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Capstone Project

**Teaching Black Environmental Histories and Geographies of Resistances:
A Curriculum on Marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp**



Introduction and positionality statement:

- I encourage you to introduce your students to the practice of naming positionality by telling them a bit about me, the timeline/curriculum author, and my intentions in writing this timeline/curriculum. It is important that teachers share who wrote the lesson plan to unsettle the presentation of school curricula as objective truth and encourage students to think critically about the historical narratives they learn.

Learning Outcomes:

Students will...

- Learn about the importance of land and the construction of space in the history of slavery
- Understand how maroons used the Great Dismal Swamp to resist enslavement and to self-emancipate
- Become familiar with key concepts such as rival geographies, historiography, archival silence, and collective memory
- Reflect on processes of memorialization and erasure

Key questions:

- How did enslaved people understand and imagine freedom?

- How did enslaved people navigate and use the land to resist slavery?
- How did slaveholding society view the Great Dismal Swamp? How did enslaved people view the swamp?
- How is the history of marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp remembered?

Anticipation Activity:

- Put [this photograph](#) of the Great Dismal Swamp on the board. Take a few minutes and have students write down initial responses to the image: What is shown in the image? What do they notice? What words come to mind? Have students share out. Create a list of associations (take a picture of the associations, so you can return to them). After you finish the activity, explain to students that the image is of the Great Dismal Swamp which is a National Wildlife Refuge located in North Carolina and Virginia. Share that they are going to be learning about the history of slavery and resistance in and around the swamp.

Introductory lesson: Geographies of Slavery

- *Introductory activity:*
 - Show [this picture](#) of a classroom on the board. Ask students: What do you know about the space shown in the image? Students will immediately identify the space as a classroom. Ask students how they know that the space is a classroom: What in the image signifies that this is a classroom? If you had never seen a classroom before, what might you be able to learn from looking at the space? What does the organization of the classroom tell us? Ex: All of the desks face a larger desk at the front. This tells us something about how power operates in the space. The person at the larger desk - and who everyone else is facing - clearly holds more power.
 - Ask students to imagine they were at school in the middle of the night: It is pitch black and completely quiet in the classroom. How would you navigate the space? What do you think you might notice or what would stand out to you? How would that differ from your observations in the daytime? Emphasize that the senses students would rely on to move through the space would change if it were dark out and that this would shift what they noticed about the space.
 - Explain that during this unit, students will be approaching the history of American slavery through the lens of geography and examining how particular meanings become attached to spaces and how different groups of people engage with and understand the same space. As the students did in the activity, students will be thinking about what we can learn from the organization of physical space, and, in this case, from the landscape of slaveholding society. Further, many enslaved people were active at night time when it was difficult for enslavers to track their movements. Explain that the activity was intended to get students to begin to think about how different conditions - like nighttime - affect how people navigate and relate to space.

- In order to approach history geographically, the class first has to develop an understanding of geography. You may choose to ask students what geography means to them and collectively craft a definition with your guidance or offer the following definition and discuss it as a class. You may want to circle back around to the example of the classroom to help students define/unpack the concept.
 - Geography is multilayered and includes the physical, three-dimensional landscape and infrastructures, the meanings given to places, the different practices of mapping and exploring land, and the social relations in and across space. Geography is also an academic area that focuses on the ways material spaces both produce and reflect societal power structures. While maps and borders often make geographies appear fixed, as Dr. Katherine McKittrick writes in the introduction to her book, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and Cartographies of Struggle*, “social practices create landscapes and contribute to how we organize, build, and imagine our surroundings.”
- *Reading:*
 - Hand out [this reading](#). Explain that the reading offers important grounding for the rest of the unit about the relationship between the environment and the development of race in the United States. This reading will help students begin to answer the question: Why is studying the environment critical to understanding the history of slavery? Ask students to read the handout alone or in small groups. After students complete the reading, create space for any clarifying questions.
 - Additional resources:
 - Tony Perry, [“How do historians use environmental history to learn about slavery?”](#)
 - Tony Perry, [“What is environmental history?”](#)
- *Bonus Challenge Activity*
 - In this activity, students will analyze selections from “Of Property” from John Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government*. Share that John Locke was an English political philosopher and a critical Enlightenment thinker who shaped the worldview of colonists in the United States.
 - Hand out [these selections](#) and give students time to read through them. Encourage them to underline key language. You may choose to have students work in small groups to summarize the main point of each section or assign each group a section to summarize.
 - As a large group, discuss the following questions: According to John Locke, what is the proper way to engage with the land? How does land become property? What does Locke value? How does Locke depict Indigenous peoples’ use of land?
 - Explain that colonizers mobilized Locke’s theory of property to justify stealing Indigenous peoples’ land, claiming Indigenous peoples were not using the land

properly and, therefore, did not have rights to the land. The theft of Indigenous land made way for the development of plantation slavery.

Digital Timeline

- *A Note About the Timeline:* This timeline was originally created as a final project for Professor Emily Owens' course on American Slavery at Brown University. It has been adapted to be more accessible for high school students, though it still engages with complex historical concepts. The timeline aims to help the viewer to think about the violences of plantation slavery and of resistance to enslavement through the lens of space and geography and to introduce viewers to the history of marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp.
- *Introducing the timeline:* Ask students to take 5-7 minutes to explore the timeline and to make observations either on their own or in small groups. What is the structure of the timeline? What materials does the author include? What information can you gather by looking at the images/section titles? What do you think the author of the timeline is trying to communicate to the viewer? Have students share out with the larger class.
- *Going through the timeline:* You may decide whether to have students read the timeline on their own or in small groups or use the timeline to present the material to students. This will depend on how students prefer to receive the material. Below are resources to support student understanding. Depending on students' familiarity with these terms and ideas, it may be helpful to prepare students before they engage deeply with the timeline.

Support Materials: Definitions, Resources, Activities, and Comprehension Checks

The digital timeline engages with a number of key terms and concepts. The following outlines definitions, resources, and activities to support student comprehension.

- *Key terms and concepts related to marronage:*
 - *Truancy:* when enslaved people sought temporary escape by running away to woods, swamps, nearby farms, or other locations for short periods of time before returning to the plantation (Campt).
 - Enslaved people also used spaces that their enslavers deemed off-limits such as woods and swamps to host illegal gatherings. Enslaved people organized parties where they could eat, drink, dance, socialize, and experience pleasure away from the surveillance of their enslavers (Campt, 61). Parties allowed enslaved people to use their bodies in ways that went against the interests and uses ascribed to them by enslavers. Their bodies became spaces for personal agency and pleasure. For example, before parties enslaved people often made or stole clothing. By using their time to make clothing, enslaved people reclaimed their energy. Any time and energy that enslaved people committed to the party, they took away from their forced labor and, in turn, the profits of their enslavers (Owens).

- *Marronage*: the act of fleeing slavery to live in a community established and inhabited by escapees of slavery (Bogues).
 - *Borderland vs. hinterland marronage*:
 - Borderland marronage refers to maroons who lived at the edges of swamps and woods that bordered white society, while hinterland maroons lived in more remote wilderness areas. While borderland maroons engaged with plantation society, hinterland maroons sought complete isolation and secrecy.
 - You may display the map of Harrison’s Landing (included in the timeline) on the board and have students come and point out areas where borderland maroons may have lived and where hinterland maroons may have lived.
 - For more on marronage, see this video [“Who were the maroons?”](#)
- *Geography of containment*: enslavement was a form of captivity. Enslavers sought to “locate bondpeople in plantation space and to control, indeed to determine, their movements and activities” (Campt, 12). Enslavers used many different technologies to control enslaved people’s movement including the landscape itself. Enslavers transformed the complex natural ecology into a flat, gridded plantation landscape, which allowed enslavers to surveil and track the movements and labor of enslaved people. Further, enslavers extended their vision over far distances by using horses to elevate them off the ground.
- *Rival geography*: a term coined by Edward Said that geographers have used to describe alternative ways of knowing and using space that conflict with and resist colonial occupation. In the context of plantation slavery, rival geography describes alternative ways of knowing and using plantation and Southern space that conflicted with planters’ ideals and demands (Campt).
 - *Activity*:
 - Note: this activity is not suggesting a one-to-one comparison between the school and the plantation. While the school is often a site of violence, these violences are not equivalent to the violences of plantation slavery. The aim of this activity is to help students understand the concept of rival geographies and how different groups use space in ways that resist the desires of those in power.
 - The school is a highly regulated landscape, where administrators and teachers (people in power) create and enforce a set of norms for how students are supposed to use and move through the space. Ask students to reflect on their own rival geographies: how do you all use and move through the school in ways that conflict with the demands and expectations set out by teachers and administrators? For example, the hall is a space where students are supposed to

quietly move through to go from one class to the next. However, in many schools, the hall becomes a place to escape a boring class or to congregate with friends during the passing period. You may choose to have students make a map that reflects the way they see and move through the school space.

- This activity requires a level of trust between you and your students. Make sure to emphasize that no one will get in trouble for what they share during the activity. If there is something you will have to report such as drug use, inform students beforehand.
- *Comprehension/discussion questions:* What does Stephanie Camp mean when she writes that, “Space mattered: places, boundaries, and movement were central to how slavery was organized and to how it was resisted?” How did enslaved people create a rival geography within the landscape of slaveholding white southern society? How did enslaved people understand and imagine freedom?
- *More on resistance to slavery:*
 - Walter Johnson, [“How did enslaved people resist slavery?”](#)
 - Christy Clark-Pujara, [“How did enslaved people challenge the institution of slavery?”](#)
 - [The Freedom on the Move database](#) compiles runaway slave advertisements as a rare source to understand the lives of fugitive enslaved people. The database also offers a series of lesson plans geared toward K-12 educators.

Key terms and concepts related to historical methodologies:

- *Historiography:* the writing of history; the principles, theory, and history of historical writing (Merriam-Webster)
 - See Tony Perry, [“How do historians use material culture to learn about the past?”](#) for more on the sources historians use to learn about the history of slavery.
- *Archive:* both a place in which public records or historical materials (such as documents) are preserved and also the material preserved (Merriam-Webster).
- *Archival silence:* a gap in the historical record resulting from the unintentional or purposeful absence or distortion of documentation (Dictionary of Archives Terminology).
 - For a more in-depth engagement with the concept of historical silences see this [handout](#).
 - See the lesson Haunting, Race, and Space for discussion prompts on archival silence and the work of “straining against the limits of the archive” (Hartman).

- *Activity*: You may ask students to choose an image from the digital timeline and to get in the mindset of a historian. In groups, the students can write down their observations and answer the following questions: Who or what is depicted in the image? What does this image tell us about the artist/mapmaker? What was the artist/mapmaker interested in? Whose perspective does the image reflect? How is the subject depicted? What questions does the image bring up for you? Make sure students are prepared to point to details in the image to support their analysis. Students may also choose to research the person who created the image if there is more information on the individual. Show each image on the board and have students come up and present their analysis to the class.
- *Collective Memory*: the ways in which groups, peoples, or nations construct versions of the past and employ them for self-understanding and to win power in an ever-changing present (Ater).
 - See this short video by Professor Magdalena Gross on [collective memory](#)
- *Monuments*: “Monuments have existed throughout history as means to speak to posterity about a specific event, action, or person. Monuments establish events as both deserving of glorification and worth remembering. They are built to demand that events and persons be perpetually, if not eternally, remembered, and they have been constructed throughout history to signify a sense of permanence... Monuments are a form of pedagogy; they instruct on historical values, persons, and events, designating those that should be passed on, returned to, and learned from.” (Sturken and Young, 1).
 - See final lesson plan for activities on memory and memorialization.
- *Working monuments*: monuments which not only commemorate but also “mind and remind... warn, advise, and call for action. Working monuments “invite collective engagement. They are not projects for silent and symbolic sites of memory but agents for active dialogue” (Bonder, 67).
 - *Working memorials*: “Their premise is that a memorial that truly speaks to traumatic memories - not only of the past, but of today - should come to exist through a process of engagement with the communities who share vital interest in it” (Bonder)
 - Artist Becci Davis frames working monuments as doing three things: 1) reclaiming public space; 2) democratizing the practice of monument building; and 3) working toward revision & repair.
 - See preparation for the final project for examples of working monuments.
- *Comprehension/discussion questions*:
 - What sources does the author use to tell the history of borderland marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp? What sources does the author use to tell the history of hinterland marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp?

What does Saidiya Hartman* mean by the violence of the archive? What argument does the author make about historical silence in the context of hinterland maroons? Do you agree?

- Share with students that Dr. Saidiya Hartman is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. She has written multiple books, which focus on Black cultural history, slavery, gender, the city, and the archive.

Lesson: Haunting, Race and Space

- Introduction:

- Show [this quote](#) from the book, *Gone With the Wind*, on the board. Share that the quote is from the book *Gone with the Wind*, which was written in 1936 by Margaret Mitchell (and later made into a major motion picture). Emphasize that *Gone with the Wind* is a deeply racist novel that romanticizes plantation life and erases the violences of slavery. Explain that the selected quote contrasts Tara, the O'Hara family's plantation, and the surrounding woods and that, as historians of the history and geographies of slavery, you all are going to be critically analyzing the author, Margaret Mitchell's, depiction of the landscape.
 - Choose a student to read the quote out loud and ask students what they notice about the language: How is the plantation landscape depicted? How are the woods depicted? Given their knowledge of the history and extreme violences of slavery, why is this a problematic depiction? Whose perspective is centered and whose is left out? What does this excerpt illuminate about how enslavers viewed the natural world?
 - Note that, as exemplified in the quote, who or what we deem monstrous and scary is societally constructed. Our fears both reflect our position in relation to systems of power (as exemplified here) as well as our worldview.
- ### - Primary source group activity:
- Divide students into groups and pass out [this handout](#) which includes selections from different primary sources that engage with the Great Dismal Swamp. Assign each group one collection of sources. Explain that, as you modeled collectively in your analysis of *Gone with the Wind*, for each source, students will be thinking about what the source tells us about how the writer understood and related to the Great Dismal Swamp and to the system of plantation slavery. Ask students to respond to the following questions for each of their sources and to be prepared to present their sources to the class:
 - Who is the author of the source? How do they understand and relate to the Great Dismal Swamp and to the institution of slavery? What kind of language and imagery does the author use to describe the Great Dismal

Swamp and/or maroons? Who or what does the author fear, and what does this fear reveal about their social location and worldview?

- *A Note on Language:* some of the sources include violent language. It is important to prepare students beforehand and to make clear that students should not use the language in reading or discussing the sources. Reinforce that students should use the terms “enslaved people,” “Black people,” or “maroons,” depending on who they are speaking about.
- After students have time in small groups, have students present their sources to the whole class.
- *Discussion questions:*
 - After students present their sources, move into a whole class discussion. Ask students to reflect on the primary sources that either they engaged with directly or that their classmates presented: How did enslavers view the Great Dismal Swamp? How did Northern abolitionists imagine the Great Dismal Swamp? How did enslaved people relate to the swamp?* How did each of these groups view the plantation landscape? How are maroons depicted in the different sources?
 - You may refer back to the reading that students did at the beginning of the unit. How do the sources reflect or challenge the Enlightenment view of the environment?
 - *There are a few short selections that give insight into the experiences and perspectives of maroons themselves. However, overall, there is a lack of sources that capture the voices of enslaved people and maroons. In engaging in this exercise, students will have to infer and imagine how enslaved people understood and related to the swamp. This is a good opportunity to talk about archival absence / historical silence and to demonstrate how students might attempt to “strain against the limits of the archive.” You may choose to ask students: What evidence did you use to determine how enslaved people related to the swamp? Why do you think there are so many more sources from enslavers and/or people in the north? What information do we have access to that can help us understand or imagine how enslaved people might have thought about the swamp?

Concluding lesson:

- *Opening and mini-lesson:*
 - Begin by asking students to reflect on the following two questions: How do we learn history? Why is it important to remember the history of marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp? For the first question, you want to prompt students to think about how they learn about history outside of a school setting (ex: through popular culture like movies and books, museums, monuments, the news, etc.). You may have students journal first and/or discuss in small groups before discussing in the large group.

- Explain that, today, the students are going to be thinking about how the history of slavery is remembered. Show these two short videos on [the purposes of historical monuments](#) and [the way the history of slavery is remembered](#).
- After showing the videos, talk about the wave of Confederate monuments that were torn down or graffitied during the Black Lives Matter protests of summer 2020. Do students remember seeing, hearing about, or even participating in these protests? Show [these images](#) and reflect on how the activists are rewriting or challenging the stories told by the monuments
 - *Discussion questions:* Drawing from what you learned in the videos, why do you think that activists focused on tearing down and graffitiiing Confederate monuments in the aftermath of the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor? What do these monuments represent and why is it critical to tear them down?
- Read the final section of the timeline as a class together. Return to the question: Why is it important to remember the history of marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp?
- *Activity: Editing the signs*
 - Break students into three groups and pass out [this handout](#). Assign each group to one of the panels / time periods. Have students look at the sign and read over the transcript. Ask students to discuss what they appreciate about the sign and what they might change. Is there any information you would add? Would you change anything?
 - After having time in small groups, have the groups present their thoughts to the larger class.
 - Discuss the signs as a whole class. Do they effectively communicate the most important parts about the history of marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp? Why or why not?
- *Final reflection:* Put [the image](#) of the Great Dismal Swamp up on the board again. Ask students to take a couple of minutes and write down their associations with the photograph. Have students share out. Pull up an image of students' initial responses to the photograph. Ask students to reflect on how their associations with and understandings of the Great Dismal Swamp have changed over the unit.

Preparation for the final project:

- To prepare for either project, you may decide to have students learn about and reflect on other projects that recognize and remember the histories and legacies of slavery.
- *Intro Activity:*
 - Begin by asking students to share what they think of when they think of a monument. What are some monuments they have seen? Who or what do they commemorate?

- Show images of local monuments. Do they fit the descriptions students offered? What do they notice about the monuments?
 - [Here is a slide](#) of local monuments in Providence, Rhode Island. I would encourage you to make a slide with monuments near your city or school.
- Explain that monuments are not always static and unchanging and that there is a movement of people working to reimagine the monumental landscape, including who and what is represented.
- One of those groups is the Monument Lab. Read through the [Monument Labs' mission statement](#) and show this [short trailer](#) about one of their projects. Encourage students to check out some of their projects on their own time.
- *Activity:*
 - Explain to students that they are going to be looking at an example of a “working monument” (see the definition in the “support materials section”).
 - Break students into groups and assign each group one of the following working monuments/memorials (students will need laptops for this activity). Ask students to explore their monument(s) and take notes on the following questions: Describe your monument/memorial/intervention. How is the individual or group challenging the idea of a “monument” or intervening in an existing monument? What do you think is the purpose of the monument, memorial, or intervention? Is it effective? Why or why not?
 - EJI Lynching Memorial (and, specifically, the Community Historical Marker Project)
 - [Read about the Community Historical Marker Project and see the video for an example of a community installing a historical marker](#)
 - [Read this description of Professor Renee Ater's visit to the Lynching Memorial](#)
 - Becci Davis - “In the Shadow of Dixie”
 - [Read a bit about the project and see photos](#)
 - [See this video](#)
 - Ada Pinkston
 - Project 1: Pipelines
 - [See images and a project description](#)
 - [Read a bit more about the project](#)
 - Project 2: Landmarked
 - [See images](#)
 - [A description of her approach to performance](#)
 - [Watch a video of her performing](#)
 - Haus of Glitter - Activist Dance Opera

- Explore the site for the Haus of Glitter and [read about their Activist Dance Opera and how they think about historical intervention](#)
- [See some images and footage from the activist dance opera](#)
- Have students present their monument/memorial to the class.
- Introduce the final project!

Final Project Options:

Below are two potential options for final projects. Project one focuses specifically on the history of marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp. Project two requires outside research and asks students to apply the concepts and ways of thinking they have learned over the unit to a location that is significant to them.

- *Project 1 - Designing Public Education on the History of the Great Dismal Swamp*
 - Framing for students:
 - The Great Dismal Swamp Stakeholders Collaborative just received a massive grant from the federal government to develop public programming and education at the Great Dismal Swamp. They have selected you to be the head historian/curator. Write a proposal that outlines either:
 - A) The design for the main room of the new welcome center including the information and objects that will be displayed.
 - B) The design for a monument that will go in front of the welcome center and a 2-page, double-spaced description of its significance.
 - C) An event that will be held during the opening weekend of the new welcome center.
 - D) A guided tour of the swamp which visitors can listen to as they move through the space (this can be either in the form of a script or an audio recording).
- *Project 2: Research Project - Mapping Personal Geographies*
 - In this project, you will research the history of a physical location that is significant to you. You will then create a 5-7 minute presentation that you will share with the class. Your presentation will include a description of the place including why you chose it, an overview of its history, and a proposal for a plaque, monument or some other form of public education focused on your place.
 - Select a location that is significant to you. This may be the street you grew up on, a public park, a religious site etc. Begin by going to the place. Sit there for at least 20 minutes and write down observations. How are people engaging with and moving through the space? What do you notice about the physical landscape (the colors, the architecture, the plant life...)? What

is the weather like? Is it day or night? Are there any markers or plaques acknowledging the history of this place?

- Research the history of your place. How has the space changed over time? How have different groups of people engaged with the space? Has the use or meaning of the space changed over time? Which Native nation does the land belong to and who controls the land now (you can find the Native nation whose land you are on at native-land.ca)?
 - If you cannot find information on the history of your specific location, you may need to focus on the broader area or neighborhood.
- How might you share the history of the space with the public or make visible invisibilized histories? This may include editing or reimagining what is already there or proposing a new monument/plaque/event to recognize the history of the place.

Works Cited

(in addition to those cited in the timeline)