

Africans In The Old South: Mapping Exceptional Lives Across The Atlantic World

Claude Clegg

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Review

Clegg, Claude

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Sparks, Randy J. *Africans in the Old South: Mapping Exceptional Lives across the Atlantic World*. Harvard University Press, \$26.95 ISBN 9780674495166

Lives of Distance: African Journeys in the Atlantic World

This highly readable work explores the peregrinations of several people of African descent around the Atlantic world during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The author argues that such biographical microhistories, while often difficult to construct from available sources, give a more granular texture to historical knowledge and the lessons of history than can generally be derived from macro-oriented reconstructions of the past. In six chapters of varying length and detail, the book conveys fascinating glimpses of Africans navigating the perils of their “life geographies,” penetrating porous boundaries between slavery and freedom while careening against (and sometimes through) hardening categories of racial identity and lineage.

Sparks positions his book as part of the “biographical turn” that has become naturalized within the study of African experiences in the transatlantic frame. In some instances, he is able to offer rich renderings of individual lives and family networks, such as in the case of the Clevelands and the Holmans, mixed-race families in South Carolina who—especially the Clevelands—experienced an approximate equality with whites. In other instances, the evidentiary trail is more vague and limited, compelling the author to build more ethereal biographies upon contextual clues and circumstantial linkages to known facts. In general, this approach works well, giving the reader access to the lives of individuals such as Robert Johnson, a man of Kissi origin kidnapped from Africa as a boy and enslaved in Georgia, but later able to gain his freedom and become a voice in the Boston free-black and abolitionist communities. This observation is also true of Dimmock Charlton, another man of Kissi origin reduced to slavery in Georgia, but who was ultimately able to acquire freedom in the northeastern United States and procure the liberty of a granddaughter through dogged legal efforts and

communal mobilization.

There are several themes that flow through the book that are worth mention. Geography and mobility are not only part of the backdrop of each story, but crucial mediums that give shape and form to identities and possibilities. The author helpfully includes a number of maps for charting the movement of his subjects, which further underscore how context and environment mattered to their experiences. Some lives were lived out on a number of continents and waterways, connecting places like inland Sierra Leone and the Gambia River to locations such as Charleston (SC), Mobile (AL), Providence (RI), Jamaica, and London. Examining other lives illuminates the ruptures between urban and rural settings, with the former sometimes offering economic opportunities for the hiring out of slaves (who might one day save enough money for self-purchase) and the latter consigning an individual to obscure, lifelong bondage in the Carolina Lowcountry or Mississippi Delta. Another prominent motif of the book is the elasticity of slavery and the precariousness of freedom for blacks throughout the Atlantic world, with the ever-present danger of (re)enslavement weighing on many, regardless of locale. All of these concerns contributed to a certain malleability of life chances and identity options for African peoples and their progeny of various ranks, often accompanied by a vibrant worldliness that was a necessity for taking advantage of whatever fleeting opportunities that existed for improving one's lot. The author's caveats concerning the often silencing effect that the fetishization of archives can have when it comes to the stories of oppressed people are especially well taken.

The book does have a few quirks. The author makes the concluding statement that "Historians of slavery in the antebellum South have shown little interest in the African presence," an assertion that would likely surprise scholars in the field such as Michael Gomez and Ira Berlin, and a claim made even more baffling by the author's citation of the work of both authors in the book's notes (160, 168n6, 168n7). A more troubling reference is made in regard to a slaveholder whom Sparks characterizes, quite problematically, as "a good master," even though a paragraph earlier this same individual was described as having illegally enslaved blacks from the Bahamas (117). Aside from these stumbles, *Africans in the Old South* is, overall, a solid addition to the literature on African life in the Atlantic region.

Claude Clegg teaches history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of three books and is currently working on a study of the

Obama presidency.