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Matthew Pratt Guterl. *American Mediterranean: Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008. 237 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02868-5.

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An International Community of Slaveholders

American Mediterranean is Matthew Pratt Guterlâs second monograph. It is an ambitious and impressive study. The work, covering much of the nineteenth century, situates the American South and its slave owners within a broad international context. Americaâs âmaster class,â as Guterl calls them, were connected through âinstitutions, cultures, and âstructures of feelingââ to other slaveholders (p. 1). These connections transcended national boundaries. The workâs subtitle, âSouthern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation,â is accurate: Guterl deals episodically with antebellum fears of emancipation, reaction to the enactment of emancipation during the Civil War, and then the results of emancipation after the conflict. In dealing with each time period, the author takes pains to step back again and again to bring international context to the story. With precise but lively prose, Guterl also aggressively situates his work in the vast historiographical canon covering the American South. From nearly the first page, he chides heavyweights, such as (the recently deceased) Kenneth Stampp and Eugene Genovese, as well as historians in general, for comparing the South exclusively to the North. Such limited comparisons produce limited portraits Guterl argues. In presenting the American South as part of the slavery diaspora, Guterl raises several important questions. Perhaps the most fundamental of these questions is one that American historians have long considered: just how âexceptionalâ is the United States–or in this case the American South–and how does its history fit with that of the rest of the world?

The study crosses both geographic and disciplinary boundaries. Guterl uses literature throughout his analysis, beginning with William Faulknerâs *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and ending with F. Scott Fitzgeraldâs *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Guterl deftly uses these interludes of classic fiction to provide color for his descriptions of pan-American slavery and abolition movements. While Guterl can rightly say that his is a history of the South âpushed offshore,â he wisely focuses on comparisons with Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, and Jamaica (p. 10).

Guterl provides his readers with a purposefully com-

plex image of the American South. He demonstrates that Southerners were keenly aware of their counterparts in other countries. The revolution in Haiti stood out as a possible Armageddon that might spread internationally. American slave owners did not look at Brazil or Cuba or Jamaica as civilizations on par with their own, but they did see opportunities for annexation and for cooperation in the fight against emancipation. According to *American Mediterranean*, the American South was like Rome in the midst of a slave empire. The other communities might be part of the empire, but only Rome was, well, Rome. Southerners saw themselves as the most civilized members of an economic and cultural network based on slavery. Plans for this community ranged from specific proposals, such as giving Cuba statehood, to more general conceptions of the Caribbean functioning as a âsafety valveâ for the United Statesâ burgeoning slave population (p. 57). Guterl balances these discussions of affinity by pointing out that Southerners were also worried about being grouped too closely with the âLatins,â race-mixers, and Catholics of the Caribbean and South America. Trumpeting the purity of white Southern womanhood became a means of distinguishing the South from other slave locales.

Military defeat knocked the American South from its position of leadership in the American Mediterranean. Before the Civil War started, many Southern leaders envisioned Cuba becoming an American slave state and New Orleans serving as the hub for an increasingly cohesive economy. Ideas of conquests and territorial expansion had been a part of Southern thinking from the time of American independence. While such measures as the Missouri Compromise made adding new slave states to the Union more difficult, Southerners thought transnationally when it came to expansion. The Mexican-American War bore witness to this reality. After the Civil War had been lost, however, the slave worldâs balance shifted. The regions that had been eyed greedily by Southerners became havens for Americans who were unwilling to live in a slave-less United States. A relatively small number of Southerners (Guterl does not give many details about how many) left the United States to try slavery elsewhere. In relating these stories in his third chapter, âThe Promise of Exile,â Guterl is at his best. Most history texts dealing with the Civil War and Reconstruction era mention that a handful of Southerners left the country after the war, but somehow the story usually stops there.

A very capable storyteller throughout, Guterl masterfully uses the tales of Eliza McHattan and other ordinary men and women to demonstrate how Southerners experienced exile. While the legality of slavery was, it seemed, enough to entice some Confederates to migrate to Cuba, there was no escaping the fact that one had entered another country. Everything was âjust a bit off the mark,â many Southerners found (p. 82). As for McHatton, she left her Louisiana home for Mexico and then Cuba midway through the war. She tried to bring the familyâs slaves along, but all but one had escaped by the time she made it onto foreign soil. Eventually she joined her husband on a sugar plantation in Cuba. There she contemplated new slave labor questions, complicated by the increasing numbers of Chinese coolies arriving on the island and the relative scarcity of African slaves. When Cuba experienced its own civil war in 1868 and her husband died, McHatton returned to the United States. Her hopes of preserving a way of life had been dashed: âCuba was no longer the lost world of the Old South–it was, instead, the New South gone madâ (p. 108).

Guterl declares at the outset of his work that he has not written a comparative history–at least not in the strictest sense of the genre. Comparative histories involve emphasizing boundaries, a tactic this author wants to transcend. Thus, rather than pitting the American South âagainstâ Brazil or Cuba or Jamaica, Guterl looks across borders and examines the âmaster class in Diaspora, in exile, and in empireâ (p. 11). Still, to readers not accustomed to such geographic freedom, it is the juxtapositions that stand out. To prove his points, Guterl plays matchmaker throughout the text: New Orleans and Havana, Mississippi and Jamaica, Toussaint LâOuverture and George Washington, and Haitiâs successful revolution and Nat Turnerâs rebellion, to name a few. In the case of Mississippi and Jamaica especially, Guterl points out the different circumstances surrounding emancipation. But for the most part, stories are intertwined and the reader is left focused far more on common slave culture and experiences than on exactly what happened where.

Because of his scope, Guterl touches only briefly on Reconstruction legislation. He offers rather perfunctory histories of the typical Civil War era characters, such as Jefferson Davis and Carl Schurz, and a very cursory description of the war itself. He also offers very little in the way of economic data to support his discussion of the international economy and labor issues. But in fairness, one can read about Davis and Schurz in any number of textbooks. Economic data can be googled. Guterl is after something different. He captures the common hopes, fears, and experiences of the master class–regardless of

nationality. And so in his chapter on âThe Labor Problem,â Guterl cuts to the heart of slavery and shows why transitioning to wage labor proved so difficult for the master class. There was a lack of understanding, Guterl points out, regarding the ârelationship between physical coercion, or forced labor, and âmoralâ or ârationalâ compulsionâ (p. 130). Fears of rebellion, miscegenation, and then labor-less destitution racked the former plantation owners. Attempts to control former slaves through apprenticeships and black codes might seem futile with emancipation having come, but they make sense in the context Guterl provides.

In sum, Guterl offers a unique, transnational look at slavery and emancipation. As he reminds his readers near the end of the text, âThe imagination of Southern slaveholders was not constrained by the borders of the Old Southâ (p. 185). He demonstrates this truth repeatedly. The text is well documented and superbly written. It should be required reading for those interested in understanding the peculiarities of American South–even though, as Guterl makes evident, the American South was not so different after all.

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