

**Elizabeth A. Bohls, *Slavery and the Politics of Place: Representing the Colonial Caribbean, 1770-1833*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. 262. £60. ISBN 9781107079342.**

In this insightful literary and historical study of the British Caribbean colonies in the era which spanned the entire process of the abolitionist struggle, Elizabeth A. Bohls argues that ‘the politics of slavery ... played out to a significant degree as a politics of place’ (8). To strengthen their support amongst the British public, anti-slavery activists filled the public sphere with texts and images which depicted these highly lucrative imperial possessions as ‘aberrant places in need of metropolitan intervention’ (2), while planters worked to justify what they saw as the legitimacy of slavery through acts of ‘discursive place-making’ (1). Drawing upon both published and manuscript sources, Bohls depicts the slaveholders’ attempts to convince metropolitan readers that these plantation colonies were simultaneously alluringly exotic and assimilable to British ideals of domesticity, while also foregrounding the strategies by which former slaves deployed ideas of place and mobility as strategies to escape the landscapes of slavery.

By the late eighteenth century, Jamaica was notorious throughout the Anglo-Atlantic world as the site of the greatest planter fortunes, but also as a place supposedly inimical to civilisation, home to the cruellest and most debauched slaveowners and the most rebellious and threatening slaves of any of the European plantation colonies. But, as Bohls argues, the island’s planters did their utmost to convince themselves and metropolitan readers that the island was no tropical hellhole, but instead could be assimilated into the fashionable discourse of the picturesque, with relation to both the environment and the inhabitants. Through the writings of Edward Long, William Beckford, and Matthew Lewis and the sketches of the architect and artist James Hakewill, the Jamaican landscape is rendered not wild but pastoral, the planters ‘remake colonized territory in a metropolitan mold’ (26), creating deer parks and artificial lakes on their estates, and the slaves are largely invisible. Yet, in Bohls’s view, these georgic visions inevitably sound a false note, as when Lewis claims to find the Afro-Caribbean Jonkonnu carnival indicative of both the creativity and the childishness of his slaves, but in fact seems to find this ritual of inversion a disturbing indication of his potential loss of control over both his plantation and his bondpeople. Similarly, the narrative of the Scots mercenary John Gabriel Stedman regarding his experiences in the Dutch colony of Surinam, whence he travelled to assist in the subduing of the local Maroons, runaway slaves who had established settlements deep in the colony’s tropical interior, offers ‘a disturbingly incoherent glimpse into the human cost of Europe’s imperial projects’ (81), as his encounters with the Maroons constantly challenged his initial conviction of the supremacy of white Europeans and the legitimacy of slavery.

One might wonder if at this point there are new insights to be gleaned from Olaudah Equiano’s narrative, so extensively has this text been analysed over the past two decades, but Bohls makes a valuable intervention by focussing not on Equiano’s birth in Africa, his experience of the Middle Passage, or his life as a slave, but on his extensive travels across the Atlantic world, voyages which rendered this formerly enslaved man ‘a black cosmopolitan—a citizen of the Atlantic world’ (40), and argues for his autobiography’s significance not only as a slave narrative but as a work of travel writing. But the most inventive sections of *Slavery and the Politics of Place* are its final two chapters, which examine ideals and practices of domestic life from the perspectives of both white and enslaved women. The Scotswoman Janet Schaw, who visited Antigua in 1775, and Maria Nugent, wife of the governor of Jamaica at the beginning of the nineteenth century, did their utmost to establish and maintain a recognisably British way of life in the tropics, and insisted that doing so was both possible and desirable, but their narratives depict them as repeatedly forcing themselves to ignore

many 'unhomely' (163) aspects of life in a slave-based plantation colony. By contrast, Mary Prince, enslaved in the West Indies for decades, was never 'at home' on the plantation, in which 'the stones and the timber...were not so hard as the hearts' of her owners (171), but found a physical and emotional home for herself in London and depicted the Caribbean colonies as 'a wholly separate, degenerate world' (180), in line with the claims of the abolitionists.

*Slavery and the Politics of Place* is an important book for scholars both of the Caribbean and of Britain in the era of abolition. It draws new insights from canonical works such as those of Long, Equiano, and Schaw, as well as from the less familiar productions of Hakewill and Nugent. Weaving a web of connections between disparate locations and subject positions in the colonial Caribbean, it shows the crucial place of place, both physical and figurative, in the practice of slavery and its eventual end.

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