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Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840

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CHAPTER 9

Time and revolution in African America: temporality and the history of Atlantic slavery

Walter Johnson

I write in the cold, clear light that comes with the beginning of the fall. The World Trade Center has come down and the United States is bombing Afghanistan. Thousands are dead, and many thousands more, it appears, are destined to die. These events have changed the meaning of things, making planes overhead and sirens in the night into portents of terror, making symbols of loss into calls for war, making things that were once easy to say hard to think about.

To begin it is enough to say that on September 11 one version of history was punctured by another. Issues that most people in the United States had sealed off in the category of the "elsewhere" were suddenly made manifest in their relation to the daily lives of even the most complacent Americans: US troops in Saudi Arabia, fanatics in Afghanistan, suicide bombing and state-sponsored terror in Israel. It seems equally clear that simply to try to define the character of that collision of histories is to take a part in it. For Tony Blair, the present apparently began with the "atrocity" of September 11. For Osama Bin Laden, the present began eighty years ago, with the European partition of the Ottoman empire. For a man I heard on the radio last night, knowledge of the crusades, of the battles of Richard the Lionheart and Saladin (Salah-al-Din Yusef ibn-Ayyub), seemed usefully to illuminate the news on a day when the United States was using satellite-guided missiles to target the "air defense system" of Afghanistan. The parameters of these on-the-fly histories of the present define the horizons of the futures their tellers imagine.

My thanks to Mia Bay, Thomas Bender, Christopher Brown, Elizabeth Esch, Ada Ferrer, Robin D. G. Kelley, Maria Grazia Lolla, Molly Nolan, Ulfried Reichardt, Jeffrey T. Sammons, Nikhil Pal Singh, Stephanie Smallwood, Sinclair Thomson, Henry Yu, and participants in the 1997 and 1998 NYU/OAH conferences on "Internationalizing American History," the "New Perspectives on the Slave Trade" conference at Rutgers (November 21–22, 1997), and the Early American Seminar at Columbia University.

In light of this clash of history-tellings, it seems more important than ever to think hard about what we are saying when we use words like "empire" or "globalization," words that seem straightforward enough as accounts of history as presented by the metropolitan centers of the western world, but whose explanatory force begins to wane as they move outward and encounter other conflicting accounts of events – some of which are themselves imperial or global in outlook. This chapter represents an attempt to think about one element of the history of empire and global capital – the history of slavery – in relation to its own counter-histories. In relation, that is, to the alternative understandings and historical projects that were forcibly though never fully over-coded with the set of historical terms and definitions favored by European and American slaveholders.

Let me begin with a famous misunderstanding. As he later recounted it, when Olaudah Equiano first saw the white slave traders who eventually carried him to the West Indies, he thought they were "bad spirits" who were going to eat him. Awaiting shipment across an ocean he had never heard of, Equiano, like many of the slaves carried away by the traders, made sense of an absurd situation with a narrative of supernatural power.[1] When he sat down to write his narrative, of course, Equiano knew better than to believe that the white men on the coast were "spirits." By that time he called himself Gustavas Vassa, and, having spent ten years as a slave in the Americas and another twenty-three as a free man traveling throughout the world, Vassa could see what Equiano could not: that he was a descendant of the Lost Tribes of Israel, that his deliverance from heathenism marked him as a "*particular favorite of heaven*," and that the events in his life were effects not of the evil intentions of African spirits but of the Christian God's "Providence."[2] Vassa resolved the collision of contending versions of cause and consequence in his own mind through a narrative of progressive enlightenment: he had learned that it was God's Providence to steal him

[1] Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 53–4; see also narratives of Job Ben Solomon (p. 57) and Joseph Wright (p. 331) in Philip D. Curtin, ed., *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1967); "It was the Same as Pigs in a Sty: A Young African's Account of Life on a Slave Ship," in Robert Conrad, ed., *Children of God's Fire: A Documentary History of Black Slavery in Brazil* (Princeton University Press, 1984), 39; John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1680* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 161; Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 160, where it is argued that fears of being made into oil and eaten were common among slaves in the trade; and Charles Piot, "Of Slaves and the Gift: Kabre Sale of Kin and the Era of the Slave Trade," *Journal of African History*, 37 (1996), 38.

[2] Equiano, *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 33, 44.

away from Africa and carry him to London where he could spread the gospel of anti-slavery.

Vassa's time travel reminds us that global historical processes are understood through locally and historically specific narratives of time and history. And yet by invoking God's Providence, Vassa did not so much resolve the contention of these temporal narratives as superimpose one upon the other. Equiano's initial understanding of the situation of the coast was incorporated into the story of Vassa's eventual enlightenment. His African history was reframed according to the conventions of his European one.

Recent work in the humanities and social sciences has emphasized the darker side of the temporal conventions that have framed many western histories of the rest of the world: their role in underwriting global and racial hierarchy. Concepts like primitiveness, backwardness, and underdevelopment rank areas and people of the world on a seemingly naturalized timeline – their "present" is our "past" – and reframe the grubby real-time politics of colonial domination and exploitation as part of an orderly natural process of evolution toward modernity. More than a fixed standard of measure by which the progress of other processes can be measured, time figures in these works as, in the words of Johannes Fabian, a culturally constructed "dimension of power."[3]

Seen in this light, Equiano's anachronistic account of the situation on the coast raises a host of questions about the history of Atlantic slavery. What were the historical and temporal narratives through which Africans and Europeans understood what was happening on the coast, in the slave ships, and in the slave markets of the Americas? How did these various understandings shape the historical process in which they were joined? In what cultural institutions were these ideas of time rooted and through what practices were they sustained? What was the fate of African time in the Americas? What were the practical processes of temporal domination and resistance?

Taking time seriously suggests, at the very least, that the slave trade was not the same thing for Olaudah Equiano that it was for his captors. Most simply, this difference might be thought of spatially: "the slave trade"

[3] Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). See also Wai-Chee Dimock, *Empire for Liberty: Melville and the Poetics of Individualism* (Princeton University Press, 1989), 17–20; Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for the Indian Past?" *Representations*, 37 (1992), 1–26; Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995); Jonathan Crush, ed., *Power of Development* (London: Routledge, 1995); Reynaldo C. Ileto, "Outline of a Non-linear Emplotment in Philippine History," in Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd, eds., *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 98–131; Maria Josefina Saldana-Portillo, "Developmentalism's Irresistible Seduction – Rural Subjectivity under Sandinista Agricultural Policy," in ibid., 132–72.

did not begin or end in the same place for European traders, American buyers, and African slaves. The African slave trade, after all, had an eastern branch stretching to Asia as well as a western one which stretched to the Americas. Thus a historical account of the African experience of "the slave trade" necessarily has a different shape from an account of the European experience; indeed, properly speaking, "the slave trade" has not yet ended in some parts of Africa.[4] But even if we confine ourselves to the history of the Atlantic slave trade, the problem of boundaries persists. The journeys of the slaves who were shipped across the Atlantic Ocean often began in the interior of Africa, hundreds of miles from the coast where they eventually met the European slave traders, hundreds of miles away from where any European had ever been. Indeed, the First Passage was integral to the experience of those who eventually made the Middle Passage – to their understanding of what it was that was happening, their emotional condition going into the journey, and their ability to survive it.[5] And yet the First Passage is often elided from historians' accounts of "the slave trade," many of which focus solely on the Middle Passage, treating the trade as if it were something which began on the west coast of Africa with a sale to a European trader and ended in a port in the Americas with a sale to a colonial slaveholder. In so doing they have unwittingly embedded the historical perspective of a European slave trader – for it was only for the traders, not for the slaves or the buyers, that "the slave trade" happened only in the space between the coasts – in the way they have bounded their topics.[6]

The historical disjuncture marked by Equiano's version of the situation on the coast, however, was much deeper than a difference about beginnings

[4] Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades* (Cambridge University Press, 1990). My thanks to Mia Bay for her pointed comments about contemporary slave trading.

[5] See Joseph C. Miller, *The Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1988). See also Stephanie Ellen Smallwood, "Salt-Water Slaves: African Enslavement, Forced Migration, and Settlement in the Anglo-American World, 1660–1700," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1999, 15–128.

[6] See, for instance, James A. Rawley, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History* (New York: Norton, 1981), and David W. Galenson, *Traders, Planters, and Slaves: Market Behavior in Early English America* (Cambridge University Press, 1986). The unwitting prominence given to the traders' definition of the phenomenon in these and many other accounts has to do with the fact that they limit themselves to treating the trade as an economic and demographic phenomenon, and their sole reliance upon the records generated by the trade itself, an example of what the historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot has called "archival power," the material power that past actors have over their future through the records they create and keep. See Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 31–69.

and endings. It signals a fundamental difference between the versions of slavery which met in the Atlantic trade. To oversimplify: in Euro-America, slavery was, above all, a system of economic exploitation; in much of West Africa slavery was, above all, a system of political domination. In the Americas slaves were purchased in markets, held as legally alienable property, and put to work as laborers producing staple crops and some other goods which were generally shipped to Europe in exchange for money and more goods.[7] In much of precolonial West Africa, slavery began with capture: a warrior who would otherwise have been killed was allowed to live on as a socially dead slave. Though most slaves in West Africa were agricultural laborers, many were employed as soldiers, state ministers, and diplomats, and even as governing placeholders for princes and kings. Some slaves owned slaves.[8] As such, West African slavery has often been described as a system of "institutionalized marginality," one among a set of intertwined social relations – kinship, fealty, clientage, etc. – by which one group of people held "wealth in people" in another. Some slaves, over time and generation, through marriage and connection, were able to move out of slavery and into another status.[9]

Equiano's confusion on the coast reminds us that two versions of slavery – "aristocratic slavery" and "merchant slavery" in Claude Meillassoux's formulation – met in the African trade. Those who entered the slave trade had been extracted from histories of enslavement and slavery which sometimes had very little to do with the Atlantic slave trade in the first instance. Rather their story as they understood it was embedded in personal histories of isolation from protective kinship and patronage networks, in local histories

[7] Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944); Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624–1713* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

[8] Claude Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold*, trans. Alide Dasnoism (University of Chicago Press, 1991). Meillassoux does not share the view of precolonial African slavery described in the following sentences.

[9] Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, "African 'Slavery' as an Institution of Marginality," in Miers and Kopytoff, eds., *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1977), 3–69; Jonathon Glassman, "The Bondsman's New Clothes: The Contradictory Consciousness of Slave Resistance on the Swahili Coast," *Journal of African History*, 32 (1991), 277–312; Jane I. Guyer, "Wealth in People and Self-Realization in Equatorial Africa," *Man*, 28 (1993), 243–65; Jane I. Guyer, "Wealth in People, Wealth in Things," *Journal of African History*, 36 (1995), 83–90; Jane I. Guyer and Samuel M. Eno Belinga, "Wealth in People as Wealth in Knowledge: Accumulation and Competition in Equatorial Africa," *Journal of African History*, 36 (1995), 91–120; Piot, "Of Slaves and the Gift," 31–49.

of slave-producing ethnic conflicts, in political struggles, and wars which occurred hundreds of miles from the coast.[10]

This is not, however, to say that all African slavery was aristocratic slavery. The jagged boundary between aristocratic and merchant slavery, after all, often lay hundreds of miles into the interior of the African continent – hundreds of miles beyond where any European had ever been. Many of the slaves who were eventually shipped across the Atlantic had been captured, transported to the coast, and sold by people who were themselves Africans. The frontier between the two types of slavery was patrolled by an African supervisory elite who presumably knew the difference between them and made their living by transmuting the one into the other. And just as the protocols of merchant slavery stretched well into the interior of Africa, those of aristocratic slavery could stretch well into the journey across the Atlantic. To describe the people they transported to the Americas, the ship captains and clerks of the French West India Company used the word "*captif*" rather than the more familiar "*esclave*," a designation which apparently referred to the aristocratic slavery origins of those in the trade rather than their merchant slavery destinations.[11]

Corresponding to the different versions of slavery which met in the Atlantic trade were different ways of measuring the extent of slavery and marking its progress through time. The (aristocratic) slaveholding kings of precolonial Dahomey, for instance, represented their history as a story of continuous growth through military expansion and enslavement. Their history was measured in a yearly census – taken, historian Robin Law argues, as a means of "political propaganda . . . advertising the kingdom's successful growth" – and in mythical bags of pebbles kept in the castle which tracked the kingdom's expansion – one pebble per person – over time.[12] Other systems of aristocratic slavery had other measures. In precolonial equatorial

[10] See David Ross, "The Dahomean Middleman System, 1727–*c.* 1818," *Journal of African History*, 28 (1987), 357–75; Robin Law, "Slave-raiders and Middlemen; Monopolists and Free Traders: the Supply of Slaves for the Atlantic Trade in Dahomey, *c.* 1715–1850," *Journal of African History*, 30 (1989), 45–68; Miller, *The Way of Death*, 40–9, 108–28; Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery*, 237–323; and Steve Feierman, "Africa in History: The End of Universal Narratives," in Gyan Prakash, ed., *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements* (Princeton University Press, 1995), 40–65. From the other side of the Atlantic see Ira Berlin, "From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African American Society in Mainland North America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 53 (1996), 251–88; Smallwood, "Salt-Water Slaves," 60–128.

[11] Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth-Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), *passim*; see also Smallwood, "Salt-Water Slaves," 127.

[12] Robin Law, "History and Legitimacy: Aspects of the Use of the Past in Precolonial Dahomey," *History in Africa*, 15 (1988), 431–65; see also Ivor Wilkes, "On Mentally Mapping Greater Asante: A Study of Time and Motion," *Journal of African History*, 33 (1992), 175–90.

Africa, Jane Guyer and Samuel M. Eno Belinga have argued, political power and historical progress were measured as wealth-in-knowledge rather than wealth-in-people. Rather than accumulating numbers of people, the leaders of kingdoms like that of the Kongo enhanced their power by acquiring, through capture or purchase, people with different types of knowledge.[13]

The African and European merchant slave traders with whom these kingdoms sometimes did business had still other ways of measuring the trade and imagining the history they were making: sacred time measured against an injunction to enslave non-Islamic outsiders or propelled by the "providence" of a Christian God; political history imagined as the conquest of monopoly rights along the African coast and market position in the Americas; market time imagined in macroeconomic cycles of depression and speculation; the microeconomic time of the slave trader, progress tracked across the pages of the ship's log, days defined by the weather and ship's speed, nights marked by the number of slaves who died in the hold – time reckoned in dead bodies and lost profits.[14]

For many of the slaves who were packed into the holds of the Atlantic slave ships we can imagine still another set of temporal frames: those derived from local political histories of war and slave raiding; a cultural cycle of social death and rebirth, the ethnic and political disorientation of capture and separation eventually giving way to new identifications with "shipmates" and "fictive kin"; a biographical culmination of lifetime fears of capture, kidnapping, or simply of falling through the cracks in the protections of patronage and kinship; the metaphysical horror of a "middle" passage that some must have thought would never end and others might only have recognized as a trip across the "*kalunga*," the body of water which separated the world of the living from that of the dead – a flight from time measured in the gradual physical deterioration of the worldly body.[15] And so on: as many journeys on a single ship as there were ways to imagine the journey.

[13] Guyer and Belinga, "Wealth in People as Wealth in Knowledge," 108–19.

[14] See Galenson, *Traders, Planters, and Slaves*; Miller, *The Way of Death*; Ross, "The Dahomean Middleman System"; Law, "Slave-raiders and Middlemen"; for Islam as a "merchant ideology" see Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery*, 243–8; for the slave trade as "providence" see Samuel Ajayi Crowther, *The Narrative of Samuel Ajayi Crowther* in Curtin, ed., *Africa Remembered*, 299.

[15] See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge University Press,1982); T. C. McCaskie, "Time and the Calendar in Nineteenth-Century Asante: An Exploratory Essay," *History in Africa*, 7 (1980), 179–200; Joseph K. Adjaye, "Time, the Calendar, and History among the Akan of Ghana," *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 15 (1987), 71–100; Richard Price, *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); Price, *Alabi's World* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Smallwood, "Salt-water Slaves," 129–90; Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 147, 160.

Each of the narratives of slavery described above represents a dimension of that confrontation, a way of being in time – a temporality – according to which historical actors made sense of what it was that was happening (God's providence, the main chance, social death, etc.) and how they would respond at any given moment.[16] These temporalities were layered, intertwined, and mixed through the process of the slave trade, running sometimes concurrently, sometimes oppositionally, tangled together by a historical process that none of them alone sufficed to describe. None of this should be taken to suggest that societies are unified in their temporalities, still less that there was a simple division between a circular premodern African time and a linear modern European time.[17] Quite the contrary. Taking time seriously suggests that "the slave trade" was not a single thing that might be viewed from a European perspective and an African perspective (or a global perspective and a local perspective or a systemic perspective and an individual perspective) and then summed into a whole – the way one might walk around a physical object, measure every face, and create a three-dimensional diagram. Rather, like a web of unforeseen connections, the historical shape of the slave trade depended upon the point of entry. Time ran differently depending upon where you started the clock.

Lived history, I am suggesting, is produced out of the clash of contending temporalities. These temporalities, however, must be seen as being

[16] On temporality see Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotopes in the Novel: Notes Toward a Historical Poetics," in Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, eds., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84–258; Fernand Braudel, "Time, History, and the Social Sciences," in Fritz Stern, ed., *The Varieties of History, From Voltaire to the Present* (New York: Meriden Press, 1973), 403–29; the essays in John Bender and David E. Wellerby, *Chronotypes: The Construction of Time* (Stanford University Press, 1991), and Jonathan Boyarin, ed., *Remapping Memory: The Politics of Timespace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1994). See also E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism," *Past & Present*, 38 (1967), 56–97; Jacques LeGoff, "Merchant's Time and Church's Time in the Middle Ages" and "Labor Time in the 'Crisis' of the Fourteenth Century: From Medieval Time to Modern Time" in his *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (University of Chicago Press, 1980), 29–52; Michael O'Malley, *Keeping Watch: A History of American Time* (New York: Viking, 1990); Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1993); Mark M. Smith, *Mastered by the Clock: Time, Slavery, and Freedom in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); and Michael Hanchard, "Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora," *Public Culture*, 11 (1999), 245–68.

[17] For examples of cyclical time reckoning in Europe and linear time reckoning in Africa, see LeGoff, "Merchant's Time and Church's Time in the Middle Ages," 29–42; Akhil Gupta, "The Reincarnation of Souls and the Rebirth of Commodities: Representations of Time in 'East' and 'West,'" *Cultural Critique*, 22 (1992), 187–211; see also Gyan Prakash, "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Indian Historiography is Good to Think," in Nicholas B. Dirks, ed., *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1992), 353–88. For the idea that "Christianization introduced Africans to a sense of history moving linearly" (with which I am disagreeing) see Mullin, *Africa in America*, 275.

themselves historical. Rather than marking the difference between timeless cultural essences – African time and European time – they reflect the politically and historically embedded circuits through which they were transmitted. And because they were historically shaped and politically situated, it is not enough simply to set these temporalities side by side and split the difference. The history of time is one of continual contest: a history of arguments about history; of efforts to control events by controlling the terms of their description; of situated and sometimes violent acts of synchronization; of forcible re-education, resistant appropriation, and everyday negotiation; of conflicts in which time itself was a dimension of contest.

As a way of illustrating the historical politics of time-making, I'd like to use the space I have left to consider briefly two aspects of the temporal politics of American slavery: the temporal dimension of slaveholders' domination and the way that slave rebels tried to make history by imagining themselves into time. As recent observers have noted, one of the many things slaveholders thought they owned was their slaves' time; indeed, to outline the temporal claims that slaveholders made upon their slaves is to draw a multidimensional portrait of slavery itself. Slaveholders, of course, defined the shape of the day. Whether it ran from sunup to sundown, was defined by the tasks that had to be done by its close, or was measured out into job-scaled clock time, slavery's daily time was delineated by the master and often enforced by violence. Those who turned out late, quit early, worked too slowly, came up short, or failed to wait deferentially while the master attended to other things were cajoled, beaten, or starved into matching the daily rhythms through which their owners measured progress.[18] As well as quotidian time, slaveholders claimed calendar time as their own. They decided which days would be work days and which days would be holidays (or holy days); they enforced a cycle of planting, growing, and harvesting timed around their crop cycles and commercial plans; they fractured their slaves' lives and communities with their own cycle of yearly hires and calendar-termed financial obligations.[19] And slaveholders thought they

[18] For time and "work-discipline" in American slavery see Smith, *Mastered by the Clock*, esp. 93–128, and Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 172–94.

[19] For crop and commercial calendars see Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 147–72; Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 171; and Winthrop D. Jordan, *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek: An Inquiry into a Civil War Slave Conspiracy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 39–45, 213–14; for hiring see Charles B. Dew, *Band of Iron: Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 67–70; for credit relations see Richard Holcombe Kilbourne, Jr., *Debt, Investment, and Slaves: Credit Relations in East Feliciana Parish, Louisiana, 1825–1885* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 49–74.

owned their slaves' biographical time: they recorded their slaves' birthdays in accounts books that only they could see; they determined at what age their slaves would be started into the fields or set to a trade, when their slaves would be cajoled into reproduction, how many years they would be allowed to nurse the children they had, and how old they would have to be before retiring; they reproduced their own family legacies over time out of the broken pieces of slave families and communities divided by sale and estate settlement.[20] They infused their slaves' lives with their own time – through the daily process of slave discipline, the foreign, the young, and the resistant were forcibly inculcated with the nested temporal rhythms of their enslavement.

As with any dimension of power, however, time could be turned back upon its master. By working slowly, delaying conception, shamming sickness, or slipping off, slaves short-circuited their master's algorithms of temporal progress. By using the time at the end of the day to cultivate their own plots, sell their produce, or visit their family members, slaves wedged their own concerns into the interstices of their enslavement.[21] By naming their children after the day of their birth (traditional among Gold Coast slaves) or giving them the names of ancestors, they reconstituted fractured links to their pasts and their families.[22] By adhering to the protocols of living with ancestors present in time and space, obeying the demands of moments that were themselves portentous of the success or failure of any action undertaken, and observing the injunctions and respecting the power of *obeah* men and conjurers, by finding time within the day to put down a rug, face Mecca, and pray, or by keeping the Sabbath for the Christian God, they bent themselves to systems of temporal discipline outside their slavery.[23]

The temporal conflicts between slaves and slaveholders were resolved in a series of unstable stalemates made at the scale of everyday life.

[20] See Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985) 91–118; da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*, 65–8, 117; Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 78–116.

[21] Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton University Press, 1987), 15–67; White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 104–10; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 48–50, 153–5, 183–4, 191–3, 359–76; and da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*, 75–85, 115–18.

[22] Adjaye, "Time, the Calendar, and History among the Akan of Ghana," 71–95; Smallwood, "Salt-water Slaves", 317–19; Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 185–201.

[23] Sobel, *The World They Made Together*, 171–229; Mullin, *Africa in America*, 175–84, 201–2; Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 2–3, 55–6, 59, 249, 283–90; da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*, 176–7, 271.

Through acts of passive resistance like slowing down and of active defiance like running away, slaves were able to gain acceptance – sometimes explicit, sometimes tacit – of their right to use a portion of the day for visiting, worshiping, provisioning, or simply resting.[24] The boundaries of the possible, however, were hedged by slaveholders' willingness to enforce their own ideas of time through force. In fact, by attributing their slaves' failure to work as hard, as eagerly, or as long as they wanted to savagery, primitivism, and biological lassitude, slaveholders invested their own everyday politics of labor discipline with the force of natural history.[25] On the surface, at least, enslaved Africans were being dragged into their masters' history, forced into temporal frames of reference defined by slavery and race.

Occasionally, however, these everyday conflicts gave way to the broader, historical acts of resistance that historians have called slave revolts. These events have generally been explained according to one of two grand narratives of African-American history: the story of how black slavery was superseded by "freedom" or the story of how Africans became African-Americans. The first narrative has emphasized the commonality of the oppressions visited upon enslaved people over the differences between them and treated events disparate in time and space – the maroon wars in Jamaica (1690–1740, 1795–6) and Nat Turner's rebellion in Virginia (1831), for example – as similar phenomena, part, at bottom, of the same broad history of the attempt of enslaved people to gain their freedom.[26] The second narrative has framed the history of these events as part of a broader story of acculturation – the transformation of Africans into African-Americans – and used the cultural content of New World slave revolts to measure the progress of this ongoing transformation at a series of stops along the way.[27]

[24] Ira Berlin, *Many Thousand Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2–6; da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*, 61–80.

[25] See, for instance, Samuel Cartwright, "Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race," *DeBow's Review*, 11 (1851), 64–9, 212–13, 331–7; "Philosophy of the Negro Constitution," *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal*, 9 (1852), 195–208; and "Ethnology of the Negro of Prognathous Race," *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal*, 15 (1858), 149–63. For the idea that ideas of historical alterity can develop out of everyday conflicts over time discipline see Frederick Cooper, "Colonizing Time: Work Rhythms and Labor Conflict in Colonial Mombasa," in Dirks, ed., *Colonialism and Culture*, 209–45, and Keletso E. Atkins, *The Moon is Dead! Give Us Our Money! The Cultural Origins of an African Work Ethic, Natal, South Africa, 1843–1900* (London: Heineman Currey, 1993); Smith, *Mastered by the Clock*, 132.

[26] See, for instance, Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 6th edn (New York: International Publications, 1969); Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the New World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979); and Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

[27] See, for instance, Mullin, *Africa in America*, and Douglas Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

There is no doubt that both of these explanatory paradigms are instructive: there were, as I have argued above, certain material and ideological features common to merchant slavery that were shared by all of the Atlantic slave societies; and African populations in the New World *did* become African-American, a change that *was* reflected in their collective lives and their revolts.

And yet neither of these stories fully exhausts the historical content of the events they seek to explain. The set of explanations which emphasizes the similarities between slave rebels and their sequential struggle toward "freedom" has glossed over very real differences (over space and time) in the ideologies which defined the purposes of collective revolt, leaving a host of questions: if the Jamaican maroon chieftain Cudjoe had met the Christian millenarian Nat Turner, what would they have said to one another? Would Cudjoe have tried to capture Turner and return him to his owner in order to protect his own community from slaveholders' reprisals? Would Turner have tried to convert Cudjoe or struck him down with all of the force of the Christian millennium? Nor, however, can the other set of (culturalist) accounts fully contain the complex history of these events. They cannot, for instance, explain why New World slave rebels were almost exclusively male nor why those conspirators were so often betrayed by their fellow slaves. They cannot, that is, explain why women or non-conspirators, who were presumably as African or African-American as their rebellious counterparts at any given moment in time, were not visible on the leading edge of what historians have taken to be their history.[28]

In fact, scarcely concealed in the contrasting outlines of these separate sets of explanations is a single story of progress: the metanarrative of racial liberalism – the story of black freedom and racial acculturation, of how black slaves became American citizens.[29] In treating slave revolts as a way to take the temperature of a historical process with a foreordained outcome, historians have often overlooked the way that the slaves themselves imagined the history that they were making – the arguments and politics, the historical process, through which they imagined themselves into time.[30]

[28] For these points see James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730–1810* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 87–116.

[29] For "liberal developmentalism" as a historical metanarrative immanent in the work of Marxist and other scholars see Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History."

[30] The best account of a slave revolt as a process of political organization remain C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd edn (New York: Vintage, 1963). Notable recent examples, to my way of thinking, are Jordan, *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek*, da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*, and Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords*. For the argument that I'm making – that the realm of "politics" is where historical subjectivities are argued

Historians, that is, have reworked the history of the rebels who were willing to risk their lives to escape from American history into a part of that history.

Excavating the internal politics of slave conspiracies from an archival record produced by slaveholders requires careful reading. The most detailed accounts we have of the way that slaves talked to one another about conspiracy and rebellion come from the records of the trials that followed the discovery of their plans: they are accounts shaped by slaveholders' fevered projections of their slaves' unfathomed purposes, by the terror of slaves whose lives depended upon the extent to which their confessions matched the expectations of their inquisitors, and by the torture riven so deeply into the archival record of Southern "justice." And yet, as anyone who has ever told a lie can tell you, the best way to make a story seem true is to build it out of pieces of the truth. Read against the grain, the conspiracy probes provide a sense of what slaves knew of the nature of slave conspiracies – where they happened, who was involved and what their plans were, and, most importantly for our purposes here, what kinds of reasons slaves gave to one another as they argued about what they should do, to whom, and when. If we wish to understand the practical complexity and political philosophy of New World slave conspiracies, the trial records are our best source.[31]

The most elementary point that emerges from those records is that talk about subversive ideas and rebellious plans had to occur off the grid of everyday life: at the margins of a landscape defined by slavery and in the interstices of weeks, days, and even hours structured by slaveholders' demands. Plans for Gabriel's revolt (1800) in Virginia, for example, were apparently discussed at riverside taverns on the James and at revival meetings and picnics in the countryside beyond the eyes of white Richmond, and spread by mobile skilled slaves, men with abroad marriages that gave them an excuse to travel between plantations, and a network of enslaved rivermen. The Demerara revolt (1823) in British Guyana was plotted at slave-led Sunday school meetings sponsored by the London Missionary Society,

over and articulated – see Stuart Hall, "The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism among the Theorists," in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, ed., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 35–57.

[31] For the inability of slaveholders (and subsequent historians) to imagine their slaves' motivations see Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 70–107; for torture and testimony see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), and Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); for examples of historians' efforts to read terror-shaped sources against the grain see Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), and Jordan, *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek*.

hushed encounters between slaves whose work took them to town, and in the large uncultivated spaces between plantations; news was spread through an interlocking set of connections between kin networks, mobile skilled and hired slaves, churchgoing slaves, and, apparently, the colony's large population of Coramantee slaves.[32]

The discussions that traveled this hybrid circuitry reflect the difficulty of the organizational task facing slave conspirators. Activating the existing circuitry of everyday life – family, community, and ethnicity – with the historical current of revolt was dangerous, and conspirators took a great deal of care to do it safely. In relating the shape of a conversation between two of the conspirators in Gabriel's Revolt, Douglas Egerton captures the tentative exchange of signs of dissatisfaction which could turn commiseration about the quotidian rigors of slavery into conspiracy. Egerton relates that the conversation in which Ben Woolfolk recruited King began with what must have been a commonplace discussion of King's dissatisfaction with the harsh discipline imposed by a new master. Woolfolk responded to King's comments with a series of non-sequiturs that must have put King on the alert that something important was about to happen – "Are you a true man?" and "Can you keep an important secret?" – and when King didn't shirk from the direction conversation was taking, Woolfolk escalated it to the point of conspiracy: "the Negroes are about to rise and fight the white people for our freedom."[33] In Denmark Vesey's Charleston (1822), the signal that subversive speech was about to begin seems to have been a question about "the news." Over and over again in the Vesey trial transcripts, the phrase "he asked me the news" is followed by accounts of the type of back-and-forth escalation which characterized the conversation between Ben Woolfolk and King. Other times, however, the ostensibly innocuous inquiry was shortly followed by answers which were not so much direct responses as attempts to end the conversation entirely: "I replied I don't know" or "I said I could not answer" or "I begged him to stop it" or "I told him I did not understand such talk and stopped the conversation."[34] The signs that conspiratorial speech was beginning were apparently well known among Charleston slaves and viewed as being so explosive that some slaves wouldn't listen any further.

[32] Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*, 29, 53–65, 119–123; Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords*, 61–70; da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*, 190–6.

[33] Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*, 56–7. For more on the conversational protocol of plotting a conspiracy see Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 71–6.

[34] Lionel Kennedy and Thomas Parker, eds., *An Official Report of the Trials of Sundry Negroes Charged with an Attempt to Raise an Insurrection in the State of South Carolina* (Charleston, 1822), 45, 50, 62, 68.

Indeed, the records of the trials which followed New World slave conspiracies are full of objections, of the arguments of slaves who tried to get the conspirators to slow down, leave off, or just leave them alone – of slaves who took a different view of the moment in time. Some were simply afraid to die: "I said I did not want death to take me yet and I quit him," remembered Patrick of a conversation with a man who tried to recruit him on the street. Some framed their objections in strictly pragmatic terms, saying they would join once it was apparent that the rebellion was going to succeed, but not before. Some felt bound by family obligations; asked if he would join Vesey's army, Bram responded, "I was so bound to my father that I could not go without his leave." Others clung to notions of justice and moral conduct that were a familiar feature of their everyday lives but were out of step with the plans of the conspirators. Acts that were axiomatic if you accepted Vesey's definition of the relation between master and slave as a state of "war," for instance, were murder if you did not. Many of those present at a meeting where Vesey outlined his plans remembered that, in the words of Jesse, "some said they thought that it was cruel to kill the ministers and the women and the children."[35] Still others remained divided from the rebels by local, historical, or traditional antagonisms: the Demerara revolt was apparently shot through with the suspicion that field slaves had of their enslaved drivers, that Creoles had of Africans, that the members of one chapel had of the members of another, and that many of those who revolted had of Muslims.

And, finally, there were those who were certain that the time just was not right. In Demerara, Daniel advised conspirators who approached him for help that they should wait for freedom rather than trying to seize it: if it was "a thing ordained by the Almighty," it would come in time. In the aftermath of Gabriel's rebellion, Ben Woolfolk reported that he had advised his fellows to postpone their plans because "I had heard that in the days of old, when the Israelites were in Servitude to King Pharoah, they were taken from him by the Power of God – and were carried away by Moses – God blessed them with an angel to go with him, but that I could see nothing of the kind in these days."[36] Framed as a matter of political organization, and viewed in light of the objections of reluctant slaves, the magnitude of the achievement of slave rebels in the New World is brought into sharper relief. Their task was nothing less than to compress the various scales of

[35] Edward A. Pearson, ed., *Designs against Charleston: The Trial Record of the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy of 1822* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 172, 195; Kennedy and Parker, eds., *An Official Report*, 59, 68, 90.

[36] Da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*, 195, 186; Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords*, 76–7.

time running through the everyday life of slavery – the biographical, tribal, metaphysical, and other definitions of self and situation evident in the objections of these reluctant conspirators – into the focused immediacy of a single shared imperative.

Given the extraordinary complexity of the layered temporalities evident in the objections of non-conspirators, it took feats of extraordinary imagination (and sometimes intimidation) to synchronize slaves into a shared account of what was happening and what was to be done about it. Indeed, the shared accounts of time and history for which enslaved conspirators risked their lives and by which subsequent historians have measured their progress along the path from African to American were as much effects as they were causes of the process of revolt. When the Bambara leaders of the Natchez uprising (1731) or the Kongolese warriors at Stono (1739) or the Coramantee rebels in Jamaica (1760), for example, prepared themselves for war through the sacred practices of their homelands, they were making an argument rather than proceeding according to a timeless cultural script known and readily accepted by all of their fellow slaves. As they drummed, danced, swore oaths, assigned ranks, and made plans to enslave rival groups, they were, through ritual practice at the scale of everyday life, giving a moment in time an identifiable historical shape: that of a war.[37] Not only that, they were doing so in a specifically male ritual idiom which underwrote the authority of male warriors to tell everybody else what to do. They were making a politically situated claim on the right to determine the proper correct collective response: this is a war and we are in charge.[38] New World slave rebels were making history by re-making time.

The history slave conspirators tried to make changed shape over time. In Haiti (1791–1804) Toussaint L'Ouverture joined his black followers to the revolution in the rights of man that was re-making the Atlantic world.[39] Gabriel in Virginia and Denmark Vesey in South Carolina imagined their own histories as continuation of the revolution begun in Haiti. Vesey, in fact, courted uncertain slaves by reading to them from the newspapers about the freedoms of Haitian blacks, advertising that he had written to the leaders of the black republic requesting military support, and promising

[37] Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 97–118; John K. Thornton, "African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion," *The American Historical Review*, 96 (October 1991), 1101–13; Mullin, *Africa in America*, 40–2. See also Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords*, 11.

[38] On sex-specific societies see Francesca Declich, "'Gendered Narratives,' History, and Identity: Two Centuries along the Juba River among the Zigula and Shamabra," *History in Africa*, 22 (1995), 93–122, and Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 94–102.

[39] See James, *The Black Jacobins*. James interestingly and continually (see pages 108, 117, 125, 146, and 394) downplays evidence of "African" definitions of the rebellion in Haiti.

that, in the words of two of the conspirators, "Santo Domingo and Africa will help us to get our liberty" by sending ships to carry them to Haiti where "they would receive and protect them."[40] Effectively, Vesey was inviting his co-conspirators to join him in fighting their way out of the history of slavery and into that of a new Black Atlantic, or, as he put it, the "war" between the "blacks" and the "whites." In Southampton County, Virginia, Nat Turner followed a series of signs – marks on his own head and breast from the time of his birth, the voice of the Holy Spirit, drops of blood on the corn in the fields and hieroglyphs on the leaves in the woods, a crashing thunder in the sky in April 1828, and a total eclipse of the sun in February 1831 – to the millennial recognition that "the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first."[41] Rather than tracing out points along a foreordained path of historical development, these rebels were investing their everyday lives with temporal purpose – cracking moments open and giving them the shape of imperatives.[42]

In practice, none of these versions of cause and consequence had the simplicity of a pure form; the most successful of the nineteenth-century conspirators, at least, were those who could loosely gather a number of alternative accounts of what exactly it was that was happening into the common purpose of making whatever it was happen. Gabriel, whom the historian Douglas Egerton has identified as a "black Jacobin" seeking to pull Virginia into the history of black liberation that had begun in Haiti, was able to abide, if not himself articulate, other versions of the struggle. When challenged about his choice of the day upon which the slaves were to rise in arms, Gabriel turned to his brother, Martin, who settled the question in terms that were at once prophetic, pragmatic, and deeply personal: "There was this expression in the Bible – delay breeds danger . . . the soldiers were discharged, and the Arms all put away – there was no patrolling . . . and before he would any longer bear what he had borne he would turn out and fight with a stick." And when challenged again: "I read in my Bible where God says, if we will worship him, we should have peace in all our

[40] Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, 95; Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords*, 257–66; Kennedy and Parker, eds., *An Official Report*, 28, 42, 59, 68 (quotations on 42 and 59). See also Julius S. Scott, "Afro-American Sailors and the International Communication Network: The Case of Newport Bowers," in Colin Howell and Richard Twomey, eds., *Jack Tar in History: Essays in Maritime History* (Fredericton, New Brunswick: Acadiensis Press, 1991), 11–36.

[41] Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed., *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1996), 46–8.

[42] Walter Benjamin puts it this way: "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain the image of the past which unexpectedly appears to a man singled out by history at a moment of danger." Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 255.

Lands, five of you shall conquer a hundred, and a hundred, a thousand of our enemies."[43]

Vesey, whose own ideology apparently synthesized the divided tribal legacies of South Carolina slaves into a revolutionary call for the liberation of a new historical subject, "the blacks," nevertheless organized some of his men into an "Ebo company" and a "Gullah company," the latter led by the conjurer "Gullah" Jack Pritchard.[44] Indeed, Vesey seems to have been remarkable for the number of temporal scales he could invoke in making the argument that the time for armed rising had come – or, even, in answering a single question. Among those who were present when Vesey was asked whether ministers, women, and children should be killed, there were slaves who recalled at least three versions of temporal scale of his response. "He then read in the Bible where God commanded, that all should be cut off, both men, women, and children, and said, he believed, it was no sin for us to do so, for the lord had commanded us to do it," remembered Rolla. "He thought it was for our safety not to spare one white skin alive, for this was the plan they pursued in St. Domingo," remembered Jesse. "Smart asked him if you were going to kill the women and children – Denmark answered what was the use of killing the louse and leaving the nit – Smart said, my God, what a sin – Vesey told Smart he had not a man's heart, told Smart that he was a friend to Buckra," read Smart Anderson's account of the meeting.[45]

Even Nat Turner was not above relying on the intricate complexities of psychological domination which characterized the daily life of slavery to help him clear the path for God's unfolding Providence – "Jack, I knew, was only a tool in the hands of Hark," he said of one of the slaves whom he entrusted with his plans.[46] Working their way up and down scales of time – metaphysical, political, local, psychological – the theorists of New World slave conspiracies were able to urge any number of historical agents – a tribal warrior, a Christian soldier, a liberal individual, a black man – to anneal themselves to the gathered strength of a single struggle.

When, in the aftermath of events, slaveholders tried to figure out what had caused the uprisings that had convulsed their societies, slaveholders restaged them as effects of their own agency rather than that of their slaves: *they* had allowed their slaves too much liberty (or not enough); *they* had

[43] Sidbury, 76–7. Sidbury identifies the source for Martin's second statement as Leviticus 26:6–8.

[44] For the racial ideology and tribal organization of the Vesey conspiracy see Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 1–3.

[45] Kennedy and Parker, eds., *An Official Report*, 46, 59, 90.

[46] Greenberg, ed., *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 48.

given their slaves too much access to Christianity (or not enough); *they* had provided for too few patrols or allowed too many black seamen or poor whites or Frenchmen or missionaries or steam doctors or Yankee peddlers to come into contact with their slaves. They told themselves stories about what happened that emphasized their own agency and reworked the unfathomed aspirations of their slaves, whether they were African, Jacobin, or millenarian, into a part of history as they recognized it – the ongoing history of New World slavery.[47]

As I have argued, historians have often taken the slaveholders at their word and written these events into the history of American slavery as accounts of a labor force in arms. But look again and these conspiracies look like battle plans in a war for control of the New World, efforts to force Euro-Americans into another place in time: into the well-grooved tribal histories of African wars to determine who would be slave and who would be master; the history of the Black Atlantic that had begun in Haiti with the idea that freedom (rather than mastery) was the opposite of slavery; or the history of the Christian millennium when the first would be last and the last would be first. The seemingly neutral phrase "slave revolt" provides less a description of these events than it does an account of one side (the winning side) of a bloody conflict which was itself characterized by the clash of alternative understandings of time and history – of exactly what it was that was at stake in the Americas.

[47] See Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 70–107.