CHAPTER ELEVEN

NETWORK CLUSTERS AND SYMBOLIC COMMUNITIES: COMMUNITALIZATION IN THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PROTESTANT ATLANTIC WORLD

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Ties and boundaries in the religious history of the Atlantic world

The historians of the new Atlantic history claim to reevaluate and rearrange social boundaries. They view the oceanic basin as one major space of early modern interaction and attempt to overcome a number of axioms that have governed American, imperial, transatlantic, and European expansion history. Eventually they strive for nothing less than a reconceptualization of the histories of Africa, the Americas, and Europe. The practitioners of an Atlantic approach challenge the common distinction between the Old and New World, including the notions of the move from the (old) Eastern to the (new) Western rim of the Atlantic and the domination of the (Western) periphery through the (Eastern) metropole. They also question the historiographical fragmentation of the Atlantic world into separately researched empires and colonies, societies, economies, ethnicities, and cultures leading to neatly disconnected narratives. In short, the Atlanticists dispute boundaries erected by previous historians.

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To construct new narratives, Atlantic historians trace ties across supposed boundaries following the paths of migrants, ideas, and goods or redrawing the interactions of particular locales with the wider oceanic world. By now, most practitioners of an Atlantic approach conceptualize their area of study as a multifaceted web of multidirectional movements. They illuminate how individuals and groups on all coasts of the Atlantic, as well as in the middle of it, contested, claimed, erected, or breached boundaries of a geographical, political, or cultural nature.

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