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.
(Cloth US\$35.00)

Almost Home is one of the latest books to attempt to tackle the Jamaican Maroon saga—an oft-told story that continues to excite academic and popular debate across generations. It is distinguished from previous histories of the Maroons in two ways. First, it focuses almost exclusively on a single group, the Trelawney Maroons, following their trajectory from the Second Maroon War of 1795–96 through their deportation to Nova Scotia and eventual resettlement in Sierra Leone in 1800. Secondly, it treats this particular history as an example of a broader phenomenon within British imperial history, which might be characterized as “subaltern loyalism.” One of its primary goals is “situating the Maroons within a history of loyalism as well as the history of slavery” (p. 9).

The book offers a well-documented account of the remarkable transatlantic journey of the Trelawneys, making it particularly useful for readers interested in viewing the Maroons in relation to the geopolitics of empire and the forces that buffeted them in one direction or another following the Second Maroon War. For those intent on accessing the local world of meaning in which the Maroons operated in daily life—or those hoping to understand how the Maroons’ own culturally conditioned perceptions might have affected their responses to such large-scale politics and forces—the book is more problematic.

Inevitably, given its author’s professional interests (as a specialist in “loyalists” among colonized peoples in various parts of the world), *Almost Home* dances around an ongoing polemic that has dogged the historiography of the Jamaican Maroons for many years. Were the Maroons heroes who resisted slavery or traitors who opted instead for “loyalty” to the British oppressors? Ruma Chopra tries for a more nuanced picture, appearing to eschew such simplistic binaries. She admits, for instance, that although the posttreaty Maroons at times allied themselves with British planters, they “never acquiesced to full subordination” (p. 30). Elsewhere she points out that, after being transferred to Sierra Leone, “the Maroons were far from subservient and their loyalty was far from blind” (p. 167). Speaking more generally, she cautions that they “held multiple and contradictory views and expressed a range of loyalties to the empire” (p. 264 n. 37).

Such occasional disclaimers aside, the book gives the overall impression that the Maroons felt “intense loyalty” toward their posttreaty British allies (p. 194). Chopra repeatedly represents them in unflattering terms that contradict present-day Maroons’ understandings of their ancestors as proudly autonomous actors. For example, she asserts that the Maroons “gave up” dur-

ing the Second Maroon War (rather than negotiating a new peace treaty that the British ended up violating) (p. 1). She represents the Maroons, because they often cooperated with the Whites after the peace of 1739, as “having preserved slavery in Jamaica” (p. 8). Their survival, she insists, came at the cost of “conserving slavery in Jamaica” (p. 9). Such stark characterizations surely do not do justice to the Maroons as complex political actors with cross-cutting and conflicting allegiances.

A telling example of the way Chopra sometimes misreads the meaning of “loyalty” for Maroons lies buried in an endnote elaborating on the Maroons’ “high self-regard” (p. 10), which she assumes derived from an identification with the island’s White rulers and the idea of racial superiority on which the slavocracy depended. Citing a twentieth-century source that “noted that the Maroons used the phrase ‘white-a-middle’ for children who had a Maroon father and a slave mother,” she concludes that “Maroon blood hence bestowed ‘whiteness’ on the children” (p. 203 n. 14). A better acquaintance with the ethnography of Jamaican Maroons would have alerted her to the fact that the term “white-a-middle” does not suggest anything “White” in Maroon blood; quite the contrary, it refers pejoratively to the dilution of the “Maroonness” of the child’s blood. “Whiteness” here points not to superiority, but to the taint of the coastal, “White” world of plantations (the *obroni* world, as Maroons referred to it in their Akan-influenced Kromanti language), of which the mixed child was a partial product. This misunderstanding aligns with a larger tendency to interpret colonial sources, in the absence of further evidence, at face value. For instance, one notes a disturbing willingness to treat literally the paternalistic language of official documents purporting to convey Maroon voices, as if this colonial rhetoric represented a genuine expression of Maroon sentiment.

Chopra’s study makes an erudite and valuable contribution to the writing of Maroon history from the perspective of empire, but it needs to be balanced by closer attention to the Maroons’ own world as they most likely understood it.

Kenneth Bilby

Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington DC, USA
kmbilby@gmail.com