The Disposal of Atlantic History

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Few readers of this journal need to be introduced to the concept of “Atlantic history,” which over the past few decades has either taken specialists in the early modern field by storm or run roughshod over them, depending on one’s point of view. Assiduous scholars have traced the origins and/or antecedents of the concept/approach/perspective known to us today as Atlantic history as far back as the late nineteenth century, but these same scholars and virtually everyone else in the early modern field would agree that the concept really came of age beginning in the 1990s. This being the case, it might be fun as well as illuminating to proceed analogically and apply to Atlantic history the divisions established by Jaques in his famous “seven ages of man” speech in Act II, Scene 7 of Shakespeare’s As You Like It. Once we do, we find that we can state with some confidence that Atlantic history is past its infancy and “whining school-boy” period, and is today in its third (lover) age of life, that is to say, “sighing like furnace.” Readers with good memories of their own school-day readings may recall that in Jaques’s speech the age informed by love is followed
immediately by a fourth (soldier) age. In this period, humans are “full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard, jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel, seeking the bubble reputation, even in the cannon's mouth,” which sequence, if followed in this case, should make for increasingly lively debates in the years ahead!

If I was a bit harsh in 2002 when I wrote—with a nod to a formulation by Robert Reich—that Atlantic history was “one of those rare ideas that moved swiftly from obscurity to meaninglessness without any intervening period of coherence,” I believed at the time and continue to believe that this idea is hard to catch hold of, much less to pin down (Coclanis 2002:170). For the record, let me state that I am persuaded that Joyce Chaplin is correct in arguing that the “Atlantic Ocean” itself is a meaningful rather than anachronistic concept for students of early modern history (Chaplin 2009). Many authors, including Karen Ordahl Kupperman, have pointed out that during the early modern period, this ocean was often divided up into a discrete North Atlantic Ocean and a South Atlantic Ocean (or Aethiopian Sea), indeed, in some cases, into as many as five bands of seas. That said, Chaplin makes sense in arguing for the gradual emergence of a shared sense of the bounds of the “everyday Atlantic” during the early modern period. By this, she means that quotidian maritime experiences—travel, trade, storms, acts of depredation, etc.—led interested/knowledgeable/experienced parties to consider the Atlantic to be one ocean well before the nineteenth century.

To affirm that the concept of an Atlantic Ocean is meaningful does not, however, commit me in a logical sense to affirm that Atlantic history is as well. Even as Atlantic history rides high, other scholars have also expressed their doubts about Atlantic history, for various reasons and on sundry grounds. For example, a number of scholars have questioned whether there was in the early modern period sufficient unity between and among the peoples from the four continents rimming the Atlantic Basin to justify treating it as an integrated unit. Some of these scholars continue to believe that narrower conceptual/organizational schemes—focused around ethnic, national, or imperial lines—make better sense when considering the societies of the Atlantic Basin during the early modern period. Others privilege Atlantics “of different hues,” as Philip D. Morgan and Jack P. Greene have suggested, most notably White (European/Euro-American) or Black (African/African American) Atlantics, with some on the left—Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker come immediately to mind—listing toward a “Red” Atlantic comprised of workers, subalterns, and proles from Old World and New whatever their particular ethnic or national origins (Morgan & Greene 2009:6; Linebaugh & Rediker 2000).