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Atlantic Lives: A Comparative Approach to Early America

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Atlantic Lives: A Comparative Approach to Early America

Description
Atlantic Lives offers insight into the lived experiences of a range of actors in the early modern Atlantic World. Organized thematically, each chapter features primary source selections from a variety of non-traditional sources, including travel narratives from West Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America. The fully-revised and expanded second edition goes into even greater depth in exploring the diverse roles and experiences of women, Native Americans, and Africans, as well as the critical theme of emerging capitalism and New World slavery. New chapters also address captivity experiences, intercultural religious encounters, and interracial sexuality and marriage.With classroom-focused discussion questions and suggested additional readings accompanying each chapter, *Atlantic Lives* provides students with a wide-ranging introduction to the many voices and identities that comprised the Atlantic World.

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Early America, History, Sources

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Introduction: What Is Atlantic History?

By anyone’s accounting, David Georgia led a remarkable life. He was born of African parents in Essex County, Virginia, in the mid-eighteenth century and spent his early years working as a plantation slave. As a young man, he ran away and found work in South Carolina and then Georgia. When his freedom seemed in jeopardy, he escaped into the Georgia backcountry, only to be captured by Creek Indians, who reenslaved him. He worked for several months for a Creek chief who spoke some English and arranged to sell George back to his original master, 800 miles away in Virginia. Georgia fled again before that transaction could be completed but ended up working as a slave for a master on the Savannah River. Here he was introduced to Christianity by another slave, and after his conversion, became a Baptist minister.

When the British invaded Georgia during the American Revolution, George again sought his freedom. Now married and the father of two children, he abandoned his patriot master and sought refuge for himself and his family among the British. George survived the siege of Savannah and a case of smallpox, and at the end of the war, he accepted a British offer for free passage to Nova Scotia, along with other white and black loyalist refugees. In Nova Scotia, he became a leader of the black community, despite the persecution he faced from whites for preaching before interracial audiences.

His travels were not over yet. After enduring several years of hard times in Nova Scotia, George decided to move again, this time to Africa. In 1792, he joined about a thousand other black loyalists in founding the colony of Sierra Leone. As conceived by British antislavery advocates, Sierra Leone would be populated by former slaves from British colonies, who would bring Christianity and European civilization to Africa and help end the slave trade there. George continued to work as a minister in Sierra Leone, often mediating when resentments flared between his fellow settlers and British agents. He died there in 1810.

What are we to make of David George? During his life he moved between freedom and slavery not once, but several times. He participated in two colonizing ventures on opposite sides of the Atlantic: Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone. At various times he lived among Indians, American slaves and slaveholders, British soldiers, and West Africans. He pursued liberty during the American Revolution, but not in a fashion typically associated with that conflict; he became a loyalist rather than a patriot and preserved his freedom by leaving the United States instead of remaining there. His travels took him hundreds, and then thousands, of miles from his place of birth. Over all that time and distance, how did he come to identify himself? Was he an African who lived in America, or an American who lived in Africa? In a brief autobiographical narrative he composed in the 1790s, George expressed consciousness of his race, noting his parents’ African origins and his introduction to Christianity by a “man of my own color,” but his most insistent self-identification was as a Christian. After his conversion, he sought the company of

other Baptists, black and white, and he worked closely with whites to organize the black loyalist emigration to Sierra Leone.

David George's life defied the conventions by which historians typically tell the story of early America. He was not an immigrant who became American by adopting the New World as his homeland. Neither was he a slave who gained freedom by taking up arms in the patriot cause during the War of Independence. He was a slave who converted to Christianity and learned to read and write the English language, but who also abandoned America to live in the country of his ancestors. George's story is too expansive and too contradictory to be told only in the context of the thirteen colonies that became the United States. It demands a much larger geographic arena for its action and a framework for its themes and events that can connect and explain his experiences in the American South, Nova Scotia, and Sierra Leone.

Atlantic history provides that framework. Focusing on the period between 1450 and 1830—from the earliest European encounters with sub-Saharan Africa to the demise of the Atlantic Slave Trade—Atlantic history examines the ramifications of long-distance contact, exchange, and conflict between human populations in Europe, Africa, and the Americas. While the term *Atlantic history* has only recently gained widespread currency in academic conferences, graduate programs, and college catalogues, historians have been pursuing it in various ways for quite some time. The first scholars to define it as a field of inquiry were interested in the transatlantic revolutionary movement of the late eighteenth century. They explored ideological links between the French Revolution and the North and South American colonial wars of independence. Some of the most prolific practitioners of Atlantic history have been scholars who recognized the need to move beyond traditional geographic boundaries when writing about the Atlantic Slave Trade, which forcibly dispersed Africans throughout the Americas and the Caribbean. Attempting to survey the demographic, economic, and cultural impact of this migration on both sides of the Atlantic required evaluating data from the Old World as well as the New and from a variety of regions within the Western Hemisphere. Uncovering the economics that governed the Atlantic Slave Trade often meant dealing with commodities rather than nations; studying the rise of an international plantation complex that produced sugar, tobacco, coffee, and other cash crops for world markets.

Likewise, those historians who have investigated the biological and ecological consequences of contact between the Old World and the New have often found national borders irrelevant to their purposes. Microbes, plants, and animals moved into new environments oblivious to man-made boundaries, and their introduction to an ecosystem could wreak havoc regardless of the political or religious differences that divided human societies. When historians have tried to measure the impact of such biological exchange on human populations, they have often done so on an international or intercontinental scale. Human migrations are another topic fit for analysis on a transatlantic scale. What historical forces created the displaced peoples who moved between the Old World and the New? How did the experience of forced migration differ from that of voluntary migration? What were the varieties of bound or indentured labor that could bring a person across the Atlantic? What effect did such migrations have on the indigenous populations who encountered them?

Some of these questions have already been addressed in the familiar narratives of European colonization of the Americas. Each European colonial power produced its own national heroes for this story, from Spain's conquistadors to England's Pilgrims to France's missionaries. These

nationalist narratives, however, fall short in several respects. All emphasize the exceptional quality of their subjects' experiences, be it their superior bravery, piety, or humanity. In doing so, they also downplay the consistencies and similarities between these stories that would allow for comparative analysis across national or ethnic borders. Nationalist narratives tend to leave many groups involved in colonization out of the story; they hide or obscure the roles played by stateless people in building the connections between the Old World and the New. For example, many of the sailors whose labor made transatlantic shipping possible were people of mixed ethnicity or no fixed nationality, who lived their lives in flux between two or more places that they might have called home. Pirates, slaves, and fur traders lived and worked among hybrid populations that combined African, European, and Native American identities. Such communities did not fit easily into national categories, and they often ignored whatever claims distant powers made to dominion over them, yet their importance in shaping the Atlantic World is undeniable.

What distinguishes Atlantic history from previous narratives is its transnational quality. Rather than splitting the story of the colonization of the Americas into discreet national units that would have made sense to only a fraction of the people involved, it asks questions that are best answered by taking a comparative perspective on the evidence. How did the Native American response to European missionaries differ in various regions of the Americas, and what circumstances explain those differences? Why did some New World slave societies create large biracial populations that occupied a middling social status between freedom and slavery while others did not? Did the colonial wars of independence originate from common grievances against European empires? If so, why were the results of those wars so different? Contemplating these questions reduces the emphasis on exceptionalism that has shaped nationalist narratives of early America and helps us recapture the connections and overlaps that contemporaries would have recognized between these topics.

Let us return to the story of David George. His life illustrates several of the topics that make up the backbone of Atlantic history: slavery, the plantation economy, migrations, revolutions. More significantly, he illustrates this notion of transnationality, of the movement of peoples and their identities across geographic, cultural, and political borders. George's life was marked by his ability to reinvent himself. He ran away from slavery no fewer than three times to assume the life of a free man. He became a part of the loyalist exodus to Nova Scotia by choosing to align himself with the British cause in the War of Independence. He thought of himself as a Christian and as an African, and that identity led him to emigrate to Sierra Leone. His life reflected a willing, even restless, movement between social and political categories that at first seemed hard and fast. The history of the Atlantic World is the story of David George writ large, of intercontinental exchanges and conflicts between human societies set in motion by the collision of Europe, Africa, and the Americas.

In a way, it is not surprising that historians have latched onto the concept of Atlantic history in recent years. There is much about the Atlantic World that seemed to anticipate the issues and problems of our own. Just as the Atlantic World was made possible by technologies and migrations that broke down previous barriers to human contact and exchange, so too our modern world has been reshaped by an explosion of global relationships. The earth's population is more integrated than ever before. Intercontinental travel occurs with an ease and regularity that few would have expected even fifty years ago. International corporations make products, from cars to clothes to films, which are aimed as much at international audiences as local ones. The Internet

and World Wide Web have a global reach and impact, but so do AIDS, greenhouse emissions, and overpopulation. Just as the generations that followed Columbus had to deal with a world that was suddenly much larger than they had previously thought, so too must we deal with a world that is shrinking before our eyes, bringing formerly isolated peoples into contact and conflict with each other, turning local and regional problems into international ones. We should not expect the study of Atlantic history to provide solutions to our current crises, but it can help us understand how human societies in the past have created and dealt with problems of similar global dimensions.

Suggested Readings

David George's autobiography can be found in John Rippon, *The Baptist Annual Register*, *including Sketches of the State of Religion Among Different Denominations of Good Men at Home and Abroad*(London, 1793–1802), 473–484. For more on the black loyalists and the Sierra Leone colony, see Ellen G. Wilson, *The Loyal Blacks* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1976). For essays about the challenges and promises of Atlantic history, see Alison Games, "Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities," *American Historical Review* 111 (June 2006): 741-57; David Armitage, "Three Concepts of Atlantic History," in David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, editors, *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 11-29; and Nicholas Canny, "Writing Atlantic History; or, Reconfiguring the History of Colonial British America," *Journal of American History* 86 (1999): 1093-1114. Other works that are useful for conceptualizing Atlantic history include Jack P. Greene and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Atlantic History: A Critical Reappraisal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005); and John K. Thornton, *A Cultural History of the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2012).