

Transnational Island Museologies



Materials for discussion

Edited by
Karen Brown, Jamie Allan Brown
and Ana S. González Rueda

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ICOFOM Materials for Discussion

Transnational island museologies

ICOFOM MATERIALS FOR DISCUSSION

This publication brings together papers submitted for the 47th symposium organised by ICOFOM under the theme Transnational Island Museologies, to be held at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, 5-7 June, 2024.

The Materials for Discussion collection brings together, in an inclusive spirit, contributions selected for the symposium in the form of short articles, to prepare the ICOFOM Symposium. This publication has been made available before the symposium, in a very short time frame. In spite of the care given to the publication, some mistakes may remain.

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***Capitalism and Slavery* round table**

Heather Cateau

University of St. Andrews – Scotland

In 2024 we will commemorate the 80th anniversary of the publication of Eric Williams's seminal work *Capitalism and Slavery*. Although originally published in 1944, the global message of the book still resounds in 2024. Ideas developed in the text are increasingly being revived as we try to understand some of the major challenges of our contemporary world. A related area which is subsumed within *Capitalism and Slavery* is the issue of the perspectives from which history has been written, and by extension, the ways in which the stories of the past have been preserved or presented in books, in our museums and in our memories; as well as the ways in which such histories have shaped our contemporary landscapes. The text and its theses therefore fit neatly with the central themes of this conference. The book provides a road map which can be used to unearth hidden stories and extricate entangled economic, social and cultural spaces. *Capitalism and Slavery* thus has a unique place in our attempt to grapple with the issues connected to emerging transnational island museology.

The themes in *Capitalism and Slavery* have been applied to the relationship between the developed and the developing world; to our understanding of development challenges; and to contemporary movements which focus on economic, social and political equity, such as the Black Lives Matter Movement, the Reparation Movement and current discussions about statues and monuments. Building on this, the round table will share related and relevant ideas as espoused in *Capitalism and Slavery* and apply them in discussions which address issues of representation in history and heritage preservation. The text will therefore be positioned as a basis for discussing some of our contemporary challenges and possible pathways forward.

A round table discussion which engages five contributors will share the perspectives in *Capitalism and Slavery*. The panel will include academics as well as persons connected with history and heritage collection, preservation and dissemination. The insights will therefore come from persons actively grappling with the issues outlined above. Emphasis will be placed on how they have used ideas and themes influenced by *Capitalism and Slavery* in their research and related professional activities to better understand and illuminate history and heritage concerns, as well as to engage the wider community.

Panellists

In keeping with the Shared Island Stories, Scotland the Caribbean: Past, Present, Future Project, which focusses on the historical and contemporary connections between these two geographic spaces, the panellists are from institutions in the Caribbean and Scotland. These two geographic areas share a history that spans at least five centuries, and they are today grappling with embracing and positioning this rich story in our current understanding of ourselves and our societies. The training and occupational specialisations of the panellists facilitate constructive discussion as we

grapple with the multifaceted challenge we face today as we try to create more integrated and equitable societies. This of necessity involves rethinking the past; examining its impact through a 2024 lens; and dealing with the practicalities involved in the dissemination of new ideas. They have collectively all been directly involved in discovery, revisioning, education, dissemination and policy formation. Thus, we will share insights about work done in repositories, research conducted, creative methodologies employed, introduction of new historical narratives, challenges of transmission, continued attempts to educate and implications for our contemporary spaces.

Meet the panel

Heather Cateau, Chair, Senior Research Fellow, University of St. Andrews/University of the West Indies, Trinidad – Shared Island Stories: Scotland and the Caribbean.

Henderson Carter, Head, Department of History, University of the West Indies, Barbados – Street Names and Built Landscape.

Lorna Steele-McGinn, Community Engagement Officer, Highland Archive Centre, Inverness, Scotland – Collection and Preservation.

Stephen Mullen, Lecturer, University of Glasgow, Scotland – Economic Connections.

Diana Paton, William Robertson Professor of History, Head of History, University of Edinburgh, Scotland – Teaching and Learning.

Applying *Capitalism and Slavery* in our contemporary spaces

In his conclusion of *Capitalism and Slavery*, Williams warned that, “The ideas built on ... interests (from previous periods) continue long after the interests have been destroyed and work their old mischief, which is more mischievous because the interests to which they correspond no longer exist” (1944, p. 211). It is therefore fitting that we examine this supposition made in 1944 with respect to the interests that benefitted from sugar and enslavement in the Caribbean and Scotland. Several questions arise: Can these interests continue to work their mischief in 2024? If so, it would be particularly worrying because these are ideas from a period which was characterised by coercive labour systems such as enslavement, racialisation based on skin colour, astronomical profit making and skewed development trajectories. This should not only be worrying but should engender a sense of urgency to grapple with the ramifications. Can we identify the various aberrations in 2024? Do we understand where these ideas have come from? Are we correcting them? Or alternatively, are they still working their old mischief and perhaps have become even more mischievous?

We will start with the academic debates that have come to be identified within *Capitalism and Slavery*. This assessment will begin with a discussion of the major themes in the text and their elaboration in ways that are applicable to our communities in 2024. Williams’s theses on the origins of slavery, the extent of the profitability of the slavery system, and the reasons for emancipation will therefore set the foundation for the rest of the round table. Each panellist will also share individual

perspectives on how the text has shaped her/his research interests and professional activities. These have been elaborated in a series of Think Pieces, included here.

The discussion advances through examining the ways in which *Capitalism and Slavery* can be applied to produce a better understanding of our contemporary spaces. This will include sharing perspectives on implications for history, approaches to tangible and intangible heritage, as well as focus on sites and built landscape in both the Caribbean and Scotland/Britain. This will be further enhanced through sharing collaborations and initiatives in which the panellists have been directly involved to share insights with a wider cross section of the public. We will end by exploring the lessons learnt and the ways in which we can ensure more equity and better representation in how we treat with historical narratives, their preservation and their dissemination.

The think pieces

In “Enabling historiography: the responsibility of the archivist as conduit”, Lorna Steele-McGinn shares insight from her position at the frontlines in the Highland Archive Centre, where they are uncovering a wealth of Caribbean material in their collections and deposits. Many of the collections connect the region to African enslavement. She takes us from discovery to access of archival information in an outline which includes collection, appraisal, cataloguing and dissemination. In so doing she positions archives as both a starting point and an end in the journey to uncover the past and shape the future. She draws us into that journey from the vantage point of archival collections which are really at the base of so much of our understanding about the past. She captures the varied difficulties in establishing what can be described as a full or true story. The challenges start from the initial decisions about what is collected and preserved. The material itself is laden with conscious and unconscious bias, not just of the writers and those handling the material, but even of the eras. Thus, she posits that record keeping itself may be considered as act of writing history. McGuinn clearly establishes a power relationship in the nature of the custodial responsibilities of archives and encourages us to think about issues like, “Who polices the future?” and “Who has the right to tell the story?” Her questioning leads to re-envisioning the role of the archivist from a passive guardian to one which involves not just custodial responsibilities but also a more active role in interpretation and engagement. Thus, McGuinn’s contribution takes us back to *Capitalism and Slavery* and Williams’s warning by showing us exactly how old ideas can continue to shape our present. This think piece makes us cognizant that we must all be on our guard against these old “mischiefs” and demonstrates how archives can play a more dynamic role as we try to shape a more inclusive future with a fuller sense of the past.

Stephen Mullen recounts the life of *Capitalism and Slavery* from 1944 to 2024 in “Historiographical afterlives of *Capitalism and Slavery* and the Williams theses”. He demonstrates that historical analyses, mainstream conclusions and accepted truisms about empire, colonies and African enslavement are not static but change over time. Through these changes the narratives in our societies and indeed of our own perspectives are also transformed. Thus, he contends that the book is representative of shifts not only in historiographical theorising, but also societal understanding. Mullen outlines each of Williams’s theses and examines the body of work spawned by the book. In 2024 research calls into question glorious accounts of the British empire which underplayed the extent of the involvement of Britain’s colonies in its economic development that prevailed to the early twentieth

century. These accounts resisted challenges and were supported by strong defences mounted by historians and publishers. These are indeed examples of the “old mischief” that Williams warned would persist without questioning. Today Williams’s theses have undergone resurgence and much of that questioning has taken place in our contemporary period. There is growing support from studies expanding the depth and range of the colonies’ impact on British commercial and industrial development. Mullen also looks specifically at Scotland, where Williams was ignored until even later in the twentieth century. Through his own path breaking research, as well as new databases and studies, the full contribution of the Caribbean in Scottish commerce, institutions and landscapes are only now being revealed. Mullen ends with a call for continuing the movement from Scottish historiographical orthodoxy to truth-seeking, as we grapple with our shared history of empire and African enslavement.

Diana Paton combines her extensive academic experience with her practical involvement in pathbreaking education projects in “Teaching and learning with and through *Capitalism and Slavery*”. She demonstrates changes in action through timely examples of how the text is being incorporated into the education system in Britain. She elaborates through three of Williams’s theses which continue to engage us: the extent of the impact of African enslavement and the colonies on British economic growth; the reasons for emancipation which has two extremes of humanitarianism and economic self-interest; and the debate as to whether economic factors or racism led to the introduction of the slave system. She cautions against counterfactual claims and conservative think tanks and so echoes Williams’s warning about the mischief that can be done by interests will live on hidden within the framework of our societies. Paton gives practical examples from two innovative projects, Teaching Slavery in Scotland and Living Histories of Sugar, and shares lessons learnt from the approaches used. She advocates the importance of paying attention to the methodologies used to connect today’s learners to the past. She calls for not just intellectual or academic approaches, but what she describes as intuitive approaches. She points to the value of material that can be created by teachers and supports community involvement and engagement. She also cautions about the isolation of factors as we develop revised historical perspectives and reminds us that understanding the past requires a multi-layered approach rather than isolation of any one set of factors. For Paton, teaching and learning must be an ongoing process, and *Capitalism and Slavery* continues to provide inspiration.

In our world today one of the more visible and emotive challenges has become how we treat with areas of our built landscape that are signifiers of a past characterised by enslavement, violence and racism. These imperialist symbols of the power and by extension the subjugation of native and forcefully transported groups have existed silently among us as “great objects”, often without thought to their historical significance or impact on the people in the past and present. The question of who determines the signifiers we choose to place in positions of honour or to use as reference points is one that we are grappling with today. They, too, are representative of the old ideas which Williams warned were reflective of “old interests” which continue their “old mischief”. Henderson Carter develops his insights into this theme through his examination of the current context in Barbados in “Street names and built landscape: Scottish colonial imprint on Barbados”. He draws from his research into the shared history of Barbados and Scotland and shares dimensions of Barbados’ Scottish past that are still present in what he describes as the very imprint of Barbados. This legacy involves not only persons of Scottish ancestry but also surnames, place names and

buildings. Drawing from history, he traces the origins of this imprint and questions the reason for its persistence despite independence and current calls for decolonisation and reparations. For Carter however, it is not a simple matter of removal and change. The process must also be used as a tool for public education and for tourism and heritage development. He describes Barbados as a “country museum of tourism”. Thus, he advocates leveraging these shared stories and connections of the past to bring a better understanding of our landscapes as well as our people.

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