why did New York's complicity with slavery ultimately end?

Human beings who embraced values very similar to our own also justified the bartering of other human beings and condemned them and their descendants to perpetual exploitation. The social impact and profits from this illicit trade contributed to the inequalities and injustices in this country and the world today, inequalities and injustices that many in our society, including some of our highest-ranking public officials, prefer to overlook. An examination of New York City's role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and society's unwillingness to acknowledge it raises the questions: What is our fundamental nature as human beings? and Are humans condemned to live in a world rife with racism and exploitation?

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. DuBois wrote: "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line." The general silence on the impact of slavery on the United States and the world, the difficulty in developing and disseminating curricula on slavery and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and continuing social and economic inequality in this country and the world, demonstrate that the gap described by Dr. DuBois is still with us as we proceed into the twenty-first century. This introduces the essential question, Can the United States ever become a more just society and finally bridge its racial divide?

A major debate that continually reemerges in discussion of the teaching of social studies and history is whether teachers should be permitted to express their own views in class. While I try to hold myself to the standard for research and analysis expected of an historian, I have a point of view. I am not neutral. As they analyze the past, I want students in my classes and readers of this book to challenge me and to challenge people with authority in our society. An examination of essential questions such as the ones posed in this chapter is crucial for protecting and promoting democracy. The ultimate test of whether this book contributes to telling the "truth" about history will be the extent to which it stimulates broad public debate involving people who are often shut out of the discussion.

I often speak with students, teachers, and community groups who are interested in the history of New York's complicity with slavery. Sometimes I am the only White person in the room. I usually begin by saying, "Just in case you haven't noticed, I know that I am White." In the United States today, many White people argue that they are color blind and claim that they do not see race. Very few, if any, Black people believe them. I do not believe them either. No one raised and educated in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century can honestly assert that race is not a factor in the way they see the world and other people. I acknowledge being White, not because the audience does not recognize it, but so that they understand that I realize the historical baggage I bring to the topic of slavery, to raise the issue that race does not determine political perspective, and because I value their views on the material I will present.

The narrative thread that runs through this book is the story of New York's complicity with slavery and the struggle to overturn the slave system as

told from my perspective. It is not the only perspective, but I am convinced that it is a useful one.

This book opens and closes with discussions concerning teaching about slavery, and, by extension, about race in American society. In the racially and ethnically charged atmosphere of contemporary America, currently in the midst of a national debate over the status of undocumented immigrants, many White teachers, especially if they work in schools with predominately African American student populations, are hesitant to enter into conversations about slavery, oppression, and racism in the classroom. They are uncertain about their own biases and worry about potential student reactions. These concerns are legitimate and actually helpful to a teacher. Once you see a problem, you can begin to address it. The worst teachers are those who refuse to recognize the reality of race and its continuing impact on themselves and others.

An examination of secondary school student attitudes toward what they have learned about slavery in chapter 10 is based on interviews with hundreds of students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. While Black and White students who attended racially segregated schools had similar levels of content knowledge about slavery and racism, they had very different attitudes toward them. Their divergent responses raise serious questions about the future of the United States as a nation.

Local elites, from the time of the Dutch settlement in 1624 up until New York State Emancipation Day in 1827, supported a labor system that exploited an enslaved Black population. While the overall Black population of New York and the Northern states was small, they made up as much as 30 percent of the population in some counties near New York City. This story is presented in four chapters that describe the settlement of Dutch New Netherland (chapter 4), the systemization of enslavement in the British colony of New York (chapter 5), and attitudes toward slavery and African Americans in New York and the new nation (chapters 6 and 7).

A second concern is how New York merchants, bankers, and their political allies profited from human misery (chapters 7 and 8). In the nineteenth century, New York City merchants and bankers financed the illegal trans-Atlantic slave trade and trafficked in goods produced by human beings living and working under dire circumstances in the South and the Caribbean. During this period New York City became a dominant force in world commerce and the mores of modern American capitalism were established.

There was heroic resistance to slavery by both Black and White New Yorkers (chapters 7 and 9). Theirs is the third story told in this book. Some of the names, such as John Brown and Frederick Douglass, are well known from standard historical sources. Others, including William Wells Brown, Henry Highland Garnet, Harriet Jacobs, Jermain Loguen, Gerrit Smith, and Lewis Tappan, have largely been forgotten outside the circle of professional historians. Many of these people left behind powerful memoirs that detail life under slavery and the struggle for freedom. Solomon Northup of Saratoga Springs and Frederick

Douglass of Rochester tell the most useful stories. Northup was a free Black New Yorker kidnapped and sold into slavery in 1841. His autobiography, written after his escape twelve years later, explains conditions faced by free Blacks in the North and details life and work on plantations in the Deep South. It is a unique historical document.

Frederick Douglass is best known for his escape from slavery in Maryland, but what I find most interesting in his memoirs are his reflections on his life as a free man of color and on political struggle. Douglass was involved with John Brown in planning a slave insurrection in the American South, but withdrew his support when Brown decided to target the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry. Despite this, Douglass was indicted for treason in the state of Virginia and was forced to flee the country. Douglass's involvement in the planning stages of the Harpers Ferry assault, and his material support for Brown, compel readers to consider other essential questions confronting us in the modern world, such as: What does it mean to be patriotic? and Who is a terrorist?

Powerful Voices

This book resurrects these people and their struggles from the wastebasket of the past in order to show how human efficacy can reshape historical possibility (Thompson, 1963). As Frederick Douglass powerfully noted in an 1857 speech commemorating West Indian emancipation, "If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are people who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. . . . That struggle might be a moral one, it might be a physical one; it might be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle" (Foner, 1950, p. 437).

The words of these freedom fighters continue to resonate today. Reverend Henry Highland Garnet, who was born enslaved, escaped to the North and freedom at age eleven. He later graduated from Oneida Institute in Utica, New York and became a minister in the city of Troy. In 1843, he issued a call for a slave rebellion in a speech at a National Negro Convention in Buffalo, New York. Garnet beseeched his enslaved brethren to "Awake, awake; millions of voices are calling you! Your dead fathers speak to you from their graves. Heaven, as with a voice of thunder, calls on you to arise from the dust. Let your motto be resistance! resistance! resistance! No oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance. Trust in the living God. Labor for the peace of the human race, and remember that you are four millions" (Aptheker, 1951/1973, pp. 232–233). In the spirit of Reverend Garnet, I humbly ask readers of this book to share his motto and join the resistance against injustice.

In the first issue of *The Liberator*, published in Boston, Massachusetts, on January 1, 1831, William Lloyd Garrison (Seldes, 1960, p. 270) declared that on the issue of human enslavement: "I *will* be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice . . . I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat

a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD. The apathy of the people is enough to make every statue leap from its pedestal, and to hasten the resurrection of the dead.” In the spirit of William Lloyd Garrison, activists need to cease equivocation and to struggle, as did the abolitionists, until our voices are heard.

Frederick Douglass was born in Maryland, the son of a White man and an enslaved African woman. As a young man he escaped to the North where he became a prominent abolitionist and champion of full citizenship rights for African Americans. In 1852, Douglass was invited to give a Fourth of July speech in Rochester, New York. His audience was probably surprised when he charged them with mocking him and declared, “This Fourth of July is *yours*, not *mine*. You may rejoice, *I* must mourn” (Aptheker, 1951/1973, pp. 330–334).

“What to the American slave is your Fourth of July?” Douglass asked the crowd. “I answer, a day that reveals to him more than all other days of the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality . . . There is not a nation of the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of these United States at this very hour.”

While the “hour” of slavery was “back in the day,” we must, as citizens and as activists, ask ourselves and our nation if the “gross injustice” and “brass-fronted impudence” that Douglass decried are things best relegated to the past or if they are problems that still must be confronted.