For a Comprehensive History of the Atlantic World or Histories Connected In and Beyond the Atlantic World?

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“If the concept of Atlantic history is fairly new ... the practice is not,”¹ state Philip Morgan and Jack Greene in the introduction to their book offering a critical assessment of this “new” field of study, which has been explored in the United States for the last twenty years. The French scientific community would not be surprised by such a statement, having never forgotten Pierre and Huguette Chaunu’s work on Seville and the Atlantic or the controversy that opposed Robert Palmer and Jacques Godechot against Albert Soboul regarding the concept of the Atlantic revolution in the 1950s.² The French and European academics who were writing about such topics as the Atlantic “space,” the Atlantic “economy” or even the “Atlantic civilization” when the Atlantic Charter was signed and NATO was first

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established, however, had a very different idea of Atlantic history in mind from that developed in the late 1960s at The Johns Hopkins University in the United States with the Atlantic History and Culture program. This is because American historians already accorded an important place not only to communication between Europe and the New World, but also to relations between Africa and the Americas, as studies of the Atlantic slave trade multiplied. However, the idea of Atlantic history did not fully emerge until the 1990s, when it attracted more attention in North America through the Harvard University seminar on the history of the Atlantic world.

This more recent approach differs from earlier works on the Atlantic in two ways. First, it relates to all the historiographical currents that, in the 1990s, were once more interested in the phenomena of globalization during the early modern period but differed from Fernand Braudel’s and Immanuel Wallerstein’s earlier works. The new Atlantic history is thus a transnational history that experiments with new scales of analysis in which the nation is no longer the main historical frame of reference. According to Alison Games, it is a form of world history applied to a particular space and time: the Atlantic world formed by connections and networks developed between Europe, Africa, and the Americas from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Atlanticists promote a new unit of analysis that juxtaposes and includes other areas of focus (kingdom, colony, empire, continent, etc.). Furthermore, rather than corresponding to a specific political entity, it is centered on an ocean. It concerns the period during which the Atlantic Ocean went from being a barrier to being a bridge, multiplying transnational and trans-imperial relations and thereby bringing both banks together. Like other historiographies such as subaltern studies, postcolonial studies, new imperial history or connected history, Atlantic studies aims to move away from a history of the first globalization written solely from a European or Western point of view: Africans and Native Americans are considered full participants in this phenomenon alongside Europeans, and a resolutely “multicultural, multiethnic, and multiracial” approach is favored.

3. The most important European practitioners of this early Atlantic history who had not yet thought of themselves as such were H. Hale Bellot in England, Jacques Godechot, and Pierre Chaunu in France, Jacques Pirenne and Charles Verlinden in Belgium, Vitorino Magalhães Godinho in Portugal, and Max Silberschmidt in Switzerland. For an overview of their work, see Bernard Bailyn, “The Idea of Atlantic History,” in Atlantic History: Concept and Contours (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 3-30.
4. From 1995 to 2010, this prestigious American university, with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, brought together annually a different group of young historians who were writing or had just completed their thesis for a workshop around a particular theme related to the history of the Atlantic world. The program involved 366 young researchers from 202 American universities and 164 foreign universities. See http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~atlantic/.
7. Ibid., 167.
This constant decentralizing and shifting of scales are justified by the interpretative ambition of Atlantic history, which “is concerned with explaining transformations, experiences, and events in one place in terms of conditions deriving from that place’s location in a large, multifaceted, interconnected world.”

This conceptualization of the Atlantic analytical framework and the formulation of this research program—without which a true Atlantic history is inconceivable—emerged as debates were organized and forums, collective works, and other theoretical essays were published. The field of Atlantic studies is characterized by its strong capacity for critical reflection, both with regard to the premises upon which such studies are based and how they develop in practice. This has become necessary for two main reasons. On the one hand, the various empirical works that have been published over the last twenty years under the title of Atlantic history encompass a broad range of approaches and fields, with research that takes different and even contradictory directions. Despite significant efforts to define its purpose and methods, the Atlanticist community has resisted all attempts to identify, order, and give a single definition and orientation to the field. On the other hand, while Atlantic studies was quickly implanted and institutionalized in the United States, it has incited much discussion and resistance, particularly from world historians. Paradoxically, in recent years, it has also helped the emergence or renewal of other analytical frameworks, such as imperial history, continental history or hemispheric history, which attempt to accompany or replace the Atlantic perspective. Hence the need to publish works that seek to collect and make sense of this disparate and heterogeneous production in order to respond to critics and position itself vis-à-vis other historiographical proposals.

8. Ibid., 163.
Assessing a Generation of Atlantic Studies

Regularly faced with the proclamation that Atlantic history is dead, the two works published under the direction of Jack Greene, Philip Morgan, and Nicholas Canny seek to proclaim that, after twenty years of facing challenges, the field is in fact still very much alive, continuing to remain relevant and to interest future researchers. Both volumes were published by Oxford University Press, which has played an important role in diffusing Atlantic history in the Anglophone world, notably with the Oxford Bibliography on Atlantic History. Though their perspectives are similar and complementary, they do not follow the same approach. Greene and Morgan’s volume is a collection of epistemological and historiographical essays: the authors provide an update on the status of research, compare the advantages and limitations of the Atlantic approach, discuss the complementary or competitive historiographies, and identify the most promising and innovative directions in research.

After several textbooks already offering a synoptic view of the development of the Atlantic world, the longer work by Canny and Morgan offers a synthesis or survey that takes the form of a narrative in four parts. These four parts correspond to the four stages of the Atlantic world’s evolution, from its emergence to its disintegration through its consolidation and integration between the mid-fifteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. The book further provides a series of more exploratory essays on new research topics (such as family, environment, law, and sciences) or on more established subjects (such as migration, commerce, modes of settlement, and religion), the study of which is revitalized by adopting a comparative and transversal approach. The terms “handbook” in the title or “survey” on the back cover, therefore, do not do justice to the ambitious and innovative nature of

12. Jack Greene is now Professor Emeritus in the History Department at The Johns Hopkins University, which spearheaded a “program in Atlantic history and culture” in the late 1960s. Along with Bernard Bailyn, who provided an important contribution to the emergence of Atlantic history when he began his Atlantic History seminar at Harvard University in 1995, Greene is one of two major tutelary figures of American colonial history and the American Revolution, shaping several generations of “colonialists” since the 1970s. Also affiliated with the same history department at Johns Hopkins is Philip Morgan, known as one of the greatest contemporary historians of slavery in the British colonies. Born in Great Britain, where he completed his studies and began his university career, Morgan then migrated to the United States, participating in the very process of internationalization in higher education and research that, according to Bailyn, has played such an essential role in the emergence of Atlantic history. Nicholas Canny, the eminent specialist of early modern Ireland, also crossed the Atlantic several times from his native Ireland to write his thesis and start his career in the United States before taking a position at the National University of Ireland in Galway. Bernard Bailyn, “Preface,” in The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800, eds. David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), xiv-xx, here XVI-XVII.


a volume that seeks to lend impetus to Atlantic studies by embracing the whole of the Atlantic world in both its diachronic and synchronic dimensions. It also proves an essential tool for introducing students and young researchers to a difficult field of research that requires both a broad historical knowledge of history and a mastery of many historiographical fields.

By the late 1990s, Greene and Canny had written the first two articles presenting and theorizing Atlantic history. As the title of Canny’s essay indicates, this was first a reconfiguration of British colonial American history. Initially, Atlantic studies was reproached for its focus on the British Atlantic and its generally Eurocentric propensity, despite its explicit intentions to develop a transnational, multi-ethnic, and polycentric history. The two works discussed here, however, attest to the significant effort to correct these early mistakes and fulfill all the promise of Atlantic history by focusing as much on the Spanish, Portuguese, French or Dutch Atlantic as the British Atlantic or by looking at the Africans and Native Americans as well the Europeans, although the geographic origins of their contributors are much less diverse than the variety of populations and territories explored.

These works offer an invitation to travel not just from one corner of the Atlantic world to the other—from Lisbon, Ceuta, the Rhine valley or the Sokoto Caliphate to Philadelphia, Tlaxcala, the Illinois Country, Salvador de Bahia or Patagonia, passing by the Azores, São Tomé, the Grand Banks of Newfoundland or even the Bermudas—but also into the different historiographies that have focused on the Atlantic world in part or as a whole from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries.

This historiographical decompartmentalization, which the authors of these works unanimously present as the main advantage of the Atlantic approach, must be understood in all its magnitude and complexity. This does not only involve the works produced since the idea of Atlantic studies imposed itself in the 1990s. Indeed, this new historiographical trend has multiple, deeply-rooted origins. It rests on the intersection and reformulation of different colonial, imperial, and Atlantic histories: the old Imperial School, the first Atlantic history that appeared in the 1940s and 1950s, colonial American history transformed by the rise of the new social history from the 1950s and 1960s, ethnohistory and the new Indian


16. Together these two books called upon fifty contributors (of which only three wrote a chapter for both books). Aside from some notable exceptions, a large majority of the authors are native English speakers who hold positions in Anglophone universities. It is regrettable that the books’ editors did not seek to further internationalize Atlantic studies by integrating more European, Caribbean, Latin American, and especially African historians, who are largely underrepresented in these historiographical and editorial enterprises.

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history, and the history of the Black Atlantic with its proliferation of works on the slave trade, slavery, and the African diaspora of the 1970s. All these historiographical approaches now being explored on both sides of the Atlantic present a major development because, as Laurent Dubois argues, to rise above national or regional historiographical frameworks “generates new questions, new connections, and points us to hitherto neglected bodies of historical evidence” and “can help us understand historical links between regions, as well as to broaden our analytical and methodological imagination by encouraging us to think comparatively across regions.”

Beyond this common purpose, both works slightly differ in their tone as well as their level of conviction and degree of enthusiasm for the Atlantic approach. A comparison of both titles highlights a shift from a more theoretical reflection on Atlantic history, which is more critical and circumspect, to an affirmative and paradigmatic empirical proposition on the history of the Atlantic world. The difference between an Atlantic history and a history of the Atlantic world may at first glance appear specious, but it is in fact fundamental. In a way, it reflects the two main options available for the future of Atlantic studies, as presented by Jack Greene and Philip Morgan in their introduction, in which they provide a valuable abridgment of the various positions: according to Nicholas Canny, there have been as many conceptions of the Atlantic world and opinions on how to pursue Atlantic history as there are Atlanticists! A close reading of the over fifty chapters in both books reveals numerous nuances in the different authors’ positions, even if they all completely agree on the importance of the Atlantic approach. Whether their approval is tepid or ardent, supporters have the choice between, on the one hand, an Atlantic history offering a comprehensive and comparative framework of analysis that puts the works of specialists from different regions of the Atlantic world into perspective and, on the other hand, the development of a veritable field of historical study that would eventually encompass and replace earlier studies conducted on national or imperial logics. Instead of providing a simple analytical framework, the Atlantic world itself could become the object of study.

Which Atlantic History?

These two options concerning the future of Atlantic studies correspond to the methodological and interpretative cleavage that divides Atlanticists and are related to the blind spots of the Atlantic paradigm. This paradigm postulates that the evolution of societies on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean was greatly affected by

the relationships that linked Europe, Africa, and the Americas between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries and, furthermore, that it is impossible to explain their evolution without considering these Atlantic connections. This postulate, which gives primacy to Atlantic circulation and exchange, conceals four unresolved questions: the role of internal and external factors in the evolution of each society; the importance of Atlantic dynamics compared to regional, continental, global or other influences among the external forces affecting each of these societies; a better appreciation of the consequences of mobility, circulation, and exchange, which did not always have a transformative effect; and finally, the evaluation of the differentiated impact of Atlantic interactions on Europe, Africa, and the Americas. It is thus essential, as John Elliott clearly emphasizes, to try to avoid the “natural temptation to exaggerate the extent to which one side of the Atlantic influenced developments on the other, perhaps in an effort to prove the writer’s Atlanticist credentials. But it needs to be recognized that there is no need to find a consistency, and still less a progressive developments of interaction over time and space. At some times and in some places the Atlantic component will figure strongly, while at others it may well occupy a subordinate position. Tracing and explaining the fluctuations in the degree of interaction between the whole and the parts is a necessary element in the writing of Atlantic history.”

The major issue is indeed that of the relationship between the parts and the whole, as well as the contradictory and simultaneous processes of integration and fragmentation, though this issue arises both within and beyond the Atlantic world.

This is perhaps due to the fact that, as it has been indicated many times, the Atlantic world is an anachronistic category that was not employed by contemporary participants and that the most pertinent critics have been proponents of global history because they consider the world scale as being better suited than the Atlantic scale to the phenomena they analyze. As a result, some Atlanticists have attempted to prove the existence of a “reasonably coherent and autonomous” Atlantic world over the course of the early modern period while recognizing some fragmentation, diversity, and porosity. However, as Alison Games has shown, “this emphasis on integration reveals a particular European-centred bias in the study of Atlantic history. ... Yet from the perspective of North America, and especially from an indigenous perspective, the Atlantic world hardly needed to be integrated in order to have an enormous impact on its inhabitants’ lives. Whether or not American tribes lived tightly under French, Spanish, or English dominion, for example, or outside the areas of European settlement, their lives could be profoundly altered by the presence of these Europeans powers and the disruption they caused in community life.”

Atlanticists may therefore be tempted to favor a “mobile” and “connective” Atlantic history that would be one of circulation and exchange at the origin of the formation and increasing integration of the Atlantic world or, on the contrary, a “localized” Atlantic history that would analyze the impact of these connections on the internal evolution of connected societies, which would consequently increase the emphasis on the diversity and fragmentation of the Atlantic world. As Morgan and Greene recall in their introduction, Elliott clearly advocates this alternative, unlike David Armitage and Games. In the wake of the latter, some authors such as Nicholas Andrew Martin Rodger deplore the fact that “rather too often, ‘Atlantic history’ is history with a hole in the middle. The Atlantic is treated as a pre-defined, self-evident space which serves as a sort of rhetorical device to define the peoples living around its shore. It is not regarded as something requiring any historical analysis or explanation in itself. This sort of Atlantic history is history with the Atlantic left out.” Although communication should not be totally confused with Atlantic seafaring, as it was bound by a prolonged mobility by land or by river, Rodger, a specialist in naval history, proposes to once again make Atlantic history a maritime history, which was the case in early works on the Atlantic from the 1950s and 1960s.

Nowadays, should Atlantic studies focus on the ocean or ignore the open sea in favor of its shores? Behind this debate is the broader question of what constituted the Atlantic world: the connections themselves or the catalysts that brought them into being, namely the colonialist and imperialist endeavors of the Western European powers. Clearly, the relationship between the two seems necessary but insufficient. Otherwise, the Atlantic world would, as most Atlanticists argued, not have disintegrated in the early nineteenth century, even as the Atlantic slave trade persisted illegally for much of the nineteenth century and migration from Europe to the Americas increased through the early decades of the twentieth century. Furthermore, as Donna Gabaccia has clearly shown, “well into the twentieth century, it remained faster and cheaper—not merely more common—to travel from Europe or the Americas across the Atlantic than to travel across the Indian Ocean or Pacific. While the laying of underwater cables was scarcely limited to the Atlantic, a particular dense and secure transatlantic network of high-speed communication had connected Europe and the Americas by 1900.”

circulation—with this hyper-mobility even being celebrated, which may seem somewhat surprising given the weight of forced migration—also makes one forget that the vast majority of people who inhabited the Atlantic world from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries never crossed the ocean at all. However, they were no less affected by the Atlantic dynamics than those who had experienced transatlantic migration firsthand. The conceptualization of the Atlantic world based on the sheer volume of connections and the degree of interaction perhaps causes Atlanticists to lose sight of what their main purpose should be: the redefinition and renegotiation of power relations and issues between individuals, groups, and socio-political formations in an interconnected world, driven by the expansionist ambitions of European and African political and business elites—worldwide in Western Europe and at the regional level in West Africa.

These divisions can also be found in the different perspectives of Native-American and African specialists. As reflected in Amy Turner Bushnell’s essay, scholars studying the Indians are without a doubt the most reticent toward Atlantic history, particularly because Native Americans are the only Atlantic players not to have participated in the mass migration, forced or free, that sparked the formation of the Atlantic world. Nonetheless, the Americas were no less a “New World” to them than to the Europeans and Africans that landed there: “Native People, of course, did not literally travel to this Indians’ New World, but the changes forced upon them were just as profound as if they had resettled on unknown shores.” The arrival of migrants from Europe and Africa led to many native migratory movements and the creation of new communities within the American territories but also to limited phenomena of transatlantic mobility between the Western Hemisphere and Europe. The editors of the Handbook of the Atlantic World thus put much emphasis on the fact that “the history of native societies and habitats through our period is, therefore, one of continuous change and adaptation rather... 


than termination.”31 Yet, some historians, remain convinced that continental history, rather than Atlantic history, is a much more appropriate means of reflecting the views of Native Americans, and the fact that during the early modern period much of (North) America remained, in practice, “Indian Country” or areas that were borderlands in which imperial rivalries allowed the indigenous people to maintain their sovereignty and exercise their agency.32 Daniel Richter and Troy Thompson demonstrate, however, that this would not have been possible without the existence of the Atlantic world by showing that, on the contrary, from the mid-eighteenth century “the collapse of European empires ... severed connections that had once guaranteed indigenous autonomy.”33

The Africanist perspective is somewhat different. David Eltis begins his essay on the Atlantic slave trade by emphasizing that, while Africa locates itself halfway between the Americas and Europe in terms of the impact of Atlantic dynamics,34 “yet if we shift the focus to changes in the nature and size of connections between the continents as opposed to changes within them, the most striking development between the 1640s and the 1770s relate to Africa, not Europe or the Americas.”35 Since the pioneering work of Philip Curtin in the late 1960s and the completion of the transnational database containing almost thirty-five thousand slaving voyages—thanks to which the forced transatlantic migrations of Africans are more well known than the voluntary migrations of Europeans—the breakthrough in slave-trade studies has in fact demonstrated that before 1820 around four Africans arrived to the Americas for each European, and about four out of every five females who traversed the Atlantic came from Africa.36 They therefore

played a fundamental role in the formation of new societies and cultures in the New World: “That the Americas before 1840 were more an extension of Africa than Europe is now a commonplace.”\textsuperscript{37} As Philip D. Morgan strongly summarizes, “in the early modern era, Africans were more important to the Atlantic world than the Atlantic world was to Africans”\textsuperscript{38}—which harks back, however, to the confusion of the Atlantic world with the Western Hemisphere. From one phenomenon—the slave trade—marked as it was by violence and destruction, thus emerged a creative force.\textsuperscript{39}

This reversal along with the comparisons between Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans in terms of connections or impact might seem surprising, but they translate the fact that Atlantic studies is driven by an obsession with demonstrating the agency of all Atlantic actors and not only the Europeans, without whom there would not be an Atlantic world. How does one write the history of colonization, the slave trade, and slavery without adopting the sole point of view of the “conquerors” and without minimizing the relations of domination? Responding to historiographies that had for a long time maintained a distinct Eurocentric bias, the tendency since the 1960s has been toward “revisionist” histories—to borrow a term that belongs to the American historiography of slavery—of which the principal paradigm involves the agency of “non-Europeans.” With Atlantic studies, there has been a shift from the history of European expansion to that of the encounter between Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans.\textsuperscript{40}

The term “encounter,” however, may be considered a euphemism. It allows one to avoid a certain teleological vision and provides clear evidence that colonial domination was neither immediately imposed, inevitable, nor complete and that the “winners” were not always only the Europeans but could, at any given time and depending on local circumstances, include the African and Native-American elite and peoples. However, the expression does to some extent minimize the European colonialist and imperialist project and suggests that the three populations somehow found themselves in a position of equality or played the same driving role in Atlantic dynamics. This perspective is still situated at the other end of the spectrum, always insisting more on the agency of the “colonized” at the expense


\textsuperscript{39} From this point of view, see Jean-Frédéric Schaub, “Violence in the Atlantic: Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries” in \textit{The Oxford Handbook of the Atlantic World, 1450-1850}, eds. Nicholas Canny and Philip Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 113-29. This interesting article presents a unique contribution to this volume because Schaub is the only author to insist on the process of destruction as opposed to that of creation and because he is one of the rare historians to take European societies into account. He emphasizes the simultaneous and correlative growth of violence on both sides of the Atlantic but without examining how relations became violent in Native-American and African cultures.

\textsuperscript{40} Canny and Morgan, “Introduction,” 2.
of colonial rule rather than considering it a project that was never fully realized and which demanded constant efforts to try to impose itself and analyzing all forms of domination and resistance as intrinsically linked phenomena. Paradoxically, by insisting on resistance, historians cannot pay attention to what did or did not depend on the colonial situation in the African and Native-American societies that were integrated or located on the fringes of European Atlantic empires, since the evolution of these societies was not always the result of their relations with Europeans.\footnote{On the notion of colonial situation, see the seminal article by Georges Balandier, “La situation coloniale : approche théorique,” Cahiers internationaux de sociologie 11 (1951) : 44-79.}

The notion of “encounter between Europeans, Africans, and Indians” could also lead one to ignore the fact that the conditions of the interactions between these three populations were not the same in space and time, and it therefore does not sufficiently contextualize and historicize these “encounters,” while simultaneously lending a culturalist inflection to the way in which they were designed and are understood. How long was the “encounter?” How long did individuals and groups remain strange\(\text{rs}\) to each other and when did they begin to live in a common world, even if power relations continued to maintain a distance between them? Similarly, it seems problematic to subsume the relations between, for example, African rulers and merchants and European traders in the slave trading outposts of West Africa and those between masters and slaves in colonial and slave societies in the Americas under the same expression of “encounter between Europeans and Africans.” Reducing people primarily to their own ethnic and cultural backgrounds cannot account for the complexity of the phenomena at work. While many historians now rightly insist on the fact that these are individuals—not political formations, societies or cultures—who meet and interact, these interpersonal encounters always take place in socio-political configurations and represent different degrees of a power struggle, which both transcend cultural and ethnic differences, particularly when they are reduced to oppositions between “Europeans,” “Africans,” and “Native Americans.” The macroscopic view imposed by the Atlantic scale can lead to deadlock if it is not systematically combined with micro-historical studies at the local scale based on a deconstruction of the categories born of the colonial rule that the Europeans tried to impose.\footnote{Lara Putnam, “To Study the Fragment/Whole: Microhistory and the Atlantic World,” Journal of Social History 39-3 (2006): 615-30; Rebecca J. Scott, “Small-Scale Dynamics of Large-Scale Processes,” American Historical Review 105-2 (2000): 472-79.} Thus, it seems necessary to continue to develop historiographical experimentation in order to write a more complex history of the first manifestations of globalization and its relationship to European colonialism and imperialism.
The Impossible Panoptic Vision of the Atlantic World

Morgan and Greene’s extremely comprehensive and nuanced introduction takes into account the limits of the Atlantic approach, the divisions that drive Atlantic studies and the difficulties faced by Atlanticists. They also propose very interesting directions for future research. The problem lies in the implementation of this program by Canny, Morgan, and their colleagues in *The Oxford Handbook of the Atlantic World*. This does not diminish the diligent work done by both publishers and the international group of forty contributing authors who span three or four continents across four centuries. The ambitious nature of the project and its approach, the wide variety of territories addressed, the historiographies used and the themes treated, the effort to reconcile and decompartmentalize regional or national historiographies, and the coherence of the book despite the large number of contributors all merit applause. However, structural choices regarding section and chapter divisions raise certain questions, as it is impossible to hold together all the threads of the Atlantic canvas. Since it is important to keep in mind what is gained and lost by adhering to the Atlantic approach, as Trevor Burnard rightly points out, a reflective and critical look at ways of practicing Atlantic history would equally prove useful. Given the great number of essays and their richness, it would be impossible to discuss each chapter in detail. They will be principally commented upon by looking at the question of the relationship between the part and the whole, this time within the work.

The structure of the book reflects the editors’ conception of the Atlantic world as “a complex system of trade, settlements and forced labour that linked the three continents across the vast sea.” The problem is that they demonstrate a greater interest in the commercial and imperial dimension controlled by the Europeans than the diasporic and laborious dimension considered from the perspective of Africans and Native Americans. While an entire section of Greene and Morgan’s work was already devoted to them, ten of the *Handbook’s* thirty-seven chapters concern the four national Atlantics, which are often confused with the empires of the different European powers or the revolutions and wars of independence that brought about the end of these Atlantic empires. Stuart Schwartz’s essay is interesting because the notion of an “Iberian Atlantic” serves to emphasize the multiple intersections between the Spanish and Portuguese Atlantic empires from the early fifteenth century to the separation of the Crowns of Spain and Portugal in 1640. The following article, written by Wim Klooster, covers the same period.

and insists on the role of private initiatives in this initial phase, as well as on the interpenetration of fishing enterprises, trade, and piracy of Northwest Europeans. For the subsequent period, other authors also make an effort to highlight that the British Atlantic, for example, included merchants who traded well beyond the borders of the British Empire or that a reconfigured French Atlantic survived the end of the French empire in America after the Seven Years War. Nonetheless, national Atlantics and empires are too often considered synonymous, the use of the term “Atlantic” instead of empire simply leads to not problematizing the notion of empire, especially that of Atlantic empire.

These multiple chapters on different national Atlantics or Atlantic revolutions can be accounted for by a desire to decrease focus on the British Atlantic, therefore providing more space for the Portuguese, Spanish, French, and, to a lesser extent, the Dutch Atlantic. It is also necessary to measure the advances represented by the development of a new historiography of, for example, the French Atlantic empire, as the historiographies on Canada, Louisiana, the Caribbean, and Guyana along with the slave-trading outposts on the West-African coast are still largely compartmentalized. However, each time that previously ignored regions,


48. No chapter is devoted specifically to the Dutch Atlantic, but the Dutch are included in the chapter by Wim Klooster on “The Northern European Atlantic World,” in the section covering the period from 1450-1650, and it is listed in a number of other essays. For an excellent article analyzing why historians pay so little attention to the Dutch Atlantic as well as the emergence and rapid collapse of a Dutch Atlantic empire under the leadership of the Dutch West India Company in the middle of the seventeenth century, see Benjamin Schmidt, “The Dutch Atlantic: From Provincialism to Globalism,” in Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal, eds. Jack P. Greene and Philip D. Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 163-87. The article also examines the following subjects: how the Dutch Atlantic was reconfigured with a weaker mercantilist and imperialist orientation and the simultaneous opportunity for Dutch expansion beyond the Atlantic world, both of which allow the relationships between Atlantic history, imperial history, and world history to be reconsidered.
such as Angola and Brazil in the case of the Portuguese Atlantic, are linked the authors call attention to the distinct characteristics of each national Atlantic. This results in the image of a much more diverse and fragmented Atlantic world, particularly for the period of 1650 and 1850, and runs counter to the general goal of the project to demonstrate a certain unity and coherence. This essential task is relegated to the third section of the volume entitled “Integration.”

Another consequence is the clear overrepresentation of Europe. The manner in which the contributors write about the various national Atlantics differs greatly. Some authors mention Native Americans and Africans alongside Europeans, while others focus exclusively on European settlers, as Joyce Chaplin does in her essay on the British Atlantic, which nonetheless proves to be an exciting addition because she suggests deconstructing the British Atlantic or British-Atlantic empire while examining the links between the English colonies and the British crown in 1707.49 In addition to these chapters, all three parts entitled “Emergence,” “Consolidation,” and “Disintegration” contain at least one essay on Africa and Africans and another on Native Americans. This conveys a desire to demonstrate equal interest in Europeans, Indians, and Africans. However, the result is that although all the authors highlight the variety of experiences between the different African or Native regions/territories and “nations” in these articles, Native Americans and Africans each appear as all-inclusive and undifferentiated categories in the chapter titles. Meanwhile, the specificity of the different European powers and nations is posited as a central and essential phenomenon.

Generally speaking, even though certain authors are very attentive to the differences between categories of analysis and categories of practice or the vernacular categories used by historical actors, the categories advanced by historians could have been further explored through a more reflexive and systematic analysis. This question is particularly relevant with regard to the categories developed to account for the mixing of populations, cultural exchanges, and the formation of new communities generated by encounters between Europeans, Native Americans, and Africans on both sides of the Atlantic. Do historians have to invent new terms at the risk of reifying and essentializing designated groups, thereby confusing identity and culture, or should they simply deconstruct the categories used by the actors themselves to think about these complex phenomena? In the Handbook, one finds both options. On the one hand, A. J. R. Russell-Wood evokes “some Portuguese, Luso-Brazilians, Africans, Luso-Africans, and Afro-Brazilians and Afro-Luso-Brazilians” in the same sentence without even trying to explain what is involved in this cascade of designations.50 On the other, Robin Law states: “the terminology

which historians have applied to these Europeanized elements in African societies is problematic. They have often been called ‘Afro-Europeans’ (or ‘Euroafricans’ and other variants), which captures their cultural hybridity, but is of course a retrospectively invented term, not one that they themselves used.”

The Africanist historian also implicitly refers to the term “Atlantic Creole,” coined by Ira Berlin to designate “those who by experience or by choice, as well as by birth, became part of a new culture that emerged along the Atlantic-littoral—in Africa, Europe, or the Americas—beginning in the 16th century.” This expression, currently in vogue among Atlanticists, creates confusion since the term “Creole” was employed by contemporary actors across a complex range of situations. Nonetheless, Canny and Morgan address it in their introduction. They argue that “whether local populations embraced or repudiated hybridity, it was a fact, and the emergence of creole populations throughout the Atlantic—however varied they were—was proof of commonality.” Yet it seems difficult to ignore how historical actors conceived of métissage in both its biological and cultural dimensions. Atlantic dynamics were characterized less by mixing and exchange than by the differences that the actors were continually seeking to recreate in order to justify their power over each other. It is precisely the phenomena of ethnicization and racialization that explain the emergence and construction of categories encompassing Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans during the early modern period with which Atlanticists somewhat paradoxically define their field. Indeed, the populations from Europe, Africa, and the Americas who “met” in the Atlantic world hardly thought of themselves as “European,” “African” or “Indian” before coming into contact with each other. These categories of identification only became truly meaningful in a context of confrontation, as Tamar Herzog demonstrates in her remarkable article dedicated to identities and processes of identification in the Atlantic world. Organized in three parts, the essay successively deconstructs categories of Europeans, Indians, and Africans in relation to all other categories of identification along ethnic, racial, religious or social orders, while taking into account the presence or lack thereof of each group on all three continents.

This article concludes the third part, which is certainly the most innovative of the volume because the chapters are thematically ordered and the authors seek to “think comparatively,” as they had been asked by the editors, by comparing different European populations as well as Europeans, Native Americans, and

Africans. Elizabeth Mancke’s stimulating essay on the (trans)formations of political entities exemplifies this approach. It presents a new typology of political communities (“diasporic, niche, and consolidating and integrative polities”) that enables it to take Europeans and “non-Europeans” into equal account and to offer another political history of the Atlantic world rather than focusing solely on the issue of constructing colonial and imperial states and the emergence of new nation states.56

These thematic chapters, however, raise some methodological problems. First, despite declared intentions, most of them present a more connected or global history rather than a true comparative history. As François-Joseph Ruggiu has clearly shown, “a writing that combines elements borrowed from different areas in the same descriptive movement is, in fact, no longer comparative history but it is the history of a meta-space that becomes the object of study.” Only the smaller scale, which allows national boundaries to be crossed, differentiates this type of history from national history. Transnational history therefore “looks like the synthetic or thematic history of a territory different from that of the nation state.” In contrast, comparative history involves simultaneously balancing the object, scale, and context, the latter serving as the explanatory variable. In the thematic chapters of the volume, the absence of systematic contextualization of the phenomena studied in different contact areas thus often leads to favoring description over explanation, which is, however, the ultimate goal of the comparative approach.57

Furthermore, the choice of an Atlantic scale does not always appear justified based on the object studied. This is the case, for example, in David Shields’s essay, which raises an innovative history of sensibilities and emotions.58 By examining each of the five senses, it appealingly shows how the first globalization of the world led to new sensory experiences and transformed feelings of pleasure and pain. It rightfully borrows its examples as much from Asia as Africa or the Americas but without questioning the specificity of the Atlantic experience. Why then include the expression “Atlantic world” in the essay title and such a chapter, as interesting as it may be, in a volume on the Atlantic world?

The question seems even more relevant since the subjects were selected at the expense of certain strictly “Atlantic” themes, such as slave systems and, more generally, the various forms of forced labor, even though the crucial issues of labor control and the formation of an international labor market were at the heart of Atlantic dynamics.59 Similarly, the racial question is, surprisingly, rarely at the

59. Of the two essays that mention the term slavery in their title, one is primarily dedicated to the slave trade and the other mainly to abolitionism, rather than the slave
center of the narrative, even if it appears here and there. Sylvia Frey has rightly pointed out that “the emergence of racial ideologies and racial orders is one of the great fault lines, perhaps the great fault line, in studies of Atlantic history. The study of racial orders and ideologies makes it possible to examine Atlantic history from a variety of different angles, a kind of intellectual compass that points in all directions—to Europe, to French, Spanish and British colonies on the North American mainland and to the British West Indies and the French and Spanish Antilles; to the body and sexual identities as a crucial component of racial ideologies; to the discourse of gender and race.”

Not only has the choice to give considerable weight to national Atlantics and Atlantic revolutions prevented multiplying the number of thematic essays, but it has also deprived the chapters focusing on territorial and geographical divisions from escaping the national and imperial European logics. Such articles would have much more obviously highlighted, for example, the fact that there was not one but two Atlantic slave trades that developed; that the indigenous experience differed greatly in Indian Country, that is to say in the territories over which they remained sovereign, in borderlands where neither Europeans nor Native Americans had the means to impose their domination, and within colonial societies themselves; or even to focus on areas where the empires specifically crossed and intermingled, as in the great Caribbean.

Nevertheless, the volume is marked more by an American-centered bias rather than a European-centered one. This reflects a general trend of Atlantic studies that was first developed by Americanists, as the American continent was the most transformed by Atlantic dynamics. It is therefore not surprising that the two alternatives to Atlantic history are continental history (of North America) and hemispheric history (of the Western Hemisphere), which do not directly concern Europe or Africa. In the book, this American-centered bias first appears in the systems themselves: Eltis, “Africa, Slavery, and the Slave Trade”; Christopher Leslie Brown, “Slavery and Antislavery, 1760-1820,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Atlantic World, 1450-1850*, eds. Nicholas Canny and Philip D. Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 602-17. Another chapter raises the questions of workforce control and the labor market from the crucial angle of migration: William O’Reilly, “ Movements of People in the Atlantic World, 1450-1850,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Atlantic World, 1450-1850*, eds. Nicholas Canny and Philip D. Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 305-23.


61. On the two slave trades, see Eltis, “Africa, Slavery, and the Slave Trade.” On the spatial dimension of the indigenous experience and interactions between Indians and Europeans, see Bushnell, “Indigenous America.”

chapters on the national Atlantics. While some mention slave trading outposts and colonial territories (mainly in Angola) in Africa, most focus on the American colonies and almost completely neglect the metropolitan societies.63 This is a far cry from the new imperial history, which holds that empires are not only political entities but also dynamic social and cultural formations, highlighting the “tensions of empire”64 or the dialectical relations and reciprocal influences between the metropolis and the colonies. As a result, a number of fine studies have emerged, which examine how metropolitan societies were transformed by their inclusion in imperial formations.65 This also differs from Morgan’s original approach in an important article comparing the slave systems within the British Empire, which maintained that metropolitan society was a “society with slaves” comparable to some American societies.66 This may seem all the more surprising given that young historians who list their research in both imperial and Atlantic studies have begun producing exciting work on metropolitan societies in an Atlantic perspective.67

Similarly, though Morgan and Greene proclaim in their introduction that “in the realm of Revolutionary ideas, the urgent requirement is to connect all sides of the Atlantic,”68 the Atlantic revolutions are not considered together in the same chapter. Aside from the American Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, the popular movements in Brazil, and those of the Hispanic world, not a single essay is dedicated to either the English69 or the French70 Revolutions. The emphasis is therefore

63. The chapters on the French Atlantic in both books present a rare exception: Dubois, “The French Atlantic”; Silvia Marzagalli, “The French Atlantic World.” It is perhaps explained by the ongoing debate in France on the integration of national history and colonial history.

64. Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, eds., Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).


70. However, David Geggus’s chapter on “The Atlantic Revolution in Atlantic Perspective” (in Canny and Morgan, 533-49) raises the question of the complex relations between the French and Haitian Revolutions.
not placed on Atlantic revolutions, but rather on American independence movements. That is perhaps why, despite Morgan’s obvious interest in the Caribbean region reflected in the introductions to both volumes,71 the centrality of the West Indies—particularly in the British and French empires—is not highlighted in the Handbook: aside from Santo Domingo/Haiti, the Caribbean obtained independence long after the continental colonies; indeed, some islands still remain under European sovereignty today.

The final section in which these chapters are inserted, entitled “Disintegration,” raises the highly debated question of the chronology of Atlantic history. The question is fundamental because the answer is closely tied to how the Atlantic world is conceptualized. Discussions focus on the terminal end. Atlanticists have long emphasized that the majority of American colonies gained independence before the end of the 1820s. Nevertheless, this choice is increasingly questioned. In the final essay of the book, Emma Rothschild retains the same date, but in relation to the climax of the Atlantic slave trade in 1829,72 while a growing number of historians defend the final measures to abolish slavery at the end of the nineteenth century.73 While all of these events relate to the end of colonial rule, they favor the view of either white elites or subalterns: on the one hand, they focus on the external dimension and the relationship between the metropolis and the colonies (the question of empire), and, on the other hand, the emphasis is on the internal dimension and the exploitation of non-European populations (the issue of slavery and, more generally, forced labor). They also both adopt an American-centered perspective: while these events of course had an impact on Africa and Europe, they concerned first and foremost the Americas. As Games has highlighted, it is in fact impossible to find an end date that is significant for the whole of the Atlantic World.74

It must be recognized that Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans found themselves holding very different positions and playing a variety of roles within the Atlantic world and that the Atlantic dynamics did not have the same consequences in Europe, Africa, and the Americas. It thus seems impossible to propose a single narrative for the whole Atlantic world without confusing it with its American shores. This proposal would amount to forcibly imposing a common narrative upon a totality that did not really exist, instead of highlighting how the histories of different parts of the Atlantic world were closely related without being confused. Rather than this comprehensive history of the Atlantic world, it seems necessary to write one or more histories connected within and beyond the Atlantic world. In so doing, the risk of reifying the Atlantic framework could be avoided. This approach would also allow practicing as much comparative history as transversal history or even varying scales of analysis according to the subject of study and thus reconciling Atlantic history with imperial, hemispheric or world histories.

Refusing to write a single history of the Atlantic world does not mean abandoning the Atlantic perspective. It is important to continue to practice Atlantic history because, as Subrahmaniam has emphasized in the context of the Portuguese and Spanish empires, “the Asian and Atlantic experiences of the Iberian empires, while not entirely separate and subject to interesting experiments of cross-fertilization, cannot be treated entirely in similar terms.” The specificity of the Atlantic experience rests on the conjunction of several substantial historical phenomena of which the cross-cutting effects could not be found anywhere else at the time: European imperialism, the massive and intertwined transatlantic migrations of Europeans and Africans (free in the first case and forced in the second), the formation of settler colonies, and the systematic use of all forms of forced labor. Accordingly, the “encounter” between Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans did not happen merely on the margins of European, African or Indian societies, but also gave rise to the formation of multiethnic societies in the “New World” where Europeans, Native Americans, and Africans lived together. This singular situation in turn had important effects on the societies of the “Old World.” The racialization of societies on both sides of the Atlantic and the construction of the colonial character of European empires between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries can only be understood by taking this singularity of the Atlantic experience into account.

76. This game of prepositions (of, around, within, beyond) is far from unusual. From the beginning, Atlanticists have discussed different types of Atlantic history in this way. See Games, “Atlantic History,” 745; Greene and Morgan, “Introduction,” 10.
When the illegal slave trade ceased and the last slave systems were abolished at the end of the nineteenth century, the circulations and connections within the Atlantic world did not stop. If indeed the metaphor of the game is suitable to describe the continual creation and destruction of communities described by John Elliott, what did come to an end was this three-band billiards game, which was already threatened in the nineteenth century by the arrival of an Asian workforce.79

While the relationships between Europe and the Americas, Africa and the Americas as well as Europe and Africa endured, there were no concurrent relationships between Europe, Africa, and the Americas that connected them inextricably. At the same time, exchange with and circulation throughout the rest of the world gained a new degree of importance.

Though this essay concludes with a “critical appraisal,” that is to say a critical evaluation of the structuring, of the Oxford Handbook of the Atlantic World by Nicholas Canny and Philip Morgan, on the same tone as the Atlantic History by Jack Greene and Philip Morgan, the intention is not to minimize the considerable work, the quality of the essays, and the innovative perspectives offered by these two volumes. The reflection and the discussions they are sure to generate are the sign of their undeniable interest and remarkable richness.

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