

***Almost Home: Maroons Between Slavery and Freedom in Jamaica, Nova Scotia, and Sierra Leon*, by Ruma Chopra, Yale University Press, 2018.**

Ruma Chopra's *Almost Home: Maroons Between Slavery and Freedom in Jamaica, Nova Scotia, and Sierra Leon* is an important intervention into the historical metanarrative of Jamaica's Trelawney Town Maroons and their forced exodus from the Caribbean into the larger British Atlantic World at the end of the eighteenth century. The Maroons were a group of freed and fugitive Blacks living apart from white society, existing on the fringes of empire in the lush and remote mountain tropics of Britain's most profitable slave colony. As Chopra demonstrates, despite the Maroon's apparent isolation they were never completely disentangled from imperial expansion and the institution of slavery on the island of Jamaica. Though they were free, for nearly fifty years the Maroons served as a buffer between the island's population of enslaved Blacks and white planters, preserving planter power and the profitability of slavery. From 1738, white settler elites in Jamaica and the Maroons existed under an uneasy truce, held together by a tenuous paternalistic loyalty to the colonists that, in the words of Chopra, provided a "counterweight to their African ancestry."¹ For this reason, Chopra argues that the Maroon's relationship to the Empire was as much a story of resistance as it was one of accommodation.

The confluence of planters, enslaved Blacks, and Maroons on the island colony, over many decades, fashioned an unusual racial hierarchy that permeated Maroon

¹ Ruma Chopra, *Almost Home: Maroons between Slavery and Freedom in Jamaica, Nova Scotia, and Sierra Leone* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018). 3.

society. The Maroon's unique relationship to empire, and the ways they adopted certain social mores and British customs, shaped the conflicting interpretations of the Maroons in the various settler societies they inhabited from Jamaica to Nova Scotia and on to Sierra Leone. "By the 1790s," writes Chopra, "Maroon men had creolized by taking on the names of their white patrons. The most elite [Maroon] men wore waistcoats and silk stockings." As a military force, the Maroons adapted to the British rank system and methods of diplomacy, but their close association to "slave society led them to understand the gradations of nonfreedom associated with race."²

By focusing on processes of creolization and immigration, *Almost Home* produces a unique narrative of the Maroons that complicates older ones characterized by a slavery/abolition dichotomy. Unlike other recent studies on the Atlantic slave trade in an age of revolutions, Chopra uses a framework characterized by an age of refugees.³ Throughout their migration the Maroons encountered not only various colonial societies with different histories of slavery but also the societies of refugees. In Jamaica, the fear of refugees and new ideas of liberty that they might bring posed a threat to the vulnerable minority of white planters, jeopardizing the relationship Maroons had with the island's white planter elite. In Nova Scotia, abolitionists like Lt. Governor Wentworth took up the mission of preparing the Maroons for a life of agricultural settlement, but ultimately met resistance when Maroon communities chose to live apart from white settler society.

² Chope, *Almost Home*, 4.

³ Maya Jasanoff, "Revolutionary Exiles: The American Loyalist and French émigré Diasporas," in Armitage and Subrahmanyam, *Age of Revolutions*, 38.

Chopra situates *Almost Home* as an amendment to what she defines as one of the largest issues in the scholarship on the Maroons: the lack of a single framework, instead offering readers a comprehensive analysis of Maroon migration that explores Maroon culture up to and after their arrival in Serra Leone. The Trelawney Town Maroons have attracted considerable attention from historians and anthropologists alike, with both exploring the continuity of their African lineage in present-day Maroon culture. Studies written on the Maroons have typically interpreted them as freedom fighters, or as the tragic and disposed victims of colonial power in an age of settler-colonisation.⁴ “No previous study,” writes Chopra, “examines the Maroons’ settlement in three disparate British colonies, considering their experiences in Nova Scotia and their self-exile to Sierra Leone in an era of Christian humanitarianism and revolutionary upheaval.”⁵ What has been done, instead, portrays the Maroons as a group that existed reactionary to British imperialism, rather than one playing an integral part in it.

The Maroons’ contribution to the larger imperial project changed as they migrated across the Atlantic and impacted how they were interpreted by others and their place in the British Empire. In Jamaica, white planters feared the “Maroons [could] become the beneficiaries of humanitarians or to assist in ending the slave trade” when, in 1795, British newspapers heralded the Maroons as heroes who “preferred death to a return of bondage.”⁶ In Nova Scotia, government officials sought funds for their resettlement by

⁴ For example, see Mavis C. Campbell, *The Maroons of Jamaica, 1655-1796: A History of Resistance, Collaboration & Betrayal* (Granby, Mass: Bergin & Garvey, 1988); John N. Grant, *The Maroons in Nova Scotia* (Halifax, N.S.: Formac Publishing, 2002).

⁵ Chopra, *Almost Home*, 5.

⁶ Chopra, *Almost Home*, 72-73.

appealing to metropolitan British Christian sensibilities because the Maroons appeared to be an ideal bridge “for the civilization of negroes.” Nova Scotia officials, Lt. Governor Wentworth chief among them, positioned the Maroons apart from other Blacks because they appeared “more malleable” when compared to other refugees like the Black Loyalists, but “expressions of racial prejudice in the Maritimes” were nevertheless pervasive just as they had been in Jamaica.⁷ The Trelawney Town Maroons were dispossessed in relation to whites but empowered in relation to other Blacks, achieving a precarious place in a racialized social hierarchy through close association with slave-owning whites. Because of this connection, the Maroons blur the historical binary of Black/White, highlighting the divisions of class and race that existed between whites and Blacks, but also between the Maroons and other Black peoples.

In Jamaica, racial and class divisions existed like a gradation of power that made slaveholders insecure and slave society all the more volatile. The Maroons of Trelawney Town were not immune to these sensibilities and adopted the racial prejudices of white and Black Jamaican society. As Chopra writes, the Maroon’s close proximity to white society resulted in a rapid creolization that was influenced by their “sense of superiority over African slaves who arrived in large numbers to replace those who died working in the sugar plantations.”⁸ White-settler concessions made to the Maroons were likewise structured in a similar fashion around the slave system: one that depended on a divide and rule method. In Nova Scotia, concession to the Maroons morphed into charity, and gifts

⁷ Chopra, *Almost home*, 99-100.

⁸ Chopra, *Almost Home*, 17.

were shaped by British experiences with the Mi'kmaq in the hopes that “nurturing allegiance” with the Maroons would produce future settlers and labourers.⁹

What is frustrating about *Almost Home* is the brevity in which it treats over fifty years of planter and Maroon relationships prior to the 1796 destruction of Trelawney Town – a relationship supposedly characterized by its unique paternalistic structure. How quickly feelings of distrust and animosity between the Maroons and white planters eroded such an elaborate paternal system raises questions about the kind of accommodations being made on Jamaica. Did the Maroon's subsistence depend on the largely minimal British military presence on the island, a fact changed by “fear that Jamaica would suffer the same cataclysmic convulsions that had raged in Saint-Domingue since 1791?”¹⁰ Was accommodation prior to 1794 really a reluctant toleration, and if so, does this affect how we should read the racial gradations of power in Jamaica and the Maroon's adoption of them prior to their forced migration to Nova Scotia?

Chopra's most intriguing interpretation of the role of paternalism in *Almost Home* begins in Nova Scotia, where the Maroons “faced the Anglican paternalism of Sir John Wentworth, who saw the Maroons as an opportunity to redeem his own soul.”¹¹ As the Maroons are forced out of one colony, rescued from another, and eventually returned *home*, we can see the impact metropolitan perspectives had on shaping our historical memory of the Maroons. In Nova Scotia, their short time in that colony was characterized by Wentworth's constructed utopia of a “peaceful coexistence between whites and

⁹ Chopra, *Almost Home*, 99.

¹⁰ Chopra, *Almost Home*, 27.

¹¹ Chopra, *Almost Home*, 75.

Maroons sealed by Anglican teachings.”¹² In the Maroons, Wentworth saw a chance to transform those “victims of Jamaican slaveholder’s paranoia” through English education and gospel teachings. The paternalism that characterized their experiences in Nova Scotia erased that of the role they played in maintaining a profitable racial hierarchy in Britain’s most lucrative slave-colony, that of returning enslaved Blacks attempting to escape their bondage to the white planters who held them captive.

Available sources limit Chopra’s ability to elaborate upon how the Maroons themselves understood their place in imperial spaces, her reading of letters and other colonial documentation from officials like Wentworth shows how the Maroon’s narrative evolved over time and how it is remembered in popular imaginations of the Maroons in present day. “Well-meaning abolitionists,” argues Chopra, “transformed Jamaica’s dangerous enemies into ‘helpless and injured subjects’” by focusing on the Trelawney Town Maroon’s race and banishment, and nothing else.¹³ When British Sierra Leone was founded in 1787 it became the abolitionists’ dream home for the Maroons. More than this though, Sierra Leone became a place where the Maroons, and other ‘improved’ Blacks from England and the Americas, could be recruited as organized labour so that the colony could flourish and white abolitionist guilt over slavery could be alleviated.

The Maroon’s nuanced grasp of British norms, one that they inherited from generations of living in proximity to empire, produced what Chopra argues was a sense of imperial obligation. At the same time, her work strives to demonstrate the agency that the Trelawney Town Maroons expressed in the making and remaking of their community

¹² Chopra, *Almost Home*, 91.

¹³ Chopra, *Almost Home*, 7.

in the British World. *Almost Home* reminds historians of the Atlantic World to challenge the metanarratives that have been placed on groups in flux during, and after, the political and social upheavals of the late eighteenth century. As Chopra demonstrates in her analysis of the Maroons, when we cease to read these groups, and their migrations, as reactionary to political disruption, it becomes possible to question where they fit in a longer history of colonisation and social development.

RICHARD YEOMANS

University of New Brunswick