

# Commentary: Why the Transatlantic?

Ahmed Foggie  
Humboldt State University

SPANNING FORTY-ONE MILLION SQUARE MILES of the earth's surface and connecting four continents, the Atlantic Ocean houses the origins of our current global culture. Within its depths lie legacies of nightmarish atrocities, traces of great human ambitions, and the echoes of enlightened ideas. Traverses back and forth across this giant pool, the epicenter of the so-called "Age of Exploration," resulted in unprecedented exchanges of humans, ideas and ideologies, goods and gods, technologies and diseases. The manifold consequences of these transatlantic interactions reverberate with us today. As evidence, one need look no further than the Black Lives Matter movement, which emphatically reminds us that the current economies in the Americas are founded on the labor of enslaved Africans. Financial interlinkages across the Atlantic, founded and strengthened through waves of European colonization and imperialism, continue to structure the global economy in ways that uphold the dominance of countries in Western Europe and North America over societies in Africa, the Caribbean, and Middle and South America. New and hybrid cultural forms, from food to fashion and music, arose from transatlantic interactions, subsequently becoming global culture. In short, study of the transatlantic as a *historic geographic region* can lead to critical insight into complex social and cultural dynamics that we grapple with today.

The purpose of this essay is to offer a glimpse at the Transatlantic World's history, shedding light on events that birthed our modern society, which in turn might help us to understand the specters of disease, civil turmoil, racism, and economic downturn confronting us today. These are not unprecedented events. Humanity continues to grapple with these problems, seemingly captive to historical processes that gave rise to the Transatlantic World. Insight into the transatlantic—including how we might think about it as a geographic region—may help stimulate some of the forward progress we could use at this point in history.

The term *transatlantic* is ostensibly redundant in a world where Atlantic studies exist. Kenyon Zimmer, in his essay "Transatlantic History: Locating and Naming an Emergent Field," defines transatlantic history as an umbrella which includes Atlantic studies but has no chronological end point" (Zimmer 2013, 3). However, the traditional notions of the Atlantic, a space of new

and unprecedented interactions, ascribe the notorious year of 1492 as its beginning. After setting sail from Palos de Fronterra, Spain, Christopher Columbus made first contact with the Taino tribe in today's San Salvador. This initial interaction and the events that followed created a system that exchanged ideas, people, and commodities across the Atlantic Ocean. These exchanges led to revolutions, the establishment of new states, and the rise of capitalism as the world's dominant economic system.

Europe's emergence from out of the so-called "Dark Age" coincided with the construction of this Atlantic system. Furthermore, the Europeans' ability to exploit the resources in the New World allowed them to dominate their rivals to the east. European empires formed through colonies across the Atlantic, dominating and oppressing populations to such extent that it laid the foundation for transformative revolutions. Nevertheless, the constant throughout the new interactions and accompanying change was the transatlantic slave trade, whose legacies still haunt the Transatlantic World.

The labor and practices of Africa and its people act as the foundation for the transatlantic. Africans, however, were not the first choice of labor for the Europeans. The first groups enslaved were the Native peoples of the New World. This practice ended after Bartolome de las Casas, a friar and early abolitionist, penned *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* in 1522. This seminal work exposed the Spanish exploitation of the Natives as well as made the argument that they be treated as subjects in need of civilizing. De las Casas primarily based his argument, targeted at the papacy, on the fact that most of the indigenous Americans were converts to Catholicism. This, in effect, halted attempts to enslave indigenous Americans, although the exploitation of their land and their slaughter remained constants.

Before the transatlantic slave trade, Europeans viewed sub-Saharan Africa with a combination of fear and mystery. The idea of anti-Black racism existed in Western Europe before the slave trade commenced. One group of English voyagers described sub-Saharan Africans as "beastly savage people, wilde men and brutish black people" (quoted in Davis 2006, 52). Furthermore, West Africa's climate was similar to the tropical environment found in the Caribbean. To enterprising Europeans of the era, African slaves seemed like the solution to their production dilemma. Thus, the transatlantic slave trade began. With its origins tied to racist thought, its implementation led to the rise of Western Europe and cultivated an enduring perception of Africa, its people, and its descendants spread across the world.

Although forced to migrate during the middle passage, enslaved Africans held on to their beliefs and culture. Slaves were predominantly brought from West Africa and believed in the vodun, "forces or powers that made themselves known through means of supernatural; revelations" (Sweet 2011, 409). Over time, these notions mixed with the ideas of native religions and Catholicism to form the contemporary voodoo religion. Furthermore, in these West African communities, "healing was the most viable means of addressing the misuses of power." Thus, healers held tremendous power in their communities. Often a rival lord sold healers into slavery because they possessed the ability to challenge their own power. This practice ensured that such traditions survived into the New World.

Africans also carried with them cultivation practices. The climates of the Caribbean and West Africa were similar, and "some white planters seemed to have known that they could greatly benefit from the skills of African-born slaves who were familiar with the flora and fauna of semitropical coastal regions" (Sweet 2011, 409). Furthermore, during the pioneering period, some Africans "showed whites how to develop a lowland cattle industry and helped plan as well as construct dikes to control the irrigation of low-lying rice fields" (Davis 2006, 137). These techniques proved paramount to early colonists in North America who already dealt with difficult terrain and justifiably hostile native populations.

In most instances in which a population has its history erased due to enslavement, large swaths of cultures are lost. European slave masters most often were intent on the erasure of African traditions. The annihilation of memory itself, in effect, was the aim. A population that lacks knowledge of its history is easier to manipulate, and is thus more susceptible to exploitation as free or cheap labor for burgeoning empires. Fortunately, large portions of African customs rely on the oral tradition. Therefore, healers were able to maintain stories about the vodun, which, even amid the horrors of slavery, they were able to pass along to the next generation.

The transatlantic transfer of cultural traits and traditions is even more apparent in music and dance. Many African rituals call for specific drums and dance movement to summon the will of a deity. The drum rhythms in particular spread throughout the Caribbean. As they passed from one generation to the next, they assumed new local variations, but even in hybrid expression their essence remained intact. One instance of this is the rise of Jamaican dance-hall music, which originated from African drumbeats. Jamaican immigrants usually went to one of two places. Some went to En-

gland, a common practice due to Jamaica's place in the British Commonwealth. There they laid the foundation for skinhead culture. Others took their dance-hall music and emigrated to the United States, specifically New York. In New York, dance-hall music blended with disco, the popular music of the time. This combination, along with new music technology, led to the creation of hip-hop, first in the Bronx, then spreading among other black urban populations in the U.S., then to suburbs and infilling throughout the country, in time diffusing throughout the world. Today, hip-hop, a legacy of the transatlantic, is *the* worldwide musical expression of urban youth. In spite of the forces of commodification, hip-hop still acts as a voice of resistance.

The free labor generated by the transatlantic slave trade led to the increased production of goods, giving rise to unprecedented mass production. The British Empire's adoption of capitalism allowed for them to thrive in the Transatlantic World. While the Spanish and Portuguese began their decline as leading empires, Britain rose as both an economic and a military power. In *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith documented the situation within the British Empire. After the book's publication in 1776, Smith's advocacy of free-market capitalism diffused throughout the Atlantic World and inspired others to follow. It is no coincidence that Alexander Hamilton, the first U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, designed an economic system that eerily mirrored that of Britain.

Nearly three centuries after Columbus arrived in the New World, thirteen of the British Empire's twenty-six colonies declared independence. Two pieces of the narrative of the American Revolution that too often are overlooked must be considered here. The first is that a result of compromise in the newly formed government led to the assertion that a male slave counted as three-fifths of a man. This compromise not only ended the debate about slavery temporarily, but the three-fifths compromise also changed the public perception of the slave. The masses no longer encountered a person when dealing with a slave; legally, the slave was no longer a full person. The long-term ramifications are still felt, as public perception dehumanized slaves and extended the view that their descendants were morally indecent, less human than people of European descent. Here lies a key origin of America's modern racist views.

The irony of the situation leads to the second point of importance for the American Revolution. At the precipice of revolution in Boston, Massachusetts, on March 5, 1770, British soldiers sent to maintain peace after social unrest due to the Stamp Act entered into an altercation with the mob. Six

British soldiers opened fire on the crowd. Crispus Attucks was the first person to lose his life in this incident, which was later dubbed the "Boston Massacre." Attucks, who took two bullets to the chest, was a black man. News of the event and the clearing of the six policing soldiers involved sparked outrage across the thirteen colonies. Their defense attorney, John Adams, future U.S. president, ensured victory. Again, consider that irony: an unarmed black man's killing by authorities sparked the first of the Atlantic revolutions.

Echoes of Crispus Attucks' death reverberated through the Atlantic and made their way to France, where the *ancien regime* was ripe for a revolutionary overthrow. An incompetent leader sat on the throne. Debt was accruing due to foreign war. Enlightenment ideals equipped minds prepared to move the world away from the entrenched rule of nobility and toward a world of democratic governance. Contemporary educated people are probably aware of the French Revolution and its place in feeding the subsequent rise of democracy as the most legitimate form of governance. However, most overlook the direct tie of the French Revolution to both phases of the Haitian Revolution, due in large part to France's lack of acknowledgment of slaves in the colonial empire. When the National Assembly formed, their ratification of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen declared all men of France citizens.

The events in Paris eventually traversed the Atlantic to the Caribbean and settled in Saint Domingue, one-half of Hispaniola. This French possession, with its large production of coffee and sugar, not only was the most lucrative colony in the French Empire, but it also housed the most rigid caste system, with wealthy plantation owners at the top and slaves at the bottom. On the island also lived a caste of free blacks, descended from wealthy plantation owners who maintained a higher place in the system over poor whites. News of the revolution affected the classes differently. For the free blacks, who at first were denied citizenship along racial lines, wealth and importance were key in securing inclusion in the citizenry. Poor whites became antagonistic against their fellow French citizens. Slaves, however, were most impacted. Widely perceived as non-human and of inferior intelligence, slaves were deemed less than a person. The irony is that this perception caused most slave owners to speak openly about the happenings in France in front of their slaves, who were most definitely listening. They understood that, according to the Declaration of the Rights of Man, they should be free. This, coupled with rumors that Louis XVI had abolished slavery, gave rise to open insurrection. The population of the island was ninety-five percent slaves. On August 22, 1791, they rebelled. From their French masters the slaves understood notions

of freedom. But they also “had known rape, torture, degradation, and, at the slightest provocation, death. They returned in kind” (James 1938, 88).

With the perception of the slave as subhuman and the French Revolution entering a dictator phase, the newly established republic would come under fire. Napoleon Bonaparte found himself fighting multiple wars across Europe, running short on supplies and thus needing money. Free labor was the easiest way to make his empire profitable. Attempting to restore order on the island, he sent troops to Saint Domingue, thereby pushing the Haitian Revolution into its second phase. The former slaves had already succeeded in their fight for freedom; now they fought for independence. After successfully rebuffing Napoleon’s forces, the formerly enslaved revolutionaries renamed the island Haiti, as it had been called prior to Columbus’ setting foot there more than three hundred years earlier. Unwilling to recognize Haitian independence, European powers refused to enter trade agreements with the island. Before its fight for freedom, Haiti supplied most of the tobacco and sugar circulating the Atlantic region. The boycott of Haiti was fueled by reactionary fears of fueling similar uprisings in other lands dominated by western imperialism, yet “to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error” (James 1938, 283).

The foregoing sketch of two revolutions suggests that three preceding centuries of exchange and interaction had given rise to what can be understood as a Transatlantic World: a new region not based on notions of physical separation, political borders, or cultural homogeneity, but rather one arising from new mobilities and unprecedented subjugation, the pursuit of new economic opportunities, political domination and resistance, cultural heterogeneity and hybridity. The revolutions came toward the close of the eighteenth century, marking an end to the first era of the Transatlantic World. The nineteenth century ushered in a new era. One form of revolution ended, but another began. The working classes on both sides of the Atlantic began taking pride in their status as laborers, new insights blossomed on the notion of the enslaved. Shared cultures of the northern half of the Atlantic started to eye the southern hemisphere’s attachment to the slave trade as problematic, and thus abolitionist ideas began traversing the Atlantic. By 1888, slavery was abolished in the Transatlantic World through legislation, warfare, and cultural shifts. In the wake of Atlantic abolitionism came the formation of new states, such as Sierra Leone and Liberia, a response to the ever-changing landscape of the transatlantic that initiated a process of descendants of Africans attempting to settle in their ancestral land.

The Transatlantic World arose via a set of processes that perpetuates cycles that have repeated themselves since Christopher Columbus—that infamous Spanish-backed Genoese explorer—arrived in present-day Hispaniola. Today, much like then, a government is desperate for opportunities to broaden its economic horizons and allows an enterprising individual with advanced technology to usher in a new age of exploration. Might the critical inquiry of the Transatlantic World as a historical geographic region provide insight into how new post-continental regions might emerge, the promises and pitfalls their emergence might hold? Today, in echoes of earlier Atlantic revolutions, open rebellion seeks to overthrow racist systems of oppression and economic exploitation. How are currents and contours of Black Lives Matter and other social justice movements part of the transatlantic legacy, and how might today’s rebels learn from earlier Atlantic uprisings? Remaining oblivious to dynamics and forces that gave rise to the Transatlantic World as a historical geographic region, we are likely to sit by as the cycles of subjugation and insurrection repeat themselves.

## References

- Davis, David Brion. 2006. *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- James, C. L. R. 1938. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. London: Secker & Warburg Ltd.
- Sweet, James. 2011. *Domingos Alvares: African Healing and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Zimmer, Kenyon. 2013. Transatlantic history: Locating and naming an emergent field of study. *Traversea* 3 (1):77–86.

*Ahmed T. Foggie is a lecturer at Humboldt State University in the Department of Geography, Environment, and Spatial Analysis. Before joining the faculty in spring 2020, he attended the University of Texas at Arlington, where he received a master’s degree in history. His area of focus is the Transatlantic World and its influence on modern culture. Drawing on his specialization, Foggie is designing a new course titled The Transatlantic World, which he is scheduled to teach in the spring of 2021. Approaching the Transatlantic as a historic region that has played a significant role in the formation of contemporary global society, the course will include the digital humanities.*