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Working at Living: The Social Relations of Precarity

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Rethinking Bondage

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I. Introduction

This module seeks to open up a series of historical and philosophical questions about the concept of bondage. In so doing, it endeavors to interrogate bondage as both a conceptual and historical problematic that has been central to the making of the modern world. While the notion of “bondage” appears to carry with it a set of self-evident meanings and definitions rooted in the broader concepts of servitude and subjugation, we seek to highlight the ways in which people across time and space have been “socialized” into various logics and practices of bondage. Ultimately, at the heart of this problem lies a series of deeper questions about the ways in which the notions of “freedom” and “unfreedom” are constituted through various institutional sites and practices.

Rather than attempting to offer an exhaustive definition of bondage that addresses this concept in its totality, this module instead opens up some key questions and nodes for consideration, drawing attention to some of the most critical ways in which modern bondage has been practiced and understood. Exploring the refractions of bondage through specific historical moments and institutional sites will demonstrate how seemingly disparate forms of servitude and unfreedom were in fact deeply connected -- by ideologies and practices that traveled freely across borders and continued to reincarnate in later times. Simply stated, this module attempts to track a massively important human phenomenon in several different historical manifestations.

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II. Bondage as the foundation of Western capitalism

In the history of the modern world, the concept of bondage was elaborated and refined through the entwined practices of colonialism, slavery, and capitalist development. The development of mercantile capitalism and the colonial plantation were the central forces providing the grounding logic for institutionalized bondage in the west, particularly through chattel slavery. As such, specific attention must be given to the *plantation*, and to the ways in which this nodal site became central to articulating the concept of bondage as a legal category, a labor system, and a racial ideology. It is therefore critical to understand the plantation as the productive mode that catalyzed the growth of modern capitalism, and as an ethos that has sustained itself through time.

In the western world, especially in the Americas, the captivity of African people and their sale into chattel slavery anchored the labor system most frequently associated with the plantation. However, the growth and entrenchment of the global plantation as a commodity form was predicated first and foremost on the appropriation of indigenous lands and on the genocide of Native peoples and nations across several continents. In other words, the modern system of plantation bondage was founded on and justified by sweeping acts of genocide, as indigenous peoples – from the North American seaboard to the South Asian subcontinent to the West-Central African coast and interior – were systematically killed, displaced, and enslaved. The emergence of the plantation as a viable form therefore relied on the genocidal erasure of Native peoples, on the subsequent coercion of indigenous peoples, and the procurement of bonded labor from Africa and Asia. This development of the plantation also resulted in the hyper-presence and visibility of African and eventually Asian people in the Americas that has partly masked the erasure of Native genocide. Thus colonial occupation and settler colonialism were among several forms of domination that were intricately linked and that enabled the more well-known systems of modern bondage to flourish. Ultimately within western capitalism, a system notably incubated within and *beyond* the geographic areas typically understood as “the west,” plantation bondage took the following forms: chattel slavery of Africans in the Americas; indentured labor in the Caribbean, the southern Pacific and other locations; and indigenous labor throughout Asia, Africa and the Americas.

III. Problematic 1 -- The Problem of Equivalence and Difference

Studying the history of modern bondage can sometimes produce difficult and thorny questions about how to understand the lived experiences of different groups who encountered the violence of the plantation and colonial rule. The questions explored in this module ask students and scholars to challenge [the pitfalls of] false equivalencies – such as comparing the experience of student debt to that of chattel slavery – as well as false binaries – such as determining whether slaves had it better or worse than “coolies.”² Instead, we ask that readers situate each bonded experience within its deep historical context and lived experience. Doing so requires close attention to the conflicting, yet often intersecting needs of capitalist development, territorial expansion and liberal democracy; to the entanglements and synchronicities of different kinds of bondage; and to the interdependence of multiple forms of violence and unfreedom. Moreover, it is critical to acknowledge the very real consequences of these systems that often produced uneven experiences of social incorporation, recognition, invisibility, and dislocation for oppressed people and their descendants.

Nevertheless, understanding the historical resonances and political capital of an idea like “slavery” can also be very useful, particularly upon considering the many ways in which ideas of social and political enslavement have been taken up by groups who were not legally enslaved, but were nevertheless engaged in important claims for social justice. Ultimately the metaphor of slavery (and bondage) is a complex one that should be deployed with sensitivity and care. In some cases, its use can obscure some of the same power relationships and social privileges that it purports to illuminate. In others cases, a comparison with bonded labor can create powerful analogies that are important and necessary. In this module we ask that educators and students place all such comparisons within a longer history of legal bondage, and ask how a range of intersecting lenses – structural location, (geo)political context, lived experience, etc – can facilitate a better understanding of the bonded experience at hand. For example, how should

² During the nineteenth century, the term “coolie” came to refer to an indentured laborer from eastern or southern Asia, particularly from the Indian subcontinent or China, but also from Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia and other areas. These laborers were sent all over the world, especially to the Caribbean and Pacific Islands to work on plantations, railroads, and mines that needed cheap labor after emancipation. Indentured laborers were also heavily contracted to South Africa, the Indian Ocean islands and Fiji, among other places. This term coolie has become a racial slur that refers to people of Asian descent.

modern incarceration be understood as a form of slavery, and why is the contemporary context of neoliberalism so crucial to this framing? How can the historical institution of marriage be understood as a form of bondage for women within patriarchal cultures? How did the exposure to and opposition against chattel slavery shape the ways in which women's rights advocates framed their own articulation of female oppression? How do the experiences of poor, and especially undocumented workers, along with the degraded labor they perform, challenge the idea that slavery has long since been eradicated? These and other questions can be fruitful and productive when one appreciates that ideas about bondage, slavery and servitude are invariably forged as *relational* concepts; necessarily situated within specific historical, political and economic contexts; and constituted by a series of intersecting practices, experiences and encounters.

IV. Problematic 2 -- The Problem of Linear Freedom

Interrogating the concept of bondage necessarily requires interrogating the linear progression of freedom that resides at the heart of liberal democratic political cultures, especially in the Americas. This module wishes to highlight a critical body of scholarship that disrupts the notion of a progressive telos in which enslaved people were definitively emancipated in the nineteenth century, and plantation cultures were seamlessly moved from chattel slavery to indentureship, and from unfreedom to freedom.³ The idea that “slavery ended” and “freedom began” at a particular point in the nineteenth century performs three closely related but equally pernicious tasks. First, it powerfully obscures the institutionalization of other forms of bondage that emerged in spite of (and many ways *because of*) legal emancipation, most notably the massive indenture of unfree laborers particularly from China and the Indian subcontinent, but also from parts of Africa and the South Pacific. Second, it systematically disappears the rampant violence and coercion that newly freed people encountered from Antigua to South Carolina, usually in ways that resembled – or in some cases effectively re-instantiated – the practice of slavery.

Finally, it masks the ways in which colonial indentureship – for example on tea plantations in India – conjoined feudal notions of bondage, British colonial laws of “coolie emigration,” and

³ Please see the list of bibliographic references.

older precedents such as the U.S. Fugitive Slave Law (used to round up “absconding coolies”). In short, the formal abolition of legal slavery conceals the ways in which these and other practices coexisted with and reinforced one another. In the case of Indian tea estates, three entwined ideologies of un-freedom came together to create a hybrid system of carcerality. These examples point to a temporal and spatial border-crossing that drew from pre-colonial customary rural understandings of fealty, disciplinary regimes based on North American chattel slavery, and British colonial rules around indentureship. The postemancipation moment thus highlights the mobility and flexibility of older labor regimes, punishment systems, and domination techniques, many of which regularly crossed borders and found shared resonances in different imperial settings. Ultimately the formal eradication of slavery must be studied alongside the forms of bondage and captivity that were *embedded in* and *permitted by* legal or formal freedom. Such an interrogation requires closely investigating how new and more insidious forms of domination – including debt peonage, sharecropping, and colonial indenture – emerged through the language of emancipation, the ideals free labor, and the ideologies of liberalism.

V. Problematic 3 -- Geographies of Dis/Placement (of Bondage) in Late Modernity

Over the course of the nineteenth century, from the creation of the Haitian state in 1804 to the final emancipation of Brazilian slavery in 1888, chattel slavery was formally abolished in the Americas and millions of African-descended people were legally emancipated. During the latter years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth, slavery was officially outlawed throughout west and central Africa, and in most other parts of the world.⁴ The advent of metropolitan abolition – that is to say, the formal pronouncement of slavery’s end by western governments in the nineteenth century – looms large in the global narration and historical imagination of slavery. The existence of modern slavery, understood primarily as sex trafficking and other bondage systems, thus emerges as a deep anathema to this emancipatory narrative, and most of these stories center on the African continent, South Asia, and the Middle East. Horrific images of slaves living under bondage to onerous lenders, religious shrines taking human beings in payment for services, and especially women and girls being bought and sold through

⁴ However, the anti-slavery interventions of the British in West Africa effectively laid the foundation for entrenched colonial rule in the region.

prostitution and marriage, are indelibly linked to places such as Mauritania, India, Haiti, and Nepal.

While in no way mitigating the violence and coercion of contemporary bondage, this module seeks to emphasize the ways in which questions of modern servitude are routinely flattened out and contained in time and space. In other words, there are certain places where we “know” that slavery exists, and certain places where we “know” that it does not. Because the liberal emancipation narrative instructs that slavery in the west was eradicated by the close of the nineteenth century, slavery in a place like the U.S. or Britain becomes a conceptual impossibility. As such, modern slavery is almost exclusively associated with the presumably regressive and backward/unfree labor or bonded servitude – especially of women – in the global south. Thus the equation of “slaves” with the nefarious practices of the global south and “free people” with the liberal democracies of the global north (a fascinating replication of U.S. imagined geographies of freedom prior to abolition) in many ways becomes central to the very construction of modernity itself. This old, but familiar binary of modern selves vs. barbaric others rests on the understanding that slavery as an institution has been firmly displaced to the global South, where North America and western Europe are presumed to be fully emancipated and increasingly post racial.

VI. Problematic 5 -- Carcerality at the heart of late capitalism, modernity and “post”modernity

The United States prison system offers a particularly poignant example of how bondage, unfreedom, and carcerality remain at the heart of liberal western cultures. The expansion of what is often called the “prison-industrial complex” deeply troubles the idea that modern servitude can be contained in the “spectacularized” bondage systems of the global south.⁵ The thirteenth amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which formally abolished slavery in 1865, included the telling notation that slavery and involuntary servitude were no longer permitted within the United States “except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been

⁵ For a discussion, explanation and critique of the modern prison industrial complex, please see the bibliographic references under “Prisons, Migrations, and ‘New’ Forms of Bonded Labor.”

duly convicted.” Perhaps it is not coincidental that the United States currently incarcerates a larger percentage of people than any other country in the world. A critical body of scholarship has recently drawn attention to the multiple ways in which the practices, disciplinary techniques, and confinement models honed on plantation systems in the U.S. and throughout the Americas became central to the policing and punishment systems implemented in the twentieth century. These included convict labor, chain gangs, and eventually the modern prison-industrial complex which overwhelmingly incarcerates black and brown people. The coercive forms of labor and corporeal punishment that these systems administered, the regulation of and prohibitions against mobility, the pervasive use of leg irons and wrist chains, the imposition of confining cells and other spatial regimes, the dismissal of voting rights, and the inadequate or nonexistent access to medical care and education -- all highlight the carceral and punitive impulses at the heart of plantation that were *transferred* and *incorporated* into the prison system.

Finally, any discussion of contemporary bondage in the United States and elsewhere in the west must include an examination of dehumanizing, low-wage work, particularly that which is performed by millions of immigrants and undocumented workers. The image of predominantly Mexican and Central American workers bent over rows of California strawberries or grapes calls jarring attention to the naked forms of capitalist domination that in some ways remain little changed from a hundred and fifty years ago. But one does not have to look to sprawling fields, agro-businesses, or multinational companies to find examples of people living and working under conditions of modern-day bondage. New and re-scripted forms of empire and capital continue to mark vulnerable populations – often figured as the “immigrants” who stand outside the “nation” – which include urban and rural populations of poor and frequently racialized people, as those best suited to the refuse labors of capital and the labors of cleaning, picking, caring and nurturing. As such, a close attention to low-wage work and immigration highlights the invisible forms of indenture that are absolutely crucial for the project of liberal modernity. Together with the prison system, these are among the institutions that constitute the invisible slaveries of the modern west.

The logic of the carceral ultimately runs through all these forms of labor and confinement, and reveals the extent of the liberal masking of western bondage. Presumably these practices ended

long ago, but in actuality they are quite prevalent and in fact essential for the functioning of global markets. It is clear that systemic bondage continues to lie at the heart of modernity, and remains foundational to the modern project of liberalism.

TEACHING MATERIALS ON BONDAGE

A. SAMPLE SYLLABUS

See attached syllabus:

Piya Chatterjee, *Plantation Empires: Gender, Labor, Race and the Construction of “Difference”*

B. SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

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C. FILMS AND DOCUMENTARIES

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Guiana 1838 (2005), Director: Rohit Jagessar

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“Imperialism and Colonization: Coolie Trade in the 19th Century,” Teaching Module from the University of Minnesota

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Black Gold

<http://blackgoldmovie.com/distrify>

I Is A Long Memoried Woman

<http://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/hum211/CoursePack/womanfilmnotes.htm>

Journey to Bananaland

<http://archive.org/details/Journeyt1950>

Bananas!

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The Bitter Taste Of Tea

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¹ It is useful to read Patterson’s work with Vincent Brown, “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery,” *American Historical Review*, Vol. 114, No. 5 (December 2009): 1231-1249.