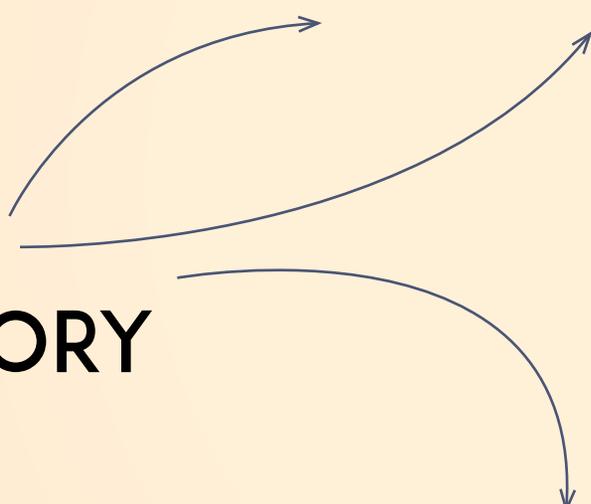


# NEW DIRECTIONS IN CARIBBEAN HISTORY



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The catastrophic 2017 hurricane season, which included two category 5 storms, briefly thrust the islands of the Caribbean to the forefront of the U.S. news cycle. The deadly hurricanes highlighted the Caribbean's heightened vulnerability to weather-related disasters and the devastating effects of climate change. The hurricanes also underscored the fact that the history of the Caribbean—and the region's longstanding ties to the United States—remain obscure to many people living in this country.<sup>1</sup> One week after Hurricane Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico, a poll of 2,200 adults on the U.S. mainland revealed that only 54 percent knew that Puerto Ricans were U.S. citizens.<sup>2</sup> In the U.S. Virgin Islands, residents linked FEMA's delayed relief effort following Hurricane Irma to the islands' political status as an unincorporated territory. As one commentator from St. Thomas remarked, "It's like they forget that we're all Americans."<sup>3</sup>

The lack of historical knowledge about the Caribbean in the United States is not a reflection of the state of the field. Indeed, as I will discuss below, the field of Caribbean history has experienced a remarkable boom over the past two decades. New monographs, articles, and edited volumes abound. Published collections of primary sources have brought together documents from scattered archives for the first time.<sup>4</sup> Ambitious digital initiatives—ranging in scope from single island projects such as the *Puerto Rico Syllabus* to regional repositories such as the Digital Library of the Caribbean—are bringing Caribbeanist scholarship to new audiences.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the outpouring of innovative and important work

produced by historians of the Caribbean remains at the margins of university curricula in the United States. Only a small number of history departments offer Caribbean-focused courses or even identify the Caribbean as a distinct geographic area of specialization. Likewise, in survey courses on U.S. history, the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico receive passing attention. As a result, many undergraduate history majors and graduate students, like the broader U.S. public, have little to no exposure to Caribbean history. The cumulative impact of these erasures is felt both inside and outside of the academy, as the failed response to the recent hurricanes makes clear.

In this essay, I sketch out recent trends in the field of Caribbean history. I focus on scholarly works in three broad subfields: disaster history, histories of slavery and emancipation, and labor and migration history. In doing so, I seek to highlight potential points of intersection between U.S. and Caribbean historiographies, while also demonstrating how Caribbeanist perspectives offer novel insights into enduring historical questions about citizenship, colonialism, and capitalism. Historians of the United States have much to gain by engaging with the burgeoning scholarship on the Caribbean. As the oldest site of European colonialism in the Americas, the Caribbean has figured prominently in studies of slavery and revolution. Recent publications build on foundational studies in the field, while also offering deeply-researched cases studies for contemporary issues ranging from immigration to weather and climate-related disasters.



## STRATIFICATION AND EMPIRE: NEW DISASTER STUDIES

Observers in the islands and rimlands of the Greater Caribbean have long documented the ruinous effects of earthquakes, fires, floods, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, droughts, and other calamities. Historians of the Caribbean, however, have only recently begun to place disasters at the center of their analyses. In a spate of new works—mostly focused on the colonial era—scholars investigate the political, social, and economic consequences of disasters. Central to this literature is an attention to how disasters both restructure the relationships among humans and transform human understandings of the natural world. Studying the impact of disasters before the advent of the modern welfare state, scholars trace how relief and reconstruction efforts mobilized the labor of local communities even as colonists sought assistance from the state. The destruction wrought by disasters, as these recent studies demonstrate, often amplified and entrenched the deep asymmetries of power within colonial Caribbean societies, fueling inequalities that persisted well beyond the recovery period.<sup>6</sup>

Hurricanes loom large in the growing historiography of Caribbean disasters. Recent scholarship by Stuart Schwartz, Sherry Johnson, and Matthew Mulcahy details how hurricanes shaped the processes of European conquest and colonization in the Caribbean. While little is known about how indigenous societies weathered these storms, historians have shown how major tempests frequently disrupted the network of maritime travel and

trade that sustained early European settlement in the Caribbean, wrecking entire fleets and forcing sailors to restrict or reroute their movements. Under Spain's *flota* system, for example, the annual sailing of ships from Havana to the Iberian Peninsula was scheduled to avoid the peak of hurricane season.<sup>7</sup> A series of major hurricanes struck the Leeward Islands and Barbados during the seventeenth century, nearly destroying the first English settlements in the region. The deadly tempests, as Mulcahy explains, "tested colonists' faith that they could dominate and transform American nature."<sup>8</sup> Starting in the mid-eighteenth century El Niño and La Niña cycles produced a fifty-year period of severe drought and hurricane activity in the Caribbean. The climate-induced disasters of this era contributed to the tumult of the Age of Revolution, highlighting the important links between environmental and political crises.<sup>9</sup> Scholarly accounts of environmental and human-made disasters in the nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Caribbean expose the limits of political inclusion in empires after slavery's end.<sup>10</sup>

## RETHINKING MOBILITY: SLAVERY AND EMANCIPATION

Deepening the rich literature on slavery in the Caribbean, a cluster of studies directs our attention to slavery's spatial logics, mapping the ways in which chattel slavery was maintained through the violent control of mobility and space. Importantly, this new work "decouples the strong association between mobility and freedom" in slavery studies.<sup>11</sup> Instead, it foregrounds

## THE FIELD OF CARIBBEAN HISTORY HAS EXPERIENCED A REMARKABLE BOOM OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES

how mobility could facilitate enslavement just as it could offer a means to escape. The millions of kidnapped Africans who survived the Atlantic crossing experienced myriad forms of what Rashauna Johnson describes as “compulsory mobility”—transportation from urban slave markets to rural plantations, labor in itinerant jobbing gangs, separation from loved ones through resale, and forced exile during times for war and revolution.<sup>12</sup> While local authorities and slave holders feared clandestine movement by the enslaved, they also relied on bondspeople’s peripatetic labor to maintain the rhythms of daily life. Thus, the ability to initiate, direct, and control the movement of enslaved persons on land and at sea was central to the exercise of power in slave societies.

Port cities—often depicted as spaces of relative freedom because of the constant circulation of people and goods—featured their own technologies of control and surveillance. The urban environment did not shield the enslaved from the forms of racialized and gendered terror most often associated with plantation slavery. Innovative studies of urban bondage in the Greater Caribbean make this point abundantly clear. Alongside the markets, warehouses, and wharves of eighteenth-century Bridgetown, colonists in Barbados erected whipping posts, stocks, gallows, and a holding prison referred to as “the Cage” to subjugate local bondspeople. “Punishments on enslaved bodies included public displays of colonial power,” Marisa Fuentes observes, “and Bridgetown contained several spaces that invoked fear in the absence of the spatial confinement of the plantation complex.”<sup>13</sup> In early-nineteenth-century New Orleans, thousands of refugees of African descent who had fled revolutionary Saint-Domingue found themselves on the city’s auction blocks, experiencing (re)enslavement rather than freedom in the cosmopolitan metropolis.<sup>14</sup> Situating urban spaces at the center of our geographies of Caribbean slavery invites new questions about the subaltern connections that linked Santiago de Cuba and New Orleans; Bridgetown and Charleston; and Cap-Français and Philadelphia.<sup>15</sup>

Careful study of slavery’s spatial logics also promises to enrich the vast and sophisticated historiography of slave resistance in the Caribbean. In *Rethinking Slave Rebellion in Cuba*, Aisha Finch reconstructs the clandestine networks that free and enslaved black people forged in the province of

Matanzas during the 1840s. As sugar production boomed in nineteenth-century Cuba, plantations increasingly existed in close proximity to one another, presenting heightened opportunities for both sanctioned and illicit movement between estates by the enslaved. Furthermore, owners of sugar and coffee plantations relied on male slaves to work as coachmen, muleteers, and in other positions that necessitated movement beyond the plantation. Seizing opportunities to interact with other black Cubans, enslaved women and men exchanged information at religious gatherings, Sunday markets, rural taverns, and in the slave barracks, ultimately creating “insurgent geographies” in the sugar-producing heartland of Cuba.<sup>16</sup>

Multimedia initiatives further build upon and enrich the spatial turn in Caribbean slavery studies. Digital mapping and data visualization tools not only enable scholars to present historical research in novel ways, but also can address silences in the archival record. Take, for example, Vincent Brown’s multimedia project *Slave Revolt in Jamaica, 1760-1761: A Cartographic Narrative*.<sup>17</sup> Examining the largest slave uprising in the eighteenth-century British West Indies—known as “Tacky’s Rebellion” or “Tacky’s Revolt” after one of the enslaved leaders—the project uses an interactive animated map and timeline to trace the rebels’ movements across Jamaica and the counterinsurgency military campaign that brutally suppressed it. Given the absence of written sources produced by the enslaved, *Slave Revolt in Jamaica* foregrounds the conflict’s spatial dimensions as a lens into the rebels’ mobilization strategies, tactics, and aims. The project’s interface allows users to explore how enslaved rebels and their adversaries navigated Jamaica’s distinctive landscape, while also raising crucial questions about how various groups of combatants conceptualized space and their relationship to the natural world. Other groundbreaking multimedia projects, such as *Digital Aponte and A Colony in Crisis: The Saint-Domingue Grain Shortage of 1789*, highlight rich yet under-utilized sources for the study of Caribbean slave societies, just as the recently launched *La Gazette Royale* promises to expand historians’ discussion of newly-independent Haiti.<sup>18</sup>

The Caribbean age of emancipation—stretching from the 1790s to the 1880s—has garnered renewed attention as well.

In the seven decades since Trinidadian intellectuals C. L. R. James and Eric Williams published their pathbreaking studies of the destruction of slavery in the Caribbean, scholars have carefully scrutinized the economic imperatives, legal regimes, ideological currents, military contests, and political debates that spurred the end of chattel bondage.<sup>19</sup> An emerging body of scholarship on emancipation in the circum-Caribbean world raises exciting new questions. This work shifts our attention from liberal discourses of liberty and citizenship to the embodied practices and solidarities of the newly emancipated, while also attending to the wave of post-emancipation restrictions sought by the planter class.<sup>20</sup> As Mimi Sheller explains in *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom*, “popular practices of embodied resistance” included public conflicts over space, wages, and religious practice as well as the renegotiation of intimacy and gender roles.<sup>21</sup> Calling on scholars to “revisit histories of emancipation in relation to more recent understandings of sexual citizenship and the sexual state,” Sheller argues that the public and private realms were tightly enmeshed in freedpeople’s post-emancipation struggles to secure equality.<sup>22</sup> Along with their attention to popular politics, several recent accounts of emancipation and its aftermath in the Caribbean are also translocal in scope, excavating the connections that united freedpeople across national and imperial boundaries.<sup>23</sup>

## INTER-IMPERIAL HISTORIES OF LABOR AND MIGRATION

In the decades following emancipation, hundreds of thousands of Afro-Caribbeans migrated within and beyond the region, using geographic mobility as a strategy in a hard-fought battle for social mobility. During roughly the same era, indentured laborers from Asia traveled to the Caribbean on multi-year contracts, with over 530,000 Indian and 160,000 Chinese immigrants arriving in the region by 1917.<sup>24</sup> Fresh waves of European sojourners headed to the islands as well. Working at the intersection of labor history and migration studies, Caribbeanist scholars have placed migrants at the center of new accounts of empire, racial formation, and capitalist expansion. Moving across scales of analysis—tracking migration from local, regional, imperial, and global perspectives—recent works illuminate how mobile laboring people forged ties across geopolitical boundaries and negotiated European and U.S. imperialism from the bottom up.

Afro-Caribbean sojourners created a transnational world

that historian Lara Putnam describes as the “circum-Caribbean migratory sphere.”<sup>25</sup> Labor-market conditions as well as islanders’ personal ties shaped migratory circuits. “Transnational networks of kith and kin determined which opportunities would-be migrants heard about, what resources they could mobilize to get there, and who they could fall back on if plans went awry,” Putnam notes.<sup>26</sup> Major receiving societies included the rimlands of Central America, the sugar zones of the Dominican Republic and Cuba, the southern Caribbean island of Trinidad, and Venezuela. U.S. expansionism in the Greater Caribbean between the 1890s and the 1940s would draw black islanders to Panama to build a transoceanic canal, to agricultural enclaves controlled by U.S. corporations, and to new U.S. military bases in the region. Significantly, work sites, as recent studies detail, provided many Afro-Caribbeans with their first exposure to U.S. empire.<sup>27</sup>

Migrants encountered myriad difficulties while overseas. Labor exploitation, physical abuse, racism, linguistic barriers, and anti-immigrant discrimination compounded the quotidian challenges of living in a new society. While documenting these indignities, new monographs recover migrants’ efforts to exert control over working conditions and to build community. Through mutual aid societies, masonic lodges, black newspapers, scouting groups, and religious organizations, British West Indians created networks of support that linked relatives in the islands to loved ones in receiving societies across the Americas.<sup>28</sup> Haitian migrant laborers in Cuba during the first four decades of the twentieth century sought to improve their condition by combining wages from work on sugar plantations and coffee farms, building personal relationships with managers and landowners, participating in labor unions, and reporting abuses to local Haitian consuls. Leisure activities such as gambling, dancing, and religious practice offered important opportunities for community formation among Haitian migrants, while also allowing Haitian men and women to forge ties with Cubans and British Caribbeans who also lived in the sugar zones.<sup>29</sup>

By studying the transnational world created by Caribbean migrants, historians have begun to craft new narratives about the origins of black internationalism and anti-colonial nationalism in the interwar era. Complementing previous studies of Caribbean radicals in the United States and Europe, recent accounts illuminate political organizing by Caribbean migrants in the sugar zones in eastern Cuba, banana enclaves in Central America, the Panama Canal Zone, and other circum-Caribbean migrant hubs. As

these studies reveal, black working peoples in outposts far from Harlem, London, and Paris developed their own sophisticated critiques of white supremacy, imperialism, and economic inequality. Their internationalism fueled the global spread of organizations like the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), laid the foundation for religious movements like Rastafari, filled the ranks of local Communist cells, and inspired militant strikes and labor protests across the Greater Caribbean.<sup>30</sup> While Afro-Caribbeans would confront a host of new restrictions on their mobility by the end of the 1920s—as the United States, Cuba, and countries in Central and South America passed new immigration laws and forcibly repatriated migrants—their internationalist politics would continue to reverberate in the Caribbean for many decades.<sup>31</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In his 1963 appendix to *The Black Jacobins*, C. L. R. James declared: “The Caribbean is now an American sea.”<sup>32</sup> James was not the first writer to situate the waters and peoples of the Caribbean within the imperial orbit of the United States.

Since the nineteenth century, slaveholders in the U.S. South had imagined the Caribbean Sea as part of an “American Mediterranean,” a connection that grew only stronger as the twentieth century dawned.<sup>33</sup> James’s declaration about the role of the United States in the Caribbean, however, occurred at the precise moment when the Cuban Revolution, decolonization in the Anglophone Caribbean, and pro-democracy struggles in the Dominican Republic had inspired militant critiques of U.S. imperialism and demands for sovereignty and self-determination in the region. James’s insight about the shifting landscape of power highlighted both the hopes and uncertainties of an era of tremendous socio-political ferment. His declaration also offered an urgent reminder about the entwined histories of the Caribbean and the United States. Recent scholarship richly illuminates these moments of exchange between the islands and the United States, while also documenting the local and regional currents that have forged distinctive societies in the Caribbean. These new narratives have much to teach us about the Caribbean past, present, and future. ■■■

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## ENDNOTES

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12. Johnson, *Slavery's Metropolis*, 3.
13. Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (2016), 38.
14. Johnson, *Slavery's Metropolis*, 24–54.
15. See, for example, Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (2014); and Rebecca J. Scott and Jean M. Hébrard, *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* (2012).
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