WHERE’S THE DOOR?:

A GRADUATE STUDENT’S SEARCH FOR NEW HISTORIOGRAPHICAL INTERVENTIONS IN SLAVERY STUDIES

Graduate students of slavery studies find themselves at an interesting historiographical moment in the field. This moment is marked by more nuanced, narrowly focused and theoretically driven examinations than ever, which are often difficult to engage in the defense of our work’s significance. As a result, students find themselves searching for historiographical origins that ground those interventions in order to make arguments for our own. Through those explorations, one finds that those points of entry were more discernable to scholars entering the field in earlier generations. Generally, two perspectives defined the terms of the debate and students chose which to defend. Were slaveholders morally upright and prudent overlords or nasty, brutal masters? Did slavery degrade the souls of masters and slaves alike or did slavery have benefits as a social system? Was the institution of slavery pre-bourgeois or were slaveholders profit-seeking? Or did the enslaved so succumb to the brutality of slavery that natal alienation stalked their lives or did they create a life-sustaining culture of resistance that allowed them to carve out a degree of autonomy? These were the kinds of debates they intervened to build a body of literature that, as I will show, continues to define the field. But eventually, many of those debates were settled and graduate students now find fewer clear opportunities to enter the ongoing discussions and offer new insights. A dissertation thesis making claims to the vitality of slave culture or the structure of the slave family, for example, or one arguing that the Civil War was a clash of civilizations would be hard to find. So, in our present moment, how does one constructing a research proposal determine which questions are worth asking? In this essay, I will share what I have discovered on my quest for a point of
historiographical intervention in slavery studies, and conclude with what lines of inquiry I have identified that might lead graduate students away from historiographical dead ends toward new and compelling research questions.

First, this essay traces the life of some major themes that have emerged in slavery studies over the past near century. These themes can be said to have originated most prominently with U.B. Phillips’ 1918 work, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro Labor as determined by the Plantation Regime*. In that text, Phillips tackled the questions of the profitability of slavery; the slaveholders’ ideology; and the nature of black people’s capacity for civilization and work. These three broad themes have defined the major veins of slavery studies even into the twenty-first century. Scholars have refined their analyses beyond the more basic arguments that originally defined those themes such that no contemporary scholar feels compelled to debate such questions as the biological inferiority of African slaves, for example. But conceived broadly, those original questions can help us frame much of the revisionist work that has been published since *American Negro Slavery*. Through this lens, I will attempt to offer some idea of where we are in the field and what we seem to have left behind. The question of the profitability of slavery that frames my discussion of economic studies of slavery makes possible an evaluation of recent studies of slavery whose authors claim to offer new analyses of the relationship between slavery and nineteenth century capitalist development. There is significant entanglement between the second theme—the slaveholders’ ideology—and both of the others, but important work by Eugene Genovese in the 1960s and 70s, which directly engaged and rebranded Phillips’ paternalism thesis seems to warrant separate recognition. In addition, Genovese has argued in his work that the ideological regime of the plantation South could not be formed or maintained without slave participation, and scholars
have continued to explore the master-slave relationship and particularly engaged Genovese’s theorization of slave resistance. This theme is also related to the final theme I explore in this essay. The theme that has been most fervently engaged, even up to the present moment, is the capacity and worldview of slaves themselves. In the end, I propose that although those original debates might seem to endure only in vague semblance, this is in large measure because they are so shrouded by new theoretical or structural formulations or are engaged on such narrow, technical grounds that the raison d’être is obscured. Finally, using these themes to trace trends in slavery studies illuminates what themes or lines of inquiry have not been afforded sustained engagement, and I offer what I think could be fruitful new directions for graduate students who are unclear about where and how to enter the conversation.

Where to begin a historiography of slavery is less difficult than where to end. The enduring significance of American Negro Slavery, the first scholarly work to consider slavery as an economic and social system, is evident in that it is still assigned in graduate history courses as a seminal text nearly a century after its publication. Specific themes that arise in the text will be discussed here, but in general, Phillips argued in his magnum opus that slavery was more often than not an unprofitable enterprise for southern planters and, although slavery was an efficient method of racial control, it retarded the economic development of the South by tying up substantial amounts of capital in the purchase of slaves. Scholars of what would be deemed the “Phillips’ School” in the 1920s and 1930s produced economic and statistical studies of specific states that contributed toward the institutionalization of Phillips’ theses.

Selected works produced by students of the Phillips School: Charles S Sydnor, Slavery in Mississippi. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1933); Ralph Betts Flanders, Plantation Slavery in Georgia (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933); Rosser Howard Taylor, Slaveholding in North Carolina. (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Pr., 1926); Charles William Ramsdell, The Natural Limits of Slavery Expansion (Crown Rights Book Company, 1929); Charles Davis, The Cotton Kingdom in Alabama (Montgomery, Alabama State Department of archives and history, 1939; Alabama State Department of archives and history, 1939).
On the question of the profitability of slavery, an anti-Phillips revisionist school, Lewis C. Gray notable among its members, emerged forcefully in the 1920s and 30s, and were joined in their pursuit by cliometricians beginning in the 1950s to argue that slaveholders would in fact have been hard-pressed to fail to profit from slavery. Scholars have continued to challenge the profitability tenet of the Phillip’s school. Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman’s *Time on the Cross: The Economics of Negro Slavery*, a seeming outlier among the outpouring of revisionist scholarship in the 1970s (discussed below), was an economic study of slavery in which the authors argued that slavery was a productive and efficient economic system. Fogel and Engerman echoed Alfred Conrad and John Meyer's earlier conclusions that slavery was a profitable enterprise, adding that its profitability was due largely to the “special quality of plantation labor.”

A useful guide to this particular historiographical labyrinth is found in Harold Woodman’s 1963 article, “The Profitability of Slavery: A Historical Perennial.” In it, Woodman identifies the key to decoding what seem like encrypted interventions by scholars who appear to be answering the same, fairly straightforward question but, as Woodman demonstrates, in some cases are not. By deciphering what scholars had in mind when they chose to evaluate the “profitability” of slavery, Woodman deciphered three ways scholars, beginning with Phillips,

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2 In his two volume study of southern agriculture Gray was among the first revisionists to argue that slavery was a profitable business enterprise, however he maintained that slavery hindered the development of the southern home market. Lewis Cecil Gray, Henry Charles Taylor, and Esther Katherine Thompson, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860 Vol. 1* (Washington: Carnegie Inst., 1933); Lewis Cecil Gray, Henry Charles Taylor, and Esther Katherine Thompson, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860 Vol. 2* (Washington: Carnegie Inst., 1933).


had approached the question—by considering slavery as an economic system, a social system, and/or a business enterprise. This differentiation, according to Woodman, allowed Phillips to argue that despite that fact that economic diversification and the development of the home market was hindered under slavery and great profits for slaveholders’ were attainable under only the most favorable circumstances, the plantation system was an efficient and beneficial mechanism of labor and social control.⁶

These distinctions are of value in engaging the arguments of newer scholarship that covers a range of subjects including, but not limited to, slavery as business enterprise as well as economic and social system. Much of the nuance in this scholarship hinges on the slavery-as-business enterprise consideration. This dimension of the economics of slavery opens questions not only about the profitability of slavery to slaveholders, but also their ideological stance in relation to the pursuit of that profit. It is at this point that the first and second themes driving my analysis converge. As scholars have become less inclined to draw sharp distinctions between slavery in the South and industrial capitalist development in the rest of the world, their arguments pertaining to a slaveholders’ ideology have become increasingly convoluted.

Eugene Genovese’s *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South*, published in 1961, represents an important strand of the debate over the profitability of slavery question. Thomas Govan’s 1955 article “Was the Old South Different?” epitomized what Genovese called the “planter-capitalism” thesis that had emanated from the anti-Phillips revisionist school. Those scholars emphasized commercial links between

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planters and commercial world markets and the existence of capitalist institutions like banks in the South. Genovese, though, argued stridently against the characterization of the South as capitalist. He claimed that the South had developed into a “powerful, largely autonomous civilization with aristocratic pretensions and possibilities”—in but not of a capitalist world.

This 1960s and 1970s debate over the South and Southerners’ place in the spectrum of progress rings very familiar to current graduate students as much recent scholarship is engaged with questions of slaveholders’ commercialism, the southern “home market,” and generally “modern” economic processes in the slaveholding South. The recent big histories of slavery in the US South place the region and its powerful leaders centrally in sweeping global narratives of the nineteenth century. However, the relationship between the older generation of scholarship and the more recent scholarship can be easily obscured by the fact that newer analyses seem to have outgrown the older questions.


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century capitalist development.\textsuperscript{10} Slavery, for these authors, appears as merely a mediating factor of the familiar, chaotic processes of capitalist market expansion.\textsuperscript{11} Perhaps “mediating factor” is too diminutive, as these authors illustrate the essential role slavery played in global capitalist development. However, that one thing is “essential” (inherent, indispensible) to another does not quite explain the relationship between them. In fact, Sven Beckert has recently argued that by focusing on cotton production in the antebellum South, scholars have missed the fact that an “empire of cotton” had emerged without slavery. He argues that before the nineteenth century, peasant cotton producers in places like Central Asia, West Africa, and India had been incorporated into the global cotton market.\textsuperscript{12} So if slavery wasn’t “essential” to cotton cultivation, then what exactly was the relationship between that excessively violent and racialized organization of labor and the triumph of western nation-states in the global economy? The era of “war-capitalism” in which Beckert locates North American slavery is one characterized by what he calls a “military-cotton complex,” in which governments were implicated in global land conquest and the exploitation of the world’s labor power as much as southern planters and northern capitalists.\textsuperscript{13} Beckert’s global history of the cotton empire includes slavery as one labor regime of many, no less “essential” to the dominant economies of the Atlantic world, but perhaps no more important than other mechanisms of cotton cultivation.


\textsuperscript{13} Beckert, \textit{Empire of Cotton}. 
For Walter Johnson, pursuing “prefabricated questions and threadbare tautologies” like whether slaveholders were capitalists or not obscures our view of the “culture of cotton” of the antebellum lower Mississippi Valley.\(^{14}\) Without such guiding questions, though, it is difficult to trace a cohesive argument throughout the book. Each approach to the question of the profitability of slavery outlined by Woodman is found in Johnson’s book. As a social system, slavery was detrimental to both slaveholders and slaves. According to Johnson the slave experience, in large part, was defined by various forms of torture. Slaveholders, in addition to being vile, inhumane, merciless villains, were further denigrated by their commercialism—plagued by debt and increasingly anxious about their economic stability. Slavery as an economic system, though, was profitable and productive. Johnson echoes Fogel and Engerman in arguing that this should be attributed not to slaveholders, but to the slaves themselves. For example, Johnson juxtaposes the knowledge slaves held about cotton cultivation—which they embodied both mentally and physically—with the ignorance of planters in relation to the crop.\(^{15}\) However, Johnson’s larger repudiation of the notion that Mississippi Valley planters were backward or pre-modern is justified by descriptions of their interest in agricultural reform and inclination to increase productivity. Notwithstanding slaveholders’ demands for quicker output and attendant threats of violence, Johnson gives the sense that slaves retained the most intimate knowledge cotton production and were primarily responsible for increasing their productivity, on average, sixfold between 1820 and 1860.\(^{16}\) These sorts of ambiguous formulations, though, characterize the book. *River of Dark Dreams* is a house of cards in which potentially paradoxical ideas are carefully situated as not to disturb one another’s logic. Multiple perspectives on each driving theme of this essay (the profitability of slavery, slaveholders’ ideology, and the nature of black people’s

\(^{14}\) Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 254.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 164–165.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 244.
capacity for civilization and work) are present in Johnson’s tome. Slaveholders were unequivocally “capitalist,” but they developed a unique sensibility toward “capital” as it was embodied in their human slaves. Slaves were at once immiserated by the “dominion” of white men, and able to stage revolts and sustain community. Perhaps Johnson’s mission was to offer an account of slavery with more “both/ands” than “either/ors.” Although much of the book’s content is comprised of old arguments adorned with new metonymy, Johnson’s portrayal of the development of pro-slavery expansionist views among slaveholders that emerged in the wake of the 1837 economic crisis and looked to places like Cuba and Nicaragua to expand in order to establish an independent slaveholding republic is a fresh take on antebellum southern ideology and the era’s forgotten alternatives.

If Johnson and Beckert’s books point outward and beyond the nation’s geographical and political boundaries at mid-century in ways that reflect the expanse, both real and imagined, of the cotton empire, Rothman draws our attention inward, to the pre-1837 “cotton culture” characterized as much by confidence and enterprise as fraud, suspicion, and violence. The main characters of Rothman’s story are not profit-driven slaveholders, they belong to an in-between class of enterprising white men seeking their fortune in the highly unregulated and rapidly expanding cotton frontier economy in the Southwest. Non-property holding white men, gamblers, and rebellious slaves unnerved slaveholders whose livelihoods seemed to be threatened from all sides. Whether cotton production and trade was a capitalist enterprise or not is no question for Rothman. Though in those flush times profit seemed unfettered and continued growth unassailable, the unique threats posed to slaveholders’ status and control that Rothman explores in the book exposes the tenuous and fragile foundations on which their power was built.

The analyses offered by Beckert, Johnson, and Rothman illustrate that scholars have, in a way, outgrown the questions Did slaveholders profit from slavery or not? Did slavery thwart the development of the South’s home market? Or was slavery beneficial or detrimental to southern character, black or white? Although conclusions can be drawn from the text, the broad scope and breadth of these histories, with the exception of Rothman perhaps, imply that some larger questions are being asked. But what are they?

An early critique of Genovese’s paternalism thesis offered by James Oakes denied that masters rejected marketplace principles and dealt with slaves through compassion or moral obligation. Rather, Oakes argued, slaveholders viewed their slaves as property. Scholars, including those mentioned above, have built on Oakes’ conceptualization by offering ever more exacting formulations to describe the ways in which planter-capitalists viewed their property in humans. These have constituted another vital element of recent arguments for the capitalist character of slavery (the first being the speculative and commercialist attitudes of planters): the hyper-commodification of slaves. Concepts like the “chattel principle,” “liquid” capital, or “modern commodities,” authors use to describe the commodification of human slaves, I think, typify newer generations of scholarship. Keeping this in mind and tracing the final theme, the capacities and worldviews of slaves, from its origins to the current moment, I think will bring us to a fruitful point of historiographical intersection.

In the 1960s slavery studies became directly engaged with political controversy bubbling outside of the university. As civil rights activism peaked in its visibility and reverberated within the walls of the academy, scholars sought ways to extend the movement’s mission and principles into white-washed institutions of higher learning. Stanley Elkins’ “Sambo thesis,” relayed in his 1959 work *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, adopted a comparative analysis of the enslaved and Jews confined to concentration camps to theorize psychopathologies that resulted from severe and cruel forms of bondage. Elkins found that the enslaved developed a Sambo personality, a plantation type characterized by child-like docility, and little capacity to think independently, let alone act politically. Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s “The Negro Family in America: A Case for National Action,” published in 1965, gave social policy weight to the idea that black Americans had been socially damaged by slavery.

Although Kenneth Stampp’s *The Peculiar Institution* (1956) and sociologist E. Franklin Frazier’s study *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939) indicted slavery as a cruel and inhuman system of bondage, thereby correcting Phillips’ naïve claims to slaveholders’ benevolence toward their slaves, Phillips’ racist assumptions of African inferiority (the third theme) that bolstered those claims lived on in these works in new form. E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*, published in 1966, however, offered a methodology for students and scholars who had been radicalized over the ‘60s long, hot summers and would generate a bounty of scholarship on slave culture, kinship, and resistance that would definitively lay such arguments to rest.

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One of Genovese’s vital interventions in studies of slave culture was his conceptualization of an ideological dialecticism between masters and slaves that created opportunities for an interpretation of slave resistance. Although Phillips discussed slave crime such as theft, he rationalized those instances as aberrations; for the most part slaves were “a passive element whose fate was affected only so far as the master race determined.” Genovese, on the other hand, adopting a Marxist interpretation of the social relations of slavery, found acts of slave resistance to be, not necessarily more threatening, but more regular. Slaves’ passive aggressive resistance to the master’s domination was what ultimately allowed them to survive it. The aberrations in Genovese’s formulation were the most extreme forms of resistance, like collective rebellion. Although Genovese attempts to demonstrate the development of a proto-nationalist consciousness among enslaved blacks, his theoretical approach precludes a political tradition among them. Organized slave rebellions, like those examined in Herbert Aptheker’s work, constituted aberrances in the paternalist plantation ethos. The nature of slave resistance continues to drive research questions in the contemporary moment and probably constitutes the strand of slave culture studies that has had most longevity, which I plan to return to below. But here, I will turn to scholarship on slave culture and kinship.

One strand of slave culture studies highlights when and how slaves forged a unique, shared system of cultural meaning and expression. In addition to Genovese, Albert Raboteau, Lawrence Levine, George Rawick, and Sterling Stuckey among others have offered invaluable

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contributions to our understanding of a world truly made by slaves. More recently, Michael Gomez’s *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (1998), gave us a compelling study of how specific linguistic, culture, and religious elements of African slaves’ various tribal cultures were translated, adapted, or transmuted in the New World. “Creolists” and African diaspora scholars have taken different approaches in studying how African cultures moved through the Atlantic world and were re-embodied on slave plantations. The former camp argues that a distinct African American culture, including elements of both African and European cultures, was created in the New World through creative and dynamic processes of creolization. The latter moves beyond observations of general Africanisms and highlights, rather, how distinct communities of Africans carried their belief systems to specific European colonies and adapted them to their new environments. Many scholars, though, have succeeded at deploying both interpretive frameworks to understand things like slave kinship organization, religious practices, and rebellion.

In what was a direct rebuttal to Moynihan’s Report, Herbert Gutman’s *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925* (1977) is a large-scale reconstructive project of black genealogies before and after emancipation. Gutman used official and plantation records in

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various states across the slaveholding South in addition to Freedmen’s Bureau records and personal accounts to illustrate the resilience of the black family. Gutman’s study opened many questions about the nature of the slave family that scholars have continued to pursue. Brenda Stevenson and Dylan Penningroth and demonstrate what new directions studies of the black family have taken since Gutman. In Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South, Brenda Stevenson provides a meticulous account of white, slave, and free black families in and around Loudoun County, Virginia.31 Her conclusions refine earlier interpretations of black kinship organization, namely Jacqueline Jones’s thesis that slaves sustained two-parent, male headed, nuclear family units despite masters’ tireless efforts to deny their humanity, and maintained this structure after the Civil War. “Contrary to popular views of family stability,” Stevenson argued, “the familial history of slaves in colonial and antebellum Loudoun and throughout Virginia offers compelling evidence that many slaves did not have a nuclear structure or ‘core’ in their families.” Furthermore, Stevenson implies that such a structure was perhaps not even their desire. “There is also very little evidence which suggests that a nuclear family was the slave’s sociocultural ideal,” she explained.32

Brenda Stevenson’s register of a matrifocal tradition in black families reflects a reconceptualization of black kinship organization and the centering of slave subjectivities. Stevenson argues that a history of matrifocality was rooted in early colonial law and custom, such as the act passed in 1662 mandating that “the children of a black female, regardless of the color or condition of their father, had to take the status of their mother.”33 According to Stevenson, this provided the “legal context” for matrifocal kinship groups among slaves. This

32 Ibid., 160.
33 Ibid., 222.
familial structure was further reinforced by the slaveowners’ acknowledgement of matriarchal lineage and frequent dismissal of the father’s biological, emotional, social or material role in a slave child’s life. Stevenson’s argument in relation to slave kinship, her rejection of arguments that center prevailing ideologies of kinship allows her to deduce that matrifocal families were *not inherently problematic*, structurally or functionally. Extended kinship networks among slaves actually augmented resources for education, socialization, protection, and material support. Although she is sure to emphasize that black kinship organization was always mediated by the realities of slavery and structures of white families, like scholars of enslaved black women before her (discussed later), Stevenson’s work continues to call on historians to find meaning in alternative forms of kinship organization among blacks in the antebellum South.

Dylan Penningroth’s work on slave families in the US and the African Gold Coast similarly challenges dominant intellectual paradigms that traditionally guided analyses of slave kinship organization. Penningroth engages Orlando Patterson’s theory of social death, arguing that the claim that “slaves were ‘socially dead’” is inaccurate.34 In fact, slaves established social ties among themselves by building and maintaining familial and community networks. His analysis of these networks departs in other ways from existing literature on the black family by foregrounding material considerations in the making (and remaking) of kinship networks. Penningroth’s arguments in “The Claims of Slaves and Ex-Slaves to Family and Proper: A Transatlantic Comparison,” and his book The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth Century South are predicated on the notion that kinship and community are “ever-changing ideologies of power that define rights to property and people.”35

His guiding question is essentially how kinship continued to function as a framework for

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35 Ibid., 1069.
“controlling people and property.” Black kinship networks, Penningroth argues, were sites of contests over power. Penningroth thus provides a resistance model that lauds the black family as a cultural and social resource for survival obscures conflict within black communities. By privileging a black-white power relation, Penningroth argues, scholars have neglected formidable struggles over community and family—struggles over who belonged, and what it meant to belong, which made the black family much more than a haven of racial solidarity and emotional connectedness or a “side-effect” of dealings with whites.

Finally, on the theme of slave culture, scholars continue to engage the question of slave resistance. Steven Hahn’s *A Nation Under Our Feet*, published in 2003 and winner of the Bancroft and Pulitzer prizes in history, is a sweeping narrative of a black political tradition beginning with the collective and grassroots foundations of black political life. This work builds on, and challenges by pushing further, historiographical developments of the 1970s and 1980s. Equipped with a new framework for understanding resistance within structures of domination thanks to scholars like Genovese and James Scott, Hahn has provided not just an account of black collective action, but a political interpretation. By demonstrating the political in black slaves’ collective action, Hahn revised one of Genovese’s famous claims about slave resistance in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. Genovese, maintaining the Gramscian notion of cultural hegemony, described slaves’ resistance to their master’s authority such as talking back, working slowly, or committing violent acts like the assault or even murder of their master as “pre-political” at best because those acts did not add up to a conscious and collective rebellion against the institution of slavery. Hahn, on the contrary, contends that all action among black slaves that could be read as an assertion of will or an attempt to improve their condition was in fact political. According to

36 Ibid., 1065.
Hahn, kinship and communal networks facilitated the sense among them of a collective, shared experience. He argues that the use of such grassroots networks to advance their interests and improve their conditions was political not just in our historical imagination but also from the perspectives of slaves. He shows that slave rebellions, runaways, and conspiracies often initiated political crises between slave and free states, and in addition, that blacks were “schooled in modern politics” through these experiences as well.\(^\text{38}\) Black people’s political knowledge continued to be enacted during the Civil War and long after, manifested in collective political impulses like separatism and emigrationism. Hahn’s intervention with this book, undergirded by a theory of slave resistance that incorporates slaves’ vision and influence beyond the plantation, is his acknowledgement that a black political tradition with great historical influence originated long before Reconstruction and was constituted by various individual and collective struggles among blacks to gain “socially meaningful power.”\(^\text{39}\) In this way, Hahn wrests a black political tradition defined by collection action and a community-oriented political imagination from a “liberal integrationist framework” in order to re-narrate the history of not just slavery but the American South and nation-state more generally.\(^\text{40}\)

The most recent scholarship on slavery that is not focused on planter-capitalists and slavery’s place in the global economy continues to add to our understanding of slave resistance. By the end of the twentieth century the idea that slaves were self-determining “agents” and resisted their bondage in myriad ways was fairly institutionalized in the academy. In 2003, Walter Johnson addressed this in his article, “On Agency,” questioning how and why it had


\(^\text{39}\) Ibid., 3.

\(^\text{40}\) Hahn defines the liberal integrationist framework as one that “does not really incorporate slaves as political beings,” and that “privileges and lend legitimacy to certain sets of aspiration” like inclusion and assimilation, and the pursuit of individual rights. Ibid., 6.
become so tempting to call almost anything resistance. Johnson argued that acknowledging slave agency in itself is insufficient, and even leads to almost obvious and simplistic conclusions and theories about the nature of resistance and survival. Discussions about slave agency, Johnson insisted, “overcode complex discussions of human subjectivity and political organization and presses them into the background of a persistently mis-posed question: African-American slaves, agents of their own destiny or not?” The more profitable approach, he argued, consists in understanding how agency operates with and against power structures. Clearly, some scholars had already begun to anticipate Johnson’s caution as they engineered their research questions. But while newer scholarship on slave resistance has certainly inherited the knowledge and heeded the lessons of earlier generations, it remains unclear whether their seemingly compelling interventions are just old ideas exhibited in new contexts and with new theoretical introductions.

In their studies of slave neighborhoods and geographies, Anthony Kaye and Stephanie Camp draw attention to spatial organization as a significant dimension of the world made by slaves. In his study of slave neighborhoods in the Natchez District, Kaye deploys Anthony Giddens’s theory of structuration, which gives primacy to neither “structure” nor “agency” in social relations, and thus successfully supplants the theoretical scaffolding of slave agency. “Neighborhoods,” Kaye argues, “were a mode of understanding society, which slaves mapped along lines of adjoining plantations. The natural geography lent permanences to the social milieu neighbors inscribed on it. And the milieu the slaves imagined became deeply embedded in their social consciousness.” Kaye cites many of the scholars of slave culture mentioned in this essay

to highlight the significance of his intervention. His intervention, he claims, reintroduces Blassingame’s “slave community” paradigm as well as Genovese’s emphasis on physical, social, and ideological bounded-ness among the enslaved and between slave and master to illustrate that scholars should pay less attention to slave “autonomy” and more to slave institutions. As a result, Kaye sees his contribution as “shifting analysis away from resistance to terrains of struggle.”

Camp similarly draws on theoretical frameworks from without the field, like James Scott’s notion of ‘rival geographies’ and joins scholars of quilombo communities to illuminate forms of slave resistance grounded in transgressions of spatial arrangements of power. Thus, for example, “where planters’ mapping of their farms was defined by fixed places for plantation residents, the rival geography was characterized by motion: the movement of bodies, objects, and information within and around plantation space.” Marronage, truancy, or hiding abolitionist propaganda in slave quarters all were forms of resistance rooted in alternative mappings of plantation geography. Camp does not go as far as to deem slave resistance “passive aggressive,” but she is focused primarily on everyday kinds of resistance that is often, but not always, limited by the organization of plantation life. For Camp, antebellum everyday forms of resistance constituted the “furtive prehistory that made the visible, and historically charismatic, wartime movement possible.” Camp’s principle critique of the literature on slave resistance is that by valorizing the “organized and the visible,” like rebellion, it “veils the lives of women” and their gendered forms of resistance. Through mapping rival slave geographies, she argues, a new logic of resistance that includes enslaved women is revealed. Both texts point to semi-new

44 Emphasis added. Ibid., 8.
47 Ibid., 119.
48 Ibid., 3.
directions for young scholars that renew our conceptualizations of slave community and invite continued exploration of gendered forms of slave resistance. But what is more difficult to glean is what about these lines of inquiry are debatable? What big questions can we possibly hope to ask or engage if none appear in the work of our contemporary scholars?

Camp's work builds on an explosion of black family scholarship that emerged in the 1980s and centered women in examinations of slavery. Deborah Gray White's *Ar’n’t I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, published in 1985, was among the first studies of enslaved black women and generated the first Library of Congress subject heading for “female slaves.” This original work undergirds all studies of black women and the black family mentioned here. Among other things, White was interested in whether the gendered hierarchies that governed white social relations in the South similarly ruled those among slaves. Contemplating Sojourner Truth's famous remarks about her experience as a slave, White showed that gender relations among the enslaved were not exactly equal, but the organization of plantation life also precluded traditional, patriarchal gender relations among slaves. Forced separation of families and the denial of the rights and protections afforded white women, which was rationalized by slaveholders’ gendered and racialized stereotypes of black women, for example, caused enslaved black women to develop unique sensibilities. White’s work, along with that of her contemporaries who centered women in their narratives of plantation slavery like Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, remains a touchstone for historians of slavery. These authors introduced the complex realities of plantation life for women and the gendered experiences of enslavement. An important thread of this scholarship is the fact of pervasive sexual violence as a

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significant dimension of enslaved women’s lives. Following White, scholars have avoided over-determining slave women’s lives by the threat and reality of sexual violence by exploring how those women forged new ideological meanings of their reproductive labors and also developed gendered forms of resistance to protect their bodies and exert some control over their reproduction.

Unfortunately, these rich slave culture studies have been largely disconnected from the popular discussions of the antebellum global cotton market. The “bifurcation” of slave life into “culture” that is semi-autonomous on one hand, and oppressive, exploitative “work” on the other, champions black cultural expression and production as the only negotiable space under slavery, and the principle means through which historians can gain access to nineteenth century black consciousness. But how did rapid capitalist expansion, increased demands on labor productivity, or the shifting and expanding geography of slavery transform enslaved people’s understandings of themselves? The studies mentioned earlier that are concerned with the place of slaveholders and the southwestern cotton economy in a global world of capital highlight the region’s particular sources of instability. The ever-present threat of slave insurrection, for example, defined cotton culture as much as capital flows and credit lines. However, slaves are most often depicted in those narratives from the perspective of white men who acquired, traded, worked, tortured, and sexually assaulted them—as laborers, commodities, and capital, as human

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53 For a discussion of the bifurcation of slave life see Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan (eds.), *Cultivation and Culture: The Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* or Peter Kolchin “Reevaluating the Antebellum Slave Community: A Comparative Perspective,” *Journal of American History* 70 (December 1983)
and less than human.\textsuperscript{54} So what might scholars learn about how slaves saw themselves in this “modern”, capitalist world by attending to the material conditions and experiences of slave labor?

W.E.B. Du Bois’s \textit{Black Reconstruction in America}, published in 1935, anticipated a large part of the arguments and critiques introduced here.\textsuperscript{55} Decades ago, he had already placed slavery and Reconstruction in a global frame and recognized the centrality of slave labor to international markets, and he designated slave laborers as part of the American working class. As scholars have taken up Du Bois’s arguments, wittingly or unwittingly, few have engaged Du Bois in terms of his idea of class formation among slaves. The historiographical themes traced through this essay, though, seem to converge at the current moment around examinations of slave culture and resistance that no longer distinguish between slave life that happens from “sundown to sunup” and the daily routine of slave labor. Newer studies of enslaved black women such as those examining black women’s resistive mechanisms used to protect their bodies and control their reproductive labor, as well as scholarship on black water transportation workers point us to strategies for understanding the intersectional subjectivities slaves forged for themselves in the shadows of the master’s gaze.

Thavolia’s Glynmph’s \textit{Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household} offers a general interpretive framework for situating those works on black women’s reproductive resistance and moving current discussions of slavery and global capitalism in new

\textsuperscript{54} Genovese devoted a section of his 1974 work to defining a “black work ethic.” Johnson also explores the meanings slaves assigned to their labor as it related to, for example, their understanding of biographical time. He also spends a great deal of time describing how slaves came to embody, physiologically, agricultural knowledge. Genovese, \textit{Roll, Jordan, Roll}; the World the Slaves Made; Johnson, \textit{River of Dark Dreams}.

directions.\footnote{Glymph’s work builds on Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s important work on women in the southern plantation household and challenges a body of work on slaveholding women, including Drew Faust’s 1996 work, that rests on a separate, gendered spheres framework. Thavolia Glymph, \textit{Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household} (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Fox-Genovese, \textit{Within the Plantation Household}; Drew Gilpin Faust, \textit{Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).} Glymph’s work draws our attention the very social relations of production that the “cotton culture” scholars discussed here are interested in. Glymph states, “we must remember that the plantation household was also a workplace, not a haven from the economic world, that it was not private or made so by the nature of the labor performed within it or the sex of the managers.” The paradigm of patriarchy might make it difficult to discern that the plantation household was actually “a field of power relations and political practices.”\footnote{Glymph, \textit{Out of the House of Bondage}, 2.} However, by displacing widely held notions of southern white womanhood and correcting uncritical interpretations of black women’s actions in bondage and in freedom, Glymph unearths a new dimension of the local, internal engineering of the cotton empire. Further, she illuminates the fact that this sphere of action was a site for the development of black women’s labor consciousness that endured from slavery to freedom.\footnote{Ibid., 210.}

Scholars of black sea- and river men in the antebellum period offer other sites of such developments in black consciousness. W. Jeffrey Bolster’s \textit{Black Jacks: African American Seaman in the Age of Sail} (1998) builds on scholarship that has highlighted black people’s central role in the abolitionist movement and Civil War period.\footnote{W. Jeffrey. Bolster, \textit{Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail} (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).} Bolster depicts black seamen’s work lives and identities, the maritime culture in which they labored, as well as the cultural meanings they and their communities assigned to their occupation. Although criticized for insufficiently illustrating that black sailors posed a significant threat to southern slaveholders and
the racial hierarchy more generally, Bolster does discuss instances of labor resistance among black maritime laborers. In *The Watermen’s Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (2001), David Cecelski escapes that critique because he makes very explicit connections between black radical activism, particularly through the mercurial life of Abraham Galloway, and the nature of maritime labor and culture. Cecelski’s book, Thomas Buchanan’s *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks and the Western Steamboat World* (2004), and, I would add, Douglas Egerton’s *Gabriel’s Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (1993) are recent interpretations of slave resistance grounded in black labor experiences. In Buchanan’s book, his discussion of “rascality” among black river men is a unique interpretation of black criminal economic activity and their rejection of legal constraints on material gain. Buchanan interprets their activity as a form of resistance against economic oppression and the slave system generally. The river men’s illicit activity exhibits the desire to control their labor and evidenced the fact that they came to create their own expectations in terms of compensation for their skills and labor capacities. Similarly, Egerton argues that Gabriel Prosser conspired to revolt against Richmond merchants based on an ideology of “artisanal republicanism” that had the potential to transcend racial divisions. Egerton is concerned with an earlier period than work on the cotton empire, but his analytical framework, like Glymph’s, centers the mode and relations of production, and the material conditions of slave labor in a way that could open new questions for the antebellum era.

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Overall, while newer scholarship that considers economic dimensions of slavery and joins slavery studies with histories of global capitalism is receiving much recognition, it offers few new arguments for graduate students to engage in their own work. On the other hand, scholars interested in slave culture and forms of slave resistance have offered some compelling methodological and theoretical approaches that make new interpretations of black life under slavery possible. The intersection between new understandings of space and place that privilege the perspective of the enslaved, and explorations of the ways in which various forms of slave labor shaped slave consciousness points in the most fruitful directions for new scholarship. Those scholars have shown that previously obscured narratives, especially those that help us understand the experiences of enslaved women, emerge more clearly when scholars engage the structural paradigms that govern slavery studies. For graduate students, the way into this conversation may not be clearly marked, but we can rest assured that there is still much work to be done—first, to understand how scholars have produced knowledge about the real and interpretive infrastructures of slavery (i.e. the plantation household, geographies of containment, or the bifurcation of slave labor and culture), and then, continue to critically engage those structures with the first purpose of offering the fullest and most humane interpretations of enslaved people’s lives, who remain peripheral actors in popularly held historical knowledge. Although old corridors may be shut off, and others seemingly obstructed, that noble pursuit demands that we enter.