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Rethinking the Problems of “Encounter”  
in Philip Morgan’s “British Encounters  
with Africans and African-Americans,  
circa 1600~1780”

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It is sometimes even assumed that slave women welcomed and encouraged the sexual attentions of white men. What happened between them, therefore, was not sexual exploitation, but rather “miscegenation” (Davis, 25).

These statements suggest (slavery was an institution based on class rather than race) that research tended to interpret the nature of slavery pragmatically, along the lines of functions and roles, rather than from the perspective of the group studied...the research failed to consider women; and there were few attempts to interpret Black female slaves as complex entities with complex behavior and motivations (Stetson, 65).

In the introduction to *Strangers within the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire*, the editors of the book Bernard Bailyn and Philip Morgan suggest that the project of the book is to reconfigure British imperial history by situating it in a global context, and present a relatively thorough overview of the changes in the historiographies of British and American scholarship. They trace the evolution

of British historiography from Seeley's "imperial destiny" to a shift towards "the noninstitutional dimensions of colonial American life" (3). This shift, they argue, brought attention to "the multiethnic and multi-racial character of colonial American societies" (4) which lead to some "fruitful" discussion but which nevertheless remained "parochial". Historians like Pocock, picking up on the inadequacy of this approach, tried to radically transform this kind of historical approach by advocating a "pluralist, multicultural" (6) history, which was simultaneously genuinely "concerned with 'an expanding zone of cultural conflict and creation'" (6).

Bailyn and Morgan describe other efforts by social scientists like Hecther and Wallerstein on the other side of the Atlantic to investigate "a Greater British history" by contextualizing it "within an even larger story." Despite this progress, the editors find problems and limitations in both British and American scholarships. They feel that British historians have failed to follow up on new historical research, while Wallerstein and Hechter's works display "insensitivity to the variations possible in the so-called peripheries or semiperipheries" (7). Contrary to the limitations in the works of these social scientists, they point out that there are new and exciting studies by historians who have focused on "the Atlantic dimensions" of American colonial history. Borrowing T. H. Breen's words, the editors propose that on the foundation of their work, now is the time to "embrace some, at least, of the diverse ethnic experiences of the first British Empire" (30).

Philip Morgan's essay "British Encounters with Africans and African-Americans, circa 1600-1780" faithfully delivers the promise of the editorial aim by examining diverse interactions between the whites and blacks during the time of British imperial expansion. The essay

shatters the myth of a monolithic black experience (or white experience, for that matter) and covers vast geographical territories from Africa, North and Central Americas. By culling research materials from various scattered colonies, Morgan attempts to gain a better understanding of the colonial societies in the process of transforming into a strict and stable slave system. By differentiating "slaveowning society" from "slave society," Morgan illuminates different forms of "encounters" among the British, Africans and African-Americans.

Morgan's essay certainly opens up new ways of looking at the dynamic and variegated social relations between whites and blacks within the British colonies. However, notwithstanding Morgan's self-conscious attempt to find some kind of middle ground, there are numerous disturbing generalizations about slaves and the master/slave relationship, and also some misconstrued assumptions about the slave system. This paper is a brief investigation into the limitations and possible dangers of using a concept like "encounter" in drawing out what is fundamentally a violent history of conquest, by examining some of the conclusions Morgan draws from his sources. This paper questions the editors' assertion that the new studies on British imperial history are sensitive to variations in the periphery and asks these questions: what does it mean to "embrace diverse ethnic experiences" on the periphery when much of colonial history is smeared with "racial" (not "ethnic") violence and oppression? Even when one grants that periphery played an important role in shaping the metropole, is "multiculturalist and pluralist" approach necessarily constructive? What does it really mean to be "sensitive" to "periphery"?

One of the main theses in "British Encounters with Africans and African-Americans" is that during the formative period of British

colonies, a sense of affinity existed between the poor whites, or the whites of lower rank, and blacks. As a case in point, Morgan offers the example of Virginia's Bacon's Rebellion. Morgan qualifies the degree of affinity by saying that "This apparent willingness to cooperate does not mean, as one historian has noted, that white laborers regarded blacks as their equals" (197). But Morgan's careful observation on the cooperation between the two groups does not develop further, and he does not clarify or attend to the problems in this ambiguous relationship along racial and class lines. The fundamental reason for Morgan's ambivalence lies in his ambivalent position on intrinsic racism. But if we turn to another historical source, we can find evidences of such intrinsic racism. In *The Old Dominion in the Seventeenth Century: A Documentary History of Virginia, 1606-1689*, there are records that show that blacks were marked by the color of their skin even during the early periods of colonial Virginia. Warren Billings in the introduction dismisses racial markings as insignificant:

Certain distinctions set free blacks apart from the English, however. One was the Englishmen's habit of identifying Negroes by race in court records.<sup>1)</sup>

Furthermore, Morgan overlooks a conspicuous and important point that whereas some laws applied equally to the entire population, some rules were enforced on people according to and depending on the color of their skin, not nationalities (for example, levies on black women in

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1) Warren M. Billings ed, *The Old Dominion in the Seventeenth Century: A Documentary History of Virginia, 1606-1689* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975) 150.

case of intermarriage, public humiliation for white men who fornicated with black women). Because Philip Morgan basically relies on Edmund Morgan's assumption that certain material conditions produced racism and that class contempt was similar to racial contempt before the emergence of a rigidified slave society,<sup>2)</sup> he does not give due consideration to the implications of racial contempt during the formative periods. Thus, he defines racism as merely "racial attitude", (212) and whereas he is able to see that blacks were not treated as equals, he also does not hesitate to diminish the significance of racial difference:

*indeed, if some West Indian contemporaries are to be believed, slaves were actually better off than servants in the seventeenth century. Certainly the living conditions each group suffered were similar enough to make them believe they were sharing the same predicament (197, emphasis added).*

As important as it may be to emphasize the similarities between the whites and blacks, and the fluid racial relations before the colonial societies turned into rigid slave societies, the political implications of arguing that black slaves did not fare any worse than white servants are far-fetched. Even if one grants the fact that the blacks enjoyed relative freedom in a slave owning society, the crucial difference between whites/blacks, namely, the experience of crossing the Atlantic as slaves, remains and must be held onto with willfulness. In this context, we must think deeply about the implications of Morgan's work. What does it mean when conquest is no longer understood as

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2) See Edmund Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton & Company, 1975).

“invasion”, but “encounter”? When one relies on the masters’ archives, the immediacy of terror of black experience in the New World is all but lost, and even a self-consciously “sensitive” approach to the “periphery” might draw some dangerous conclusions.

Morgan’s discussions on slave societies take “economic roles”, “sexual relations” and “access to freedom” as factors shaping different race relations with allowance for different degree of freedom even within rigid slave societies. Among these factors, Morgan’s discussions on sexual relations are the most problematic. Basically, Morgan’s perception is that miscegenation implied more freedom for blacks. According to Morgan, miscegenation in West Indies helped alleviate racial problems:

Open liaisons between white men and black women were commonplace, whereas sexual relations between black men and white women were strictly proscribed. Unquestionably there was much callous sexual exploitation of black women. The six or so white men living on one Jamaican estate in the early nineteenth century were twice as likely as the ninety black men there to sire a slave baby. None of the slave mistresses on this estate were manumitted—but ‘the power of sex to persuade the planters to free their property’, Richard Pares notes, ‘is illustrated by the fact, reported by the legislature of Nevis in 1789, that there were 5 female slaves to every 4 male slaves, but 9 free negresses to every 4 free negroes.’ Nor should the informal influence of slave mistresses be underestimated, for white men were said to be ‘negrofied’ by their connections with slave white men were said to be ‘negrofied’ by their connections with slave women who, in Pares’s words, ‘led them by the nose....direct physical compulsion cannot explain patters of miscegenation in any simply way, and sex in such slave systems certainly acted, in part at least, as a racial solvent (178-179).

I quote Morgan at length here so that we can follow his line of reasoning clearly. While Morgan acknowledges that there was "much callous sexual exploitation of black women", he defines this experience as "liaison". Yet, one can question, from whose perspective is it a "liaison"? The dictionary definition of liaison is, "a close bond or connection", or "an illicit sexual relationship, affair". Furthermore, Morgan implies that since the offsprings between the master and the black mistress was manumitted, these "liaisons" were a way to the road to freedom and thus, "sex" between the master and mistress was in Morgan's view, "a racial solvent".

However, it is incomprehensible why, if Morgan recognizes these relationships as "sexual exploitation", he simultaneously argues these sexual exploitations as "racial solvent". Angela Davis' critique of Eugene Genovese -- interestingly enough, Genovese is one of the sources that Philip Morgan depends on -- aptly applies to Morgan's argument:

it is not surprising that Genovese believes he has discovered a kernel of that humanity in miscegenation. He fails to understand that there could hardly be a basis for 'delight, affection and love' as long as white men, by virtue of their economic position, had unlimited access to Black women's bodies. It was as oppressors-or, in the case of non-slaveowners, as agents of domination-that white men approached Black women's bodies (26).

Morgan, despite his use of the word "sexual exploitation", does not fully accede to the psychological impact of master/slave relationship on the slave. A relationship between master and property is not a relationship which can be a "racial solvent", and the fact that the masters

sometimes freed their offsprings does not signify a greater degree of freedom for the black slaves. At most, these cases can be said to be exceptional cases of fortunate and yet tenuous manumission, since as we know, manumission did not guarantee permanent freedom.

Morgan also argues that “[E]ncounters between whites and blacks must therefore be differentiated according to a hierarchy within each group” (199). This sort of stratification of diversified status among blacks poses a problem by suggesting that the higher the status, the less willing the slaves were to sacrifice their privileged positions. In other words, what is taken for granted here is that the less physical hardship the slave experiences, the more friendly he or she would be to white masters. For example, Morgan argues that “[A]t the *apex* of slave society, drivers were truly men-in-between, whose allegiances were always equivocal” (201). This kind of assumption is in the same vein as the Eurocentric attitude of white masters who believed that as long as the slaves were treated relatively humanely, slaves would (or should) be loyal.

The most problematic aspect of this discussion on master/slave relationship springs from the fact that Morgan heavily relies on the perspectives of the masters in determining the different relationships. This problem becomes noticeable in the discussion about the distinctions between Africans and Creoles, which also had an impact on the master/slave relationship. Morgan’s argument is that there was a general preference for Creoles on the part of masters, but that there were exceptional Africans who nevertheless attracted the masters’ attention: “[C]onversely, the extent to which masters and their representatives often struck up intimate relations with supposedly recalcitrant Africans should not be underestimated” (200). But Morgan’s idea



of "intimate relations" and examples of these are all dependent on the records written by the same white masters who were "impressed". Morgan supports his argument with such evidence as a white master's admiring and yet clearly a paternalistic and racist remark that "Africans are physically a strong race of men." (200). Morgan's lack of critical distance towards this sort of statements about Africans and Creoles is disturbing because Morgan misses the glaring point that these Africans are seen through the gaze of masters who are reading them as propertied objects ("strong", "clean", "ingenious, ...honest, and ...good a natur'd poor soul").

The same can be said for the status of black women. Morgan suggests that black women came to "dominate field gangs" because they "proved the tougher" of the two sexes, and that they "demonstrated greater powers of endurance". At the same time, Morgan applauds these "strong" black women for playing "vital roles in fashioning black culture and guiding cultural exchanges with whites" (203). There are two main problems with this portrayal of slave women. From the point of the masters, black women might have been put to the same degrading field gang labor because they "proved the tougher" of the two sexes, but from the vantage point of the group studied, it simply might be that the slave system saw no sex distinction in its cruel exploitation. Secondly, Morgan's notion of "culture" does not reflect on the meaning of culture within the slave system. For people who were deprived of avenues of political resistance, culture signified not only an outlet of feelings and emotions but transcendence and political resistance. His contention that the black women "guided cultural exchange" obfuscates the dynamics of black culture which evolved through cultural shocks and conflicts.

In conclusion, the concept of “encounter” presents many problematic assumptions and descriptions regarding the interaction between whites and blacks, between masters and slaves, especially black women slaves. Despite the fact that many blacks might have enjoyed relative freedom during the formative periods of colonial Americas, Morgan exaggerates the similarities between poor whites and blacks, and overlooks the significance of intrinsic racism embedded deeply within social relations. Even if one grants that social forces shaped racial relations, relative freedom granted to blacks in formative periods were nevertheless already tainted by racial markings according to the color of skin. If solidarity between the two races was possible, it was possible *in spite of* their different predicaments, *not because of* their similar predicaments.

The kind of master/slave dynamics Morgan argues for, after slaveowning societies evolved into slave societies, demonstrate many problems as well. Morgan’s misconception about the relationship between miscegenation and freedom for blacks, his misunderstanding of black women and grossly misleading assertion that the hierarchy within the slave system influenced the degree of slaves’ loyalty to white masters, all raise questions about the historiographical method deployed by Morgan, and the confident and hopeful voice of editors regarding a new “multiculturalist, pluralist” approach which supposedly allows for a more sensitive exploration of colonial America.

Therefore, thinking about the concept of Morgan’s “encounter” leads to larger questions about the recent changes in historiography. It is true that the revisionist studies on slavery during 1960’s and 1970’s did produce challenging research interpretations based on the recognition of the slaves’ autonomy as persons both within and outside the system of

slavery, and also the multiple, rather than monolithic experiences of slavery. And certainly, the fact that early American historians started to do research on the presence of blacks in the colonies opens up new horizons, and poses new challenges. However, a much more fruitful and productive history would contextualize these archives of black/white and master/slave interactions in other voices about the slave experience, such as imaginative writings by black men and women, or black feminist writings. The responses from African American Studies scholars to the changing historiography of African American slavery should also be considered carefully.<sup>3)</sup> Without this dialogue, one can easily forget that although "encounters" did indeed shape the contours of the lives of both whites and blacks on both sides of the Atlantic, these "encounters" were nevertheless *brutal* "encounters", physically, mentally, psychologically and spiritually, for some people.

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3) For example, see George M. Fredrickson's *The Arrogance of Race: Historical Perspectives on Slavery, Racism, and Social Inequality* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1988).

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