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Book Review: Susan Dwyer Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society, 1640-1700* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

By Isaac Gonzalez-Leon

Susan Dwyer Amussen's *Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society, 1640–1700* examines how England's participation in Caribbean slavery reshaped English society during the seventeenth century. Rather than treating slavery as a distant colonial institution, Amussen places the English Caribbean at the center of England's social, cultural, and political transformation. The book traces the movement of people, ideas, and practices across the Atlantic, revealing how colonial experiences influenced metropolitan understandings of labor, authority, race, and gender. By analyzing slavery as an interconnected Atlantic system, Amussen challenges histories that isolate England from its colonies and instead presents both as part of a shared and evolving social world.

Throughout the book, Amussen argues that slavery in the English Caribbean was deeply embedded within English society rather than existing on its margins. Early on in *Caribbean Exchanges*, she emphatically states, “Yet while this traffic was of growing significance in late seventeenth- century England, it has been largely invisible in the work of historians of England in the period.”¹ This framing pushes against interpretations that confine slavery to overseas spaces and highlights how developments in the Caribbean shaped English political thought and social relations. Through this approach, Amussen demonstrates that slavery was not simply an economic system but a force that transformed English ideas about hierarchy, discipline, and power. Amussen further argues that English slave societies were not fully formed when colonization began. Instead, slavery developed through experimentation and coercion as English

¹ Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society, 1640-1700* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 6.

settlers responded to labor demands and resistance. As she explains, “One of my central contentions is that owning people did not come ‘naturally’ to the seventeenth-century English: slaveholders had to learn to do it.”² From this, she is able to emphasize the instability of early colonial labor systems and challenges assumptions that racial slavery emerged naturally from English social traditions. When focusing on process rather than inevitability, Amussen is able to draw attention to the choices and conflicts that shaped plantation societies over time.

In *Caribbean's Exchange*, one of the most distinctive features within the book was its sustained use of visual sources/information throughout the book. In particular, Amussen treats illustrations and engravings not as supplemental material, but as central historical evidence. As she notes that “Black attendants do not appear in English paintings until there actually were black slaves and servants in England; real people from Africa and the American colonies come to fill the aesthetic supporting roles projected for black subordinates...”³, especially for those who had no direct experience of colonial life. These images shaped how English audiences understood race, labor, and authority, often presenting slavery as orderly and profitable while minimizing the violence that sustained it. Through careful visual analysis, Amussen shows how familiar artistic conventions helped normalize coercion and hierarchy within English culture, with legal records forming another key body of evidence in the book. Because of this, Amussen closely examines sources like the colonial laws and court cases to demonstrate how English legal traditions were reshaped to support slavery. She argues that “the law protected planters, not slaves, ... as being created men though without the knowledge of God.”⁴, revealing how legal

² Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society*, 10.

³ Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society*, 216.

⁴ Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society*, 131.

systems were adapted to reconcile English claims to liberty with the reality of human bondage. As it defined enslaved Africans as property, the colonial law enabled the English settlers to preserve their own rights while denying those same protections to others. In the end, the analysis demonstrates the role of law as an active instrument of power rather than a neutral framework.

Alongside visual and legal sources, Amussen also draws on plantation records, travel narratives, and administrative documents to reconstruct daily life in the English Caribbean. From these materials, she reveals the harsh labor regimes imposed on enslaved people and the anxieties of colonists attempting to maintain control. Amussen emphasizes that coercion was foundational to plantation society, noting that “The violence used to control servants and slaves grew out of the systemic violence fundamental to colonial society, as well as out of fear of violent resistance.”⁵ This focus reinforces the book’s broader claim that slavery depended on constant force and surveillance, shaping both colonial society and English attitudes toward authority and discipline. All told, the sources that Amussen uses throughout her book allows her to connect slavery in the Caribbean with broader social and cultural transformations. From combining visual culture, legal analysis, and archival records, *Caribbean Exchanges* demonstrates how slavery became embedded in English society on both sides of the Atlantic. The careful integration of these materials strengthens the book’s central claim that England’s emergence as an imperial power was inseparable from the development of Caribbean slavery.

Beyond its use of diverse sources, *Caribbean Exchanges* is also distinguished by its impactful methodological approach, particularly its integration of social history, legal analysis, and visual interpretation. Amussen treats the images, laws, and archival records as poignant and intersecting forms of historical evidence rather than isolating them by category. As she explains,

⁵ Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society*, 147.

“The process of constructing slave societies explored in this book provides a critical background for many of the ways in which race and gender were connected to work, identity, and law.”⁶ Because of this, she allows the book to explore not only how slavery functioned on plantations, but also how it was normalized and justified within English society. Rather than portraying influence as flowing only from England to the Caribbean, Amussen shows how colonial practices reshaped metropolitan assumptions. She argues that colonial experiences “The Caribbean provided a model for a society where the bonds of paternalism had been largely abandoned.”⁷ By framing empire as a reciprocal process, the book challenges traditional center–periphery models and highlights the extent to which England itself was transformed by slavery. From this perspective, it helps strengthen the book’s broader claim that colonial violence cannot be separated from domestic social change.

Gender analysis was also utilized within the book, further reinforcing Amussen’s interpretation of slavery as a socially transformative institution. Throughout the book, she connects English ideas about household authority and gender order to the shaping of plantation discipline within the Caribbean. At the same time, the Caribbean conditions destabilized these familiar norms, forcing the settlers to adapt during the time period. Amussen notes, “Enslaved women were marked by race in that they were fundamentally different from European women.”⁸ By integrating gender into her analysis, Amussen demonstrates that slavery reshaped social relations at multiple levels rather than operating solely as an economic system. The effectiveness of *Caribbean Exchanges* lies in its consistent grounding of interpretation in concrete evidence.

⁶ Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society*, 235.

⁷ Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society*, 236.

⁸ Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society*, 68.

Rather than relying on abstract theory, Amussen repeatedly returns to specific examples drawn from law, imagery, and plantation life. Using the analysis of colonial legislation, Amussen illustrates how legal systems were deliberately structured to maintain control. This transformation of the law to prioritize capital over human life is most evident in her analysis of the 1688 Barbados Act and the 1696 Jamaica Act. Amussen concludes that “The law of slavery in particular mandated harsh punishments for all offences...The protection of property and wealth was at the center of both the labor and legal regimes of the islands, and no cruelty was too great.”⁹ With her focusing on these practical applications of institutional power, Amussen convincingly shows that the “liberties” enjoyed by English planters were entirely dependent upon the violent subjection of those they defined as property.

Despite its many strengths, the book does present certain limitations. While Amussen is careful to acknowledge the constraints of the archive, the perspectives of enslaved Africans often remain mediated through colonial records. She herself notes that “While we cannot tell the story directly from the perspective of enslaved people, ... in the seventeenth century, we catch only glimpses of them.”¹⁰ Although this limitation reflects the nature of the sources rather than a failure of interpretation, it still limits the scope and scale of her analysis in the book. With greater attention to resistance or everyday acts of defiance, it might have further complicated the narrative of control and authority within the Caribbean. Alongside the book’s narrow geographical focus, it also invites questions about comparison. While Amussen is able to concentrate on the English Caribbean, she then offers a detailed and persuasive case study, but many may wonder how these developments compared to other Atlantic slave societies. From

⁹ Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society*, 228.

¹⁰ Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society*, 10.

this, Amussen acknowledges this limitation in the book, noting that her purpose is not to provide a comprehensive Atlantic history but to explain how “Slavery transformed English ideas of law and order, gender, work, and property.”¹¹ This clarity of purpose essentially supports the book by maintaining analytical focus rather than diluting its argument. In the end, *Caribbean Exchanges* is a compelling and carefully argued study that demonstrates the centrality of slavery to England’s seventeenth-century transformation. Through its smart use of visual sources, detailed legal analysis, and emphasis on transatlantic exchange, the book challenges readers to reconsider the boundaries between a colony and a city. Amussen convincingly shows that English society was shaped not only by events within its borders but also by the systems of coercion and exploitation it developed overseas. In doing so, *Caribbean Exchanges* makes an important contribution to the histories of slavery, empire, and early modern England, and offers a framework that highlights the inseparability of colonial violence and metropolitan change.

¹¹ Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society*, 42.