

OUR MAROON IN THE NOW-LOST LANDSCAPES OF MONTSERRAT

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It was already hot at 7 A.M. . . . Ash suspended in the air cast a yellow haze across Montserrat; heavier gray particles settled silently on the windshield as we parked in a clearing at the top of Baker Hill. Shielding our faces with our hands, we—two Montserratians, Heidi Shea Osborne, Rootsman, and I—walked quickly to the edge of the forest and dropped down into Soldier's Ghaut, a steep ravine where the dense canopy of foliage intercepted the ash and gave us some relief. Instantly we were in a cooler, dark green environment where the effects of Montserrat's active volcano were less immediate.

So reads an entry in my July 1998 field notes. After eighteen years away, I had returned to this deep and well-watered ravine that extends north out of Montserrat's Centre Hills. On earlier visits I had studied the ecological practices of small-plot horticulturalists who raised bananas, dasheen, sweet potatoes, and other subsistence crops on the steeply terraced slopes (Berleant-Schiller and Pulsipher 1986). Soldier's Ghaut, I remembered, had been particularly beautiful in 1980, thick with heliconia blossoms and fruit trees and showing off what seemed like a hundred shades of green.

I hadn't been back because my attentions were abruptly shifted to the south of the island by an invitation from the Montserrat National Trust. Under its auspices I studied the ruins of an old sugar plantation on Galways Mountain, an intriguing site that the trust hoped to turn into a cultural heritage interpretive center. I was also interested in the ecological aspects of the daily lives that slaves had designed for themselves within the constraints of slavery. From 1980 to 1995 my colleagues and I studied Galways Plantation and environs, whose incarnations spanned 330 years. In the spirit of the *maroon*, a term in Caribbean dialect for a communal work project, we were assisted by many Montserratians, especially the people of Saint Patrick's village at the foot of Galways Mountain.

The Galways project was just winding down when, quite unexpectedly, in July 1995 Chance's Mountain, an old volcano immediately northeast of Galways Mountain, grew active. Over the next six years the volcano destroyed the southern two-thirds of Montserrat's habitable landscape, burying many villages, the best agricultural land, dozens of historic sites, much of the tourism infrastructure, Montserrat's capital town of Plymouth, and literally all of Galways Mountain. The volcano continues to be active, and access to the places where most Montserratians once lived is forbidden. Of the 11,000 citizens who resided on the island in 1995, only about 4,000 remain in 2001. All of them live north of the Belham River Valley, in a zone considered safe by the high-tech Montserrat Volcano Observatory, funded by the British.

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