

Keywords

for American Cultural Studies

Edited by

Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler



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erogeneous developments in the later half of the twentieth century: the mid-century naturalization of "sex" as the core of identity formation and psychological development; the late-century move to isolate "sex" as a category of analysis located at the center of lesbian-gay and queer studies; the more recent rise of a gay neoconservatism that insists on bracketing the politics of sexuality from a wider social justice agenda; the many vernacular discourses and dissident practices that have clustered around sex and sexuality throughout the period (Duggan 2004b; Burgett 2005). These diverse intellectual, political, and social formations are neither reducible to a core ideology nor elements of a linear history. But they do suggest that one challenge for future work organized around the keyword "sex" may be to produce research that is more episodic than sequential, more local (and trans-local) than national. Such scholarship needs to focus both on those moments and places where "sex" becomes available as an isolable way of thinking about and experiencing oneself and one's relations to others, and on those moments and places where "it" does not. The corresponding task, which may call for even greater inventiveness and creativity, involves the archiving and cultivation of alternative vocabularies for thinking and talking about bodies, pleasures, and the political relations between and among them.

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Slavery

Walter Johnson

"Slavery has never been represented, slavery never can be represented," said the novelist, antislavery lecturer, and former slave William Wells Brown in 1847 (18). Brown referred, in the first instance, to the world-making violence of the system of kidnapping, dispossession, and labor extraction that emerged in the fifteenth century and persisted almost to the dawn of the twentieth. But he referred in the second instance to a sort of epistemological violence, a murderous, forcible forgetting of the history of slavery. Only slavery's victims—if it is possible to use the word "only" in the context of so many millions of stolen lives—might have truly told the story he wanted to tell. Brown reminds us that we approach the history of slavery by way of whispers and shadows, where truth has often been hidden in half truth in order to be saved away for the future. We approach it, that is to say, across a field of argument in which the history of slavery has often been conscripted to the economic, political, and imperial purposes that have hidden inside the word "freedom."

Over the four centuries of Atlantic slavery, millions of Africans and their descendants were turned into profits, fancies, sensations, and possessions of New World whites. The vast majority of the enslaved were agricultural workers whose lives were devoted to the production of staple crops (sugar, tobacco, indigo,

coffee, and cotton). Their labor provided the agricultural base of European mercantile capitalism and much of the surplus capital that, by the late eighteenth century, was being invested in the development of European industry. North America was alone among New World slave societies in having a self-reproducing slave population. Elsewhere, particularly in the Caribbean and Brazil, the murderous character of the slaveholding regime (the life expectancy of Africans put to work cultivating sugar in the Americas was seven years from the time they stepped ashore) meant that slaveholders depended upon the Atlantic slave trade as a replacement for biological reproduction.

The history of New World slavery was characterized by daily resistance on the part of the enslaved, terrific brutality on the part of the enslaving, and frequent military conflict between the two. Daily forms of resistance took the form of everything from mouthing off and shamming sickness to flight, arson, and assault. The slaveholders' violent responses, which seem at first to emblemize the license of unchecked power, upon closer inspection reveal the brittleness of their control; mastery had constantly to be—could only be—shored up through brutality. Everyday forms of resistance helped slaves come to trust one another enough to plan a hemisphere-wide series of insurgencies—some on a very small scale, some mobilizing thousands at a time—which varied widely in their ideology and aspiration, but which continually presented the possibility that the “Atlantic World” might be remade as a “Black Atlantic” (James 1938; Genovese

1979; Stuckey 1987; G. Hall 1992; Gilroy 1993; da Costa 1994; Sidbury 1997; Berlin 1998; W. Johnson 2002; Dubois 2004; J. Morgan 2004). Indeed, the military and diplomatic history of the New World was distilled in the alembic of black revolt. From the Maroon Wars in Jamaica to the Haitian Revolution to the American Revolution, the Civil War, and the Cuban Revolution, armed and insurgent blacks (and the almost unspeakable threat they represented to white leaders) decisively shaped the course of European and American history.

The foundational role of African and African American labor and resistance in the history of European imperialism and the economic growth of the Atlantic economy was reflected in the institution's role in shaping Atlantic culture. Institutions of law and governance, structures and styles of authority, religious faith and medical knowledge, cultural forms ranging from popular amusements to sentimental novels and autobiographies: all of these emergent forms of European modernity bore the stamp (often forcibly obscured) of slavery. So, too, did the ongoing identification of blackness with the condition of dispossession, and the disposition to insurgency.

The long nineteenth century, beginning with the Haitian Revolution in 1792 and culminating with the legislative emancipation in Brazil in 1888, marked the passing of slavery from the governing institutional solution to problems of labor, empire, and difference, to a residual social form (persisting to this day, it should be said) with tremendous discursive power. The end began with the idea that the opposite of slavery was

neither redemption (as the Christian emphasis on sin as a form of slavery would have it) nor mastery (as the idea of history as a sort of race war would have it), but "freedom." The emergent antislavery version of enslavement was one that tried to demonstrate the ways in which slavery deformed the course of right and history by specifying its evils: its epochal barbarities and quotidian tortures; its corruptive tyranny and degrading license; its economic and moral backwardness; its un-freedom. And over the course of the nineteenth century this new view increasingly contested a proslavery argument that slavery itself represented the unfolding course of "freedom": the alignment of social institutions with natural (racial) history; the propagation of the earth for the benefit of its masters; the temporal manifestation of an institution that was both ancient in provenance and providential in design. Beginning with the Haitian Revolution, it was the anti-slavery argument about slavery that won: African American slavery came to be seen as the antithesis of "freedom."

Though it referred over the course of that century-long argument to a condition that was historically specific to black people, the term "slavery" came to serve as a sort of switchboard through which arguments over the character of "freedom" could be routed and defined: the archaic pendant to the emergent future. By using the word "slavery" to describe institutions ranging from wage labor and marriage to prostitution and peonage, nineteenth-century reformers sought to extend the moral force of the argument against African American slavery to other sorts of so-

cial relations. Their efforts were generally met with an insistence that "slavery" was a condition that was (or had been) unique to African Americans, who were, with emancipation, presumed to be experiencing "freedom."

The framing of slavery as archaic and freedom as emergent has a complex history in Western political economy. In both Smithian and Marxian thought, slavery remained an almost wholly unthought backdrop to the unfolding history of capitalism in Europe. For Adam Smith, slavery was destined to fall away before the superior capacity of wage labor to motivate workers through their own self-interest; the inferior motivation of bonded labor was in the Smithian tradition taken as a given rather than recognized (and theorized) as the result of the resistance of enslaved people (Oakes 2003). For Karl Marx, slavery was a moment in the history of primitive accumulation—the initial process of dispossession out of which capitalist social relations were subsequently built. It was the past to the present of "capitalism" (understood here as that system of social relations characterized by "free" labor and the factory mode of production) with which he was primarily concerned (Marx 1867/1976, 1: 667–712; W. Johnson 2004). To this day, much of the scholarship on slavery done in each of these traditions—so radically opposed in so many other ways—shares the common metanarrative shape of outlining a "transition" from slavery to capitalism.

Even as it provided the term with enormous critical potential, the marking of "slavery" as an archaism, destined to be superceded by the emergent history of

freedom, made the term (and the history of the millions of martyrs it contains) useful to those who defined freedom in terms of national belonging or economic license. In this usage, as found in nineteenth-century reform and political economy, the relationship between slavery and freedom is figured as one of temporal supercession. The United States is no longer figured as a place where the contest between the two is to be fought out, but as a place where it has been uniformly and once-and-for-all completed. As George W. Bush put it in his 2001 inaugural address, the history of the United States is "the story of a slaveholding society that became a servant of freedom." Through their struggle against injustice, he later explained, "the very people traded into slavery helped to set America free" (Bush 2001, 2003). In the historical vision expressed by (but certainly not limited to) Bush's addresses, the history of slavery has been turned into a cliché, a set of images that have been emptied of any authentic historical meaning through their sheer repetition in connection with their supposed extinction at the hands of "freedom." The history of slavery in this usage exists in a state of civil servitude to the idea of "American freedom."

A countercurrent within mostly Marxist and black radical thought—notably W. E. B. Du Bois (1935), C. L. R. James (1938), Eric Williams (1944), Stuart Hall (2002), Sidney Mintz (1985), David Brion Davis (1975), and Cedric Robinson (2000)—has insistently

contested the temporal framing of the relationship of slavery to freedom as one of linear progress. By insisting upon the place of slavery in the history of European and American capitalism—upon the way that the palpable experiences of freedom in Europe and the Americas and the narrowness of an idea of freedom defined as the ability to work for a wage both depended upon slavery—they have framed the relationship between the two terms as being one of dynamic simultaneity. They have, that is to say, insistently pointed out practices of servitude at the heart of the history of freedom, a set of insights that gives new and subversive meaning to Bush's phrase "servant of freedom."

The idea of the simultaneous coproduction of slavery and freedom lies at the heart of the case for reparations for slavery. This ongoing case has a history in the United States that dates to Reconstruction, and it represents a powerful (if also powerfully stigmatized by the intellectual and cultural mainstream) refiguration of the relationship of capitalism, slavery, freedom, past, and present. By reworking the history of the exploitation of Africans in the Americas—by whatever means, under whatever mode of production, mystified by whatever Western category of analysis—as a single extended and ongoing moment of time, the heterodox historiography of reparations calls upon us to recognize slavery not as an element of the national (or hemispheric) past but of the global present.