CONCLUSION:
ATLANTIC LIVES AND ATLANTIC HISTORY

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In his preface to this collection, Jeffrey Fortin argues that historians need to move away from a theoretical preoccupation of what Atlantic history is or is not and instead concentrate on how individuals actually defined “the parameters of this transnational littoral.” While I agree with Fortin, in this conclusion I would like to briefly examine in what ways the experiences of the individuals and groups described in the thirteen chapters are connected to the theoretical studies that have been recently written about Atlantic history. As Fortin indicates in the preface a surprisingly large amount of literature has been written about the strengths and weaknesses of Atlantic history. In what ways do the biographical approaches presented here illuminate and complicate the critical issues and themes that have been identified by the recently published anthologies advocating Atlantic history?

Arguably one of the most frequently discussed themes in the theoretical literature on the Atlantic world is that of the circulation and consumption of commodities. According to Nicholas Canny, the increasingly large-scale movement of manufactured goods and raw materials among Europe, Africa, and the Americas was a unique characteristic of the Atlantic world. While there was also considerable shipping between Europe and Asia, most of this long-distance trade was comparatively small in volume and also primarily benefited European elites. In contrast, Atlantic trade from the sixteenth century onwards was concerned with the mass-consumption of commodities, including sugar, tobacco, furs, wine, and chocolate. Many of the biographies presented here reveal the complex ways in which people were actively involved in or impacted by

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1 Jeffrey Fortin, “Preface,” p. ix.
the rise of merchant capitalism that entrenched itself across the Atlantic after 1500. Before he ran into conflict with the Puritan settlers, the English merchant Thomas Morton tried to establish a fur trade enterprise in New England with the region’s indigenous peoples. Even the French Jesuit Pierre Biard in Laura Chmielewski’s contribution became involved as a labor organizer in the arduous task of building an economically viable colony in early seventeenth-century North America. For the European working poor, involvement in the Atlantic economies was fraught with dangers. This is clear in Emma Christopher’s biography of Patrick Madan, a poor Irishman who was sent as a convict laborer to a West African slave station as punishment for his criminal activities in eighteenth-century Britain. Although Madan would have preferred to be sent as a convict laborer to British North America, this became impossible after the outbreak of the American Revolution. Because of the deadly disease environment in Atlantic Africa, Madan’s exile to Gorée Island was his virtual death sentence. In a very different way the lives of indigenous Americans were also impacted by the mass-production of commodities and foodstuffs for the European market. As the tragic careers of Pieter Poty and Antonio Camarão reveal, Brazil’s indigenous peoples became caught up in the Portuguese-Dutch struggle for control of the sugar-producing areas of northeastern Brazil. Although Poty and Camarão were able to secure privileges for their people by aligning with a European power, their involvement in inter-European warfare ultimately cost them their lives.4

Equally significant, the lives of millions of Africans were dramatically changed by the development of an Atlantic economy that heavily depended on forced labor. It is therefore fitting that this collection, in particular part II, recognizes the disproportionately large role played by peoples of African descent in the shaping of Atlantic trade and consumption. Africans worked in all sectors of the Atlantic economy, including in the maritime sector, and, as all the essays in this part demonstrate, the Atlantic economy would not have developed as it did without a constant supply of enslaved West African workers. At the same time, the lives of Benkos Biohó, Newport Gardiner, Venture Smith, Paul Cuffe, and the often nameless African pilots and Benguela slaves remind us of the great diversity of experiences among Africans and their New World descendants in the Atlantic economy. In this way the biographies of peoples of African

4 For a similar disastrous involvement of indigenous involvement in European rivalries, see Claudio Saunt, “Our Indians”: European Empires and the History of the Native American South,” in Atlantic in Global History, 61–75.