



SPECIAL ISSUE: GEOGRAPHIES OF SLAVERY

Geographies of Slavery: Of Theory, Method, and Intervention

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This is an especially appropriate time to publish a collection of papers on the geographies of slavery. In 2007, scholars marked the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade by Great Britain and the United States. This year, 2011, begins the 150th anniversary of the American Civil War. For the next four years, communities across the United States will engage in a variety of activities devoted to memorializing a conflict that, while claiming over 600,000 Confederate and Union casualties, also freed over 4 million enslaved African Americans, albeit to what was an imperfect freedom. At the same time, “slavery” in the broader sense implies a much larger project of imperialism, played out across continents, oceans, and centuries. On the academic front, we see an increasing number of conferences and symposia that examine the history and legacy of slavery in the American context as well as its larger, global dimensions.¹

In the United States, while slavery obviously played a major role, historically, in the Civil War, it traditionally has been marginalized or misrepresented within the collective or social memory, particularly among those living within the states of the former Confederacy. Seeking to cope with the trauma of defeat and Reconstruction, post-bellum white southerners created and perpetuated a “Lost Cause” mythology predicated on the belief that the Civil War was a tragic but noble struggle to retain the sovereignty of the South.² From this perspective, the war was fought to protect states’ rights rather than to preserve slavery. Slavery, when discussed, was represented as a benign institution of caring masters and faithful slaves. Black victimization during enslavement took a clear back seat to the victimization of white southern society at the hands of what was interpreted by Lost Cause proponents as northern aggression and hostility.

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The romanticizing of Southern rebellion and slavery continues today, and in fact, informs contemporary political practice. The most extreme and racist examples can be found in the rise of neo-Confederate organizations and activists since the 1990s and their influence on the American political right.³ Some Southern opponents of recent health-care reform and climate change legislation have represented their resistance as “a continuation of the efforts of Jefferson Davis and other secessionists in the 1860s.”⁴ For these citizens, the Civil War has become remembered as a rebellion against big government rather than a defense of racism and white supremacy. What is occurring, according to Samuel Wineburg, is an occlusion of memory, a case of certain historical interpretations becoming dominant publicly and blocking out the legitimacy and accessibility of alternative visions of the past.⁵

Occluding the memory of slavery is not necessarily restricted to conservatives or the South. In January 2011, Harris Poll officials conducted an online survey of over 2500 adults randomly selected from across the United States. When posed with the question of whether the South fought the Civil War mainly for states’ rights or to preserve slavery, the majority of poll respondents chose states’ rights. The forgetting of slavery, according to journalist David Von Drehle, is “not simply a matter of denial,” but an amnesia long institutionalized by novelists, filmmakers, historians, school teachers, and even the landscape.⁶ According to him, maintaining a silence about what really caused the Civil War became wrapped up in fashioning a postwar national identity. As Von Drehle writes, “Forgetting was the price of reconciliation [between North and South], and Americans – those whose families were never bought or sold, anyway – were happy to pay it.”⁷

The impact of this forgetfulness has been that it has allowed white America to ignore slavery and not deal with what James and Lois Horton call, “the tough stuff of American memory.”⁸ Discussions of the enslaved invariably lead people to talk about the enslaver and who is historically responsible for the atrocities of slavery. While the U.S. Congress and some states have apologized for slavery, some conservatives fear that these apologies will lead to a push for reparations.⁹ When facing this issue, the Virginia General Assembly decided in 2007 to express “profound regret” for “the involuntary servitude of Africans” rather a full-blown apology.¹⁰ Five years later, Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell announced that he would proclaim April 2011 as “Confederate History Month” at the request of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, he issued a proclamation that made no mention at all of slavery in the state. Intense public criticism pushed McDonnell to issue a new proclamation that acknowledged slavery and he re-designated April as “Civil War in Virginia Month.”¹¹ The case of Virginia illustrates how traditional retellings of the Civil War can work to alienate or disinherit African Americans from their own history.

As Bob McDonnell discovered, excluding the history of the enslaved is increasingly open to challenge. Over the past few decades, we have seen growing social pressure to engage in more critical and honest discussions of slavery, legitimated in no small part by the work of historians John Hope Franklin, John Blassingame, Kenneth Stamp, and Ira Berlin.¹² Accompanying these academic advancements has been the growing influence of the African American story at public history and heritage tourism sites. Major national efforts to memorialize the slave experience include the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio; the African Burial Ground National Monument in lower Manhattan, New York; and Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. These commemorative additions have not come without controversy, however, as witnessed by the embattled (and still unopened) National Slavery Museum in Fredericksburg, Virginia.¹³ For instance, when the National Park Service began incorporating slavery into the interpretation of Civil War battlefields, the decision drew protests from Confederate heritage groups.¹⁴

Debates such as those encountered by the Park Service have understandably heightened the anxiety of African Americans. Few African Americans attended a recent commemoration of the start of the Civil War at Fort Sumter, South Carolina on April 12, 2011. The events in Charleston included lectures sponsored by the Park Service about the roots of slavery and black Union troops, including the 54th Massachusetts Regiment made famous in the 1989 film *Glory*. Of the 50 people who attended these lectures, all but one were white. South Carolina African Americans are especially sensitive to the representation of Civil War heritage. In 1999, the South Carolina NAACP imposed a tourism boycott and picketed Interstate Highway welcome centers in protest of the flying of the Confederate battle flag over the state capitol. When asked about the low turnout of African Americans at the Fort Sumter anniversary, local NAACP leader Dot Scott replied: "It's almost like celebrating with the enemy."¹⁵ Despite the growing importance placed on remembering slavery, these memories can be difficult for African Americans, since they can focus on the trauma of bondage, and they are often incorporated into a problematic present, a present rife with its own racial tensions and conflicts.

As we have tried to capture in the past few paragraphs, developing a critical historical and geographic understanding of slavery is not simply an academic project, but also a political one with important implications for the social inclusion of Africans and African Americans into how people define and relate to the past. It is out of this intellectual and social context that we organized a series of papers sessions on the "Geographies of Slavery" for the 2010 meeting of the Association of American Geographers in Washington D.C. The papers in this special issue are a product of those sessions. In organizing the paper sessions and this special issue, we

sought research that reconstructed and analyzed the patterns, processes, and politics of slavery in the past as well as scholarship that critiqued the ways in which slavery is remembered (or forgotten) in the present through specific memorial sites, practices, and narratives. Both types of papers, memory studies and historical studies, were seen as equally important to our project. What is remembered of slavery is no doubt tied to the historical record and what has been discovered using traditional and newer methods of inquiry. At the same time, sheer knowledge of how enslavement operated and was organized socially and spatially does not guarantee that these facts are reflected in the public's memory. Commemoration is not an innocent reflection of what has happened in the past, but a product of choices and debates about what, how, and who to remember.¹⁶

In deciding to organize this collection of papers, we were also motivated by the fact that the geographical literature on slavery is quite limited relative to the scholarship that has been generated by historians and scholars from other fields. Aside from a recent special issue of *Southeastern Geographer*,¹⁷ there have been few (if any) examples of geography journals publishing special issues focused on slavery. This is not to suggest that enslavement has escaped the attention of geographers. As early as 1911, the *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society* published a paper exploring the influence of climate, physiography, and soils in the development and spread of American slavery.¹⁸ Several decades later, Carville Earle would examine the geography of slavery in the United States (where it was and was not practiced), suggesting that it was driven by rational decisions about the economics of staple crops and labor costs rather than the influence of the physical environment or any moral or ideological predisposition among people.¹⁹ In reality, perhaps all of these factors and others influenced spatial variation in the use of slave labor.

The Southern plantation has long been of historical geographic interest, although traditional discussions tended to emphasize the morphology of plantations over their place in race relations.²⁰ A notable exception to this pattern is the work of Charles Aiken, who has argued in his analysis of the Cotton South that the plantation continued to live on after the Civil War along with white control of the former slave population through segregation and political and educational disenfranchisement.²¹ Scholars such as Bobby Wilson have focused on the shift of African Americans from slave to wage laborer and consumer after the Civil War, pointing out that the fixed racism during slavery was replaced with a more flexible form that maintained the racial status quo but allowed African Americans to participate in commodity exchange and consumption.²²

Research in historical geography has focused on more than just the economic and political lives of slaves and their post-bellum descendants. The dietary patterns of African Americans on the antebellum plantation

attracted the attention of Sam Hilliard. While the enslaved received rations of pork and vegetables from masters, they supplemented their food supply by gardening, hunting, fishing, and gathering.²³ Understanding the role of African slaves in food production would later be developed to an even greater extent by Judith Carney. In *Black Rice*, Carney argued that slaves provided much more than labor for the Carolina rice export industry. From West Africa they brought the knowledge and techniques necessary for rice cultivation. Her most recent work, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, goes beyond rice to discuss the many other botanical materials and ideas that African slaves brought to the New World, the importance of slave gardens, and the role played by the enslaved in creating ethnically hybrid cuisines. In the case of both books, Carney's work opens up a place for re-evaluating the agency of African slaves in shaping the environmental and economic landscapes of the Americas, both on and off the plantation.²⁴

Recently, the plantation has become the focus of another branch of research by geographers who are interested in these sites in terms of memory and heritage tourism rather than agriculture. A decade ago, David Butler published an important piece in which he documented the extent to which plantation house museums in the South perpetuated a "white-washed" representation of history. He found that the words "slavery" and "slave" were frequently missing from material used to market these plantations, and there was a greater willingness to discuss the furnishings and gardens than enslaved people.²⁵ Since the publication of Butler's study, other studies in geography have examined the perceptions and expectations of plantation visitors as well as the white-centric ways that these museums narrate the slave experience through the Internet and docent-led tours.²⁶ Recent work pays attention not only to what or how much is said about slavery but also the manner in which the enslaved are discussed and whether these plantation discourses facilitate or hinder affective empathy with the enslaved.²⁷ While the plantation is ground zero in the politics of bringing the enslaved into the southern and American collective memory, other studies have explored the social challenges and tensions that surround this memory work in other types of museum settings and through other commemorative practices, such as memorial-building in Savannah, Georgia and the island of Barbados.²⁸

Mentioning Barbados provides an important opportunity to discuss the final area of recent work by geographers, that is, the place of slavery and emancipation within the circum-Atlantic World. David Lambert has led much of this effort, basing his early research in the British Caribbean and focusing on the construction of competing white identities among Barbadian sugar planters as they faced growing calls for the abolition of slavery and a revolt of the enslaved in 1816. This rebellion was the site for a "war of representation," in which multiple and conflicting

narrations of whiteness were carried out as anti- and pro-slavery interests, including the enslaved rebels, struggled with each other in locating the origins of the revolt and defining the national identity of Barbados.²⁹ As Lambert illustrated, with enslavement came a broader racialization of plantation societies, shaping the construction of white identities as well as those of enslaved Africans. Lambert's work explored the relationship between slavery and European imperialism; indeed, his later work has examined the connections between Atlantic slavery, West African exploration and colonization, and the production of knowledge by British geographers.³⁰

Work such as this serves to remind us that both slavery and the plantation were parts of a much larger system for the extraction of resources and profit, one which extended not only across the Atlantic in the notorious Triangular Trade but also to India and other locales, and which involved not merely enslaved peoples, stolen lands, and plantation crops but also resources of other kinds, manufactured goods, and the activities of innumerable merchants, financiers, and other service providers.³¹ Within the United States, the core-periphery pattern of this system was echoed in microcosm, if you will, such that the North was likewise invested in the system of plantations and slavery, with much profit accruing to individuals in the North and much Northern development driven or at the least aided by its status as core to the South as periphery.³² Many Northerners had reason to be ambivalent about questions of abolition, emancipation, secession, and the Civil War, just as many white Southerners did³³—and indeed as many British did. Approaching slavery from this systemic perspective allows scholars to move beyond popularized frameworks such as the states' rights versus slavery dualism to investigate the more complex pressures and forces that motivated individual and institutional action at different moments in time and space.

As the reader will note, the papers that make up this special issue contribute to many of the key concepts found in the previously published research on slavery—the social and economic geographies of the plantation, the politics of racial identity and rights, the agency of Africans/African Americans, the difficulties of remembering slavery, and the circulations of the broader Atlantic World and the sometimes ambivalent stances of actors within that world. At the same time, we believe that the papers presented here break some new ground in terms of theoretical approach, methodological technique, and political intervention/advocacy. The papers are, thus, organized along those lines of contribution.

Our first pair of papers contributes to the theoretical understanding of slavery, as it developed and existed historically and how it has been remembered and represented. We have already detailed the selective and

trivializing way that slavery is remembered in the American South through plantation tourism and other heritage sites. Buzinde and Osagie employ ideas from the larger literature on “cultural citizenship” to frame the struggle to include the enslaved and suggest that representational strategies at plantations embody and perpetuate certain racial ideologies from the past. They draw parallels between plantation museum narratives and Supreme Court rulings on the status of African Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, illustrating how these narratives are “bound up within political discourses that tacitly endorse dominant societal values.” Anim-Addo takes us to the nineteenth-century Caribbean and examines the trans-imperial geography created through coaling operations of the British-sponsored Royal Mail Steam Packet Company (RMSPC). Informed by the new mobilities paradigm, she demonstrates how the RMSPC moved between and relied upon coaling stations in slave and post-slave societies, allowing it to exploit enslaved workers (as well as wage laborers) and “circumnavigate emancipation,” even though Great Britain had abolished slavery. Anim-Addo’s contribution provides a needed global perspective within the special issue as well as shedding light on the complex transition from slavery to emancipation.

Our second pair of papers addresses methodological innovations in the study of slavery. Geographic Information Systems (GISs) are of growing importance in historical geography as well as other disciplines that involve study of the past.³⁴ The three widely recognized benefits to the use of GIS in work on the past include the ability to organize data from disparate sources based on coincidence in spatial location, the ability to visualize (in the sense of “make visible”) the past, and the ability to perform spatial analysis on data about the past.³⁵ Hopkins, Morgan, and Roberts describe their ongoing efforts to develop a GIS built upon a valuable series of maps, cadastral records, and censuses of the island of St. Croix, in the Danish West Indies (now the United States Virgin Islands), integrating the data from these various sources. The resources introduce the potential for reconstructing, at a very detailed and localized level, the demographic, economic, and cultural aspects of an eighteenth century slave-based plantation society, including a close understanding of the working lives of slaves as well as planters, and within the GIS these data become subject to new kinds of analysis across space and time. Lisa Randle also uses GIS, in this case with more emphasis on spatial analysis. Specifically, she employs viewshed analysis to examine possible patterns of surveillance and control on rice plantations along the East Branch of the Cooper River in South Carolina. Randle’s work is theoretically guided by a panopticon model that suggests that masters manipulated the landscape structure and layout of their plantations to ensure visual control over slave villages. While this idea has been explored previously by other historical archeologists,

Randle offers something relatively new in calling for analysis at a regional scale, suggesting that several neighboring plantations operated as an integrated community, rather than just individually, in carrying out visual control.

Our third and final pair of papers is written from an “intervention” perspective. The authors are adamant about the need to directly challenge and correct the ways in which the enslaved are excluded from dominant narratives at southern plantation heritage tourism sites. As mentioned earlier, the formal, academic study of the enslaved can be important to moving toward their remembrance as legitimate historical and geographic actors. Perry Carter, David Butler, and Owen Dwyer recognize this very fact and suggest that the rewriting of tours and exhibits at plantations requires continuing scholarship on slavery, especially since docents and managers claim that they would talk more about slave life if they had stories to share with visitors. The authors point to the usefulness of narratives collected from former slaves during the Great Depression in identifying and discussing African American memories of slavery. Arnold Modlin offers us a photographic essay in which he conducts a critical reading of the layout of the plantation museum landscape and its many narratives, artifacts, and performances. This is not just an academic or intellectual exercise, but part of a larger discussion of what historical geographers can do in helping plantation house-museums improve the representation of slavery. In the case of Modlin, he has spent several years touring and studying plantation museums across the South and has worked with plantation managers on the ground.

This special section on the historical geographies of slavery is completed by an afterword from David Lambert. In his contribution, Lambert illustrates the fundamentally geographical nature of the slavery-plantation complex through the metaphor of surveys as instruments of imperial knowledge and control. He then asks what a critical historical geography of slavery would look like, and frames an answer that invites the reader to continue the dialog and the exploration. As guest editors of this theme section, our hope is that readers *will* continue the dialog – will continue to ask and to answer, and to produce new research and interventions about slavery in the spirit of critical investigation.

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Notes

1. Examples of recent conferences and symposia include: "Places of Memory for the Slave Route in the Caribbean" (hosted in 2006 by UNESCO in Havana, Cuba); "Slavery & Public History: An International Symposium" (hosted in 2006 at Yale University); "Beyond Slavery in the Iberian Atlantic" (hosted in 2007 in Liverpool, United Kingdom); "Bridging Two Oceans: Slavery in Indian and Atlantic Worlds" (hosted in 2009 by University of Hull, United Kingdom in Cape Town, South Africa); "Rethinking the Modern: Colonialism, Empire, and Slavery" (hosted in 2011 in Birmingham, United Kingdom) "Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development" (hosted in 2011 at Harvard University and Brown University); "Slavery and the University: Histories and Legacies" (hosted in 2011 by Emory University).
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3. Euan Hague, Heidi Beirich, and Edward H. Sebesta, eds., *Neo-Confederacy: A Critical Introduction* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008).
4. Quoted in Jon Meacham, "America's War Without End," *Parade*, April 10, 2011, p. 8.
5. Samuel Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001).
6. The popularity of the book and film, *Gone with the Wind*, helps to explain some of this institutionalized amnesia about the reality of slavery along with the powerful role played by historians such as U.B. Phillips, who wrote *American Negro Slavery* (New York, NY: Appleton and Company, 1918) and *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston, MA: Little Brown and Company, 1929). Historian James Loewen has discussed the influence of teachers in misrepresenting the history of slavery and the Civil War in *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York, NY: New Press, 1994). Loewen has also conducted a rigorous interrogation of commemorative landscapes and their role in occluding the memory of slavery and downplaying the role of racism in the Civil War; see *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* (New York, NY: New Press, 1998).
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