

REVIEWS

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Charmaine Nelson, *Slavery, Geography and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica*, Routledge, London, 2016, 416 pages, hardback, ISBN 9781409468912, £110.00.

Charmaine Nelson's *Slavery, Geography and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica* compellingly inserts Canadian visual culture into the history of Atlantic slavery and colonialism. Reading the two sites together, she seeks to sever the dichotomies between metropole and colony, as well as to deconstruct the mechanisms of 'whiteness' as they unfolded in several geographically disparate sites (pp. 2, 13-15). Mobilising Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Nelson maintains that the colonial construction of place in the Americas has, until recently, gone unaccounted for in art historical scholarship. The urgency she places on this material is clear, as she asks: 'how do landscape representations produce *ways of knowing* that are dangerous for how they have naturalized Western understandings of land as universal?' (p. 25) A particularly strong facet of her deconstructive approach is an interdisciplinary reading of various media such as paintings, cartography and aquatints.

To Nelson, the representation of space is irrevocably tied to the arrangement of

figures within it. The racialisation of labour and white (diversified according to status and nationalities) privileged access to the landscape are thus key prisms through which she reads representations of landscape. The depictions of productive agricultural lands surrounding Montreal are convincingly compared to those famously featured in James Hakewill's *A Picturesque Tour of the Island of Jamaica* (1825), with their focus on order, fecundity of vegetation and enclosed animals. Here, she correlates the penning of animals with the relegation of the 'other' to passivity and subordination within the composition of views. These images are moreover imbricated in the dissemination of the wider Picturesque tradition in Europe and beyond, in which pictorial devices of framing and composition were employed to construct the landscape according to Romantic or sublime concepts of beauty. Nelson's discussion of 'the Picturesque' attaches its significance as an aesthetic category firmly to the social realities in which it operated (pp. 201-202). The rendering of humans as 'objects' in the landscape created a distance between viewer and enslaved, justifying their social marginalisation.

Over eight chapters, Nelson combines surveys of broader visual themes with more in-depth analysis of materials. In chapters two and three, we are thoroughly introduced to the social historical context of Montreal, as a

crucial site for resource extraction, trade and settlement for the French and subsequently the British. In 'Landscaping Montreal' and 'Landscaping Jamaica', she reads dominant landscape representations with the grain, to assess both their narrations of place and their occlusions. Particularly repressed in these representations is the exploitation of black and Indigenous labour. It is also here that the connections between Montreal and Jamaica are drawn out. Nelson provides a detailed analysis of painted views from the St. Lawrence River by British lieutenant and artist Thomas Davies. Through her attentive reading, these images reveal a commitment to domesticating indigenous populations against British military dominance of the harbour.

The importance of vision and 'point of view' is prevalent throughout Nelson's book, as she places an emphasis on situatedness in representations of place. The visual conventions of the tropical Picturesque were made possible by positioning the planter-viewer at a high distance, wherefrom the harsh realities of labour were subsumed by the depiction of soft, undulating landscapes. According to Nelson, this perspective did not emerge through lived experience, but primarily by the propositional imaging of land through maps and plans. This perspective belied the imposition of racial discipline in these spaces, and relates to Nicholas Mirzoeff's notion of *visuality* in the plantation regime. Power is here constituted by surveillance and the visual organisation of space from a singular viewing (and history-making) position.¹ In chapter three, Nelson turns the notion of viewing to the enslaved themselves. She calls into question images of slave dances, deliberating between slaveholders' spectacularising visual control

of enslaved activities and the potential for the enslaved to 'look back' in their mimicry/mockery of Western culture.

Nelson confronts the reader in chapter six, 'Imaging slavery in Antigua and Jamaica', with the harsh realities, including corporeal punishment and sexual exploitation, experienced by enslaved women. This is situated within the framework of anti-abolitionist literature and imagery, which either omitted black labour or naturalised it. These visual mechanisms of sanitisation functioned similarly to absences of Indigenous and black inhabitation in colonial maps, which, according to Nelson, by extension justified conquest of land. It is a shame, then, that maps receive only limited attention in the book. A deeper analytical engagement of maps against landscape views may have sutured further the gaps between the disciplines of geography and art, both of which Nelson mobilises. The scope of Nelson's material is vast, and perhaps a narrowed focus would have also allowed for a more complicating reading of details within the landscape images themselves. Diversifying the recurring figure of the 'Native' would have provided the reader with a sense of the complex cultural encounters these scenes also testify to. Furthermore, in her focus on the orderly, she may be excluding evidence of displaced conflict.

Overall, Nelson's book is a formidable piece of analysis of the visual imagination of Atlantic slavery, replete with social historical contextualisation. It is uncompromising in demanding us to look closely at a genre of images that are particularly disturbing. They seek to uphold the most abominable of practices, uncannily encoded in a visual scheme of tranquillity and order. The difficulty in maintaining such order is

frequently noted, as images of transnational trade and black and Indigenous labour invariably reference the violent colonial realities that made them possible. Perhaps the most important contribution this book makes is connecting the multiplicity of locations and actors that participated in creating the visual culture of Atlantic slavery. These visual modes of narrating place have contemporary trajectories, as tourist imagery regularly omits difference and racialised experiences. Where the dominant Western construction of place unravels is precisely in the stark contradiction between quiet spaces delineated on printed paper and the multi-sensory, visceral reality of lived life.

1 Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'The Right to Look,' in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, issue no. 3, spring 2011, pp. 473-496, p. 475.

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'A1: Britain on the Verge', Art Bermondsey Project Space, London, 16 January 2018 – 20 January 2018

Taking its name, *on the Verge*, from the preface to Paul Graham's 1983 photobook, *A1: The Great North Road*, Peter Dench's exhibition at Art Bermondsey Project Space is a study of Britain in the wake of the European Union membership referendum. In 65 colour photographs taken while travelling north on the A1 from London to Edinburgh, Dench remakes Graham's project almost frame-for-frame. Quotidian shots of kitsch cafes and bleak urban landscapes run alongside cavalier images of discarded lads' mags, fast food and

ramshackle service stations. An image of an elderly woman reading the *Daily Mirror* on a run-down, windswept corner in Archway, North London, is set-off by a photograph of faceless businessmen in crisp blue suits. Elsewhere, a yellowing copy of the Collins Britain Road Atlas hangs from a coat hook in a transport cafe, the date of its publication, 2010, marking the decline of the Labour Party and the advent of a Conservative government bent on ideological austerity. Collapsing 2017 into 1983, Dench indicates that history is in a state of repeat. Once again, economic failure has been transformed into a national identity crisis inextricable from a discourse on immigration. Fifty years on from his jingoistic 'Rivers of Blood' speech, Enoch Powell's reactionary myth endures: the promise to "Make Britain Great Again" requires an isolationist turn.

If deconstructing this myth and the Right's profoundly exclusive image of Britain necessitates that we complicate notions of the working class and of the Left itself, how – if at all – does Dench contribute toward this project? Something – the project's embeddedness in *history* – has been lost in translation. It is not simply that Dench lacks Graham's sensitivity, but that Graham's name is erased from the exhibition entirely. Thus, for those who are not well versed in British documentary, the photographer's nod to the eighties falls flat. Meanwhile, to those familiar with documentary's long trajectory, Dench's attempt to make his antecedent's project paradigmatic of a socially concerned practice seems, in a way, myopic. By refusing a contextualising frame beyond the cursory captions that accompany the images, Dench repudiates a more rigorous documentary practice that preceded Graham. This situated model mobilised the voice of the