



*Research Unchained:
The Multidisciplinary Future of Antislavery Studies*

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INTRODUCTION

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With the growing visibility of the contemporary antislavery movement on the global stage, and the rising demand for new and revolutionary research about human exploitation, emergent scholarship in the field is becoming increasingly vital. New ideas and approaches are crucial to understand and engage with the complex and constantly evolving institution. As exploitation adapts over time in response to changes in context, efforts to combat the phenomena must also transform — demanding research that grapples with the myriad of possible forms it might take and presents solutions not only to the problems of today, but to the challenges of tomorrow. Yet, in order to tend to the future, it is fundamental that we listen to the past. History must be the bedrock for the development of law, business, policy, art, literature and technology in this field, because the contemporary manifestations of exploitation and enslavement do not exist within an historical vacuum.

It is with this perspective in mind that the Antislavery Early Research Association (Antislavery ERA) was established.¹ Conceived within the framework of the ‘Antislavery Usable Past’ project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Antislavery ERA brings together a group of interdisciplinary graduate students and early career researchers of historic and contemporary slavery and antislavery. Representing over 40 different institutions and organisations from all over the world, the Antislavery ERA builds collaborative partnerships between scholars by employing interdisciplinary approaches to original scholarship that paves the way for the future of antislavery research. With contemporary slavery existing at the nexus of social, economic and cultural forces, it demands responsive methodologies and constantly evolving scholarship to tackle its changing nature, and the Antislavery ERA aims to meet these challenges head on.

Beginning at a conference at the University of Hull’s Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation (October 2015), and developing

¹ For further information on the Antislavery Early Research Association, please visit <http://antislaveryera.com> or email antislaverypgrn@gmail.com

through conferences and workshops at Masaryk University (Brno, November 2016), the University of Liverpool (October 2017), and the University of Nottingham (October 2018), the Antislavery ERA represents a groundswell of new antislavery scholarship. Over the course of its lifespan, the network has grown and evolved to provide a platform for meaningful dialogue on contemporary challenges and novel solutions, as well as constantly seeking the inclusion of new researchers who apply innovative approaches to this field of work. Representing both the culmination of three years of engagement between early career researchers and the launch of the network into the wider academic community, this Special Issue applies a new multidisciplinary framework for contemporary slavery research, incorporating fields of scholarship such as Law, American Studies, History, Geography, Literature, Social Science, and Business.

From the outset, the issue acknowledges the place of the voices of the past in contemporary discourse and seeks to empower these perspectives. To speak of history as if there is a fundamental rupture between the past and the present is to fail in recognising the continuities of experiences that connect the two. Considering the legacies of enslavement echoing around our world in numerous forms — from systems of racialisation that remain in place from the history of transatlantic chattel enslavement to the manifestation of new iterations of exploitation in response to changing legal frameworks — is crucial in the exploration of avenues of emancipation from these cycles.

Continuities and evolutions occur in the ways in which language is employed to categorise particular exploitative practices as inside or outside the definition of slavery as an institution. Associations with certain historic practices have, at times, been used as a rhetorical device to draw attention to contemporary practices without serious consideration of the ways in which this impacts the conceptualisation of slavery in theory, and the lived experiences of descendants of those who were enslaved within the transatlantic system who continue to live with its legacies. Rebecca Nelson and Alicia Kidd speak to this ongoing debate surrounding the characterisation of certain forms of human exploitation as ‘slavery’ in the post-abolition world, presenting a perspective that acknowledges both the shared characteristics, and crucial differences, between contemporary slavery and the transatlantic system of chattel enslavement.

The antislavery potential of established activist tools - those which have been employed throughout history to meet the demands of justice - have not yet been comprehensively considered or employed. Legal frameworks, in particular are sites in which significant lacuna remain, but which might readily accommodate

greater antislavery initiatives. While James Sinclair considers the potential for developing vicarious corporate accountability through strategic litigation (the application of existing law in new ways), Paola Cavanna, Ana Belén Valverde Cano and Amy Weatherburn consider the need for development of legislative frameworks to meet the unfulfilled demands of the antislavery movement. In both instances, the conceptualisation of slavery as an institution is lent greater nuance, moving beyond the individual perpetrator and individual victim paradigm to consider the role of corporations and the state in perpetuating exploitation. Alexandra Williams-Woods and Yvonne Mellon similarly present a perspective which engages with the complexities of the institution, through consideration of the tensions between immigration policy and victim protection and support mechanisms.

Ultimately, it is victims (past, present and future) that the antislavery movement must serve and empower both in practice and in theory. Research which centers the needs of victims and survivors is therefore vital in shaping contemporary efforts to combat human exploitation. Thus, the first Part of this special issue closes with a reconceptualization of victims of slavery and extreme forms of human exploitation that cements the need to care for and respect victims in the international legal frameworks — as an obligation rather than an option. Katarina Schwarz and Jing Geng argue for both recognition and empowerment of those subjected to exploitation within legal processes and antislavery efforts more generally through procedural justice for ‘victim/agents’.

Echoing the first Part of this issue, the second Part opens with a consideration of the historical continuity and legacies of abolitionism from the eighteenth century to the present. The contribution of Hannah Jeffery and Hannah-Rose Murray examines visual culture as a site in which this relationship between past and present is mediated, tracing the lineage of modern antislavery murals through 1960s black protest murals to nineteenth century panoramas. The ways in which the institution of slavery is represented and the impact of such therefore become key questions for historical and contemporary consideration, and the potential for contemporary activism that feeds from this long history of abolitionism through visual culture is explored. Charlotte James’ review of the growing body of children’ literature concerning slavery and trafficking, further highlights the role of arts and culture in the antislavery movement, presenting the first comprehensive survey of slavery and antislavery narratives in children’s texts. Thus, old and new antislavery strategies coalesce in these pieces.

Visualising exploitation can occur through many different media, and the contribution of Bethany Jackson et al highlights the instrumental antislavery potential of imagery beyond the artistic context. Demonstrating the power of new technologies to assist in practical efforts combating slavery, Jackson, from a geographical background, highlights the importance of a new practical method to capture the spread of contemporary slavery in inaccessible places. Through Jackson et al's review of remote sensing data, they engage with a brand new approach to tackle the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals. Questions of representation, imagery, and combating slavery are therefore situated both in employing old media in new ways, and for new ends, and in employing new technology in the service of shared objectives.

Responding to the demand for victim-centric approaches to antislavery work that closed Part One of this Issue in the context of new antislavery strategies, Ben Brewster takes a novel organisational perspective to consider how relevant actors can collaborate through multi-agency partnerships to ensure victim identification, recovery, and support. Thus, the Special Issue comes full circle to the significance of representation in empowering those voices which ought to be central to the movement.

Centring victims is not only about caring for their needs, but about integrating their voices and perspectives into the processes which concern them at all levels. For this reason, this Special Issue piloted a new form of review in the process of evaluating the papers represented here, conducted by survivors themselves. This survivor review encouraged authors to engage in meaningful reflexivity, not only with regard to the body of academic knowledge and academic conventions, but with the place of their research in the lives of those whose lives have been directly affected by slavery. This review is a single step in a wider ongoing process of constructive dialogue between scholars and survivors, and the partnership between the Antislavery Early Research Association and the Survivor Alliance.

The integration of themes throughout the various articles in the Issue—the significance of representation, continuities and evolution in practices of enslavement through time, and the importance of a victim-centric approach—speak to the interrelations between a diverse range of fields of antislavery research. Addressing the complexities and nuances of exploitation discussed across the different contributions demands the adaptation of existing tools, and the development of new ones. The Antislavery Early Research Association seeks to do just that by creating opportunities for collaboration between emerging antislavery

scholars and encouraging participants to look beyond the borders of their own discipline to enter a research environment defined by the needs of the movement. The Network looks to develop scholarship that is both outward-facing and outwardly engaged — drawing the demands of activism and policy, as well as the voices of survivors into the work of participants (the focus of the Liverpool 2017 and Nottingham 2018 events respectively).

This Special Issue transcends disciplinary boundaries, fuels collaboration, and brings the evolving research of early career scholars to light. It offers a space to hash out debates on definitions; to think about the role of technology in mapping sites of exploitation; to survey and understand the ways in which antislavery messages and strategies can be embedded in legal frameworks, multi-agency partnerships, and children's literature; and to understand the lineage of slavery and antislavery from the past to the present. Featuring the work of nineteen academics in nine papers, it gives voice to a new wave of antislavery research that connects past, present and future and highlights the important role of research networks at all levels of scholarship.

Engaging with the past in antislavery scholarship is not limited to instrumentalising the lessons of history to meet the demands of contemporary activism. Recognising the lineage of antislavery activism and scholarship enables us to create spaces to listen and attend to the voices of the past, as well as letting those insights guide present and future research and action. This process is a work in progress that will never be complete; a process which requires the reconfiguration of scholarship in a constantly evolving and responsive way. This Special Issue highlights the growing body of emerging researchers shrugging off the mantles of their disciplines to take up the broader requirements of the movement as a whole, as the final contribution concludes, with victims and survivors at the heart of scholarship.