Mapping a Slave Revolt

Visualizing Spatial History through the Archives of Slavery

Vincent Brown

Historians must always contend with questions about the uses of archives and archival sources in the making of history. Even the most conservative practitioners of the craft acknowledge that our sources are artifacts of complex processes rather than transparent reflections of past worlds; archival traces must therefore be interpreted with great care. However, when we shift our emphasis from historical recovery to rigorous and responsible creativity, we recognize that archives are not just the records bequeathed to us by the past; archives also consist of the tools we use to explore it, the vision that allows us to read its signs, and the design decisions that communicate our sense of history's possibilities.

The historical geography of enslavement offers few sure routes to dependable knowledge. Searching archival records and the historiography of slavery for insights into enslaved experience often makes us feel as if we are facing the void: absence, silence, negation, death, perhaps even cultural genocide. But if, as Saidiya Hartman has recognized, "history is how the secular world attends to the dead," then perhaps the silences, absences, and deaths that make up slavery's history give historians a great opportunity and a special responsibility to reimagine what we do and how we do it.[1] New work in what is often dubbed digital humanities accords special prominence to questions of scholarly ingenuity. Historians are increasingly aware of the challenge and opportunity posed by the digital revolution to customary ways of conducting research and presenting findings. The late dramatic expansion of computing power allows for the evaluation of great amounts of data in which previously obscured patterns may now be observed, queried, interpreted, and displayed. This enables the production of graphics that can illustrate some of the contours of social life. When animated by time-based media or laid out within temporal diagrams, such graphics can condense analytical storytelling in the form of data visualizations, setting seemingly static images in motion as historical processes are seen to unfold.[2] This has been a particular interest of mine as one who hopes to represent the history of slavery in media beyond the textual. I believe that only by wrestling imaginatively with difficult archival problems can we hope to find new avenues for pondering and representing history's most painful and vexing subjects.

This happens only when historians put in the creative work. I learned

as much when I attended the "Humanities + Digital: Visual Interpretations Conference" hosted by the HyperStudio at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in May 2010. The event fostered a "cross-disciplinary exploration of the aesthetics, methods, and critiques of information visualization in the humanities, arts, and social sciences."[3] And yet among the impressive array of presentations at the meeting, there was almost no discussion of Africa and its diaspora, slavery, or blackness. While nearly all the participants at the conference recognized that the kinds of information to be visualized indelibly shaped the development of new scholarship, none were prepared to ask how conversations about the history of slavery and its archival sources might affect the future of visual interpretation. Perhaps appropriately, this task was left to scholars of black history prepared to paint more vivid portraits of the past and future.[4]

Europeans often thought of their slave colonies as fundamentally alien places, atavistic spaces of degeneracy and violence comprising a "torrid zone" beyond the boundaries of civilization. Where this imagined geography shaped European self-perceptions and even, to some extent, colonial policy making, it did not even begin to map the actual circuits of consequence in the world of Atlantic slavery. Historians are thus presented with the challenge of charting intelligible patterns in space and time, even while the sources we study inscribe mystifying geographical distinctions, producing silences in the way we discuss the landscapes of the past.

In *Silencing the Past* (1995), the anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot explained how everyday understandings of *history* encapsulate both the process of change over time and its representation. "Both the facts of the matter and a narrative about those facts, both 'what happened' and 'that which is said to have happened.' The first meaning places the emphasis on the sociohistorical process, the second on our knowledge of that process." Trouillot was concerned to show how historical knowledge is produced over time as an artifact of power and how silences in historical understanding result from the creation of sources, the making of archives, the retrieval of events as moments of importance, and the interpretation of retrospective significance.[5] This argument is most often considered in regard to textual narrative, but it applies just as easily to conceptions of historical space.

Fortunately, there has lately been a spatial, even a cartographic emphasis in humanistic and social scientific study that encourages scholars to think more explicitly about how we can represent changing spatial linkages without reverting to the traditional geographic divisions. New historical cartographies allow us to visualize the networks and circuits that define spatial history, which the historian Richard White has succinctly characterized as the study of movements (of people, plants, ani-

mals, goods, and information) over time. With movement, interaction, and transformation, patterns are made and remade. By tracing these patterns, historical analysts can develop a visual language that may recover and illustrate spatial practices and processes. This is a thematic historical cartography, seen less as a technoscientific form of observation than as a rhetorical practice that can define, clarify, and advocate visions of the world that might otherwise go unarticulated. Cartographic visualization can be, says White, a fundamental part of historians' analytical process: a means of doing research, generating questions, and revealing historical relations.[6] New techniques present novel opportunities, but they also highlight the limitations of the archival material they employ.

My own online map of an African insurrection in the Caribbean offers a telling example. *Slave Revolt in Jamaica, 1760–1761: A Cartographic Narrative* (revolt.axismaps.com) interprets the spatial history of the greatest slave insurrection in the eighteenth-century British Empire. Taking advantage of Britain's Seven Years' War against France and Spain, more than a thousand enslaved blacks revolted over the entire course of the uprising, which began on 7 April 1760, in the parish of St. Mary's, and continued until October of the next year. During eighteen months the rebels managed to kill sixty whites and destroy thousands of pounds worth of property. During the suppression of the revolt and the repression that followed, over five hundred black men and women were killed in battle or executed or committed suicide. Another five hundred were transported from the island for life.[7] To teachers and researchers, the cartographic visualization of the revolt offers a carefully curated archive of key documentary evidence. To all viewers, the map suggests an argument about the strategies of the rebels and the tactics of counterinsurgency and about the importance of the landscape to the course of the uprising, and no less important, the project highlights the difficulty of representing such events cartographically with available sources.

Mapping the revolt and its suppression illustrates something that is difficult to glean from simply reading the textual sources. The colonists and imperial officials who produced the historical record were universally unsympathetic to the rebellion, so their writings skew our understanding toward the perspectives of slaveholders. But we learn something else by plotting the combatants' movements in space. Tracing their locations over time, it is possible to discern some of their strategic aims and to observe the tactical dynamics of slave insurrection and counterrevolt.

The uprising encompassed three major phases of sustained action alongside more dispersed and sporadic skirmishes. The first was the rebellion in St. Mary's, generally named Tacky's Revolt after one of its principal African leaders. This was followed by the much larger Westmoreland parish upheaval, which comprised the largest battles of the con-

flict. Finally, survivors of the Westmoreland insurrection trekked across two parishes, raiding estates along the way. These campaigns adapted to environmental constraints. On the windward side of the island—the north side—heavy rainfall and dense vegetation limited movement more than on the leeward side, where the drier climate allowed for greater mobility. Still, within each phase of the rebellion, the routes traveled by the rebels through woods, mountains, hills, swamps, and rivers indicated strategic objectives.

Viewed on the map, the insurrection appears to have been the product of genuine strategic intelligence, one that utilized Jamaica's distinctive geography and aimed toward the creation of alternative enduring societies. Recognizing a real threat to the maintenance of the colony, the British mounted a rapid and diversified response, drawing upon the highly coordinated efforts of the regular military, the haphazard and decentralized tactics of the local militia, and the rough-terrain warfare of Maroon allies, each of which traversed the landscape in distinctive ways.

The project's graphic design articulates its historical interpretation. Composed from several eighteenth-century diagrams, a terrain map and an estate map form the base for the narration, which graphically depicts a chronological database of locations. Contemporary accounts of the revolt—culled from diaries, letters, military correspondence, and newspapers—yielded descriptions of the positions, movements, and engagements of rebels and counterinsurgents. These locations were cross-referenced with multiple sources wherever possible; latitudes and longitudes were then reckoned by correlating the base maps with satellite images. The symbol design, in which fading tracer lines track the movement of units, tries to account for the uncertainty of much of the data. Early iterations of the map featured symbols such as pushpins that inappropriately signified too much clarity. But then blurred circles were confusing. Solid lines tracking movement did not reflect the nature of guerrilla warfare, in which rebels dispersed over the landscape in loose formations and their pursuers hunted rumors and chance sightings. Yet without traces between the points, it became difficult for the map to suggest that the movements were directional. The graphics ultimately attempt to balance intelligibility with ambiguity while maintaining viewers' sense of the interpretive character of the database.

Even as this approach yields new insights, there are significant limitations to plotting a turbulent slave revolt on a map like this. By using British maps that highlight the placement of forts, towns, and estates, our maps tend to reify colonial geography. Even more fundamentally, cartography presumes the natural existence of points on a grid much as history naturalizes the timeline, though these are ultimately folkways for representing space and time that have more in common with slavehold-

ers' epistemes than with those of their slaves. The "rival geographies" of the rebels—their spatial schemas, landmarks and pathways, and sense of temporality—may be irretrievable in cartographic form.[8] Moreover, maps orient viewers by offering an orderly aerial view. But gazing down from above makes it hard to see chaos and confusion, the most essential features of a protracted insurgency. Of course, if this limitation arises from the sources, it also reflects the nature of guerrilla warfare: uncertainty was the rebels' best weapon. For the same reason, quantitative reports must also be taken as impressionistic. Like words, numbers produced during the disorienting events were the products of bewilderment, fear, and rumor. If the map draws a clearer picture of the extent and contours of the insurrection, there are entire worlds that it simply cannot convey.

One might protest that the map is a reification of reifications. We have taken the dead artifacts of slaveholders' accounts and given them artificial life as animated data. How can the cameraman purport to represent experience when taking a photograph of a painting of a statue? This is a fair and difficult question, which I can only answer by admitting that I share the tragic compulsion common to historians of the oppressed: though our accounts of slavery are distorted by the mediation of the sources, we persist in trying to explore and explain its past. Knowing that the truth is a receding horizon, we still set out to close the distance. This impulse urges me toward new methods of research, interpretation, and storytelling. For I am never convinced that historians are not neglecting to explore the full range of available material. Have we learned all we can from our sources? If we care to apply new tools to this effort, what is the best way to achieve fuller understanding? Perhaps we can begin by recognizing two major obstacles: first, the unwarranted certitude of empiricist historians, and second, the fatalism and paralysis of those who think that our inability to know the past with certainty means we cannot learn anything new at all.

Historians' engagements with digital techniques may sharpen our approach to the archives of slavery. Scholars working in subaltern history rarely have the kind of big databases that inspire projects in text mining, topic modeling, or network analysis. And our data are debased, compiled from the records of the slavers, the racists, the exploiters, and their bureaucrats. Yet there may be a virtue to this limitation. We can never confuse our sources for the things they describe, and this encourages us to emphasize their qualitative nature. Without big numbers to crunch, scholars must exploit the potential of digital tools to craft scholarly designs that appreciate the interdependency of interpretive knowledge and aesthetic expression.[9] In this way the constraints of the archive compel more careful attention to the form and function—the design—of our scholarly works.[10]

Scholarly design can function as a method for generating research

questions about the most appropriate symbols for the phenomena under investigation and about how we see relationships and interactions in space and time. Rather than representing reified artifacts, historical visualizations can narrate a humanistic interpretation. Perhaps, then, the best way to discover what happened in the spatial history of slavery is to be more creative in our narration, to allow our knowledge of sociohistorical process to be shaped by new modes of historical storytelling. These novel methods may reach even more people. Web-based history offers remarkable possibilities for wide distribution.[11] However, it is too soon to tell how and what users will learn from these new works. In the digital environment we can be more confident in our roles as researchers and producers than in our duty as teachers.

Maintaining historians' traditional emphasis on primary sources, attention to change over time, historiographical awareness, and an overarching respect for evidence-based claims, we may admit more experimental forms of research and presentation without compromising the veracity of historical study. Such a shift will require a deeper exploration of the relation between graphic expression and historical understanding. As I have argued, this will amplify the importance of design in historical scholarship, perhaps softening a persistent tension between quantitative, interpretive, and artistic approaches. Admittedly, this is less a method than a vision. But it is a vision that might, in time, discover the contours of a counterhistory of space, power, and social life—a past that might otherwise remain silenced.

Notes

1. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 18; see also Gikandi, "Rethinking the Archive of Enslavement."

2. Burdick et al., *Digital_Humanities*; see esp. Rigney, "When the Monograph Is No Longer the Medium"; Cohen and Rosenzweig, *Digital History*; and Weller, *History in the Digital Age*. Over the last few years, I have been working in Harvard University's History Design Studio (historydesignstudio.com) to join a commitment to the professional practice of history with an experimental approach to form and presentation. Our goal is to embed historians' core values and methods in the innovative products of artisanship and craft. Extensive use of primary sources, attention to processes of change over time, keen historiographical awareness, and an overarching respect for evidence form the basis of projects in multimedia storytelling and analysis. Thinking creatively about the design and presentation of our research, we attempt to stretch the canvass of historical scholarship. This work draws inspiration from parallel projects such as the Digital Scholarship Lab at the University of Richmond (dsl.richmond.edu), the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University (chnm.gmu.edu), the Spatial History Project at Stanford University (web.stanford.edu/group/spatialhistory/cgi-bin/site/index.php), and eHistory at the University of Georgia's Center for Virtual History (www.ehistory.org).

3. HyperStudio, "Humanities + Digital: Visual Interpretations Conference 2010"; Bailey, "All the Digital Humanists Are White."

4. For a promising recent theorization of the challenge, see Harrell, *Phantasmal Media*. Also see the online work of Jessica Marie Johnson, especially *Diaspora Hypertext, the Blog* at diasporahypertext.com.

5. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 2.

6. White, "What Is Spatial History?"

7. For eighteenth-century histories of the war and its aftermath, see Long, *History of Jamaica*, 447–72; and Edwards, *History of the West Indies*, 75–79. Recent accounts include Bollettino, "Slavery, War, and Britain's Atlantic Empire," 191–256; Brown, *Reaper's Garden*, 129–56; Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*, 170–74; Hart, *Slaves Who Abolished Slavery*, 130–56; Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 125–39; Reynolds, "Tacky and the Great Slave Revolt of 1760," 5–8; and Schuler, "Ethnic Slave Rebellions," 374–85.

8. "Rival geographies" is Stephanie Camp's terminology, taken from *Closer to Freedom*. On alternative ways of knowing and using space in slave societies, see esp. Camp, *Closer to Freedom*; Kaye, *Joining Places*; and Troutman, "Grapevine in the Slave Market."

9. Drucker, *Graphesis*.

10. As Elizabeth Maddock Dillon stresses in her contribution to this forum.

11. As Claudio Saunt indicates in his contribution to this forum.

References

Bailey, Moya Z. 2011. "All the Digital Humanists Are White, All the Nerds Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave." *Journal of Digital Humanities* 1, no. 1. journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-1/all-the-digital-humanists-are-white-all-the-nerds-are-men-but-some-of-us-are-brave-by-moya-z-bailey/.

Bollettino, Maria Allessandra. 2009. "Slavery, War, and Britain's Atlantic Empire: Black Soldiers, Sailors, and Rebels in the Seven Years' War." PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin.

Brown, Vincent. 2008. *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Brown, Vincent. 2013. *Slave Revolt in Jamaica, 1760–1761: A Cartographic Narrative*. revolt.axismaps.com.

Burdick, Anne, Johanna Drucker, Peter Lunenfeld, Todd Presner, and Jeffrey Schnapp. 2012. *Digital_Humanities*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Burnard, Trevor. 2004. *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

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

Cohen, Daniel J., and Roy Rosenzweig. 2005. *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Craton, Michael. 1982. *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Drucker, Johanna. 2014. *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Edwards, Bryan. 1793. *History of the West Indies*. Vol. 2. London.

Gikandi, Simon. 2015. "Rethinking the Archive of Enslavement." *Early American Literature* 50, no. 1: 81–102.
Harrell, D. Fox. 2014. *Phantasmal Media: An Approach to Imagination, Computation, and Expression*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Hart, Richard. (1985) 2002. *Slaves Who Abolished Slavery: Blacks in Rebellion*. Kingston, Jamaica: University of West Indies Press.
Hartman, Saidiya. 2007. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
HyperStudio. "Humanities + Digital: Visual Interpretations Conference 2010: Aesthetics, Methods, and Critiques of Information Visualization in the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences." Massachusetts Institute of Technology. hyperstudio.mit.edu/events/about/.
Kaye, Anthony. 2009. *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
Long, Edward. 1774. *History of Jamaica*. Vol. 2. London.
Reynolds, C. Roy. 1972. "Tacky and the Great Slave Revolt of 1760." *Jamaica Journal* 6, no. 2: 5–8.
Rigney, Ann. 2010. "When the Monograph Is No Longer the Medium: Historical Narrative in the Online Age." *History and Theory* 49, no. 4: 100–117.
Schuler, Monica. 1970. "Ethnic Slave Rebellions in the Caribbean and the Guianas." *Journal of Social History* 3, no. 4: 374–85.
Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 1995. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press.
Troutman, Phillip. 2004. "Grapevine in the Slave Market: African American Geopolitical Literacy and the 1841 Creole Revolt." In *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas*, edited by Walter Johnson, 203–33. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Weller, Toni. 2012. *History in the Digital Age*. New York: Routledge.
White, Richard. 2010. "What Is Spatial History?" Working Paper, Spatial History Lab. web.stanford.edu/group/spatialhistory/cgi-bin/site/pub.php?id=29.

DOI 10.1215/01642472-3315826