

Chapter 2 Excerpt

The debate on whether the disproportionate success of black athletes is culturally or biologically driven has long been shaped by two powerful and related fears: those of racial biology and “the dark history of eugenics.” Most black intellectuals and some white sympathizers, for very good reasons, have adamantly opposed the concept that black physical ability is “inborn” and “too natural to be taught and developed or understood.” Given America’s regrettable racial history and the fact that for a long time the theories that purported to explain black athletic success were based on prescientific and clearly ridiculous racial biology, the objection of many black intellectuals to biological explanations of black athletic success is certainly understandable. But it is impossible to comprehend the current wide acceptance of environmental explanations for black athletic success in the general intellectual community without understanding what Grant Steen described as “the dark history of eugenics.”

One of the major goals of the campaign to justify slavery was to convince the world, including the enslaved Africans themselves, that they were a people without history—a race so naturally inferior that they contributed virtually nothing to the civilization of the world. Perhaps the clearest and most definitive statement by an American politician of the racial ideology used by whites to justify the evil of slavery was delivered on the floor of the United States Senate in 1858 by Henry James Hammond of South Carolina. A successful planter and one of the largest slaveholders in the country, Hammond told his colleagues that “in all social systems there must be a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life. That is a class requiring but a low order of intellect and but little skill. Its requisites are vigor, docility, fidelity. Such a class you must have... It constitutes the very mudsill of society. Fortunately for the South we have found a race adapted to that purpose... We do not think that whites should be slaves either by choice or necessity. Our slaves are black, of another, inferior race. The status in which we have placed them is an elevation. They are elevated from the condition in which God first created them by being made our slaves.”

Hammond’s statement was just one chapter of an intensive, systematic, and decades-long campaign waged on both sides of the Atlantic. Seeking to reconcile the irreconcilable, Christian slaveholders struggled mightily to create a moral basis for excluding black Africans from the human family. That task had been made more difficult by the formation of the United States and its embrace of the concepts of equal justice and divinely endowed inalienable rights and more urgent by the success of the abolitionist movement in Britain and the United States. Founded as a shining city on a hill, as a rebuke to the aristocratic and corrupt governments of Europe, the fledgling nation had faced in slavery the first great test of its moral authority.

Abolitionists were having considerable success exposing the inescapable contradiction between slavery and the religious and ethical teachings at the very base of the country’s moral foundations. Genuinely frightened by this, the defenders of slavery concluded that their position could only be justified if they could clearly demonstrate that God, in an unalterable act of nature, had made Africans inferior.

The formal development of this ideology was prompted by the discussion of emancipation in the Virginia Legislature, in the winter of 1831-32, after Nat Turner’s uprising took the lives of more than sixty white citizens. The intensification of the American abolitionist movement after 1831 drove Southern leaders to summon the region’s finest minds to defend slavery by methodically enumerating all possible reasons for human bondage. Southern intellectuals responded enthusiastically to this clarion call, and one result was the development of a Southern publishing industry focused primarily on the defense of their “peculiar institution.” Pro-slavery writers who had earlier attracted very little attention were now

acclaimed. George Frederick Holmes, a pro-slavery essayist, openly acknowledged his and his fellow writers' indebtedness to the controversy for the creation of a genuine Southern literature: "For out of this slavery agitation has sprung not merely essays on slavery, valuable and suggestive as these have been, but also the literary activity, and the literary movement which have lately characterized the intellect of the South."

Initially, much of the defense of slavery was based on Scripture. But, in the eloquent words of the writer and scholar Drew Gilpin Faust: "For an age increasingly enamored of the vocabulary and methods of natural science, biblical guidance was not enough. The accepted foundations for truth were changing in European and American thought, as intellectuals sought to apply the rigor of science to the study of society and morality, as well as the natural world." The result of this growing dependence on science was the development of a new ideological position, one that sought to establish its moral authority by creating a scientific rationale for slavery and postbellum racial oppression.

Even in the United States there had been very little effort, prior to 1830, to justify slavery on the basis of race or to argue, as Hammond did some three decades later, that black labor and unskilled labor were synonymous. In fact, it was only the failure to procure sufficient numbers of Indian or European laborers that prompted planters to turn to Africa for an alternative source. And it is clear that Africans brought to the New World considerable skills in tropical cultivation, cattle breeding, mining and smelting.

The quality and extent of African contributions to their new homes were dictated not by their abilities but by the requirements of their environments and the range of opportunities they were permitted to explore. In Brazil, Africans subdued the land, raised cattle, mined and smelted gold and other metals and founded towns and whole provinces. One of the most famous and important of the early Brazilian settlers was an African woman, Jacintha de Siqueira, who was the founding mother of Minas Gerais, the richest of all the Brazilian provinces. This remarkable woman, who is credited with the discovery of gold in the Quatro Vivers ravine and the founding of the settlement of Villa Nova de Principe in 1714 was, like so many other Africans in Brazil in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, one of the legendary bandierantes who fled slave plantation and helped to open up the wild, mineral-rich interior of the country. Like pioneers on other frontiers in other countries, these bold black men and women, once free of the tyranny of slavery, would forge frontier societies out of the wilderness and create their own laws. In the Villa Nova de Principe they applied the skills and knowledge of cattle breeding developed on the African savannahs, and their old skills in mining for metal and in smelting ore and forging tools. Like pioneers everywhere, these Africans sought to build a life for themselves and their forebears, and to search for the gold, silver, diamonds and minerals that reputedly lay beneath the fabulous but completely unexplored sertao. Some were fortunate and enterprising enough to build their camps into towns, some of which became the cities of modern Brazil. know today.