

Introduction

Slave Spaces

Stories about places are makeshift things.

Michel de Certeau¹

Of all the places I've been in the world, New Orleans is the only place I've ever been where, if you listen, sidewalks will speak to you.

John T. Scott²

Charlotte's first Atlantic crossing did not require a passport. Her 1805 Middle Passage from Africa to New Orleans was legal. However, by her second transoceanic journey fifteen years later, the Atlantic currents had shifted. New Orleans, a colonial hamlet, had transformed into a booming American metropolis. Its population exploded from about 8,000 in 1803 to 27,000 in 1820, which made it the fifth largest city in the United States. International slave importation had been illegal since 1807, and Charlotte herself had changed: The prepubescent girl who left Africa had become the property of the prominent Forstall family and a mother in New Orleans. Like Charlotte, the Blancqs of New Orleans also descended from an Atlantic lineage, but unlike the enslaved woman these elite sojourners could visit their relatives in Bordeaux. In preparation for their 1820 journey, Pierre Blancq leased Charlotte, who would leave her daughter Corine behind in New

¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 107.

² John T. Scott, *American Experience: New Orleans*, DVD, directed by Steven Ives (Boston: WGBH Educational Foundation, 2007). Scott (1940–2007), a celebrated visual artist, was a black New Orleanian who, among other accolades, received the MacArthur Genius grant.

Orleans to nurse the three Blancq children. Since such border crossings jeopardized property claims and subjected importers to prosecution, the mayor issued a passport for Charlotte. That paper – the mayor, slave owner, and slave lessee all hoped – would ensure that Charlotte could travel to France and then re-enter New Orleans as she had left it – a slave.³

Charlotte's story and others like it suggest that daily experiences of slavery in New Orleans and its environs at the turn of the nineteenth century were international, interconnected, and itinerant – a sharp contrast to the contained, isolated, and stationary bondage long associated with the plantation south. Unlike in the northeastern states of the early republic, where emancipation schemes diminished slave populations, New Orleans became a major American metropolis as its slave population exploded. From 1803, the year of the Louisiana Purchase, until 1830, slaves made up one-third of the urban population. The city became a hub of slavery, diversity, and circulation at the same time that the proper management of people became a measure of civilization and modernity. How did Charlotte and her fellow slaves help to produce the cosmopolitan places of New Orleans, the polyglot port city at the intersection of US imperial expansion and the Atlantic market economy? How did elites seek to establish order among the slaves and rabble in a compact urban core? How was the place of slaves in the city and its terrestrial and maritime conduits informed by the transitions between mercantilism and liberalism, small-scale farming and agro-capitalism, Old World imperialism, and New World republicanism? In short, what do we make of a slave woman with a passport?

Slavery's Metropolis uses slave circulations through New Orleans between 1791 and 1825 to map the social and cultural history of enslaved men and women and the rapidly shifting city, nation, and world in which they lived. In contrast to the prevailing idea that black Atlantic journeys and intimate interracial assemblies were exceptional to or subversive of chattel slavery, this book argues that in New Orleans not only did such

³ I explore Charlotte's story in depth in Chapter 2. See footnotes there for full references.

On changes in jurisdiction and their implications for slave status, see Rebecca Scott, "Paper Thin: Freedom and Re-Enslavement in the Diaspora of the Haitian Revolution," *Law and History Review* 29, no. 4 (2011): 1061–1087; Edlie L. Wong, *Neither Fugitive nor Free: Atlantic Slavery, Freedom Suits, and the Legal Culture of Travel* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

journeys and assemblies exist despite that system of domination, but they were essential to it. A monolithic slaveocracy did not conspire to quarantine bondspersons; rather, slaveholders and local and imperial officials disputed over how to regulate and exploit slave mobility to build the city's infrastructure and industries. Bondspersons used this compulsory mobility to enact their own ideas about their proper place in a burgeoning slave society. So that diverse port situated at the intersection of Atlantic circularity and early American imperial expansion offers a rich vantage point for exploring the history of those multidirectional movements and the race-based containment strategies masters and leaders developed to regulate them. Though the master–slave relationship was a property-based arrangement, over time leaders and masters used law and custom to transform a black phenotype into a proxy for slave status. This book charts the uneven contests over the place of enslaved people in a port city to contribute fresh insights into the geographies of slavery and freedom for men and women, the history of racism, and the malleability of modern power.

This book uses everyday life across lines of empire, color, race, and status to offer a novel analysis of a transformational epoch in world history. In a little over three decades, the United States went from a collection of British colonies to a sovereign and imperialistic “nation among nations.” The Haitian Revolution became a model for black freedom and an omen for the slaveholding Americas. The Louisiana Purchase doubled the nation's territory, accelerated the dispossession of indigenous nations, and hastened Anglo-American settlement in the continental interior. The transatlantic slave trade gave way to a domestic one that met the skyrocketing demand for slaves during the ascendance of King Cotton, strengthened US national sovereignty, and advanced the global industrial economy. The US victory over Britain in the War of 1812 and Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo ushered in a new era in the history of free trade, globalization, and colonialism. And this period stoked a white supremacist ideology that holds power even in the present. Slavery was central to each development, which put enslaved people in a position to advance, interrupt, shape, and talk back to such geopolitical shifts.

Slavery's Metropolis contributes analytical and historical perspectives to three intertwined fields: African diaspora and black Atlantic studies, cultural studies of American empire, and Louisiana history. First, the book proposes a novel analytical framework, “confined cosmopolitanism,” that extends recent scholarship on the geographies of slavery and freedom in the

United States and the black Atlantic. Ex-slave, abolitionist, and orator Frederick Douglass declared, “people in general will say they like colored men as well as any other, *but in their proper place!*”⁴ While Douglass likely referred to status, social and geographic positions are intertwined. Space is not a blank slate or an inert setting over which time acts. Rather, over time people produce places through lived experience even as those places shape people’s daily lives. As such, contests over place-making offer unique insight into historical processes.⁵ For example, auction blocks, whether the centerpiece of an elaborate pen or a slipshod arrangement of wood or stone no more massive than a milk crate, were a trader’s showroom and a buyer’s prospecting place. For those who mounted it, the auction block was a shattering space. Strangers gathered at that one physical place for a transaction that deepened their social and economic distance from one another.⁶

Slavery studies is heavily indebted to historian Stephanie Camp, whose groundbreaking *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday*

⁴ Frederick Douglass, “The Church and Prejudice” (speech given to the Plymouth County Anti-Slavery Society in Plymouth, County, Massachusetts on November 4, 1841), in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, eds. Philip S. Foner and Yuval Taylor (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 3–4, 4, emphasis original.

⁵ As geographers and environmental historians have long insisted, people and places act on each other in contingent and competing ways. For example, New Orleans owes its existence as much to the rhythmic silt deposits carried by the Mississippi River as to the decision by early French urban planners to situate the city atop a “natural” levee. Geographers have long debated the relationship between space and place. For some, space is the “empty” terrain on which places are built. For others, place connotes the varied and distinctive landscapes associated with the pre-modern past while space refers to the homogenous or uniform landscapes of modernity and the future. In this book, I am interested in the ways that people “produced” places consistent with their competing visions of present and future society. I will generally use “space” to refer to conceptual or analytical schemas, whether those belonging to the historical actors or to me, and I will use “place” to refer to the concrete, material structures and sites that these actors produced and inhabited. On the shifting meanings of space and place in geography, see John A. Agnew, “Space and Place,” in *The Handbook of Geographical Knowledge*, eds. John A. Agnew and David N. Livingstone (London: Sage Publications, 2011), 316–330. Important works on space and place in New Orleans history include Lawrence N. Powell, *The Accidental City: Improvising New Orleans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Building the Devil’s Empire: French Colonial New Orleans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Ari Kelman, *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

⁶ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

Resistance in the Plantation South analyzes the ways that masters and slaves competed over physical space. Rural slave masters, Camp argues, sought to contain slave movement within a “geography of containment,” such as fields, housing quarters, and any other space subject to the master’s will. Through fences and slave patrols, pass systems and surveillance, they enacted power by containing their slaves. In response, enslaved men and women created a “rival geography” or the “alternative ways of knowing and using plantation and southern space that conflicted with planters’ ideals and demands.” The rival geography consisted of appropriated plantation space, and the areas to which truant and escaped slaves fled. These competing geographies, she argues, were one terrain in the ongoing struggles between masters and slaves that lasted through emancipation.⁷

While Camp focuses on rural plantations, her insights into the relationship between space and power apply to more capacious and dynamic geographies of slavery and resistance. Though most enslaved people lived, labored, and died on rural plantations, which were the primary sites of staple production, they were not the only contested space of Atlantic slavery. Rural plantations belonged to global geographies of capital and power that connected the African continental interior to the Atlantic, American plantations and mines to European capitals. Trade routes, wars, and displacement in the African interior supplied captives for the coastal trade. Elmina, Gorée, and other slave castles housed human cargo, sometimes for over a year until they passed through doors of no return. After kidnappers stole Olaudah Equiano (c. 1745–1797) from his home he spent years as a captive in West Africa before he embarked upon the Middle Passage and later became a famed sailor and abolitionist. Millions lived and died on the salty Atlantic waters. Those who survived then mounted auction blocks to be scattered across the plantations, ships, mines, and households of the Americas. And after they arrived in port cities like New Orleans and their rural environs, bondspersons maintained “simultaneity” with the Atlantic World through heterogeneous assemblages and urban and rural migrations. Slaves were “citizens of the world.”⁸

⁷ Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 6–7.

⁸ On the Middle Passage and the remaking of Atlantic communities, see Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*

Transnational lives demand transnational histories. The analytical framework “confined cosmopolitanism,” I argue, illuminates the global “geographies of containment” that masters hoped would bring land and sea, urban cores, and rural hinterlands into a single geography of Atlantic slavery, and the global “geographies of resistance” that enslaved men and women used to challenge it. It applies the conceptual frameworks pioneered by theorists of the black Atlantic to the populations often addressed by social historians of African diasporic slavery. This phrase “confined cosmopolitanism” may seem paradoxical, since everyday usage of “cosmopolitanism” calls to mind wealthy, educated, or otherwise privileged individuals, many of them male, who comfortably hop from place and place. I hope to subvert this assumption. In New Orleans, enslaved men and women had likely circulated through up to four regions – Africa, continental North America, the Caribbean, and Europe – and belonged, however unequally, to diverse communities of strangers.⁹ As recent scholarship shows, slaves manipulated space on and beyond plantations to build complex communities, escape, and revolt.¹⁰ But what about slave movement that was not the result of slaves’ attempts to find freedom, but instead the result of masters’ efforts to build their own wealth and power? Rather than mark plantations as containment spaces and everything beyond as latent freedom spaces,

(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998); John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998 [1992]).

⁹ Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Recent spatial histories of slavery and freedom include Vincent Brown, “Slave Revolt in Jamaica, 1760–1761: A Cartographic Narrative,” <http://revolt.axismaps.com>, accessed January 10, 2014; Thadious Davis, *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, and Literature* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Anthony E. Kaye, *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). On maritime marronage, see Jorge L. China, “Diasporic Marronage: Some Colonial and Intercolonial Repercussions of Overland and Waterborne Slave Flight, with Special Reference to the Caribbean Archipelago,” *Revista Brasileira do Caribe* 10, no. 19 (July–December 2009): 259–284; Linda M. Rupert, “Marronage, Manumission and Maritime Trade in the Early Modern Caribbean,” *Slavery & Abolition* 30, no. 3 (2009): 361–382.

I am instead interested in how, under particular conditions, the entire world could become slave space.¹¹

An Atlantic perspective on containment geographies contributes to the history of women and gender by disrupting the association between mobility and masculinity and by emphasizing the contingent aspects of slave women's circulations. Historians generally argue that male slaves were more likely to be "hired out," or leased, while, with few exceptions such as midwives and healers, female laborers occupied domestic and plantation spaces.¹² "Over the course of their lives," one historian writes, "bond-women would leave their home plantations, with permission, extremely rarely."¹³ But in the port city of New Orleans, the geographies of slavery for men and women spanned the plantation south and the Atlantic World. Enslaved women also circulated as nurses, chain gang laborers, and peddlers, which allowed them to gain "geographic literacy" or knowledge of the physical and social terrains of the neighborhoods, regions, nations, and empires that converged in New Orleans.¹⁴ At the same time, such

¹¹ Pioneering works on the black Atlantic include Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Brent Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). Important works on slavery and the African diaspora include James Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*; Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*. Several recent works investigate migrations and the practice of diaspora across slavery and freedom. They include Adam Rothman, *Beyond Freedom's Reach: A Kidnapping in the Twilight of Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Greg Grandin, *The Empire of Necessity: Slavery, Freedom, and Deception in the New World* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014); and James H. Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

¹² On midwives and ritual healers, see Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

¹³ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 28.

¹⁴ Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 161; Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, chapter 2. On geographic literacy, see Phillip Troutman, "Grapevine in the Slave Market," in *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas*, ed. Walter Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 203-233.

circulations rendered them vulnerable to verbal and physical abuse in that notoriously violent port city.¹⁵

Beyond that, this focus on slavery in an Atlantic port city allows us to bring the conventions of land and sea into a single analytical frame. Scholars of the early modern Atlantic World are interested in the ways pirates, sailors, merchants, missionaries, and other such “citizens of the world” carved out unconventional lives and, at times, radical politics on the high seas. This association between the Atlantic World and freedom proves especially strong for the black “Atlantic Creoles,” a term historian Ira Berlin coined to describe the early generation who traveled freely in ways that would later become difficult. As one historian writes, these “Atlantic Creoles” were “extraordinarily mobile, both geographically and socially . . . These were not people who felt constrained by place or defined by slavery. Nor was race their primary identification; that imposition came later.” These daring individuals “repeatedly risked danger, found an opening, seized the moment, and freed themselves.” This relationship between Atlantic migration and freedom has proven a durable one, and many recent works show the ingenious lengths to which people of African descent traveled to escape bondage.¹⁶

Yet in its insistence that mobility was integral, not exceptional, to slave life and labor, *Slavery's Metropolis* democratizes and deromanticizes cosmopolitanism and thereby decouples the strong association between mobility and freedom in Atlantic World studies. To be sure, transnational migration afforded some bondspersons an escape from or alternative to the hierarchies of slavery and nation. From the moment of their arrival in the Americas, people of African descent crossed national borders to join

¹⁵ On slave women peddlers in Charleston, see Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 178–183.

¹⁶ Jane Landers, *Atlantic Creoles in the Age of Revolutions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 13. According to Ira Berlin, many Atlantic Creoles were predominately male African and African diasporic merchants, *gens de mer*, free blacks, and black landowners who enjoyed broad life possibilities before the lines between slave and free, black and white became more fixed in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Jane Landers extends Berlin's Atlantic Creole framework to the Spanish Gulf Coast and circum-Mexican Gulf. Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003); Rebecca J. Scott and Jean M. Hébrard, *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

indigenous communities and to form maroon nations. The continued resonance of the Underground Railroad and the North Star as powerful symbols of the African-American experience is a testament to the enduring association between migration and black freedom. But for the vast majority of Africans in the early modern black Atlantic, migration brought them closer to bondage. The stories of slaves in motion across, between, and within physical, social, and imperial borders remind us of the possibilities and, more often, limits of migration and other such spatial fixes to structural hierarchies in the Global South.¹⁷

In addition to its exploration of slavery's Atlantic geographies this book also investigates the contingent local and imperial efforts to create a rational race regime in a city legendary for disorder. Both Napoleon Bonaparte and Thomas Jefferson saw in Louisiana the solution to the challenges that confronted their respective imperial ambitions. After the Seven Years War (1756–1763), republican revolutions upended thirteen British Northern American colonies, France, and the French Caribbean. At the same time, the Age of Revolution was the age of African slave importation. According to some estimates, the enslaved population in Spanish Louisiana nearly quadrupled from 5,600 in 1766 to 20,673 in 1788.¹⁸ Napoleon Bonaparte envisioned for Louisiana a plantation economy to support his efforts to avenge France's defeat in the Seven Years

¹⁷ Philosophers and intellectual historians have long debated the connections between cosmopolitan or universal moralities and particular interests. Even before philosopher Immanuel Kant elaborated on the concept in his influential 1795 essay *Perpetual Peace*, the word “cosmopolitanism” has situated the universal realm as an antidote to the narrow prejudices and hierarchies of home. Cosmopolitanism as a moral project, however, is beyond my scope. Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Essay*, trans. M. Campbell Smith (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co. Lim, 1903). Recent works that interrogate cosmopolitanisms in the black Atlantic include Emmanuel C. Eze, *Achieving Our Humanity: The Idea of the Postracial Future* (New York: Routledge, 2001), chapter 3; Ifeoma C. K. Nwankwo, “‘Charged with Sympathy for Haiti’: Harnessing the Power of Blackness and Cosmopolitanism in the Wake of the Haitian Revolution,” in *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean*, ed. Doris Garraway (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 91–112; Pnina Webster, “Vernacular Cosmopolitanism,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, nos. 2–3 (May 2006): 496–498; K. Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006); Clifford Geertz, “What Is a Country If It Is Not a Nation?” *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 4 (1997): 235–247. On deromanticizing black history, see Clarence Walker, *Deromanticizing Black History: Critical Essays and Reappraisals* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991).

¹⁸ Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 278, 284–285.

War and the Haitian Revolution. He planned to re-enslave the rebellious blacks in Saint-Domingue, return them to cash-cropping agriculture or deport them to Louisiana, and sustain the tiny Caribbean island with staples imported from Louisiana. When anticolonial and antislavery forces in Saint-Domingue defended their revolution, Napoleon sold Louisiana to his archenemy Great Britain's other Atlantic rival: Thomas Jefferson's United States.¹⁹

To Jefferson, New Orleans was central to US geopolitical interests. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, published in 1785, he rightly predicted the Mississippi River would become "one of the principal channels of future commerce for the country west of the Allegheny." It would convey goods from the continental interior out to European markets. In addition, Louisiana promised a peaceable solution to the divisive slavery question that threatened national unity from the start. Jefferson and others thought slavery would decline. By the 1770s, only South Carolina and Georgia had expanding plantation economies, and by 1804 seven of the original states had either abolished slavery outright or instituted gradual emancipation schemes. Jefferson hoped reproduction and geography would lead to a similar result in Louisiana. As Anglo-American settlers migrated west, he calculated, they would take the nation's slaves with them. The "diffusion" of the slave population over space and the presumed superior rates of white reproduction over time would lead to the gradual and, for masters in the Old South, profitable disappearance of blacks and, by extension, slavery in the early republic.²⁰

¹⁹ Laurent Dubois, "The Haitian Revolution and the Sale of Louisiana," *Southern Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (2007): 18–41. On Saint-Domingue, see Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004).

²⁰ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. Frank Shuffelton (New York: Penguin Books, 1999 [orig. published 1785]), 9. On slavery and Jefferson's vision for American empire in the era of the Louisiana Purchase, see Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 30–35; Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Walter Johnson, "The Racial Origins of American Sovereignty," *Raritan* 31, no. 3 (Winter 2012): 50–59; Roger G. Kennedy, *Mr. Jefferson's Lost Cause: Land, Farmers, Slavery, and the Louisiana Purchase* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). On whiteness in the early republic, see Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1990).