

## Review

Winter 2024

Clow, Owen G.

**Blakley, Christopher Michael.** *Empire of Brutality: Enslaved People and Animals in the British Atlantic World*. Louisiana State University Press, 2023. HARDCOVER. \$45.00 ISBN 9780807181010 pp. 256.

In 1723, under a veil of secrecy, a community of enslaved people in colonial Virginia penned a letter to Edmund Gibson, the recently appointed Archbishop of London. Imploring Gibson to investigate and intervene in the deplorable conditions of their enslavement, the anonymous writers took pains to remind Gibson of their humanity as brethren in a shared Christian faith. Among their complaints was a brief but curious line: their enslavers, they wrote, “doo Look no more up on us as if then if wee ware dogs.” (2) For Christopher Michael Blakley, this is no idle turn of phrase. Rather, this comparison points up a complex set of historical relationships between slaveowners, enslaved people, and the nonhuman animals with which they lived, labored, and died. *Empire of Brutality: Enslaved People and Animals in the British Atlantic World*, Blakley’s first book and a revision of their 2019 dissertation, traces how British slaveowners distinguished between people, animals, and those persons who, through enslavement, occupied a position “in-between,” and how that process of dehumanization was molded by the material human-animal relationships that structured Atlantic slavery.

In short, Blakley argues that “slaving and slavery relied on and generated complex human-animal networks and relations spanning the British Atlantic world.” (16) Moreover, these relationships were essential to the social and material reproduction of slavery because slaveowners relied on these linkages to justify the dehumanization of enslaved people, although Blakley is quick to caution against the assumption that dehumanization was literal or entirely successful. Rather, they argue, while slaveowners understood that enslaved people were not literally animals, by likening enslaved Africans to animals, characterizing their productivity and value in animal terms, and materially linking animal

labor and enslaved labor, slaveowners produced a particular subhuman status that ultimately reified Atlantic slavery. Blakley's understanding of dehumanization is drawn primarily from the philosopher David Livingstone Smith, with critical additions from Cedric Robinson and Jennifer Morgan. While there now exists a robust literature on dehumanization and slavery, Blakley's approach differs from the primarily legal approach of scholars like Colin Dayan or Veronica Hendrick, instead emphasizing human-animal networks within material categories of labor, trade, and the natural environment. Much of Blakley's archival base should be reasonably familiar to scholars of the British Atlantic, but *Empire of Brutality*'s strong focus on reading dehumanization via interspecies comparison—as well as the elucidation of the animal networks present in the backgrounds of these texts—sheds new light on everything from the Royal African Company's internal correspondence to the diary of Landon Carter.

The organization of *Empire of Brutality* is more thematic than chronological—a structure intended to trace the various “modes of interaction” (drawing from Marcy Norton's phrase) between enslaved people and nonhuman animals. Chapter one focuses on the “Castle Trade” along the so-called Gold Coast of Africa, highlighting the importance of animal bodies to sale of human captives. Some animals, like sheep and cowries—small snail shells which functioned as a kind of currency between European and African slavers—expedited Atlantic slavery, while other animals, such as guinea worms and rats, complicated matters. Chapter two turns to the issue of slavery and zoological knowledge production: colonial elites regularly used the labor and expertise of enslaved Africans to source and gather animal specimens for natural history collections. Blakley draws on materials from the Royal Society (explicitly conceived, as Blakley notes, as a “Twin-Sister” to the Royal African Company (55)) to highlight the enslaved cliff-runners, divers, and other laborers throughout the British Caribbean who actually performed the dangerous work of collecting the desired animal species, and whose labor was erased or otherwise disregarded by their colonial enslavers.

Chapter three, which discusses the political ecology of the American plantation, is a highlight of the book overall. Structured as a comparison between plantations in the Chesapeake and the Caribbean,

Blakley finds more similarities than differences. Here, Blakley draws on an anatomical metaphor, articulated by eighteenth-century slaveowners like Samuel Martin, which placed the enslaved alongside horses, cattle, oxen, and mules as the “nerves” or “sinews” that enabled the mechanical function of the plantation itself. In practice, this produced a form of bodily dispossession, reflected in plantation records that contained valuations of both human and animal lives, and which contributed to a “British racial imaginary and hierarchy that placed [enslaved people] between fully human whites and livestock animals.” (115) Here the conceptual linkage between the animal body and the body of the enslaved human is at its clearest and its most degrading: Blakley uses plantation records to show how animals and enslaved laborers were fed nearly identical diets of fodder foods, and how their waste was mixed and recycled as fertilizer.

In the latter half of the book, Blakley emphasizes the human-animal interactions occurring within and alongside various strategies of resistance employed by enslaved people. Chapter four, which is based primarily on Landon Carter’s diary, is primarily concerned with the use of animals by enslaved people as a means of sabotage. This takes a variety of forms, but Blakley is most interested in incidents where certain enslaved persons at Carter’s plantation—Manuel, Sarah, Kit, Sukey, and others—attacked plantation animals or otherwise drove them to serious injury, oftentimes by causing them to fall into ditches, ravines, or waterlogged terrain. These actions not only allowed enslaved people to assert their own bodily autonomy, but also enabled the creation of “rival geographies” within the plantation, following Stephanie M. H. Camp’s expansion of Edward Said’s concept. At their core, these incidents also suggest enslaved people’s mastery of the animal and environmental knowledge necessary to accomplish this kind of sabotage. Chapter five expands on the rival human-animal geographies of the American plantation by highlighting instances where enslaved people fled on stolen horses. Many of these escapes, which Blakley has drawn from fugitive advertisements, succeeded because of the familiarity particular enslaved people had developed not only with horseback riding but also with the specific horses they took, which were in some cases horses they regarded as their own.

To the extent that *Empire of Brutality* is positioned as a historiographical bridge between the history of Atlantic slavery and environmental history, it tends more toward the former than the latter. This is not to say that Blakley neglects environmental history—much of the book’s argument depends on a critical interrogation of the political ecology of Atlantic slavery—but rather that Blakley’s focus dwells primarily on the dynamics of enslavement and dehumanization and uses the environmental characteristics of human-animal modes of interaction as a means to understand the social lives and worlds of enslaved people. To this end, Blakley is remarkably effective. Animal studies scholars should find this book particularly enlightening, and in many ways *Empire of Brutality* promises to open up an array of new avenues for future research for historians interested in the relationship between nonhuman animals, enslaved persons, and the logics of enslavement, colonialism, and dehumanization beyond the British Atlantic world.

It is a testament to the pathbreaking nature of *Empire of Brutality* that Blakley has managed to argue something fresh and methodologically innovative within the well-saturated field of the history of Atlantic slavery. Blakley’s approach is acutely bounded by chronology and geography—the book terminates in the mid-eighteenth century and concentrates primarily on the British colonies in the Caribbean and North America—and future scholarship may find it fruitful to explore these same modes of interaction in places and contexts beyond the fairly narrow parameters of this book. It is also notable that Blakley focuses almost entirely on enslaved Africans: what, one wonders, might a similar study of enslaved indigenous Americans and nonhuman animals reveal? As historians like Rebecca Goetz and Joyce Chaplin remind us, “Indian slavery” was a pressing concern in the Atlantic World despite its oftentimes marginal position within the historiography. The relative absence of this narrative from *Empire of Brutality* represents one among many opportunities for further research following the course Blakley has charted in this book.

*Empire of Brutality* should find a welcome audience among scholars of Atlantic slavery—particularly slavery in the British Atlantic—as well as animal studies scholars, early American

historians, historians of science and technology, and environmental historians. It would be well-suited for graduate seminars in any of these subfields, although undergraduate students may require some additional context to fully appreciate the book's intervention. Readers of this journal may note the book's absence of a direct relation to the American Civil War, but should find many elements of the book, especially Blakley's reading of the human-nonhuman animal interactions within the North American plantations in chapter three through five, instructive and prescient. At 150 pages, *Empire of Brutality* is concise and readable without sacrificing nuance or sophistication. As historians continue to disentangle the complex web of interactions between nonhuman animals, enslaved people, and their enslavers, they would do well to heed Blakley's example.

*Owen Clow ([oclow@fordham.edu](mailto:oclow@fordham.edu)) is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History at Fordham University. He studies twentieth-century American environmental history, focusing particularly on issues of place and regional identity.*