INTRODUCTION

Captive spaces

> I have often wondered how English people can go out into the West
> Indies and act in such a beastly manner.
>
> *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave*

I begin with a captive: not a slave but rather the planter William Beckford, illegitimate scion of the super-rich Beckford clan. He has just made the transatlantic voyage back from Jamaica, where he owns three sugar plantations. On his way to London, his post-chaise meets a carriage containing his cousin Richard, a London merchant to whom he owes £25,000, and two bailiffs, who arrest him for debt.[1] Imagine the bankrupt planter pining and fuming in London's Fleet Prison from 1786 until the late 1790s, passing the time by writing his massive two-volume *Descriptive Account of the Island of Jamaica* (1790). Immobilized in a London jail by the financial and legal system that had supported him through decades of flamboyant prosperity, what does Beckford decide to do? He takes readers on a picturesque tour of a colony on the other side of the Atlantic, detailing its scenic attractions for those unable to sail to the New World.

His choice is not as whimsical as it may seem. Beckford's work of discursive place-making served the interests of his planter peers at a time when the source of their fortunes – the institution of slavery – was under attack from an increasingly powerful abolitionist movement. In *Slavery and Human Progress*, David Brion Davis discusses a fundamental shift in metropolitan attitudes toward slavery starting in the 1760s and 1770s: from acceptance, or at least toleration, to a sense that slavery was fundamentally wrong and destined – sooner or later – to end. This shift was accompanied by "a profound change in the basic paradigm of social geography." The problem of slavery, in other words, became spatialized.[2] This process coincided with the first stirrings of the abolitionist movement, which coalesced in the 1770s and 1780s, marked by the founding of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (SEAST) in 1787.

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Abolitionists constructed Britain's slave colonies as aberrant places in need of metropolitan intervention. Their humanitarian narrative depended on a notion of collective responsibility for distant others: they felt compelled to rescue West Indian slaves from their corrupt Creole owners. This "othering" of the West Indies was central, the geographer David Lambert suggests, not only to the success of the abolitionist movement but also more broadly "to the forging of British metropolitan identity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries."[3] Anti-slavery activists strove, with considerable success, to paint the colonists as un-British and to define Britishness against colonial corruption. Of course, powerful pro-slavery interests fought back with all of the means at their disposal. Britain's protracted national debate over slavery was a war of representation, fought in numerous venues and modes. A key tactic in this struggle forms my topic as I examine a range of writings by people with varying stakes in the political struggle over slavery. They represent the nodes of the Atlantic system – the sites of slavery, including not only the West Indies but also Africa, the source of their captive labor; and the British Isles, the destination of their produce and profits – as fully imagined places, vividly described in ways that support a particular political vision, whether pro- or anti-slavery.

This is a book about the places that slavery made. Beginning in the fifteenth century, colonization and slavery shaped the ecologies, economies, and societies of the Caribbean islands: took them captive, so to speak, hostage to the political and economic imperatives of the empire. The mid-seventeenth-century "Sugar Revolution" generated large-scale agribusiness, including the proto-industrial management of enslaved bodies and labor in plantations.[4] By the 1770s, Britain's mature sugar colonies had become slave societies with distinctive customs, landscapes, and histories. However, they were also nodes in an Atlantic network connecting the Caribbean with Europe and Africa in circuits of exchange, carrying constant flows of bodies, goods, and ideas. Slavery's captive spaces were the quintessentially modern product of a capitalist economy and a colonial society, assembled on tropical terrain: displaced, deracinated people living in relations of compulsion and surveillance for the benefit of owners an ocean away.

The expanding field of Atlantic Studies has been shifting our conceptual focus from nations and national traditions to the dynamic connections among them.[5] Paul Gilroy's influential *The Black Atlantic* put slavery where it belongs: at the center of these super-regional economies and histories. Gilroy's main concern is with later black intellectuals (i.e., Douglass, DuBois, and Wright) who creatively wrought the legacy of slavery into countercultures of modernity. However, his powerful conceptual

framework – the "transcultural, international formation" that was and is the Black Atlantic – directs our attention to mass mobility: the 10 million captive Africans who endured the abjection of the Middle Passage and – those who survived – permanently changed the shape and color of Western modernity.

Movement is essential to this project. All of the writings I discuss belong – in one way or another – to the capacious genre of travel writing: texts that bring faraway places home to readers unable to travel there physically. Because travel writing chronicles movement to and through places, it renders those places for readers, searching out terms to convey travelers' experience to distant minds. The academic study of travel writing has expanded in recent years, another body of work that grounds this study. Its popularity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries cannot be understood apart from colonial expansion. It addressed a curiosity about the wider world, driven by Britons' vested interests in the far-flung spaces into which their empire was expanding or might in the future expand.[6]

People traveled varying routes across the captive spaces of the Atlantic, depending on who they were and what they owned – or who owned them. A plantation owner based in the English countryside, like Sir Thomas Bertram in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, might need to travel to Antigua or Jamaica to inspect his property and check up on those administering it. Conversely, planters resident in the islands returned on occasion to the "mother country" to spend their fortunes (or, like Beckford, to try to repair them). They sent their children home to be educated because the colonies lacked good schools. Soldiers and civil servants, from humble to grand, could be posted to one colony or another as customs collectors, defense forces, and colonial governors. The risk of tropical disease meant that many would never return.

Enslaved people traveled as well.[7] The Middle Passage obviously does not fit received ideas of travel, with its "history of European, literary, male, bourgeois, scientific, heroic, recreational, meanings and practices," as James Clifford observes. However, even conditions as harsh as those on the slave ships did not prevent travel from becoming a source of significant experience, knowledge, and cultural production. Slavery created "diasporic and migrant . . . cultures of displacement and transportation" whose creativity shaped our modern world. Olaudah Equiano and Mary Prince, the enslaved travelers whose narratives I study, had survival skills honed by their suffering. Their travels fostered what Clifford calls "discrepant cosmopolitanism": moving beyond local attachments, they became citizens of the Atlantic world.[8] To read their so-called slave narratives as travel writing

is to realize that they are in dialogue with travel writing as it is conventionally understood. As I uncover their sophisticated engagement with the same discourses and paradigms invoked by more privileged writers, texts authored by enslaved people offer an invaluable counterpoint.

A wealth of recent scholarship on British slavery and the abolitionist movement informs my study. As postcolonial criticism continues to decenter literary and cultural studies of the long eighteenth century, scholars of colonial slavery have been especially productive, although much remains to be done.[9] The essays in Paul Youngquist and Frances Botkin's recent online collection, *Circulations: Romanticism and the Black Atlantic*, are an outstanding example. As their introduction reminds us, the maritime economy of the Atlantic drove the booming prosperity of the eighteenth-century British Empire, and the Caribbean slave colonies comprised its core. "The West Indies are not the edge of Empire. They are its engine: the economic, material, and cultural condition of British prosperity and dominion during the Romantic era."[10]

The colonization of the Caribbean basin by the European empires – beginning with Spain and including Holland, Britain, France, Portugal, and even Denmark – formed part of what we can call "early globalization." Although most scholarship on "globalization" covers the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, some geographers believe the term can be usefully applied beginning as early as 1500.[11] In the early modern period, expanding European networks of transportation, trade, and colonization established new links between Europe and other parts of the world for the circulation of ships, people, goods, and capital. By the late 1700s, the material culture of the British Empire flowed through well-developed circuits connecting Western Europe with the Americas, Africa, and India. The Caribbean provides an especially compelling example of imperial interconnectedness. Its lucrative agrarian capitalism, grounded in plantation agriculture, depended on the global circulation of plants, people, implements, and supplies. The Caribbean's global connections linked it (through the metropolitan center) to Britain's interests across the world.

One example of this imperial reach is Sir Joseph Banks's 1790s scheme to transplant Tahitian breadfruit to the Caribbean to feed enslaved laborers. Banks, the botanist who accompanied Captain James Cook on his first voyage to the Pacific (1768–72), later became President of the Royal Society, turning his scientific authority and political influence to imperialist ends. Banks pioneered the systematization of scientific knowledge at the imperial center, building complex networks to connect areas of scientific research around the world. The Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew anchored

a worldwide botanical network. Plants could be taken from one colony, carefully nursed, and transported to another – putting both exploration and science in the service of the empire. The first attempt to transport breadfruit plants in 1787 was thwarted by the notorious mutiny on the *HMS Bounty*, but Captain Bligh's second attempt in 1791 was successful (except that most West Indians, for various reasons, rejected the breadfruit as food).[12]

Sugar cane was an introduced species, taken from the Canary Islands to Hispaniola, from Sicily via Madeira to Brazil, and then to the Lesser Antilles.[13] The mature sugar colonies were intertwined with Europe as metropolitan populations consumed their product with an appetite that became part of daily life. The anthropologist Sidney Mintz observes, "Tobacco, sugar, and tea were the first objects within capitalism that conveyed with their use the complex idea that one could *become* different by *consuming* differently." The availability of these addictive tropical products modified personal and national identities. "Like tea, sugar came to define English 'character.'"[14] This created need generated immense profits. In addition to squandering their wealth on high living, colonials reinvested it in manufactured goods for their plantations and more shiploads of enslaved Africans to replace those who died of deprivation and overwork.

What type of places were Britain's Caribbean sugar colonies in the half-century or so before emancipation? They were organized for sugar production: that was their "purpose and place in the British Empire."[15] Jamaica was by far the biggest colony and it is the topic of the majority of texts I discuss, so I use it as my example. Jamaica was extraordinarily wealthy – by 1774 the richest colony in British America. Individual Jamaican colonists were the richest people in the British Empire.[16] A substantial proportion of planters were absentees (i.e., about one-sixth in 1774, including the island's wealthiest landowners) who spent their fortunes in the British Isles and hired others to manage their estates. Of those residing on the island, relatively few had their wives and families with them. Jamaica was considered "a place in which to make a fortune, not to make a life." White Jamaica was far from a proper bourgeois society. Rather, it was "a model of disorder, licentious sexuality, illegitimacy, irregularity, with colored mistresses kept openly, and concubinage a completely accepted form." Many eighteenth-century Jamaicans were avaricious and self-absorbed, "addicted to ostentatious display and devoted to luxury," spending their wealth on "lavish feasting, copious drinking, and all manner of sexual and sensuous delights."[17]

The enslaved majority had scant part of these enjoyments, except for interracial sex – much of it non-consensual or quasi-consensual (as the notorious diaries of the slave owner Thomas Thistlewood reveal).[18] By the latter half of the eighteenth century, the enslaved outnumbered white colonists more than 10 to 1. Of these, 75 to 80 percent were African-born. The continuing, massive importation of captive Africans fueled agricultural expansion and replaced the large numbers of laborers who "failed to thrive due to poor diet, debilitating work regimes, and brutal treatment."[19] The enslaved were taken from various regions of West and Central Africa and mingled every which way through sale and dispersal from ships to plantations. They spoke different languages and practiced various religions, including Islam. Despite all of this upheaval, displaced Africans and their island-born cohorts together managed to develop a rich and dynamic cultural life, combining elements of African and European language, music, and religion into, hybrid cultural forms. Fighting dehumanization, they achieved "some measure of self-expression within an overall structure of fierce repression, social disruption, and constant uncertainty."[20]

White Jamaican culture was hybridized as well: a Creole culture, shaped by the conditions of island life, with the white minority surrounded and intimately served by their human property. "The plantation complex during slavery produced an amalgamated culture from which the master class could not insulate itself."[21] Snobbish metropolitan observers such as Lady Maria Nugent (discussed in Chapter 5) noticed the influence of the enslaved on their owners' speech, diet, and behavior. Nugent wrote, "Many of the ladies who have not been educated in England, speak a sort of broken English, with an indolent drawling out of their words, that is very tiresome if not disgusting. I stood next to a lady one night, near a window, and by way of saying something, remarked that the air was much cooler than usual; to which she answered, 'Yes, ma'am, *him rail-ly too fra-ish*.'"[22] The groundbreaking work of Edward (Kamau) Brathwaite famously studied the formation of the Jamaican Creole society through the reciprocal shaping of white and black, master and captive. Rather than debased and degenerate – as it appeared to many metropolitan writers – Brathwaite argues that the Creole society was (and is) dynamic and creative, although white Jamaicans, crippled by racism, refused to recognize this.[23]

What is the relationship between slavery and ideas of race? Its exact nature remains controversial. The Trinidadian historian Eric Williams claimed polemically in 1944: "Slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery."[24] This approach refuses to accept racism as eternal and essential, an unfortunate fact of life. Rather, it has a history:

a history inseparable from the history of the captive spaces of the Atlantic system – the history of enslavement, plantation agriculture, and nascent capitalism. Theories of race or human variety have drawn widespread scholarly interest in recent years; many scholars agree that the decades discussed in this book witnessed significant change in prevalent accounts of human variety. "By the early nineteenth century . . . what increasingly served to distinguish one people from another was not their religion, their degree of 'civilization,' their customs or their beliefs, but rather their anatomy and external appearance." This shift prepared the way for the more dogmatic racism of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[25]

Race is not my central topic; however, ideas about race, or human variety, are unavoidably woven throughout the process of discursive place-making. Textual representations of the captive spaces of the British Atlantic were driven by the political debate over slavery. The discursive resources engaged in that debate were steeped in assumptions about groups of people and their connection to the places they inhabit. The discourses of aesthetics and natural history, in particular, are intertwined with ideas of race in ways that individual chapters explore. Writers' identities and their stakes in the slavery debate involve skin color as well as nationality, occupation, gender, and free or enslaved status. Skin color or physiognomy, national or regional origin, climate and culture, and the connections among them enter into the texts I discuss in ways that are symptomatic of the evolving character of theories of human variety during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

I draw my working definition of "place" from a range of recent work by geographers – in particular, feminist geographers such as Doreen Massey and Linda McDowell. One geographer defines "place" as "space invested with meaning in the context of power." Places "are not given but produced by human activity": the production of place is a project with an inevitable political dimension.[26] If space is undifferentiated, Cartesian – pure potential, as it were – then places are what human societies make of the spaces they occupy. The project of place-making is collective, contentious, and open-ended. At an individual level, the social and the spatial converge to generate each person's sense of place, "constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus." It follows that, as McDowell states, "occupants of the same Cartesian spaces may live in very different 'places.'"[27] Caribbean planters and their human property starkly exemplify this truth, as this book describes. Depending on who is writing, Jamaica or Antigua can be either paradise or purgatory.

Of course, the power to invest these colonial spaces with textual meaning was not evenly distributed between white colonists and their human property. Each group's sense of place nonetheless functioned as a limit or horizon for that of the other. During the decades of the abolition controversy, a few enslaved men and women – with the support of metropolitan allies – were able to intervene in the representational contest over the captive spaces of the British West Indies. Access to print, of course, was highly restricted for the enslaved and formerly enslaved. Reconstructing the traces of enslaved people and other subalterns from the archives remains a methodological challenge for postcolonial critics but one that we cannot avoid.[28] This study attempts to set the voices and traces of the enslaved in dialogue with those (far more plentiful in the printed record) of slave owners.

The politics of slavery, I argue, played out to a significant degree as a politics of place. Edward Said famously identified the struggle over imaginative geography as crucial to the culture of imperialism. The imaginative geography of the Atlantic Triangle and the places that its perverse geometry connected became the object of a high-stakes contest during the final decades of British colonial slavery. I examine the process of place-making in various types of texts by writers with diverse stakes in the region. The politics of place is also a politics of identity: planters, slaves, soldiers, sailors, wives, and other travelers bore varying relationships to slavery's captive spaces. For example, we return to our woeful prisoner in London's Fleet Prison. For this member of the West Indian planter elite – cultured cosmopolitan, patron of the arts, former master of many fertile acres and hundreds of slaves – the place that is Jamaica signifies both high-risk investment and intense aesthetic appeal. Sugar planting is a "high-wire act," vulnerable to damage by pests, hurricanes, slave revolt, and price fluctuation: a drama of extremes carried out by larger-than-life characters. Having taken the risk and suffered the fall, Beckford languishes across the Atlantic from his beloved island, feeling very sorry for himself and describing Jamaica for metropolitan readers using the powerful modern discourse of aesthetics.

Why aesthetics? This may seem a surprising category with which to begin a discussion of the spaces that slavery made. Aesthetics, after all, appears closer to pure philosophy than to politics; it is a category strongly marked as extra-historical or psychological. Such assumptions are precisely what made aesthetics attractive to elite writers for constructing colonial space, and they tended to insulate their work from the scrutiny of postcolonial criticism. However, aesthetics exemplifies the distinctively modern discursive resources used to produce places as colonial – to take them captive, as

the chapter title indicates. Colonial modernity demanded "non-localized forms of action and vision" – that is, what John Durham Peters calls "bifocality": a dual vision encompassing both the near and the far, the local and the imperial or global.[29] Planter writers such as Beckford exploit the bifocal capacity of aesthetics to enact imaginative intertwinement between colony and metropole, at the same time obscuring the ugliness of slavery's site-specific practices. The discursive construction of place, in this instance, paradoxically involves undoing the purely local (if there is any such thing). These bifocal discourses are at the center of this book. Six interlinked case studies analyze their use by colonial writers to represent the captive spaces of the British Caribbean and to contest the politics of place.

The definition of politics at work in this study is clearly a broad one, encompassing more than only the doings of Parliament, the West India lobby, and the Abolition Society. Although the political struggle culminated in the landmark legislative actions of 1807 and 1833, which abolished the slave trade and emancipated British slaves, the cultural politics of slavery and colonialism was fought out in many venues. Explicit persuasion played a part, but opinion and hegemony also could be crafted through subtler means – importantly, I contend, through the powerful discourses of place the use of which this book explores.[30] The discourses with which I am most concerned – although they were used to construct the colonial periphery – were central to the eighteenth-century epistemic shift known as the Enlightenment. Their emergence marked the onset of modernity and coincided with the peak of British slavery. The case studies in my chapters offer snapshots from the confrontation between slavery and modernity, a later phase of which concerns Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic*. Historians have claimed that the profits of Britain's colonial plantations fueled investment in industrialization.[31] If slavery was indeed a "midwife" to industrial capitalism, what was its relation to the modern division of knowledge emerging around the same time? A partial answer may reside in these writers' politically inflected deployment of an array of distinctively modern discourses to render, contest, or obscure the captive spaces of the British Atlantic.

I first consider the language of aesthetics. One defining feature of the Enlightenment was the "invention of the aesthetic as an autonomous discursive realm." The German Alexander Baumgarten coined the term around 1750, although a concept recognizable as disinterested aesthetic perception emerged in British aesthetic thought as early as 1710. A wide range of eighteenth-century writings on the Caribbean – colonial histories, natural histories, and travelogues – draws heavily on the language of landscape aesthetics, in which aesthetic disinterestedness takes the form

of the viewer's distance from the aesthetic object, the natural prospect, or scene.[32] The islands' tropical beauty might seem to make aesthetic discourse a natural fit for them; however, seventeenth-century accounts of the area focus less on the islands' beauty than on their productive potential to serve European needs and desires. By the period that is the concern of this study, the emphasis had shifted – or at least broadened – to encompass a fascination with the islands' scenic appeal. I previously sought to explain the appeal of aesthetics to the apologists of slavery.[33] Chapter 1 traces the shifting fate of a particular aesthetic paradigm – that is, the picturesque – in books about Jamaica the authors of which stood in varying relations to its colonial economy and society.

The slave colony does not exactly lend itself to the picturesque. That a number of writers nonetheless brought the two together during the decades-long lifespan of the picturesque fad – the same decades that saw the rise and eventual triumph of the abolition movement – bespeaks their motivation to assimilate the West Indies to the English countryside, where planters aspired to spend their retirement and their colonial fortunes. The empire, Simon Pugh observes, "was the countryside writ large: an idyllic retreat, an escape, and the opportunity to make a fortune."[34] Picturesque aesthetics overwrote the tropics with European nature, remaking Jamaica into an English countryside or Italian *campagna* with a difference. However, that difference – the insurmountable distance or gap between colony and metropole – comes inexorably to the fore in the texts of the planter picturesque. The difference is slavery, which happened in the colony but sustained the imperial economy. The planter writers that I discuss – Edward Long, William Beckford, and Matthew Lewis – and the artist James Hakewill put picturesque aesthetics to work to beautify the slave colony and keep its ugly realities at arm's length. Their success was very partial, as my readings reveal. Each version of the planter picturesque is differently eroded by the hazards of colonial life and the unruly presence of Jamaica's enslaved majority.

Natural history, along with aesthetics, dominated published British discourse about the Caribbean from Hans Sloane in 1719 through the eighteenth century and beyond. Scientific and economic interest in Caribbean plants and animals filled the subscription lists of lushly illustrated volumes, including Hughes's *Natural History of Barbados* and Browne's *Civil and Natural History of Jamaica*. For Michel Foucault (1994), as is well known, the ordered tabulation of living beings typifies the eighteenth-century episteme, or regime of truth. Natural historians needed specimens and information as their raw material; to procure them, they needed help