**TRANSCRIPT OF IRA BERLIN’S GILDER LEHRMAN LECTURE, *“MANY THOUSANDS GONE”***

Now, it would be nice for me, as a historian—particularly as a historian who has written about slavery—to conclude that slavery’s intrinsic importance has driven folks to the history books—the history of slavery. I certainly would like to believe that. But, as we all know, there is more to it than that.

There’s a recognition—often backhanded and indirect, sometimes subliminal or even subconscious—that our largest, our most pervasive social problem—what Du Bois called the “great problem of the 20th century”—which is fast on its way to becoming the great problem of the 21st century—that is, racism—is founded in the institution of slavery. There is a general, if inchoate, understanding that, to address the question of race in our own times, we must address the question of slavery in our history. And this, of course, has become all the more imperative as our society becomes more racially segregated, more racially unequal, and as a previous generation’s remedies for this segmentation and inequality are discarded as politically unacceptable.

In short, behind the interest of slavery is the crisis in race. And, indeed, slavery has become a way of talking about race in a society in which black people and white people hardly talk at all. Slavery has given us voice to address some of our deepest hurts, some of our festering anger. Some of the all-too-depressing reality of how much of American life—jobs, housing, school, access to medical care, to taxis, to justice—is controlled by race. In all of these events, slavery has become an emblem, a sign, a political metaphor, for our failure to deal directly with this profound question.

But, of course, employing slavery in this manner often doesn’t clarify things. Take, for example, the dispute over John Vlach’s exhibit, Behind the Big House—this exemplary presentation of slave housing by one of our premier folklores, drawn from a book of Vlach’s by the time same title. Its placement in the Library of Congress angered the employees of the library—mostly nonprofessional, mostly black—who demanded its removal. The Librarian of Congress, a historian by trade and training, acceded to that demand. But no sooner had the exhibit been dismantled than the librarians at the Martin Luther King Library—our public library in the District of Columbia, again, mostly black—welcomed it and made it a centerpiece in their own celebration of Black History Month.

Or take the case of Beloved. Drops off the edge of the box office—only to be proclaimed a critical success but a commercial failure. At least in its direct discussion of the extremes to which slavery pushed slaves. Or the debate over the apology, which falls on muffled silence. Or The Monticello Association’s continued reluctance to recognize the descendants of Sally and Tom.

Now, I note this not so much to arouse sympathy for the plight of John Vlach’s exhibit—which, after all, did find a new home—or for Miss Oprah, who seems to take good care of herself, without any assistance from me. Or even to revive discussion of the apology, or to say, authoritatively, exactly what was the relationship between Tom and Sally. But to note that the subject of slavery, for all our contemporary interest, is not an easy one. It carries with it deep anger, resentment, indignation, and bitterness for some—embarrassment, humiliation, and shame for others. And I talk here about both blacks and whites. And for both certainly a large measure of denial. The depths of denial here seem to be fathomless.

Discussions are muted in fear that we will reveal something about ourselves that will embarrass us, our perhaps somebody else—and this is not simply a point of good manners. For 130-plus years after the ratification of the 13th Amendment, the question of slavery sits on very tender and sensitive ground. We know we need to address it, to understand it. The simple fact is, we don’t know exactly how.

Now, my own sense is that a good deal of our difficulty lies in the confusion between slavery’s history and slavery’s memory—the ways in which they are connected, and the ways in which they are different. And since my own two books—that is, Remembering Slavery and Many Thousands Gone—address by turns these two subjects, I would like tonight to try to clarify some of the differences that separate the history of slavery from its memory. But, also, inevitably—and, perhaps, even necessarily—unite them.

Now, Many Thousands Gone—as Ms. Herrmann noted—is a study of the first two centuries of slavery in mainland North America. These are years between the beginning of the 17th century and the beginning of the 19th century. This is a period when slavery is a continental, not a regional or sectional, institution. Years in which what many consider the touchstones of slavery in the United States—cotton, the Deep South, the African Christian Church—do not exist.

And, indeed, when I conclude Many Thousands Gone at the beginning of the 19th century, the vast majority of African American slaves were not growing cotton, did not live in the Deep South, were not Christians. In short, the very icons which we have come to understand as the touchstones of slavery—what every schoolchild knows—were not in place at the beginning of the 19th century.

All of which is to say that slavery in the United States is not often what we have been told it to be. So what exactly was it? In Many Thousands Gone, I divide the history of black people in those first two centuries into three experiences. I call them the charter generation, the plantation generation, the revolutionary generation. In each, the experience of black people was radically different—although all, of course, were of African descent; all, of course, were black in color; all, of course, were slave in status.

By the charter generation, I speak here of people of African descent who arrived as slaves prior to the advent of the plantation. Disproportionately, they were people not of the African interior but of the Atlantic Coast. Their world focused outward, into the larger Atlantic. They spoke, among other languages, a Creole dialect developed among the people of the Atlantic during the 15th and 16th centuries—a language with a Portuguese grammar and syntax, but with a vocabulary borrowed from all over the Atlantic world.

They understood something about the trading etiquette, the religions, the laws of the Atlantic world. Many of them had been employed as interpreters, supercargoes, sailors, compadores—a kind of all-purpose seagoing handyman—for the great 15th- and 16th-century trading companies: the Dutch West Indian Company, the French Company of the West, the English Royal African Company. A host of private traders and privateers. They enter into a society in which many white people, although not slaves, were held in servitude of a variety of sorts.

Almost immediately these Atlantic Creoles begin to integrate themselves into that society—taking familiar names; trading on their own; establishing families; accumulating property; employing their knowledge of the law to advance themselves, and often to gain their freedom. Indeed, about a fifth to a quarter of this charter generation would gain their liberty. And to give you an idea what that would mean, it would mean if the same was true in 1860, there would be some 1 million black people living in the South who would be free.

Now, we know very little about—and I mean very little about—these men and women, with names—wonderfully telling names, like Anthony Johnson of Virginia; or \*Paulo D’Angola of New Amsterdam; or Francisco Menendez of San Augustine; or Sam \*Babambarra of New Orleans. Names which literally to their connections to this larger Atlantic world.

To give you a feeling of the history of this charter generation, let me say a few words about Sam Babambarra—whose life we know, we have just a few shards of evidence. We first learn about Sam Babambarra when he’s working for the French Company of the Indies on the Senegal River in West Africa in the 18th century. We know something about him because he disputes his pay. He complains that his wife has dishonored him. He wants the company to discipline her.

Working along the river, moving cargo—perhaps human cargo—from San Luis on the coast into the interior, Sam Babambarra comes in contact with saltwater sailors of various European and African nationalities, traders from the interior, of course, the corporate bureaucrats who run the company, the soldiers who protect the corporate bureaucrats. He probably speaks the Creole of the Atlantic, along with his own language—perhaps with a bit of French. Like others who followed his path, he has become something of a cultural broker—negotiating among the various peoples who have come together in the Atlantic.

Now, sometime during the 1720s, Sam Babambarra becomes involved in a slave insurrection in San Luis. Or perhaps he’s accused of being involved in a slave insurrection—the evidence is ambiguous. He was enslaved, however, and sent across the ocean to Louisiana—a desultory society with slaves at the far end of the French empire. Now, that, itself, is an interesting choice. Most of the slaves which are leaving that part of Africa—French Africa at that point—are going to Martinique or San Domingue—fast becoming these great sugar factories. But perhaps somebody realizes that it was dangerous to send a man like Sam Babambarra—a man who understands something of how the system works—to revolutionary tinderboxes like San Domingue.

Now, doubtless, Sam Babambarra was not happy about his enslavement and his exile—his forcible separation from everything and everyone he held dear. But once in New Orleans he picks up his life almost without missing a beat, and within a decade Sam Babambarra, still a slave, is successively the overseer of the largest company-owned plantation in Louisiana, and then chief interpreter in the Louisiana superior court.

Sam Babambarra suggests something about the unity of the Atlantic world—how New Orleans on the Mississippi River was, after all, not much different than San Luis on the Senegal River. That is, they were both ports; they were filled with saltwater sailors, with native traders from the interior, with European corporate bureaucrats, with soldiers of all nations. In short, places where a cultural broker like Sam Babambarra could not only survive but enjoy modest success.

And, as I said, the story of the charter generation is one of modest success. Certainly, it is different than the history of slaves who follow them. Their successes—the men and women who enter mainland North America after the plantation revolution in the Chesapeake with tobacco at the end of the 18th century; in low-country Carolina at the beginning of the 18th century; in the Mississippi Valley at the beginning of the 19th century, with sugar—who I call the plantation generation—these were not nearly as fortunate.

They worked harder, they died earlier. Their family life was truncated, and few men or women could claim blood or ties of marriage. They knew, or probably wanted to know, very little about Christianity and European jurisprudence. They had but small opportunity to participate independently in exchange economies. They rarely accumulated property. Most lived on large estates deep in the countryside cut off from the larger Atlantic World. Very, very few escaped slavery. Their names reflect the contempt in which their owners held them. Most answered to some European diminutive—Jack and Sukie in the English colonies; Pedro and Francisco, in places under Spanish rule; Jean and Marie in French dominions. As if to emphasize their inferiority, some were tagged with names more akin to barnyard animals. Others were designated with the name of some ancient deity or great personage, like Plato and Hercules. A kind of joke—a kind of comic jest—the most insignificant of individuals given the greatest of names.

Whatever they were called, they were rarely allowed surnames—marks of lineage which their owners sought to obliterate—and adulthood, which they would not permit. The names suggest the invisibility of members of the plantation generation. Their biographies—to the extent that we can construct them—is thin, to the point of invisibility. As men and women, we hardly know them. We know less about these individuals than perhaps any other generation of slaves.

Now, this radical transformation of slavery between the charter generation and the plantation generation signals an equally radical transformation in the definition of race—the very meaning of blackness and whiteness. Color, of course, is always a marker in the early modern Atlantic, as it is today, and often it was given meaning that was called race. But race did not always mean denigration. And even when it did, it did not always mean the same kind of denigration. So members of the charter generation were slaves, and Europeans characterized them in a variety of ways which distinguished them from themselves, and generally disparaged and ridiculed the people of African descent.

However, it was said that they were clever, or manipulative, or cunning, or deceptive—or too smart by a half. Perhaps the adjective which I like best is “smooth-ass.” A kind of nice descriptor which at once expresses grudging admiration mixed in with utter disdain.

But this mixture is never attached to the plantation generation, who are stereotyped in very different ways. Dull and dirty and stupid—indolent, libidinous creatures, often characterized as barely human. In short, the transformation of slavery also transformed the very meaning and definition of race. And, hence, I try to connect the history of slavery to the history of our understanding of race.

I make a similar kind of argument for the folks who follow the plantation generation—the men and women of African descent who come of age at the end of the 18th century, during the age of the American, French, and Haitian revolutions. I call them the revolutionary generation, with no claim to originality. Their history is much different. As a new generation of African Americans come of age, they transform themselves from Cato and Hercules, or Sukie and Phoebe, into Richard Allen, or Benjamin Banneker, or Phillis Wheatley; the Prince Halls, the Daniel Cokers, the Absalom Jones. The revolutionary generation witnesses, and in some ways participates, in the remaking of black life. And with the remaking of black life, the redefinition of race.

Many Thousands Gone, in short, is an attempt to historicize the study of slavery—to free slavery in the United States from the stereotypes which have bound it. Stereotypes which lock it into the master narrative of the Civil War. Stereotypes which connect it to the history of the black belt, and cotton, and Afro-Christianity. Stereotypes which fix it to contemporary notions of race. Stereotypes which inevitably deny historical contingency and historical agency—the fact that history is made by men and women, on their own terms, if not always exactly to their own liking. In short, that slavery was not only made, but it was constantly remade.

Now, like all history, Many Thousands Gone is a critical, skeptical, empirical, source-bound reconstruction of past events—based upon the belief that the past is different in its very essence. It’s not simply that the past was slow and we’re fast; or the past was wooden and we’re plastic; or that they have quills and we have PCs—but that the fundamental assumptions that govern men and women—the basic relationships that were created—are different.

The cliché, of course, is that the past is a different country—and, hence, it must be reconstructed on its own terms, careful not to telescope it into the present, or weigh it down with anachronisms of various sorts. I remind my students that Lincoln did not live in the White House, but the Presidential Mansion. I also tell them that slavery, whatever else it was, was never the peculiar institution—at least prior to the American Revolution.

Many Thousands Gone is part of a continuing debate about the past—about what happened and what it meant. It is an ongoing debate, because we know that the past can never be recovered in full. We appreciate that the discovery of some new fact—the appearance of some new perspective, some new point of view—will shift our understanding of the past.

And we admit, however painful and reluctantly we do so, that there are some things which we will never know, or we will know imperfectly, or we will never be able to get our hands around. History, in short, is contested terrain. We enter into its study with great skepticism. We take nothing for granted—we understand that everybody lied. [Laughter]

Remembering Slavery—my other book, from which you heard an excerpt, Fountain Hughes, is a very different book. It speaks to the experience of the last generation of slaves—men and women who did, in fact, grow cotton, reside in the black belt, practiced Christianity. It is constructed from interviews done during the 1930s and 1940s under the auspices of the Federal Writers’ Project—that agency of the New Deal which was charged with keeping unemployed artists and intellectuals off the streets, committed to recapturing the real history of America, the people’s history of America. The great moguls and magnates had had their chance—they had clearly screwed up. It was time to have a new kind of history. And a history written by former slaves—clearly a perishable commodity in the 1930s and ’40s—was key to this.

Now, most of these interviews were transcribed, and they have long been available in libraries. Our own has some forty volumes of these. But some were recorded, and the recording of ex-slaves continued even after the federal project ended. The transcribed interviews we know all about. They have long since become a standard source for the history of slavery. The taped interviews were a different matter. They have sat in the Library of Congress for some forty years or more.

They have rarely been utilized by historians—in large measure because they were inaudible. That is, these recordings were made originally on acetate and aluminum disks. They were probably of poor quality when they were made—they have subsequently degraded in a variety of ways. Those who were interviewed were old. The register of their voices wandered in ways that the primitive equipment could not capture. They, of course, rambled. When I first heard these recordings, personally, I didn’t think it was possible to do much with them. But others had the same idea, and eventually people at the Smithsonian—with the aid of a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities—digitized and remastered these recordings, and we can now hear the voices of people like Fountain Hughes. We still did not have enough for a tape or a book, but we joined them together with other readings from the transcribed interviews. Remembering Slavery has been played on some hundred radio stations, and, of course, it is now in this book-audio set.

It provides voice to the men and women who experienced slavery directly—and, as such, it tells two great stories. The first story is a physical and psychological imposition, which was at the heart of slavery—in all times, in all places. It is a story of hideous, obscene violence; of mutilations, of beatings, of rapes; of the forcible separation of husbands and wives, and parents and children; of husbands forced to see their wives abused, and wives forced to do unspeakable things. All are told in these recordings.

But then there is a second thing. If slavery was violent, an imposition—if slavery was death, it was also life. Former slaves did not give in to the imposition—the physical and psychological. They refused to be dehumanized by dehumanizing conditions. That, on the narrowest of grounds, they created and sustained life in the form of families and churches and schools, and associations of all kinds.

These organizations—often clandestine and fugitive, fragile, unrecognized—created language, philosophy, theology, expressed in stories, and sermons, and music, and dance, cuisine. So much so that we have to concede: If slavery is the darkest part of the American past, it may, in fact, be the most creative part of our past. That is, it’s impossible to imagine what American society would be without the creative legacy of slavery.

Now, in giving voice to former slaves, Remembering Slavery speaks not only to slavery’s history but to slavery’s memory. And memory—as we now know from the movies and the TV series, from the monuments, from the historical reenactment, from the politics—is contested terrain. Listening to the voices of former slaves, and their dual message of the dehumanizing force of slavery, and slaves refusing to be dehumanized, we are reminded how different memory is from history.

For memory, unlike history, is not skeptical or critical reconstructions of the past. It is spontaneous and unquestioned; it is absolute and immediate. It speaks to our own most personal understandings of intimate experiences, passed down through families and communities and nations—conveyed, often, through symbols and rituals that are anything but tentative, or distant or contingent. They are immediate, they are intense, they are emotive. It is the picture of the slave ship Brooks, with its cargo tightly packed, spoonlike, into the hull of the Brooks ship, which has recently showed up on posters in college dorms, on T-shirts—often emblazoned with the words: Never forget.

It is what angers us about Thomas Jefferson’s relationship with Sally Hemings, and the refusal to recognize paternity—not simply personal, but national, as well. It is about the debates about naming schools after Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner, and the slave rebel Gabriel. Or removing the names of Robert E. Lee, and Stonewall Jackson, and Jefferson Davis. And, of course, about the Confederate flag. It is embedded in the race card that Johnnie Cochrane played in what once was called the greatest trial of the century—we’ve since gone on. [Laughter] Or Clarence Thomas used when he talked about electronic lynching, or what we now see in the Confederate flag debates.

If history is skeptical and contested, memory is certain and uncontestable. When Fountain Hughes tells us that he would rather be dead by his own hand than accept re-enslavement, the nightmare of slavery is upon us. Almost everything else sounds like hollow apology. And, indeed, the searing message of Fountain Hughes is clear: Lives were lost and mutilated, and should not be forgotten. A rich legacy was created at great cost, and homage must be paid to those who paid that price.

They demand that we root out the deniers; that we unmask the dissemblers; that we remind those who would forget: Never forget. All true enough. But such formulation speaks against the skeptical, critical inspection of the past, which is at the very heart of the historical enterprise. For former slaves, slavery is not something that can be questioned, inspected, debated—because it is absolute, and it is undeniable.

But if that is so, what becomes of slavery’s history? What becomes of the world of the charter generation, of Sam Babambarra? Of Paulo D’Angola? Of Francisco Menendez? Of the members of the plantation generation, whose names were taken from them and hidden from us? Of Prince Hall, and Phillis Wheatley, and Benjamin Banneker, and Daniel Coker of the revolutionary generation, who recovered those names and rebuilt African American life anew? What of slavery’s history?

The unique experience of Africans and African Americans in bondage. Unique because they were African, or descendants of Africa—but also because of the diverse landscapes in which they lived; the diverse economies in which they worked; the diverse societies in which they were enmeshed. And, perhaps, most importantly, the diverse battles which they fought—some of which they won, most of which they lost. And in the process the identities which they created for themselves.

If the memory of slavery is fixed and undeniable, the history of slavery remains contingent and debatable. Yes, endlessly debatable. How many slaves crossed the Atlantic? What was the nature of the slave family? Why were there so few slave rebellions? Or, perhaps, so many? What, exactly, did it mean to become a Christian? Debatable, and debatable it must be, because to deny the debate is to remove slaves from history, to mummify them, to separate them from the real world. It, too, is to deny the undeniable.

So Many Thousands Gone and Remembering Slavery speak to the subject of slavery, and the history of slavery—and peoples of African descent in America—but they speak in very different tongues. And suggest the ways we have segregated the subject, and in so doing denied its contemporary realities by confining them to the past, and revivifying its past to make its history conform with our own contemporary purposes.

If memory is denied—if history is allowed to trump memory—the past then becomes without relevance to our lives, to our politics—to everything that we know and value. To the kind of world that we live in to the kind of world that we want to create. On the other hand, if history is denied—if memory is allowed to trump history—then the past becomes only a shadow of the present, with no real purpose than wish fulfillment. A source, perhaps, of great personal satisfaction—to ourselves, to our cause, to our people—but little weight beyond mere assertion.

Remember, after all, for most of the 20th century it was the slaveholders’ memories—through that son of a slaveholder, Yale professor \*Eubie Phillips—who ruled slavery’s history. Is history only dueling memories? If history is but myth with footnotes; if what we want to be true is true—is history nothing more than whose myth is stronger?

Now, slavery lives, and must continue to live, in both history and in memory. But I think it’s time to bring, somehow, the two together—to join history and memory. To embrace slavery’s complex history, and to accept the force of slavery’s memory—and thereby elevate them both. For only by testing memory against history can we get a sense of a collective past, and sustain a sense of a collective past. By incorporating slavery’s memory into slavery’s history, and perhaps vice versa, we can, at last, have a past which is both memorable and past. Thank you for your attention.