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The Plantation Complex: Towards a Global History

Abstract:

The plantation complex emerged, in the early modern era, as a key driver of European imperial expansion and social, economic, and environmental change across the world. American historians are most familiar with plantations in Brazil, the Caribbean, and U.S. South, where Europeans displaced Indigenous peoples and forced millions of Africans across the Atlantic to produce sugar, coffee, cotton, and other commodities. At the same time, Europeans also developed plantations in other parts of the world, from the Indian Ocean to southeast Asia. The plantation complex endured long after the legal end of slavery in the nineteenth-century Americas—and expanded into new regions, including Hawaii, Zanzibar, and Australia.

This lecture takes a global, *longue durée* approach to the history of the plantation complex, focusing on the laborers at its center and the methods of coercion that shaped their experiences. It reveals that plantations were less reliant on chattel slavery than is often assumed. Instead, planters were insidiously flexible, extracting labor from a wide variety of coerced workers—including convicts and prisoners of war, indentured servants, and nominally free wage laborers. What united plantation laborers across time and space was the experience of migration and dispossession. Uprooted from their home societies, they were thrust into new worlds where their rights were not respected and their limited opportunities to resist were met with crushing violence.

Bio:

Randy M. Browne is an award-winning historian of Atlantic slavery who specializes in the British Caribbean. He is the author of *The Driver's Story: Labor and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (2024), which was awarded the Slavery Archive Book Prize, and *Surviving Slavery in the British Caribbean* (2017), which received the biennial Elsa Goveia Book Prize from the Association of Caribbean Historians. Randy is Professor of History and Director of First-Year Seminar at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio. His scholarship has been supported by grants and fellowships from the Library Company of Philadelphia, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the U.S. Department of Education, and The Huntington Library. His articles on slavery and the transatlantic slave trade have appeared in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, *Slavery & Abolition*, and the *New West Indian Guide*. Randy received his B.A. in History and Spanish from Eckerd College and his Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is currently working on a new project on the global history of the plantation complex.