# EXPLORING THE ATLANTIC WORLD: AN EXPERIMENT IN TEACHING AN EMERGING PARADIGM

Annette Laing
Georgia Southern University

## Why the Atlantic World?

"The Atlantic World" is an emerging perspective in early American history, one that blends nicely with contemporary interest in globalization.[1] This field is an exploration of connections that formed among Africa, Europe, and the Americas between c. 1500 and c. 1800, not only of the political and economic links engendered by colonization, but also the ecological, social, and cultural impacts of initial contact and subsequent interconnections. At the same time, scholars are exploring comparative history within the region, particularly through seminal topics such as gender and religion. Historians thus far have found the paradigm stimulating. For example, the model offers hope of rescuing English history from critics who accuse it of insularity and African history from those who would continue to ignore that vast continent's active role in world history. Yet it is also a conceptualization whose implications are only beginning to be worked out by European, African, and American historians.

While rising interest in the Atlantic World encouraged me to offer a class dealing with the subject, the course actually originated in my own investment as an historian in transatlantic issues. My research has focused primarily on religion, and specifically on the relationship between Anglican missionaries and their white parishioners in British America during the first half of the eighteenth century. Initially, I conceived of my scholarship within the model that Bernard Bailyn and others had developed for the British Atlantic, one that emphasized the influence of the metropolitan hub (that is, London) on the imperial periphery (in other words, the mainland British American colonies).[2] At first, my work occupied a fairly narrow corridor from Britain to the area that eventually would become the United States, ignoring continental Europe, Latin America, Africa, and even the nearby British West Indies. In 1997, however, this insularity began to be eroded. Encouraged by my colleague Cathy Skidmore-Hess, the resident African historian at Georgia Southern University, I expanded my research on Anglican missionaries to include a discussion of their relationship with Africans in the eighteenth-century South Carolina Low Country. The conventional wisdom that Africans had rejected Anglican Christianity made rather less sense when I learned that many Africans who were imported into early South Carolina hailed from the Kingdom of Kongo, where Catholic beliefs and practices had long before gained wide acceptance. In 1998, eager to learn more about African history, I attended "Roots: The

[1]H-Atlantic at http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~atlantic, a H-Net Listserv focusing on the Atlantic World was set up in June 2001, in response to growing scholarly interest and activity in Atlantic World studies.

[2]For example, see Bernard Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Strangers Within the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

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African Background of American Culture Through the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade," a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute for College Teachers at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities in Charlottesville. The Institute's lecturers stressed the utility of understanding that Africans were not merely victims in the Atlantic World, but full participants in shaping it.

Early American historians, perhaps most of all, benefit from the Atlantic World perspective. Colonial history has suffered (in the eyes of the public and perhaps other Americanists, if not in those of its practitioners) from a stodgy image, tied to visions of Pilgrims wearing belt buckles on their hats and stern white-wigged Founding Fathers waving quill pens. When undergraduates casually inquire about my field of specialization, the words "colonial America," or even the slightly euphemistic "early America," tend to elicit more polite feigning of interest than expressions of enthusiasm. Their interest was piqued, however, when I mentioned that I was mulling over the idea of a course focusing on "The Atlantic World." The only problem, I realized as I sat down to draft a syllabus, was what that meant in practice.

While the idea of teaching a course grounded in the Atlantic World was intriguing, I was as much intimidated as excited by the prospect. Would it be a narrowly topical course, focusing perhaps on religion, and, if so, would it either bring the innovative aspects of the paradigm to the fore or give students a larger sense of the connections of every aspect of life within the Atlantic World? Would it focus on comparative histories within the Atlantic World, or on the connections that created it? How would students with little or no background in any of the national traditions of history cope without the reassuring framework of a chronological national narrative? From the beginning, however, I was conscious of my commitment to a pedagogical as well as a scholarly goal: I wanted to offer undergraduates the same excitement that I experienced for the first time in graduate school, by stepping off the treadmill of unfolding narrative punctuated by exams, and presenting a subject not so much as a story to be told, as a theme to be explored. This has always struck me as an especially urgent goal at a large state university serving a large traditionally aged student body, where students not long graduated from high school might be forgiven for assuming that the acquisition of facts is the primary goal of education, and that upper-level history courses are the sole province of history majors. The course and the flyers advertising it were aimed explicitly at students of all class levels and majors, and eventually attracted several students from other majors, including International Studies and Anthropology.

In devising the course, I decided upon what seemed to me the riskiest but also the most interesting approach. My course was titled simply "The Atlantic World." It was not a lecture course, but a seminar, in which students would discuss readings at almost every session. The focus would be on defining its subject—in effect, within the parameters set by the readings, students would be invited to develop their own creative syntheses and a collective (and individual) conception of the new paradigm and its significance to their thinking about past and present. We would do so as a class in our twice-weekly discussions, and as individuals in written assignments. The course would

not attempt to be comprehensive, but rather would sample sub-themes through which we explored developing connections within the Atlantic World. I emphasized to my students that the process was the important thing; that the course's goal was to have them think for themselves about historical themes that have a direct relevance in this era of globalization, while anchoring their opinions in the assigned texts. I pushed students to reference the umbrella theme of the Atlantic world as much as possible in their comments and—especially—in their writings.

The emergent nature of the field was both a blessing and a curse in selecting topics (or, as I termed them in the syllabus, "units," in an effort to impose at least a semblance of order on the spaghetti strands of the themes). On the one hand, I had great freedom to explore subjects that I found interesting, and that I anticipated that students would too. On the other, I was concerned that, unless I selected the units carefully, the course would be utterly incoherent. The themes that emerged were (1) The Formation of the Atlantic World, (2) The Atlantic World and the Slave Trade, (3) Intercultural Contact and Conceptions of Conversion, (4) Consumption, and (5) Revolutionary Connections.

Although I wanted readings and discussions to give students a sense of the broad sweep of the impact of the rise of the Atlantic World, I most especially wanted them to gain a sophisticated understanding of the experiences and active agency of people throughout the region. Consequently, I conceived of each unit as moving from the general to the specific or, as I presented it to the students, as a camera zooming in. The readings limited my ability to follow an identical format for each unit, but in general we began with a reading that dealt broadly with the subject and then moved to a discussion of it within a particular region or nation. We ended each unit by studying what I termed biography, but which was prosopography, or group biography, when relevant and accessible biographies focusing on a single person proved either unsatisfactory or nonexistent. Altogether, I assigned 32 articles and chapters, as well as three books. This was a challenging reading load for students at a comprehensive regional university, many of whom hold down part-time jobs while attending classes full time, and whose academic abilities vary widely. I was nonetheless confident that most could be persuaded to read the majority of the assignments.

We began with several readings dealing broadly with the Atlantic World, including Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power*, which served as a useful (albeit rather challenging) introduction to the course, having the value of highly complex and theoretical arguments grounded in the wonderfully mundane subject of sugar.[3] Our discussion of sugar, which was produced in the New World by enslaved Africans and consumed in the Old World (increasingly by the proliferating industrial proletariat), led the class to consider the roles of increased material consumption and the exploitation of

[3]Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking Press, 1995).

labor in the expanding economy of the Atlantic World. The book thus provided both the focus for specific study and an introductory overview of the larger themes of the course. Although students grumbled about the density and length of Mintz's arguments, they referred repeatedly to the book and its themes throughout the course.

**Two Sample Units:**

**(1) The Atlantic Slave Trade**

I decided to take an unusual (and potentially controversial) tack by exploring the Atlantic slave trade using West Africa not only as a starting point but also as the main focus. African historians often are frustrated by the reluctance of American historians to discuss African agency (as opposed to victimhood) in the Atlantic World. The problem, of course, is that such agency included involvement in the slave trade. The reluctance is understandable: A lack of training in African history has, I suspect, caused American historians to fear that they will be unable to handle discussions of the "They did it too, so how can they blame us?" variety. It seems to me that the only effective solution to this quandary is to tackle it directly, without hesitation, and to give students the opportunity to understand how and why Africans, like Europeans, became (and remained) involved in the selling of people across the Atlantic.

We began the unit with an excerpt from African historian Paul Lovejoy's *Transformation in Slavery*, which not only gave a concise and useful explanation of the origins and nature of slavery in West and West Central Africa, but also suggested a working definition of slavery.[4] This led to interesting class discussion on what was—and was not—slavery and whether comparing traditional domestic slavery in West Africa with Atlantic World plantation slavery was useful or even valid. The discussion also focused on the frequently overlooked fact that Africa is not a country, but a continent: Those who sold slaves were not selling "each other" but rather prisoners of war, criminals, and political prisoners. It was then that the conversation took a particularly interesting turn: How were criminals defined? Was the enslavement and deportation of people justifiable just because they were prisoners of war? Such questions expanded our discussions of the economic exploitation of the powerless by those with power (and those who aspired to it) as a central component of the Atlantic World. Subsequent readings also gave evidence of the impact of the Atlantic trade on societies in West and West Central Africa, including on politics and culture. Among these readings was Robin Law and Kristin Mann's fascinating study of the connections between the Slave Coast and Brazil that included discussion of former slaves who returned to West Africa from the New World and became slave traders.[5]

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[4]Paul Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), xii–22.

[5]Robin Law and Kristin Mann, "West Africa in the Atlantic Community: The Case of the Slave Coast,"

The biography section dealt with two specific cases that allowed us to examine both slave traders and slaves. One introduced the Signares of Senegal, African women who used their profits from slave-trading to enhance their own attractiveness and thus power, while the other focused on Olaudah Equiano, an obvious choice for the course. This was my best experience ever of teaching Equiano's autobiography. The students were deeply engaged by the story of how Equiano unshackled himself from slavery by harnessing Christianity and the commercial opportunities of the Atlantic World into which he was thrust. One student later commented: "It helped to link the various socio-economic aspects of the Atlantic World together in a very thorough manner." Equiano was also unshackled from national histories—none of which he fits comfortably—and helped form a useful segue from our intensive discussion of West Africa to our next unit dealing with cultural conversion. The students found Equiano's cultural chameleonism absorbing and thought-provoking.

What I enjoyed most about this unit was that it made great strides in convincing students that Africans were—and are—people with histories as diverse and complex as those of any other continent. Most of the students who took this class would never have considered studying African history, and they had had only the most limited contact with the subject in the world history survey. The unit worked well in introducing them to West African history and proved to me that, despite the ambitious sweep of this course, its structure, focusing on a small set of topics, and using readings to move from broad overview to specific regional examples and finally to individual people, promoted students' deeper understanding of subjects and their significance than I had ever observed in more traditionally taught courses.

**(2) Intercultural Contact and Conceptions of Conversion**

In this unit, which was the longest of the course, we considered the nature of cultural, and particularly religious, "conversion" within the Atlantic World through several different cases. While our "stage" for the unit on the slave trade had been West Africa, our main "stage" for this discussion was North America. We focused especially on European efforts to convert both Native Americans and Africans to Christianity. Looking at attempts to proselytize Indians, for example, we began with the view from Italy with an essay by Italian scholar Luca Codignola on the Vatican's perspective on the conversion of North American Indians. We considered the particular problems of directing an extensive missionary enterprise in an age of poor communications and initial encounters with Indian peoples and beliefs. Our focus then shifted across the Atlantic to the actual experiences of Catholic missionaries in Canada. Watching *Black Robe* breathed life into the themes and subjects we were discussing.[6] In the biography

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*William and Mary Quarterly* 56 (April 1999): 307–34.

[6]*Black Robe* (1991), 101 min. Available on DVD ($19.98) and VHS ($5 to $18.98, depending on the source).

section, we looked at Native Americans who adopted Christianity, in this case Indians living in eighteenth-century Martha's Vineyard, and explored how they adapted it to their own cultural requirements. The students were struck by the similarity to African adaptations of Christianity in the Kingdom of Kongo, and we reflected on how, contrary to prevailing wisdom, religious "syncretism" was also very much a part of popular religion among Europeans. Finally, we examined another type of conversion, that of English settlers in North America to Native American cultures. These two themes were amply showcased in John Demos's *The Unredeemed Captive*, the complex story of the kidnaping of a young English girl, the daughter of a Massachusetts minister, in the early eighteenth century, and her subsequent adoption of an Indian identity.[7] This had the added advantage of depicting events from the French and Indian points of view as well as from the English, thus reiterating our theme of multiple perspectives. Although the students found the book tough reading at times, several cited their exposure to the idea of "white Indians" as one of their most enjoyable experiences in the course.

**Assignments**

There were no in-class exams. Seventy percent of the grade derived from take-home essay assignments. Four of these were short (two to three-page) response papers, in which students wrote about specific reading assignments before these were discussed in class. They were encouraged to identify specific ideas in the reading, to describe how these enhanced their understanding of both the Atlantic World theme and the unit sub-theme, and to explain what questions the readings raised in their minds. The three longer papers (five to six pages each) were grand, open-ended questions about unit themes. One, for example, asked students what the readings revealed about the nature of conversion in the Atlantic World. Another, which was an option for the final essay, asked them to write about what they understood to be the most important themes and significances of the rise of the Atlantic World. Given the scope of the course, and unused to constructing their own syntheses, the students approached these long essays with considerable trepidation. I encouraged them to submit rough drafts and allowed those who had encountered difficulties to rewrite the first essay. Almost all came to understand that, given the emerging nature of the paradigm and its scope, it would have been rather artificial for me to have handed them a packaged synthesis. Even more importantly, they came to appreciate that they learned most when they learned it for themselves.

A few weeks from the end of the term, I attended a workshop at the Atlantic History Seminar at Harvard University, "Gender Issues in Atlantic History, 1500–1800: Sources and Interpretations." My students were delighted to learn that many of the themes and subjects we had discussed in class surfaced during the discussions in Cambridge: It seemed to give them a sense of participating in a shared intellectual

[7]John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America* (New York: Knopf, 1994).

enterprise, rather than as simply conceiving of themselves as passive and unimportant consumers of knowledge.

**Student Responses to the Course**

Twelve of the thirteen students in "The Atlantic World" completed the university's evaluation form, and eight responded to my request to write an extensive evaluation, which was held in confidence by the department secretary until after the submission of grades. Among the twelve who completed the university's quantitative evaluation, there was general agreement that this course had been challenging, both intellectually and in terms of the amount of work required. Asked about the workload, ten responded that it was either "much more" or "more" than other courses of similar credit value. Two responded that it was about the same. Nine said that they had put "more" or "much more" effort into the course than into others of a similar value, while only one admitted putting in less. Nine said that they had been intellectually challenged "more" or "much more" by this course, while three thought the challenge was about the same as that of other courses.

I had wondered how students would respond when asked, "How much did you learn in this course?" given the course's emphasis on exploring issues rather than the mastery of facts. Eight thought they had learned "more" or "much more," three thought "about the same," and only one said "less" (I was relieved to see that the response had not been "much less").

In the open-ended portion of the official evaluations, students lauded what one described as "the open no lecture style of the course. It gave students the chance to ask questions, and/or feed off of what other students' thoughts were." Another remarked that I "explained what we read, but let us come to our own conclusions about the things we discussed." Several expressed appreciation of the all-essay, no-test format: "This helped us to explore our understanding of the material and to express our own conceived opinions."

The responses to the written evaluations that I requested of the students were especially revealing about the students' reactions to the content of the course. The unit that they agreed they enjoyed most was "Conversion," a fascinating subject for students living in the Bible Belt. "I especially enjoyed the unit on conversion," one student wrote, "mostly because I learned so much about the true nature and degree of conversion, particularly between the Europeans and the Native Americans." Several also mentioned "Consumption" as a favorite unit. One wrote: "Discovering why my diet is the way it is was very fascinating. It also interested me to see the lengths people would go to satisfy their appetites."

Asked about how the course affected the ways in which they thought about history, student responses included the following comments: "This course has given me a broader concept of the social, political, and economic factors that shaped the way a global community developed.... My grasp of the state of international affairs throughout

this time period has been greatly increased as I can now recognize and appreciate the motivations and goals that tied the Atlantic World together."

"This course has broadened my view on the title of Atlantic World. It helped [me] to think of it as more than just America and Europe, which is the conventional way of thinking. The studying of Africa was especially good at getting this point across."

"History during this time makes much more sense now because traditionally the classes do not touch on this material. This class has made several connections and answered many questions about this time period."

"It explains more of why institutions and cultures were able to spread more widely ... beyond country borders. I also learned more about Africa's role in this time period."

"This course has shown me the views, not just of Europeans and Americans, but of the cultures that they interacted with, and why colonization was so important."

In both evaluations, students praised the course for its emphasis on critical thinking: "The course really challenged me to think." "The material provoked critical thinking on the subject matter." "I enjoyed learning about issues that I've never even thought about." "Thanks for making me think! It is really refreshing to have a class where you have to dig, think, and search to find possible answers.... This has been the most refreshing history class I've taken."

**Conclusion**

"The Atlantic World" succeeded in its primary goals: First, virtually every student ended the course with a good (and in several cases, very good) understanding of the nature and significance of the rise of the Atlantic World. They were aware that this understanding was shaped by the readings they were assigned, but they were also cognizant of the extent to which their interaction with and discussion of the readings allowed them to create their own syntheses. Students often questioned the "hub" and "periphery" model of Atlantic history: Most strikingly, the readings revealed how Indians and Africans selectively adopted European ideas and tools and made them their own. Similarly, the students enjoyed reading about how the Atlantic World and its non-European inhabitants influenced the lives of European people. Most of all, they saw the rise of the Atlantic World, whether conceived of in economic, social, or cultural terms, as the product of interaction between different peoples, and not simply the product of European expansion. Second, the readings enhanced students' understanding of modern globalization and its cultural and social impact. All but one agreed that the course was highly relevant to their comprehension of the present.

There are several improvements that I wish to implement in future versions of the course. First, I will provide advance discussion questions for every set of readings, along with short statements of introduction. The students needed this sort of guidance for some readings more than others, but they were less apprehensive when they had these tools available to them for an assignment. I will also occasionally break the class into small discussion groups; although I am not convinced this would necessarily prove

advantageous to discussion, I recognize that varying the class format can help avoid it falling into a rut. I am interested in using more primary sources and biographies: The students very much enjoyed Equiano and also a selection from the diary of Dr. Alexander Hamilton, offering an eighteenth-century American travel account that shows clearly the growing links between consumption and rising gentility. The largest question for the future, perhaps, is whether I will continue to teach such a comprehensive course. I suggested to the students that I might instead focus on one or two themes. They insisted, however, that they liked the smorgasbord approach, because it gave them a much better sense of the meaning and extent of the impact of the rise of the Atlantic World than they would have gained in focusing on a specific aspect of it. Moreover, I appreciated the diversity of the students who were attracted to the larger theme, and noted that many of them might not have been attracted to a more narrowly defined course. Last but not least, I will reduce the number of readings based on North America, and expand the course's coverage of Europe and Latin America.

**Selected Resources**

**Books and Articles**

I have found the following readings especially successful in the course.

Allison, Robert J., ed., *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 1995).

Bolster, W. Jeffrey, "An Inner Diaspora: Black Sailors Making Selves," in Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, and Fredrika J. Teute, eds., *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). This provides illuminating context to Equiano's life, showing how black sailors served as agents of news and change throughout the Atlantic World.

Breslaw, Elaine, "A Perilous Climb to Social Eminence: Dr. Alexander Hamilton and His Creditors," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 92 (1997): 433–55.

Bridenbaugh, Carl, ed., *A Gentleman's Progress: The Itinerarium of Dr. Alexander Hamilton, 1744* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948). A selection from Hamilton's diary, used in combination with Breslaw's article, helped to illustrate the growing importance of material objects and gentility to the emerging gentry of the Atlantic World.

Brooks, George, "The Signares: Entrepreneurial African Women," in Robert O. Collins, ed., *Problems in African History: The Precolonial Centuries* (New York: Markus Wiener Publishing, Inc., 1993), 213–21.

Codignola, Luca, "The Holy See and the Conversion of the Indians in French and British North America, 1486–1760," in Karen O. Kupperman, ed., *America in European Consciousness, 1493–1750* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Pres, 1995), 195–242.

Demos, John, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America* (New York: Knopf, 1994).
Law, Robin and Kristin Mann, "West Africa in the Atlantic Community: The Case of the Slave Coast," *William and Mary Quarterly* 56 (April 1999): 307-34.
Lovejoy, Paul, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), xii-22.
Mintz, Sidney, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking Press, 1995).
Thornton, John, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). A wonderful corrective to Eurocentric conceptions of the Atlantic World, this book argues convincingly and knowledgeably for the active agency of Africans.

**Websites**

**International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World, 1500-1800**:
http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~atlantic/
This center at Harvard University is developing several online resources for the study of the Atlantic World. While much is under construction, preliminary bibliographies are currently available. Its workshops offer the opportunity for all interested faculty and graduate students to discuss aspects of the Atlantic World theme with leading scholars.

**The Roots Institute Home Page:** http://cti.itc.virginia.edu/~roots/site/home.html
This page was constructed by the NEH Institute, "Roots: The African Background to American Culture Through the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade," held at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities in 1998. The most useful links, including the Institute's reading list, may be found at http://cti.itc.virginia.edu/~roots/seminar/pedagogy/

**Syllabus for Erik Seeman's graduate course: "Culture and Contact: The Atlantic World, 1400-1800":** http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~seeman/534syllabus.html
Seeman, who teaches at SUNY Buffalo, offers a pioneering graduate-level course. His detailed syllabus offers an extensive list of readings, several of which I used for my own course.

**H-Atlantic:** This H-Net listserv, which has operated since mid-2001, is for those interested in the scholarship of the Atlantic World. It draws a diverse membership in terms of both geography and emphasis. For subscription information and archives, see http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~atlantic

**Videos**

**Wonders of the African World with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.: Episode 3: The Slave Kingdoms (PBS) website:** http://www.pbs.org/wonders/

This provocative and entertaining program, part history and part travelogue, allowed students to get a better sense of the geography of West Africa as they read about it. The program also stimulated much discussion about Africa and the slave trade, as well as about Americans' understanding of African history.

**Black Robe (1991) 101 min.** Available on DVD (List Price: $19.98) and VHS (at time of writing prices ranged from $5 to $18.98 online). Based on Canadian author Brian Moore's novel of the same name, this is one of the finest films yet produced about early America. The film looks mostly through the eyes of a young priest traveling to revive a mission among the Hurons in the early seventeenth century. His encounters with the peoples and the landscape of North America reshape his understanding of the world and his own religion.

**A Son of Africa: The Slave Narrative of Olaudah Equiano (1996).** Available from California Newsreel, 149 9th Street, San Francisco, CA 94103, (415) 621-6196, http://www.newsreel.org. This BBC-produced film based on the life of Olaudah Equiano has the advantage of brevity (it lasts only 30 minutes), so that it can be discussed in class on the same day that it is shown. Dealing with Equiano as a figure in British history, it features short interviews with several British historians, interspersed with well-produced dramatized vignettes of episodes from Equiano's life. Several of the incidents depicted were composites, and some of the interpretations were questionable, but such problems only created more discussion among the students who had, of course, read the book.