"In the Beginning: The History of Slavery in the United States"

Lecture 1: African American Slave Narrative

In this first week, we are focusing on the history and origins of slavery in what would become the United States of American. Our main text this week is Betty Wood's *The Origins of American Slavery: Freedom and Bondage in the English Colonies.* As we can see from the subtitle, Woods is focusing exclusively on the British slave trade, how both its structure and ideology developed from the moment New World and Old World contact, outlining the long standing prejudices against outsiders prevalent in British culture of the Early Modern World. This culture had at its core a belief that some people are less human than others and may therefore treated as property or chattel, hence the description of African American slavery as chattel slavery. The upside of Wood's approach is that we get a more detailed picture slavery in the English Colonies in American and a thorough explanation of not only the economic reasoning behind slavery but also a detailing of the elements within British society that allowed for the development of chattel slavery. Chattel slavery was a form of slavery in which individuals were owned as property by another person. Their lives were completely controlled by the person considered their owner or master. This meant they could be bought or sold or even destroyed on the whims of the master. The downside of Wood's approach toward the history of American slavery is that it isolates out one part of a much larger whole, leaving us without a clear picture of the other 2/3rds of the slave trade, Spain and Portugal. However, since Woods wants to specifically focus on the English colonies, this approach works. We should, however, still remember that the Portuguese and Spanish have an even longer history in the slave trade, but that is a different course. Our focus, like Woods', is on the institution of slavery in the colonies that would become the United States of America.

Woods, in the first few chapters, is trying to explain why chattel slavery developed in the colonies when English society "had no clear precedent in either English law or social and economic practice. . . unlike Spain and Portugal who were already enslaving West Africans in their domestic economies" (9). While some historians try to claim that economics alone led to chattel slavery, Woods details how this was only one part of the whole situation:

> The economic argument must loom large in any attempt to explain the precise timing of the transition from indentured to involuntary servitude. Economic considerations alone, however, do not satisfactorily explain why slavery became a status reserved principally for people of West African ancestry. Albeit with the benefit of hindsight, it would seem that from the outset American slavery was characterized by an awareness of ethnic difference that over the course of a century hardened into an overt racism, a racial contempt and hatred that was deliberately cultivated by those who stood to gain financially from the employment of enslaved Africans. Certainly there is evidence of racial prejudice in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. That prejudice alone, however, did not account for the enslavement of West Africans by the English in the New World. A

preexisting English racial awareness would make possible, but did not dictate, the enslavement of West Africans in the Americas. (7-8)

Woods continues explaining how English society was structured hierarchically, often based on the Christian religious concept of the Great Chain of Being, which listed all creatures in order from best and closest to good and to lesser quality and closer to bottom, and possibly closer even to Satan (God's opposite). One's place in the Great Chain was immutable, divinely ordained and unchangeable (13). Therefore, if one were considered non-Christian and non-British, their enslavement was easily justifiable as well as changeable: "As understood by the English, slavery was a status reserved for strangers, for outsiders, who were defined primarily in terms of their religious preferences rather than by any other characteristic or attribute" (12). So even average English people had rights and privileges that could not be taken away, but those who could be defined as "others," especially in terms of religion, could be enslaved as they were not close to God and were therefore less human. As time went on, the physical attributes of these others became markers, signs and symbols for this distance from God and humans and the potential for enslavement. While it was not a foregone conclusion at the outset, "the images of West Africa and its inhabitants that formed in sixteenth-century England, as well as the colonial practices of England's European rivals in the New World, raised the distinct possibility that the vast majority of those selected to fill this role would be people of West African descent" (19).

In Chapter 2: "Beastly Lyvynge: Images of West Africans and Native Americans," Woods goes into further detail of how Africans were, by the 16th century, already considered good candidates for enslavement by the English, for reasons including religion, cultural customs, skin color, and technological advancement. The English of the 16th century considered themselves "the very personification of civilization" (20). Everyone else was on a circle outside of that English heart. The other peoples of the British Isle such as the Scots, the Welsh, and the Irish were on circles further and further away from that civilized center. Africans and Native Americans fell the furthest out from English civilization and were considered as beyond possible civilization, therefore farthest from God and most suited for enslavement and forced labor. Eventually, for a variety of reasons Woods details, Africans stood alone as the best candidate for chattel slavery and the plantation systems of farming that would flourish under it. One of the social/cultural aspects that made it easier to see Africans as evil was "the blackness of West Africans [their complexion] that at once fascinated and repelled English commentators. The negative connotations that the English had long attached to the color black were to deeply prejudice their assessment of West Africans. If, as the English believed, the color black epitomized sin and evil, then presumably the same defects must attach to the black-skinned person" (23). Woods further explains how the Christian story of Noah and his son, Hamm, is related to how Christians "conclude[d] that slavery had originated as a divine punishment for sinful behavior" (24). There were three basic reasons for considering Africans as possible slaves: 1) they were "held to be inferior to the English;" 2) they were "despised on account of their heathenism, their skin color, and their reputed lack of civility;" and 3) they had "their humanity called into question by the English" (29). Economic, religious, and philosophical

reasoning came together so that "By the early 1560s, there were those in England who, driven by the prospect of profits and displaying no moral qualms, sought to exploit the opportunities offered by the enslavement of West Afrcans in the Iberian New World colonies" (26).

In Chapter 3, Woods explores the Caribbean as the place of development for the slave society and plantation slavery that would arise not only there but also in the Southern United States: "the social, economic, and racial imperatives of those English people who, beginning in the mid-1620s, struggled to secure a foothold in the Caribbean would have a direct and crucial bearing on the course of events in the southern mainland" (40-41). In this chapter, Wood explains how entangled the relationship between Spanish/Portuguese colonies and British privateers, merchants, and slavers, and how this relationship influenced Great Britain's own implementation of slavery in the Americas. Woods explains throughout how that the indigenous populations were at first used as slave labor and then replaced by West Africans. She makes connections between how native and African peoples were imagined and their suitability for enslavement (according to British and other Old World principles). Woods makes the important connection between the early Caribbean slave societies, such as Barbados, and the lands that would become the southern U.S.: "during the latter part of the seventeenth century all the imperatives that informed the already deeply entrenched slave society of Barbados would be transported wholesale, and uncritically, to the Carolina Lowcountry" (60).

The reiteration of the history of the Fundamental Constitutions of the Carolina Colony reveals a connection that many academics and philosophers would prefer to ignore, the fundamental role of the philosopher John Locke, whose philosophes are taught to this day, in developing the rules that allowed slave holders from the Caribbean to take their slaves as property with them if they decided to move to the Carolina Colony (62). This is one among many examples of just how entrenched and fundamental slavery was to not only world economics, but even philosophy of the Enlightenment Period. Though many would prefer to ignore the implications, slavery, its value, and its role in the world were topics of great interest to those philosophers we enshrine as lighting our way out of the dark Middle Ages. Locke, for example, "despite his ideas about inalienable personal property, [he] was able to justify the institution of slavery by arguing that it lay outside of the realm of the social contract," (63) meaning that slaves could not be considered part of society as a whole despite the fact that their labor created the wealth, industry, and infrastructure of English society at the time, particularly in the colonies. He considered slavery to be like war as it "entailed the suspension of all normal social relationships. Moreover, there were those who, because of their lack of virtue or because they lacked a propertied interest, could never qualify for participation in political society" (63). So African slaves and also the poor and other despised groups were not considered any actual part of society and so were, therefore, unimportant to the question of universal rights of man. This is not an aspect of Enlightenment thinking that people generally like to acknowledge, but slavery undeniably built the structure upon which Enlightenment thinkers, philosophers important to this very day, built their concepts about society and the rights of man.

In Chapter 4, Woods focuses on the Chesapeake Colonies, including the Jamestown settlement. Initially not as successful as the Caribbean colonies, Jamestown's survival "owed much to the material assistance provided by Powhatan and his people, to the strict discipline imposed upon the surviving settlers by Captain John Smith, and, in London, to the determination of the Virginia Company to persist in its quest for profits" (69). Woods focuses on how the land grants to settlers was like a granting of freedom as the land was privatized and a representative government was adopted there by 1619, unlike in previous colonies, which had always been under the control of the crown (70). She details the conflicts between natives and settlers, various interactions between the two groups, and also the development of slavery in the region. Like the Caribbean colonies before, the settlers went through a period of indentured servitude, then attempts to coerce natives into labor, all before settling on the chattel slavery of Africans as the preferred choice for their labor force issues. This transition took longer than that in the Caribbean. Anthony Johnson, a black man, who arrived in Virginia in 1621, and gained land rights in 1651, is often used as an example of how slavery took longer to take hold on the mainland and how the "enslavement of West Africans was by no means a foregone conclusion in the 1620s" in Virginia (81). While Woods never explicitly explains, the role of Dutch slave traders is of vast importance as they provided vast quantities of slaves to colonies throughout the region. Woods emphasizes the role of "racist language [planters and elites] used to develop their own alliance with the non-elite whites, one based purely on skin color" (90) during this time period of the 1660s and 1670s as slave codes were being enacted. Elites wanted to cut the possibility that the poor whites might help black slaves by creating images of inferiority (a discourse discussed by Higgenbotham in this week's readings). Chapter 5 focuses on slavery in the colonies of Puritans and Quakers, and how they developed their own justifications for enslaving both native peoples and Africans, generally according to religious strictures. Perhaps surprising is that most Quakers did not find "contradiction between one Christian holding another Christian in bondage" (115). William Penn, considered a heroic figure in American pacifist history, chose not to outlaw slavery in his colony (116). Even the individuals we have most revered for attempts toward equality and fair treatment did not always stand against the institution of slavery. It was in the mid-1700s, long after William Penn's time, that Quaker thinkers such as John Woolman and Anthony Benezet began to show "opposition to slavery and the slave trade [that] would emerge as an accepted part of mainstream Quaker thought on both sides of the Atlantic" (117).

One of the main points that I hope you take away from Woods' book is how fundamental slavery was to the foundation of the United States of America. Additionally, slavery is not to the side of the development of "the land of the free and the hope of the brave," but part of the backbone upon which the country was built. Kolchin's "Origins and Consolidation" chapter gives further information on how this particular system of forced labor developed in the America. He engages with the historical debates around slavery and race that occurred throughout the institution's life in the U.S. as well as offering details of slaving ships and the day to day treatment of slaves that Woods does not cover. Higgenbotham's chapter on "The Precept

of Inferiority" traces the entrenched idea of black inequality and inferiority, describing its origins in slavery and outlining how it continues to affect the lives of African Americans to the present moment. This week we are building our basic knowledge of the US slave holding society, from origins to post-slavery cultural ramifications. We do this so that in the following weeks we may have a better knowledge foundation from which to understand the slave narratives that are our primary texts during this summer session.

If you have any questions about the lecture, the readings, the assignments, or the course as a whole, do not hesitate to email me at ascaves@email.arizona.edu. I look forward to reading your discussions and interacting with you as we engage with these important texts that show the integral nature of slaves' lives to the history and fabric of the United States.