

3-2010

Comparing Atlantic Histories

Eliga H. Gould

University of New Hampshire, eliga.gould@unh.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.unh.edu/history_facpub



Part of the [European History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

"Comparing Atlantic Histories," composite review of Bernard Bailyn and Patricia L. Denault, eds., *Soundings in Atlantic History: Latent Structures and Intellectual Currents, 1500-1800*, Alison Games, *The Web of Empire: English Cosmopolitans in an Age of Expansion, 1560-1660*, and Jack P. Greene and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal*, in *Reviews in American History*, 38, no. 1 (March, 2010): 8-16.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Scholarship by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact nicole.hentz@unh.edu.



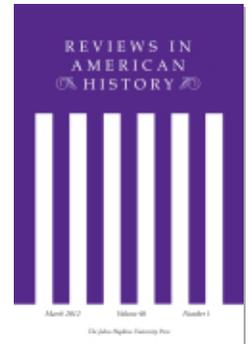
PROJECT MUSE®

Comparing Atlantic Histories

Eliga H. Gould

Reviews in American History, Volume 38, Number 1, March 2010, pp. 8-16 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/rah.0.0180



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/rah/summary/v038/38.1.gould.html>

COMPARING ATLANTIC HISTORIES

Eliga H. Gould

Bernard Bailyn and Patricia L. Denault, eds. *Soundings in Atlantic History: Latent Structures and Intellectual Currents, 1500–1830*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009. x + 640 pp. Illustrations, figures, maps, tables, notes, bibliography, and index. \$59.95.

Alison Games. *The Web of Empire: English Cosmopolitans in an Age of Expansion, 1560–1660*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. xii + 381 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, and index. \$35.00 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper).

Jack P. Greene and Phillip D. Morgan, eds. *Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. x + 371 pp. Notes and index. \$99.00 (cloth); \$21.95 (paper).

Several years ago, David Armitage proclaimed, slightly tongue-in-cheek, that “we are all Atlanticists now.” As Armitage would be the first to admit, the Atlantic label does not fit all Atlanticists equally well, nor would everyone who could be called an Atlanticist necessarily welcome being so designated.¹ Still, Atlantic history continues as an area of study. Perhaps the clearest indication of this vitality is the contention that has recently arisen over Atlantic history’s limits and divisions. Is Atlantic history inherently Euro-centric? Is it too wedded to national and imperial frameworks? In seeking to overcome a geography that relegates Africa to the margins and privileges histories of the north over histories of the south, are Atlantic historians better served by comparative or interconnected approaches?² And who, exactly, are the thinkers with the answers to such questions? Partha Chatterjee, Paul Gilroy, Marc Bloch, Alfred Crosby, Mary Louise Pratt, Homi Bhabha, and Carl Schmitt are among the many names that have been put forward of late. The sheer variety says it all.³

Given this extraordinary breadth and diversity, readers have good reason to welcome the three books under review here. As the two edited volumes, in particular, make clear, Atlantic history is increasingly well-established, becoming in the process “sufficiently mature and orderly,” as Peter Coclanis writes in Jack Greene and Philip Morgan’s volume, “to be allowed to sit with

the interpretive grown ups." As Cocolanis notes, "sitting with the grown ups is not necessarily a bad thing" (p. 337), yet Atlantic history is hardly ossified. Six years ago, when David Armitage first proposed the tripartite formulation from which this review's opening quote is taken, it made sense to give equal billing to comparative and transnational methods.⁴ From the evidence assembled here, the upper hand currently belongs to historians who stress connection, interaction, and entanglement, with comparative history occupying a distant second place.⁵ In their introduction, Greene and Morgan see the current emphasis on connected histories as a natural result of Atlantic history's "early stage of development" (p. 10), and Greene uses his own contribution to argue for a "hemispheric" approach that can provide a comparative alternative to such integrative tendencies. Given the speed with which things have changed over the last decade or so, it would be foolhardy to predict where the prevailing winds will be blowing ten years hence.

So what, exactly, is Atlantic history? According to Greene and Morgan, both of whom have ties to the Johns Hopkins Atlantic history program—in Greene's case, as one of the program's founders—Atlantic history is less a unified field than an "analytical construct," one that can be used to examine "some of the most important developments of the early modern era" (p. 3). As Joyce Chaplin makes clear in one of the volume's more intriguing chapters, there is nothing new about this usage. With roots that stretch back to the eighteenth century, if not earlier, the Atlantic has long been what Chaplin calls an "actors' category," by which she means a category that contemporaries themselves used (p. 35). From the outset, however, the Atlantic was an unstable concept. Indeed, the modern definition of the Atlantic Ocean as a single body of water—as opposed to two (or more) oceans—only gained widespread acceptance during the middle decades of the eighteenth century and was initially only used by the English (pp. 43–45). In affirming the usefulness of the Atlantic as an "explicit category of historical analysis," Atlantic historians are therefore necessarily embracing a subject that is not only "remarkably complex and diverse," as Greene and Morgan write in their introduction, but whose very name is, on a rather elemental level, anachronistic (pp. 3, 7–8). "There is no such thing as the Dutch Atlantic," cautions Benjamin Schmidt in his chapter on the Dutch Atlantic (p. 163). The same might well be said of the subject as a whole.

If Atlantic history is fluid and open-ended, the Greene and Morgan volume does a superb job of capturing the subject's parameters. The first part, entitled "New Atlantic Worlds," consists of chapters on the national Atlantic communities of Spain (Kenneth J. Andrien), Portugal (A. J. R. Russell-Wood), Britain (Trevor Burnard), France (Laurent Dubois), and the Netherlands (Benjamin Schmidt). Written by leading scholars in their respective fields, each demonstrates the benefits of moving beyond what Laurent Dubois, quoting the work of Gilles Havard and Cécile Vidal,⁶ calls the "strictures" of history based

on formal imperial narratives and embracing the "broader story" of peoples whose histories were often only tangentially connected to such narratives (p. 148). In the case of the Spanish, Portuguese, and British Atlantic worlds, where the authority of European governments and empires persisted, in some areas, well into the nineteenth century, parsing the difference between formal empire and informal community can be a difficult, though by no means impossible, task. There is, by contrast, no other way to study the far-flung consequences of the Haitian Revolution or the Acadian diaspora. As Schmidt writes of the Dutch, whose Atlantic empire was so loosely organized as to barely qualify as an empire, the story that really matters is not "'the Dutch' per se, let alone the WIC [the Dutch West India Company], but rather private merchants, mostly of Holland and Zeeland, working collaboratively with a range of colonial planters, Atlantic traders, chartered companies, and, by extension, English, French, and Spanish agents" (p. 177). Insofar as a Dutch Atlantic can be said to have actually existed—Schmidt clearly has doubts—it was a remarkably decentralized and cosmopolitan affair.

Although the Dutch Atlantic was an extreme example, varying degrees of autonomy, individual as well as provincial, characterized all of the European Atlantic communities. Speaking of Portuguese Angola and Brazil, John Russell-Wood notes the apparent ease with which "individuals created their own spaces" in both settings, often with only minimal deference to either the crown or the Catholic Church (p. 82). To a surprising degree, the same was true of the British and Spanish Atlantic worlds. Although the term "British Atlantic world" is sometimes used as a synonym for Britain's Atlantic empire, Trevor Burnard notes that historians of the British Atlantic often write from a self-consciously "anti-imperialist" standpoint, going to considerable lengths to differentiate the empire's diverse and far-flung peoples from the well-defined institutions and rulers to which many (though by no means all) of them professed allegiance (p. 130). Despite the emphasis that historians of Spanish America typically place on formal imperial structures, Spain's "New World," writes Kenneth Andrien, was similarly autonomous and polyglot. In religion, politics, and social behavior, African and Amerindian peoples retained considerably greater control over their own affairs than conventional top-down narratives would suggest. They accordingly produced "a constantly evolving mixture that was neither Spanish, nor indigenous, nor African" (p. 71).

Complementing these chapters on the main European Atlantic communities is a second section on the three "old worlds" that the early modern Atlantic knit together: indigenous America, Africa, and Europe. As is clear from the title of Amy Turner Bushnell's wide-ranging essay on native America, each of these chapters is, in different ways, about the "limits of the Atlantic world." In the Americas, writes Bushnell, these limits reflected the fact that the "areas of neo-European mastery . . . were small and slow-growing," so much so that

until the late nineteenth century, more than half of the hemisphere's habitable land was still under native control (p. 191). Bushnell could easily have said the same thing about Africa where, as Philip Morgan notes, most Europeans, including the Portuguese in Angola, "perched precariously on the shore" (p. 225). From Carla Rahn Phillips's chapter on Europe, it is evident that such limits were even present in the Old World, as the opening of vast new markets and territories to the west and south disproportionately enriched the nations and peoples on the continent's Atlantic littoral. Viewed from this perspective, the Atlantic world emerges as a far-flung cluster of neo-European "islands"—to use John Gillis's suggestive term⁷—one that affected some parts of Europe more directly than others and that never came close to subsuming all of Africa or native America. Speaking of the Americas at the end of the colonial era in 1825, Bushnell writes:

From an Atlantic perspective, the new settler republics and empires were the masters of all the space that mattered. A hemispheric perspective, however, reveals that from Brazil to Alaska and from Patagonia to Newfoundland, indigenous people held sway over an abundance of habitable land. Unbroken to the yoke of the Atlantic world, if willing to use what it had to offer, the autonomous nations beyond the frontiers continued to hunt, trade, fight, and make peace in revised standard versions of the old ways (p. 212).

To say that the Atlantic world's reach was limited, of course, is not to deny that its impact was profound. In the case of Africa, European merchants, acting through African intermediaries (both on the coast and in the near interior), shipped approximately ten million Africans to America between 1500 and 1820, or four times the number of Europeans who crossed the Atlantic during the same period. For this reason, Africans themselves played an important role—more so in some ways than Europeans—in shaping the Atlantic world, whether as agents in Africa of the trade that developed in slaves and European goods or as conveyors of African ways to America. No less important, Africans and their creole descendants in America were essential players, sometimes in their own right, in creating the enclaves of "European and African Atlantic-crossers" against which Bushnell sets her story of Indian survival (p. 212). As far as I can tell, Morgan refrains from using the slightly loaded term "African Atlantic" anywhere in his essay, but he leaves no doubt that the impact of Africa on the Atlantic was at least as consequential as the impact of the Atlantic on Africa.

Although the essays in the first two sections cover the wider subject of Atlantic history with skill and insight—rarely have I seen such a balanced, uniformly strong collection—what sets Greene and Morgan's volume apart from most competitors is the inclusion of four chapters in a final section on "Competing and Complementary Perspectives." Each author in this section

approaches the Atlantic paradigm from a critical standpoint. Without disputing Atlantic history's achievements—he is, after all, one of the volume's editors—Greene uses his essay to call for greater attention to comparative questions by adopting a “hemispheric perspective.” By this, Greene means an analytic that eschews the current Atlantic emphasis on “connections and interactivity” for one that is concerned with differences and similarities among colonial societies in North and South America (p. 312). Peter H. Wood has fewer problems with Atlantic history's integrative tendencies; however, taking a leaf from Daniel Richter's *Facing East from Indian Country*,⁸ he speculates on what American (and Atlantic) history might look like if it were organized not as an “eastern seaboard narrative” but from a “continental” vantage point situated somewhere out over the North Pacific (p. 279). The final two essays by Nicholas Canny and Peter Coclanis tackle the currently fashionable question of whether to replace Atlantic history with world history. Reiterating arguments that he has advanced elsewhere, Coclanis suggests that Atlantic history has become too self-contained and limiting, especially when it discourages historians from following connections into adjacent bodies of water and land masses. Canny, on the other hand, maintains that the Atlantic world between the 1490s and the 1820s was sufficiently “coherent and autonomous” vis-à-vis the world's other regions to merit being studied as a subject unto itself (p. 320). Despite these differences, both are in agreement, I think, in privileging approaches that stress connection over those based on comparison.

If the contributions in Greene and Morgan depict Atlantic history as a subject preeminently about integration, Alison Games's *Web of Empire* and the essays in Bernard Bailyn and Patricia Denault's *Soundings in Atlantic History* supply ample reason for why this should be so. Unlike Greene and Morgan, Bailyn makes no apology in his volume for Atlantic history's current emphasis on connectivity and entanglement, nor does he mince words in defending the subject from critics who would like to see a more global approach. In the introductory essay, he insists that Atlantic history deserves to be studied as a “distinct and cohesive subject” because of the unusually high degree of integration that characterized the basin's lands and waters between 1500 and 1820 (p. 1). Until true globalization began after the Napoleonic Wars, “East and West were fundamentally different” in this regard (p. 4). Though Bailyn drives this point home with a few comparative gestures toward the other “great regional entities” of South Asia and the Pacific, his main interest is in the economic, migratory, and cultural circuits that made the Atlantic a uniquely “coherent whole” (p.2). Of the volume's twelve chapters, the only one that could plausibly be described as an exercise in comparative history is Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra's thoughtful essay on English Puritan and Spanish Catholic “typology”—the Christian tradition of interpreting scripture through contemporary events, and vice versa—but even here the emphasis is on the

Atlantic as a “shared space in which peoples, commodities, and ideas circulated across porous imperial boundaries” (p. 264). Significantly, a recurring theme is what David Hancock, in the title to his contribution, calls “The Triumphs of Mercury” (p. 112). While an array of factors—political, religious, military, racial, administrative, migratory, and informational—helped bind the Atlantic together, none was more powerful than the self-interested ties of commerce.

Soundings in Atlantic History, which is based on a conference that Bailyn and his coeditor Patricia Denault organized for the Atlantic History Seminar at Harvard in 2007, does not aspire to be comprehensive in the same way as Greene and Morgan’s volume. Rather, as suggested by the nautical metaphor in the title, the goal is to explore a select group of “latent but revealing lines of coherence” (p. 3). In that vein, the volume contains essays on the African slave trade (Stephen Behrendt); the slave-trading kingdoms of Kongo and Dahomey (Linda Heywood and John Thornton); the Pennsylvania merchant and man of parts George Frey (David Hancock); inter-imperial smuggling (Wim Klooster); the religious networks established, respectively, by the Jesuits (J. Gabriel Martínez-Serna) and dissenting Protestants (Rosalind Beiler); Spanish and English typology (Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra); the transatlantic circulation of Enlightenment ideas (Neil Safier) and scientific knowledge (Londa Schiebinger); the provincial metropolises of Boston (Mark A. Peterson) and Buenos Aires (Beatriz Dávila); and, finally, the “Atlantic worlds” of David Hume (Emma Rothschild). In a number of essays, the narrower focus enables authors to explore their subjects in considerable depth and detail. The paired essays by Martínez-Serna and Beiler on religious networks, Safier and Schiebinger on the circulation of ideas, and Peterson and Dávila on Boston and Buenos Aires are especially satisfying in this regard, as is Emma Rothschild’s wonderful thought piece on the multifaceted ways in which the Atlantic world “surrounded” Hume’s Scotland (p. 435). As Rothschild notes, Hume never crossed the Atlantic—he only briefly lived outside Britain—yet he had a profound sense of “connectedness” to England’s other cultural provinces (p. 434). In ways both figurative and real, Hume’s native Scotland was as much a product of Britain’s Atlantic empire as the American colonies where he briefly considered emigrating.

Taken together, the volumes edited by Bailyn and Denault and Greene and Morgan highlight the themes that are currently dominant in Atlantic history: the importance of informal connections over formal institutions, the resilience of indigenous peoples in the face of European encroachment, the autonomy of creole forms in both North and South America, and the apparently irresistible spread of new ideas and patterns of belief everywhere. As Alison Games shows, such phenomena were by no means limited to the lands and waters of the Atlantic basin. Based on her first book, *Migration and the Origins of the Atlantic World* (1999), Games has been a player in Atlantic history for over a

decade; more recently, though, she has positioned herself with the subject's critics, calling for Atlantic historians to adopt a more global, "transoceanic" approach.⁹ In *The Web of Empire*, she makes a convincing case for the benefits of applying this second approach to the first hundred years of England's expansion. Following an English and Scottish cohort of merchants, adventurers, travelers, soldiers, ministers, and diplomats wherever they went—India, Madagascar, Japan, Ireland, both Americas, and Istanbul are among the many places that feature in her book—Games argues that England's expansion between 1560 and 1660 produced a profoundly decentralized empire, one that was "weak" and "vulnerable" and that therefore forced the English to be far more "cosmopolitan" and open to adaptation in their encounters with others than would later be the case (pp. 6–11). Although the settlement of Jamestown in 1607 falls right in the middle of the book's timeframe, Games also maintains that America and the Atlantic were but one part of England's overseas empire during its first century, and not always the most important part.

Given the criticism that Games has voiced elsewhere, some readers may be surprised that *The Web of Empire* marks less of a move "beyond Atlantic history" than initially seems to be the case.¹⁰ Although Games is persuasive about the significance of widely scattered places and events in shaping the English empire, her book reminds us that the only realistic way to get to any of these places was to sail through the waters of the Atlantic. England's may have been a global empire, but one could just as easily think of it as an "extra-Atlantic" empire. Indeed, by placing Spain at the center of England's imperial imaginary, Games indirectly affirms the centrality of the American lands and waters that Spain briefly but effectively dominated. Of the various explanations for why the cash-strapped subjects of Elizabeth and James VI/I would be willing to incur the time and expense of founding a global empire when the Americas were so much easier to reach, the most plausible one seems to be that, during the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the cheaper option was unavailable. It is surely no accident that as soon as Spain's ability to exclude other powers from North America and the Caribbean began to wane, England's "globetrotters" rushed in to fill the void. As Bailyn reminds historians who would like to push Atlantic history in a global direction, the Atlantic world "was never entirely autonomous, never wholly discrete, self-enclosed, or isolated from the rest of the globe" (p. 3). Because of the region's porous boundaries, it should come as no surprise to find the Atlantic occupying the vital center of the imperial web that Games so expertly delineates.

Despite these caveats—if that is what they are—there can be no question that *The Web of Empire* is a remarkable and important contribution to early American history and the history of England's overseas expansion, to say nothing of Atlantic and world history. Because the English presence in Madagascar, say,

or Japan proved so fleeting, historians often depict the widely dispersed events that appear in her book as a series of false starts and experiments—interesting, fascinating and important, to be sure, but also scattershot and disjointed. By projecting Atlantic history's predilection for connection and interactivity onto a global canvass, Games suggests that this cosmopolitan moment was actually a moment of integration and, as the presence of the singular "web" in the title suggests, unity. "The British Empire ultimately spanned the world," writes Games in one of the many well-turned phrases with which her book abounds, "but first the world made the empire" (p. 298). Although she does not use the words entanglement or entangled anywhere in the book, she easily could have, for that is what a web usually is.

To judge from the evidence gathered here, Atlantic history is clearly a well-established, increasingly mature area of inquiry—bad news for people who think that virtue is only to be found among *enfants terribles* and insurgents, but a most welcome development in terms of the resources that are now available for the study of long-neglected questions and topics. Without Atlantic history's overarching rubric, whether as a subject of inquiry in its own right or as a point of departure from which to venture in new directions, it is hard to imagine the current scholarly interest in subjects such as the African dimensions of American slavery, the American presence in Hume's Scotland, or the global implications of Europe's expansion. No less important, Atlantic history remains multi-vocal and protean, making it resistant to the sorts of interpretive orthodoxies that usually foreshadow decline. For Greene and Morgan, Atlantic history is one of several possible analytical constructs, each as valid as the others, while Bailyn sees Atlantic history in quasi-exceptionalist terms as the study of a "distinct" region where the "culture of modernity" originated (pp. 42–43). And the subject's divisions do not end there. As a number of us have recently suggested, one area demanding particular attention concerns the linkages that entangled the Atlantic world's various empires and communities with each other, including, especially, entanglements between North and South America and between the Americas and Africa, yet there is little agreement about whether to approach such linkages from a comparative or connected standpoint.¹¹ None of this should come as a surprise. Far from being a source of weakness, such differences are surely a sign of vitality, and they suggest that Atlantic history will remain a going concern for some time to come.

Eliga H. Gould teaches history at the University of New Hampshire. His new book, *An Unfinished Peace: The American Revolution and the Legal Transformation of the Atlantic*, will appear next year.

1. David Armitage, "Three Concepts of Atlantic History," in *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800*, ed. David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick (2002), 11.

2. On the current challenges of Atlantic history, see Alison Games, "Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities," *American Historical Review* 111 (2006): 741–57; Eliga H. Gould, "Entangled Histories, Entangled Worlds: The English-Speaking Atlantic as a Spanish Periphery," *American Historical Review* 112 (2007): 764–86; James H. Sweet, "Mistaken Identities? Olaudah Equiano, Domingos Álvares, and the Methodological Challenges of Studying the African Diaspora," *American Historical Review* 114 (2009): 279–306.

3. Because of his association with the Third Reich, Schmitt's is the most surprising name on this list. For an especially insightful discussion of Schmitt's work and its relationship to the history of Europe's expansion, see Jonathan Elmer, *On Lingered and Being Last: Race and Sovereignty in the New World* (2008), 12–13, 100–112, 144–45, 152, 214, 220, 231–33.

4. In Armitage's three-part schema, circum-Atlantic history is transnational in approach, trans-Atlantic is comparative, and cis-Atlantic is transnational *and* comparative. Armitage, "Three Concepts of Atlantic History," 17–18, 21. A second edition of the volume containing Armitage's essay (Armitage and Braddick, eds., *British Atlantic World*) appeared earlier.

5. For some of the reasons, see Gould, "Entangled Histories, Entangled Worlds," 764–86.

6. Gilles Havard and Cécile Vidal, *Histoire de L'Amérique Française* (2003).

7. John R. Gillis, *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World* (2004).

8. Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (2001).

9. Alison Games, *Migration and the Origins of the English Atlantic World* (1999); Games, "Atlantic History," 741–57.

10. The claim is less conspicuous in the book than it is in a preview of the book that appeared three years ago. Alison Games, "Beyond the Atlantic: English Globetrotters and Transoceanic Connections," *William and Mary Quarterly* 63 (2006): 675–92.

11. See the articles cited in note 2 above.