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Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch
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Introduction

Errol G. Hill

In the march of human history few topics have generated as much controversy as "race." Now, at the dawn of the third millennium AD, all such disputes can be put to rest, scientists having conclusively established that human beings are biologically the same under the skin. "We all evolved in the last hundred thousand years from the same small number of tribes that migrated out of Africa and colonized the world," said research scientist J. Craig Venter; adding, "race is a social concept, not a scientific one."[1] Socially then, or perhaps "culturally" would be more appropriate, differences do exist among the descendants of those earliest African migrants, doubtless caused by changing environments and the many ways – physical, mental, emotional and, yes, spiritual – that humans strove to survive through control of those harsh environments. That regardless of outward appearance we are all part of the same family has been acknowledged and proclaimed by saints and savants from time immemorial. Hence a history of the African American theatre is a human story worthy of study and review by all peoples in view of the unique conditions in which that theatre was created and sustained.

By "unique conditions" we refer to the slave trade that brought to America millions of black Africans who remain the only minority group forcibly transported to the United States and enslaved. Yet, in spite of and through this experience, African Americans over time have created and maintained a theatre of their own. Accordingly, it is fitting to provide a brief sketch in this introduction of the background to the trade in African people to the New World, in order to place in perspective some of the issues that confronted (and consumed) Blacks, free and enslaved, as they began a new life in America.

It started well before Christopher Columbus. Throughout recorded history mass movements of people from one region or country to another have resulted from catastrophes, natural or man-made, including war. Nothing,

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however, has equaled in scale, longevity, and horror what has been called "the rape of Africa" that followed Europe's first contact with the Americas. For a period of well over three hundred years, from the early sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, black Africans were seized, bound, shipped across the Atlantic Ocean and sold to labor in the territories of the New World. Their numbers defy logic: 12 to 15 million Blacks were reliably estimated to have survived the horror. How many did not remains debatable.[2] That African chiefs were complicit in the capture and sale of their fellowmen (whether felons, prisoners of war, or tribal enemies) compounds the guilt but does not mitigate the tragedy. At the start of the twenty-first century the long-term effects of that forced migration continue to haunt the most powerful and prosperous nation the world has known.

Slavery has been a common human phenomenon for countless years, but not until the modern era was it limited to people of any particular racial group. Ancient slavery often resulted from warfare and was governed by the rules of war and carried no ignominy; hence the Greek philosopher Plato could suggest that every man had slaves among his ancestors. To Christian Europe, the rise of Islam added a new dimension to the institution of slavery by making religious persuasion a central issue. Members of the two faiths saw each other as infidels who deserved to be enslaved. "The same rationale served both groups when economic interests and improved technology focused world attention on Africa."[3]

As early as the 1420s Prince Henry of Portugal (who was later given the honorific title "the Navigator") had heard stories of Africa's wealth and ordered his captains to explore the Guinea coast. By 1444, having made contact with settlements of Moors, the Portuguese captured some 235 men, women and children; others perished or were killed. The captives were promptly baptized and enslaved. In less than a decade Portugal was importing a thousand baptized Africans a year to serve on the docks, in the fields, and in the homes. Since there was at the time no marked color line, "the two races mingled freely, resulting eventually in Negroid physical characteristics in the Portuguese nation."[4] The racial situation would change drastically after Europe "discovered" the existence of a new world and extended its assault upon Africa to the native peoples of the Americas.

Enter Columbus: "From the moment he signed the articles of agreement with the Catholic Kings," wrote Germán Arciniegas, "he promised them gold. He was obsessed by the idea . . . And so in the account of his first ten days in the islands the word *gold* appears twenty-one times."[5] That was not all. Arciniegas, who apparently had access to the relevant documents of the

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period, explained that when the people of the New World gazed at the beard of Columbus and believed he was Heaven-sent, the explorer thought of ways "in which this may be turned to advantage to enslave them. Even before he took ship, Columbus was thinking of gold and slaves . . . He was the forerunner of the gold-hunters."[6]

Black Christian converts from Portugal and Spain joined the early explorers of the New World. Pedro Alonso Niño, pilot of one of Columbus' ships (possibly the *Niña*) was allegedly of African descent. Other Blacks, whether servants or slaves, were assigned various duties whose proper execution was essential for the safety of all. In this way life aboard ship tended to circumscribe recognition of status and favor effective working relationships. The Negro Estevan, a scout for the explorer Narváez, was in 1527 the first foreigner to penetrate what is now Arizona and New Mexico. Much later, as the Jesuits led French parties into Canada, one of the many Blacks among them, Jean Baptiste Point du Sable by name, would become the founder of Chicago.

Portuguese mariners who held a virtual monopoly over the *asiento*,[7] an authority ultimately sanctioned by the Papacy, were among the first in the post-Columbian era to carry Blacks out of Africa to the New World. By 1500 Portugal had laid claim to Brazil, established in 1532 a permanent settlement in São Paulo, and repulsed all attempts by other adventurers to invade its sphere of influence. Portuguese traders imported Africans to work in the cane-fields as slaves, an institution that would endure in Brazil for some 350 years until it was totally abolished in 1888. That black slavery under Portuguese settlers may have been more tolerant than elsewhere in the Americas is witnessed in the founding by 1630 of the black republic of Palmares in northeastern Brazil. It exists today as a town 60 miles south of Recife.

Other maritime nations of Europe soon carved out their own colonies. Spain, an early contender in the search for rumored gold, established overseas settlements around the western arc of the Caribbean Sea in regions known today as Florida, Mexico, and Central America, and extended its reach to Colombia and Venezuela in northern South America. The island of Cuba and part of Hispaniola were also appropriated by Spain. The seafaring nations of Holland and Denmark joined the colonial rampage by sending raiding parties to Africa and by setting up outposts in coastal areas such as Surinam (also called Dutch Guiana) and the smaller Antillean islands. England and France also joined the pillage, transferring their historic rivalry in Europe across the Atlantic to North America and the Caribbean.[8]

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In discussing the European exploration of the Americas, one ought not to leave the impression by one's silence that the new lands were devoid of people or inhabited by bands of savages. The opposite is true. From the fourth century AD until the European invasion began in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, several highly developed and structured civilizations existed in parts of today's Mexico, in Central America and in northwestern South America. Their people were known as the Maya, the Toltec, the Aztec, and the Inca; the latter two empires received the brunt of contact with European explorers and adventurers. In addition there were in North and South America and throughout the Caribbean islands distinct ethnic groups in the lowlands and river valleys who lived by farming, fishing, hunting, and gathering, each regional group possessing its own beliefs, its unique arts, crafts, and ways of being.

"Spain," wrote the Jamaican scholar Sylvia Wynter, "sent two kinds of conquistadors to the New World: the conquistadors of the flesh; and those of the spirit. Those who came to conquer with the gun, and those who came to conquer with the Cross of Christ." Ms. Wynter concluded dolefully that while both types of conquerors bolstered and supported each other, "the time would come when the Cross would take it for granted that it would survive in the gun's shadow."[9] And so in the early sixteenth century the Aztecs under Emperor Montezuma II (ruled 1502–20) were utterly destroyed by Hernando Cortés, leader of the invading Spanish armies. While professing friendship Cortés used treachery, broken promises, and stirred up revolt among subject peoples to undermine the authority of the emperor and his military general. The Aztec treasury, much of it exacted in a fraudulent deal that contained a promise to spare the emperor's life, was stolen and the sovereign executed. That the treasury was lost at sea on the voyage back to Spain is an irrelevant footnote.[10]

The actions of Cortés were closely mirrored by Francisco Pizarro, another Spanish general who learned of fabled wealth at the Inca's capital of Cuzco, located in the mountains of modern Peru. With the approval of the Spanish king who had decorated him and made him governor of a Central American province not yet colonized, Pizarro in 1531 traveled with his three brothers back to Panama, his ship resupplied with soldiers and arms for the journey to Cuzco. Learning that the sovereign Inca, Atahualpa, was then at Cajamarca, Pizarro sought and gained an audience with him at the great square in the city, having first deployed armed soldiers nearby but out of sight. The emperor eventually arrived with a retinue of several thousand men, apparently unarmed or with no arms to match those of the Spaniards.

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At the first opportunity and without provocation,[11] Pizarro summoned his troops, who seized the emperor and slaughtered the surprised Incas. Imprisoned in a cell, Atahualpa agreed to fill it with gold in exchange for his life. This he did but was then falsely accused of plotting to overthrow the Spaniards and was strangled to death. The centuries' old Inca empire and its satellites were no more.

This epic tale, brilliantly dramatized as *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* by British playwright Peter Shaffer, showed on Broadway in the 1965/66 season. It was, in its author's view, "a kind of total theatre, involving not only words but rites, mimes, masks, and magics." Shaffer conceded that the villains of the play were "the neurotic allegiances of Europe, the Churches and flags, the armies and parties," but he hesitated to name a hero unless it was by a curious paradox Pizarro himself who "recovers joy by finding real grief." The play was staged at Dartmouth College in 1969, with black students as the Incas and white students the Spaniards, and proved a memorable event for the newly appointed faculty director.[12]

As European nations began to establish colonies throughout the circum-Caribbean basin, the native Amerindian peoples were displaced.[13] They faced two dangers: the superior firepower of the invading armies and strange diseases brought by the foreigners, which could also be fatal. These pre-Columbian indigenes called by different and often overlapping names – the Ciboney, Lucayo, Taino, Arawak, and Carib[14] – originally inhabited lowland forests and grasslands adjacent to the Amazon and Orinoco rivers in northeastern South America. In the distant past these "Amerindians," as they came to be called, traveled up through the Caribbean islands in rudimentary canoes and piraguas, pushing ever farther northward. At the time of their first contact with the European settlers, the Tainos or island Arawaks, a gentle agrarian people, occupied most of the Greater Antilles, while the warlike Caribs[15] were largely based in and around the Windward Islands of St. Vincent and Dominica.

Meanwhile the Spanish, in their insatiable lust for gold, had forced the indigenes to work in the minefields of Hispaniola, where an early colony had been established. In 1502 Bartolomé de Las Casas of Seville arrived in Hispaniola to join his merchant father, who, having sailed with Columbus on his second voyage, had brought back an Indian slave to be his son's personal attendant. Eight years later Bartolomé became a Roman Catholic priest in the Dominican order, but he continued to support the enslavement of American Indians as necessary to provide a steady labor force until he experienced a conversion in 1514 and realized that the enforced work system

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Figure 1. Errol G. Hill's Dartmouth College production of *Royal Hunt of the Sun* by Peter Shaffer, 1969

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was "unjust and tyrannical."[16] In his assumed new role as "protector of the Indians," Las Casas appealed to Rome against their harsh treatment by the Spaniards and suggested, in the course of his plea, that it would be better to replace the Indians with hardy African slaves. What till that time had been a steady trickle of Africans to the Americas would soon become a flood tide.[17]

What the victims endured in their forced transfer from Africa to the Americas, especially during the Middle Passage, should be neither forgotten nor cheapened.[18] Captured Africans – men, women, sturdy youths – were chained together and trekked over long distances to holding pens that might be open-air stockades or damp dungeons in seaside forts owned by Europeans, or might be kept on floating "barracoons" (abandoned hulks of vessels), all to await the arrival of the slave ship. These ships would ply up and down the west coast of Africa picking up their cargo of Blacks at different points along the coast until the vessels were full to capacity.

The second leg of the journey was the dread "Middle Passage" aboard ship. Africans were shackled together and, except for limited periods of exercise on deck, were kept below in confined areas with women on the upper and men on the lower levels. Stacked like sardines,[19] their diet unaccustomed, their conditions unsanitary, on a crossing that often took several weeks, black captives were prone to disease including dysentery. The death rate on seventeenth-century ships soared to 24 percent.[20] The third and final stage of the journey began after the surviving Blacks arrived in the Americas. Washed, fed, put on sale and branded, they traveled to the estates of their new owners, where they were housed in slave cabins or huts. They were now the property of the master who purchased them, their future dependent on his every whim and that of his family, his overseer, and his slave driver.

The American poet and playwright LeRoi Jones (aka Amiri Baraka) attempted to dramatize the Passage in his short play *Slaveship* (1969), staged at the Academy of Music in Brooklyn's Chelsea Theatre Center, under the direction of Gilbert Moses on a set designed by Eugene Lee. Characters listed were Old Tom (slave), New Tom (preacher), Captain, Sailor, Plantation Owner (eternal oppressor), Dancers, Musicians, Children, Voices and Bodies in the ship.[21] Since captive Africans spoke little or no English, the action was mostly choreographed (by Oliver Jones) to sounds of creaking timbers, rattling chains, and occasional voices uttering a few words in Yoruba, calling on deities – Shango, Ogun, Obatala, the Orishas – for deliverance. Voices hummed and groaned in anguish. Children wailed; a disembodied

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white voice reported nonchalantly that a slave woman had killed her child and strangled herself with her chains. Similar voices talked sneeringly of "black savages," avidly of "riches"; indistinguishable dark skins muttered "white beasts" and "devils." Using a director's prerogative, Gilbert Moses introduced atmospheric background music by jazz saxophonist Archie Shepp; distant drums beat in the mind. For sensitive members of the audience, the experience must have been devastating.

From the slave merchant's perspective, his "Triangular Trade" paralleled the three stages of the African's journey into slavery. The ship left its home port in Europe, Britain, or North America stocked with guns, ammunition and chains used in the capture of Africans as well as with rum, cloth, pans, beads, and other baubles that could be bartered for them. At the second stage the ship would pick up its human cargo and sail to the Americas. Finally, having delivered its cargo, the sanitized vessel would load up with staple produce from the plantation: coffee, tobacco, rice, molasses, rum, or cotton and return to its home port, where the produce would be marketed and the cycle would start again.

The essential difference between slavery in former times and as it latterly developed in the Americas was the concept that the individual person was a piece of property to be bought and sold at will, broken or repaired, without recourse to law or higher authority. Naming the new captives "slaves" before they left Africa promptly changed their status from human to nonhuman; as "black slaves" they unwittingly conferred the stigma of inferiority to free Blacks on the basis of skin color. Thus in 1753, at the height of the slave trade, the Scottish philosopher and historian David Hume, in supreme ignorance of or callous disregard for the great African civilizations of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay, as well as traditional African arts and letters, could write: "There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white nor even any individual eminent in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences."[22] More than one hundred years later a similar sentiment would be expressed in America some months following the defeat of southern confederate states that sought to withdraw from the Union over the issue of slavery. Writing in the Richmond (Virginia) *Whig* newspaper on 15 November 1865, the correspondent declared: "That the negro is or can be made equal to the white man, the world will never be convinced . . . The negro's happiness and safety are best promoted by . . . conformity to his manifest destiny and that is social and political inferiority to whites."[23] It would be comforting to report, as the nation enters the twenty-first century, that such benighted sentiments have long been

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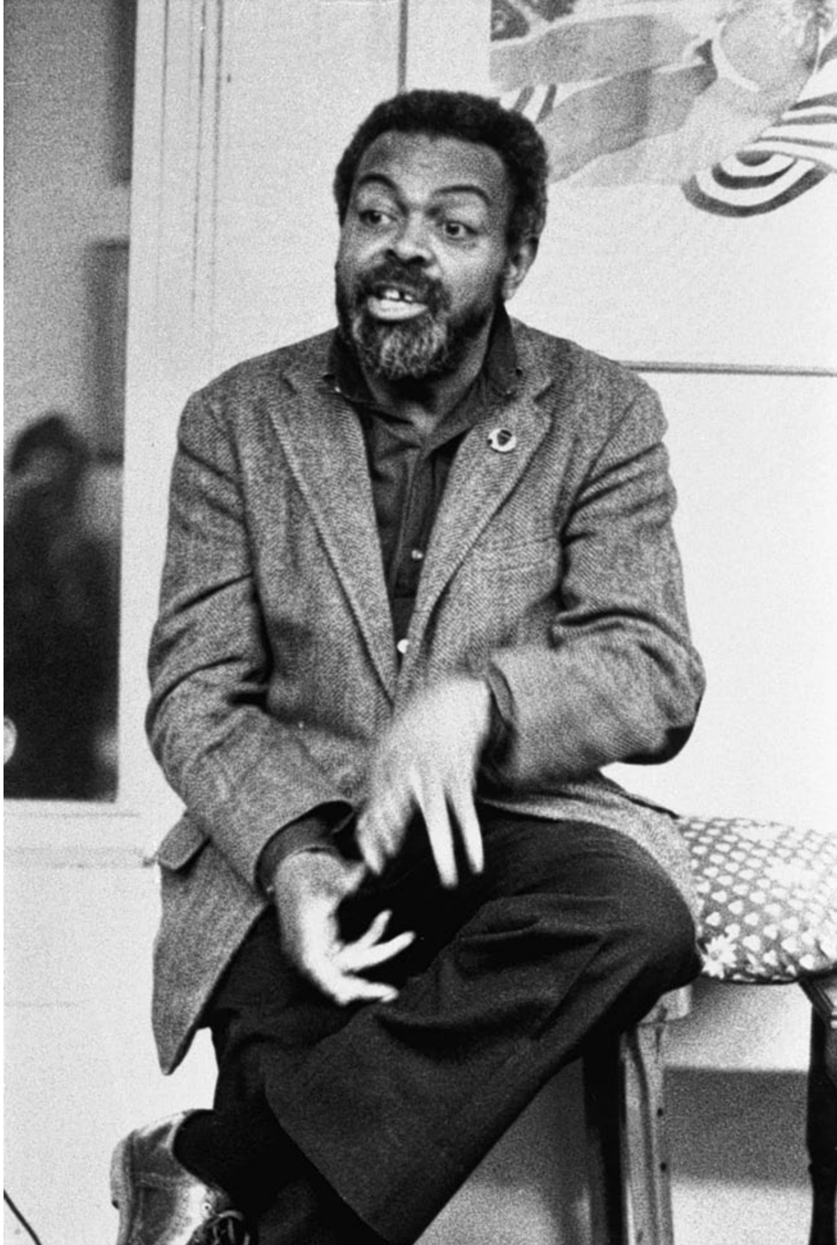

Figure 2. Amiri Baraka, author of *The Slaveship*

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banished from public discourse in America. Sadly this is not the case. Extremist hate groups or individuals, often protected by law or by a lack of law enforcement, still spread their venom, leading at times, as recent history has demonstrated, to acts of extreme cruelty against black Americans. Only then can the perpetrators be prosecuted and brought to justice; by which time the victims are already maimed or dead.

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