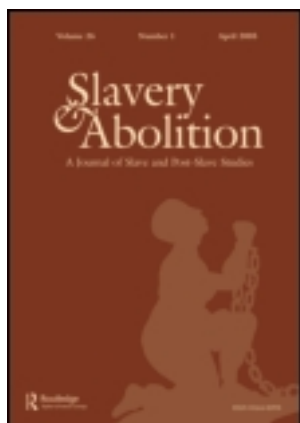


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Neither Fugitive nor Free: Atlantic Freedom Suits and the Legal Culture of Travel

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Book Reviews

Reconfiguring Slavery: West African Trajectories, by Benedetta Rossi, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, x + 237 pp, £65.00, ISBN 978-1-84631-199-4

This collection of essays derives from a conference held at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London (SOAS) in May 2007, coincidentally on the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade. It was appropriate at the time to signal that British ‘abolition’ did not end slavery, anywhere, and that the ways in which the institutions of servile subjugation have been reconfigured over time have to be analysed nonetheless. These ten essays provocatively focus on West Africa in recent times, well after the supposed abolition of slavery under colonial rule, which as specialists of West Africa will know did not result in the emancipation of enslaved persons but instead led to continued and sustained forms of servitude, discrimination, and struggle. The studies in this volume focus primarily on areas of Muslim domination along the desert-edge of the Sahara and in the savanna regions where Muslim governments came to prevail or where Islam was the main influence in political discourse and social construction. There are several exceptions, but this is the focus of this volume that tries to follow the reconfigurations.

In her introduction, Benedetta Rossi, who organised the SOAS conference, explores the ‘trajectories’ of change and continuity during the colonial and post-colonial eras in West Africa. Her analysis bridges an important gap in the conceptualisation of slavery in the history and contemporary politics of West Africa. Previous analysis by historians tended to trace slavery into the colonial period, with the result that what happened got lost. From a different perspective, and at points in time that witnessed slavery, anthropologists ‘discovered’ slavery, often without reflecting on the significance of this discovery in the context of colonialism. The implications of seeing the persistence of slavery during the ‘modern’ era of research from the 1960s to the present have inadvertently confronted the scholarly community with a different problematic, which this volume attempts to confront with varying degrees of success. Although previous transformations in slavery have been identified that relate to the significance of slavery historically, there has been a roadblock in the confrontation with what happened to slavery under colonialism and, indeed, into the post-colonial era. Moreover, we do not know enough about the complexities of stigma, discrimination, and the forms of collective memory in relation to the slavery past and how these shape the present. What happened to slaves, former slaves, and their descendants? Rossi has worked out the reconfiguration in a conceptually clear way. The contributions to the volume do not always grapple with the issues that she raises but, nonetheless,

she provides an overview that is refreshing, even if some major historical trends are not adequately dealt with.

Martin Klein demonstrates how slave descent and social status remain closely associated in the Sahara and the savanna regions of West Africa. The disjuncture with the past is more apparent than real in his analysis. His essay provides a second introduction to the volume, although the historical precision and depth that his essay commands is not always addressed in the essays that follow. Tom McCaskie's exposé explores the ways in which visiting African Americans seeking a homeland stumbled into the developmental politics of the Ghana state. His analysis explores the interesting contradiction of the politics of Afrocentric scholars of Africana and the real politics of confronting slavery and its legacy in a specific national context in Africa. McCaskie's cynicism is certainly warranted, and he provides a good introduction in examining the correlation between people's expectations and the product that is delivered, and who tries to deliver. Alice Bellagamba discusses the metaphors of slavery in the political history of the Gambia, in which relationships to the slavery past are being reconsidered in the politics of governance. As McCaskie does for Ghana, Bellagamba shows the ways in which the 'slavery' past is interpreted, manipulated, and misunderstood. Similarly, Christine Harding explores the contradictions in the ways in which slavery has been perceived both as a curse and a blessing in Benin.

Jean Schmitz considers Muslim patronage and the 'republican' emancipation of slaves in the Senegal River valley, specifically the strategies of the descendants of slaves of the political elite in attempting to overcome the ongoing stigma of heritage. Olivier Leservoisier follows the trajectories of slavery in Mauritania, where the struggle over status and identity has persisted to the present. Leservoisier does not place his analysis in the context of the historical literature, which, if he had, would have reinforced his main points. Eric Komlavi Hahonou explores the stigma associated with the slavery past in Niger and northern Benin, as represented in decentralisation and political representation. However, Hahonou ignores the historical context before the colonial period, which detracts from the contribution. Rossi's own research focuses on the forms of slavery and migration in the Adar region of Niger in the twenty-first century. She considers how the current desert-side arrangements over access to land, water, and legitimacy have been transformed in the post-colonial state. She demonstrates better than the other essays on the 'desert-side' societies and economies how slavery and its complicated legacies have remained fundamental in understanding historical change. Finally, Philip Burnham reflects on forty years of research in northern Cameroon, in which the significance of slavery in the cultures of anthropological research became historical in his own lifetime.

Despite the attempt to provide an anthropological and historical perspective on the persistence of slavery and its reconfigurations, the contrast between anthropology and history and the way the issue of slavery has been addressed in these two disciplines is not resolved. Rossi attempts in the introduction to address the conflicting paradigms, but with rare exceptions, the contributors do not bridge the disciplines. Klein's

brilliant overview of the rough transition from slavery to freedom in West Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is not carried through in the anthropological essays. For example, Burnham's reflections on his research apparently does not mean that he has read much of the historical literature on the Sokoto Caliphate, or even on the Emirate of Fombina (Adamawa), where his own research has been concentrated. The essays on northern Benin do not engage the literature on the Sokoto Caliphate, where again the historians have been virtually ignored. Even Rossi's otherwise superb chapter claims that seasonal labour migration, *cin rani*, became a phenomenon only in the 1930s, which overlooks evidence that *cin rani* was being practised at least as early as the end of the nineteenth century, well before the introduction of colonialism, let alone the Great Depression. As has been demonstrated by more than one study, both in Niger and Nigeria, *cin rani* was not a phenomenon of colonialism but the result of the logic of slavery and Islam.

This volume makes an important contribution to the study of slavery in Africa. The ways in which relationships deriving from slavery have been reconfigured have clearly been complex during the colonial and post-colonial eras. The weakness of the volume is that the various contributions do not always link the recent trajectories with the past. Despite some exceptions, the disjuncture between Anglophone scholarship and Francophone theory is ever present, as is the mixed communication between anthropologists and historians. Anthropologists and historians are in the same volume, but we still do not communicate very well with each other.

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Slave Captain. The Career of James Irving in the Liverpool Slave Trade, edited by Suzanne Schwarz, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2008, xiv + 212 pp., £19.99, ISBN 9781846310676

This welcome reissue of a book first published in 1995 is an important contribution to the remarkable literature on the slave trade. Readers of this journal need no reminding of the importance of the subject or of the flood tide of scholarship that laps around those scholars anxious to keep abreast of the latest findings. This upsurge represents not merely a reappraisal of the slave trade itself and a recognition of its centrality in the shaping of the modern Atlantic world. It also reveals the remarkable data available to scholars of slavery. The primary evidence about the slave trade is almost overwhelming (but that, in its turn, raises perplexing questions about why the subject lay dormant for so many years). It remains unclear why a subject that was so abundantly represented in archives on both sides of the Atlantic remained relatively untouched by serious scholars. Even the astonishing riches brought together by Elizabeth Donnan in her four-volume collection on the slave trade failed to lure historians to the task.

Yet there remain obvious gaps in the materials. It is rare, as Schwarz points out, to find detailed personal accounts by slave-trade captains. Even the rich materials left by James Irving, and skilfully assembled and analysed here, emerged by accident. Thanks to her own research in the Lancashire Record Office and that of Linda Colley in the Beinicke Library at Yale, Irving's journal emerged. It is now republished – but grounded in Schwarz's studious work on the wider scholarship of the slave trade. What unfolds is at once an important story in itself and an entrée to a much broader story of contemporary sensibilities: about slavery, humanity, and about relations between black and white.

James Irving progressed from humble origins in the Scottish borders to become slave surgeon and then captain in the peak years of Liverpool's slaving ascendancy. His shipboard career alone saw 3,000 Africans shipped to the Americas. His was a common pattern: a literate, literary Scot (the kind of man with which the trans-Atlantic story of slavery in the eighteenth century is peppered) trading first to the West Indies before later joining slave ships to and from West Africa. He gradually acquired the particular skills and know-how of working a slave ship and of handling its volatile Africans. However, like John Newton, this highly literate man also wrote a stream of letters to his family. His work and his bearing impressed his superiors (on land and at sea) and Irving rose to become surgeon and then – a common pattern – captain of his own slaver. His correspondence between 1786 and 1791 is reprinted here: forty invaluable letters to and from loved ones and associates, from Africa, from the Americas, and from on board his ships.

Irving's luck ran out in September 1789 when his ship, the *Anna*, was wrecked off the Moroccan coast – the cargo plundered and, irony of ironies – the crew were enslaved. The enslavement of European crews (and, indeed, of Europeans living in exposed coastal reaches) was not uncommon, but the reaction of Irving and his fellow prisoners to their enslavement provides a remarkable insight into the mentality of contemporary Europeans. Their ambition was to acquire and sell enslaved Africans. However, they now found themselves enslaved: Christian slaves to infidel captors. Irving pleaded to a British official to 'rescue us speedily from the most intolerable Slavery'. It was a desperate time: they were sick, moved around, and their mood swung from optimism to despair. After fourteen months in captivity, they were released to the local British Vice-Consul. They landed back in England in October 1790. By the end of the year Irving was celebrating the birth of his first-born in Liverpool and had been appointed captain of the *Ellen*, destined for West Africa. It then sailed to Trinidad with 252 Africans, of whom 206 survived. Irving, however, did not, dying at sea in the Atlantic on Christmas Eve 1791.

Time and again, his letters reveal what to us might seem a remarkable refusal to see the obvious. He complained of the difficulties, the noise, the worries posed by the Africans; he day-dreamed about his distant wife and their domestic fireside. He pleaded in misery about his own enslavement in Morocco; but the feelings, the families, the thoughts of the Africans crowded below decks on his own vessels were something different: distant, unknown, and unknowable.

Schwarz has written and compiled an important volume. She has presented us with some remarkable primary data of a kind we rarely find; and she graces that material

with a sharp, persuasive analysis. *Slave Captain* is an important book for any historian of the Atlantic slave trade.

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Slavery in White and Black: Class and Race in the Southern Slaveholders' New World Order, by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008, ix + 314 pp., \$80.00 and \$22.99, ISBN 9780521721813

In this thoughtful and sweeping book, the authors – long known as leading scholars of the antebellum South – set out to demonstrate that a surprising consensus about the intrinsic social value of slavery emerged in the region just before what they call ‘the War for Southern Independence’. The conventional wisdom has been that slaveholders were, for the most part, rather ashamed of their regional addiction to chattel bondage. Outside of George Fitzhugh, James Henry Hammond, and Henry Hughes, few saw slavery as anything other than a strategically instrumental labour system, developed as a local response to the climate, the demographics, and the need for many hands in the field. There was little general enthusiasm for a defence of slavery as an ideal, global social formation. The standard story suggests that few thought that it could be the antidote to the worldwide problems that were increasingly obvious in industrial capitalism.

The authors, however, have unearthed what they see as a fairly broad faith in ‘Slavery in the Abstract’. Consequently, and somewhat ironically, their version of the slaveholding South seems more convincingly attentive to the needs of the poor generally and more confident in its mastery. According to this logic, Southerners understood slaveholding as a most Christian act in the face of social decay and tumult. As the War approached, Southerners grew more and more comfortable with the idea that all of the world’s lesser peoples should find their way into God’s community through enslavement.

In many ways, this book must be understood as a companion to the authors’ *The Mind of the Master Class* (2005). Like that volume, *Slavery in White and Black* is eclectic, scattershot, and ambitiously global, with chapters and sections of chapters drifting away from the thesis for many pages. Like *The Mind of the Master Class*, it sticks closely to the Great Planters and their allies, putting them in conversation with Great Thinkers, suggesting that the history of ideas matters more to historical argument than social or cultural context. Like *The Mind of the Master Class*, this work stridently and repeatedly proclaims its originality and highlights its supposedly provocative findings. The authors suggest, in a brief ‘Preface’, that *Slavery in White and Black* was meant ‘to stand alone’, but they also admit that readers of *The Mind of the Master Class* will ‘have a richer context’ for understanding this latest collaborative effort (ix). It is possible to imagine the two books as a single effort,

and to conceive of *Slavery in White and Black* as an appendix to the larger, more formidable volume.

Unlike *The Mind of the Master Class*, however, this book relies largely on the authors' imagination to establish the intellectual singularity that has been proposed. 'Southern views on Slavery in the Abstract', they proffer, 'have to be teased out of diverse sources' (5). 'Most southern political economists', they write, 'rejected or ignored Slavery in the Abstract, but they contributed to it through the introduction of Malthusian population theory' (174). 'After the War', they admit, 'few Southerners admitted to having ever believed in Slavery in the Abstract, but then, few admitted to having ever much liked black slavery either' (290). More than once, *Slavery in the Abstract* gets flattened, so that all sorts of master/servant relations might well fit within its conceptual contours. The repeated reliance on thick argumentative flesh over thin evidentiary bones is troubling.

There were, of course, many features of the defence of *Slavery in the Abstract*: an understanding of sociology and political economy, for instance, along with a certain sort of cosmopolitanism and Christian world view. Fox-Genovese and Genovese connect the dots, but one could very easily re-draw the lines to suggest an opposite conclusion. At one point, for instance, when scientific racism is offered as a 'pillar' of *Slavery in the Abstract*, the authors subsequently note that '[a] nuanced racism foreshadowed the ideologies of modern imperialism, promising to render the enslavement of whites more palatable to the tenderhearted' (220). One cannot easily reason from their first clause to the second. Elsewhere, they take note of the 'astonishing' fact that 'by 1850 a significant if undetermined number of Southerners were taking seriously the argument that every society rested on some form of personal dependency' (142). Even this minor pillar cannot bear the weight of scrutiny; in truth, we do not know that this is new, that the number of Southerners is significant, that they were, indeed, taking something seriously, that there is a relationship between this acknowledgement of the unevenness of society and the ideological defence of *Slavery in the Abstract*, and that this particular finding should merit the term 'astonishing'.

Taken on its own terms, though, this is a challenging, and admirably bold book. It offers a strong argument about a serious matter, and it caps off a decades-long collaborative partnership that shaped a generation of writing about slavery, slaveholding, and the South. If it seems to have sprung from a contrarian impulse, if it rubs abrasively against the standard conventions of Southern history, if it picks fights where there might not be cause, it does so with an interest in furthering our understanding of the slaveholding South. It offers a thesis that will prompt further inquiry; and because the authors have been sifting through this particular soil for so long, and so productively, *Slavery in White and Black* will be a book that stays, and that comes back around as a part of our scholarly conversations.

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Neither Fugitive nor Free: Atlantic Freedom Suits and the Legal Culture of Travel, by Edlie L. Wong, New York, New York University Press, 2009, viii + 368 pp., \$24.00, ISBN 970-0-8147-9456-2

Neither Fugitive nor Free combines law, history, culture, and literature in its exploration of the significance of freedom suits for the antebellum Anglo-American conception of freedom. Edlie Wong joins a growing list of literary scholars (Jeannine DeLombard foremost among them) who are enriching the legal history of slavery and freedom with a cultural and literary approach. Like DeLombard, Wong sees the significance of a newly burgeoning print culture to the rise of abolitionism across the Atlantic world, and she reads closely the narratives of ex-slaves and other writings that circulated in this popular print culture regarding the experiences of slaves seeking their freedom. However, Wong draws the attention of cultural historians and literary scholars to an archive that has heretofore received more attention from social and legal historians: the suits for manumission brought by slaves in cities from London to New Orleans to Baltimore.

Wong argues that the anti-slavery movement's equation of freedom with the right to travel, especially to travel to a free state or territory, lost sight of the family ties that mattered to the slaves themselves who were the subjects of freedom suits. In her retelling of the *Dred Scott* case, Wong builds on the ground-breaking work of Lea Vanderdelde on 'Mrs. Dred Scott' to reveal the gendered dimensions of the landmark freedom cases, explaining why a freed slave might return to a slave state, in order to be near family and friends still in slavery. As Wong points out, despite the popular trope of the male runaway slave, many of these cases involved women. She deftly teases out the gender implications of freedom suits by women and men, emphasising the importance of kinship and the equivocal nature of freedom in a slave society.

Neither Fugitive Nor Free explores both famous and lesser-known cases, from *Somerset v. Stewart*, the 1772 British case that came to stand for the idea that breathing British air set one free, to *Commonwealth v. Aves*, the 1836 Massachusetts case that took the *Somerset* principle to its logical extent in a free state, setting free even a 'sojourning' slave travelling with her master. The Missouri court's decision in *Dred Scott* that 'times now are not as they were' and therefore they would no longer follow the principle of 'comity' by recognising the laws of another state, was in part a response to *Aves* and decisions like it. Wong also discusses the South Carolina 'Negro Seaman' Acts, by which that state imprisoned men of colour who stopped in its ports as sailors, as well as the legal challenges to those laws.

This cultural history has many strengths, not least its interdisciplinarity and transnational scope. Wong has illuminated slaves' own perspectives on freedom suits more broadly than any previous work on the subject, and has tied the genre of the freedom suit to the ex-slave narratives in a way that has not been done before. But the book is also subject to some of the challenges of interdisciplinary writing. While it appears at times to be making historical claims, the argument is somewhat buried; for example, what is called the 'Conclusion' is in fact more of an epilogue, introducing the new subject of ex-slaves' passports. Similarly, a deeper engagement with law could have

brought other dimensions to the work. Trials are read here primarily as sources for slaves' voices and as documents of popular culture. There is little exploration of the law of freedom and manumission, almost no legal background provided, nor any sense of freedom suits as part of a longstanding anti-slavery lawyers' strategy, especially by the lawyers of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society going back to the late eighteenth century. Finally, while trials did have a life in print, they were also live performances, and the subject of these trials as performances with participants and audiences might also have enriched the discussion.

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Majority Rule Versus Consensus: The Political Thought of John C. Calhoun, by James H. Read, Lawrence, Kansas, University Press of Kansas, 2009, xi + 276 pp. \$34.95, ISBN 978-0-7006-1635-0

Over 150 years after his death, John C. Calhoun continues to intrigue and frustrate scholars. James Read's *Majority Rule versus Consensus: The Political Thought of John C. Calhoun* constitutes the latest effort by a political scientist to explore Calhoun's thought and its relation to the antebellum United States. His book has three goals,

first, critically to examine Calhoun's minority veto/consensus model of government; second, to use Calhoun to shed new light on the crisis that led up to the American Civil War; and third, to explore attempts elsewhere to institute Calhoun's consensus model of government, or something like it. (19)

Read succeeds admirably in explicating Calhoun's theory, but he is less successful in shedding light on the crisis that led to war. His evaluation of consensus theory and practice in modern contexts, including Yugoslavia, Northern Ireland, and South Africa, may be of interest to political theorists but detracts from Read's historical reading of Calhoun.

One of the virtues of Read's book is its willingness to take Calhoun seriously. Read forcefully points out the limits of majority rule in protecting minority rights and interests. Although he regularly insists that Calhoun's consensus model ultimately produces problems worse than those it seeks to solve, he nonetheless acknowledges that Calhoun developed and proposed his theory in hopes of maintaining the nation and avoiding disunion. Secession, Read states, 'was precisely what he hoped to avoid and what his entire political and constitutional theory . . . was intended to render unnecessary' (112). The best parts of Read's book lay out Calhoun's theory, as he developed it from the Nullification Crisis of the 1820s and 1830s to his death in 1850, and demonstrate how it sought to protect southern slaveholding interests in a polity increasingly dominated by a northern numerical majority. He effectively demonstrates how much of Calhoun's theory represented 'a response to Madison's constitutionalism and to Madison's own very different diagnosis and remedy for majority tyranny.' Whereas

Madison's 'republican remedy to the diseases most incident to republican government' sought to preserve majority rule, Calhoun's consensus model rejected majority rule as necessarily tyrannical (41). Read correctly notes, as have others, that some scholars have exaggerated Calhoun's supposed reversal from 'nationalism' to 'sectionalism' between 1816 and 1828. Calhoun always insisted that policies designed to strengthen the nation had to 'benefit each of its parts' (58). Thus, as Read points out, Calhoun's 'support for the 1816 tariff is consistent with his opposition to the 1828 and 1832 tariffs, which appealed to explicitly sectional interests and passed Congress by an explicitly sectional vote' (61). The tariffs alarmed Calhoun less because of the economic damage they inflicted on the South than because of 'the way they violated the spirit of sectional reciprocity' that was necessary for the Union to function properly (62). Nullification, and consensus theory in general, thus sought to restore, through threats, the sectional reciprocity that alone could keep the Union together. Read smartly identifies both the centrality of the 'spirit of sectional reciprocity' to Calhoun's understanding of the Union and the breakdown of that spirit to the rise of Calhoun's consensus theory.

Read also does a fine job of identifying Calhoun's defence of slavery – as both a moral social relation and a constitutionally protected right – as vital to his political theory. He points out that 'Calhoun's reading of the Constitution was coherent only if opposition to slavery was an illegitimate position, devoid of constitutional rights or protections' (89). Although all states possessed the right to veto national legislation, that right did not extend to vetoing federal policy protecting slavery. Read's insightful analysis of Calhoun's 1836 'Report on Incendiary Publications' and his response to the 'Vermont memorial' of 1837 reveals Calhoun's belief that the Constitution obligated every state not to interfere with but actively 'to uphold reciprocally the institutions of each other' (101). States thus had a duty to suppress state abolitionist societies and their publications as those societies and publications threatened the 'institutions' of a fellow state of the Union. Read convincingly argues that Calhoun went even further, claiming that although the federal government could not prohibit publication of 'incendiary' literature, it was obligated 'to co-operate in [the] execution' of state laws aimed at suppressing such literature. Calhoun thus endorsed employing, in his words, 'the powers of Congress over the mail, and regulating commerce with foreign nations and between the States.' As Read notes, Calhoun called for far more than 'mere federal noninterference with slavery, instead demanding the federal government actively use its extensive powers to protect and reinforce the institution of slavery' (105).

What makes Read's interpretation of Calhoun persuasive is his grounding of that interpretation in the historically specific context of antebellum US politics. Unfortunately, Read refuses to examine the ten years of history that followed Calhoun's death and instead chooses to look – ahistorically – at modern examples of consensus theory. He goes to considerable lengths, in his discussions of both Calhoun and modern examples, to establish the impracticality and oppressive potential of consensus theory, pointing out that it could lead to a minority imposing its will on the majority or to minorities deadlocking the entire political process with their veto power.

But missing from Read's critique of Calhoun's consensus theory and his defense of majority rule is any discussion of the rise of the sectional and majoritarian Republican Party in the 1850s, the actual secession of southern states, the War for Southern Independence, and the deaths of over 600,000 men between 1861 and 1865. Although Calhoun died before all of these events, they nonetheless directly relate to the question of whether majority rule – in this historically specific instance – promoted the 'common good'. Read asserts that in both the 1828 tariff debate and the 1850 debate over slavery in the territories 'a functioning (if imperfect) system of constitutional majority rule existed' and that 'it was this functioning system of majority rule that Calhoun deliberately chose to reject in hopes of achieving something he believed would be better' (231). Read further claims that the United States political system had 'certain structural rules' that made it 'difficult, though not in the long run impossible, for a single majority party or coalition to control all branches of government'; but for slaveholders it was precisely the 'long run' possibility of the Republican Party controlling 'all branches of government' that led them to quit that system before that 'single majority party' realised that end (235). The breakdown of that 'functioning system of majority rule' and the war that followed that breakdown need not lead us to conclude that Calhoun's system could have done better, but we ought to consider them when evaluating Calhoun as a historical figure who sought, however futilely, to devise a means to avoid them.

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Colonial Blackness: a History of Afro-Mexico, by Herman L. Bennett, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2009, xvi + 227 pp., \$39.95. ISBN 978-0-253-35338-2

This book identifies several shortcomings in the historical literature on Afro-Mexicans and seeks to redress them. Herman Bennett is concerned that histories of the New World African diaspora pay insufficient attention to Mexico, to free people (as opposed to slaves), and to Christianity as a shaper and moulder of black life in the Americas. Within Mexico specifically, he feels that Afro-Mexicans have been largely excluded from narratives of Mexican history and the nation. Finally, he argues, scholars of Afro-Mexican history have tended to focus on socio-economic topics such as labour and production, black people's pursuit of upward mobility and social advancement, and 'race relations' more generally, to the neglect of black culture and community life. Having targeted these problems, he offers 'a rewriting and original reconceptualization of Afro-Mexican social and cultural history for the seventeenth century and beyond' (12). That rewriting is based largely on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century marriage petitions from couples requesting permission from the Church to marry.

Readers of this book will be distracted by frequent lapses that either the author or the editor(s) should have caught. Numerous books cited in the footnotes do not appear in the bibliography. Statistical tables are sloppily presented (see, for example, table 2.2, which is misprinted and garbled; or table 3.1, which parallels 2.2 but uses different chronological categories). Many Spanish words are misspelled; words that require accent marks do not have them, and vice versa. Even in English, embarrassing typos and mistakes appear. On a single page (109), a defendant is 'brought to trail' (read 'trial') and the last sentence of note 45 appears to be missing a crucial 'not'. Similar mis-steps occur throughout the text.

Moving from mechanics to content, the author spends a good deal of time and energy (both his and ours) setting up and knocking down straw men. For example, Orlando Patterson's concept of 'social death' comes in for repeated criticism; but the notion of 'social death' is now almost thirty years old and has been thoroughly reworked and modified by intervening scholarship, as Bennett eventually acknowledges: 'contemporary scholarship has forged a consensus ... that slaves manifested social practices and cultural institutions that reflected their consciousness as social beings' (106). Quite so; so rather than belabour Patterson, let's get on to what the history of Afro-Mexico adds to our understanding of slave (and free black) social and cultural practices.

Here, Bennett focuses on two related historical processes: the demographic transition from a black and mulatto population dominated numerically in the 1500s by Africans to one dominated in the 1600s by American-born 'Creoles'; and the role of Catholicism in black community life. By 1646, native-born Afro-Mexicans outnumbered Africans by 117,000 to 35,000 (in a total colonial population of 1.7 million) (59). Afro-Mexican Creoles did not suffer from the 'natal alienation' ('the absence (in a person's life) of ascending and descending lineage' (95)) experienced by the Africans. On the contrary, they were embedded in thick networks of kin, friends, and neighbours that provided social meaning and context to their lives.

The evidence for those networks is found in the marriage petitions, which recorded friends, relatives, and other witnesses testifying on behalf of the would-be brides and grooms. The petitions also express Afro-Mexicans' deep familiarity with and commitment to the practices, ideas, and rituals of Catholicism. So central was Catholicism to Afro-Mexican life, suggests Bennett, that 'in urban New Spain, Christianity rather than race or slavery provided the structural contours of blackness' (61). '[I]n embracing Christian practices, Creoles created greater social autonomy from Spaniards' (88). Afro-Mexicans used Christianity to create family and community structures that in turn enabled them to construct lives largely of their own choosing. Christianity also enabled Africans and Afro-Mexicans to bridge the cultural gaps between them, forging 'a common black cultural identity' (109).

I have no doubts of the importance and even centrality of Christianity in black social and community life in Mexico. However, that conclusion is virtually pre-ordained by the sources with which Bennett has chosen to work: petitions directed to Church officials and aimed at persuading them to allow would-be brides and grooms to marry. Obviously, those documents had to be framed in a Catholic

idiom and imbued with Catholic ideology; were they not, they would have had little to no chance of success. For a fuller exploration of other cultural and ideological influences in Afro-Mexican community life, we need to push on beyond the marriage petitions to explore other sources that might reflect, for example, the continuing coexistence of African beliefs and practices alongside Christianity.

Bennett's analysis raises a final question: if, as he suggests, Christianity had the effect of bridging cultural gaps between Africans and Afro-Mexicans, might it have had a similar effect in bridging gaps between Afro-Mexicans and the colony's Spaniards, indigenous peoples, and castas? As one reads about the networks of relatives, friends, and neighbors who appear in the petitions in support of the would-be brides and grooms, one starts to wonder what, other than their racial composition, made those networks distinctively 'black'? And if racial composition was indeed those networks' only distinguishing characteristic, then aren't we back to questions of how race, slavery, and 'race relations' functioned as determinants of 'colonial blackness'?

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Ocean of Letters: Language and Creolization in an Indian Ocean Diaspora, by Pier M. Larson, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, xx + 378 pp., \$35.99 (pb.) and \$99.00 (hb.). ISBN 978-0-521-73957-3 (pb.) and 978-0-521-51827-7 (hb.)

Between the years 1501 and 1900 nearly half a million men and women from Madagascar were taken as slaves to the Cape of Good Hope, the Arabian Peninsula, the Mascarene Islands, and other destinations stretching across the Indian Ocean. These Malagasy speakers were part of a larger, multi-lingual diaspora of slaves from eastern and southern Africa. But even as captives from Madagascar took a place in slave communities that were culturally hybrid, they also spoke – and taught their neighbours to speak – the Malagasy vernacular. Pier Larson's excellent new book illuminates the sphere of vernacular-language communication that Malagasy slaves, apprentices, refugees, linguists, and evangelists created. In doing so he helps us to see slaves in a new light: not as amnesiacs stripped of their culture, nor still as righteous defenders of a heritage, but as entrepreneurs, bending old languages to new purposes and moving with agility across the discontinuous linguistic landscape that colonialism created.

Larson's tenacious pursuit of Malagasy language source material gives this book its form and direction. He has unearthed a great volume of material showing that Malagasy, not the French Creole, was the *lingua franca* in some of the Indian Ocean's slave societies. On the sugar island of Mauritius – where Larson focuses much of his attention – 60 per cent of the slave population hailed from Madagascar in 1730. This demography obliged the French colonists to invest in the language. The middle chapters of

Larson's book focus on three dictionaries composed by linguists working in Mauritius. One text, published in 1773, offered a pared-down, condensed version of Malagasy, useful for Frenchmen negotiating the Indian Ocean marketplace. Another text, a catechism published in 1785, offered careful, precise summaries of Catholic church teachings for catechumens to learn. But the crowning achievement of Mauritius's linguists was never published. The 'Grand Dictionnaire de Madagascar', composed by the savant Froberville in the early nineteenth century, was a scholarly effort to collect all the words of the Malagasy language between the covers of one text. When, in the 1830s, Froberville sought to publish his *magnum opus*, Mauritius had passed into the hands of British rulers. British missionaries working in the highlands of Madagascar feared that a French-language dictionary of Malagasy would draw Madagascar into the French orbit. They therefore blocked the publication of Froberville's manuscript and advanced their own version of Malagasy. The prevalence of the Malagasy language in Mauritius and elsewhere in the Indian Ocean was not simply a survival, a hold-over from the past. Working from a variety of angles, European entrepreneurs constituted the Malagasy language as a vehicle for commerce, a language of instruction, or a template by which to make Malagasy speakers into a biddable congregation.

Ocean of Letters is more than a study of colonial language politics. It was Malagasy slaves, sailors, and evangelists, not fastidious linguists, who sustained the Malagasy language in Mauritius. Larson urges scholars to look past the European Creoles that seem to dominate the culture of slave colonies, to 'peel away [the] superficial Creole-colonial integuments to actually see the cultured persons behind them' (219). Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Mauritius's streets were dominated by Malagasy speakers, who moved in and out of the French Creole as they conducted business, built social networks, and communicated with government officials. After slavery was abolished in 1835, thousands of ex-slaves purchased land and established hamlets across rural Mauritius. These Malagasy-speaking communities were reinforced by refugees fleeing from Madagascar, where in the 1830s Christians found themselves exiled by the rulers of the Merina kingdom. Two distinct Malagasy diasporas – ex-slaves and Christian refugees – thereby converged in the 1840s, and it was in Mauritius, hundreds of miles from Madagascar, that they learned to see themselves as a people. The London Missionary Society built schools for the Christian exiles and ex-slaves, who together learned to read and write a newly standardised version of Malagasy. Tutored in standard Malagasy, Christian writers in Mauritius and elsewhere carried on a correspondence across geographic frontiers, constituting the 'ocean of letters' that gives Larson's book its title. This body of textual communication was by no means titanic in quantity: Larson has found only one hundred handwritten letters tucked into the corners of mission archives. The smallness of their network did not limit the scope of Malagasy writers' imaginations. In their vernacular-language correspondence, Larson shows, Malagasy writers overlooked the ethnic and linguistic diversity of Madagascar's inhabitants, addressing each other as 'the people of Malagasy' and building networks of sociable interchange that helped to bring a novel polity to life. 'Madagascar' was first imagined as a pan-ethnic community by the literate correspondents of the Indian Ocean diaspora.

This exciting book makes a novel contribution to two distinct literatures. *Ocean of Letters* ought, first, to spur scholars of New World slave communities to learn African languages, dredge through archives, and search for evidence showing how slaves practised, and elaborated on, their vernacular languages. *Creolité* – the cultural mixing that often fascinates scholars of slave communities – was only one aspect of slaves' social lives. Even as slaves from Madagascar inhabited a Creole society, they also spoke the vernacular, and positioned themselves as members of a distinct community. As a first step toward a study of African-language use in slave communities, scholars might usefully follow Larson's lead in looking at *creolité* not as hybridity but as agility, the skill by which people navigated the uneven cultural terrain of colonial society.

Larson's second contribution is to expand the terrain on which scholars studying the imagination of ethnic identity in Africa must work. Precolonial Africa's political communities were polyglot arenas of disputation; and social historians – myself included – have been fascinated by the process by which diverse, argumentative people came to see themselves as constituents of uniform, homogeneous ethnic identities. But social historians generally work within a constrained geography, defined by the boundaries that latter-day map-makers established. Larson's book invites historians to expand their research itineraries, to see how the 'Yoruba', the 'Kikuyu', and other ethnic communities came to know themselves through the cultural work of people living far from their African homelands. On this latter point Larson himself has more work to do. It would be good to know more about the social lives of Malagasy correspondents, about the political projects in which they and their compatriots-of-the-mind engaged. Malagasy identity may have been imagined through a skein of letters, but to make it real and effective its architects had to work within a specific territory: they had to draw maps, erect boundaries, valorise political hierarchy, and summon people up as constituents. There is a story still to be told here, and there is good reason therefore to look forward to further work from Pier Larson.

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Slavery, Emancipation, and Freedom: Comparative Perspectives, by Stanley L. Engerman, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2007, x + 128 pp. \$25.00 cloth, ISBN 0-8071-3236-5

When Adam Smith commented that slave labor was inefficient because it lacked incentives, it became a very popular, widely used antislavery argument, but what it most clearly showed was that it was doubtful that Smith had ever seen or studied an operating plantation. (20)

Such pointed and insightful comments abound in Stanley Engerman's wide-ranging study that uses the US South as a touchstone for broader historical and economic

comparisons. Engerman shows that in a world historical perspective, slavery was, and perhaps is, not a peculiar institution resistant to economic rationality. Contrary to Smith's influential views, southern slaveholders believed that slavery was economically viable and showed no signs of abandoning it. Their commitment seems less perverse not only upon considering the economics of slavery but also when recognising slavery's pervasiveness across time and space. It is freedom that is historically peculiar.

Turning to emancipation, Engerman notes that while manumission of individual slaves has been a feature of many slave systems, direct attacks on slavery as a whole have been rare. He posits that, in the Americas, Haiti, and the USA were unusual because in those countries war and revolution brought slavery to an end, whereas peacetime legislation was the norm in Latin America and the Caribbean. While the claim is literally true for Spanish America – laws did finally abolish slavery in most of the former Spanish colonies in the mid-1800s and in Cuba and Puerto Rico several decades later – it is not in step with findings by Reid Andrews, Peter Blanchard, and Rebecca Scott, who have shown that war and rebellion crippled slavery before legislators acted decisively to end it. The revolutionary aspect of Spanish American emancipation, triggered by the wars of independence in the 1810s and 1820s (in the 1860s and 1870s in Cuba), needs to be brought into the larger picture of New World slavery and abolition.

What consequences did emancipation have? Former slaves benefited economically from greater autonomy and control over their time. Planters retained political pre-eminence in most American societies but their power did not ensure continuity in plantation labour, a disconnect that Engerman indicates as an area for more research:

the economic, political, and moral constraints that prevented the return to the full coercion of labor on plantations is still unclear. While the political balance of power was clearly with the ruling class, its members accepted limits upon what they could do to reimpose a plantation economy. (51)

Post-emancipation societies in the Americas had more similarities than Engerman acknowledges in this section, at least in terms of political participation. It is debatable now that the USA was exceptional because of 'the greater rights given ex-slaves upon their liberation' (59). Historians are making similar arguments about Spanish America and Brazil, at least in the decades after independence. Moreover, like the USA (61), Latin American countries witnessed racist backlashes at the end of the nineteenth century that curtailed rights gained in earlier decades. Perhaps the real exception in this period is Cuba, where independence leaders resisted restrictions on the franchise, despite pressure from the United States during its occupation of the island between 1898 and 1902. However, Engerman shows that Cuba, too, experienced racial strife, especially the horrific violence against Afro-Cubans in 1912, an event that calls for more research and explanation (65–6).

In the final chapter, the author considers the durable intellectual and political legacies of abolition. Among the most stubborn is the rhetorical use of slavery to signal absolute evil and oppression, a testament to the power of abolitionist language and political mobilisation. Engerman expresses some scepticism over such usage because

it blurs the complexity of coercion in different labour regimes, both slave and free, but he acknowledges that it carries great emotive power. Thus, like David Brion Davis and Seymour Drescher, Engerman has provided us with an essential work on slavery and abolition that is both a cogent historical overview and a reflection on the legacies not only of slavery but also of the abolitionist struggle that continues to shape our historical and political imagination.

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Deep Roots: Rice Farmers in West Africa and the African Diaspora, by Edda L. Fields-Black, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2008, xvi + 277 pp., \$34.95, ISBN 978-0-253-35219-4

Professor Edda L. Fields-Black has written a fascinating book that can be placed within several historiographical frameworks or trajectories. The first and most obvious involves the connection between enslaved Africans and the development of rice production in colonial South Carolina, suggested in 1974 by Peter Wood and subsequently taken up by Judith Carney and by me. The second is a concern in African history about the origins of rice cultivation in the Rio Nunez region and a related methodological issue of how one reconstructs the story of those Eric Wolf called ‘the people without history’. A third is epistemological and related to how one conceptualises African American history and whether it is rooted in Africa or the diaspora. A fourth is the notion of Atlantic history and the terms on which scholars connect the major continents ringing the ocean. These strands, interrelated, can be separated for analytical purposes though space will not permit consideration of all of them.

In many ways, I think Fields-Black is most successful in handling the second of these trajectories. I am not a linguist and cannot judge the strength of her argument tracing words and sounds and their meanings across various African languages, even while I appreciate the arduousness of her fieldwork and the depth of her training. In securing her interviews, she obviously combined the sensitivity of an accomplished diplomat with the hardiness of an Indiana Jones. She admits that glottochronology can advance theories that are ‘tentative and controversial’ (21) but, as her fieldwork attests, she is nothing if not daring. The details of her work might escape the non-specialist but its thrust is clear. She brings together many pieces of evidence to support her argument about the antiquity and indigenous character of rice cultivation in coastal Rio Nunez and the way she does so is of particular importance in an age that pushes interdisciplinarity as well as multiculturalism. Bracketing part of her story between two written sources, Samuel Gamble’s *Log of the Sandown* and André Coffinère de Nordeck’s ‘Voyage aux pays des Bagas et du Rio-Nuñez’, she goes backward in time from the first and elaborates on the relevance of environmental changes in the region between the first and the second. In the process, she brings

history, linguistics, botany, geography, typography, oceanography, and climatology to bear on her subject.

Using linguistic dating, she shows how coastal dwellers in Rio Nunez first mastered the local flora and fauna, becoming familiar with white and red mangrove swamps, and recognising a need and discovering ways to maintain a balance between brackish and fresh water in order to cultivate plants. They developed their own peculiar methods to grow rice in their environment. When migrants from the interior brought rice to the coast, their prior experience unsuited them to grow it in the new setting and they required collaboration with the 'first-comers' to adapt the grain for coastal production. These migrants also brought iron and, as Fields-Black says, 'sowed the seeds of an indigenous agricultural revolution' (105). She gives an extended discussion of the features of local rice production, including a description of their unique and adaptable shovel, a tool suited in various guises to variant conditions. In association with which, she touches on gender conventions and mentions that some shovels and some jobs are reserved either for men or for women. She discusses, too, the qualities of the indigenous African rice *oryza glaberrima* which can withstand a higher level of salinity in coastal soils than the Asian *oryza sativa*. It yields less and is more difficult to clean; the grains of African rice tend to shatter if not carefully milled; but while Asian rice has spread throughout Africa in places where African rice has traditionally grown, it has not entirely displaced it because *oryza glaberrima* grows in marginal lands of high acidity and enables African farmers to grow rice in places unsuitable to Asian types.

The significance of these agronomical characteristics of *oryza glaberrima* is that African cultivators needed a sophisticated knowledge of the crop and of how to adapt their environment to it before they could get it to grow, and that although the region's distinctive system of paddies, dams, trunks, and sluices are arresting, the underlying knowledge would still be impressive even if it were not exhibited by such discrete manifestations. What Judith Carney and Edda L. Fields-Black both allege is that 'separating parts of the West African rice knowledge system and portions of the landscape gradient along which West African rice farmers adapted *O. glaberrima* obscures the indigenous knowledge systems' underlying principles' (52). Understanding those principles helps to explain why African farmers can adopt Asian rice without abandoning African rice and makes clear that these reasons have nothing to do with ethnic chauvinism or an African essentialism. In other words, African rice survives for practical scientific reasons rather than mushy romantic ones and in this feature of her work Fields-Black has made a solid contribution.

In another area, her work is more contentious and that concerns the connection between rice cultivation in colonial South Carolina and the African labourers who made it grow. This has less to do with her than with the fact that the topic is emotional and political as well as academic. It was a novel departure when Peter Wood suggested three decades ago that Africans might have taught Englishmen how to grow rice. Many Africans came from a region where rice was their staple crop and Englishmen had no prior experience with it. Englishmen succeeded in successful cultivation only when they were importing Africans directly from the coast. Wood saw function in the

coincidence. It may be well to state up front that the case is largely circumstantial. One could only really prove the case if we found a document left by a colonial planter saying that his newly enslaved African had on a particular day taught him the secret of growing rice and that he had shared the information with other planters. Even then, for some people, that would not be enough, as is suggested by the 'birthers' who deny the American nativity of Barack Obama, evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. It is the passion with which some reject the idea that tells the tale and the most recent exercise of that nature is so far off the mark as to be depressing. Clearly, several scholars are more interested in repudiating the notion than to exploring it and, in that regard, although Fields-Black has made some original suggestions, particularly in proposing that particular Africans knew more than most about how to maintain a balance between fresh and salty water and thereby extending the period in which they might have had unique capabilities, what she offers will not be convincing.

Most importantly, Fields-Black has done basic research that places Africa and Africans within an Atlantic context and proposes connections for other scholars to explore. She also advances a useful model for others to follow in recovering the background of peoples who did not consign their stories to print.

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