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Introduction: Africa in the Atlantic World

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Atlantic history has become an influential scholarly paradigm over the past few decades, especially for historians of the early modern period. Its many advocates claim that the idea of an "Atlantic world" enables us to break down boundaries, connecting what might otherwise be seen as disparate regions or isolated historical subjects, and encouraging the study of interactions around the ocean beyond the confines of a single nation or empire.[1] While globally-minded critics have in turn accused Atlanticists of constructing barriers between this ocean and the rest of the world, the circuits of communication and exchange which were forged across the Atlantic—and their lasting consequences—remain an engaging subject for historians.[2] In spite of its limitations, Atlantic history demands that historians seek out and understand these connections and relationships. It is therefore a uniting theme, but one which encompasses a broad range of topics, as demonstrated by the essays collected here.

Africa was an important part of the Atlantic world, a world in large part defined by the actions (and especially the movement and the labour) of African people. Indeed, the transatlantic slave trade has galvanised scholars and is probably one of the most heavily researched topics in this field.[3] Yet the continent and its peoples have, in many respects, been left outside the remit of much Atlantic and indeed global history, and numerous questions remain about the encounters between Africans, Americans and Europeans in the early modern world. Excellent studies by scholars such as John Thornton, David Northup, and others have convincingly shown that African people were not passive victims of or respondents to European expansion, and the importance of African agency is now widely recognised.[4] However, Africa has frequently been overlooked by Atlanticists who do not work specifically on that continent. This situation can be demonstrated in a simplistic way by using JSTOR's Data for Research tool. Of those articles included on JSTOR in the subject "History" published since 1960, and featuring the word "Atlantic," around two thirds also mention America or some derivative term, and roughly the same number include Europe. Just 19 per cent of the total refer to Africa. As Figure 1 shows, matters have improved marginally since the mid-nineties, and this measure is in any case imprecise and not restricted to writings on Atlantic history. Nevertheless, it hints towards a discrepancy in the degree to which these three continents are generally associated with

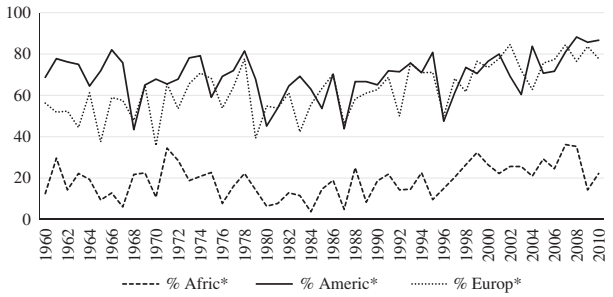

Figure 1. Percentages of items on JSTOR in subject "History," featuring "Atlantic" and continental terms, 1960-2010.

the ocean that lies between them.[5] Scholars have made great progress in understanding Atlantic Africans on their own terms, yet there is still work to do to place Africa within the broader stories of Atlantic history, and to reflect upon how these stories might change as a result.

It is this challenge that inspired this special edition. In 2012, during the Oceanic and Maritime History seminar series at Cambridge, it became clear that, while the seminar attracted significant interest around topics of cultural encounter and exchange in the Indian and Atlantic Ocean worlds, our understanding of the role of Africa in our subjects was limited. With this critique in mind, we organised an international conference for the following summer, with speakers from five continents, papers covering four centuries, and a considerable amount of new research. We would like to thank the Centre of African Studies, the Faculty of History, and The Trevelyan Fund at the University of Cambridge for their generous support of this event. Alongside a number of early career researchers presenting their work, we were joined by senior academics, and the discussions that took place have since been developed into the essays presented here. We are grateful to all of the participants of the conference for their input, to our peer reviewers, and to the journal editors at *Itinerario* for their gracious support.

This special edition is not intended as a "textbook" or a comprehensive analysis of Africa and the Atlantic world as a topic. It is a platform to present new research, and the articles in this collection have been written by historians who, generally, have specialities elsewhere than African history. Therefore, while some articles aim to investigate the perspectives of African people, in others Africa is approached from a range of historiographical traditions. What unites these articles is that they try in various ways to appreciate the place of Africa in the early modern world and to explore some examples of the two-way exchanges between Africans and others which took place throughout the Atlantic. We hope that this collection will contribute to the ground where Atlantic and African histories can intersect.

The picture that emerges can be divided into three main themes, with two articles dedicated to each, arranged in a broadly chronological order. First, the question of

the African experience of European expansion is explored, in particular concerning how Europeans were forced to adapt to African customs, laws and expectations. Michal Tymowski's "African perceptions of Europeans in the early period of Portuguese expeditions to West Africa" takes advantage of African sources, especially material culture, to explore Atlantic encounters from the African viewpoint, analysing the judgements and opinions reached by Africans about Europeans, and discussing the general traits that can be found across diverse regions in West Africa. In a similar vein, Judith Spicksley's article "Contested enslavement: the Portuguese in Angola and the problem of debt, c. 1600–1800" examines how Europeans developed practices that brought together African and European perceptions of the law and how African engagement with Europeans ideas affected slaving practices. Considering the role of slavery in the Atlantic world and investigating how slavery and the value of human life was conceived during exchanges between Europeans and Africans, Spicksley presents an interesting new perspective on these discussions.

In the second section, European conceptions of Africa and Africans are considered, alongside the place of Africa within the developing global networks of European expansion. Edmond Smith's "'Canaanising Madagascar': Africa in the English imperial imagination, 1635–1650" examines Africa as both a barrier and bridge between the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds. As well as assessing English perspectives of Africa, and how parts of Africa were conceived in relation to other continents and oceans, this article questions how thinking about Africa in English writings aligned with contemporary discussions about English interaction with other parts of the world. While Smith's article considers Africa within a global framework, Richard Blakemore's "West Africa in the British Atlantic: trade, violence, and empire in the 1640s" looks at how increasingly regular contacts between English seafarers and trading communities in West Africa can be seen as a formative element in the development of what would become an identifiable British Atlantic world. By tracing two case studies from the English High Court of Admiralty this article provides a detailed discussion of specific moments of negotiation and conflict, as well as considering their long-term implications.

Finally, the third section examines the experience of African travellers and migrants and how Africans' identities developed in an Atlantic environment of crossover, exchange, and movement. Ryan Hanley's article, "The Royal Slave: nobility, diplomacy and the "African Prince" in Britain, 1748–1752," introduces the case of William Ansah Sessarakoo – the son of a wealthy African trader who was enslaved and brought to Britain before returning to West Africa. The article examines the political and cultural circumstances of his journey and what they reveal about the European perception of African identity as well as how this episode affected Euro-African diplomacy. The final article of the collection, Jennifer Nelson's "Apprentices to freedom: Atlantic histories of the *Africanos livres* in mid-nineteenth century Rio de Janeiro," questions how African identities were influenced through Atlantic migrations and how communities of Africans developed both within and outside slavery in the nineteenth century. By examining how the Atlantic world

informed and shaped the lives and identities of a specific group of Africans travelling across it, this third section helps us to understand how African participation in the networks that spread across the Atlantic world was certainly not limited to the African coast.

Throughout these articles, which showcase some of the new work being undertaken by historians, a wide variety of sources have been used to approach the question of Africa's position within the Atlantic world from varying perspectives. They seek to understand the place of Africa within the history of global interconnection, the role of Africans in the development of the Atlantic world, and the significance of Africa for other inhabitants of that world. Methodologically diverse, the articles in this collection demonstrate the great variety of research still to be done upon the history of Africa in the Atlantic world and how cultural, economic, political and social histories of the region can be brought together. This special edition seeks, above all else, to present some of the avenues available for exploring this vitally important and vast topic. On a more personal level, we hope that we have risen to the challenge presented to us in 2012 and that our own research has developed in scope and sophistication as a consequence.

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Notes

1 For historiographical reflections on Atlantic history, see Pietschmann, "Introduction"; Games, "Atlantic history"; O'Reilly, "Genealogies"; Bailyn, *Atlantic History*; Bailyn, "Introduction"; Morgan and Greene, "Introduction"; Canny and Morgan, "Introduction"; Cañizares-Esguerra and Breen, "Hybrid Atlantics"; Coffman and Leonard, "Atlantic World."

2 Coclanis, "*Drang Nach Osten*"; Cañizares-Esguerra, "Some Caveats"; Games, "Atlantic Constraints"; Coclanis, "Atlantic World"; Games, "Beyond the Atlantic"; Cañizares-Esguerra and Seeman, "Introduction"; Coclanis, "Beyond Atlantic History."

3 For recent overviews of the vast literature on the Atlantic slave trade, see Eltis and Richardson, "New Assessment"; Benjamin, *Atlantic World*, chs 6–7; Richardson, "Cultures of Exchange"; Eltis, "Africa, Slavery"; Burnard, "Atlantic Slave Trade"; Walvin, *Crossings*.

4 Thornton, *Africa and Africans*; Law and Mann, "West Africa"; Northrup, *Africa's Discovery*; Northrup, "West Africans"; Inikori, "Africa and the Globalization Process"; Chambers, "Black Atlantic"; Yerxa, ed., *Recent Themes*; Morgan, "Africa and the Atlantic"; Richardson, "Cultures of Exchange"; Law, "Africa in the Atlantic"; Northrup, "Africans, Early European Contacts"; Nafafé, "African Voice."

5 dfr.jstor.org, accessed 10 July 2015. This is based upon four searches restricted to the subject "History," for the years 1960–2014, and for the terms Atlantic; Atlantic Afric*; Atlantic Americ*; and Atlantic Europ*.