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The Atlantic World: A History, 1400-1888

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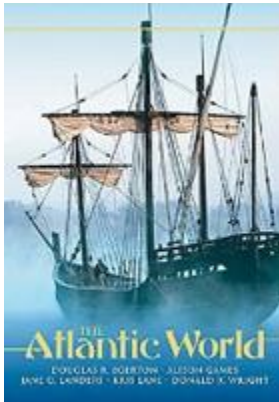
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Book Review



Douglas R. Egerton, Alison Games, Jane G. Landers, Kris Lane, and Donald R. Wright. *The Atlantic World: A History, 1400-1888*. Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, 2007, 530 pp., paperback, \$48.95, ISBN-13: 978-0882952451.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by B. R. Fortenberry, Boston University.

The Atlantic World: A History 1400-1888 is an ambitious offering from some of the leading Atlantic historians currently working in the field. Beginning in the years prior to European expansion, and ending with the abolition of the slave trade, the authors seek to present the wide diversity of the "Atlantic World" while demonstrating some of the broader trends and patterns that shaped, and were a result of, the medieval and post-medieval periods. Their volume, like many historical introductory textbooks, presents both larger interpretive ways of knowing, illustrated by carefully placed case studies.

When reading this volume the variability of approaches to Atlantic History is striking. As such, one must be cognizant of the purpose of this text as an introductory offering to the broad idea of Atlantic History. Throughout the volume the authors shift between chapters that focus on moments of history related to particular states or regions and historical events (Iberians in America [77-113], Wars and Ruptures [323-89], and Empires [115-48; 391-416] and broader interpretive paradigms (slavery and its abolition [185-214; 461-93], migration and labor [149-83], and racial and cultural mixture [255-71]). This is, after all, the way that historians, and in most cases archaeologists, understand the past. What is frustrating about this approach is the emptiness one feels when interesting stories of real people and things in real places are watered down or reduced to larger interpretive categories. This is where the real challenge of Atlantic History (and eventually archaeology) comes to the fore: how does one understand something as infinitely large as the Atlantic? More pressing, however, is the challenge of balancing one's individual case studies with the larger processes that provide overarching understanding of the oceanic basin. It is academia itself that falsely makes researchers want "something more." We want our case studies from disparate parts of the world to make a difference and feed into some larger, holistic picture that the research itself can provide -- in essence, we want them to be more than themselves. To achieve these ends, the authors in this volume maintain that they are interested in looking at strings of connections and how decisions made at one locale affect a large number of people (3). They also claim that they are not interested in creating a "composite history" or more traditional nationalistic histories; instead, this volume is a project in looking at interactions (4). Nonetheless, as a result of the breakdown of a nation-state focus, they instead reduce the mosaic of contexts into categories that are discernable across time and space, constructing some broad pattern or process of history that provides an understanding to the present generation of scholars. The movement of thousands of Europeans, Africans, and Indigenous groups is not understood on their own

terms, but rather, through "migration" (as one example of this reduction). This relationship, above all else, is related to a hierarchical notion of history and time, one that is very much akin to an *Annales* approach to history. The volatility of everyday life is partitioned off from the ethereal processes of history: the locale is defined by the process and the process is defined by the locale. But do we need to think of the Atlantic in those terms? Do we need an overarching comprehension of its breadth? Moreover, do we need a textbook to attempt to study such a thing?

I would argue the answer is a resounding no. Instead of striving for a comprehensive survey of the Atlantic, let us embrace the idiosyncrasies of the stories that we can tell. Perhaps it is best to think of the Atlantic as an empty canvas. It is only through our own research that we can begin to put lines and trajectories on the white, or in this case ocean-blue, space, tracing real people and things from locale to locale through time and space. It is a return to an emphasis on the fine grained interactions. Here we can focus more clearly on the idea of place-making, which in Atlantic History has been called "cis-Atlantic" history by David Armitage (2005). More importantly, for archaeology, is the fact that a focus on place-making allows the archaeologists to concentrate on what they do best -- understanding the materiality of particular places at particular times. With these fine-grained, focused methods, the archaeologist can move beyond the site, following people and materials as they cross and re-cross the Atlantic.

In conclusion, I think that the authors have done an exquisite job attempting to grapple with the Atlantic from a holistic perspective. Nonetheless, I do not think that it is the approach that archaeology should embrace. Instead, we can look to the work of micro-historians and their ability to look at fine-grained interactions of particular places and their capacity to debunk widely-held claims of broad patterns and trends in history as a possible template to follow for the Atlantic historian and archaeologist (see Putnam 2006). Furthermore, I think we can look to the authors' work outside of this textbook, what I would call Atlantic History "in action," to find more appropriate approaches to the Atlantic than those presented in this volume. Alison Games' work tracing the movements of travelers from London to the Lowcountry to the American colonies comes to mind (1997). Here there is less of a focus on a monolithic Atlantic or migration patterns; rather, Games' work seeks to get inside the mind of her subjects (an emic approach for those of us who work within anthropology). In the end, we cannot approach the Atlantic by presupposing its existence in some distant place or time. Rather, we the researchers must construct it through our work as we seek to understand the people and places that shape our world in the present.

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