

## Remarks on April Shelford's *A Caribbean Enlightenment*

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Hundreds of years ago, when I was in graduate school, it was already an old joke, when someone spoke too unironically of the Enlightenment, to sneer and say, “you mean the *endarkenment*.” Scholarship that seeks to complicate the idea of a unified, modern-looking Eurocentric Enlightenment event is not new. And I’ve heard from several people of Professor Shelford’s book, “I’ve been waiting for someone to write this!” So what makes this a new achievement in an old field?

We’ll stipulate for now that the Enlightenment happened—a prioritization of individual liberty (at least for patriarchs) and intellectual inquiry had a moment that we locate roughly Locke to Kant, where they pushed back hard against political and religious traditions. But this happened, causally not coincidentally, as Christian rhetoric was being used to spread enslavement across the Atlantic at a furiously increasing pace. Quite often the people doing the enlightening were also conniving at the crimes. We’ve all known this to be true, but there’s a level at which it still refuses, at least for me, to cohere, to make sense. *A Caribbean Enlightenment* gets me several steps closer to understanding. The book is a triumph of nuance, if not a particularly comfortable one. While my first read-through left me applauding Shelford’s scholarship, her ability to make acane archives breathe and dance, my second reading left me a little concerned about humanity and, frankly, worried about the election. I don’t work in Indiana anymore, so I’m probably allowed to say that.

Before exploring the void in our collective souls, though, I’d first like to acknowledge the parts of this book that just give me academical warm fuzzies: number one is Shelford’s exhumation of the thriving French periodical culture of Saint Domingue. Her interweaving of the *Affiches Américaines*, its rival *Journal de Saint-Domingue*, and the fair-sexing *Iris Americaine*, provide a familiar parallel to continental periodical culture while still preserving a unique lens. We learn about the *Affiches* avidly following the North American Stamp Act Crisis, and, interestingly, siding with the Americans because of the ways local politics inflects the reading. Game recognizes game, and colonials recognize colonials. We find also that colonial subjects wrote poetry, published it, and critiqued it in their periodicals—it wasn’t necessarily very good poetry, but then the periodical poetry in London and Paris was also (you can take my word for it) pretty bad. Meanwhile, the publication of the *Iris* in is a fairly early example of a woman-centering periodical, albeit one crafted (most of them were) by a male editorial team—such works were not very prolific even in London in 1769. And if we need any more evidence that the periodical culture was fully developed, Shelford includes a description of a full-bore 1766 paper war in the pages of the *Affiches* and *Journal* over whether the climate of Limbé could support sugar cane or would be best suited to indigo. Just as I would expect to find in Europe or North America, despite the relative pettiness of the subject, men’s wounded passions are on parade in full written display. If we measure periodical culture as a key component of Enlightenment, well QED.

Here’s another personal pleasure in reading this book: I’ve been through a fair amount of Caribbean literature when I’m doing my piratey work, and one of the things I like best about it those works are the Europeans who, in the midst of exploration, privation, and crimes, are also genuinely interested in trying American foods, describing American tastes, transcribing recipes. Shelford explicates how Patrick Browne’s *Civil and Natural History of Jamaica* (1756) includes

a long litany of foods eaten by wealthy as well as poor white and Black Jamaicans—parrots (presumably captured by the enslaved?) are food mainly for the wealthy; kidney beans are for the poor (40-41). Guinea corn and breadnut fruit, we are told, fed both starving humans and livestock, recalling Samuel Johnson’s upsetting crack in the *Dictionary* that oats are “A grain which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people.” (On point here, Johnson elsewhere compared the Scots both to Indigenous Americans, and to beasts.) So far so good, until at the end of a long paragraph, it appears that Browne reported that enslaved people considered pet cats a delicacy (41). Even remembering that the planters were eating parrots just a page ago, given recent the horrifying discourse about the Haitians in Springfield, reading this passage a few days ago this made my blood run chill. How do we even begin to talk about an Enlightenment society, let alone a post-Enlightenment one, in which people are terrorized, starved, and accused of eating pets?

But eighteenth-century Jamaicans were indeed trying to have a society, after their own fashion. An especially important tie through many of these chapters is the lofty ideal of white male companionship, the supposedly improving powers of affective bonds of a sentimental rather than sensual cast. Shelford reminds us that with white men being outnumbered by Black people and yet themselves vastly outnumbering white women, “Surely friendship ... assumed even greater importance in Jamaica than in the metropole” (84). Yet still this sits oddly with the image she shows us of Robinson and Robert foolishly cuddling an alligator in their laps, and then repeatedly, one assumes drunkenly(?), trying to drown a tick in madeira (65). Such actions might have been taken in the spirit of inquiry and observation, and still they strike the reader as somehow not very scientific.

At the same time, if male homosocial friendship was a sustaining and pleasurable force, it does not show any signs of having been a moralizing one. These men could weep together over sentiment, even commonplace *Clarissa*, and yet remain stoic in the face of the genocidal violence that underpinned their entire society, and in which some of them were avid participants. Shelford herself cautions that “we cannot confuse” what such men “argued with what they did” (307). She vividly paints a heterogeneous Enlightenment, where both metropolitan and American whites understood that what *was*, with respect to racial and economic injustice, was not inevitable but the results of choice—and yet the same choice is made over and over. Robinson’s naturalist impulses somehow enabled him to count as a “very good friend” Thomas Thistlewood, a man whom, if his diaries are even partially true, we can only consider a sadistic monster (86). Perhaps, as Shelford posits, Robinson offered “gentle disciplines,” bonding with other men over flora and fauna, drawing and measuring. But it did not make the men gentle. The humanities will save us, we cry, but have they ever done so before?

Well. Speaking of English majors. Literary book ownership in the Caribbean was widespread, if by no means equal to what it would be in London or Paris. Shelford’s truly fascinating archival work on this topic is how she traces the practice of book swapping, which enabled small but not minute coterie circles to become effectively quite well read, even in Jamaica. In the middle of truly enjoying this chapter, a sentence about Thistlewood suddenly struck me hard—it is one of Shelford’s finest turns of phrase, I think: “Through commonplacing, he furthered a good, if limited education; by commonplacing the books he borrowed, he extended the borders of his little empire of learning beyond what he could afford or chose to spend” (199).

“Little empire of learning” is somehow the perfect encapsulation of Caribbean Enlightenment and the abuses to which it could be put. So many—most—of the natural

philosophers and agricultural writers Shelford highlights see Black Africans as humans, as rational, often as perfectly intelligent. Nearly all, with the exception of the inscrutable *Sugar-Cane* Grainger, calmly accept enslavement as a part of their worlds, but most also argue for amelioratist policies. But we watch Thistlewood read Rousseau and Grainger and even Montesquieu, copying down passages and seemingly learning nothing (204-205). Thistlewood transcribes Montesquieu's famous satire of race chattel slavery (206) and apparently misses the satire entirely; his engagement with James Ramsey constitutes, as Shelford puts it, "a spectacular example of a reader coming to precisely the opposite conclusion intended by the author" (211).

This hits because we are in another political moment in which no amount of corrective reading seems to be digging us out of a very dangerous hole. Teaching satire becomes ever more difficult, because, from *Starship Troopers* to *The Boys*, so many of us seem to have lost the knack for detecting it.

A respectable body of literature now suggests that presenting people with facts that contradict their beliefs is not an effective persuasive tactic, that science is no more a cure for conspiracy theories than sentiment has ever been a cure for sadism. As if determined to prove from a yet a new angle that societies are impervious to learning from past examples, people at places like MIT are now attempting to program generative language models to talk people out of conspiracy thinking by "personalizing" their facts. See for example the brand-new issue of *Science* (385.6741), which includes an essay proudly claiming that scientists can tweak LLM GPT-4 Turbo to be capable of (this is the title) "Durably reducing conspiracy beliefs through dialogues with AI." I'm not a luddite, but I really don't think this is going to work. Appeal to sentiment—personalizing the facts, so to speak—didn't stop Jamaican planters from torturing bondspeople. I'd love it if it would get people to vaccinate their children against measles, but I'm not holding out a lot of hope.

Still, that's my problem; hopelessness is not where Shelford is pointing. Her argument, I think, is that Jamaicans and Dominicans were not passive consumers of European metropolitan intellectual hand-me-downs. These people had agency, and the choices they made, which were frequently awful ones, were not inevitable. Indeed, and perhaps I should have started here instead of ending here, Shelford understands Enlightenment not as philosophy or axiom, but as "approach-attitude-activities"—a phenomenon that was accessible to anyone with income and the ability to read, even if they were Caribbean colonists. While the naturalists in the center metropole were slow to pay attention to the margins, "Jamaicans did not wait until after the Seven Years' War to become curious about their natural environment and to seek to make it 'useful' and 'profitable'" (25). As she puts it nicely in her conclusion, "We see French and British colonists *doing* Enlightenment" (325). Enlightenment, then, is perhaps as performative as gender, as overdetermined as race. But that means it can take other forms. The Caribbeans did Enlightenment differently from the metropolitans, even if not precisely better. The better Enlightenment, perhaps, is still left to us; we also have income and the ability to read. I'm glad this is a book that was available to me to read.