Fragile Empire

Fragile Empire reinterprets the rise of slavery in the early English tropics through an innovative geographic framework. It examines slavery at English sites in tropical zones across the Atlantic and Indian oceans and argues that a variety of factors – epidemiology, slave majorities, European rivalries, and the power of indigenous polities – made the seventeenth-century English tropical empire particularly fragile, creating a model of empire in the tropics that was distinct from other English colonizations. English people across the tropics were outnumbered by their slaves. English slavery was forged in the tropics and it was increasingly marked by its permanence, inflexibility, and brutality. Early English societies were not the inevitable precursor to British imperial dominance; instead, they were wrought with internal vulnerabilities and they faced external threats from European and non-European competitors. Based on thorough archival research, Justin Roberts' important new study redefines our understanding of slavery and bound labor from a global perspective.

Justin Roberts is Associate Professor of History at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. He is the author of *Slavery and the Enlightenment in the British Atlantic, 1750–1807* and has published numerous articles on racism and plantation slavery.

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Slavery in the Early English Tropics, 1645–1720

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For Alicia and Winter

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Acknowledgments

This book gave me a deeper understanding of slavery in a broader global context, but it took a decade of my life. The book devoured my attention through a courtship and marriage to my wife, Alicia O'Leary, a worldwide pandemic, and the birth and early life of our daughter, Winter Roberts. My family had far too many adventures without me while I spent months researching and writing at foreign archives and on fellowships and weekends and late nights at home poring through digitized manuscript sources, trying to learn more about the many places I address in this book. I owe Alicia and Winter my deepest gratitude for their support and patience. I also owe them far more of my time and undivided attention now that this book is done. I intend to pay that debt in the decades to come.

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An early portion of this project was published in *Early American Studies* (*EAS*) as "'Corruption of the Air': Yellow Fever and Malaria in the Rise of English Caribbean Slavery" (see *Early American Studies*, 20 no. 4 [Fall, 2022]: 653–672). That article has been adapted and extensively revised for this book, but some passages from it still appear in Chapter 4. I would like to thank the editors of *EAS* and the University of Pennsylvania Press for granting me permission to incorporate some revised passages from that article into this book.

Note on Spelling and Dates

The spelling in names and the quotations in original sources have been left largely unaltered, although some superficial changes have been made to make original quotations easier to read (e.g. "slaue" has been changed to "slave"). Abbreviations have sometimes been expanded (e.g. "wch" changed to "which") to aid in clarity. In any decisions about slight modifications, the maintenance of the original text and any ambiguities that may have existed in that text have been prioritized.

All of the dates are as they appear in the original sources with the exception of the years. Before 1752, the British used the Julian (Old Style) calendar and considered March 25 the start of the new year. Dual dating of the years, acknowledging both January 1 and March 25 as the start of a new year, was common before 1752. The years referred to in this text and cited in the footnotes have been revised and modernized throughout for consistency to accord with the January 1 start date for the new year of the post-1752 Gregorian (New Style) calendar. All dual dating has been eliminated.

Note on Language

Sensitivity to language has always been an important part of the craft of writing history. Historians of slavery have made renewed efforts in recent years to avoid writing about enslaved people or the institution itself with the language used by enslavers.[1] They are becoming more sensitive to the ethics of using of certain historical terms and to the ethics of relying on traditional methodologies and archives to uncover the histories of the enslaved. Some scholars have chosen to use terms such as "enslaved" rather than "slave" and "enslaver" rather than "master" in order to reinforce the humanity of enslaved people and to avoid invoking or echoing the brutal ideologies that served to label a group of human beings as objects or things.

"Slave," in particular, has always been a charged and contested term. It is a word that has been cast about rhetorically to emphasize an extreme degree of exploitation or an abuse of power. American revolutionaries, for example, used the term freely to describe their political subjugation to what they saw as British tyranny.[2] Yet, "slave" is also a word that has

[1] For recent examples, see Simon Newman, *Freedom Seekers: Resistance to Slavery in Restoration London* (London: University of London Press, 2022), xi–xiv; Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy, "Silence and Violence in the Archive of Slavery," *English Language Notes* 59, no. 1 (2021): 222–224; and Marisa J. Fuentes, "Slavery's Archive and the Matter of Black Atlantic Lives," *English Language Notes* 59, no. 1 (April 2021): 229–231. For a fuller discussion of the concerns being raised about archives in the historiography of slavery, see Trevor Burnard, *Writing Early America: From Empire to Revolution* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2023), 11–13, 67–69.

[2] Peter A. Dorsey, *Common Bondage: Slavery as Metaphor in Revolutionary America* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2009); Joshua Fogarty Beatty, "'The Fatal

often been avoided or elided to avoid conflict, reshape more palatable pasts, or disguise the coercion and oppression of people. Enslavers and their descendants and allies, uncomfortable about the institution, have sometimes avoided the term. As Steven Mintz explained, "The word 'slave' does not appear in the United States Constitution. The framers consciously avoided the word, recognizing that it would sully the document."[3] In contrast, in the twenty-first century there are people who deliberately use the term "slave" because of its charged connotations. "White Slaves" memes have spread rapidly across social media. These memes have appropriated the label "slave" and the violence it connotes and loosely applied that label of "slave" to European convicts and indentured servants, particularly the Irish. This is a deliberate effort to downplay the uniqueness of the racial violence of Afro-African enslavement and its legacy. This "white slaves" narrative is part of a critique of European servitude in the Americas that extends back to the seventeenth century, but it has been advanced with renewed vigor in recent years. Unfortunately, that narrative has often been used to justify nefarious political agendas.[4]

Historians need to confront the brutality and mundane violence of slavery directly. This is a challenging endeavor. We are faced with difficult choices. It is important to be able to fully convey the realities of the period. Words such as "slave" or "master" have deep historical roots and complicated meanings. They shock us because of the sensibilities of the people who used them, sensibilities that seem so alien in the modern world. Historical terms such as these serve as entry points into understanding the past. It is the duty of the historian to explain what these words both denoted and connoted in a given context and what they meant at that time to the enslaver, the enslaved, and to the societies in which those masters and slaves struggled against one another. To use these words is to avoid the

Year': Slavery, Violence, and the Stamp Act of 1765," (PhD Dissertation, College of William and Mary, 2014).

[3] Steven Mintz, "Historical Context: The Constitution and Slavery," *History Resources*, Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/teaching-resource/historical-context-constitution-and-slavery (accessed August 2023).

[4] Liam Hogan, "Two Years of the 'Irish Slaves' Myth: Racism, Reductionism and the Tradition of Diminishing the Transatlantic Slave Trade," *Open Democracy: Free Thinking for the World* (November 7, 2016): https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/two-years-of-irish-slaves-myth-racism-reductionism-and-tradition-of-diminis/ (accessed May 2019). For a collection of memes posted about "Irish Slaves" between 2014 and 2016, see Liam Hogan, "But the Irish Were Slaves Too," https://theirishwereslavestoo-blog.tumblr.com/ (accessed May 2021).

dangers of anachronism. The careful use of these terms, properly contextualized, allows us as historians to get closer to understanding and explaining the realities of the past. That work involves grounding such terms in a specific historical setting, which helps us to better define the terms and prevent their misuse or loose application. We need to ensure that words such as "slave" are applied to the appropriate context. One can use these terms without reifying the ideologies undergirding the institution of slavery, and one can do so without necessarily undermining any efforts to humanize the people held in bondage. Anglo-American abolitionists, for example, fought to convey the humanity of the enslaved and eradicate the institution while still using the terms "master" and "slave." They used these terms without endorsing the institution.

"Master" is a particularly important historical term to use when describing seventeenth-century English relationships. Masters were conceptualized as the patriarchal head of households in a world in which asymmetrical dependencies and power imbalances were the norm. "Master" within the seventeenth-century English empire was a term that denoted legal and social power over a "family" that could include a variety of subordinate people, including slaves. It is important to convey the complicated social relationships and hierarchies within these patriarchal systems by using and unpacking the term "master." "Enslaver" is a much more limited term than "master." In some contexts, it can be synonymous with the word "master," but that is not always the case. "Enslaver" may be used to reinforce the idea that enslaving was an active process over an individual whose identity cannot be fully subsumed under the word "slave," but "enslaver" needs to be reserved for specific contexts and specific relationships. By using "enslaver" exclusively, we risk conveying an all too simplistic and binary discussion of hierarchical relationships in the past. We may fail to uncover the nuances of asymmetrical dependencies in the past.

In this book, I will use a range of terms to reinforce the stark brutality and objectification that accompanies the condition of slavery while still trying to underscore the humanity of the enslaved. By selectively using, explaining, and interrogating historical terms, I will better be able to reconstruct the past. I will use "slave" as well as "enslaved" and "master" as well as "enslaver." I will try to avoid anachronisms while still demonstrating the humanity of the enslaved.