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Afterword: Critical Geographies of Slavery

David Lambert

In October 1808, a Scotsman named James MacQueen was engaged to survey the Adelphi Estate in the mountainous interior of the Caribbean island of Grenada. The owner, John White, wished to subdivide the land in order to sell it off. MacQueen was a commissioned land surveyor in the colony, as well as being an experienced plantation manager. In the course of carrying out White's instructions, MacQueen directed four enslaved men to clear the undergrowth at Adelphi with machetes and saws. He and his assistant then undertook the survey using compass and chains, recording measurements of angles and distances in a field book, before marking the sub-plots with boundary stones placed on the ground. Returning to the estate where he lived as manager, MacQueen protracted the recorded measurements to produce a rough copy of Adelphi. From this he drew up a fair copy of the plan for his client, as well as copies for the six men to whom the sub-plots were to be sold. He then presented White with his bill.¹

Surveying the field

Surveys and surveying were an important aspect of the slavery-based economy in Grenada and elsewhere in the Americas. The boundaries of Adelphi had been originally laid down during the French colonial period, which ended initially with the island's transfer to the British in 1762.² On taking control of the island, the colonial power surveyed its new possession based on existing French plans. Many of the estates abandoned by or taken from their French owners were sold off, though the boundaries themselves often remained intact. Yet, the importance of surveying was not only limited to foundational acts of colonization or new territorial acquisition. The role of the land surveyor was also a vital one in maintaining the geography of the colonial plantation economy. As MacQueen put it, albeit in somewhat hyperbolic terms, the surveyor produced

...a *sacred record* of a practical mathematical fact, which should descend unimpeached and uncontradicted to future ages; *forming* the only sure guide for individuals to know their properties;

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and without which it would be impossible at this moment, for many in this Colony, to *find* the properties of their ancestors; or ascertain the *limits* of their own.³

Hence, surveying was a means through which the ownership of land was maintained in the present and for future generations, as well as made available for sale and purchase. It also allowed plantation owners like White and managerial staff like MacQueen to calculate the necessary inputs of enslaved labor for particular areas of land and to estimate their potential yields. In Grenada, like elsewhere, land surveying was one of the means through which the geographies of slavery were reproduced.

Returning from Grenada in the early 1810s, MacQueen used the money and connections he had acquired through his involvement in the colonial slave economy to establish himself in Glasgow's mercantile community. He also used the skills he had gained as a land surveyor to produce a series of large-scale maps of Northern Africa to support proposals submitted to the government for an ambitious trading expedition to the region. The most original feature of these maps was their depiction of the lower course of the River Niger and its termination in the Gulf of Guinea.

As I have discussed elsewhere, this geographical fact—true, but not generally accepted in Europe until after 1830—had its origins in knowledge MacQueen had gathered through the interrogation of the enslaved people he had managed and tried to control in Grenada. This “captive knowledge” was the foundation for a particular set of claims about the physical geography of Africa; further, it bore witness to the geographical displacements of individuals and collective experiences caused by slave trading in the Atlantic world. Moreover, at the same time that MacQueen was seeking to win government and public support for his African commercial scheme, he was also disseminating pro-slavery propaganda in a desperate effort to stave off the abolition of slavery in the British empire. Seeking to portray British Caribbean slavery in as positive a light as possible, he made regional comparisons with systems of labor in other parts of the world. For example, he gleefully drew on all manner of Orientalist tropes to attack the Indian caste system and the role of the British East India Company in perpetuating what he alleged was “East Indian slavery.”⁴

I begin with MacQueen because his life and works serve to illustrate some of the entanglements of geography and slavery. These include the geographical locations and displacements inherent to slavery; how geographical practices and knowledge could produce and stabilize the landscapes of slavery; the imaginative geographies of slavery and (allegedly) comparable systems of labor; and, not least, the role of enslaved people as carriers and producers of geographical knowledge. The papers in this collection focus on some of these themes and also demonstrate how thinking

“geographically” might both enhance our understanding of slavery and sharpen the critical tools through which we can address its legacies. In this short epilogue, I want to pursue the implicit and explicit geographies that animate this collection by considering how geographical perspectives contribute to the study of slavery and suggest other ways that this might be done. In so doing, I want to sketch out some of the parameters for an agenda that we can call the “critical geographies of slavery.”⁵

Geographical perspectives on slavery

Historical geographers and historians with a foundation in geographical approaches and methods have contributed much to the understanding of slavery. Indeed, it would not be unreasonable to claim that some of the most innovative and illuminating historical work on slavery has its basis in (historical) geographical training, skills, techniques, and, more nebulously, the application of a “geographical imagination.”⁶ Yet, as Daniel Hopkins, Philip Morgan, and Justin Robert demonstrate in their paper, there is clearly much more that can be done. For example, taking advantage of an especially rich and interrelated series of sources, their paper indicates the tremendous potential that exists for revealing the dynamic economic and social geographies of slavery in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century St. Croix and, by doing so, shedding light on those else where in the region. Meanwhile, Lisa B. Randle’s paper demonstrates the *new* forms of geographical data sets that can be generated and analyzed to add to our understanding of the factors that shaped the spatial layout of individual plantations and their location in particular areas. Both papers clearly exemplify the benefits of thinking geographically about slavery.

As a collection, these papers illustrate a variety of approaches to the geographies of slavery, including the use of Geographical Information Systems, textual analysis of literary writings and oral histories, the critical photo essay, and many others. For example, the maps and censuses discussed by Hopkins, Morgan, and Robert might be considered not only as *sources* of geographical information about slavery, but also as representations and technologies implicated in wider systems of colonial control and racialized power, rather like MacQueen’s land surveys. Geographers and historians of cartography are used to thinking about maps in terms of the articulation of discourse and power. Clearly there is scope to apply such insights to slavery. This approach parallels work in the field of “critical” or “new” histories of accounting that examines the complicity of bookkeeping in sustaining slavery by facilitating the conversion of qualitative human attributes into rank-ordered and monetized discrete categories, as well as rationalizing a particular and peculiar labor structure.⁷ Moreover, just as the examination of slavery provides a means of producing more critical

histories of accounting, so it might occupy a similar role in relation to the histories of geography as a discourse and discipline. Such critical histories of geography would need to consider such themes as the place of wealth derived from slavery in geographical careers and institutions; how geographical ideas and techniques were used to maintain (or undermine) slavery; plantations and other places of slavery as sites for the production and reception of geographical knowledge; and the role of enslaved people themselves in the circuits of geographical knowledge.

Treating maps as discursive elements that, like present-day plantation museums, serve to obscure or normalise slavery is similar to how other representations have often been understood (e.g., landscape paintings or pastoral poetic forms).⁸ Indeed, a source like a landscape painting can be considered as a power-laden representation, a depiction of the plantation economy and a source of information about everyday life under slavery. Such different approaches, while not straightforwardly complementary, suggest the range of interpretive perspectives that might be taken toward “geographical” sources, in addition to those that are broadly positivist. In this collection, Anyaa Anim-Addo’s paper, which draws on both postcolonial literary theory and concepts of mobility, demonstrates the value of geographical approaches informed by social and cultural perspectives. In particular, a focus on mobility has much to offer to our understanding of power, resistance, and the formation of racialized identities under slavery.⁹ This perspective is important because it moves beyond a focus on incarceration and captivity as the main mode through which slavery is understood to operate. Michel Foucault’s work, for example, mentioned in the paper by Randle, has informed other treatments of slavery.¹⁰ Similarly, the applicability of concepts derived from the work of Giorgio Agamben and Carl Schmitt to systems of slavery have been discussed.¹¹ Attractive though such models are, it is important to retain a sense of the historical and geographical specificity of (particular) systems of slavery and to recognize that slavery was not only manifest in spectacular forms of violence or exceptional acts of incarceration – or, indeed, through economic processes of extracting labor – but also through everyday, small acts of dispossession.¹²

Mapping the geographies of slavery

So far, I have spoken of “slavery” as though it were a self-evident term, not least in terms of its geographies. Most of the papers in this collection focus on slavery in the U.S. context and especially the Southern states. This is unsurprising given the origins of the collection in a conference in Washington, D.C., and the national affiliation of most of the presenters. It also reflects the strength and vibrancy of the study of U.S.

slavery more generally. Nevertheless, it is necessary to attend to the possible consequences of such a focus and to consider what might be being missed out. Overall, the geographies of slavery conveyed in this collection are rural rather than urban, Southern rather than Northern, American rather than, say, Caribbean or Brazilian, and New World rather than African or European. More generally, the form of slavery addressed in these papers is that of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic world. Clearly, we can imagine many other geographies of slavery across the globe and in other times that need attention.

What might be termed a Southern U.S. “master narrative” of slavery should not be allowed to stand uninterrogated. Moreover, broader concepts and conclusions derived from this context should not be extended to other situations without critical reflection. In part, the construction of this master narrative is an act of displacement, a “disowning” of slavery within the United States such that its existence in other parts of the country is erased and the South is “othered.”¹³ Its unthinking reproduction would be an act of arrogation and metonymy, such that a particular version of the history of U.S. slavery comes to obscure and stand for that elsewhere. Geographers and historical scholars attentive to space are particularly well attuned to the explicit and implicit geographies of work on slavery, possessing the tools both to produce geographically sensitive studies and to critique the geographical assumptions embedded in existing work.¹⁴ A critical geography of slavery must not only seek to avoid unwarranted generalizations but also attend to the traffic in the concept of “slavery” as a historical phenomenon. Important questions relate to how the discourse of slavery has traversed different times, places, labor relations and practices, and the implications of this for present-day research.

Critical geographies of slavery

Although many of the papers in this collection focus on slavery itself, rather than its contestation or its ending, geographical scholars have much to offer to the study of abolition, resistance, and their legacies. Indeed, several of the papers attend to the question of how geographers and others might contribute to challenging and overcoming the racial inequalities and injustices that are a product of slavery by focusing on the erasures of past injustices perpetrated at plantation museums, a perspective that draws on Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small’s highly-influential book, *Representations of Slavery*.¹⁵ These papers aim both to critique contemporary museological practice by exposing how it perpetuates unjust forms of social memory and, as the paper by Christine N. Buzinde and Iyunolu F. Osagie shows, legal treatment, but also to prompt and provide advice on better practice. Of course, an important question that stems from this

laudable objective is how critical work can engage with museums while avoiding being assimilated into broader patterns of injustice. More generally, such work resonates with the significant role that some geographers have played in relation to the continuing consequences of indigenous-settler relations and questions of land rights, especially in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. However, national debates about apologies, symbolic restitution or reparations for slavery in the United States have tended to be dominated by critical legal scholars and historians, and there is clearly scope for geographers to play a greater role in such areas.

One theme that recurs in how the critical geographies of slavery are practiced in this collection is a contrast between plantation myth and historical realities. In the paper by Perry L. Carter, David Butler, and Owen J. Dwyer, for example, the latter is articulated by the oral histories gathered as part of the Federal Writers' Project—although the authors rightly point out the highly-mediated and problematic nature of these sources. Yet, while challenging racial mythology is clearly an important part of a critical approach, we also need to be careful not assume that there is an objective "truth" about slavery waiting to be revealed. Resistance to slavery and its legacies not only operates in a factual register (i.e., the truth of slavery versus plantation myths), but also in the subjective ways that slavery has been, and is, contested. The genre of the "neo-slave narrative," most famously expounded by Toni Morrison, is exemplary here. The blending of fact and fiction, history and memory in such writing to depict and interrogate slavery as a phenomenon with lasting cultural meaning and social consequences could usefully inform how critical geographies of slavery are undertaken. In this light, such work should not be confined to the realm of the "factual" or to positivist perspectives, but also examine the imaginative and creative practices through which enslaved people, their descendants and others have sought to contest patterns of subjugation. As Arnold Modlin's photo essay suggests, artistic practices may be an ideal means of articulating such critical geographies of slavery.

Conclusion

At his death in 1870, Sir Roderick Murchison, President of the Royal Geographical Society in London, described James MacQueen as a "distinguished veteran geographer." Elected to the Fellowship of the RGS in 1845, he is generally described as "James MacQueen, geographer" and such geographical authority was founded on wealth and experience derived from slavery. The geographies signalled by this collection have a rather different relationship with slavery, of course, but it is worth considering just what this critical perspective might entail. I would suggest that a critical geography of slavery must be critical of the patterns of

subjugation and injustice that stem from slavery and its legacies; critical in its approach to the implicit and explicit geographies in how and where slavery is studied in order to ensure that particular master narratives do not obscure specificity and difference; critical in its use of sources, not only by attending to their flaws and limitations, but also by recognizing how they represent power and articulate dominance; critical of the idea that revealing the objective “truth” about slavery is and has been the only way in which the myths of mastery can be challenged; critical of a sole reliance on positivist approaches to slavery and attentive to how subjective, creative and imaginative practices might be used; and, finally, critical in our own engagements with slavery and how we use them to build our careers. It is unlikely that any modern geographer could be quite so indebted to the dispossession of enslaved people as James MacQueen was, but in our efforts to study the geographies of slavery and to develop new geographical sources and techniques toward it, we should never treat this as just another “topic.”

Notes

1. John White, *An Account of the Trial (with Observations by the Defendant), M'Queen versus White, in the Supreme Court of Judicature, before His Honour the Rev. Francis M'Mahon* (Grenada: Printed by John Spahn, 1809); James MacQueen, *An Answer to John White's Pamphlet* (Grenada: Printed by John Spahn, 1810). On land surveying in the Caribbean, see Barry W. Higman, *Jamaica Surveyed: Plantation Maps and Plans of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2001).
2. Grenada was re-captured by France in 1779 and restored to Britain in 1783.
3. MacQueen, *An Answer to John White's Pamphlet*, 17, emphasis in original.
4. On MacQueen, see especially David Lambert, “‘Taken Captive by the Mystery of the Great River’: Towards an Historical Geography of British Geography and Atlantic Slavery,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 35 (2009): 44-65. A book-length treatment of MacQueen’s entanglements with geography, slavery and empire, *Mastering the Niger*, is due to be published by the University of Chicago Press in 2013.
5. I also spoke at the session at which these papers were presented. My own paper was published as David Lambert, “Black-Atlantic Counterfactualism: Speculating about Slavery and its Aftermath,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 36 (2010): 286-296.
6. See, for example, Barry W. Higman, *Plantation Jamaica, 1750-1850: Capital and Control in a Colonial Economy* (Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2005); Jack H. Galloway, *The Sugar Cane Industry: An Historical Geography from Origins to 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); David Watts, *The West Indies: Patterns of Development, Culture and Environmental Change since 1492* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). See also David Eltis and David Richardson, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New Haven: Yale Uni-

- versity Press, 2010) and The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, Available online at <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/index.faces>.
7. See, for example, Thomas N. Tyson, Richard K. Fleischman, and David Oldroyd, "Theoretical Perspectives on Accounting for Labor on Slave Plantations of the USA and British West Indies," *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal* 15 (2004): 758-778.
 8. Geoff Quilley and Kay Dian Kriz, eds., *An Economy of Colour: Visual Culture and the Atlantic World, 1660-1830* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).
 9. Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies* (London: Routledge, 2003). See, for example, Susan Eva O'Donovan, "The Politics of Slaves: Mobility, Messages, and Power in Antebellum America," unpublished paper presented in 2010 at the Newberry Library, Chicago.
 10. For example, Diana Paton, *No Bond but the Law: Punishment, Race, and Gender in Jamaican State Formation, 1780-1870* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1992).
 11. Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 185-189.
 12. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
 13. Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860* (London: Cornell University Press, 1998); David R. Jansson, "Internal Orientalism in America: W. J. Cash's *The Mind of the South* and the Spatial Construction of American National Identity," *Political Geography* 22 (2003): 293-316.
 14. Other examples would include the tendency for slavery in Jamaica to stand for that in the rest of the (British) Caribbean and for the Anglo-American trans-Atlantic slave trade to obscure other Atlantic networks.
 15. Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 2002).