PART THREE

THE WORLDS OF THE ATLANTIC OCEAN
INTRODUCTION:
THE ATLANTIC, ITS MIGRATIONS, AND THEIR SCHOLARS

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English-speakers have been writing about an Atlantic “World” as if it were a self-contained space since at least the end of the eighteenth century. Of course, the Atlantic even then was in no way disconnected from the other oceans and seas that have been the focus of the first sections of this volume. And neither were the European empires of the age that has (until recently) defined the “Atlantic World” as an early modern phenomenon confined to the littorals of Europe, North America, South America, and Africa. England had its India and Portugal its Goa; Holland had its Batavia and Spain its Philippines. Many of these imperial and ocean-bridging worlds persisted well into the nineteenth and, in some cases, the twentieth centuries.

Nevertheless, the conceit of the Atlantic as a distinctive “world” unto itself has proved to be a very powerful one. Even as scholars became fascinated with increasing global interconnectedness, in the aftermath of the Second World War, they re-discovered and began to study intensively the early modern Atlantic World. Studies of the modern Atlantic and especially of its migrations—which began to emerge somewhat later, in the 1970s—just as often focused on the years after 1800, however. These Atlantic migrations, too, were apparently assumed to be so large, so instrumental in the formation of the most powerful nations of the twentieth century, and thus so unique, that they easily captured the preponderance of scholarly attention until the past decade. Only rarely in fact—and only quite recently—do we find scholars writing of the “World of the China Seas” or about the “Indian Ocean World.” By contrast, references to a “Mediterranean World” are almost as old, and precede Braudel’s work by well over a century. Discussions of the “Mediterranean World” (484,000 “hits”) are also considerably more common than references to the “Atlantic world,” (374,000 “hits”) as measured by a Google search on December 20, 2008.

1 See George Adams, Lecture on Natural and Experimental Philosophy (London, 1794), 570.
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