THE IBERIAN ATLANTIC, 1492–2012

José C. Moya

The Iberian Atlantic has a birth date. It is a clear one, or at least less arbitrary than most other historical temporal markers, such as July 4, 1776 when a document that had already been agreed upon was simply sent to the printer; or 1789, the presumed starting point of the modern or, in European-usage, contemporary period. Before 1492 there was an Atlantic basin, a 100 million year old geological feature. But there was no Iberian Atlantic or an Atlantic World, a historical concept that refers to human connections across this particular space. Indeed, for the first century of its existence, the Atlantic World was primordially an Iberian phenomenon.

A perusal of the historical literature would suggest that the Iberian Atlantic has also a clear end. Jane Landers’ Oxford on-line bibliography Iberian Atlantic World ends it in 1800. So do Daniella Kostroun and Lisa Vollendorf’s edited volume on Women and Religion in the Atlantic World (2009);¹ and Isabel dos Guimarães Sá’s Quando o rico se faz pobre: Misericordias, caridade e poder no imperio português, 1500–1800 (1997). In Stuart Schwartz’s All Can Be Saved: Religious Tolerance and Salvation in the Iberian Atlantic World (2008) apparently no one could be saved after the eighteenth century. The historiographical date of termination is not limited to the spiritual. It also affects commerce (even though the volume of transatlantic trade in the three decades before 1914 surpassed that of the three centuries before 1800);² the Middle Passage (even though more than one-third of the eleven million slaves taken to the Americas arrived after 1800);³ political identities;⁴ and even biology.⁵

¹ Daniella Kostroun and Lisa Vollendorf, eds., Women, Religion, and the Atlantic World, 1600–1800 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009). Unlike other books with the generic “Atlantic World” in the title, which basically cover the Anglo-American portion of it, seven of ten chapters here deal with the Iberian Atlantic.
There is, of course, nothing particularly significant about 1800 other than it suits our decimal numerical culture. That is why 1500, rather than 1492, acts as the starting date and 1800 as the book-end in volumes about the Iberian Atlantic empire, even though it lasted about two more decades in the mainland and one more century in the Caribbean, and in volumes about the British Atlantic empire, which ended a quarter-of-a century before in the mainland and endured into the 1960s in the West Indies.6

Yet the circa 1500–1800 periodisation has two other more significant rationales. One is its association with early-modernity. This is the reason why the dates are commonly used in the titles of books that do not deal with the Atlantic, ranging from Jan de Vries’s classic on European urbanisation to volumes on the environment, economy, demography, rural society, and so on. In this respect the periodisation is entirely valid. As I have argued elsewhere, the transformations of the nineteenth century were drastic, swift, and centred in the Atlantic World rather than global.7 The second rationale rests on the timing of European imperialism in the Americas and is equally valid despite the persistence of colonial rule in various specific areas of the Western Hemisphere.

The problem lies then not in the periodisation itself but in the habit of restricting Atlantic history to it and thus to early modernity and colonialism.8 It is true that after the 1820s Iberia’s political dominion in the American mainland ended and its economic links diminished. But cultural ties survived and social connections actually increased. To limit the concept of an Iberian Atlantic to the colonial period thus is to define it by formal politico-economic power. Defined by the broader spectrum of socio-cultural life, the Iberian Atlantic has not ended. The roots of this remarkable continuity, however, can be found in the colonial period.

Iberian colonialism in the Americas may have not been exceptional but it was definitely distinctive and one of the primary sources of that trait was its modernity. Anglo and Anglo-American ascendance after the middle of the eighteenth century combined with Iberian economic and geopolitical relative decline and Ibero-American stagnation during the

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8 David Armitage referred to this practice as “the distinguished pedigree of identifying Atlantic history with ‘early’ modernity”, *The British Atlantic World*, 12.