In this ambitious and thoughtful book, Justin Roberts advocates historians to make a paradigm shift in slave studies. In the second half of the twentieth century, resistance paradigm, which emphasized agency and resistance of African slaves in struggling against their masters, obtained its paradigmatic priority in the field of slave studies. This resistance paradigm, to some degree, greatly helped historians to understand the brutality of slavery, as well as the chattel principle that made slave labor different from other forms of coerced labor such as naval impressment or indentured servitude. Treating slaves as political actors “engaged with their master in an endless contest for freedom,” this paradigm, as Roberts claims, restrains “the kinds of inquiries historians are able to make about the day-to-day experiences of enslaved workers” (p. 3). In the twenty-first century, this resistance paradigm is still popular in historical scholarship, yet it could not explain the laboring experiences of slaves. To further study slavery, historians, as Roberts declares, should make a paradigm shift, recognizing slavery “is more complex than a simple contest between heroically resisting bondsmen and their evil oppressors” (p. 5).

Focusing his case studies on four plantations such as Newton and Seawell in southeastern Barbados, Prospect in northeastern Jamaica, and Mount Vernon in northern Virginia, Roberts considers the daily details of slave work routines and plantation agriculture in the late eighteenth-century British Atlantic world. As slaves worked in large gangs, a system of division of labor on plantations, overseers, according to Roberts, used multiple gangs “to help dictate the pace of slave labor, to better supervise and discipline the slave workers, and to create an economy and repetition of motion that
would coerce the slave workers, both male and female, into great exertion” (p. 148). For example, William Dickson, a Barbadian, vividly described a gang at work holing a field:

“The holes are dug, with hoes, by the slaves, in a row, with the driver at one end, to preserve the line. They begin and finish a row of these holes as nearly, at the same instants, as possible” (p. 148). Using plantation logbooks, diaries, letters, period manuals, and registers, Roberts carefully considers the gang system, the work time and non-work time of slaves, the seasonal patterns of work, sexual division of labor, medical care and sickness rates of slaves, the work routines of skilled workers and unskilled workers, etc. Connecting slaveholders’ plantation management with slaves’ day-to-day work routines, Roberts thus demonstrates how slaves as laborers experienced slavery, which was rather different from the resistance paradigm.

Roberts also pays particular attention to the relationship between the Enlightenment and labor management in plantations. In the late eighteenth century British Atlantic world, planters, according to Roberts, were influenced by the ideals of Enlightenment science, the accounting revolution of the Scottish Enlightenment, the rise of numeracy and political arithmetic, new ways of conceptualizing and tracking time, and the growth of an agricultural improvement project (p. 23). Illuminated by these kinds of Enlightenment discourses, planters not only believed that African slaves were “fixed capital,” but also understood that labor division and specialization were keys to increasing efficiency and productivity. As planters knew Scottish political economist and philosopher Adam Smith’s ideas on comparative advantages in labor specialization and the benefits of proper labor division, they used their plantations as sites for scientific experiments and enthusiastically participated in genteel discourses of Enlightenment
science. For example, when the harvest began in December 1806, slaves worked as gang units at Duckensfield Hall, Jamaica. On one day, as Roberts points out, the first gang cut canes, the second gang spent the day gathering and bundling the canes on the same field (145-46). In doing so, Roberts explores the impact of the Enlightenment-inspired improvement movements on plantation management and slave labor in detail.

Placing labor history in a broader Atlantic context, Roberts underlines the similarities of factory labor in metropolitan Britain and slave labor in British overseas colonies. In the second half of the eighteenth century, metropolitan Britain was experiencing the first Industrial Revolution, during which industrialists widely used factory system to improve productivity of their factories. In December 1967, Edward P. Thompson, a pioneer of British Marxist historians, published his classic article “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism” in Past and Present, one of the most stimulating historical journals in the English-speaking world. In this article, Thompson not only discusses the changing notions of time of the English working class, but also emphasizes that new modes of labor discipline were central to the process of industrial innovation in the mid-eighteenth century. Following Thompson, Roberts argues that white planters in the late eighteenth century British Atlantic not only “conceptualized time as currency,” but also used time as “a tool of discipline and an aid to measuring (slave) performance (p. 27).” Recognizing the significance of time and labor discipline for their improvement movement, planters, Roberts maintains, manipulated work time and rest time of their slaves so that they could improve their plantations’ productivity and ameliorate the conditions of slavery. Applying Thompson’s arguments on time, work-
discipline, and labor conditions in early industrial Britain into plantation slavery, Roberts illustrates how slaves as laborers experienced slavery in their daily activities (27-9, 288).

Certainly this book is not without flaws. Enlightenment discourses from Europe are central to this provoking book, yet Roberts does not trace the communication networks of the Enlightenment between metropolitan Britain and its colonies in Barbados, Jamaica, and Virginia. While Roberts thinks that the Enlightenment project in imperial Britain greatly shaped the views of slaveholders in the late eighteenth century British Atlantic on time, work-discipline, quantification, and amelioration, he does not explain the ways in which planters obtained enlightenment thinkers’ books and the extent to which planters assimilated the Enlightenment ideas. For readers who are interested in planters’ Enlightenment, perhaps they should take a look at Trevor Burnard’s Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World, in which he has a chapter discussing Jamaica slaveholder Thomas Thistlewood’s “practical Enlightenment.” For readers who want to know more about the exchange of enlightened ideas between Scotland, especially the University of Edinburgh, and the British West Indies, perhaps they should read Richard B. Sheridan’s Doctors and Slaves: A Medical and Demographic History of Slavery in the British West Indies, 1680-1834.

None of this, however, should take away of this book’s achievement. In this challenging book, Roberts emphasizes the centrality of work and the conditions associated with the lives of enslaved Africans in Barbados, Jamaica, and Virginia in the late eighteenth century. Puting plantation slavery in the late eighteenth century British Atlantic world, Roberts highlights the Enlightenment in imperial Britain and its impact
on plantation management strategies and slave labor in the colonies. This book should be read not only by scholars of British imperial and African American history but by anyone interested in Enlightenment in the late eighteenth century British Atlantic world.

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