

*H-France Review* Vol. 11 (August 2011), No. 168

Madeleine Dobie, *Trading Places: Colonization and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century French Culture*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2010. 424 pp. \$69.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 978-080144-9024.

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Somewhere at the margins of history and literary criticism, a number of scholars have recently turned their attention to the representation of slavery and race in the French colonial world. Books by Doris Garraway, Christopher Miller, Elsa Dorlin and the forthcoming study by Andrew Curran offer extended explorations of the textual representations of blackness and slavery produced by French authors of the late seventeenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries and beyond.<sup>[1]</sup> Madeleine Dobie's *Trading Places* is a new contribution to this discussion, with thoughtful and engaging arguments about French representations of slavery and colonialism over the long eighteenth century. While I enjoyed reading this book and learned a great deal about some aspects of French colonialism that I had not heretofore considered, I was ultimately not persuaded by Dobie's overarching argument. This is primarily due to fundamental disciplinary differences in our approaches to the same material; literary scholarship tends to seek explanation in the texts' own logic, whereas historians seek to explain images and representation by virtue of a posited reality outside the texts themselves.

Inspired by Said's insights into the relationships between power, knowledge and empire and Michel Trouillot's theorizing of "silences," Dobie argues that whereas slavery and the colonial world ought to have been prominent in French philosophy and literature of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, in fact they remained largely absent in any meaningful way until the 1770s. Instead, a double fascination—with indigenous "primitive" peoples of the Americas (the Noble Savage) and with "Oriental" culture, especially of harems and domestic slavery—dominated French representations of the world overseas. Dobie claims that the silence that effaced France's involvement in plantation slavery arose because the realities of tropical colonialism were "unrepresentable" (p. xii). This was due, in part, to the moral questions surrounding slavery, but also to "the absence of an established discursive framework for depicting the new diasporic environment of the colonial Americas" (p. xii). Rather, "in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the issue of colonial slavery was regularly projected or 'displaced' onto two adjacent cultural terrains.... to the Oriental world [and] the Americas [as] a terrain of encounter between Europeans and 'noble savages' or 'native others'" (p. 9). Finally, she concludes that French antislavery discourse of the late eighteenth century, which is the site at which depictions of plantation slavery finally enter the field of representation, grew out of economic liberalism, which threaded its way rather surprisingly into both philosophical and literary texts, even those of sentimental cast.

Dobie lays out her theoretical framework and surveys both historiographical and literary scholarship in a lucid introduction. The rest of the book is divided into three parts totaling seven chapters plus the conclusion. Part I: "East Meets West" explores the first part of her argument, that French writers "displaced" their moral and cognitive ambivalence regarding colonial slavery in their almost prurient fascination with the "Orient"; this is manifest in texts, but also in material commodities. The two chapters in Part II: "Savages and Slaves" argue that a second form of displacement occurred in the large number of texts on Amerindians, framed as colonial "encounters," and the celebration of the Noble Savage. Part III: "Liberty Equality and Economy," examines the development of liberal economic

thought and its relationship to antislavery literature in the late eighteenth century. The conclusion, “Slavery and Postcolonial Memory,” reexamines contemporary French aversion to “race” and the relationship of French postcolonial subjects (Antillais and Algerians) to the history of colonialism.

Throughout the book, Dobie draws from both canonical publications (e.g., works by Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Diderot, Raynal, De Gouges) and lesser known texts (e.g., French retellings of the *Inkle and Yarico* tale, Abbé Bandeau’s and Dupont’s essays in the *Éphémérides*) of the eighteenth century, but two chapters also examine works of material culture—objects appropriated through colonial exchange into French spaces and assigned “Oriental” valence. Chapters two and three examine France’s taste for wood furniture and cotton cloth, both made of raw materials produced with slave labor in the Caribbean, and both imprinted with symbols of the Orient, including Turkey, Persia, China and Japan. Among the tropical hardwoods, mahogany (*acagou*), varieties of which were indigenous to Saint-Domingue and Cuba, emerged as the most important. Furniture made of these woods was introduced first in the Antilles and France’s Atlantic port cities in the middle of the eighteenth century, and only later adopted as high style in Paris in the 1780s and 1790s, just as the African slave trade to Saint Domingue and deforestation for agricultural production peaked (pp. 65–68). A similar history emerges regarding cotton textiles from India (*indiennes*), which were crucial as articles of exchange in the African slave trade in the eighteenth century. [2] Due to French artisans’ resistance and mercantilist policy, the French government instituted a ban on both the importation of Indian cloth and the French manufacture of “knockoffs” from 1686 to 1759 (a similar ban was instituted in England); beginning in the 1760s, French production of cheaper imitations of Indian textiles expanded dramatically, using cotton grown with slave labor in the American colonies (pp. 98–111).

Part II explores textual depictions of Amerindians, beginning with Caribs in the two editions of Jean Baptiste Du Tertre’s *Histoire générale* (1654 and 1667–71) and continuing through mid-eighteenth century texts, like Jean-François Marmontel’s *Les Incas* (1777). Dobie argues that “Encounters between Amerindians and Europeans are far more widely represented in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European literature than exchanges with diasporic Africans, even though, by the late seventeenth century, contact between Europeans and Africans or Creoles of African descent was more extensive in most regions than encounters between natives and settlers” (p. 127). Amerindians were generally depicted through the trope of encounter, at the frontiers of colonization: “Amerindians continued to occupy a central place in the colonial narrative long after they had been removed from colonized territories, while enslave Africans occupied a marginal position despite their growing numbers” (p. 131).

In Part III, Dobie demonstrates the prevalence of liberal economic theory in French antislavery writings in the last decades before the Revolution. From the articles of the *Encyclopédie* (where one would expect to see the influence of Physiocratic thought) to fictive works, such as those by feminist writers Olympe de Gouges and Germaine de Staël, Dobie demonstrates how ideas like the profitability of slave versus free labor, ameliorative reforms, and the productive power of the land take center stage in many works, even those partaking of sentimentalist style. Unlike English antislavery, which appealed to moral anxieties, both religious and political,[3] French antislavery grew out of an almost wonkish concern with productivity and free trade.[4] Dobie argues that: “there was no sustained representation of the colonies without abolitionism, and no abolitionism (at least in the French context) without the appeal to economic interests that these new theories entailed” (p. 200). One of Dobie’s most important contributions, then, is to show how these economic threads are woven, not only through canonical works of political economy but also through the imaginative literature of the late eighteenth century.

In the concluding chapter: “Slavery and Postcolonial Memory,” Dobie argues that contemporary relations between France and its former slave colonies echo in powerful ways the relations established under mercantilism and plantation slavery. The abolition of 1848, consonant with the liberal economic theories of the late eighteenth century, did not prompt redistribution of land and wealth, which was concentrated in the hands of relatively few families (the *békés*, descendants of the dominant planter

families). Instead, former slaves and their descendants were imagined—and, indeed became—laborers subject to the management of elite whites. Likewise, the islands' colonial monoculture of cane sugar is today echoed by the “monoculture” of tourism, which, like mercantilism, binds the former colonies of Martinique, Guadeloupe, French Guiana and Réunion in dependent relationships to the metropole.<sup>[5]</sup>

Throughout the book, Dobie asserts that colonial slavery was virtually absent in French literary and philosophical texts before the 1760s (in several places she excepts “empirical travel literature” as a distinct genre, but notes that even authors such as DuTertre and Labat downplayed colonial slavery in favor of extensive discussions of Caribs).<sup>[6]</sup> She argues that this “silence exploded into discourse” on slavery after about 1770 due to

a combination of historical and cultural factors that included the defeat of 1763, the rethinking of colonial affairs to which this military debacle gave rise, and the expansion and refinement of economic philosophy. Before the emergence of liberal economic philosophy, slavery was considered morally problematic but economically beneficial, an element that led to cultural repression, and the displacement of the issue onto adjacent concerns. In the 1760s and 1770s, by contrast, not only the morality but also the economic benefits of slavery were called into question, a convergence that gave rise to the discourse and the debate (p. 225).

In some ways, Dobie’s argument recalls Londa Schiebinger’s innovative thesis in *Plants and Empire*, on the plants utilized by enslaved women in the colonies, whose abortifacient properties were “forgotten” or suppressed/repressed in the botanical literature produced by European men in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>[7]</sup>

As a historian, rather than a literary critic, I am a little wary about critiquing a work like *Trading Places*. Although historians and literary scholars utilize many of the same texts and are interested in similar themes and subjects, our respective disciplinary orientations can be quite different. Literary criticism tends to place the accent on how texts (and other cultural signifiers) represent according to an implicit system of representation; literary scholars read texts for their intertextuality, their tropes, and the political relations apparent in the characters, plots and imagery. Historical research, though attentive to power relations, tends to use the texts to uncover, reveal or argue about the world *outside* of the texts, stressing human agency and actions over symbolic coherence of the documents themselves. On the other hand, it may simply be a matter of emphasis—literary scholarship (especially of the new historicism, in contrast to postmodernism) also accepts and interrogates the reality of the world outside the texts while the best historical research is skeptical of its textual sources and sensitive to the ways that textual representations are shaped by genre, literary devices, and tropes. There is a convergence, of sorts, in both strains of humanities scholarship.

While I appreciate the elegance and clarity of Dobie’s argument (and I do—her writing is accessible and illuminating, her exegesis thought-provoking, and her engagement with other scholars’ arguments lively and probing), I ultimately find her umbrella argument about the absence of colonial slavery in early texts, its projection onto Orientalist discourse, and the reasons for this “forgetting” unpersuasive. The core explanatory model of Dobie’s argument is, at heart, a psychoanalytical one: the French, ambivalent about their participation in colonial slavery, simultaneously *deny* its existence (hence its under-representation in texts before 1770) and *displace* this ambivalence onto the Orient, as the site of “despotism” and domestic slavery, especially of women.<sup>[8]</sup> I think that such an argument might hold water regarding contemporary French mentality until the last decade or so, and at first, I found this notion refreshing and original as applied to the eighteenth century. Yet, as I read the book, I kept turning to other kinds of explanation for the sudden explosion of representations—philosophical, economic and literary—at the end of the eighteenth century.

An argument explaining the sheer volume of textual representations of slavery as a function of a French mindset misses several aspects of the wider historical context: the changing scale of migration and travel to various sites in the Old and New Worlds, changes in the production and circulation of texts (including advancing literacy and the expansion of the reading public), the development of fiction as a genre, and the changing nature of colonial slavery itself.

As I composed this review, I tried to get a handle on the scope of slavery in the Ottoman Empire as a point of comparison with French Atlantic slavery in the early eighteenth century. I was surprised to learn that historians have not fully quantified Ottoman slavery over the centuries, but some rough calculations suggest that it was not as extensive as might commonly be believed. According to Alan Fisher, the number of slaves passing through Turkey's Kaffa market between 1500 and 1700 was between 1 million and 2.5 million people, but slaves made up no more than 5% of the Ottoman population at any given time, and these were primarily devoted to domestic labor.<sup>[9]</sup> In 1800, after a century of decline, the entire population of the Ottoman Empire was between 25 and 32 million.<sup>[10]</sup> This would yield a conservative estimate of no more than about 80,000-100,000 slaves in the Ottoman empire around 1700—a figure that seems surprisingly low and tends to support Dobie's argument about the relative attention paid by French writers to "Oriental" and French Atlantic slavery, given the prominence of each.

Yet, by accepting the "term" slavery, as used by French writers, at face value – as a univalent term, meaning the same thing wherever it is used—I think Dobie misses an opportunity to understand the origins of antislavery discourse in historical terms. First, colonial slavery was not as socially or economically significant to France before the Seven Years War (1756-1763) as it would become in the last decades. Yes, France founded, settled and forcibly transported African (and some Indian) slaves to the Caribbean colonies beginning in the seventeenth century. By 1670, the number of black inhabitants equaled the white population in the island colonies of the Antilles – about 15,000 of each.<sup>[11]</sup> There was no census of Carib Indians in the same era (especially those not subject to French rule), but it would make sense that the French missionary DuTertre, following in the wake of almost two centuries of Spanish and Portuguese efforts to convert the *Indios* to Catholicism, would devote the greater part of his *General History of the Antilles*, to the culture and society of the Caribs, since they were the primary object of the Catholic mission. Dobie notes that the number of slaves in Saint-Domingue grew to about 47,000 in 1720 (130); the number of blacks, mostly enslaved, throughout the French Caribbean colonies a decade later was about 160,000 (the white population was only 32,000, a 5:1 ratio).<sup>[12]</sup> But even this demographic situation was vastly outstripped by the end of the 1780s, when 639,000 slaves overwhelmed the total free population, white and nonwhite, of 91,000 in the French Antilles.<sup>[13]</sup> Arguably, the sheer magnitude of this emerging plantation society transformed the very nature and meaning of slavery itself, so that the structures and attitudes criticized by antislavery voices at the end of the eighteenth century were not, in fact, the same institutions invoked by the word "slave" in the earlier Orientalist discourse.

The labor regime for Atlantic slaves employed force, surveillance, and brutal conditions that differed completely from the forms of "domestic" slavery that prevailed in the Old World, whether in Africa, Asia or the Mediterranean. The antislavery that emerged at the end of the eighteenth century might be more properly understood as a reaction to a new form of exploitation on a scale and in a form hitherto unknown. We do not need to resort to ideas of "repression" or "displacement" to explain French inattention to slavery before 1760. One may as well ask why furniture and clothing were not decorated with motifs of French peasants hoeing or winnowing in the fields. The depiction of agricultural labor was not a visual motif deemed suitable for elite attire. (Indeed, I suspect we would see such "romantic" themes emerging in the nineteenth century as older techniques gave way to industrial agriculture, much as the field of "folklore" developed at this time.<sup>[14]</sup>)

Similarly, Dobie argues that French fascination with the Caribs outlived most of the Carib people themselves in the Antilles. Most readers (including Voltaire) have assumed that Rousseau's references to "savages" in his *Second Discourse* (1755), meant Amerindians of New France, i.e. Canada, but Dobie shows that Rousseau drew most heavily from accounts of the Caribs, including DuTertre's seventeenth-century ethnology (p. 171). However, as she points out, other eighteenth-century writers drew most heavily from accounts of Amerindians in North America, and she attributes this to "displacement" arising from an anxiety about colonial exploitation (p. 177). I would argue that, at least through 1763, French colonists had more sustained contact with the Iroquois, Hurons, Algonquins, Natchez, and Mickmacs, for example, than with enslaved Africans in the Caribbean. The French formed alliances and contracted treaties with these warriors as peers. These North American allies, not the Caribs, were the images that fueled the writings of Enlightenment critics of French society.

Finally, Dobie notes that the representation of colonialism and slavery exists primarily in early travelogues, rather than imaginative literature like novels and plays (p. 86). But fiction itself was emerging as a dominant genre in this era—we should not expect to see representations of colonialism in novels much before the middle of the eighteenth century. In other words, I think that Dobie fetishizes slavery to some extent when she emphasizes its absence in French culture before 1770; she takes the modern, liberal aversion to this idea and reads it backward anachronistically.

While Dobie's *Trading Places* offers an interesting—and often insightful—interpretation of eighteenth-century French elite culture, it violates the historian's prime directive by presuming a presentist discomfort with the institution of slavery among the French and then explaining the absence in terms of displacement. French elites (and, indeed, most of society) were completely at ease with notions of social hierarchy and station. If some lawyers sought to keep alive the maxim "Nul n'est esclave en France," the monarchy and the ministry were busy making way for the colonial nouveau riche to bring their enslaved servants to the metropole, if only temporarily. Fundamentally, the French did not want to *be* enslaved; they were less categorically opposed to the institution across the board. Nor, for that matter, were most people in the world philosophically troubled by "slavery" prior to the late eighteenth century. It is the very novelty of "antislavery" in this period—a new idea in world history—that makes the topic a fascinating area of historical inquiry.

## NOTES

[1] Doris Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Raleigh, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), Elsa Dorlin, *La Matrice de la race : généalogie sexuelle et coloniale de la Nation Française* (La Découverte 2006), Christopher Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008), and Andrew Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, forthcoming 2011).

[2] Current scholarship on the worldwide textile trade indicates that West African merchants were highly discerning in their consumption of Indian cloth and that European grade cotton cloth was not valued as highly as the materials produced on Indian looms. See Pedro Machado, "South Asian Merchant Involvement in the Slave Trade of the Western Indian Ocean" and Kazuo Kobayashi, "Indian Cotton Textiles as a Global Commodity: The Case of the Atlantic Slave Trade"; papers presented at the conference, "Enslavement, Bondage and the Environment in the Indian Ocean World," McGill University, Montreal April 28-30, 2011. See also: Giorgio Riello and Prasannan Parthasarathi, eds., *The Spinning World: A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200-1850*, Pasold Studies in Textile History (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[3] Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*, Omohundro Institute of Early American History & Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[4] This is not a new insight. Edward Derbyshire Seeber made this point in *Antislavery Opinion in France during the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century*. The Johns Hopkins Studies in Romance Literatures and Languages, X, (orig. pub. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1937, rpr. New York: Greenwood Press, 1969).

[5] A fascinating fictive re-imagining of this history, with the oft-missing transition from the post-emancipation era, through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), translated from the French and Creole by Rose-Myriam Réouis and Val Vinokurov, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997).

[6] Dobie also cites a quantitative study published by the Institut national d'études démographiques (INED) that, of the thirty-eight references to slavery in works of French economic literature published between 1750 and 1789, only 20 percent appear before 1780, while the remaining 80 percent appear in the last decade before the Revolution (Philippe Steiner, "L'Esclavage chez les économistes français (1750-1803)," in *Les abolitions de l'esclavage: De L.F. Sonthonax à V. Schoelcher, 1793-1794-1848*, ed. Marcel Dorigny [Paris: UNESCO, 1995]).

[7] Londa Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[8] Dobie cites Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* for the theoretical notion of "displacement" (p. 10).

[9] Alan Fisher, "Ottoman Empire" in *Macmillan Encyclopedia of World Slavery*, ed. Paul Finkelman and Joseph C. Miller, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1998), v. 2, pp. 661-662.

[10] Halil İnalçık, Donald Quataert, *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1914*, (Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 646.

[11] James Pritchard, *In Search of Empire: The French in the Americas, 1630-1730* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 424.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Sue Peabody, "A Dangerous Zeal: Catholic Missions to Slaves in the French Antilles, 1635-1800," *French Historical Studies* 25:1 (Winter, 2002): 75. On the vast increase in the scope of the slave trade in the late eighteenth century, see David Geggus, "The French Slave Trade: An Overview," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 58: 1 (January 2001): 135.

[14] Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), pp. 3-22.

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ISSN 1553-9172