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The politics of an archaeology of global captivity *Paul R. Mullins*

In 1922 Carter Woodson lay a brief but nevertheless sweeping foundation for a history of captivity that reached into the earliest recesses of the classical world. Invoking the classical paragons of democracy, Woodson argued (1922, 15) that slavery

> was once the normal condition of the majority of the inhabitants of the world. In many countries slaves outnumbered freemen three to one. Greece and Rome, the most civilized of the ancient nations in which the so-called democracy of that day had its best opportunity, were not exceptions to this rule.

Woodson rhetorically turned to Greece and Rome to illuminate the contradictions of American democracy and underscore the profound inequality that has existed within democratic states from their very creation, painting captivity as a nearly timeless institution.

Jane Webster champions a quite comparable archaeology of captivity that systematically compares the structural similarities if not continuities between a vast range of slaveholding societies. Woodson was among the African-American scholars who blazed this trail by advocating a global history of race and slavery as they touched the African diaspora, and his scholarly politicization provides some direction for the ways in which archaeologists might address Webster's provocative challenge. Woodson's consciously politicized scholarship reflected many African-Americans' suspicion of grand historical narratives that rationalized contemporary inequalities by ignoring the historical depth of imperialism and excusing the brutalities of captivity. Like many of his African-American scholarly contemporaries, Woodson aspired to produce a rigorous and critical history that illuminated the distortions in dominant American and world histories, but his scholarship was always driven by present-day concerns and did not divorce modern racism from its historical precedents. For African-American scholars, the history of captivity and the Middle Passage underscored the anti-black racism and social inequalities that were invested in Atlantic colonial experience across half a millennium. Yet this African-American scholarship passed largely ignored in

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conventional academic circles until very recently. Ostensibly it was rejected because it was laden with political biases, but its real danger was that it threatened to rewrite Atlantic world histories if not utterly destabilize how histories are produced.

Webster's ambitious study of captivity reaching from the classical world to the New World is likewise charged by a consequential critique of state society and imperialism and significant potential to recast conventional archaeological comparisons, but the concrete impact of such a scholarship remains to be established. Much of the transformative potential of Webster's project is to simply reorganize scholarly practice, which is today partitioned into disparate disciplines each staking a claim to certain data, periods, and research questions. New World historians and archaeologists, for instance, are trained in quite different methods and scholarly traditions even though their interests in captivity are quite similar, and some of the resistance to more broadly conceived comparative studies of slavery mirrors such disciplinary divides. Academics routinely patrol the boundaries of their disciplines, building on established *oeuvres*, inheriting research questions and methods, and carefully staying within such intellectual boundaries in ways that present a challenge to Webster's very ambitious worldwide study of slavery.

For many scholars, though, the dilemma has less to do with disciplinary surveillance than with whether comparisons between the likes of Rome and South Carolina are valid. Webster suggests that some classicists defend culturally specific norms as the only appropriate way to evaluate particular contexts, but she recognizes that anthropologically trained archaeologists have always been willing to impose interpretive frameworks for comparing disparate contexts. Archaeologists are often torn between a commitment to examining global or systemic processes and a paradoxical sifting through the material remains of very modest local contexts, with the former revealing the broadest contours of regional and world systems as the latter illuminates the numerous local variations and complexities within and in rejection of those systems. Armed with the everyday material things of small social groups and households, some archaeologists have championed a hypercontextualized approach to interpretation that views systemic determinism very warily; this sort of archaeology aspires to interpret local settings in their own highly local if not individual terms. Such fine-grained analyses of local contexts will always be an element of archaeological insight, but all interpretive frameworks – from constructions of what constitutes a local culture to the parameters of capitalism – are defined by scholars and open to reasonable debate over their definition. Ideally all archaeological assemblages illuminate the contradictions between broad social systems and everyday local lives. Webster presses archaeologists to make connections between societies that have used slaveholding to reproduce their domination, which pushes beyond local agency and experience and even reaches beyond contemporary systems to establish the mechanics of power and dispossession shared by a broad range of complex societies. There will always be contextually distinct questions archaeologists will ask of any given setting and material assemblage, so Webster is not delivering the death rites to locally based archaeological research. However, she is emphasizing a broadly relevant grand question

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about how complex societies discipline their subjects and the range of ways people are integrated into states.

If archaeologists lead this charge and trace structural similarities in the ways complex societies exercise power and frame inequality, precisely how will that alter archaeological knowledge and practice? A global study of slavery could potentially change the ways in which contemporary scholars view state societies, race, inequality, ethnicity and many of the most fundamental dimensions of life in complex societies, but it might just as well create a contrived coherence in power relations across contextually distinct settings over thousands of years. Clearly some comparative analyses aspiring to establish recurring causative relationships between state structure and captivity across time and space move beyond heuristic analogies and risk fabricating such contrived universals. Likewise, many scholars are justifiably leery of any analysis that paints cultural groups and state societies as monolithic entities and ignores all the contextual complexities and hybridity hidden with subjectivities like Roman or American. Consequently, the most persuasive global studies of captivity will clearly define what is being compared within the heuristic framework of slavery, concretely outlining the 'continuum of practice' represented by captivity and confronting the contemporary political goals of such comparison. A comparative lens on disparate complex societies is likely to find many different systems of privilege building on captivity in various forms. At the very least, such a comparative framework would make it increasingly difficult to reduce states simply to functional entities and compel scholars to assess how the most brutal injustices routinely are at the heart of state societies.

Slavery is itself a complex subjectivity that denotes many different relations of power inequality and dispossession within myriad structurally distinct social forms, so it seems critical to define carefully the forms of dispossession (and freedom) that exist within and support the rubric of slavery. In its most ambitious form, such a scholarship would assess the state-sanctioned inequalities that flourish alongside captivity, ranging from class to race to patriarchy, while judiciously recognizing that various forms of slavery have been supported by different ideological rationalizations. It would also push scholars to define carefully the various forms of 'freedom' that exist in slaveholding societies, many of which place non-captives in positions that are in many ways little different from bondage. Nevertheless, much of the power of a free subjectivity is garnered from the polar foil of captivity. In contexts like 19th-century America, for instance, the notion of a racially based freedom moved many otherwise poor working-class whites to side against the citizen privileges of African-American captives and free people of colour. The most interesting dimension of Webster's argument may be that she is advocating a shared general framework while acknowledging the contextual distinctions within it. For example, her reluctance to lump together a wide range of migrations as undifferentiated 'diasporas' is well placed, because it acknowledges the vast scope of more-or-less compelled migrations and distinguishes between the sorts of dispossession wreaked by each. It is difficult to paint slavery as a 'universal' phenomenon without circumspection about its local guises, but it does not seem at all infeasible to argue that

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human dispossession is a structural feature of all complex societies. How scholars approach such domination – and whether they choose to move it to the heart of their analysis – is somewhat more complicated. For some scholars, socially condoned dehumanization effected through various forms of captivity is fundamentally all the same phenomenon, and efforts to cast one form or another as 'better' or 'worse' fail to stake the appropriate ethical stand against basic human injustice. It seems difficult, though, to ignore that captivity was a widespread material reality and moral dilemma that complex societies have rationalized, reproduced and resisted in numerous ways. Perhaps those researchers who see comparative slavery studies as 'ahistorical' are resisting the contemporary scholarly imposition of universal measures of social justice, but this is the sort of transparent logic wielded by slavery's American apologists after the Civil War. A scholarship of slavery across the globe over millennia is inherently politicized and inevitably forces us to examine the deep-seated relationship between injustice and privilege.

The impression of modern politics on scholarly questions always requires conscious reflection. Even Carter Woodson was hard-pressed to see the breadth of captivity as a more brutal institution than the New World enslavement of Africans in the last half-millennium. He suggested (1922, 15) that classical

> slavery ... differed very much from the slavery of which our forefathers remind us. Among the ancients, slavery resulted from the effort to make a safe disposition of captives in war by using them as laborers at home while citizens and subjects in good physical condition went abroad to defend the honor of the nation.

Woodson was likely reacting against the notion of a benevolent slavery that remained the staple of most American history in the 1920s, instead emphasizing the brutality of the Atlantic slave trade even as he implied that comparable systems of dispossession characterized the history of state societies. Woodson stood just a half-century removed from American slavery and in the midst of a nation state that had systematically crippled African-American citizen rights, so his scholarship inevitably reflected that experience. Over 80 years later, American archaeologists have flocked to studies of captivity because the unspoken tragedy of bondage and racism is perhaps the central feature of life in the United States and continues to fuel how we see ourselves and our society. In contrast, Roman slavery apparently has a very different public meaning, though it could clearly be approached in ways that complicate established scholarly visions of classical enslavement, expand how the empire is defined, and paint a picture of Roman life that would illuminate issues like justice and privilege that are relevant outside narrowly defined classical scholarly circles.

The excuse that archaeologists cannot actually dig classical slavery was once made by American historians who believed African culture was utterly effaced by the Middle Passage (cf. Mintz and Price 1992), and archaeologists were likewise slow to identify African culture's material expressions and reconfigurations (cf. Perry and Paynter 1999). In a society structured by captivity, the material traces of slavery are inscribed into everything, so

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captivity is not a spatially or socially isolable phenomenon reflected simply in unique material patterns or goods. Webster focuses primarily on objects and patterns that are associated with resistance and used in the interstices of power, and this is certainly a rich context to begin tracing the materiality of captivity. Nevertheless, the more interesting archaeological pictures of captivity may come from the most prosaic objects that appear otherwise unimpressed by slavery, ranging from public spaces and architecture to commonplace mass produced goods. Such goods and spaces can begin to illuminate how captives understood material culture in distinct ways that reflected the contextually specific conditions of their enslavement. For instance, how did captive Africans in the New World define the meaning of the mass produced English ceramics found on archaeological sites? Some of that symbolism borrowed from ever-transforming African precedents, but much of it also clearly and consciously borrowed from the ideologies of slaveholders. The formal landscapes built throughout colonial America on the eve of the American Revolution were all constructed with enslaved labour, yet most scholarly attention has focused on the stylistic dictates of Anglo architects and ignored how such spaces might also have been "Africanized" in subtle but meaningful ways. What social beliefs and material practices might Roman captives have brought to the communities and households in which they were held, and how did they negotiate the boundaries of captivity by borrowing from dominant Roman social practices? How were the broad citizen rights and material world of free Romans a direct product of captive labour? The absence of many discrete Roman contexts holding captives' goods is indeed a methodological challenge, but that also means that there is no such thing as a Roman context untouched by captivity, just as African culture, Anglo practices and captivity impressed themselves into all American social and material life. Captives were at the heart of most slaveholding societies socially and spatially, so slavery and freedom are inseparable phenomena, and captivity is less a relationship of stark domination and resistance than a relationship of social, material and cultural hybridity.

In an odd twist of irony, many American slaveholders prided themselves on their classical education and saw their heritage extending back to Rome and Athens. Their sense of connectedness to Greece and Rome was mirrored in the vast number of captives with the names of classical gods, heroes, statesmen and philosophers. Even some newly arrived captive Africans were given Greek and Roman names aboard slave ships, arriving at American ports already dubbed Caesar or Nero (Inscoe 1983, 541–42). The connections slaveholders and captives had with the classical world were in many ways transparent ideology, yet they still were concrete continuities that linked colonial slaveholding societies with a host of states built upon the dispossession and dehumanization of select subjects. Perhaps captives in 19th-century America perceived no links between their plight and those of people held in bondage millennia earlier, and slaveholders may have been self-deluded in their belief that they inherited the political and civil traditions of the classical world. Nevertheless, establishing the rich affinities between the many people and societies who have been enslaved and held captive charts an ambitious and challenging history of complex society that archaeology is ideally suited to address.

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