

## BOOK REVIEWS

Laurent Dubois and Julius S. Scott, eds., *Origins of the Black Atlantic* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

Since the past twenty years or so, the Black Atlantic world has become an effervescent field of research with a transdisciplinary reach stretching across history, cultural studies, literature, and so on. In the field of history specifically, scholars have sought to reintroduce the ideas and experiences of people of African descent at the core of the historiographical tradition of the Atlantic world. Published in Routledge's book series "Rewriting Histories," *Origins of the Black Atlantic* is another major intervention of that sort. To be sure, the two editors, Laurent Dubois, specialist of the French Atlantic, and Julius S. Scott, renowned in Atlantic history for his ground-breaking doctoral dissertation "The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Era of the Haitian Revolution" (Duke University, 1986), explicitly situate the book within the "Atlantic approach" as pioneered by both, albeit differently, C. L. R. James (1938) and Paul Gilroy (1993); this is an approach that seeks "to comprehend how the enslaved and formerly enslaved imagined, reformulated, and transformed the political and legal contexts in which they lived" (1).

I should mention at the outset that *Origins of the Black Atlantic* is not a collection of original works. But this does not make it any less interesting. Far from it! Indeed, Dubois and Scott have brought together fourteen contributions (from scholarly articles to book chapters), of which most can now be considered cardinals in the field of Atlantic history (such as, for instance, pieces by David Barry Gaspar, Ira Berlin, Julius S. Scott, John K. Thornton, and Eric Williams).

The collection is divided into four parts. In Part One, the chapters grapple with the issue of mobility and connection among people of African descent, who were not isolated but highly mobile agents, conscious of themselves and of broader contexts of international relations. In Chapter 2, for example, Richard Sheridan demonstrates how the leaders of the Jamaican slave insurrection scare of 1776 were "informed by the progress of the American Revolution and may have been influenced to revolt by its ideological content as well as the opportunity afforded by the removal of a military unit" (29). The most fascinating piece of the section is certainly Julius Scott's chapter, which portrays how "[t]he movement of ships and seamen not only offered opportunities for developing skills or escaping, but provided the medium of long-distance communication and allowed interested Afro-Americans to follow developments in other parts of the world" (69). This chapter is particularly interesting for it maps out a maritime "masterless underground," crucial for inter-island cooperation among slaves during the Age of Revolution.

Part Two seeks to illuminate the broader context of the Black Atlantic from biographical point of views. Here, Ira Berlin's famous piece on the making of Atlantic creoles stands out for its analytical breakthrough and, incidentally, it grounds the two other chapters of the section in a common perspective. This is especially true in Chapter 7, where Emily Clark and Virginia Meacham Gould explore how the intergenerational transmission of Roman Catholicism among free Black women in New Orleans from 1727 to 1852 resulted in a "religious creolization," characterized by "the expansion and formalization of the leadership role of black women in religious instruction and benevolence" (161).

The three chapters that constitute Part Three look at the Black Atlantic from an Africanist perspective. The focus here is on how African cultural traditions shaped, as much as they were shaped by, Atlantic-significant, local contexts, such as the role of Islamic tradition in the 1835 Muslim uprising in Bahia, studied by Joao José Reis, and the practice of oath-taking among the Guianese and Jamaican Maroons, studied by Kenneth Bilby.

Part Four nicely brings together the threads of the book into the theme of "Insurrection and Emancipation in the Atlantic." Matt Childs's chapter analyzes the connection between the 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba and the Haitian Revolution, and shows how Cuban slaves and free Blacks utilized the image of the slave revolution to catalyze their movement and legitimate their actions against the colonial elite. Exploring the role of rumours not only as means of communication but also as agent practices, Steven Hahn's essay shows how during the 1865 Christmas insurrection in the American South "white landowners turned rumours of land redistribution into harbingers of insurrection so as to reassert their local prerogatives..." whereas "...freedpeople used the rumours to bolster their own bargaining positions" (352). In other words: rumours should be seen as part of class struggle.

The merit of *Origins of the Black Atlantic* lies in the second life it gives to contributions which, now grouped together, generate a strong and coherent comparative historical account on Black people in the Atlantic world. Were there reservations about the book, they would be more about what is missing in it than what it offers. For example, it would have been welcomed to have a section of primary accounts exposing how Black people themselves viewed the Atlantic world. People like Toussaint L'Ouverture, Olaudah Equiano, David Walker, and so many others, left written testimonies that, in and of themselves, were first-hand fragments of the origins of that Black Atlantic. But beyond this small criticism, we have to applaud *Origins of the Black Atlantic* for what it already is: a classic book of Atlantic history. It should be classified in an "Atlantic history," section "from below," next to, say, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, but not too far from the "Black Radical Thought" section, where W.E.B. Du Bois,

Richard Wright, Claudia Jones, Cedric Robinson, and Robin D.G. Kelley, to name only a few, would have certainly much to say on the origins of the Black Atlantic.

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**Lyman L. Johnson, *Workshop of Revolution: Plebeian Buenos Aires and the Atlantic World, 1776-1810* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).**

*Workshop of Revolution* concludes with notable success Johnson's lengthy work on the late Spanish colonial artisans of Buenos Aires. In this book, he reconstructs the lives of many artisans and of more widely defined plebeian groups. He traces the attempts of plebeians to organise guilds and analyses the failure of guilds compared with those elsewhere. He studies the urban labour market enumerating the multiple ways slaves were utilised in a non-plantation economy. He addresses many other cognate topics touching on popular consumption and standards of living: diet, prices of consumer goods, housing and rents, monetary wages and real wages. The book divides into two parts; the first addresses the period 1776-1805, and the second the run-up to the independence struggle from the British military occupation of June-August 1806 to the aftermath of the revolution of 25 May 1810. The first part of the book deals with the politics of guild formation and presents most of the data on popular living standards. The second deals principally with the expansion of public sector spending through the formation and consolidation of the urban militia. Johnson argues that the populace played a central political role in the revolutionary period but he also addresses the activities of various political leaders. He credits the plebeians with an autonomous role in resisting the British in 1806, in repulsing the second British attack in mid-1807, and in triggering the May Revolution of 1810 itself. He notes the dashing of popular aspirations in late 1811 when an attempted mutiny by the plebeian dominated Patricios Regiment was quashed.

Striking novelties of the book include Johnson's analysis of housing in Buenos Aires and his work on slaves. He depicts an urban environment in which extraordinarily high rents prevailed. He provides many illustrations of the hiring out of labour by small slave owners and the ubiquitous functions of slaves as imports of slaves climbed steeply from the 1790s. Johnson has collected impressive data on prices and wages and digested a mass of archival material to create fascinating anecdotes on people of high and low social status. I learned a great deal about the purchase and hiring out of slaves and about the rumoured slave revolt of 1795; I learned more too about the relations between critical figures of the revolutionary era like the Francophile Santiago Liniers and his nemesis Martín de Álzaga representing pro-Spanish interests. The book is the most