Reparative Semantics: On Slavery and the Language of History

History happens on the internet, and so does historiography. In recent years, scholars and lay commentators alike have advocated an alternative vocabulary for describing the historical violence of racial slavery. We should substitute "enslavement" for "slavery"; "enslaved person" for "slave"; "enslaver" for "slave owner" or "slaveholder"; "slave labor camp" for "plantation"; "freedom-seeking" or "self-emancipated" for "fugitive." These arguments have been advanced by public history and educational organizations, governmental agencies, and scholarly organizations—all aiming to address (and perhaps redress) the legacies of Atlantic slavery by centering questions of language. From this perspective, the oft-cited "power" or "importance" of language resides precisely in its capacity to inflict or alleviate harm. But this all-too-neat categorization of right and wrong, good and bad terms and phrases actually underestimates the power of language by insisting upon its moral and semantic stability. Language is far too dynamic and slippery a medium to serve as foundation for such broad normative claims. This move to revise our collective historical vocabulary, moreover, introduces as many complications as it seeks to resolve. In what follows, then, I aim merely to question the assumptions that undergird arguments for what I call *reparative semantics* and, in so doing, illuminate some of the historiographical problems that arise in the process.

First, we should endeavor to understand the arguments for reparative semantics on their own terms. The preference for "enslaved person" over "slave," for example, is most often framed as a question of humanity or personhood. The phrase "enslaved person," that is, supposedly acknowledges or restores the full humanity of the enslaved, whereas the term "slave" is objectifying, commodifying, or dehumanizing. "Slave" evacuates the personhood of historical subjects, signifying instead a totalizing identity altogether outside the realm of the human. In this sense, the phrase "enslaved person" is meant to stake a quasi-metaphysical claim: Those who were enslaved were not merely "slaves," they were fully complex persons victimized by the institution of slavery. "Enslaved person" recognizes the complete humanity of the enslaved by detaching it from slave status. (It is worth noting that similar developments are taking place with respect to non-English languages. In Spanish, for example, *esclavo* might be replaced by *esclavizado*; in Portuguese, *escravo* by *escravizado*. Some speakers of French, meanwhile, have adopted the neologism *esclavasigé*.)

The preference for "enslaver" over "slave owner" or "slaveholder" works in similar ways. The former intends to emphasize the violent practices and processes that constituted racial slavery while deemphasizing the seeming neutrality of identity markers like "owner" or "master." The latter terms, that is, function as little more than historiographical euphemisms obscuring the mundane forms of brutality to which the enslaved were subjected. This focus on historical process likewise bolsters the argument for using "enslavement" in the place of "slavery"—where one highlights how individual historical actors promulgated racial slavery and its attendant ideologies, the other suggests a kind of transhistorical phenomenon that operates of its own accord. Phrases like "freedom-seeking" or "self-emancipated" individuals, moreover, stress the agency of the enslaved where "fugitive" assumes the perspective of slaveholding legal regimes. Finally, the use of "slave labor camp" aims to supplant "plantation," tinged as it is by a certain nostalgia for the "moonlight and magnolias" paternalism of the Old South.

As we can see, these are perfectly legitimate reasons to abandon one terminology for another. Still, I think the above arguments should give us pause. This is not to take issue with the use of terms like "enslavement," "enslaved person," or "enslaver"—all of which I use periodically in my own scholarship—but rather to question the normative argument that this language produces a more rigorous, righteous, or politically efficacious approach to the historiography of slavery.

Let's consider the phrase "enslaved person." First, there is the issue of the presumed equation of "slave" with an "identity." I would be surprised if any scholar or student of slavery considered "identity" an appropriate term to describe what was in fact a legal *status* and social *condition*. Proponents of reparative semantics advocate a turn away from the term "slave" as a marker of identity, though it remains unclear whether anyone has made such an assertion in the first place. Second, suggesting that those enslaved in the African diaspora were not in fact "slaves" easily slips into a kind of social

constructivism whereby “slavery” did not happen at all. That is, the argument goes, it is impossible truly to make any person a “slave” because their essential humanity cannot be extinguished: People are not “slaves,” they can only be “enslaved.” (This rhetoric seems especially risky at a time when myths of Irish or white “slavery” persist online and new conspiracy theories spread unabated—for example, that the Middle Passage never occurred because people of African descent are indigenous to North America.) Removing “slave” from our historical terminology implies that slavery is ultimately a state of being rather than a matter of law or social practice. In other words, “slave” is an ontological condition rather than the outcome of observable social and legal processes by which persons come to assume or inherit the status of “slave.” One could certainly make the former claim, but it would not be a historical one. Arguing that people cannot be “slaves” renders ever more difficult the task of understanding how that history itself unfolded.

Second, this claim arguably leads us to misunderstand the history of slavery as a process of reducing *persons* to *nonpersons*. As I have shown elsewhere, it is commonplace to describe slavery as the “commodification” or “dehumanization” of enslaved people. We often take for granted, for example, that slaves were nonpersons in the eyes of the law—or, as Saidiya Hartman has notably argued, that slaves’ legal personhood was only legible as criminality. This particular framing is troublesome on two fronts. First, it neglects a rich body of scholarship on the comparative law of slavery, which has demonstrated how distinct legal regimes in African, Iberian, Francophone, Dutch, and Anglo-American contexts, respectively, constructed and perpetuated enslavement as an institution and practice. If we know, for example, that Iberian and Dutch legal regimes—which shared a common ancestor in Roman canon law—endowed slaves with certain rights and obligations unavailable in Anglo-American contexts, then to insist that the slave is definitionally a legal *nonperson* is to privilege the latter over the former. This perspective thereby reifies a nationalist framework belying the truly global character of Atlantic slavery. Taking #VastEarlyAmerica seriously as an interpretive framework requires shirking the tendency to subsume diverse colonial histories to an Anglo-American model. And second, even if we limited our analysis to the United States or broader Anglo-American sphere, crucial work by historians including Laura Edwards, Ariela Gross, Martha Jones, Dylan Penningroth, and Kimberly Welch, among others, has revealed a deep history of American slaves’ legal claims-making in spite of their alleged lack of “legal personality.”

While rhetorically appealing, I would venture that this manner of conceptualizing history fundamentally misconstrues the historical dynamics of enslavement: Rather than seeking to extinguish the humanity of its victims, slavery rather invests in, and relies upon, their human capacity for suffering. As scholars across history and literary studies—including Walter Johnson, Christopher Freeburg, Jeannine DeLombard, and myself—have argued, we might yet frame our approach to the history of slavery not as the restoration of personhood to the enslaved, but as the recognition that enslaved personhood was the very basis of that system. (Indeed, recent philosophical and social

scientific work suggests that similar forms of historical violence are predicated upon the humanity of its victims, not the deprivation thereof.)

Figure 1: Debates over proper uses of “slave” and “enslaved person” often hinge on questions of enslaved humanity. Proponents of the latter term insist that it acknowledges and restores personhood otherwise evacuated by the former. Scholars of slavery continue to debate, however, whether the institution of slavery denied or depended upon the humanity of its victims. Unknown author, “Daguerreotype of Caesar — A Slave; 1851,” public domain, *via Wikimedia Commons*.

In her recent book *Breathe: A Letter to My Sons* (2019), cultural critic and legal scholar Imani Perry tackles this very question. “People say that white people did not think Black people were fully human during slavery. And sometimes they still say that today,” Perry writes. “I have never believed that was true. Having studied the law of slavery, it is very clear to me that in the antebellum period white people knew Black people were absolutely human. . . . To be treated as other than human when you are human is not a mistake or a flaw; it is a sin without excuse.”

Further, the ethical injunction to substitute “enslaved person” for “slave” actually contains and relies upon the very claim it seeks to refute. That is, in order for the term “enslaved” to recover the personhood of the slave, we must first presuppose that the term “slave” expunges said personhood. The claim that the “slave” is a nonperson is, perhaps in an ironic twist, made most forcefully by the exhortation to replace that term with a better one. Finally, I think we should be wary of purporting to “restore” or “recover” the humanity of the enslaved. As Walter Johnson has noted, this approach assumes that said humanity needs to be discovered or recovered in the first place rather than taken as a given. It also places the scholar, historian, or writer in an almost heroic position—excavating enslaved personhood from beneath the depths of racist historiography. I cannot help but wonder if, in doing so, we are giving

ourselves too much credit. It often seems that the case for reparative semantics is more about us and our politics than it is about the historical questions that occasion it. Does the shift from “slave” to “enslaved person” help us think more clearly about the history of slavery, or does it function—as Johnson might caution—as a mere “advertisement of good will”?

Similar problems arise when we consider other semantic substitutions. The term “enslaver,” for instance, often obscures the very historical phenomena it aims to make legible. Indeed, the term can be and has been used to describe any number of individuals and groups involved in slavery and the slave trade: merchants who purchased and sold slaves; ship captains and crew who held them captive; auctioneers who ran slave markets; slave traders who acted on behalf of wealthy planters; overseers on plantations throughout the Americas; managers who ran plantations for absentee estate holders; banks and firms that financed those plantations; institutions and other corporate bodies that owned slaves; and more. Put simply, the broad use of “enslaver” consolidates numerous social actors into a single, ahistorical abstraction. Many so-called “enslavers” did not, after all, own any slaves. To collapse these various social positions into a single identifier is to risk misunderstanding how they together constituted a global slaving system.

More specifically, the terms “enslaver” and “enslavement” are commonly used in an African context to denote the process by which people are brought into the system of slavery—through kidnapping or warfare, for example. From this Africanist perspective, which remains marginalized in studies of slavery and the Atlantic world more broadly, “enslavement” is not synonymous with the institution of chattel slavery. One precedes the other. Other terminological alternatives bring their own complications. While some advocate using the phrase “kidnapped Africans,” several historians note that kidnapping was only one of several means by which African people were enslaved. And while others urge that the Atlantic slave trade should be referred to as “trafficking,” we must yet recognize that “trafficking” denotes illegal activity. For several centuries, however, the Atlantic slave trade was very much not illegal (even if we wish it had been). In this case, opting for what might seem a more accurate word is actually less accurate—and thus obscures historical fact by foregrounding our own contemporary political concerns.

Figure 2: Is “enslavement” the same thing as “slavery”? From an Africanist perspective, the two terms are not synonymous. Enslavement usually refers to the historical processes by which free people become forced into slavery. For scholars of the African diaspora, then, this term marks the distinction between practices of slaving—for example, through kidnapping or warfare—and chattel slavery in the Americas. Unknown author, “A Coffle of Slaves Being Driven on Foot from Staunton, Virginia, to Tennessee in 1850, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, Virginia,” public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

The descriptors “self-emancipated” and “freedom-seeking,” meanwhile, seem to privilege individual enactments of fugitive agency while arguably obscuring how those very same acts were enabled by necessarily collective networks of secrecy, solidarity, and sociality. The use of “slave labor camp” also has complex political ramifications. The phrase is most commonly used to describe Nazi concentration camps, as well as Soviet gulags. These historical analogues have indeed been crucial to the historiography of slavery. In his landmark (if timeworn) *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (1959), for example, Stanley Elkins attempted to understand the plantation as an institution through contemporary social-psychological research on Nazi camps. Much recent work on trauma and memory—both critical issues in African diaspora studies—also traces its disciplinary roots to the field of Holocaust studies. If “slave labor camp” evokes a broader, trans-temporal framework for analyzing global forms of forced labor, then it also has the effect of de-emphasizing the historical novelty and specificity of Atlantic slavery.

Figure 3: This image of a Brazilian sugar mill strikingly contrasts oft-romanticized images of paternalistic and pastoral American plantations. Describing these sites as "slave labor camps" aims to highlight the dangerous, difficult, and highly technical work performed by the enslaved, but also risks eliding crucial historical distinctions between Atlantic slavery and other forms of forced labor under Nazi and Soviet regimes. "Sugar Mill, Brazil, 1816," *Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora*, accessed October 22, 2021, http://slaveryimages.org/s/slaveryimages/item/2901.

In closing, I want to think more specifically about the "power" and "importance" of language in matters of historiographical debate. Arguments for reparative semantics insist that "slave" and "enslaved person" necessarily have contrary significations: The one is a nonperson wholly defined by enslavement, whereas the other is a fully complex person victimized by enslavement. Substituting the latter term for the former thus aims to replace one concept with another. Insofar as "enslaved person" functions as a corrective for the term "slave," however, it arguably signifies merely its own semantic substitution. That is, rather than index a fuller conception of enslaved humanity, the phrase "enslaved person" might in fact signify the replacement of one term by another. In this case, language refers not to an historical object or concept but to itself; the given term or phrase does not produce a more ethical historical framework but instead reflects the semantic process by which such a framework is sought. Put simply, these correctives can refer to *us* more so than they refer to the historical subjects about whom we think and write.

The "power" of language resides not in its stability but in its contingency. We can urge that "enslaved person" is more ethical than "slave" on the grounds that it disaggregates personhood and enslavement. But what to make of its use of the passive voice? Some commentators have similarly suggested that "slave" should be replaced by "victim of enslavement." I wonder here what is to be gained by describing the enslaved always with reference to their victimization. And while others stress that terms like "enslaved person," "enslaver," and "enslavement" more forcefully represent the violence of racial slavery, I remain ambivalent about our own normative investments in this representation of violence. On what grounds does this emphasis on violence make us better

students and scholars? Is the value of our thinking and writing certified by the degree of historical violence borne by our language? Does this corrective terminology help us think better, or does it merely make us feel better? If the latter, we should reflect long and hard about why our own moral standing remains founded upon the re-inscription of violence against the enslaved.

In parsing these questions, I am reminded of Katherine McKittrick's assertion that "description is not liberation." "As we see from the work of many scholars of black studies, the liberatory task is not to measure and assess the unfree—and seek consolation in naming violence," McKittrick writes, "but to posit that many divergent and different and relational voices of unfreedom are analytical and intellectual sites that can tell us something new about our academic concerns and our anticolonial futures." Language is central to the task of historical analysis, and the project of reckoning with our shared legacy of slavery will never be easy. Nearing this ethical imperative is made all the more difficult by the traps we set along the way.

Further Reading

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