

## Enslaved People's Agency

Agency: (noun) the state of being in action or of exerting power; a means of exerting power or influence (adapted from Random House Unabridged Dictionary, 2006)

### Different kinds of agency

*Individual Agency:* When agency is exercised by an individual, and primarily benefits only that person.

*Group Agency:* When agency is exercised by an individual or group, and benefits more than one person. The people who benefit may or may not be the ones exercising the agency – it may be on behalf of others.

*Agency within the system* (legal, social, cultural): Exerting power to change one's own situation, using means that are allowed by the dominant culture, society, or government.

*Agency outside the system* (legal, social, cultural): Exerting power to change one's own situation in ways that are not acceptable to the dominant culture, society, or government. This could include breaking laws or violating social expectations.

### Examples of enslaved people's agency

People often assume that when people are enslaved, they have no agency. However, historical documents are full of examples of enslaved people finding ways to exercise some amount of control over their own lives, even under the most extreme oppression.

Here are some examples of ways that enslaved people exercised agency in their lives:

- Escape
- Fighting, using violence
- Rebellion against enslavers
- Political uprising
- Influencing the decisions of enslavers
- Education of self or others
- Establishing control over aspects one's own life
- Marriage, choosing partners, bearing children
- Working for one's own benefit
- Refusing to work
- Resisting demands of enslavers
- Establishing economic independence
- Sharing resources
- Showing empathy for others
- Collective activity, organizing
- Communication, sharing information
- Practicing religion
- Lobbying, convincing, persuading others

## Slavery in America

### Questions about agency

Here are some possible discussion questions to explore the subject of agency:

- What is the relationship between agency and power? Are they the same?
- Is there anyone who has no agency? Who? or why not?
- Does anyone have unlimited agency? Who, and why? or why not?
- How do people who we think are powerless express agency? (examples: a newborn baby, a person in prison, a very sick person)
- How is a person's agency restricted in everyday life? What are the limits on your own agency in your life?
- How does one person's agency affect other people? Discuss examples
- How might enslaved people's agency have affected:
  - other enslaved people?
  - free African Americans?
  - enslavers and other white people?
  - politics in the US?
- Why is it important to study the agency of enslaved people? How might it affect our understanding of history?