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Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace. *The British Slave Trade and Public Memory.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. xiv + 248 pp. $29.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-13715-7; $82.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-13714-0.

Reviewed by Ralph Austen (Department of History, University of Chicago)

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Historical Representation as Postcolonial Morality

When events and epochs from the past are represented to the general public through museums, tours, novels, films and theater, the first instinct of historians is to evaluate their accuracy. Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace, a literary scholar, chooses instead to privilege the contribution of such efforts–here directed at the very sensitive topic of the Atlantic slave trade–to the construction of a healthy consciousness of what it mans to live in a multi-cultural, post-colonial Britain. Kowaleski Wallace is well grounded in history, particularly of Britain in the critical eighteenth and earlynnineteenth centuries, but her main analytic tools are post-modern and post-colonial literary theory. The approach is not without its problems–the theory sometimes becomes obtrusive and a little obscure–but on the whole it is very successful. The conscious purpose of historical memory projects is moral–to use the past to shape the present–and Kowaleski Wallace does an excellent job of both documenting these efforts and revealing the complexities of constructing them in terms which recognize both their sources in the past and their responsibilities to their intended audience.

The documentation element is strongest in the introduction and opening chapter on museum exhibits and walking tours in the major slave trade ports of Bristol and Liverpool. Here Kowaleski Wallace is more historian and ethnographer than literary critic, although perhaps less ethnographic than she claims or is required by her goals. We get a very valuable account of the circumstances under which these efforts were put together and an astutely critical analysis of their contents, but not much on how audiences (both those attending and the larger urban communities being addressed) respond. It is too much to expect Kowaleski Wallace to do this research, but there actually are studies to which she might have referred.[1]

Kowaleski Wallace is, not surprisingly, more authoritative in dealing with literary and film/theatrical productions. Her arguments here all rest upon the postcolonial and postmodernist credos of eschewing "essentialisms" and "binaries" for "hybridity" and "cultural forms [that] remain self-conscious about themselves as expressions" (p. 208), as well as insisting upon granting agency to the non-European (in this case enslaved African) "other."

Yet however over-used such concepts may have become, they serve Kowaleski Wallace's project very effectively. Her critiques of novels on the slave trade by Barry Unsworth, Fred D'Aguir, and Phillipa Gregory are very telling.[2]. Both here and in her discussion of several television presentations on the slave trade, she argues persuasively against extended attention to details of costume and furniture that play "to a scopophilic impulse, in which we are encouraged to love visually the very world we have been asked to judge intellectually" (p. 147). A documentary series showing the many connections of British history to the slave trade is praised generally but criticized for its emphasis on the many "white" Britons who are descended from slaves, since this form of hybridity privileges "family connections over more abstract universal human rights" (p. 147).

I was less convinced by Kowaleski Wallace's championing of the very post-modern (and rather opaque) novel, *A Harlot's Progress* (1999) by David Dabydeen. On the other hand she makes a very good case for the works of the Caribbean-born Caryl Philips and the Anglo-Nigerian playwright Biyi Bandele. The latter's recent adaptation of Alpha Behn's late-seventeenth-century novel *Oroonoko* inspires Kowaleski Wallace to draw on her extensive knowledge of the eighteenth-century London theater, the site of many previous "Oronookos," articulating a long history of British attempts to come to literary terms with the slave trade. Bandele's play not only adds a valuable (if, to me, implausibly Yoruba) African idiom to the story but also complicates the notion of Africans as simple victims of enslavement.

In comparing Jane Austen's 1814 *Mansfield Park* with a recent film adaptation by Patricia Rozema, Kowaleski Wallace shows how undoctrinaire her standards for morally effective representation of the slave trade can be. *Mansfield Park* has been subjected to extensive post-colonial analysis and Rozema largely rewrote the narrative so as to deal more explicitly with the slavery upon which the finances of the eponymous English manor house and country estate are built. Kowaleski Wallace, however, argues that Rozema's interventions (on behalf of both Africans and British women) raise their own moral issues of prurient complicity in the abuses of enslavement (much like Unsworth's *Sacred Hunger*). At the same time Rozema fails in the critical task (accomplished in Austen's original text) of making the audience do "the more difficult but necessary work of reflecting upon how events such as slavery come to be tolerated in the first place" (p. 176).

At the end of her own account, Kowaleski Wallace finds that "As of early 2005" signs of "healthy public conversation on the subject of British hybridity were omnipresent" (p. 209). Many critics may find this observation a bit complacent, especially in the light of current tensions with immigrant Muslim communities (an issue not brought into this study). But Kowaleski Wallace cannot be accused of setting insufficiently high standards for evaluating the many slave trade commemoration projects that she examines. In all of them she recognizes not only political pitfalls, but also the tensions between serving the consumer tastes of a public audience and seeking to evoke its responsibility for living in "a world the slave trade made." The result is enlightening both on its chosen subject matter and as a more general working lesson on how to grapple with the interface between historical understanding, artistic production and moral consciousness.

Notes

[1]. Jacqueline Nassy Brown, "Enslaving History: Narratives on Local Whiteness in a Black Atlantic Port," *American Ethnologist* 27, no. 2 (2000): pp. 340-370; see also her recent book, *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[2]. Barry Unsworth, *Sacred Hunger* (London: Penguin Books, 1992); Fred D'Aguir, *Feeding the Ghosts* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997); and Phillipa Gregory, *A Respectable Trade* (London: Harper Collins, 1995).