

Sammelrez: The Atlantic World 1500-2000

Mamigonian, Beatriz G.; Racine, Karen (Hrsg.): *The Human Tradition in the Black Atlantic, 1500-2000*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield 2010. ISBN: 978-0-7425-6730-6; 229 S.

Racine, Karen; Mamigonian, Beatriz G. (Hrsg.): *The Human Tradition in the Atlantic World, 1500-1850*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield 2010. ISBN: 978-1-4422-0698-4; 274 S.

Dubois, Laurent; Scott, Julius S. (Hrsg.): *Origins of the Black Atlantic*. New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2010. ISBN: 978-0-415-99446-0; 410 S.

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More often than not, researchers tend to stay within linguistic comfort zones without mixing with those who explore related subjects – albeit from different cultural contexts. The three books under review juxtapose scholarship from various fields, assembling findings from above-all Anglo-American, Spanish, Portuguese and Caribbean contexts. They attempt to piece together a larger picture of multiple perspectives on an Atlantic World, insinuating in the process how much work remains yet to be done – and how refreshing it could be to start filling the gaps and undertake a synthesis of findings from different geographic regions.

Having read as far as the titles of the three volumes, the first question I wanted to ask was: What exactly is this „Atlantic World“? A recent textbook defines Atlantic history as generally „the study of the history of the people living in a geographic region: the four continents that surround the Atlantic Ocean. More specifically, it focuses on the societies transformed by the convergence of cultures following Christopher Columbus’s momentous voyage in 1492.“¹ Columbus’s voyage happened, however, in the context of European exploratory voyages that cannot be restricted to the Atlantic, for they led adventurers traveling for various European kingdoms and empires around the globe, including also the Pacific. After all, when Columbus stumbled over the Americas, he had actually been looking

for India.

An Atlantic World would have to be created within the specific time-frame of Atlantic history by focusing on aspects that make it unique in comparison with, for example, a Pacific World. Of course, Columbus’s voyage paved the way for the large-scale transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery in the Americas, which, in turn, eventually gave rise to the abolitionist movement that, of course, led to the cessation of the trade and, by 1888, to the end of slavery in all of the Americas.² The Atlantic World is therefore closely linked to the transatlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas. It is economic history entangled with a history of ideas and intellectual exchanges in the contexts of human rights, enslavement and imperialism. The result is an intricate web of transnational history that covers the period from 1492 to 1888.

Against such a background of a conceptualizing framework, the three multi-author volumes under review provide stimulating reading material, starting with the books’ titles. Furthermore, while the three volumes actually present a certain multitude of perspectives, these different viewpoints are presented one after another rather than attempting a synthesis – though, for example, „*The Human Tradition in the Atlantic World, 1500-1850*“ comprises articles from different regions on related topics at roughly the same time period, thus allowing the reader to draw conclusions for themselves. For instance, Sarah Cline’s contribution on „William Lamport/Guillén de Lombardo (1611-1659): Mexico’s Irish Would-Be King“ is followed immediately by Noah L. Gelfand’s chapter on „Jacob Leisler (1640-1691): German-Born Governor of New York“. Both articles highlight mobility in the Atlantic World by tracing European migrations to the Americas in a similar time period. But how different are the contexts and also personalities, though both Lamport and Leisler strove for power and were executed in the end. The volume also hints at the multitude of approaches by in-

¹ Douglas R. Egerton et al, *The Atlantic World: A History, 1400-1888*, Wheeling, Illinois 2007, p. 1.

² Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* Cambridge 1999; Anne C. Bailey, *African Voices of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Beyond the Silence and the Shame*, Boston 2005.

cluding several biographies of women (including one on „Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte (1785-1879): Napoleon’s American Sister-in-Law“ by Charlene Boyer Lewis). To become aware of the existence of different perspectives, it is certainly a necessary starting point to collect them before a synthesis may be attempted.

All three volumes discuss ways in which a complex picture of the Atlantic World may be achieved, which is particularly necessary to counterbalance Eurocentric perspectives on Atlantic history. The three volumes explicitly point to people of African descent and Native Americans. They also single out individual fates that rarely figure in Atlantic history, such as Mark Meuwese’s article in Karen Racine’s and Beatriz Mamigonian’s *The Atlantic World* on „Samuel Cohen (c. 1600-1642): Jewish Translator in Brazil, Curaçao, and Angola“. All three volumes also focus on intellectual, cultural, and economic exchanges and achievements in transatlantic contexts. But whereas Julius Scott and Laurent Dubois chose as their red thread resistance to the institution of the slave trade and slavery on the part of people of African descent, Racine and Mamigonian bring together biographies that illustrate a humanist tradition especially among people of African and native American descent.

Dubois and Scott include articles and excerpts from monographs that have already been published elsewhere. They all have in common that they present Blacks as active agents even during slavery. The volume suggests to what extent the idea of viewing the Atlantic World from non-European perspectives has been tackled before. For example, Eric Williams’ „The Slaves and Slavery“ (pp. 323-333) was published as early as in 1945 in his *„Capitalism and Slavery“*. Williams notices three perspectives on slaves, including the one of the slaves themselves. He points to the irony that while his contemporary historians tended to neglect the slaves’ point of view, slave owners, by contrast, had been acutely aware of it in their day. In combination with other chapters in the book, Dubois and Scott thereby achieve an archaeological reconstruction of Black perceptions of the Atlantic World in history in the course of the second half of

the twentieth century.

Dubois’ and Scott’s multi-author volume is arranged in four parts, each of which comprises three or four contributions preceded by a brief introductory note. The book is overall structured chronologically, starting with the early nineteenth-century and closing with an episode set in late nineteenth-century Cuba and involving a former slave successfully fighting over the ownership of a mule with a former slave master (Rebecca Scott, „Reclaiming Gregoria’s Mule“, pp. 365-395). Most articles focusing on the colonial period present maritime stories, such as an analysis of the question to what extent Black sailors were able to gather news and information during their sea voyages that then spread throughout slave communities back in the Americas (for example Julius Scott, „Negroes in Foreign Bottoms’: Sailors, Slaves, and Communication [selection],“ pp. 69-98).

Dubois’ and Scott’s volume centres on the Caribbean – though not exclusively. Haiti figures prominently as a role model. On Haiti, of course, in 1804 Blacks successfully broke free from colonial rule, defeated the French slave masters, and founded the world’s first Black Republic.³ As slaves were often shipped to the Caribbean before being transported to North America, information actually circulated beyond national borders even among Black people. The example also shows to what extent Black experiences differed within the Americas: Whereas, on some Caribbean islands, new slaves kept arriving thus reinforcing different African heritages, in North America – particularly after the cessation of the transatlantic slave trade in the British Commonwealth (which happened earlier there than in the Spanish and Portuguese American colonies) – slaves began much earlier to develop American forms of African cultures mixed with elements from European and Native American societies. Surviving documents also give evidence of how astutely Africans observed their situation in the Americas and even the changing influx of newly enslaved Africans depending on where European and American slave-traders chose to acquire their „cargo“ (Matt D. Childs, „The 1812 Aponte

³ Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic*, Baltimore 2010.

Rebellion and the Struggle against Slavery in Cuba [selections],“ p. 278). It is one of the book's great assets that it reminds the reader of the diversity of African cultures.

Racine and Mamigonian present their collected biographies in two publications: *The Atlantic World 1500-1850* and its accompanying volume *The Black Atlantic 1500-2000*. Many of the biographies in the two volumes unearth forgotten lives that add valuable details to scholarship. The books are linked with a chapter on „Harry Washington (1760s-1790s): A Founding Father's Slave“ by Cassandra Pybus, which is reprinted in both volumes. Both books are organized in a chronological fashion, starting with the colonial period. Taken together, with the individual contributions, the two editors raise numerous subjects, covering them from multiple angles or in the contexts of different regions of the Atlantic World. The reader is thereby placed in the comfortable position of being free to roam across the text unearthing connecting points without being directed by the editors (other than their establishing chronologies).

In the „*Black Atlantic*“ volume, the selected contributions boldly take the reader into the twentieth century, a period when vibrant Black cultural life in Atlantic settings becomes much more visible and more easily traceable for the inquiring scholar. But can racism – a legacy of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade that is at issue here – be discussed exclusively in the context of an Atlantic World? How can racism in Asian and Australian contexts be excluded particularly if one considers the numerous links between peoples struggling for independence and equality across the globe in the course of the twentieth century? Moreover, especially the two volumes by Racine and Mamigonian have a strong focus on the Anglo-American, the Spanish, and the Portuguese/Brazilian empires, merely implying other Europeans and their dealings in Africa and the Americas, such as the French, the Dutch, or the Germans. The editors' Atlantic World is therefore somewhat restricted to its most visible parts.

The selections in the „*Black Atlantic*“ volume illustrate the gaps of knowledge we still harbour, which may even be misleading. For example, the book contains a chapter on C. L.

R. James and yet another on Malcolm X. But while Martin Luther King, Jr. and W. E. B. DuBois are mentioned, there is no separate entry on them as if they were not a part of a Black transnational world. I explicitly chose „transnational“ rather than transatlantic, as the later entries really discuss Pan-Africanism rather than exclusively a Black Atlantic World. Alan Bloom, the author of the chapter on Malcolm X, argues that in contrast to King, Malcolm X „favored a more radical approach that aimed to *internationalize* the problem of racial oppression by creating a united front of exploited people from around the globe“ (p. 164, my emphasis). Dichotomies are constructed here where we simply find different answers to one and the same question, that is, how to overcome racism and gain civil rights. The idea actually points us to a global history, which brings us back to the necessity of defining the Atlantic World in the first place: The Rev. King actually represented an inherently *international* nonviolent protest. He was a disciple of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy in this regard. DuBois, in turn, was also greatly interested in China and travelled there together with his wife.

The volume thus inspires the reader to search for definitions, and also to start filling in the gaps. Indeed, the *Black Atlantic* includes an essay by Meredith L. Roman on the experiences of a Black American, Robert Robinson, in the Soviet Union. Robinson was a Jamaican who had grown up in Cuba until he emigrated to the USA as a young adult, from where he emigrated to the Soviet Union during the Great Depression. The article mentions Paul Robeson in passing, pointing out „how in 1934, while on his way to Moscow through Berlin, he was deathly afraid he was going to be lynched“ (p. 140). Such a statement without any further elaboration of German contexts feeds stereotypes – of course, Nazi Germany would have to be hostile to an African American (with a taste for communism). The truth is, however, a little more knotty. At about the same time – and this story is not part of the volume under review – a certain Michael King, Sr. travelled Nazi Germany and encountered the legacy of Martin Luther and sixteenth-century German reformation. He was so impressed that he eventually

renamed himself and his son „Martin Luther King“.⁴ Of course, racism was and is an issue in Germany, but it was coded differently there than in, for example, the United States of America. Already Mary Church Terrell noticed it during a 1904 visit. She remembered later that it was a revelation for her to find her hosts were Jewish and therefore subject to racism. Their „otherness“ was not conveyed in the colour of their skin but in their names.⁵ The question is simply one of the visibility of the „Other.“ In Germany, for example, people of African descent have always made up a very small portion of the population.

It is the challenge of twenty-first century scholarship to do justice to many different perspectives – be it by merely attempting to do so, thus providing inspiring food for thought. The three books under review undertake the important task of bringing different branches of knowledge production together that have often been discussed separately in specific national contexts or within the contexts of a shared language. But Latinists will have to communicate with people in American, German and African studies and the like if we truly want to understand the Atlantic World as a phenomenon on an academic basis. We need to have scholars with different linguistic skills and from different cultural contexts not simply to put their articles jointly into one volume, but to actually discuss their findings and exchange results in order to benefit from research in different parts of the Atlantic World (and beyond).⁶

The books under review can only be a beginning by showing us how many pieces of the story will yet have to be added to the picture. What we need to ask as a next step is to what extent we can link these approaches – bringing together older published materials and more recent biographical scholarship. Such puzzle pieces should be combined in a synthesis, inquiring into different subjects such as resistance and Empire as well as intellectual, cultural and business exchanges.

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⁴ Peter J. Ling, Martin Luther King, Jr., London 2002, p. 11; Hyde Flippo, Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), in: *The German Way&More: Language and Culture in Germany, Austria and Switzerland*, <<http://www.german-way.com/famous-mlk-german.html>> (22.09.2011).

⁵ Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, Amherst, NY 1940/2005, pp. 246-248.

⁶ Anja Werner / Kendahl Radcliffe / Jennifer Scott (eds.), *Anywhere But Here! Black Intellectuals: The Atlantic World and Beyond*, Jackson, MS 2013 (forthcoming).