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Possible Pasts: Some Speculations on Time, Temporality, and the History of Atlantic Slavery*

WALTER JOHNSON

ABSTRACT

Picking up on recent work in the social sciences and humanities which has emphasized the culturally constructed character of time, this article considers the temporal dimensions of the Atlantic slave trade and New World slavery. The paper uses a survey of the various versions of time and history running through the slave trade to argue that historical struggles are shaped by the way that historical actors imagine themselves into time. As a way of illustrating the real-time politics of imagining and making a historical moment, the paper considers the temporal dimensions of domination and resistance in New World slavery: slaves and slaveholders, it argues, were each trying to drag the other into another place in time. The article concludes with a brief consideration of the implications of its method for the contemporary practice of scholarly history writing.

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 an-

* My thanks to Mia Bay, Thomas Bender, Chris Brown, 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 (21-22 November 1997), and the Early American Seminar at Columbia University.

¹ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995) 53-54. See also narratives of Job Ben Solomon (57) and Joseph Wright (331) in Philip D. Curtin, ed., *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1967); “It Was the Same as Pigs in a Sty: A Young African's Account of Life on a Slave Ship,” *Children of God's Fire: A Documentary History of Black Slavery in Brazil*, ed. Robert Conrad (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1984) 39; John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1680* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) 161; and Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1998) 160, where it is argued that fears of being made into oil and eaten were common among slaves in the trade; Charles Piot, “Of Slaves and the Gift: Kabre Sale of Kin and the Era of the Slave Trade,” *Journal of African History* 37 (1996): 31-49; 38.

other twenty-three as a free man traveling throughout the world, Vassa could see what Equiano could not: that he was a descendent 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 through God’s Providence he had been stolen away from Africa and carried to London, where he could spread the gospel of antislavery.

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. In so doing, he drew upon the rhetorical force of an ongoing history of metropolitan question-begging about colonial time to bolster his antislavery argument—he used the temporal conventions of European Christianity to oppose himself to European history. Recent work in the humanities and social sciences has emphasized the darker side of narratives of temporal progress: their role in underwriting global and racial hierarchy. Western 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, in the words of Johannes Fabian, as 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” did not begin or end in the same place for European traders, American buyers, and African slaves. The African slave trade, after

² Equiano 33, 44.

³ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia UP, 1983). See also Wai-Chee Dimock, *Empire for Liberty: Melville and the Poetics of Individualism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 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,” *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, ed. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993) 98-131; María Josephina Saldaña-Portillo, “Developmentalism’s Irresistible Seduction: Rural Subjectivity under Sandinista Agricultural Policy,” *The Politics of Culture*, ed. Lowe and Lloyd 132-72.

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 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 In re-imagining the trade through statistics generated from the records generated by the trade itself, however, some historians have treated 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 a historical perspective—that of a European slave trader—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 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 pre-colonial 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

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

⁵ See, especially, Joseph C. Miller, *The Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730-1830* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1988). Miller makes the further point that mortality in the First Passage was tremendous and must be considered alongside exportation if the demographic impact of the slave trade in Africa is to be fully reckoned.

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: Cambridge UP, 1986).

⁷ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1944); Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (New York: Norton, 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 UP, 1983).

soldiers, state ministers and diplomats, and even as governing placeholders for princes and kings. Some slaves owned slaves themselves.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, then, 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: personal histories of isolation from protective kinship and patronage networks; local histories of slave-producing ethnic conflicts; 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

⁸ Claude Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold*, trans. Alide Dasnoism (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991). Meillassoux does not share the view of pre-colonial African slavery described in the following sentences.

⁹ Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, “African ‘Slavery’ as an Institution of Marginality,” *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Miers and Kopytoff (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 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 31-49.

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 40-49, 108-28; Meillassoux 237-323; and, from the other side of the Atlantic, 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.

¹¹ Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1992), *passim*.

Corresponding to the different versions of slavery which met in the Atlantic trade—to the varying answers to the question “What is slavery?” threading through the journey of a single shipment of slaves—were different ways of measuring the extent of slavery and marking its progress through time. The (aristocratic) slaveholding kings of pre-colonial 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 pre-colonial equatorial 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 re-birth, 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: there were as many journeys on a single ship as there were ways to imagine the journey.

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.

¹³ Guyer and Belinga 108-19.

¹⁴ See Galenson; Miller; Ross; Law, *Slave-Raiders and Middlemen*. For Islam as a “merchant ideology,” see Meillassoux 243-48; for the slave trade as “providence,” see Samuel Ajayi Crowther, *The Narrative of Samuel Ajayi Crowther, Africa Remembered*, ed. Curtin 299.

¹⁵ See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death, A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 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,

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 imagined their response to a given moment.¹⁶ These temporalities were layered, intertwined, and mixed through the process of the slave trade, sometimes running 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 pre-modern 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 not the product of time, as the developmental and unilinear teleologies hidden within terms like ‘chattel slavery’ and ‘empire’ suggest, but of temporality: of situated acts of imagining time and responding accordingly. These

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, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983); and Richard Price, *Alabi's World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990); Stephanie Smallwood, paper delivered at “New Perspectives on the Slave Trade,” conference at Rutgers University, 21 November 1997; Gomez 147, 160.

¹⁶ On temporality, see Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and Chronotopes in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics,” *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981) 84-258; Fernand Braudel, “Time, History, and the Social Sciences,” *The Varieties of History, from Voltaire to the Present* ed. Fritz Stern (New York: Vintage Books, 1973) 403-29; the essays in John Bender and David E. Wellbery, eds., *Chronotypes: The Construction of Time* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1991); and Jonathan Boyarin, ed., *Remapping Memory: The Politics of Timespace* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994). See also Edward P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past and 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,” *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 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: Cambridge UP, 1993); and Mark M. Smith, *Mastered by the Clock: Time, Slavery, and Freedom in the American South* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1997).

¹⁷ European markets, after all, inscribe time in cycles, as does the sacred time of Christianity—the cycle of death and rebirth yearly recapitulated through the ritual calendar. There are plenty of examples of linear time reckoning in “pre-modern” African history: work oriented around the accomplishment of specific tasks and the stone-accumulating censuses of the Dahomean kings being only the most obvious. See, generally, LeGoff 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,” *Colonialism and Culture*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992) 353-88. For the idea that “Christianization introduced Africans to a sense of history moving linearly” (with which I am disagreeing), see Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736-1831* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1992) 275.

temporalities, however, must be seen as being 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 to simply 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 would like 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 multi-dimensional portrait of slavery itself. Slaveholders, of course, defined the shape of the day. Whether it ran from sunup to sundown, whether it 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 up 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 owned their slaves' biographical time: they recorded their slaves' birthdays in account 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 proc-

¹⁸ For time and "work-discipline" in American slavery, see Smith, esp. 93-128; and Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P) 172-94.

¹⁹ For crop and commercial calendars see Morgan 147-72; and Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994) 171. For hiring, see Charles B. Dew, *Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge* (New York: 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: U of Alabama P, 1995) 49-74.

²⁰ See Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon, 1976); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*

ess 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 by a series of running compromises made at the scale of everyday life. 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 temporal domination with the force of natural history. Time became an important medium for the elaboration of white-supremacist ideas about racial difference and hierarchy.²⁵ On the surface, at least, slaves were being dragged into their masters' history, forced into temporal frames of reference defined by slavery and race.

(New York: Norton, 1985) 91-118; da Costa 65-68, 117; Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999) chap. 3.

²¹ Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1987) 15-67; White 104-10; Morgan 48-50, 153-55, 183-84, 191-93, 359-76; and da Costa 75-85, 115-18.

²² Adjaye 71-95; Gutman 185-201.

²³ Sobel 171-229; Price 21; Mullin 175-84, 201-202; Gomez 2-3, 55-56, 59, 249, 283-90; da Costa 176-77, 271.

²⁴ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousand Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998) 2-6; da Costa 61-80.

²⁵ See, for instance, Samuel Cartwright, "Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race," *De-Bow's Review* 11 (1851): 64-69, 212-13, 331-37; "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 argument 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," *Colonialism and Culture*, ed. Dirks 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, 1993); Smith 132.

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 has treated events disparate in time and space—the maroon wars in Jamaica (1690-1740, 1795-1796) and Nat Turner’s Rebellion in Virginia (1831), for example—as similar phenomena, 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 as a series of stops along the way.²⁷ 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 the forms of their collective revolt.

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 to go begging—if the Jamaican maroon chieftain Cudjoe had met the Christian millennialist Nat Turner, what would they have said to one another? Would Cudjoe have tried to enslave Turner? Would Turner have tried to convert Cudjoe? 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 the progress of a historical process

²⁶ See, for instance, Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 6th ed. (New York: International Publishers, 1996); Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the New World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1979); and Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1982).

²⁷ See, for instance, Mullin and Douglas Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1993).

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

²⁹ For “liberal developmentalism” as a historical metanarrative, see Chakrabarty.

with a foreordained outcome, historians have often overlooked the way the slaves themselves imagined the history that they were making—the arguments and politics, the historical process through which they imagined themselves into time.

Rather than as benchmarks along a historical metanarrative of liberty and acculturation, New World slave revolts should be considered as episodes in the real-time politics of collective action.³⁰ Considered as feats of political organization, slave revolts were quite complex—shaped both by the immediate local circumstances of slavery in a particular region and through overlapping networks of existing connections among the slaves. Plans for Gabriel's Revolt (1800) in Virginia, for example, were 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, 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.³¹

The discussions that traveled along this hybrid circuitry reflect the difficulty of the organizational task facing slave conspirators. Charging 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 ("Are you a true man?" and "Can you keep an important secret?") that must have put King on the alert that something important was about to happen, and when King did not shirk from the direction conversation was taking, Woolfolk escalated it to the point of conspiracy: "[T]he Negroes are about to rise and fight the white people for our freedom."³² 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

³⁰ The best account of a slave revolt as a process of political organization remains C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1963). Notable recent examples, in my opinion, are da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*, and Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords*. For the argument that I am making—that the realm of "politics" is where historical subjectivities are argued over and articulated—see Stuart Hall, "The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism among the Theorists," ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988) 35-57.

³¹ Egerton 29, 53-65, 119-23; Sidbury 61-70; da Costa 190-96.

³² Egerton 56-57. For more on the conversational protocol of plotting a conspiracy, see Johnson, chap. 2.

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.”³³ The signs that conspiratorial speech was beginning were apparently well-known among Charleston slaves and viewed as being so explosive that some slaves would not listen any further.

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 one accepted Vesey’s definition of the relation between master and slave as a state of “war,” for instance, were murder if one did not accept that definition. 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.”³⁴ Still others remained divided from the rebels by local, historical, or traditional antagonisms. The Demerara revolt, for instance, was apparently shot through with suspicion: between field slaves and their enslaved drivers, between Creoles and Africans, between members of one chapel and members of another, and between many of those who revolted and the Muslims. 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

³³ Edward A. Pearson, ed., *Designs against Charleston: The Trial Record of the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy of 1822* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1999) 179, 185, 191, 203-204. Of course, those who testified, with their lives hanging in the balance, that they had demurred at the first mention of “the news” had good reason to lie. But even if they were lying, the shared structure of their recountings—the conversational feint of asking about “the news” followed by the suggestion that the conversation be immediately terminated—seems to me to reflect what must have been a shared protocol for regulating the flow of seditious speech.

³⁴ *Designs against Charleston*, ed. Pearson 195, 204, 172, 186, 190, 217. A similar boundary between acts of war and murder was invoked by Harry Haig, an active participant in the Vesey conspiracy who had nevertheless refused an order from Jack Pritchard to poison his master’s pump (196): “I refused to poison as I considered that murder and God would not pardon me ‘twas not like fair fighting.”

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.”³⁵ Framed as a matter of political organization, and viewed in light of the objections of reluctant slaves, the magnitude of the task of slave rebels in the New World becomes clearer. Their task was to compress the various scales of time running through the everyday life of slavery—biographical, tribal, metaphysical, etc.—into the focused immediacy of a single revolutionary imperative.

The notions of historical subjectivity that defined the revolts, the ways that slave rebels imagined themselves into time, must then be viewed as effects as much as causes of the process of revolt. Given the extraordinary complexity of the layered temporalities which characterized their lives, 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. 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 war.³⁶ 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 appropriate collective response: ‘This is a war and we are in charge.’³⁷ New World slave rebels were making history by re-making time.

Over time, the history that slave conspirators tried to make changed shape. In Haiti (1791-1804), Toussaint L'Ouverture joined his black followers to the revolution in human rights that was re-making the Atlantic World.³⁸ Gabriel in Virginia and Denmark Vesey in South Carolina imagined their own histories as continuation of the one begun in Haiti. Vesey, in fact, courted uncertain rebels 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 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.”³⁹ Effectively, Vesey was inviting his co-conspirators to join him in fight-

³⁵ Da Costa 195, 186; Sidbury 76-77.

³⁶ Gwendolyn Midlo Hall 97-118; John K. Thornton, “African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion,” *The American Historical Review* 96 (October 1991): 1101-13; Mullin, *Africa in America* 40-42. See also Sidbury 11.

³⁷ 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 94-102.

³⁸ See James. James interestingly and continually (see pp. 108, 117, 125, 146, and 394) downplays evidence of “African” definitions of the rebellion in Haiti.

³⁹ Genovese 95; Sidbury 257-66; *Designs against Charleston*, ed. Pearson 3, 20, 86, 118, 169, 177, 190, 203, 214 (quotations on 169 and 190).

ing their way out of the history of slavery and into that of the 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 of 1828, and a total eclipse of the sun in February of 1831—to the millennial recognition that “the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first.”⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹

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 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, he said: “I read in my Bible where God says, if we will worship him, we should have peace in all our Lands, five of you shall conquer a hundred, and a hundred, a thousand of our enemies.”⁴² Vesey, whose ideology 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.⁴³

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, 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

⁴⁰ *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, ed. Kenneth S. Greenberg (New York: Bedford Books, 1996) 46–48.

⁴¹ 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, “These on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations* [New York: Schocken Books, 1968] 255).

⁴² Sidbury 76–77. Sidbury identifies the source for Martin’s second statement as Leviticus 26: 6–8.

⁴³ For the racial ideology and tribal organization of the Vesey conspiracy, see Gomez 1–3.

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.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ 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, a psychological subject—to anneal themselves to the gathered strength of a single struggle.

On the slaveholders’ side, those struggles were called slave revolts. No less than the slaves whom they so feared, when slaveholders used the words “insurrection,” “revolt,” or “rebellion” in their letters to one another about slaves who acted up, ran away, burned down buildings, or murdered their masters, they were making an argument rather than simply describing an event. By giving an event (the killing of a slaveholder or the flight of a number of slaves) an identifiable historical shape (a slave revolt), they made the case for a certain type of response (racial terrorism).⁴⁶ And, 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 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.

History, to paraphrase the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, is a temporality backed by superior firepower.⁴⁷ Many of the narratives historians have used to give order to their accounts of the past are, in fact, politically situated versions of the very processes we use them to describe. Indeed, the teleological promise of liberal equality which lies at the end of scholarly narratives of the continual progress of “acculturation” and the succession of slavery by “freedom” provide inadequate accounts of the complexities

⁴⁴ *Designs against Charleston*, ed. Pearson 186, 190, 217.

⁴⁵ *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, ed. Greenberg 48.

⁴⁶ I treat this process more fully in my forthcoming article “‘The Imperious Necessity of the Hour’: Imagining and Explaining the Mississippi Slave Conspiracy of 1835.”

⁴⁷ Chakrabarty 20-21.

and restricted possibilities of African-American life in the twentieth century. Outside the narrow band of acceptable academic discourse, these liberal metanarratives have been displaced by a set of historical counter-practices. The science fiction supernaturalism of Elijah Muhammad or the anti-liberal essentialism of Molefi Kete Asante, for example, contest the story of gradual acculturation that frames so many scholarly histories of the black experience. Similarly, popular histories which frame the slave trade as a single element of a ongoing *Maafa*, an African Holocaust, and emphasize its immediate psychological and emotional relevance to the contemporary black experience contest the redemptive linearity that frames the slavery-to-freedom narrative of American history. In the words of the historian John Henrik Clarke: "The events which transpired five thousand years ago, five years ago, or five minutes ago, have determined what will happen five minutes from now, five years from now, or five thousand years from now. All history is a current event."⁴⁸ Seen in the light of the historian Robin D. G. Kelley's admonition that it is less important to debunk anti-historicist histories than it is to understand the source of their attraction to their adherents, these histories seem irruptive reminders of the possibilities suppressed by the forcible superimposition of European history that began with the slave trade.⁴⁹ To say so is not to suggest we can step out of time and return to the lost temporalities of the past; it would, in any case, be a mistake wholly to abandon the liberal historical narratives which have supported what compensation African Americans have been able to exact for past wrongs. It is, however, to emphasize that history-making itself is an integral part of historical process, and to urge that scholarly history writing be punctuated with constant reminders of its own historicity. At a time when there are estimated to be twenty-seven million slaves servicing the global economy, we do well to heed the warning that the metanarrative of liberal individualism which has shaped so many of our existing histories may be neither linear nor irreversible.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ See Malcolm X, with Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1965); Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1987); www.maafa.org; www.swagga.com/maafa.html. I am grateful to the participants in the 1999 NYU/Faculty Resource Network seminar on "United States History in International Perspective" for thoughtful comments on issues of narrative and periodization in African-American history.

⁴⁹ See Robin D. G. Kelley, "Looking B(l)ackward: 2097-1997," *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997) 159-80.

⁵⁰ The statistics is drawn from Kevin Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1999) 8.