

Article

“Using History to Make Slavery History”: The African American Past and the Challenge of Contemporary Slavery

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Abstract

This article argues that contemporary antislavery activism in the United States is programmatically undermined and ethically compromised unless it is firmly grounded in a deep understanding of the African American past. Far too frequently those who claim to be “the new abolitionists” evince no interest in what the original abolitionist movement might have to teach them and seem entirely detached from a U.S. history in which the mass, systematic enslavement of African Americans and its consequences are dominating themes. As a result contemporary antislavery activism too often marginalizes the struggle for racial justice in the United States and even indulges in racist ideology. In an effort to overcome these problems, this article seeks to demonstrate in specific detail how knowledge of the African American past can empower opposition to slavery as we encounter it today.

Keywords

convict lease system; debt peonage; historical perspective; legacies of chattel slavery; prison industrial complex; slaving; white racism

Issue

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1. What This Essay Is and Is Not

American political culture presents antislavery activists with three substantial challenges when they attempt to develop public understanding and support. The first involves the vast number of Americans from all walks of life who believe, deep down, that the Civil War put an end to human bondage a century and a half ago—end of story. The second involves politically engaged African Americans who regard the modern antislavery movement with deep (and often highly justifiable) suspicion as a project that automatically marginalizes their ongoing struggles against the legacies of their forebears’ enslavement. The third involves the low level of historical discernment among proponents of modern antislavery themselves. Today, throughout the United States, antislavery activists frequently describe themselves and their work as literal extensions of the na-

tion’s abolitionist past. While some of this historical appropriation gets put to very good uses, much of it involves today’s abolitionists repurposing for public consumption some of the original abolitionists’ most negative images and ideas about the enslaved and how to represent them. The results, mildly put, are deeply damaging. Then there are politicized partisans of antislavery today who declare in chauvinistic accents that since the nation permanently eliminated its own system of human bondage in favor of universal freedom it is uniquely positioned to lead in the world-wide abolition of slavery everywhere. (All this goes far to explain “problem two”, above). Finally we come to the majority of today’s antislavery activists who seem to operate in the absence of historical knowledge and perspective, living exclusively in a socially engaged “now” rather than pursuing such questions as: “Where did this problem come from? Who was responsible for creating it?—How

comparable is it, historically, to others that can be identified?—Are there historical precedents or cautionaries to think about when combating it?”—And so forth.

This essay, written by a student of the American abolitionist movement, suggests how these difficult problems can be addressed by “using history to make slavery history”, that is, by applying reliable knowledge and perspectives drawn from the American past, particularly the African American past, to the problem of slavery today. When doing so it also argues that informed perspectives on the past make possible much deeper grass-roots understanding of and support for contemporary antislavery activism than is currently the case. This essay, in other words, offers a historical users’ guide for contemporary antislavery activists as well as a challenge to American historians to make their work speak directly to problems of contemporary slavery while emphasizing, not marginalizing, the central importance of the African American experience. It makes no pretense to original primary scholarship, only to offering fresh approaches to understanding the past. It also develops few transnational perspectives, save those in a concluding section that examines the American history of slavery and antislavery in a global context. In sum, this essay seeks to present a considerable amount of familiar historical information bearing on the United States in presumably new, more accurate, more accessible, more accurate antislavery perspectives.

2. Inviting American Historians to Address Contemporary Slavery

“Using History to Make Slavery History” is the tagline that describes the mission of Historians Against Slavery (HAS), an organization of close to 800 scholars, teachers, graduate students and campus activists located in colleges and universities throughout the United States, Canada and the British Isles. It was founded in 2011 by a group of distinguished historians of pre-Civil War slavery and antislavery movements in the United States after discovering that many current activists in the struggle against the “new slavery” were claiming to be “modern-day abolitionists”. These scholars quickly realized that today’s would-be heirs to the original abolitionist movement were often uninformed of what earlier abolitionists actually believed and said, what they were up against, and what actions had contributed to their success. In addition, these historians also realized that today’s activists had little if any sense of how profoundly the legacies of antebellum slavery and antislavery in the United States have shaped how most Americans respond to (or fail to respond to) the challenges of today’s global slavery. To HAS’s founders it seemed obvious that specialists in the history of slavery and antislavery in the American past had much of value to offer to “modern-day” abolitionists.

But by the same token, historians also realized, con-

temporary antislavery activists have much to teach to them about slavery and antislavery today. Slavery and human trafficking in our time, as historians well know, assumes forms that are as often radically different from as they are similar to the “plantation models” familiar to American and other Western Hemisphere historians. The roles played by law, the state, the media, non-governmental organizations, “race”, and the economy in either promoting or impeding slavery today often depart dramatically from what was commonplace in the pre-Civil War era. If scholars of the history of slavery and antislavery (such as the founders of HAS) expect their work to have currency in the age of the “new slavery” they have a great deal to learn from today’s activists. Given all this, these historians decided, what was required was a vehicle for productive conversations and direct collaborations between historians of slavery and abolitionism and contemporary activists that would make college and university campuses become centers of historically informed antislavery study and activism. Thus was created Historians Against Slavery, an organization dedicated to “using history to make slavery history” that has much in common with the Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation, Hull University, UK and with Canadian York University’s Alliance Against Modern Slavery.

The founders of Historians Against Slavery see themselves as being supported by ample scholarly precedents as well as by these counterpart organizations. Back in the 1960s outstanding scholars of American slavery and antislavery who deeply influenced by the Civil Rights Movement such as Kenneth Stampp, John Hope Franklin, Winthrop Jordan, Benjamin Quarles, and Gerda Lerner initiated a major re-writing of U.S. history that placed the problem of chattel slavery and its legacies where we find them today—as central components of the American experience. “Back then” those esteemed historians were responding directly to the moral challenges of segregation and white supremacy (all legacies of southern chattel slavery) put before them by Martin Luther King, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Fanny Lou Hamer, Nikki Giovanni, Maya Angelou, Angela Davis and so many others. Should not historians today be doing likewise in response to the exceptional work being undertaken by today’s antislavery activists? The parallels and contradictions between slavery and antislavery “then” and slavery “now” are far too revealing to allow any conclusion other than an affirmation.

It goes without saying that Historians Against Slavery sees little value in scholarship “for its own sake”. Instead, their work reaffirms a well-known provocation issued by the eminent abolitionist and historian Wendell Phillips in his famous 1881 Harvard University Phi Beta Kappa address, *The Scholar in a Republic*: “Timid scholarship either shrinks from sharing in these agitations, or denounces them as vulgar and dangerous”, he warned. “I urge on college bred men” to set aside “cold moonlight reflection on older civilizations” and instead

“lead in the agitation of the great social questions which stir and educate the age” (Wendell, 1881, pp. 17, 18, 22). Historians Against Slavery responds to Phillips’s challenge with an agenda designed explicitly to multiply public support for antislavery activism today. It counts chapters on twenty campuses (thus far) and offers financial support for their activities. It has established an ongoing partnership with the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center through which it collaborates not only in holding conferences but also in website development, supporting campus activities, documentary film consultation, the design of short antislavery web videos, and building partnerships with other activist organizations. It is directly involved in developing an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation supported Center on Modern Slavery and Antislavery at Tougaloo College, a historically black college in Jackson, Mississippi. Its website features The FREE Project, a user-friendly tool for establishing campus-based antislavery societies and linking them into networks that offers practical answers to the most important abolitionist question of all: “What can I do to make a real difference?”

Historians Against Slavery’s short answer is “study the past”. For this reason, its Speakers Bureau offers colleges and universities outstanding exponents of antislavery scholarship and pedagogy. These are widely published historians some of whose books have garnered national prizes and all of whom have won accolades for their teaching. Sessions organized by Historians Against Slavery have filled rooms at recent meetings of professional historians. Its biennial conferences at Cincinnati’s National Underground Railroad Freedom Center foster collaboration between socially engaged historians and antislavery activists. Its new book series with Cambridge University Press, “Slavery since Emancipation”, is designed explicitly to act on the imperative for historical reinterpretation discussed above.

3. Varieties of Historical Blindness

Why insist on the necessity of historical perspectives? A fair and absolutely justifiable question, particularly if it is being posed by activists today, many of whom consider themselves heirs of the original American abolitionist movement. Are we not finally gaining traction against today’s slavery? Here are the points one might wish to cite to document the progress being made against slavery and trafficking today in the United States and all over the globe:

- Major non-governmental organizations continue to extend their reach while smaller ones continue proliferating;
- Notable antislavery successes have been achieved in negotiations with governments and private enterprises;

- Since 2000 no fewer than thirty new antislavery books and a profusion of research articles have been published, two dozen antislavery documentary films produced, and an exceptional array of informative digital resources made available on line to publicize the challenges of slavery around the world;
- Federal and state governments have committed increasing resources to address human trafficking;
- Talented journalists and media celebrities have repeatedly highlighted the global problem;¹
- Thanks to sensational headlines, the public has become aware that police and prosecutors target sex-trafficking rings and enslavers of immigrant laborers.

These developments surely indicate growing public awareness. But the organizers of Historians Against Slavery worry whether “awareness” uninformed by historical understanding can amount to more than hand-wringing, sending money, and mistaking “clicking and joining” for sustained personal engagement. Answers emerge once we consider, *as historians*, the deficiencies in how activists present contemporary slavery and their efforts to combat it to the American public, how historians themselves are implicated in creating these deficiencies, and what historians can do to enhance the power of activists’ appeals.

Access any webpage for the leading antislavery non-governmental organizations (Free the Slaves (n.d.), the Polaris Project (n.d.), Not For Sale (n.d.), the International Justice Mission (n.d.)) and television networks (Al Jeezera and CNN) and look hard for historical perspectives. Search the books and films just mentioned and one can find little historical perspective. These organizations, publications, and films focus almost exclusively on contemporary slavery because NOW, quite understandably, counts most for antislavery activists working at close quarters and in short time frames to liberate the enslaved, prosecute their oppressors, and assist in rebuilding their lives while simultaneously competing for grants and soliciting funds from their supporters No matter where the area of concern—

¹ The most widely read of the recent studies on modern slavery include *Disposable people: The new slavery and the global economy* (Bales, 2001); *Ending slavery: How we free today’s slaves* (Bales, 2007); *A crime so monstrous: Face-to-face with modern-day slavery* (Skinner, 2008); *Human trafficking: A global perspective* (Shelley, 2008); *Sex trafficking: Inside the business of modern slavery* (Kara, 2010); *Bonded labor: Tackling the system of slavery in South Asia* (Kara, 2012). Many excellent documentaries exist, but these three are representative: “Fatal Promises” (Rohrer, Greenman, & Rohrer, 2009), “The Dark Side of Chocolate” (Mistrati & Romero, 2010) and “Not My Life” (Bilheimer, 2010). For one of the most accessible and comprehensive data-based sites addressing modern slavery and antislavery, see Polaris Project (n.d.).

India, Southeast Asia, Brazil, Eastern Europe, West Africa, northern Florida, Chicago, and Minnesota's Red Lake Indian Reservation, to name just a few places slavery exists—activist groups offer information about today's slavery bereft of historical context. Ordinary Americans, as a result, find it difficult to connect descriptions of today's slavery with their reflexive understanding of African American bondage in the national history. Whenever today's antislavery activists complain—as they often do—about the widespread and presumably ignorant American belief that the world permanently abolished slavery at the conclusion of the Civil War, they actually demonstrate a historical blindness for which, strangely enough, historians themselves are largely responsible.

Why not believe exactly this? After all, we historians are the ones who have (correctly) assured Americans time out of mind that emancipation constitutes a transformational event in United States history thanks to an enormous civil war. That war cost the lives of over seven hundred fifty thousand dead and left an additional four hundred thousand wounded while emancipating roughly four million people in what stands as the largest governmental appropriation of private property until the Russian Revolution. These scholars also insist that Americans can better understand the nation's ongoing racial difficulties once connected to the legacies of enslavement, emancipation, and the collapse of Reconstruction. Little wonder then that the vast majority of Americans find it difficult to empathize with today's enslaved, believing instead that all slaves were black, their owners all white, and that human bondage vanished in 1865. Mention of slavery today leads Americans to fasten instinctively on the Civil War and symbols of emancipation's enduring legacies—Abraham Lincoln, Robert E. Lee, Frederick Douglass, Gettysburg, Martin Luther King, the 1965 Civil Rights Act, post-Katrina New Orleans, the "prison industrial complex", the "achievement gap", reparations, racialized policing practices and Barack Obama. For this reason, today's manacled wood cutters in Manaus, Brazil, children sequestered behind barb-wire fences on West African cacao plantations, enslaved vegetable pickers in the Florida "panhandle", or prostituted women trafficked in Bangkok and St. Louis remain to most Americans wholly remote and unrecognizable as enslaved people.

At the same time, a variant of this historical blindness produces a pernicious form of antislavery ideology for which historians are clearly *not* responsible, apart from the obligation to refute it. This problem is created by politically-minded advocates of antislavery who "practice history (ignorantly) without a license" and at issue are myths asserting the uniqueness of our nation's historical "exceptionalism" and its "manifest destiny" in expanding "frontiers of freedom" the world over. Examining this ideology for a moment goes far to explain why African Americans view the "new aboli-

tionist movement" so suspiciously. Consider the remarks of Republican Texas Senator John Cornyn, a fervent supporter of U.S. government initiatives against slavery all over the globe, before Committee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Property Rights (2004):

As we continue the fight to protect the American Way of life in our war against terrorism, we also have been fighting another war to protect American ideals and principles, a war against an old evil—human trafficking and slavery. Most Americans would probably be shocked to learn that the institutions of slavery and involuntary servitude, institutions that the nation fought a bloody war to destroy, continue to persist today, not just around the world, but indeed hidden in communities across America.

It has been nearly two centuries since the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, and well over a century since the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment. Yet to this day, men, women and children continue to be trafficked into the United States criminal, but profoundly evil.

The experiences that we will hear recounted amount to a modern-day form of slavery. The stories are not easy to hear, but we must hear them and we must face up to them if we are to finish the work of the Thirteenth Amendment, and truly expel the institution of slavery from our midst (Cornyn as cited in Hua, 2011).

What the good Senator is propounding here are assertions about the relationship of "then" to "now" that have become all too commonplace in antislavery ideology in the United States today, and to put it charitably, they exude smug nationalism and a contemptuous rejection African American history. By linking the abolition of the institution that originated today's forms of racial oppression—plantation slavery—to an agonizing human rights concern—contemporary human bondage—Cornyn casts white supremacy as a problem that no longer exists within the post-emancipation United States. What perverts "American ideals and principles" is not the persistent white racism that comprises slavery's legacy, but instead contemporary human trafficking that impinges into our previously secure communities from *outside the United States*. We in the United States are free and morally sound. They, the enslavers, beyond our borders, threaten to overrun us and undermine our cherished liberty.

Moreover, by arguing that human bondage today threatens "the American way of life" because it is reincarnation of the "old evil" of plantation slavery Cornyn, like so many other believers in "American exceptionalism" obliterates the epic historical struggle by African American abolitionists, their white allies and succeeding generations of Civil Rights activists to secure racial

equality in the face of white racial terrorism. By erasing this all-important history in favor of an account that emphasizes the smooth, triumphal progress of liberating American values. Cornyn creates a dangerous mythology that celebrates the nation's supposedly unique mission to lead the world in ridding itself of "the new slavery". As the history of African American struggle vanishes, so does the imperative that "white America" face up to its biases and bigotry. Meanwhile, the presumably antislavery Cornyn, like so many and many other Republican Party antislavery advocates (former President George W. Bush, Kansas Governor Sam Brownback and former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee only begin a much longer list) endorse voter suppression laws that aim at the disenfranchisement of African Americans. Unfortunately, this sort of rhetoric also circulates freely among white antislavery advocates whatever their political preferences who, like so many of their fellow Americans, hold fast to an instinctive belief in the fundamental goodness of their nation's founding principles. As Historian Against Slavery scholar Laura T. Murphy demonstrates, this parochial view too often taints the antislavery appeal with nationalistic anti-Muslim, anti-foreign and anti-immigrant prejudice (Murphy, 2014a, 2014b).

Apart from the political arena, still other blind spots in the visions of today's antislavery activists are widely shared and easy to diagnose. They also go far to explain the reasons for the alienation of African Americans from the modern antislavery movement. Such are the consequences when today's abolitionists sift through cultural artifacts left to us by the largely white pre-Civil War antislavery movement and repurpose them for their own 21st century uses. Serious scholars of the original abolitionist movement have cautioned for decades against treating this legacy uncritically. Mixed with these white abolitionists' deep moral insights, compelling rhetoric, uncommon courage and unmatched persistence, historians warn, were reflexive tendencies to stereotype, patronize, display, commodify, and disempower the very African Americans for whom they were advocating. The visual images produced by the original white American abolitionists reflected all these biases with a voyeuristic intensity—fettered slaves, hands clasped, kneeling in supplication—helpless naked slaves being whipped by sadistic masters—scantly clad slaves fearfully trembling atop the auction block—half-naked female slaves being pursued by lust-driven planters—and so forth.

"The pornography of pain" is how one noted historian characterizes the appeal of these images to their composers and to the white audiences for which they were intended. Yet as a much respected members of Historians Against Slavery have demonstrated, today's American abolitionist movement has seized on these old images, has updated them to suit a 21st century idiom, and now circulates them extensively to broadcast

an antislavery message in which dark skinned people (again) have no place beyond silence, victimization, marginalization and powerlessness. As in antebellum times, chains, manacles, barred windows, sexually provocative poses and supplicating victims repeatedly constitute the dominant motifs. Quite recently historians such as Zoe Trodd (an active Historian Against Slavery) have begun taking exception to these representations with the result that some artists and designers have begun producing images that convey far more empowering antislavery messages. Surely this is how history ought to be employed in order to "make slavery history" (Haltunnen, 1995).²

4. Bringing the African American Past into the Present.

Apart from correcting the misrepresentations just discussed, what treatment is there for the most difficult form of historical blindness of all, the instinctive conviction shared by so many Americans that the Civil War put a permanent end to slavery? The balance of this essay contends, no surprise, that the surest cure is to emphasize the vital importance of African American history for the work of the modern antislavery movement. To illustrate, consider following hypothetical situation. Imagine yourself speaking on behalf of Historians Against Slavery on "the challenges of the new global slavery and the need for a new abolitionist movement" at Tougaloo College, Jackson, Mississippi, the birthplace of the Freedom Riders Movement in the late 1950s. The audience consists entirely of African Americans who trace their genealogies to enslaved ancestors. If you fail to connect the "new" slavery with the "old", the audience will likely conclude that the history of enslavement they consider central to their lives and the "global" slavery you plan to describe exist in separate and incompatible universes. They might also suspect that you harbor certain racial insensitivities, a likelihood confirmed by the facts that African American participation in contemporary antislavery work is close to non-existent. Politically engaged African Americans have repeatedly made it clear that their exclusive historical claim to the problem of slavery is no less overriding is that of the holocaust for many Jews.

Fortunately, the best response available is also one at which you excel: developing revealing (though to you obvious) comparisons and contrasts between slavery in the antebellum South and slavery in the world today. These include:

- The old slavery was legal and widely considered a respectable practice. Abolitionists attacked it from

² For a nuanced explanation of the human rights implications of these images of victimization see Clark (1995). For Zoe Trodd's examination of antislavery images, see Trodd (2014).

close range and caused enormous controversy. Today's slavery is illegal and universally condemned. Today's abolitionists have no proslavery advocates to argue against. How can an abolitionist movement thrive in the absence of controversy?

- In the nineteenth century, slavery constituted the United States' second largest capital asset. Controversy over slavery involved incredibly high stakes. Though enormously profitable, the enslaved today are treated as "disposable people". Their labor has no visible impact on our formal economy. In today's economic terms, who cares?
- Because of their skin color the enslaved in the South were easy to identify. Though racism and ethnic hatred often motivates slaveholders today, slavery involves so many races and ethnicities that the enslaved themselves become much harder for Americans to identify;
- Yesteryears' enslaved troubled the white nation by rebelling, fleeing, and becoming formidable abolitionists. The enslaved today remain isolated, sequestered, seemingly quiescent, and therefore all but invisible;
- Back then, abolitionists fought against geographically defined opponents and the enslaved escaped from their masters across those same geographical boundaries. Today's slavery respects no boundaries. Traffickers remain out of sight. How can we fight for enslaved people if we cannot see them?

As you develop these obvious comparisons it quickly becomes clear why Americans have such difficulty identifying, understanding, and responding empathetically to the enslaved today. The staggering contrasts between "then" and "now" make today's forms of slavery all but unrecognizable to historically conditioned Americans *until they are presented in comparison with one another, at which point the realities of modern enslavement and the distinctive brutalities of the "old" slavery both become perfectly clear.* Insight into contemporary slavery supplied by the African American makes modern slavery visible. Moreover, and at least as important, comparisons drawn from the African American experience make manifest the deepest truth about slavery that Americans need to know no matter its location, dynamics, or history. Inescapable in every instance, past and present, is slavery's detestable brutality and the categorical imperative to assist those ensnared in it. Its legacies, whatever its form and however abolished extend most painfully into the present, a truth that your Tougaloo listeners know only too well.

To illustrate this vital truth about slavery's legacies you continue your lecture by reflecting on enslavement in the United States *after* the ending of the Civil War. You are now about to develop still more illuminating

connections between a past that deeply engages your listeners and the moral challenges of slavery facing us today. You refer primarily to Pete Daniel, David Oshinski, and Douglas Blackmon, accomplished historians with whose work you've been familiar for years, and who have exhaustively documented how former masters redesigned African American slavery after 1865 by instituting debt peonage and by trafficking fraudulently indicted black citizens as enslaved convict-lease laborers. These practices ensnared tens of thousands, were implemented in the 1890's and persisted well into the twentieth century. Denied effective legal representation tens of thousands of African Americans (and a much smaller number of whites) convicted of any sort of crime (no matter how petty) found themselves shackled, transported long distances (sometimes in iron cages) and coerced at gunpoint to work long and excessively hard for not just the state, but for large private businesses. Prison officials extended sentences as it suited them. Resistance meant beatings, deprivation of food and water, extended isolation, and the risk of being murdered.

Leasing convicts to work for private corporations turned handsome profits in which prison officials shared. Exploiting incarcerated people to work on state sponsored projects lowered tax rates, suffocated union organizing and suppressed wages for everybody else. As always, slavery paid the owners handsomely, and slavery surely is what debt peonage and convict leasing were. Both systems employed the pretext of punishing criminal behavior to seize dark-skinned people, sequester them and wring profits from their coerced labor. The system mirrored features of state-sponsored systems of enslavement currently found the world over. It also reflects perfectly what the distinguished activist/scholar Kevin Bales posits as slavery's essence:

Of all the core characteristics of slavery the most important is the presence of violent control. After violent control is established, slavery can take many forms—human trafficking, debt bondage [chattel] slavery, contract slavery, slavery linked to religious practices or state sponsored forced labor (Bales, 2007).

But as you continue your Tougaloo presentation you need above all to stress one largely unappreciated aspect of these familiar facts: If transported back to the 1880s today's enslavers and human traffickers would instantly recognize the activities of their southern counterparts and eagerly join in. Enslavement today and the enslavement of African Americans that menaced your audience's immediate ancestors for generations appear as close fraternal twins. Slavery "then" should strike today's antislavery activists as disturbingly like slavery "now". The crucial importance of this point cannot be overstressed. What African Americans

endured in the post emancipation is precisely what vulnerable people the world over endure today. *Properly understood, African American history illuminates the problem of slavery today. Properly understood, the problem of slavery today illuminates legacies of the plantation for African Americans.*

To explain: As we well know, enslaving traffickers the world over demand the repayment of impossible sums for supposed “services rendered” from undocumented people after smuggling them across national borders. These workers find repayment impossible and face the penalty of enslavement for sexual exploitation and/or brutalizing labor in factories, on farms, and in fishing ships. The southern convict lease system replicates itself wherever unscrupulous governments and private recruiters enslave “guest workers” after luring them with promises of employment. What awaits them is enslavement in public works projects and private industries. Similarities multiply once one recalls that debt peonage has paved the way for newer forms of enslavement throughout the world. The Central American nations, the British Caribbean Islands, Haiti, and the Philippines, each a major exporter of “enslaveable” people today, have a significant history based in “old” slavery followed by decades of debt peonage. It is well documented that in China and India, debt peonage enslaves millions, many of whom flee only to face re-enslavement elsewhere. Undocumented labor as a springboard to enslavement has hardly ended within the United States either. Exploitative fruit and vegetable growers, for example, have made southwest Florida infamous as “ground zero” for modern-day slavery”, as former chief assistant U.S. Attorney Douglas Molloy notes (President’s Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, 2013, p. 23). The African American experience illuminates the plight of enslaved people today. *The enormity of the problem of contemporary slavery, conversely, lends powerful support to historical claims for justice on behalf of African Americans.*

Wrapping up your presentation, you stress to your Tougaloo listeners that much remains unaddressed regarding history’s relationship to slavery within the United States today. How, for example, might the enslavement of violently displaced Native Americans before the twentieth century help to explain why today’s Indian reservations stand as epicenters of sex trafficking? How might the history of slavery in the Far West, embedded in early twentieth century “guest worker” and “coolie labor” program, help account for the enslavement of undocumented immigrants today? How might late nineteenth century “white slavery” involving immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe illuminate our current plague of sexual enslavement of undocumented Asian, Mexican, and Central American women and children? Most obvious of all, how might the history slavery’s re-emergence in the post-emancipation South illuminate the massive application of incarcer-

ated labor, prisoners who are overwhelmingly dark complexion? Convict leasing in its historical form ended in 1945, but has it really?

5. From Plantation to Prison

How well do the following facts support Kevin Bales’ contention that slavery depends on “violent control”?

The United States today has less than 5% of the world’s population, but incarcerates 25% of all the prisoners in the world.

1 in 106 **white** men today (80% US male population) are incarcerated;

1 in 36 **Hispanic** men today (8% US male population) are incarcerated;

1 in 15 **Black** men today (10% US male population) are incarcerated.

Whites make up 72% of illegal drug users. **Whites** are eight times more numerous in the US population than **blacks**. Yet **Blacks** incarcerated for drug violations outnumber whites 4:1. **White** drug users usually receive probation. **Blacks** and **Latinos** are almost always imprisoned.

Incarceration rates have skyrocketed over the past decade as crime rates have fallen.

The two largest private prison corporations, Correction Corporation of America and Wackenhut Inc. post combined profits of close to \$5 billion annually.

Prison labor has supplanted free workers in the production of hundreds of types of goods and services. Victoria’s Secret, Chevron, Boeing, IBM, Motorola, Honda, Toys R Us, Compaq, Dell, Texas Instruments, Honeywell, Hewlett-Packard, Microsoft, Nordstrom’s, Revlon, Macey’s, Pierre Cardin, Target Stores and AT&T only begin a list of companies that are using or have used prison labor. Inmates in federal prisons manufacture practically all the clothing and small scale equipment items necessary to outfit our entire armed forces. Prison “workers” are paid an average of 25 cents per hour. (Is there such a thing as wage slavery? Don’t immediately dismiss this possibility. Think carefully. Long before Marx industrial workers in the United States vehemently insisted that this was exactly what they were.)³

Can some of these overwhelmingly dark skinned inmates be legitimately categorized as slaves? This question has surely crossed the minds of those in Tougaloo listening to your speech. While granting unequivocally

³ These statistics and factual summaries have been supplied by The Sentencing Project (n.d.) the Prison Policy Initiative (2010) and the Center for Research on Globalization (Pelaez, 2014).

that those committing serious crimes need incarceration, from this historian's perspective, the answer is "absolutely". To this particular Historian Against Slavery it seems obvious to conclude that as long as conviction and sentencing rates remain so catastrophically biased against people of color, prisons today are much like the convict-lease prisons of the post-emancipation South, that is, highly remunerative profit centers that exploit dark skinned laborers while depriving free workers of gainful employment. The exercise of "violent control", by law enforcement agents and judicial officers precisely explains the dismaying disparities. By Bales' definition many of these inmates have been forcibly detained and incarcerated not for serious crimes but for their raw monetary value of their bodies Michelle Alexander (2010) lays all these facts bare in her highly disturbing *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. And since we taxpayers capitalize this system, the argument might well be advanced that we're all directly complicit.

Is it being recommended that today's antislavery activists further complicate their challenging missions by confronting the nation's prison systems? Absolutely not. Highly effective NGOs such as the Sentencing Project, address this challenge and in this writer's view it is imperative that modern abolitionists support their work. But there is no reason for duplication of effort. Instead the point regarding our prison system is exactly the one that has been made throughout this essay—that organizations fighting against today's slavery need to embrace historical perspectives and that do requires historians to explicitly connect "then" with "now" and act on the resulting ethical imperatives. Some already have by supporting Historians Confront the Carceral State, an organization founded by Historian Against Slavery Heather Thompson. Otherwise, the vast majority of Americans will continue responding to appeals against modern slavery by fastening reflexively on cotton plantations and the Civil War. Politicians hostile to racial equality will continue, unchallenged, to wrap themselves in antislavery rhetoric. Today's enslaved, imprisoned or "outside", will remain invisible. Absent historical perspective, it will be ever thus.

6. Endless Slavery: The Indeterminacy of Emancipation in Global Perspective

Though an essay this brief cannot address the many varieties of post-emancipation slavery to be found in the United States, it does suggest that for all their immediate importance, great emancipatory moments in western history such as the Civil War have limited durability. True, historians must always acknowledge the supreme importance of dramatic turning points such as the Haitian Revolution, the U.S. Civil War, the British Compensated Emancipation Act, the Cuban War for Independence, and the collapse of Brazilian slavery. But

at the same time, the public must keep in mind Wendell Phillips's prescient admonition in response to the ratification of the 13th Amendment: "We have abolished the slave, but the master remains". Though the narrative of "from slavery to freedom" retains enormous explanatory power for all Americans, Phillips's comment suggests that this narrative can also double back on itself, especially when, as just discussed, post-bellum southern planters created "slavery by another name" even as other groups entering the United States fell prey to similar exploitation. The narrative becomes painfully twisted when historian Sven Beckert documents how the post-emancipation plunge in southern cotton production in the United States caused the massive expansion of state-sponsored slavery in India and Egypt as its governors rushed to capture unmet world demand. Could the United States' Civil War have enslaved at least as many as it emancipated? It tangles and snarls completely in Joel Quirk's *The antislavery project: From slavery to human trafficking* (2012), which confutes the ahistorical assumptions that inform so much of contemporary antislavery activism—that a "new" slavery has only recently exploded across the planet, powered by unprecedented globalization, political disruption, population explosion, and so forth. We know better (*National Anti-Slavery Standard*, Feb. 23, 1866, as cited in Stewart, 1986, p. 98; Beckert, 2014; Quirk, 2012).

Quirk forcefully reminds us that in the face of epochal emancipatory moments slavery endures and evolves across the centuries, having adapted in response to ongoing social and economic changes. While old systems of enslavement across the Americas ended, they were replaced by newer forms in the nineteenth century, and millions remained in long-standing systems of bondage across Africa, the Middle East, India, and Asia through much of the twentieth century. Following the traumas of two world wars and in response to antislavery, activists demanded that first the League of Nations and then the United Nations issue protocols requiring global abolition. Certain governments took these injunctions seriously and significantly advanced the abolitionists' agenda. Many others, however, responded with flimsy legal decrees while persisting with time-honored forms of coercion or replacing them with new ones that continue today—again, "slavery by another name". As Quirk notes, little about either the "new slavery" or about global initiatives to eradicate it is unprecedented. The deepest and most comprehensive historical account we have of slavery and antislavery all over the globe, Seymour Drescher's magisterial *Abolition: A history of slavery and antislavery* (2009), confirms this crucial point with unmatched erudition.

Yet for all this crucially important scholarship no historian has pursued more deeply the troubling the implications of slavery's uninterrupted march across the past and into our time than has the distinguished Africanist Joseph C. Miller. His recently published *The*

Problem of slavery as history: A global approach (2012) asks historians to set aside everything we think we know about slavery as historical archetypes or as formal systems. Instead, according to Miller, historians and activists can best comprehend how the practice of subjugating others has been enacted and reenacted only if they abandon the noun “slavery” and all references to “the institution of slavery” as self-contained, nationally defined entities. These, Miller argues, are static, ahistorical characterizations that convey none of the dynamism of slavery’s evolution across the centuries. This problem arises, Miller argues, because historians too often have erroneously constructed “models” of antebellum United States slavery specifically and of 19th century slavery in the Western Hemisphere more generally that they then apply in an ahistorical manner when comparing slavery in differing locales.

Instead of constructing static models, Miller insists, the best way to come to grips with the extreme subjugation of humans by one another is by using the active voice when recounting the history of human bondage. Employ the dynamic gerund “slaving”, Miller recommends, and dispense with the use of “slavery” with its connotations of stasis and passivity. The gerund, Miller argues, forces us to recognize that human bondage has always been and remains above all a historical process specific to time and place carried forward by force by “slavers” who are engaged in “slaving” under ever-changing circumstances and historical contingencies. To present such practices as having produced archetypal “institutions of slavery” is descriptive sociology, Miller contends, not analytical history.

For these reasons, Miller concludes, it is useless to attempt to understand or combat human bondage by developing “models” of Western Hemisphere slavery such as that once practiced before the Civil War in order to build comparisons between them and to delineate the nature of master/ slave relationships anywhere else in the history of the world. Historical accounts that highlight variability and change over time in specific places are much more revealing. This approach also offers a disturbing cautionary against falling prey to the misapprehension that the 13th Amendment, the Haitian Revolution, the Cuban War for Independence, British West Indies emancipation, the fall of King Leopold’s empire or the liberation of the death camps, life transforming as these events incontestably were, constituted significant historical “progress.” In the final analysis, no matter how epochal the moment of emancipation for all involved “the master (or as Miller would have it the “slaver”) remains” (Miller, 2012).⁴

To be clear, Miller’s analysis invites criticism. It can be argued for example that plantation slavery throughout the Western hemisphere did in fact organ-

ize itself into highly articulated institutionalized systems, supported as they consistently were by the force of national interest, law and military might, the prevailing political order, ecclesiastical organizations, white supremacy, and the web of agencies and practices that sustained global capitalism in that era. In this fundamental respect, one might contend, human bondage in 19th century Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, the British West Indies and the United States is best described as a cluster of distinctive systems of institutionalized slavery. Certainly the abolitionists of that time understood their task as the destruction oppressive institutions embedded in economic, political and racial regimes much more than the suppression of individuals practicing “slaving”. Likewise slaveholders everywhere comprehensively defended their “peculiar institution” not simply their actions as “slavers”. But granting all this, Miller argues, only reinforces his basic objections about how historians have been describing slavery. The terms historians currently employ to present slavery as a reified institution, he points out, originate in nineteenth century moral polemics for and against slavery, not in well-grounded historical description that reveals what actually developing over time locally, regionally or transnationally. Precisely for this reason, he stresses, all the descriptive and analytical language associated with the history of slavery that grounds itself in Western hemisphere models requires a thoroughgoing overhaul.

Miller’s extended analyses of what *was* actually developing as slavery spanned the centuries are dense and often difficult to follow, but also stunningly erudite, analytically powerful and comprehensive. Addressing his text in detail is far beyond the scope of this essay. However, his explanation of who “slavers” were and what has motivated them over the millennia deserves attention because it holds great import for those seeking historical perspectives when addressing the problem of slavery today. “The definable and distinguishing position of slavers is their marginality”, Miller explains. “It is a very precise situation in terms of historical contexts that both motivated and enabled slavers to enslave” (Foner, 1983; Miers, 2003).⁵ Moving from the margins to positions of social centrality meant acquiring people, dominating them, growing rich from their labor, deriving status and patronage from their dependency and deploying resources derived from their exploitation to work their way into elite positions.

⁵ For a powerful historical account of the struggles over the centuries of enslaved people throughout the Western hemisphere to secure freedom see Kerr-Ritchie (2013), which includes a challenging “Epilogue” (pp. 150-161) addressing enslavement and freedom seeking today in historical perspective. This study does not address Miller’s preference for active voice gerunds (slaving) over passive descriptive nouns (slavery) but does reinforce such an approach by deploying little other than active verbs when describing the struggles between those engaged in slaving and those engaging in “anti-slaving”.

⁴ For a deep, disturbing study of linkages between slavery and the idea of progress see Davis (1989).

Slaving, in all these respects, has served as the time-honored way for ambitious outsiders to secure legitimacy that is woven deeply into the entire fabric of history across the centuries “Strategic slaving” is Miller’s term of choice and its value lies in the strong historical underpinnings it provides for the prescient comment by Wendell Phillips that reappears so often in this essay: “We have abolished the slave, but the master remains”.

By invoking “marginalization” Miller opens the supremely important question of what exactly, beyond greed and raw ambition, motivated enslavers in the long term and perhaps still today. The most substantial studies of those motivations, in this writer’s opinion come from Bertram Wyatt-Brown’s exceptional analyses of codes of honor and humiliation as practiced in the American South and by Americans through slavery and through warfare in large portions of the Atlantic and Mediterranean worlds, Orlando Patterson’s formulations of enslavement as the infliction of “social death” and Nell Painter’s view of enslavers as “soul murderers”. Writing in ways that should more than satisfy Miller’s preference for active verbs each of these scholars opens rich opportunities for all of us, historians and activists alike, to assay the deeper motives of the enslavers and the grievous circumstances of those enslaved (Wyatt-Brown, 1982, 2007, 2014; Patterson, 1982; Painter, 1995).

Historical insights and debates of such rich import have much to offer today’s activists engaged with the problem of slavery, (or as Miller might put it engaged in the action of “anti-slaving”). Instead of regarding their work as perpetually focused on the moment, those who combat human bondage today on a day-to-day, “real-time” level can look to the past and recognize themselves as the inheritors of rich, varied, and endlessly challenging abolitionist traditions. They can develop empowering understandings that illuminate their predecessors’ incontestable accomplishments, enduring insights, and sustained commitment. They can develop self-critical perspectives by considering how and why earlier abolitionist initiatives fell short, generated unintended negative consequences, or outright failed. They can and above all should demand that historians answer questions that repeat the ones that once so deeply engaged Wendell Phillips and his fellow abolitionists: Where did this *particular* oppressive practice come from? Who was responsible for creating it and who is currently responsible for maintaining it? What instructive examples and cautionary lessons does history offer us when we oppose it?

American historians responding to queries such as these have served as vital intellectual first responders to our nation’s most agonizing social crises. They have also developed powerful historiographical precedents for doing so. When in the 1960s, as has been mentioned, the United States experienced deep conflicts over white supremacy and civil rights, historians contributed African American history. In the 1970s when

women reignited their struggle for equality, historians answered with women’s history. When the 1980s brought the realization that humans are destroying the planet, historians created environmental history. Scholars engaged today with the history of slavery and antislavery clearly face challenges from contemporary enslavement every bit equal to the crises of previous decades. The problem of human bondage in our time demands from historians precisely the same intellectual engagement on behalf of human rights that a previous generation of morally grounded scholars offered the Civil Rights Movement. This, in short, is what Historians Against slavery means when promising to “use history to make slavery history”.

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