Lisa A. Lindsay & John Wood Sweet (eds.)


As Lisa A. Lindsay and John Wood Sweet point out in their introduction to this anthology, “recent years” have seen a “surge of studies of the ‘Black Atlantic’ organized around particular life stories” (p. 1). *Biography and the Black Atlantic* seeks first to take stock of the surge, and then to provide examples of some of the most important work done in that vein. The essays in Part One, “Parameters,” examine what Joseph C. Miller calls the “biographical turn” in Black Atlantic Studies. Those in Part Two, “Mobility,” are case studies of African descended people for whom physical mobility proved important. Part Three, “Self-Fashioning,” includes the essays that fit most easily into the genre of biography, and Part Four, “Politics,” consists of three cases in which blacks achieved significant local political power in Atlantic societies. James T. Campbell’s “Afterword” returns to the task of taking stock of this growing body of work. The individual essays are consistently strong and worthy of much more discussion than space will allow, and together they raise interesting questions about whether we are, in fact, witnessing a biographical turn in diasporic studies.

The editors begin to raise this question in the introduction, when they claim that “the ‘Black Atlantic’ represents an argument, [but] biography represents a method” (p. 2). They ease away from focusing on biography as method, however, when they insist that, at the most basic level, the essays in the volume show that “writing ‘Black Atlantic’ biographies is methodologically possible” (p. 15). They do, unquestionably, demonstrate that much can be learned about the Black Atlantic by reconstructing and contextualizing as much about individuals’ lives as is archivally possible. But with the exceptions of Lloyd S. Kramer’s analysis of David Dorr’s assertion of “independent selfhood” (p. 169) and Vincent Carretta’s discussion of the controversies surrounding Olaudah Equiano’s birthplace and the way they influence our understanding of him as a source and literary artist, this collection is engaged in projects that overlap with but remain distant from biography.

Rather than telling a single life story that focuses on the ways a given person became a fully formed subject, most of the contributors use carefully reconstructed fragments of the lives of individuals (or, just as often, families) as the foundations from which to analyze general social processes. Jon Sensbach explores the practical barriers to recovering the lives of black women in the eighteenth-century Atlantic. Cassandra Pybus analyzes kin and religious networks in Revolutionary Virginia. João J. Reis reconstructs the commercial and cultural strategies through which some African-born freedmen became...
successful merchants in Bahia, Brazil. Jane Landers uses the life of Francisco Menéndez to reveal the complex interactions among peoples of different races and ethnicities in eighteenth-century South Carolina and Florida. Roquinaldo Ferreira recounts Francisco Ferreira Gomes's career as a merchant and rebel in Benguela, Angola, to structure a social and cultural history of that town's merchant elite. Rebecca J. Scott and Jean M. Hébrard begin with “Rosalie of the Poulard Nation,” but spend less time on her story than that of her family.

None of this takes anything away from the value or importance of this anthology. Each chapter is smart, well-written, and important. It is a tribute to the editors as well as the contributors that the essays speak to one another both implicitly and explicitly, providing, as Joseph Miller suggests, a collective push away “from structures and abstractions” in the study of the African Diaspora and toward “people and their experience” (p. 20). For all of those reasons it should (and hopefully will) be read by all scholars interested in the histories of African descended people in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic world.

The volume also suggests the need to rethink what is biographical in the Black Atlantic’s biographical turn. The claim by Lindsay and Sweet that biography is a “method” points toward a useful way to begin that process, as does Martin Klein’s observation that work like that done by the other contributors is less likely to produce “biographies” than “many segments of someone’s life” (p. 63). Biography is, after all, first and foremost a genre of historical writing rather than a method of historical analysis. Like most genres, it is flexible and capacious, but its default goal is the reconstruction of the full life and personal development of an individual. That individual can be presented as “great,” or “representative,” or “illustrative,” but the farther authors move from focusing on the life of the subject, the farther they stray from writing biography. Most of these authors have strayed quite some distance, and they have done so in productive and interesting ways. In the process, they have used biographical methods to write a hybrid form of social and cultural history that emphasizes lived experience over social structure.

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