Christopher P. Iannini


In Fatal Revolutions, Christopher Iannini provides a powerful argument for the importance of natural history to literary cultures of the Atlantic. His central project is to place the evolution of Atlantic literary practices in conversation with the growth of West Indian plantation economies fueled by New World slavery. Examining the rise of natural history as a discipline, practice, and literary form alongside the rapid development of the West Indian plantation as an institution and economic system, he argues for a concomitant relationship between slave-driven commerce and Enlightenment knowledge production: the practice of letters in the eighteenth century, he contends, is deeply indebted to the representational strategies and logic of natural history and, in turn, that natural history assists in the rapid expansion of commercial empires centered on slave-produced West Indian commodities. For Iannini, natural history makes legible the fact that the specimen-commodity as a new cultural form emerges alongside the redefinition of human beings as property. The link is as material and literal as it is associative: the generation of New World wealth and the mass extermination of slaves and native peoples went hand-in-hand in a process that might be characterized as a kind of morbid accumulation—a process that natural histories participate in and parallel.

Establishing the centrality of natural history writing to Atlantic and North American literary cultures also means establishing the centrality of the Caribbean to the economic, discursive, and institutional practices of the period and to North America in particular. In this sense, Fatal Revolutions joins a host of recent publications that seek to position the Caribbean as central to the circumatlantic movement of materials, ideas, representational practices, and peoples. For Iannini, natural history is fundamental to the establishment of these routes: it opens institutional channels and establishes representational techniques that define the way colonists and creoles relate to their world and to metropolitan authorities. As he contends, the genre of natural history was largely shaped by its long connection to the colonial Caribbean, and the Caribbean—as well as creole authorship—plays a foundational role in the development of Atlantic literary cultures and an American enlightenment.

Fatal Revolutions is divided into two parts. In a series of historicized close readings of Sir Hans Sloane’s Voyage to ... Jamaica (Chapter 1) and Mark Catesby’s Natural History (Chapter 2), Part I, “The Nature of Slavery,” makes the persuasive claim that natural history was the genre that helped readers navigate
the new epistemological conditions of a transoceanic empire fueled by speculative economies and the slave trade. The formal arrangement of image, label, and descriptive text serves to attach “hidden or socioethical significance” to the object or artifact described (p. 7). The formal strategies of these “visual essays,” Iannini argues, “yielded unstable and multivalent meanings” (p. 167). Read emblematically, these texts expose a paradox central to his study—namely that natural history’s participation in a world of letters promoting civility, refinement, and reason was also deeply connected to material routes defined by slavery.

Part II, “Reaping the Early Republic,” explores the legacies of Sloane and Catesby in the works of colonial natural history writers during the revolutionary era when natural history became a genre through which to explore the possibilities of the new republic, both as a political formation and an expanding empire. These works include J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s Letters from an American Farmer and “Sketches of Jamaica and Bermudas and Other Subjects” (Chapter 3), William Bartram’s Travels (Chapter 4), Thomas Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia (Chapter 5), and John James Audubon’s The Birds of America (Chapter 6). The Caribbean, as a commercial region and as a discourse, remains central to literary production throughout the eighteenth century because, in Iannini’s words, “where the Caribbean began and ended” continued to be a contested question (p. 10). Iannini suggests that writers of the American Enlightenment utilized many of the stylistic conventions of Sloane and Catesby to represent the colonies of Carolina, Louisiana, and Florida as part of an extended Caribbean geography ripe for cultivation. While these writings draw parallels between West Indian islands and the southern mainland, they do so, he argues, with the hope of also establishing key differences: later natural histories promoted the potential of North American material resources as key to the expansion of an empire founded on republican liberty rather than the slave economies of the Caribbean. While seeking to remain centered on the Greater Caribbean, Fatal Revolutions is also a book about the role of the West Indies in the writing of the American Enlightenment.

This is an ambitious book that will make path-breaking contributions to the study of early Atlantic literary culture, economy, and society. Indeed, one of Iannini’s most important contributions is the way he links Enlightenment thinking to the development of plantation labor and production regimes. As a literary historian, he provides strong, historicized close readings of natural history as a genre; however, it is also a text with interdisciplinary breadth, relying on extensive archival research and demonstrating historical depth. At times, the focus on printed texts produced by primarily elite writers for cosmopolitan readers means that this is a slightly one-sided account; stories told from slaves’ point
of view, including stories about their specific experiences, are once again left for another scholar to tell. Yet *Fatal Revolutions* is a study deeply informed by the black Atlantic routes of Paul Gilroy’s work, showing how those routes were also the purveyors of white elite print culture. It is a book that has many moving parts and lines of enquiry—the history of a genre, the rise of credit, West Indian plantation, New World slavery, the Age of Revolution, science writing and enlightenment—but perhaps this is also what makes it such a rich study.

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