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Matthew Pratt Guterl. 2008. *American Mediterranean: Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press. 237 pp. ISBN: 978-0-674-02868-5.

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This compelling book suggests viewing the oft-studied U.S. master class in a new way: as a culturally hybrid social group that experienced itself as an integral part of a sub-tropical, multi-lingual, Creole world drawn together by business and marriage ties, by ship, letter, print culture and above all, by a shared commitment to slave-centred plantation capitalism. The author argues that an Americas-spanning “fraternity of slaveholders” shared a “sense of singular space” not contained within the bounds of any nation-state. Many men and women of the U.S. planter elite “invested in a vision of the circum-Caribbean that included their own holdings” (p. 1). Guterl has really given us something valuable here: a sonorous label for what I have awkwardly been calling “the slaveholding Atlantic world of the industrial era.” “The American Mediterranean,” a term which the author has adopted from an older tradition of international relations scholarship but turned to his own ends, makes good sense as a cultural, economic and geographic category, and I hope the term catches on.

One of Guterl’s particularly cogent revisions is to point out how a “Black Legend” discourse typically used to disparage Spanish colonial rule was applied to the U.S. South as well. On the one hand, Northern abolitionists portrayed the plantation South as a “Latinized” tropical Other—a muggy abode of tropical indolence, unmeasured violence, racial impurity and economic backwardness. On the other hand, many Southern elites highlighted their common destinies with the Caribbean, Mexico, and Brazil as lands destined to be incorporated into an expanding U.S. slave-based republic, thus positing the South as a Roman (Latin) Empire-in-waiting. Yet, the dread of “another Haiti” and the example of abolition in the West Indies led Southerners to shrink from commonality. The blurred cultural, political, climatic and economic boundaries between the Caribbean and the South, noted by observers of contrasting political stripes, were thus felt to be at the same time promising and deeply threatening.

American Mediterranean is a model of effectively deployed interdisciplinary method. In service to his larger arguments, Guterl plumbs

the complex depths of traditional sources like newspapers, personal correspondence and travel accounts, more surprising archival materials like the creolized fashions worn by Louisiana plantation mistresses, and even the racialized iconography stamped on southern currencies (his analysis of these money aesthetics was one of the book's highlights for me). Guterl is at his best when engaged in close textual readings. His enlightening and elegant exegesis of Martin Delany's 1859 radical antislavery novel, *Blake, or the Huts of America*, for example, shows convincingly how Delany unveiled "the planter's sense of slavery" as "cosmopolitan and global, and prospering...outside of the authority of the nation-state" (p. 42).

After giving the reader a general picture of the "American Mediterranean" at mid-century, Guterl analyzes the effects that the Civil War wrought on the Caribbean-oriented worldview of the southern elite. The author uses theories of nationalism laid out by such scholars as Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm to build a compelling interpretation of the South's nation-building project: he emphasizes that Confederate elites had to *nationalize* what had been a profoundly transnational polity in the midst of violent social upheaval and all-out war. Their effort was riven with contradictions, since they simultaneously attempted to recast the South as an "Anglophone city on the hill" distinct from and superior to other slaveholding societies, while building upon their shared pasts with Caribbean slaveholders in order to fight the war, and in order to envision a future as a prosperous imperial nation-state independent from the Union.

The military defeat of the South resulted in a definitive transformation of the "American Mediterranean," pulling the formerly Caribbeanized South more closely into an increasingly racist, Anglo-American republic. The centralized nation-state into which the Confederate states were forcibly reincorporated was marked by a vanishing sense of the anti-colonial republican heritage it shared with the rest of the Americas, redirecting social, cultural and economic ties northward (p. 49). Nevertheless, post-defeat options for the vanquished master class were shaped by the old "Mediterranean" circuits of slaveholders. Many southern planters chose to go into exile in Cuba or Brazil, where they built "colonies" of former Confederates in places where mastery over blacks was still thought achievable. "The establishment of these outposts," Guterl points out, "was utterly dependent on older networks of exchange, older patterns of thought, and older understandings of the circum-Caribbean" (p. 80).

The second major option was to stick it out at home, attempting to re-energize plantation agriculture by perpetuating conditions of near-slavery through exploitative labor contracts and draconian "black

codes” (themselves drawing on legislation used during emancipation in the West Indies). In his analysis of post-emancipation social transformation, readers will find Guterl mostly in accord with the works of Seymour Drescher (*The Mighty Experiment*), Rebecca Scott (*Degrees of Freedom*), Thomas Holt (*The Problem of Freedom*) and scholars of the Reconstruction-era US. South like Amy Dru Stanley and Saidiya Hartman. The “American Mediterranean” becomes a much less exciting analytical category in this section of the book, relegated to the position of “example”—an object for the comparative thinking of post-bellum policymakers. The claim that southerners used Caribbean and Latin American experiences with slave emancipation as object lessons for their own situation strikes me as a truism. Nevertheless, it is probably true that this is what the old “American Mediterranean” had been reduced to by the 1870s.

The final chapter, “Latitudes and Longitudes,” is the most original and convincing. It exhumes North Americans’ fascinating postbellum debates about the comparative merits of Chinese “coolie” labor and European immigration as replacements for vanishing plantation labor. Guterl’s recharacterization of the New South (which has too long been painted in black and white) as a locus for “the triangulation of white, black, and yellow labor within the context of ‘imperial labor reallocation,’” (p. 151) is an important contribution.

Here the story of the “American Mediterranean” comes to an end, as an antebellum, Caribbean-leaning mindset gave way “to a postbellum fixation on the Northern states that could sometimes cut across the Atlantic to Europe. It was as if a conversation among four parties—Europe, Africa, the United States, and Latin America—was, quite suddenly and abruptly, to exclude half of its participants” (p. 157). Ideologically, however, the American Mediterranean still mattered. The failure to attract new immigrants of any color to the rural South, Guterl proposes, was partly due to long-standing Black Legend-tinged images of the Caribbeanized southern states. The fallout from this association with poverty, backwardness and oppression moved Southerners “to tighten their hold on the only available labor force—‘the Negro’—with a viciousness born of absolute desperation” (p. 180). Guterl thus uses his transnational frame to recast the origins of the Jim Crow South in a most interesting way.

American Mediterranean is a beautifully written, inventively argued study, the kind of infectious book that makes one think, and raises a lot of interesting questions. The central category—the “American Mediterranean,”—like many of Guterl’s well-chosen phrases, has a pleasing ring to it. But the precise meaning of the term is hard to get a handle on. For example, he includes the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean within the

category, but most of the Gulf coast, taken up by the republic of Mexico, was anti-slavery and had no remaining slave-owners to speak of. Brazil, on the other hand, geographically apart from Guterl's Mediterranean, is central to his story. So, was the "American Mediterranean" really constituted by a "wider fraternity of slaveholders," or is it simply defined as territory which southern expansionists at one time or another pondered conquering? Guterl does not seem sure.

Next come questions of periodization. Is the "American Mediterranean" something that *arose* after 1790 or so, with the newly independent republics of North and South America, the sugar and cotton revolutions that battened up New World slave societies, the post-Haitian Revolution migrations of slaveholders and slaves, and finally, with the rise of the U.S. as a regional center of power outside Europe? Or is it a category useful for understanding the 18th century as well as the "age of emancipation"? Finally, what is its analytical relationship to such constructs as the Atlantic World, the Black Atlantic, the circum-Caribbean and to the resurgent category of "*las Américas*" employed by recent scholars? How helpful is it to throw on to the pile yet another geographic marker that promises to aid our escape from the artificial confines of the nation-state?

The author's central claim—that transnational perspectives must be brought to bear on United States history—will come as no revelation to readers of *Caribbean Studies*. The journal has been a forum for explorations in transnational history for many years. And in relationship to recent historiography of the U.S. South, the book sometimes reads like a rehearsal of the already-established notion that the "master class" of the antebellum South was transnational and cosmopolitan. At times, Guterl is boxing with ghosts. In his only explicit engagement with historians of the antebellum South, he offers his transnational interpretation as a corrective to Kenneth Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution* (1956) and Eugene Genovese's *The World the Slaveholders Made* (1971). Needless to say, considerable revisions have taken place in the four decades ensuing, not least by Genovese himself, who recently published a comprehensive new picture of the very class that Guterl reinterprets here, *The Mind of the Master Class* (coauthored with the late Elizabeth Fox-Genovese). Michael O'Brien's two-volume *Conjectures of Order*—an exhaustive analysis of the cosmopolitan, transnational makeup of the antebellum "master class"—also comes to mind. While Guterl does cite the work, one is left to wonder how he views his own book in relation to O'Brien's towering contribution, which makes claims so similar to his own. To be fair, I think disciplinary commitments might explain much of this. Guterl's engagements with literary and cultural studies scholarship are much more lively and up-to-date.

The book's contribution—its originality—is also hard to put one's

finger on. After all, scholars of slavery took the ‘transnational turn’ long ago. What Guterl’s work offers, I propose, is a catch phrase (the “American Mediterranean”) that captures the spirit of two decades of scholarship pushing a similar point. Perhaps we can view Guterl’s new book as an elegantly wrought capstone, supported by and completing an edifice of a certain type of transnational scholarship: a U.S.-centric vision, studying North Americans’ outward gaze, even if interested in understanding how Americans were shaped by their own outward movements and by immigration. The interests and emphases of the author leave the reader to wonder whether or not this pan-American slaveholders’ consciousness, this sense of inhabiting a “singular space,” was shared by North Americans’ counterparts in the Caribbean and Brazil; i.e. did *they* view the plantation South as part of a shared, semi-tropical cultural unit? Or was the “American Mediterranean” a one-way mirror, with U.S. slaveholders simply seeing their own reflection when they looked out to the wider world? The issue is never broached because we seldom hear the voices of non-U.S. slaveholders (who made up a great part of Guterl’s transnational master class).

The author emphasizes that the slaveholding elites featured in his book “are not just Southern. They are Caribbean; they are West Indian; they are American. They speak Spanish, French, Dutch and English” (p. 4). Unfortunately, the book itself does not reflect the Caribbean cosmopolitanism of the master class it portrays. One only finds in the footnotes a single source not written in English: Ramón de la Sagra’s *Cuba en 1860*—a wonderful source for Cubanists. If the author does in fact read Spanish, why is his research on a multi-lingual social group insistently mono-lingual? Misspelled Spanish terms (“leyanda negra,” p. 28, “calisero,” p. 76), the unfortunate slip-up that slaves in the West Indies had been allotted “provisional grounds” on which to farm for themselves (p. 130) and finally the puzzling claim that Havana had an “annual yellow fever epidemic” (p. 168) do not give the reader much confidence in Guterl’s commitment to studying the *actual* pan-American scene (as opposed merely to looking outward at the broader potential empire longed for by *yanqui* expansionists).

I say none of this to condemn what is on its own terms, and within its limitations, a stimulating and insightful book. I seek merely to position Guterl’s text at the endpoint of one kind of transnational scholarship, and at the starting place of a new phase. An emerging body of work is characterized by sustained archival research and linguistic/academic training in various regions, represented by such scholars as Roquinaldo Ferreira (2003), Rafael Marquese (2004), and Jon Curry-Machado (2007)—new exemplars of an Atlantic cosmopolitanism fully committed to uncovering the transnational, transcultural and multi-lingual circuits

which constituted an “American Mediterranean” in the nineteenth-century. What Guterl has given us is a worthwhile study of how one national group of slaveholding elites imagined this wider transnational polity.

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Ginetta E.B. Candelario. *Black behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops*. Durham: Duke University Press. 340 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8223-4307-9.

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In this accessible and masterfully crafted study, Ginetta E. B. Candelario examines the complex, contradictory, and countervailing historical processes that have shaped Dominican national identity since the nineteenth century until the present day. The book addresses three interrelated questions: first, why did Dominicans construct a discourse of *indigenismo* and *mestizaje* that celebrated a mythological, indigenous past and denied its African heritage; second, how have Dominican elites and popular groups reinforced and sustained Indo-Hispanic national identity; and, third, does Dominican migration to the United States in any way challenge normative representations of *Dominicanidad*?

Candelario begins the book with a comprehensive introduction that situates her argument within multiple scholarly debates. Indeed, her analysis represents a careful and rigorous integration of foundational theoretical concepts from her discipline—sociology—with the

Matthew Pratt Guterl is professor of Africana Studies and American Studies at Brown University and is the author of *American Mediterranean: Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation* among other books. Related authors. Skip carousel. carousel previous carousel next. Irin Carmon. Shana Knizhnik. Jules Scheele. By Matthew Pratt Guterl. Enrico. Lago. Published in: *Journal of Social History*. Year: 2010. Volume: 43. Number: 4. Article type: Research. Estados Unidos. Search form. Search. follow us on Facebook. Contact. For more information or questions, please contact Rossana Barragán or Pilar Uriona. Guterl, Matthew Pratt. Publisher. Harvard University Press.