




REVIEW ARTICLE

Expanding the Borders of Atlantic History

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Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, ed., *Entangled Empires: The Anglo-Iberian Atlantic, 1500–1830* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

David Wheat, *Atlantic Africa and the Spanish Caribbean, 1570–1640* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

Juan José Ponce Vázquez, *Islanders and Empire: Smuggling and Political Defiance in Hispaniola, 1580–1690* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

Elena Schneider, *The Occupation of Havana: War, Trade, and Slavery in the Atlantic World* (Williamsburg: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

Abstract

The field of Atlantic history initially focused exclusively on the Anglo-American North Atlantic, largely ignoring the South Atlantic and Africa. This approach, dominant after World War II, portrayed a “Western civilization” based on North Atlantic liberal values, akin to a postwar Mediterranean. Over time, historians of the Anglo-American Atlantic criticized this narrow focus, recognizing the broader interconnectedness of the Atlantic world. Recent decades have seen a shift, with more historians acknowledging the Atlantic as a complex, interconnected space involving four continents. Particularly notable is the rise of studies on the South Atlantic, especially regarding science and empire in the Iberian world. These studies highlight the significant role of Spain and Portugal, challenging the previously North Atlantic-centered narrative. This research has revealed that the Atlantic world was as much, if not more, shaped by Spanish and Portuguese influences as by English ones. The reviewed works exemplify this shift, focusing on the South Atlantic’s imperial entanglements and the African diaspora in the Caribbean.

Keywords: Atlantic History; South Atlantic; African diaspora; the Caribbean; imperial entanglements

Although Atlantic history has been defined as a history without borders, written from no one vantage point and with no single representative place, for many years the reality was that this historiographical approach had very well-defined borders: its studies were limited to the Anglo-American Atlantic. When historians started to think in terms of an Atlantic history after World War II, they were thinking exclusively of the history of the North Atlantic, or Anglo-America. It was a history in which the South Atlantic, or

Spanish and Portuguese America, were completely absent, having played no significant role in the creation and further development of an Atlantic world (needless to say, this exclusion also applied to Atlantic Africa). For these historians, who saw the Atlantic as the Mediterranean of the postwar age, there had existed, at least since the eighteenth century, a common civilisation in the North Atlantic world, which was pluralist, democratic, and driven by liberal values; in other words, it was a civilisation based on the principles that had allegedly created the modern world. But, as David Armitage has put it, “this idea of Western civilization thus owed more to NATO than it did to Plato.”¹

In later decades, historians of the Anglo-American Atlantic criticised this geographical narrowness. They emphasised that the early modern world was much more connected than historians used to think, recognising that these connections were not limited to the North Atlantic basin, but also included interactions between the North and South Atlantics. In this more recent understanding, Atlantic history is clearly the history of the connections and interactions among the peoples of four continents (three continents in the view of Iberians and Latin Americans, since they consider North and South America as only one continent). In this view, even a place such as Peru, which faces the Pacific and not the Atlantic Ocean, can in fact be considered as part of the Atlantic world because of its deep connections with the Iberian Peninsula. More recently, Anglo-American historians have almost exclusively concentrated their attention on the study of the transatlantic slave trade and the interactions between the North Atlantic and Africa, a region of the Atlantic world that had tended to be ignored or occupied a secondary role in the early development of Atlantic history.

Despite this change of focus, Atlantic history continued to be dominated by studies of the North Atlantic. Only in the last fifteen years or so has this state of things started to change, and a considerable number of valuable works focusing on the South Atlantic have been published by historians writing in English. Most notable are the many works published on topics related to the history of science in the South Atlantic, an area of study that traditionally has not been associated with Iberian societies. Research on the intertwining of science and empire in the Iberian Atlantic has probably been the most dynamic area of study among historians who focus on the South Atlantic. Their studies have shown that the Atlantic was a world as Spanish and Portuguese as it was English, if not much more so, if we take into consideration that for a whole century the Atlantic world was basically an Iberian (mostly Spanish) world. The four works discussed in this review are all excellent examples of effective and compelling research in the history of the South Atlantic, although they are not related to the history of science, but to the history of imperial entanglements and the African diaspora in the Caribbean.

Entangled Empires is a collection of essays dealing with the many connections and webs of relationships that existed between the Spanish and British Atlantic worlds. In this sense, it elaborates on an aspect of Atlantic history that was not extensively examined in John Elliott’s great comparative study of the two Atlantic empires, Elliott’s book being a more conventional comparative study.² According to Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, the editor of the compilation, after Britain acquired a dominant position in the Atlantic in the eighteenth century, the entangled history of the two empires was forgotten or simply ignored, because the British were not interested in remembering that in the

¹ David Armitage, “Three Concepts of Atlantic History,” in David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 14. On the genealogy of Atlantic history, see Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concepts and Contours* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005).

² See J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America 1492–1830* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006).

sixteenth and first half of the seventeenth centuries the Spanish had been the model after which the British wanted to build their empire. To a great extent, the aim of this compilation is to show how important the Spanish imperial experience was to the English colonisation of the New World. Christopher Heany shows in his essay that, in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the English were fascinated by the Spanish conquest of the Inca Empire, and their expeditions to Florida, Guyana, Virginia, even to Newfoundland were ultimately expeditions in search of another Inca Empire that could bring as much wealth to the English kingdom as the rich silver mine of Potosí had brought to the Spaniards.

In the century that goes from the mid-1600s to the mid-1700s, British dominance in the Atlantic was far from being a reality. As April Lee Hatfield notes, in the late seventeenth century, English Caribbean merchants and officials frequently complained that Spanish authorities in Campeche, Havana, and Cartagena de Indias treated them as subordinate petitioners, at the same time recognising that the Spaniards had the upper hand. However, British naval dominance in the Atlantic from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, Hatfield points out, contributed to erasing the reality that many English officials in the previous century were still looking at Spanish officials to mould their own behaviour. The many similarities and entanglements that had existed between the two empires would gradually be replaced by a narrative of opposites and contrasts.

According to Cañizares-Esguerra, it was trade what connected these competing worlds, and multiple commercial networks “tied these two Atlantics tightly together” (5). However, we need to be careful and avoid excessive generalisations. While this argument may be correct for the eighteenth century, it would be an exaggeration to argue that the British and Spanish Atlantics were also tied “tightly” together in the sixteenth and first half of the seventeenth centuries, when the English presence in the Atlantic was reduced to marauding pirates and corsairs and a few colonising expeditions. Yes, there were always English merchants in Seville and Cádiz in these centuries, who were more interested in their business deals than in asserting their English or Protestant identities. But the presence of some English merchants in Seville does not justify such a categorical assertion. There were always many more Portuguese, Italian, French, even Flemish merchants than English in the Spanish port cities.

The circulation of knowledge is the other aspect of Atlantic history emphasised by this collection. In that regard, the compilation has a very concrete objective: to credit the Iberian Atlantic with many bodies of knowledge that were appropriated by the British and seen for a long time as originating in the British Atlantic. Benjamin Breen, for instance, argues that while the traditional assumption among historians is that the Dutch replaced the Portuguese in East Asia, West Africa, and Brazil in the second half of the seventeenth century, in reality it was the British who truly inherited the Portuguese Empire, an inheritance symbolised by the marriage between Catherine Braganza of Portugal and Charles II of England. The British not only inherited lands, capital, and trading networks from the Portuguese but also great amounts of anthropological and botanical knowledge. Yet the experts who had collected this knowledge were never credited by the British in their publications, where they chose to appear as the original creators of that scientific knowledge. For his part, Michael Guasco shows how the English were initially able to establish their presence in Africa by taking advantage of the commercial networks already created by the Portuguese. To do so they had to respect certain rights of slaves recognised in the Iberian world, such as the right to marry, the right to purchase their freedom, or the right to self-employment and to own property. But as Guasco notes, the relationship between Englishmen and Africans changed dramatically in the late seventeenth century, when the development of the plantation complex eliminated many if not all of these rights.

Brokers and translators were quintessential inhabitants of the Atlantic world and several chapters of this collection are devoted to studying them. Of particular interest is Christopher Schmidt-Nowara's discussion of the Irish as cultural brokers and intermediaries in Anglo-Spanish imperial rivalries in the early 1800s. Though they were subjects of the British Crown, the Irish had a long history of entanglement with the Spanish Empire, as many migrated to Spain and Spanish America and were naturalised as Spanish subjects; many of them also served in the Spanish armies; and in the late 1700s and early 1800s they became involved in the struggles over slavery and abolition in the Spanish Empire. Schmidt-Nowara focuses his discussion on three individuals who illuminate the entangled histories of the Spanish and British Empires in the independence era. George Dawson Flinter, an Irishman by birth, started his military career as an officer in a British regiment stationed in Curaçao during the British occupation of the Dutch colony, but later he took residence in Caracas and ended up writing in defence of the Spanish Empire and denouncing the independence movement. Alejandro O'Reilly, born in Ireland and educated in Spain, was a military commander who was sent to tour Cuba and Puerto Rico to recommend military and economic reforms in the aftermath of the shocking capture of Havana by the British in 1762. O'Reilly, like Flinter, advocated slavery and thought that the best way to defend the empire from British attacks was to create wealth in the Caribbean through the development of a plantation economy with its attendant slave labour. In stark contrast, José María Blanco White (born José María Blanco y Crespo) was one of the first Spanish abolitionists. Born in Seville, of mixed Spanish and Irish descent, he became a priest and was greatly influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment. In 1810, in the midst of the Napoleonic invasion of Spain, he left for England, settled in London, changed his name to Joseph Blanco White and converted to Anglicanism. In London, he actively participated in the intense debates on the future of the Spanish American empire that consumed the Hispanic community resident in the British capital. Gradually, his views became more radical and he ended up defending the independence of Spanish America. He met William Wilberforce, the prominent figure of the British antislavery movement, and agreed to translate into Spanish some of his writings. Arguing against slavery, Blanco White contended that the surge in slave labour that Cuba had experienced was an anomaly in the long history of Spanish colonialism, which had relied far less on slave labour and had not been directly involved in the slave trade. No doubt, Blanco White deserves further study. He was a fascinating intellectual figure of the independence era, but he is hardly known in the English-speaking world.

The other three books of this review focus on the Caribbean, a natural choice for Atlantic historians because it was in that region that imperial entanglements, webs of relationships, and slavery and the African diaspora were most pronounced. Historians of the South Atlantic have started to investigate in detailed ways the interactions between the Iberians and Africa. It is a topic long overdue, if we keep in mind that the Iberians have the dubious honour of being the ones who first developed the transatlantic slave trade. Even though slavery never dominated Spanish Atlantic societies (with the exception of Cuba in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), the history of the Spanish Atlantic could not be fully understood without it. David Wheat's *Atlantic Africa and the Spanish Caribbean* focuses on the formative period of the slave trade, when it was basically an Iberian trade. It concretely deals with the period of the Union of the Crowns from 1580 to 1640, that is, the sixty years during which the Spanish and Portuguese Empires were united under the Spanish Habsburgs. This work is among the relatively few studies of African slavery in the Spanish Caribbean during its early stages and provides an important corrective to the still common assumption that slavery only became historically significant in the Caribbean with the arrival of Northern Europeans and the creation of sugar plantations in the second half of the seventeenth century.

The reality was that by the mid-sixteenth century, free and enslaved Africans already formed the backbone of the Spanish Caribbean labour force. In fact, Wheat argues, sub-Saharan Africans became the colonists of the Spanish Caribbean, as the rural and semi-rural hinterlands that sustained the cities of this region were populated by a majority of slaves and free people of African descent. At the same time, Wheat's study shows that the slave regime which developed in the Spanish Caribbean was very different from the slave regimes that Anglo-American scholars of the North Atlantic are accustomed to study and read about. In contrast to the British Atlantic of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the rural slaves of the Spanish Caribbean appear to have enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy and mobility and "a surprising number of rural properties were owned by free men and women of colour, including sub-Saharan African former slaves" (18).

Focusing on the Spanish port cities of Santo Domingo, Panama City, Cartagena de Indias, and Havana, *Atlantic Africa and the Spanish Caribbean* presents many relevant "Atlantic arguments." Wheat contends that, contrary to a common assumption, residents of the early Spanish Caribbean did not tend to homogenise Africans. In the early stages of the slave traffic, a majority of slaves came from the West African region of Upper Guinea, and the Spaniards usually gave Upper Guineans the opportunity to identify themselves. At the same time, Upper Guineans knew how to portray themselves in terms that Iberians could recognise. This mutual understanding was a consequence of earlier cross-cultural exchanges in Atlantic Africa, where the Portuguese had been present since the early fifteenth century. Many first-generation African slaves sent to the Spanish Caribbean quickly became familiar with the Spanish language and Catholic practices. This learning process was surely helped by the fact that some of these Africans had been previously exposed to the Portuguese language (or to Afro-Portuguese creole) spoken in São Tomé, the Cape Verde Islands, or the Upper Guinea coast. On the other hand, the same vessels that transported enslaved Africans carried sailors, merchants, servants, and other people with extensive experience and knowledge of West African and West Central African peoples and their cultures. Some were Iberians, others were Africans or of mixed African-Iberian descent. As short-term residents or long-term migrants, these peoples helped create continuities between Atlantic Africa and the early colonial Caribbean.

The same happened after Angola became the main source of enslaved workers in the Portuguese Atlantic. Although Brazil established the deepest connections with West Central Africa, Wheat contends that the Spanish Caribbean was also strongly linked to Angola during the Iberian Union. Portugal's colonisation of Angola and Spain's colonisation of the New World mutually reinforced each other. By the 1620s the slave trade had become dominated by enslaved peoples from Angola. Wheat shows how the slave traffic reinforced both Portuguese colonisation of Angola and Spanish colonisation of the Caribbean, at the same time enriching those who invested in the trade. Angola's governors played an important role in this trade, since they fomented wars to produce captives, while they themselves participated in the slave trade by securing contracts with the Spanish Crown to supply slaves to its American possessions.

Wheat reminds us that in the early modern Spanish Caribbean world Africans and peoples of African descent "were not necessarily associated with slave status or systematically excluded from participating in colonial society" (177). Their acquisition of Spanish social and cultural customs and values was both fast and widespread. Racial hierarchies were not rigid and inflexible and free women of colour, for example, were recognised by both civil and religious authorities as legitimate spouses of Iberian men. Wheat disagrees with those historians who believe that the experience of urban slaves was radically different from those living in rural areas. He writes about "black peasants" to convey the idea that the daily routines and economic activities of enslaved farmworkers in the early Spanish Caribbean closely resembled those of Spanish *jornaleros*, landless peasants who

made a living as day labourers; in some instances, their experience was even similar to that of Spanish *labradores*, peasant farmers who owned tracts of land and cattle. By the late sixteenth century, Wheat contends, sub-Saharan Africans had become the de facto settlers of the rural Spanish Caribbean. This is, no doubt, one of the most significant arguments of this book.

Regarding the “creolization” or “acculturation” of the enslaved Africans brought to the Spanish Caribbean, Wheat shows that these processes had in fact begun in western Africa, since many of these slaves were familiar with multiple cultures and languages, and quite a few among them were also familiar with Iberian cultural practices. He contends that the acquisition of Iberian languages and the regular participation in the rituals of the Catholic Church did not mean that slaves lost their African identities, beliefs, or memories. For many captives, the adoption of Catholic practices was in many ways a continuation of cross-cultural exchanges that took place before their enslavement. It is important to point out here the stark contrast that in this regard existed between the Spanish and British slave regimes. While in the former it was assumed that the incorporation of slaves into the Catholic Church contributed to the docility of slaves, in British slave societies the dominant belief was that conversion to Christianity fomented slave rebellions, for which reason conversion was seen with suspicion and generally discouraged.

The transatlantic slaving networks that connected the Spanish Caribbean to the coasts and rivers of western Africa were severed after Portugal regained its independence in 1640. But the influence of the enslaved Africans who had been transported to the Spanish Caribbean remained long after. Their descendants constituted the demographic core of Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, Panama, and Cartagena de Indias in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As Wheat asserts, although Spanish Caribbean society was made by the forced migration of African peoples, it was also shaped by the extensive participation of free and enslaved Africans.

Juan José Ponce Vázquez's *Islanders and Empire* investigates the history of the Spanish Caribbean during the same period as Wheat's work, albeit focusing more on the Spanish side. This book is a nuanced study that offers many insights into the nature of Spanish colonialism. Even though the study focuses on the island of Hispaniola (present day Dominican Republic and Haiti), many of its ideas can be extrapolated to other parts of the Spanish Empire in the New World. It joins a recent historiography that has re-evaluated the complex political and economic systems of centres and peripheries that developed in the Atlantic world. By probing the negotiated nature of early modern empires, these historians have changed our understanding of the ways in which political and economic power was wielded during the early colonial era. At the same time, *Islanders and Empire* is a welcome addition to a historiography which has been dominated by research on colonial centres such as Mexico and Peru to the detriment of the “peripheral” areas of the empire. Moreover, these studies have usually focused on the conquest and late colonial periods, but more research is needed on the so-called long seventeenth century.

From the perspective of the history of the Spanish Atlantic world, *Islanders and Empire* demonstrates that Hispaniola was not as isolated as conventional wisdom would have it, since the island was well integrated into the interregional and transimperial commercial networks that crisscrossed the Atlantic world in the seventeenth century. Contraband was the crucial factor that made the connectedness of Hispaniola possible. While historians have been aware of this illicit activity, which has usually been associated with the history of corsair and pirate exploits in the Caribbean, Ponce Vázquez brings much-needed clarity to this topic. Rather than just being one more example of the corruption that, in the conventional view, dominated the Spanish Empire, his study shows that smuggling was a strategy developed by the inhabitants of the island, from every walk of life, in order to survive the economic challenges that they faced in the second half of the sixteenth

century. After the consolidation of the fleet system in the mid-1500s, the yearly fleets that transported the wealth of the empire would skip Hispaniola to the benefit of Cuba, the other great island of the Spanish Caribbean. As a consequence, the indispensable commercial connections of the islanders with the rest of the empire became greatly diminished. As Ponce Vázquez pithily writes, smuggling became a necessity for the majority of island residents, and, despite the risks, a great opportunity to accumulate wealth for a few. By the early seventeenth century, contraband came to dominate all aspects of life on the island and many of its inhabitants organised their lives around the illicit trade with foreign merchants. Even royal officials, the military, and the clergy were drawn into the business of smuggling.

All of this did not mean that the ruling elites of the island were disloyal, since one could be a loyal subject of the Spanish monarch and at the same time have no qualms about engaging in contraband activities. This applied to the soldiers in charge of defending the island as well. As Ponce Vázquez observes in relation to the military elites residing in the northern regions of Hispaniola, while they constituted the first line of defence against a French invasion, they also actively participated in trade deals with the French settlers. It was their strategy for survival whenever they were deprived of their salaries. These arguments are highly significant, because the logical conclusion that can be drawn from *Islanders and Empire* is that it was not the decline and impotence of the Spanish monarchy that allowed the establishment of a French colony in the western part of Hispaniola (the future colony of Haiti), but the inhabitants of the island themselves, who saw the French presence as a great source of wealth and hampered the attempts of the Spanish imperial authorities to expel the foreigners from the island. In this sense, Ponce Vázquez's analysis contributes to the historiography of the early 1600s depopulation of northern Hispaniola ordered by the governor of the island, which would allow the establishment of a French colony, and provides the historical context necessary to understand the ways in which this event still shapes Dominican collective memory.

In many respects, *Empire and Islanders* can be defined as a political history of the island of Hispaniola in the seventeenth century. But it is a political history which concerns itself not only with the formal aspects of colonial power, as institutional history used to do, but with its informal aspects as well; it is a history interested not in the abstraction of the "colonial state" but in the political beliefs and practices that constituted the Spanish imperial system of rule. In that regard, the book offers an illuminating account of the interplay of local and imperial politics. Of particular interest is the discussion of the sale of municipal offices and the ways in which the price of the post of *regidor* (alderman) oscillated depending on how much local elites interested in acquiring one of these posts manipulated its price.

Ponce Vázquez's book also contributes to a better understanding of an aspect of Spanish colonial society that has not received sufficient attention. Although relations of patronage and clientelism were central to the functioning of colonial society, these are aspects that have hardly been studied by historians, although one always finds references in passing to the system of patronage on which colonial government was based and, above all, to the corruption that characterised that system of government. In this regard, the author could have dedicated more space to discuss the issue of corruption, beyond a brief mention in the introduction, since the spectre of corruption has haunted the historiography of the Spanish Empire in the New World for decades, it being the source of many stereotypical views of Spanish colonialism. In any case, this work can be situated within a recent historiography (recent at least in the case of colonial Latin America) that has argued that personal ties and loyalties were what provided "substance" to the "form" of the institutions, suggesting that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century institutions were qualitatively different from modern ones. This approach problematises the nature

of the “colonial state” as an autonomous entity with independent goals and programmes by emphasising the many ways that it was infiltrated by society and how its political institutions were dominated by networks of clients. In this respect, Ponce Vázquez makes an excellent point when he affirms that the collaboration of the island’s royal officials, the governor in particular, with local elites could not be taken for granted. It depended on the personality of the individual official and required negotiations in order to incorporate new officials into existing networks of patronage and power.

Elena Schneider’s *The Occupation of Havana* continues to explore the role peoples of African descent played in the making of the early modern Atlantic world, in this case focusing in the late colonial period. This is a remarkable, deeply researched work that combines the history of Spanish and British imperial competition with the history of the African diaspora in the Caribbean. Atlantic history has usually emphasised the circulation of people, commodities, and ideas as its object of study, but this book is, in the words of the author, “an Atlantic history of an event” (4). This event—the capture of Havana by the British in 1762—was unprecedented in the history of imperial rivalry in the Atlantic. The seizure of Havana came as a shock to Spanish authorities, as the port city was thought to be impregnable. After all, the British had tried to capture the strategic city for centuries and they had never succeeded. Ironically, after acquiring this long-sought prize, the British authorities came to realise that keeping it was going to be very difficult and costly. The city was returned to the Spanish Crown the following year, after signing the peace treaty which put an end to the Seven Years’ War. *The Occupation of Havana* presents two overarching arguments. First, although the occupation was brief, the consequences of the invasion were long lasting, but not in the ways historians have usually described them. Second, although people of African descent, both free and enslaved, played an essential role in the historical event that it is the subject of this book, this role has been ignored or obscured in the historiography.

The British occupation of Havana compelled the Spanish Crown to institute ambitious and costly military, administrative, religious, and commercial reforms throughout the empire, in the belief that the Spanish Empire had become backward and incapable of competing with the British. In the aftermath of the invasion, many commercial, military, and political reforms were tried in Cuba that were later exported to other areas of Spanish America. These so-called Bourbon reforms have been extensively studied by historians, but much less is known about the immediate effects of the British presence on Cuban soil and how it transformed long-standing Spanish policies regarding slavery and the slave trade. By the time British warships showed up in Havana’s harbour in 1762, more than half of the Cuban population was of African descent. At the same time, Cuba was already entangled in a complex relationship with the British Empire, because the island obtained most of its slaves not from Africa but from British slave traders in Jamaica. Schneider argues that the British invasion did not mean a radical rupture in Cuban history, as has traditionally been argued. The occupation was too short (barely nine months) to have a transformative impact on Cuba’s economy and society. Schneider disagrees with the traditional assumption, especially prevalent among scholars writing in English, according to which the British occupation helped open Spain’s trade monopolies, something that brought about the Cuban sugar boom of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. What the occupation actually represented was an “intensification of existing patterns and processes of interaction between Havana and its British neighbors that were directly connected to slavery and the slave trade” (9). Havana’s largest land-owners and slaveholders saw the occupation as an opportunity to expand their access to slaves and to continue to build their ties with the British Atlantic economies.

According to Schneider, one of the more decisive effects of the British capture of Havana was that, after reoccupying Havana in 1763, the Spanish authorities implemented

new pro-slave trade policies that began to erode the traditional position of the peoples of African descent in the Spanish monarchy. For more than two centuries, these peoples, whether enslaved or free, had been endowed with a legal and moral personality that allowed them to become active participants in the economic, social, and religious life of colonial society. As Wheat showed in his study, their lives defied expectations of Caribbean slavery based on the plantation model, distinctions between the enslaved and the free being often ambiguous. For their part, many Blacks and people of mixed descent saw themselves as loyal subjects of the Spanish kings, willing to defend their realms in the face of foreign attacks. That was precisely the case in 1762, when many of them fought to defend Havana from the British invaders. Schneider observes that many Black slaves would have been especially inclined to take risks in the defence of Havana not only because they were fighting to win their manumission, but also because they were aware that they would very likely be (re)-enslaved if captured by the British. It was rather possible that these Black soldiers would have heard of or even experienced personally the harsh treatment that slaves received on the sugar plantations of neighbouring Jamaica. After Havana was returned to the Spanish, royal authorities sought to reward enslaved Africans for their role in defending the city against the British. In Schneider's view, the reoccupation strengthened the bond that had existed between the king and the population of African descent, giving them leverage against slave owners and local authorities. For this population, the crucial role they had played during the siege of Havana became a proud memory.

But, at the same time, the Spanish royal authorities came to the conclusion that to secure the loyalty of the Cuban ruling elites, they had to meet their increasing demands for slave labour. The Spanish government took unprecedented measures to promote the transatlantic slave trade, including the annexation in 1778 of Equatorial Guinea, which would remain as the only sub-Saharan Spanish colony until 1968. In addition, the imperial authorities restricted the traditional rights and privileges of people of African descent, including those of free Black soldiers. A new thinking emerged in Spain according to which African slavery and the slave trade were essential to the wealth of the nation. The traffic in slaves was considered so crucial that it was the first kind of trade to benefit from the new economic policies fomenting free trade. It was a great irony of history that, as Schneider points out, the Spanish rush to participate in the transatlantic slave trade coincided in time with the rise of British abolitionism (the Spanish had never been prominent slave traders, for centuries relying on foreigners, mostly Portuguese and British, to meet their demands). By the 1790s slavery in Cuba had begun to resemble the form of slavery that dominated the British and French West Indies. Some royal officials started to refer to Blacks as "the most useful machines for agriculture." As Schneider accurately observes, "to see enslaved Africans as machines broke from several centuries of precedent in which the Spanish crown and the Church recognized the personhood of enslaved Africans" (257). The invasion and occupation of Havana ended up, she asserts, strengthening slavery and white hegemony in Cuba.

Schneider concludes her study by reminding readers that "Britain's centuries-long obsession with possessing the island of Cuba became the political and cultural inheritance of the United States" (315). In the nineteenth century the annexation of Cuba was seen as natural and necessary, part of the nation's manifest destiny, since the Spaniards were incompetent colonial masters and the Cubans were incapable of ruling themselves. Five U.S. presidents tried to purchase the island, beginning with Thomas Jefferson. And if purchase was not possible, invading the island was always an option. Needless to say, this meddlesome history would continue into the twentieth century.

Taken together, the works discussed in this essay give us a rich and complex view of the early modern South Atlantic, making it clear, in turn, that to fully understand the

history of the Anglo-American Atlantic, the Iberian world needs to be taken into consideration. However, while the historiography of the South Atlantic has made impressive progress in the last decade, there are still many topics and geographical regions that need to be studied as intensely as the history of the Caribbean.

Alejandro Cañeque is Professor of History at the University of Maryland. His research focuses on the political and religious cultures of New Spain and the Spanish Empire. He is the author, among other works, of *The King's Living Image: The Culture and Politics of Viceregal Power in Colonial Mexico* and *Un imperio de mártires. Religión y poder en las fronteras de la Monarquía Hispánica*. He is currently working on a study of the intersection of empire, privateering, contraband, and the slave trade in the Spanish Atlantic world during the first half of the eighteenth century.