

Introduction

New Approaches to the Comparative Abolition in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans

Jesús Sanjurjo*

School of Modern Languages, Cardiff University, UK

Manuel Barcia

School of History, University of Leeds, UK.

Taking the theme of “abolition” as its point of departure, this collection of essays builds on the significant growth in scholarship on unfree labour in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds during the past two decades. The essays revisit some of the persistent problems posed by the traditional comparative literature on slavery and indentured labour and identify new and exciting areas for future research.

This volume is the result of the homonymous Inaugural Conference of the Baines Research Group for the Comparative Study of Unfree Labour that took place at the University of Leeds, UK, in September 2017 with the support of a British Academy/Leverhulme Small Grant. Ranging from the analysis of the abolition of the slave trade to the avenues existing at the time to accessing of freedom, the papers explored the benefits of adopting new approaches to the study of unfree labour by bringing together historians of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds.

These essays demonstrate that, gradually, from the sixteenth century, the Atlantic and Indian Ocean spaces became profoundly connected. Therefore, historiographical approaches that consider these two worlds as entangled realities have the capacity of providing more comprehensive and sophisticated explanations about the political, social, cultural, economic

* E-mail: SanjurjoJ@cardiff.ac.uk

and legal experiences of the peoples that lived in these parts of the world. Comparative and micro-historical approaches are central to this collection, emphasising the unique capacity that these methodologies have in navigating vast and complex geographical spaces and, simultaneously, providing nuanced analysis of individual, even personal, histories of those often neglected in traditional narratives.

All six essays are concerned with the idea of how the processes of “abolition” produced significantly complex responses in the societies and communities in which various forms of unfree labour persisted. All of them vindicate the need to better understand those “grey areas,” the intricate reality that led to and emerged after the abolition of slavery and its relationship with indentured labour. To be sure, the links between the Atlantic and the Indian oceans have been highlighted before by a number of historians, some of which are included in this collection. It is well known that these connections almost certainly went even further, as enslaved Africans were likely taken to the Americas not only from places like Quelimane, Mozambique and Madagascar, but as farther afield as the entrance to the Red Sea.¹

In the face of new ways of addressing geographical links between different regions of the world, and more specifically, between oceans, new methodologies have recently pointed to the necessity of expanding comparative approaches. These methods, rather than singling out particular territories due to their perceived relevance, have attempted to find commonalities and associations that underline the true nature of transnational events in the modern world. The new field of Oceanic History, pioneered by scholars such as David Armitage, Alison Bashford, Sujit Sivasundaram, and David Abulafia, among others, constitutes the most recent example of this kind.²

In his essay “The Cape Lopez Africans at Maranhão: Geo-political literacy, British consuls, and the demise of the transatlantic slave trade to Brazil,” Dale Graden unveils the fascinating story of four Africans rescued by the British Navy in 1845 who were, however,

kidnapped and re-enslaved when they arrived in Maranhão, Brazil. Graden's work provides a unique window of micro-analysis into the lives of four victims of the slave trade and slavery in Brazil, and more generally, makes a crucial contribution to the ongoing debate on the reasons for the ending of the transatlantic slave trade and the role that the British authorities played during the early 1850s.

Randy J. Sparks' essay, "On the frontlines of slave trade abolition: British consuls combat state capture in Cuba and Mozambique" is a comparative study of the lives of two remarkable British consuls deployed in two distant parts of the world. David Turnbull, in Cuba, and Lyons McLeod, in Mozambique, played a central role as abolitionist on the ground in developing what Richard Huzzey has defined as "anti-slavery imperialism."³ In his essay, Sparks explores the complex task that these two British diplomats had in advancing the abolitionist cause in such manifestly hostile places and navigates the ways in which Turnbull and McLeod altered, defined and defied imperial policies and practices. Ultimately, Sparks' work offers a novel and compelling exploration of the fight for abolition in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans.

Preben Kaarsholm's study illustrates the connections and continuities between the Indian and Atlantic oceans worlds in relation to the debates on slave trade, slavery and abolition. In his work "From abolition of the slave trade to protection of immigrants: Danish colonialism, German missionaries, and the development of ideas of humanitarian governance from the early eighteenth to the nineteenth century," Kaarsholm explores how the work of missionaries in Danish and German colonies in India impacted the intellectual development of abolitionism in the Atlantic World. It discusses the historical continuities between various forms of unfree labour in the Western Indian Ocean from the early eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries. Further, his study links eighteenth-century debates on abolition of the

slave trade in India to discourses of protection and humanitarianism in the last half of the nineteenth century in the Atlantic.

In her essay “Guerrilla Inscription: Transatlantic Abolition and the 1851 Census,” Bridget Bennett examines the Wilson Armistead’s defiant act of abolitionist activism. In 1851 in his Leeds house, he hosted the African American fugitives Ellen and William Craft and succeeded in having them recorded as “fugitives” in the UK census. Bennett’s work masterly navigates the distance between the micro and macro levels of interrogation, demonstrating how what might simply be seen as a “curious anomaly” carries radical meaning. Analysing this remarkable yet “quiet” performance, she reflects more broadly on the wider picture of transatlantic abolitionism and the relationship between state documents and activism, then and now.

Jennie Jeppesen’s piece “In the shadows between slave and free: A case for detangling the word ‘slave’ from the word ‘chattel’” vindicates the importance of correctly identifying, differentiating and naming the terms “chattel” and “slave” in the context of the history of the United States. In doing so, she connivingly demonstrates the need for historians to untangle both terms, recognizing that a person who is chattel is not always a slave and a slave is not always chattel. Jeppesen’s work emphasizes that other forms of unfree labour, such as indentured servants and convicts, also existed and scholars must differentiate between their life experiences and those of enslaved Africans. In the context of growing influence of white supremacy groups on both sides of the Atlantic, Jeppesen’s proposal confronts the attempts of those who try to assimilate or equate the experiences of enslaved Africans and other unfree workers in the United States, thereby providing a more accurate and sophisticated terminology for the study of slavery.

Finally, in “Shared Atlantic legal culture: the case of a freedom suit in Benguela,” Mariana Dias Paes argues for the existence of a shared legal culture in the Lusophone Atlantic

and how legal categories of property law defined the judicial language of freedom across the Atlantic, both in Benguela and Brazil. This essay focuses on the lawsuit against Luiza Cordeiro Bimbi who was accused of illegally enslaving Bibiana Catumbo and Thereza Caleço, in Benguela, in 1866. What makes this case relevant, Dias Paes explains, is that it is far from unprecedented: Many similar lawsuits were filed in Benguela's and Brazilian courts and their intrinsic similarities in terms of norms, categories, and arguments, draws a wider picture of a shared legal culture for the Lusophone Atlantic.

We believe this volume will constitute a significant contribution to the ongoing debates on the slave trade, slavery, abolition and emancipation across these two oceans. As new titles on Atlantic and Indian Ocean history appear every year, the links between these two vast masses of water and their millions of inhabitants will become increasingly apparent.⁴ The exceptional essays included here provide nuanced and innovative approaches to the study of unfree labour and its eradication in two areas of the world that, as the authors of these works demonstrate, have become profoundly connected and dependent from the sixteenth century onwards. All together and each of them in its own right, they constitute vital contributions to a more comprehensive understanding of the complex realities that shaped the life experiences of enslaved and un-free peoples in these regions and spark new exciting areas of research enquiry.

Notes

¹ Joseph T. Crawford to Lord Palmerston. Havana, 23 December 1851. House of Commons Parliamentary Papers: Correspondence with British Coms. at Sierra Leone, Havana, Cape of Good Hope, Jamaica, Loanda, and Cape Verd Islands; Reports from British Vice-Admiralty Courts and Naval Officers on Slave Trade, 1846 (Class A), 414.

² See, for example, Armitage, Bashford, and Sivasundaram, eds., *Oceanic Histories* and Abulafia, *The Boundless Sea*.

³ Huzzey, *Freedom Burning*.

⁴ Among those who have inserted these links in recent books, see, for example, Candido, *An African Enslaving Port and the Atlantic World*; Ferreira, *Cross-Cultural Exchange in the Atlantic World*; Allen, *European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean*; Kobayashi, *Indian Cotton Textiles in West Africa*; Anderson, *Abolition in Sierra Leone*; Barcia, *The Yellow Demon of Fever*; and Harris, *The Last Slave Ships*.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the authors for their contributions to this special issue, the external reviewers, and the participants in the conference “Comparative Abolition in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans” held at the University of Leeds in 2017 under the auspices of a BA/Leverhulme Small Grant.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Jesús Sanjurjo is Disglair Lecturer in Hispanic and Latin American Studies at Cardiff University. He is the author of *In the Blood of Our Brothers. The Abolition of the Slave Trade in Spain's Atlantic Empire* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press) which will be published in early 2021.

Manuel Barcia is Chair of Global Studies at the University of Leeds. He is the author of four books, including *The Yellow Demon of Fever: Fighting Disease in the Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020) and *West*

African Warfare in Bahia and Cuba: Soldier Slaves in the Atlantic World, 1807–1844 (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

References

Abulafia, David. *The Boundless Sea: A Human History of the Oceans*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Allen, Richard B. *European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500–1850*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014.

Anderson, Richard Peter. *Abolition in Sierra Leone. Re-Building Lives and Identities in Nineteenth-Century West Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Armitage, David, Alison Bashford, and Sujit Sivasundaram. *Oceanic Histories*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Barcia, Manuel. *The Yellow Demon of Fever: Fighting Disease in the Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic Slave Trade*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020.

Candido, Mariana. *An African Slaving Port and the Atlantic World*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Ferreira, Roquinaldo. *Cross-Cultural Exchange in the Atlantic World: Angola and Brazil During the Era of the Slave Trade*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Harris, John. *The Last Slave Ships: New York and the End of the Middle Passage*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020.

Huzzey, Richard. *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012.

Kobayashi, Kazuo. *Indian Cotton Textiles in West Africa: African Agency, Consumer Demand and the Making of the Global Economy, 1750–1850*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.