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June 2008 Newsletter

Not Presentism but Honesty: Symposium and Lecture Series at Boston University Commemorates the 200th Anniversary of the Ending of the US-Atlantic Slave Trade

By Mary C. Beaudry

In April and May, 2008, the Department of African American Studies at Boston University held a symposium and a lecture series to acknowledge the ending of the US Atlantic slave trade in 1808. The series was co-sponsored by the university's African Studies Center, American & New England Studies Program, Latin American Studies Program, Women's Studies Program, The Howard Thurman Center, and the Dean of Students.

Prof. Ron Richardson, chair of the Department of African American Studies, noted in opening remarks that America has collective amnesia about the trade, an amnesia that is reflected by the relative lack of commemoration of the end of the US Atlantic slave trade, while in England in 2007 there were seemingly countless events, exhibits, and commemoration of England's exit from the trade. Richardson stated that to accuse the founding fathers on behalf of the many thousands gone is not presentism but honesty; it acknowledges who we are. The aim of the symposium and lecture series was to "open the books" on 1808 and to look at the implications of the closing of the Atlantic trade.

The April 11 symposium featured five speakers, the first of whom, David Eltis of Emory University, discussed "The Contribution of the Expanded Open-access Database to our Understanding of the Transatlantic Slave Trade." Eltis heads a team that has compiled the massive database on the transatlantic slave trade (TAST), first made available in 1999 on CD-

ROM. Now the database has migrated to a web site (www.slavevoyages.org); in beta version it is password protected. Much has been added to the database since 1999 – it now contains information on over 35,000 slaving voyages, representing 12.5 million individuals taken from Africa and 10.7 million who survived the ca. 66 days at sea during the Middle Passage. The database is fully searchable and the Voyages web site has facilities for producing calculations, charts, graphs, and downloadable spreadsheets derived from customized searches; it also has sections providing images (maps, engravings, etc.), lesson plans, and links to other web resources.

The collective data have provided Eltis and his colleagues with unparalleled insight into the trade; they now know that there were two separated trades, the highly familiar North Atlantic or Triangular Trade, shaped by North Atlantic currents and prevailing winds. This was mainly based in Europe; vessels left western Europe or North America, collected slaves from West or West Central Africa, sailed across to the Caribbean or North America, then back to Europe. The Southern Atlantic trade is less well known but was nearly equal in size and volume; it was largely non-European despite being referred to in contemporary documents as the “Portuguese traffic.” It was based in Brazil, with sponsors and suppliers in Lisbon, and like the North Atlantic trade was based on prevailing winds and currents. Ships plied between Brazil and Angola and West Central Africa, the Bight of Benin and Bajiha; a small percentage of ships went to Guinea/Senegambia. The data reveal that the two trades operated independently, with the northern system dominated by Britain and the southern system by Portugal; other parts of the Atlantic world, France, for example, were only “bit players” in the TAST.

Examining the data has allowed the team to begin to understand connections between Africa and America and to estimate what might be missing from the voluminous documentation

on the TAST, and they are beginning to build a profile of captives taken beyond the coastal regions of Africa. Eltis and his colleagues discuss their current findings in a book on the size and direction of the slave trade, *Extending the Frontiers: Essays on the New Transatlantic Slave Trade Database* (edited by David Eltis and David Richardson) forthcoming in September, 2008, from Yale University Press.

Linda Heywood and John Thornton of Boston University have made extensive use of the TAST database in their research; in their talk, “Dynamics of Ethnicity in the African Slave Trade,” they discussed research they have conducted since publication of their book *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660* (Cambridge University Press, 2007). They have documented what they refer to as “waves” of specific ethnic groups brought to the Americas in episodic fashion during the trade. They acknowledge that the waves are not necessarily big but resulted in the simultaneous importation of people from the same ethnic groups (e.g., Minas, Angolas, Yoruba, Hausa) in sufficient numbers to have an effect on ethnic survivals/retentions in parts of the Americas. Their findings are controversial in that they argue against the notion presented by scholars such as Mintz and Price (1976, 1992) and taken on board by many leading scholars (see, e.g., Ira Berlin 2005) that the trade “randomized” ethnicities. The scholarly tendency has been to stress heterogeneity over homogeneity, based on the assumption that African captives brought to the Americas were thrown together in a way that undermined African ethnicity. Thornton (1998) has argued the reverse, and claims that one can identify African ethnicity/origins in the Americans; he spoke of “replenishment” of African ethnicity through waves in the slave trade (see also Hall 1995, 2007; Fennell 2007).

Heywood and Thornton have found that the TAST database allows them to trace the cultural makeup of “waves” of forced migration to the Americas, and note that historians of Africa could provide information on African cultures during the time of the trade using documents created by missionaries, for instance. Thornton and Heywood looked at 18th-century missionaries’ accounts of languages, 39 in all, collected for translating catechisms and plotted ethnic names, hoping to reinforce the coastal geography as documented in the TAST with information on inland geography and cultural shifts over time. They note that while “randomization” was a real phenomenon throughout much of the North Atlantic TAST, there remains the issue of waves, of “blips and bumps” of extra-large concentrations of people of specific ethnicities brought to specific locales; only a few cultural groups were dominant in this regard, however. This can be documented on the African side by examining the highly concentrated nature of British and Dutch slaving in a small area of West Central Africa from the 1680s onward, and by the arrival in places like South Carolina between 1720-1810 of large numbers of people from Central Africa, or in Louisiana of large numbers of Bamba from Senegambia and Benin, as well as many Yoruba people, between 1719-1743.

Heywood and Thornton pointed to an “Igbo wave” of Africans brought to Virginia from the Niger Delta between 1676 and 1775, with especially large numbers brought between 1750-1770 (cf. Walsh 1997); they also discussed the origins of “Coromantees” – maroons in Jamaica, rebels in Antigua and New York – who originated from different groups living along the Gold Coast of Africa, who may have fought each other in Africa, but who spoke Tweek languages that allowed them to communicate in America and to band together to resist enslavement. A fascinating aspect of Heywood and Thornton’s research involves the notion of “Atlantic creoles,” individuals who had a long history of dealing with the Portuguese in Angola and

Central Africa; many Atlantic creoles ended up in the Hudson Valley area of New York, where they formed a distinctive Afro-Dutch culture. The creole culture was commented on throughout the Americas; observers mentioned that they were Christians (many had converted to Catholicism although they practiced a highly mixed, syncretized form of Christianity). This leads one to wonder whether some of the individuals mentioned in the documentary records of early sites such as Plymouth in Massachusetts or St. Mary's City, Maryland, who are described as "mulatto" might in fact have been "Atlantic creoles" – the man called Mathias de Sousa who is recorded as living in the Catholic proprietary of Maryland in the early 17th century seems likely to have been, if not an Atlantic creole, an individual with some sort of Portuguese background who likely found a measure of acceptance in the community because he was a Catholic.

Stephen Deyle of the University of Houston spoke on "An Abominable New Trade: The Closing of the African Slave Trade and the Changing Patterns of Political Power in the United States, 1808-1860" – a shocking account of the unforeseen consequences of the closing of the trade, which he refers to as a second Middle Passage, an even bigger trade with greater political consequences for the US (Deyle 2006). By this he means the internal trade in slaves that began to develop as early as 1798; it was an indigenous operation, moving slaves from the upper to the lower South. The South was not on board with the elimination of slavery after the Revolution, although it was abolished in the North by the early 19th century. Rather, Southerners, in particularly white slave holders in Virginia, welcomed the close of the Atlantic trade as an opportunity to "drain off" the excess population of enslaved Africans by selling them to new territories, especially new cotton-growing areas. This led to the interstate trade in slaves; between 1790 and 1860, more than one million slaves were sold and marched from the upper to

the lower South. Slaves were the main source of property and of capital for planters in the upper South, and the internal slave trade solidified their commitment to slavery as a form of mortgage capital, linking the farming states with the cotton states into a unified slave market worth around three billion dollars. The internal slave trade by 1860 was more valuable than investments in manufacturing or any other concentrations of capital (e.g., railroads, livestock, banks, etc.); except in the South, only the value of real estate was greater. Deyle stresses that this is the reason that the deep South developed such strong support for slavery; those who profited from the internal trade relied upon it as their source of wealth and could not give it up either at home or in the new states and territories. In large measure this is the reason that Southern states seceded from the Union and fought the Civil War.

Walter Johnson of Harvard University spoke on “The ‘Negro Fever,’ ‘The South,’ and the Ignominious Movement to Re-Open the Atlantic Slave Trade,” recounting how by 1850 “slave and cotton men” imagined and tracked the history of the South and indexed their identities through comparison of the prices of cotton and slaves. “The Negro Fever” developed in the late 1850s after speculation in the internal slave trade led “slave farmers” to increase prices for slaves, women and children in particular. This development highlighted two central tensions; the divide of race and class and the role of non-slave holders. Slave owning was trumpeted by whites as a natural right for all white men regardless of class; many proposed re-opening the TAST. Various schemes for reopening the trade were touted, from smuggling and piracy to bringing in captives as nominal “apprentices” – the rhetoric stressed that the high prices of the internal trade rendered small farmers unable to afford slaves, thereby undermining the social order by preventing non-holders from moving up the social ladder. Reopening the trade was proposed as a solution to the low status of poor whites in the south. In truth, “slave farmers”

feared that the upper South would be drained of all its slaves and that they would lose both their source of wealth as well as the political power that came along with it. Johnson makes it clear that Southern planters supported the reopening of the trade for much the same reasons they had supported its closure in 1808 – protection of their assets and their ability to profit from them (cf. Johnson 2004).

On April 7, 2008, Ira Berlin of the University of Maryland provided his perspective on “The Closing of the Slave Trade and the Transformation of Slavery in the US.” His talk dealt with many of the same topics discussed by Deyle and Johnson: support by white Virginia planters such as Jefferson and Madison for closing the trade because of their desire to address the “excess or surfeit” of indigenous slaves; later attempts to reopen the trade. But Berlin took a different approach to the topic, what he called “counter-factual speculation” – what would have happened if the trade had not been closed or if it had reopened? Berlin asked his audience to imagine the newly opened US territories peopled not through white immigration but by recently captured and enslaved Africans; what if the United States ended up being not 10% but 30-40% black? We don’t know what the impact would have been; instead we know that Chesapeake/Virginia planters ended up controlling the US government and supported the close of the TAST for their own self-serving reasons, in part to assure that the new territories, especially those brought in through the Louisiana Purchase, would be slave states with slaves supplied through the internal (IST), not the international, trade. The IST, Berlin insists, did give non-slave holders a stake, an interest in slavery by making slavery a national institution creating new ideas and a new culture. The very idea that small holders could buy into slave holding was part of the matter, but a huge parallel economy developed whereby small farmers and their families could derive income by assisting the trade, provisioning slaves and slave drovers as they

marched slowly from upper to lower South. This, he says, is why the mass of white farmers fought for slavery in the Civil War – because they can buy into slavery and/or profit from the IST through provisioning and so forth – their stake is not purely ideological. This despite the rhetoric in which the debates over closing the TAST and later over reopening it is couched; it is always about little-d democracy and aimed at creating alliances between planters and “plain republicans.”

The movement of slaves through the IST from upper to lower South in the end undermined the power of Virginia planters at the same time that the North began to look beyond slavery for labor; the population of the North increases through white immigration from Europe as the North industrializes, and political power shifts as new values of free labor, mobility, equality, competition, and self-improvement are promulgated; labor becomes a source of value and a way to remake the self. The new values acknowledge that American slaves are *Americans*; they are Christian and they speak English; they are not the savage others that Northerners see when they envision black Africans. Berlin says this shifting ideology was powerful alongside shifting demography in causing Virginia’s decline. The closing of the TAST created new wealth by fostering the growth of the IST, but in the end the IST destroyed itself.

Berlin went on to discuss the issue of “re-Africanization” and the evidence for this; he stressed that by the time of the Revolution everywhere in the colonies had a self-reproducing slave population except Low Country rice plantations and the Sea Islands. He says this is where many slaves were brought in the renewed international trade after the Revolution and that is why there is such a clear survival of African ethnicity among the Gullah. For Berlin, the critical issue was, how did this affect the white population? Very little, he says; more important is white response to uprisings, especially the Haitian Revolution and the Denmark Vesey revolt in 1820.

He notes that the notion of “re-Africanization” is a recent “discovery” that requires further exploration and research. He also stated that not enough attention has been paid to British slavery, or to the volatile and violent nature of slavery in the Caribbean, though he does not like to distinguish between resistances and rebellion in the Caribbean vs. the mainland. More interesting, he says, is exploring reasons for not rebelling; looking at the rise of anti-slavery movements and their eventual success given they were always minority movements. He sees the Haitian Revolution as a signal event in American history; it proved the greatest fear of the planter class to be real, not a paranoid delusion. Geographically it had the strongest impact on Charleston, South Carolina, where refugees, once planters with huge estates, arrived with only the clothes on their backs and their wits about them. Their presence made South Carolina a center of slave holder radicalism, but the impact of the Haitian Revolution was not just on whites. It was a powerful and ardent flame in the minds and hearts of enslaved people in the US. Members of the audience and Ron Richardson at this point spoke about family oral tradition about the Haitian Revolution as well as naming practices; Richardson mentioned that at least one member of his family has, ever since 1798, been named Toussant.

Richardson introduced the final lecture in the series, on May 1, 2008, by Gary B. Nash, Professor Emeritus, University of California at Los Angeles, with further thoughts on the “living memories” of African Americans that have helped preserve in the Black community knowledge of events such as the Haitian Revolution or the close of the transatlantic slave trade, events in danger of perishing from broader US memory. He asked that we all consider expanding on what he terms “Founders’ Chic,” noting there is more room for additional pedestals in a more capacious pantheon of American history.

Gary Nash said that his talk, “Agrippa Hull: New Perspectives on a Berkshire Revolutionary Patriot” (see also Nash and Hodges 2008) explored the theme of agency, which he defined as the acts of individuals to make things happen: the individual as an army of one. Agrippa Hull was a free black man, born in Northampton, Massachusetts in 1759; he grew up in Stockbridge and attended Jonathan Edward’s church there. At age 18 he enlisted in the Revolutionary Army and became an orderly to Col. John Patterson; at Ticonderoga in 1777 he met Tadeusz Kosciuszko. Kosciuszko was a member of the Polish gentry who trained in France and was instrumental in the American victory over British general Burgoyne. He took a great liking to Hull, who was reassigned to him. Hull served Kosciuszko for four years and two months; after the Revolution Kosciuszko became a freedom fighter in his native Poland, and Hull returned to Stockbridge and went into domestic service. Hull was able to purchase land and became a fairly prominent figure in the town. Kosciuszko during his time in America had also become great friends with Thomas Jefferson, and he made an American will with Jefferson as its executor/administrator, directing that his American estate be used by Jefferson to free his own slaves in Virginia. If this were not possible, he directed that the funds be used for a school for free black children. But Jefferson, upon learning of Kosciuszko’s death, refused to honor his pledge and marched to the local courthouse, interrupting a hearing in session, and relinquished his administration of Kosciuszko’s American estate. Jefferson’s betrayal of his friend caused the estate to be in litigation for decades: the estate has never been settled, Kosciuszko’s wishes were never carried out, and no one, not even his descendants, have received a penny. Jefferson’s appalling behavior is perhaps explained by what we have learned about his commitment to slavery and to the internal slave trade in the US, but is nonetheless a wretched indictment of his lack of commitment to genuine liberty. Nash points out that those who hold the power get to tell

the stories, but uncovering the story of how acquaintance with Agrippa Hull led a Polish officer to provide the means for Jefferson to free his slaves to some degree redistributes the intellectual property of history; we need to remedy our knowledge of the role blacks played in the American Revolution and indeed in American history, and to reconsider some of the foundational myths about the “founding fathers.”

In closing Prof. Richardson asked that we all continue to remember the transatlantic slave trade and its end and what it has and continues to mean for history and for all of us.

* Mary C. Beaudry is Professor of Archaeology at Boston University.

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