

# What Harriet Tubman and John Brown can teach us about abolishing ‘White men’

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**Abstract**

This commentary argues that one path toward Natalie Oswin’s ‘An Other Geography’ is through abolishing the institution of ‘White men’. Like other oppressive institutions, ‘White men’ have produced epistemic violence that has shaped and structured the discipline of geography in uneven and unjust ways. This essay is an effort to show appreciation and gratitude, and to stand in solidarity, with Oswin’s prophetic vision of ‘an other geography’. I mobilize the linked biographies of Harriet Tubman and John Brown as an entry point given how little we have yet worked to understand abolitionist history for thinking through the many ways we can work to transform geography.

**Keywords**

abolition geography, Harriet Tubman, John Brown, Natalie Oswin, White men

When I was asked to respond to Natalie Oswin’s (2020) essay, ‘An Other Geography’, I had been working to grasp the relationship between Harriet Tubman and John Brown. I have become increasingly interested in the relevancy of their relationship for abolitionist politics both in the late 1850s as well for the 2020s and especially interested in the blind spots that exist in the ways their relationship gets recalled. Central to their intersecting biographies is the power of prophetic vision and legacy that thunders through time and space revealing things about ourselves that are too often veiled by the obstinate persistence of oppression’s many stations.

In his biography of Brown, WEB Du Bois (1909: 187) suggest, ‘In this women [Tubman] John Brown placed the utmost confidence’. Du Bois quoted Brown when talking to an underground railroad fellow traveler once, when he said: ‘I bring you one of

the best and bravest persons on this continent—General Tubman, as we call her’. Tubman and Brown first met in Canada in 1858. Tubman mobilized her deep spatial knowledge and access to clandestine resources to help and support Brown plan the raid at Harpers Ferry in 1859, the goal of which was to initiate an armed slave revolt and insurrection. Prophecy connected Tubman and Brown’s relationship in important ways. Tubman had a reoccurring dream numerous times prior to meeting Brown in which she ‘saw a serpent raise its head among the rocks, and as it did so, it became the head

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of an old man with a long White beard, gazing at her “wishful like”. In her dream, a crowd of men surrounded the serpent and took charge of it. Tubman knew the dream was about Brown upon meeting him but did not realize until several years later when he was captured at Harpers Ferry exactly what the dream meant (see Larson, 2004).

The bedrock of their relationship was the shared goal of abolishing slavery. If we think about this through an embodied perspective, we see another institution largely sustained the institution of slavery: ‘White men’. Relative to other histories, the history of slavery and abolition, which is a history of the tyranny of ‘White men’, has not been engaged very much in geography despite the fact that these histories prefigured the intellectual development of the discipline in profound ways. Imaging ‘an other geography’, Oswin captures these relations in telling a version of geography’s origin story by suggesting: ‘The drive by White supremacist heteropatriarchs to chart, map, exploit, and extract from lands, peoples, flora, and fauna previously unknown to them for their own early capitalist gain set geography into motion as a discipline, and embedded a disregard and disdain for difference and social justice into the fabric of geographical thought and practice’.

Ahmed’s invocation of ‘White men’, which Oswin references but does not have space to fully engage, is generative here. Ahmed (2014) maintains that “[w]hen we talk of “White men” we are describing an institution . . . An institution typically refers to a persistent structure or mechanism of social order governing the behaviour of a set of individuals within a given community. “White men” refers also to conduct’. If we take Oswin up on her invitation to imagine ‘an other geography’, one of the surest ways to transform the historical grip of White supremacist heteropatriarchy that has shaped the discipline would be abolishing the institution of ‘White men’.

The day before the plenary talk that Oswin’s essay is based upon, on the same floor of the same Marriot Hotel, at the same AAG conference, there was yet another demonstration of the audacity of the institution of ‘White men’. At a session organized to discuss the past accomplishments and future

challenges of Socialist Geography, Professor Richard Peet demonstrated the behavior so central to the institution of ‘White men’ as articulated by Ahmed when he proceeded to shout down two remarkably intelligent, insightful, and accomplished women of color (one on the stage, one in the audience), arguing his opinion that ‘race doesn’t matter’. After the session, Professor Peet proceeded to chase down one of the women in the hallway and continued his attempt to intimidate her by insisting his point was correct, that ‘race doesn’t matter’.

The timing of Oswin’s talk is worth noting given the prophetic substance of her ‘an other geography’ and the shameful manner in which one of the most recognizable geographers in the discipline reinforced the centuries’ old sentiment of the institution of ‘White men’ that ‘race doesn’t matter’. We can amplify Oswin’s prophetic voice toward the abolition of ‘White men’ through the mobilizing logic of one of the discipline’s most respected scholars and abolitionists, Ruthie Gilmore, through her proposal that: ‘By centering attention on those most vulnerable to the fatal couplings of power and difference signified by *racism*, we will develop richer analyses of how it is that radical activism might most productively exploit crisis for liberatory ends’ (2002: 22).

There can be no absolution for ‘White men’, as a close colleague recently told me. The collective harm is too great and the shaping of lives and structures too extreme. If this is true, what does a focused effort to abolish ‘White men’ as an institution of harm and oppression look like? How could abolishing the institution of ‘White men’ start to repair the legacies of harm done for those who have marginalized, sidelined, erased, dismissed, and othered? A part of Oswin’s argument hinges upon the fact that ‘academic institutions say they prize social relevance and impact’. The superficial metrics used to bolster this goal are central to the problem, it seems. So how would abolishing ‘White men’ allow for a recasting, reconfiguration, and reimagining of what relevancy looks like and be part of a reparative politics?

Extending the argument made by Mansfield et al. (2019), it seems a component of abolishing ‘White men’ starts with naming the harm done by individuals who give foundation to the collective harm;

raising voice from the shadows of the whisper network to center stage. Once corrupt individual behavior is more legible, putting the work of individuals in conversation with their actions facilitates broader forms of accountability. If taken seriously, this act would likely dramatically shift the canon away from its hyper focus on the work of 'White men'. This strikes me as having everything to do with relevancy and impact and would start to prefigure nothing short of revolutionary transformation of the discipline.

Oswin is also careful to recognize that there has been progress in the discipline. Back to Ahmed's definition of the institutional composition of 'White men' as 'conduct', it is worth noting that amid his efforts to convince a room full of people that 'race doesn't matter', from the back of the room I could hear four other White men, also on the stage, insisting, 'Dick, sit down now', 'Dick, shut up, you must stop this', 'Dick, you are wrong, stop'. To this end, the public admonition of Peet's behavior the following month on the Socialist and Critical Geography listserv suggests there are solidarities on the road to 'an other geography' upon which to continue building. A concrete result from this episode is that the AAG has evidently prohibited Dr Peet from attending any future AAG conferences due in part to the behavior that he exhibited at this session. At the same time, this point does not seem to be public information in a way that would signal to others that the behavior of 'White men' matters and will not be tolerated in 'an other geography'.

Another step that Mansfield et al. (2019) suggest that seems necessary in moving toward 'an other geography', and working toward the abolition of 'White men', is refusing to honor them with awards and recognitions from which to extend heteropatriarchy. In particular, they recommend that 'we can institute new review requirements for disciplinary honors and other forms of institutional recognition' (Mansfield et al., 2019: 85). The 'we' here is important, as many awards that prop up the institution of 'White men' are professional societies and universities. Thus it seems necessary to consider to what extent abolitionist goals extend to those institutions as targets if they are unwilling to acknowledge their complicity in these systems of power, privilege, and

oppression. Taking the importance of how legacy is a pillar that props up all institutions, it also seems necessary to note that, as of yet, the AAG has left Dr Peet's *Lifetime Achievement Award* intact, thus exhibiting a problematic complicity in the institution of 'White men' even as some members who compose the governing bodies of the institution fight from within to transform it.

In the aftermath of the 2019 Socialist and Critical Geography session at the AAG, people who I care about 'called me in' (as opposed to 'called me out') for not doing more to intervene to stop Dr Peet's abusive tirade given that I was in the room. I have replayed the events over in my head numerous times and continue to be left with not knowing what politics of intervention could have resolved the spectacle in the moment. This makes me realize how much work I have to do to better understand, as somebody intimately embedded within the institution of 'White men', how better to intervene, when to interject, how and when to mobilize my privilege toward being a better ally. It also makes me see more clearly how relevancy is not only about citation numbers or awards, but working to ensure my colleagues feel respected, heard, and appreciated for the ways that they stretch my collective understanding and help me understand the 'magic' and possibilities that, as Gilmore (2011: 258) suggests, 'spark new drives for abolition'. We all leave legacies informed by the intellectual and political work we do, and the manner, care, and respect that we show for others while we do it. None of us can escape the reach of history and the legacy we leave behind even if this unveiling often takes a long time (see Warren et al., 2019).

Harriet Tubman said of John Brown, 'He done more in dying than 100 men would in living' (Larson, 2004). At the same time, the ways that Harriet Tubman helped John Brown become relevant in the struggle for emancipation matters much more than historians have yet demonstrated. There might very well not be the John Brown of our abolitionist imaginaries had it not been for Harriet Tubman. Oswin's article offers her experience in a way that othered others have also done, that collectively presents fundamental insights to be gleaned and internalized toward the abolition of 'White men' and toward 'an other geography'. To this end, Oswin

offers a prophetic vision when she writes, ‘There is, I aver, a growing creep of an other geography. Such work fights forcefully against the guiding logics of the status quo, guiding logics that produce such limiting dualisms as us/them, margin/centre, major/minor, civility/incivility . . . It accepts and asserts the authority of those with intimate knowledge of how dispossession, exploitation, and oppression work, of those who feel it on their bodies and in their skin’. Oswin’s prophetic voice bears a truth not yet realized but one that is coming, makes claims not yet seen but becoming legible on the horizon, testifies to great injustice because she knows more just geographies are possible. She convinces me all these things are truths in the making. While perhaps there can indeed be no absolution for ‘White men’, White men can work harder in the face of the impossibility of redemption nonetheless, mobilizing privilege for the improvement of all, for the future of the discipline, for our friends, colleagues, and students who feel like they are not welcome and who, through being in our lives, help us see things that we would have never otherwise seen nor accomplish things that we would otherwise not accomplish.

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