



*Research Unchained:
The Multidisciplinary Future of Antislavery Studies*

A Special Issue of the Journal of Modern Slavery in collaboration with the Antislavery Early Research Project supported by the AHRC Antislavery Usable Past

FORWARD

Dr. Jean Allain and Dr. Kevin Bales

Volume 4, Issue 2
December 2018

Foreword

Jean Allain and Kevin Bales

This Special Issue provides us with the possibility to look into the multidisciplinary futures of antislavery studies and to appreciate the contemporary terrain in which early career researchers are seeking to establish and develop their voices. It is not surprising that fresh voices are represented here expressing fresh and challenging ideas.

Today's scholarly landscape is a challenging one for these authors, as they are the beneficiaries of an information revolution which has placed remarkable digitised primary sources, a flood of official reports, as well as an explosion in more readily available academic literature at their finger-tips. These riches require them to be discerning in drilling through the various layers of information before they find and develop the veins of knowledge they seek to mine. Each, in their own way, has demonstrated that their research has not been passive, that they have been active in either their empirical undertakings or their doctrinal studies so as to develop new understandings, new ideas, and new theories.

There is a clear sense in the writings of this generation that their work is not purely academic, that the issues of slavery and antislavery are at the forefront of the public agenda, and that they are seeking to be part of the solution rather than the problem. For some, this means a critique of broader political and economic systems that drive modern slavery, for others diving deeply into the lived experience of slavery, and for still others it is teasing out the policy implications and most powerful responses to slavery.

In finding their writing voice and developing it through this edition focused on *Research Unchained*, we all bear witness to embryonic avenues of research which may well define full areas of knowledge as we move forward in exploring the ways that human beings exploit each other. These new avenues of antislavery inquiry and knowledge are novel and important and push the boundaries of scholarship. As the study on satellite technology shows, the sky is no longer the limit. But while looking forward, these young scholars are recognising a past with which they must grapple, one which speaks to historical enslavement and manner in which that past speaks to the present. This is a *usable past*, for the history of all previous anti-slavery work has much to say and teach the current global antislavery movement—a movement that is often sadly unaware of the lessons of its past.

Beyond the technologies that will assist in defining this generation of academics, knowledge at their fingertips has also meant that voices long silenced and isolated are now being networked and heard again. As a result, social barriers

are being dismantled: #BlackLivesMatter, #Rhodesmustfall, #SlaveTech, and #Metoo speak to an emancipatory impulse which is central to antislavery efforts. Recognition of white supremacy, of the monuments to slavers of the past, of racial injustice, and structural inequalities; each emerging movement in its own way redresses the balance towards a more just world. The emphasis on survivors of slavery which is given voice in the three last studies of this *Special Issue* speaks to this shift and is a harbinger of things to come.

The development of these articles have been ‘workshopped’ through annual conferences of the Postgraduate Research Network of the *Antislavery Usable Past*, a programme of research funded by the UK Arts & Humanities Research Council. We have been privileged to see this Network grow and to engage these young scholars, creating an environment for them where they could meet each other, learn from their colleagues in other academic disciplines, enrich their academic lives, and ultimately build networks which can benefit them in their future endeavours - as well as teach us a great deal in the process. The collegiality that has developed is manifest in the co-publications which constitute the majority of the articles in the *Special Issue*.

This is one further example of the future of academic scholarship, where young scholars living and working in different countries, in different cities, having had the opportunity to get to know each other through the Postgraduate Research Network, have been able to bring multidisciplinary collaborative research to print, working at a distance. Each of the authors in the Antislavery Usable Past Postgraduate Research Network Special Issue, entitled *Research Unchained: Multidisciplinary Future of Antislavery Studies*, is to be commended for both their independent research and the multidisciplinary impulse which has brought them together. As this *Special Issue* attests, antislavery studies are well equipped to meet the challenges of the future. They have developed networks which will serve them well into this future and have come to learn from each other the various dynamics at play both in their academic lives, but more so in the lives of those who still live in bondage. Their studies, their written works, and their collaborations are in themselves acts of liberation.