

**Introduction:**  
**Anglo-Caribbean Slavery**  
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To lay the past to rest ... means not that we should forget it but that we have no choice but to relate it, no choice but to live on within the full knowledge and unending of it. Time does not pass but accumulates. Why? Because what has been begun does not end but endures. Because this fatal Atlantic 'beginning' of the modern is more properly understood as an ending without end. Because history comes to us not only as flash or revelation but piling up. Because this is, not was. Because this is the Atlantic, now. Because all of it is now, it is always now, even for you who never was there.

Ian Baucom, *Spectres of the Atlantic* (333)

The essays collected in this special issue of *ARIEL* were produced in 2007 to mark the bicentennial anniversary of the Act To Abolish the Slave Trade. The year has seen many commemorations, celebrations, and academic conferences, all of which have provided useful opportunities to reflect on the myriad legacies of the slave cultures that for over two centuries held sway in European metropolises and colonies alike. Most of the essays collected here dwell on a moment or sequence of moments that is in some sense "past," and yet this backwards-looking focus invites the reader to acknowledge, as Baucom does, that history is not a revelation marking an endpoint to a specific moment in time; rather, it is an accumulation, or as he puts it, "an ending without end" (333). It would not make sense, then, for this collection of essays to commemorate or to celebrate the 1807 Abolition Act, since that would seem to suggest that the Act marked an epochal shift or what Hilary Beckles describes ironically as that self-proclaimed moment "in which moral politics appeared to have transcended, finally, the power of profit, thereby closing

the darkest road modern man had journeyed.” To bracket the era of slavery so conveniently and neatly might provide comfort to contemporary readers who wish to believe that the extraordinary violences that were enacted in the name of economic “progress” could never take place in the present, but such a mode of historicizing would not constitute what Ann Stoler has described as the work of effective history and politically accountable acts—work that is necessarily *discomforting* in its deliberate unsettling of the accepted boundaries between “then” and “now” (210).

While it is certainly the case that most of the articles collected in “Anglo-Caribbean Slavery” focus on texts produced in the past by authors who are long dead, this is not in the service of abstract historicizing. Rather, taken together, the essays are intended to produce precisely the uncanny sense Baucom evokes when he describes the melancholy possession our nonsynchronous present has only recently begun to take of its pasts, in partial acknowledgement of the debt the present owes to that past (203). In his contribution to this volume, Beckles is clear about the material nature of that debt, but as academics we are also forced to think in terms of what might be called “intellectual reparations” as we retrieve and pick over texts from what has, somewhat discomfortingly, been called “the slavery archive.” Of course, there is no single archive of slavery, notwithstanding the establishment of “slavery museums” in ex-slaving cities such as Liverpool. And it is certainly the case that, as Edward Said intuited in his by-now notorious chapter on *Mansfield Park*, the “archives” of culture and imperialism—specifically in this case, slavery—cannot be separated, no matter how oppressive the “dead silence” that may fall whenever the subject is raised.<sup>1</sup> The “slavery archive” may be located almost anywhere and everywhere in the cultural productions of the era, whether in direct representations of plantocratic life, or as Said argued, in descriptions of the domestic order “at home” that was and still is the product of a plantocratic economy.

The essays in this volume are concerned with texts that are less than oblique in their relationship to life in a slave society, raising a number of ethical questions concerning what precisely academics are doing when they read, comment on, and/or teach texts that represent Transatlantic

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slavery whether extensively or fleetingly. What is the value of such scholarship, and what might be its place and its relevance in a contemporary world, which, as one of the directors of National Museums Liverpool pointed out at the International Slavery Museum's inauguration in August 2007, is still riven with racism and racialization (Fleming)? In this bicentennial year, we may also be prompted to ask whether it is possible to remember, comment on, and analyze colonialism in ways that are not merely voyeuristic or self-serving. How can we read fictional and non-fictional texts ethically and responsibly, remaining sensitive to the specific contexts of "the past" as well as the complex imbrications of "past" and "present"? Do we repeat "hateful speech" when we extensively cite and quote the racist ideologies of the past, along with the descriptions of punishments visited upon the enslaved, the harms done to their bodies, and the dismantling of those bodies? How are we bearing witness to the past, and what kind of witnesses are we? Must we join Giorgio Agamben in his claim that the language of testimony is a language that no longer signifies, and that the complete witness (in Agamben's text, the troublingly-named *Müsselmänner* who did not survive the German death camps) is s/he "who by definition cannot bear witness" (39)? If that is indeed the case, then what is the value of the kind of scholarship represented in this special issue?

Part of the answer must come from its readers, whose interactions with this body of writings is shaped by the same concerns. For while the essays collected here may not directly address the questions above, those of us who work on, in, and around issues of slavery and enslavement are faced with the inherent contradictions of our role as witnesses. It seems inevitable, then, that cultural workers in this field should be more than usually conscious of the colonial epistemologies that frame the available ways of reading, seeing, and remembering the innumerable narratives of Transatlantic slavery.

To that end, this issue's contents are arranged so that discussions of the present "bookend" the analyses that center on historical material. The first, Beckles's "Remembrance, Reconciliation and the Reparations Discourse," reveals both the instability and persistence of colonial epistemologies, nowhere better illustrated than by the loaded term "apology."

In the context of twenty-first century reparations discussions the word clearly derives moral and legal significance from the demand for and expression of regret attached to the acknowledgement of past wrongdoing. However, as the essays by Brycchan Carey, John Gilmore, Sara Salih, and Candace Ward suggest, colonial writers like George Fox, Edward Long, John Singleton, and Cynric Williams act in the role of apologists, more interested in vindication than regret. At the same time these apologies reveal an awareness of a morally indefensible position, itself complicated by the texts' attempted engagement with quotidian "realities" shaped by the institution of slavery. Finally, the particular push-pull inherent in the invocation of apology/apologist is complicated by the accumulation of history, a process by which, to use Mark McWatt's expression, "things echo and re-echo." In the interview that concludes this special issue, McWatt's description of his work in *Suspended Sentences* calls to mind a kind of echo-locution, to coin a phrase, a strategy by which we locate ourselves spatially and temporally by sending out and receiving language, bits and pieces of texts that bounce back to us to shape us in our now. Of particular importance—as all the essays here reveal—are the means by which history is evoked in a language that is always freighted with past narratives.

#### Notes

- 1 See <<http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/about/capitalprojects/slavery.asp>>.

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