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## Almost Home: Maroons between Slavery and Freedom in Jamaica, Nova Scotia, and Sierra Leone

Ruma Chopra, *Almost Home: Maroons between Slavery and Freedom in Jamaica, Nova Scotia, and Sierra Leone*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018. viii + 313 pp.

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REVIEWED BY ALEX A. MOULTON

*ALMOST HOME IS AN ENTHRALLING EXAMINATION* of the pursuit for belonging, the contradictions of black kinship and the contestations of colonial institutions. Ruma Chopra exposes the fraught nature of black mobility and freedom as it sits in uneasy tension with the aspirations of the British colonialists in Jamaica, Canada and Sierra Leone. The picture that emerges is one of the Trelawny Town Maroons as highly strategic actors who negotiated the colonial apparatus of government through conflict, accommodation, and connivance. This is an important contribution to the historiography of the British empire, African-American history, Maroon studies and the emergent work in Black Geographies. Chopra draws on an extensive archive of the Maroons' story both to ensure richness and to demonstrate one of the central themes of the book: Maroons commanded the attention and reflection of the British empire. Maroon existence proved the empire was pregnable rather than a fait accompli.

In the introduction we learn that the Maroons signed treaties with the British in 1738 and 1739 that "established the Maroons as useful neighbours" (15). As Chopra shows, though, while the Maroons would at first seem compliant with their role of propping up the plantation economy, they were less ready to accept an inferior racial positioning. War broke out following what Maroons perceived to be an especially demeaning event: the beating of two Trelawny Town Maroons "by a slave overseer the Maroons had previously captured as a runaway; adding insult to injury, the Maroons overheard nearby slaves making jeering remarks" (22). By insisting on these details Chopra highlights the fraught position of the Maroons within a racist colonial system that made their position volatile and their loyalties questionable.

The chapter "Bloodhounds" shows the inconsistencies of the perceived social and moral position of the Maroons. As a last resort to ferret out the Maroons from their haunts and retreats, the colonial government brought in Cuban bloodhounds. Yet, as Chopra shows, the coincidence of these devel-

opments with the increasing agitation of the anti-slavery movement opened up a discussion about just what kind of humans the Maroons were, if at all, and thus where the line could be drawn concerning their treatment. The debates show how unstable the moral and legal pendulum was, swinging between colonial paternalism and the more violent tendencies of racism.

It is curious that Chopra should examine the process of resettlement under the heading “Deportation”, since she makes it clear that the Maroons, while descended from Africans who refused enslavement, were Jamaicans who had held rights to land and freedom. It is debatable whether “exile” would be more fitting. The vacillations over whether to banish the group or force their integration into the wider Jamaica, however, reflected anxieties around “signifying white power and imparting a warning to the Jamaican enslaved” (69) and maintaining “a slave catching corps that could aid in securing the colony” (70–71).

“Conversion” narrates the encounters of the Maroons with Nova Scotia lieutenant governor Sir John Wentworth, who would frustrate himself trying to accomplish their immersion into the society. If the Maroons are always almost home and never quite there, then for the colonial authorities they are always, but not ever fully converted, subjects. That Wentworth “fathered a child with a Maroon woman” (85) reflects the “fantasy of savage innocence” with which he viewed the Maroons, and which informed his insistence that they could be converted into “law-abiding farmers if properly civilised and Christianised” (91). Chopra, though, seems to mean that another kind of conversion takes place in Nova Scotia: a conversion of the narrative of the Maroons from black rebel to indigenous. They become “black versions of the indigenous population, the Mi’kmaq” (83), even as they become the replacements of the Black Loyalists who had left for Sierra Leone in 1792.

Despite their effectiveness in resisting the British and their success in establishing communities, Maroons were refugees. This is clear in “Winter” where Chopra shows us the vulnerability of the Maroons. She is careful not to reproduce an environmentally deterministic historiography of the Maroons’ resettlement in Nova Scotia. Yet, as Chopra shows, that very kind of thinking was to animate abolitionists’ advocacy on behalf of the Maroons. The Maroons intervened in the discussions and cleverly positioned themselves as victims of the cold who were only seeking a home in more familiar environments.

“Resistance” provides a snapshot of the ways the Maroons insisted on their status as distinguished and free black subjects, and illustrates their conscious and systematic efforts to control their transatlantic movements. “Their non-cooperation they hoped, would mean their return to Jamaica, or at least to a region where they could sustain themselves and their families without dependence” (117). The Maroons’ effort to force a move to “their native climate” (127), and their self-reference as “Maroon exiles”, who had been “blacken[ed] . . . beyond their natural hue” (128), effectively negotiated the atmosphere of antislavery campaigning and British interest in settling Sierra Leone.

“Crisis” relates the Maroons’ arrival in Sierra Leone, just in time to help quell a rebellion by the Black Loyalists of Nova Scotia. In the theatre of conflict, the Maroons, the native Africans and the Nova Scotian black settlers stood contentiously alongside or perhaps against each other, and racial positioning was not simply a black or white matter. Rather, Chopra points to a complex social hierarchy that was mediated by, among other things, Christian status, personal contact with colonial agents, opportunity, and the immediate material needs at any given moment. Yet, the Maroons did not simply or unquestioningly reproduce the colonial order by suppressing the freedom of other blacks: “The memories of their own deportation compelled them to question taking a possible role in suppressing the Nova Scotians . . . The Maroons urged the council to come to terms with the rebels” (152).

In “Accommodation”, Chopra shows that the Maroons were no more resistant to the malarial conditions in Sierra Leone than whites or the black Nova Scotians. In “Conversion” Chopra showed us the attempts to make the Maroons into docile subjects; here she returns to those themes to show the negotiations between Maroons and the administrators of the colony for the creation of a suitable home. The yearning for Jamaica was not satiated, but the Maroons accommodated themselves to Sierra Leone. “The Maroons adapted to the task of making an impregnable establishment. They constructed fortifications and laboured in public works projects” (177), they “followed the law, acted as jurors, served proudly as constables” (178). Yet, the Maroons’ sense of a distinct identity persisted and, as Chopra’s epilogue shows, this identity and the sense that they were not truly home in Sierra Leone motivated emigration to Jamaica in the mid-1800s. The landscape of Jamaica they found had changed in many respects, due in significant part to the abolition of slavery and black emancipation. Chopra leaves us wondering whether the Maroons had come back to find home. 