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Title

Faces of Perfect Ebony: Encountering Atlantic Slavery in Imperial Britain Catherine Molineux. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011. xvi341 pp. US49.95 (hardback).

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8pf0r3cq>

Journal

Britain and the World, 7(1)

ISSN

2043-8567

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Publication Date

2014-03-01

DOI

10.3366/brw.2014.0137

Peer reviewed

Catherine Molineux. *Faces of Perfect Ebony: Encountering Atlantic Slavery in Imperial Britain*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011. Xvi+341 pp.

In this important book, Catherine Molineux examines the “cultural intelligibility” of images of Black people in eighteenth century Britain, as well as the “popular racial and imperial consciousness it presupposed” (1), demonstrating that the relatively small Black population of eighteenth century Britain (and especially London) was rendered considerably more visible than mere numbers would suggest. In a chronologically and archivally wide-ranging study, Molineux moves from elite portraits to popular magazines, trade cards, Hogarth’s prints, and dramatic and satirical representations of slavery. While the principal contact zone between the British and imperial others was across the Atlantic, Molineux argues that visual, literary and dramatic representations moved the contact zone into the metropole.

Molineux begins with the tradition of elite portraits including Black attendants; she places these in a longer iconographic tradition. Later images of people of African descent echo, revise, and challenge the models set by the portraits. The second chapter examines the way seventeenth century Britons understood the purposes of empire, and especially its growing reliance on African slavery, through an analysis of texts, including Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* and Thomas Southerne’s theatrical adaptation of it: she reads these as ways the British harmonized their commitment to liberty and the nature of empire. The debates on the nature and origins of human variety in the *Athenian Mercury* in the 1690s move between accepting variety as divinely established, and assuming that racial others become white in heaven. As she demonstrates more clearly in the fourth chapter, the success of the plantation project is connected to the veracity of Protestantism, so the English empire is connected to both imperial and religious rivalry; the greater care and kindness of British treatment of both Indians and

slaves was central to that. A chapter on tobacco trade cards and papers shows how plantation slavery is visually erased from the story of tobacco, while some sellers offer a vision of universal fraternity linking Black and white smokers. Hogarth's prints use Black figures – often based on real people – to point out the hypocrisies and deceptions central to his work. Finally, the “rebel slaves” starting with Mungo from Isaac Bickerstaff's opera *The padlock* and moving to abolitionist tracts show the gradual incorporation of ideas of slave resistance into English thinking.

While a growing body of research has illuminated aspects of these issues, Molineux's work is notable for its equal engagement with visual and textual representations of people of African descent. As she argues convincingly, each of these traditions of representation is in some way or other unstable, often saying two things at once, simultaneously suggesting complete difference and radical similarity. Particularly in visual culture, Black bodies could be used to tell radically different stories, so both anti-slavery and pro-slavery advocates drew on the same visual traditions. Her theoretically sophisticated and nuanced readings of texts and images work against simplistic understandings of the place of Black people in the imaginary of Empire. This is an impressive and important, if sometimes dense book. It definitively demonstrates the pervasive visibility of people of African descent in the media of eighteenth century Britain. Furthermore, its chronological range allows Molineux to show that abolitionist imagery and rhetoric does not just emerge in the late eighteenth century, but draws on a set of ideas and depictions which have developed over the course of a century.

This is an exemplary work of cultural history, but it also shares a common weakness of cultural history. In pointing to the wide visibility of people of African descent in British culture, Molyneux never addresses the impact of these representations on the very real Black people

whose presence is reflected and magnified in the cultural record she explores. Ignacio Sancho makes a few appearances, as do several others. The focus remains, however, on representation. The reader cannot help wondering: what is the significance of these representations outside the field of representation? How do they shape relationships between the embodied citizens of London? What does the debate on the nature of skin color mean for what people do when they meet people of different races? Do the images on tobacco cards make a difference in encounters between white and Black Britons? To put it another way, what is the life of these depictions outside the world of cultural representation? None of these questions are theoretically or methodologically unproblematic, but they are vital.

To ask such questions is to ask for another book, and these are questions that can be asked because this one is so rich. This is a book that every student of the early British Empire, and indeed of eighteenth century culture and society, will find illuminating and stimulating. Britons encountered their empire in a multitude of ways, and that the non-white inhabitants of that empire were both visible and legible. Britain has been in some ways a multi-racial society for far longer than most people recognize.

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