

On the Genesis of Destruction, and Other Missing Subjects

James Sidbury and Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra

WE are grateful for these critical and insightful engagements with our essay. Each raises important issues that could easily spawn a separate article in response, but, mindful of the limitations of space and readers' patience, we will be brief. We will first discuss points with which we are in complete or substantial agreement. Then we will turn to a couple of issues about which our readers reached slightly different conclusions than we had intended, and we will close by discussing how we conceive of identity as an analytic category in hopes that we can clarify how we think it can be useful for understanding the analogous but disparate experiences—and nothing in our essay is intended to suggest those experiences were not disparate—of the peoples of the early modern Atlantic world.

To begin with what we see as the biggest shortcoming of our original piece, Karen B. Graubart is correct that there is an inexplicable inattention to gender in our essay.¹ From the gendered conceptions of nature and the New World, to the ways that different peoples used gendered language to understand, and sometimes denigrate, other peoples, to the influence that different conceptions of gender difference played in relationships between native peoples and European settlers, gender belongs in the analysis of the creation of new peoples in the Atlantic world. As Graubart points out, the role of gendered thought and language in the Atlantic world extends far beyond the issues involving marriage and either consensual or nonconsensual sex across ethnic lines that we alluded to in our essay.²

Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra is the Alice Drysdale Sheffield Professor of History at the University of Texas, Austin. James Sidbury is a professor of history at the University of Texas, Austin.

¹ Our colleague Ann Twinam alerted us to this shortcoming, but, unfortunately, we did not ask her to read the essay before it went to the respondents, so our essay did not benefit from her suggestions. Ann Little made a similar point in the 2009 "Territorial Crossings" *William and Mary Quarterly*—Early Modern Studies Institute workshop, but we responded to her questions in a more minimalist way than we should have.

² Karen B. Graubart, "Toward Connectedness and Place," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 68, no. 2 (April 2011): 233–35. For gendered conceptions of land, see Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1989). For examples of gendered language to describe other peoples, see Londa Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (New

The question of violence is a little more complicated, not because it is less important but because, as James H. Sweet acknowledges, we did not intend to downplay its importance. Nor did we intend for our use of terms such as cosmopolitanism to imply a triumphalist narrative, so Sweet's reminder of those terms' positive connotations is very helpful. To the extent that disruption and displacement suggest that the new peoples of the Atlantic world were bloodlessly birthed, we should all remember that, especially for the peoples of African and American descent, warfare, slaving, and epidemic disease were what disembedded people. Sweet is correct that Anthony Giddens's discussion of disembedding assumes a Western subject, thus privileging the individual, but by borrowing his terms we do not intend to suggest that the creation of the disembedded individual was anything but a crisis for the African and American peoples who experienced it (and for many of the Europeans). Life as an individual meant life as a nonperson; that is precisely why those who experienced it so ardently sought to create new communities in which they could reacquire social existence. Sweet rightly points out that we focus on those who successfully achieved some kind of reembedding and thus silently drop the countless victims of Atlantic history who did not become a part of a new people. One of the many virtues of Sweet's reconstruction of the life of Domingos Álvares is his analysis of a single victim of Atlantic slaving successfully re-creating communities and escaping "social death" (in Pernambuco and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), and of that same victim later failing to do so, living out the end of his life in a state of social purgatory in Portugal. Those cast into the brutalities of Atlantic disruption did not encounter an opportunity for self-fashioning, but a crisis that could only be solved by fashioning a community, and scholarly celebrations of the remarkable accomplishments of those who forged new peoples need not and should not obscure the human and cultural toll represented by those who, in Sweet's words, managed "mere survival," if even that.³

Brunswick, N.J., 1993); Eric Hinderaker, *The Two Hendricks: Unraveling a Mohawk Mystery* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010), 166–67. For gender and relationships between natives and Europeans, see Juliana Barr, *Peace Came in the Form of a Woman: Indians and Spaniards in the Texas Borderlands* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2007). For gender and relationships between Africans and Europeans, see Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, 2004). On how gender was central to the changing, interconnected identities of all groups in the Spanish and Portuguese Atlantics, see Ann Twinam, *Public Lives, Private Secrets: Gender, Honor, Sexuality, and Illegitimacy in Colonial Spanish America* (Stanford, Calif., 1999); Laura A. Lewis, *Hall of Mirrors: Power, Witchcraft, and Caste in Colonial Mexico* (Durham, N.C., 2003); Bianca Premo, *Children of the Father King: Youth, Authority, and Legal Minority in Colonial Lima* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2005); Júnia Ferreira Furtado, *Chica da Silva: A Brazilian Slave of the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2009).

³ James H. Sweet, "The Quiet Violence of Ethnogenesis," *WMQ* 68, no. 2 (April 2011): 209–14 (quotations, 212).

Focusing on the violence and brutality that are too easily concealed in references to disruption raises another issue that several of our respondents brought up: the equivalence they understand us to be claiming for the experiences of Africans, Americans, and Europeans. We are not claiming that all the peoples—or even the new peoples—of the early modern Atlantic had identical histories. Our goal is to highlight the importance of locality and contingency, and every local story should examine the asymmetries of power and the violent processes that fueled specific examples of ethnogenesis. We believe that ethnogenesis throughout the Atlantic basin was analogous and that one way to bring order to the seemingly chaotic series of histories of cultural adaptation within the Atlantic is to write with an appreciation for the specifics of each story. Such specifics can only be understood through careful empirical studies that we do not want displaced by a unified research agenda but that balance attention to local conditions with an appreciation of some broad, if necessarily general, patterns into which most cases of ethnogenesis fit. We also hope that, by redirecting attention to this analogous cultural change through which the peoples of the Atlantic were created, we can shift our understanding of what tied the Atlantic basin together in a direction that foregrounds the histories of Africans and Amerindians. To the extent that we intend our essay to be “a plea for a new Atlantic history,” to use Patrick Griffin’s phrase, that plea involves moving the ethnogenesis of African and Amerindian peoples at least into parity with stories of constitutional and commercial development.⁴ In that sense ours is very much a call, as Laurent Dubois points out, to preserve the vision of Atlantic history behind the work of Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, even as it argues that the creolization debates, having stimulated a mountain of scholarship during the previous forty years, may finally have played out.⁵

Mintz and Price represent a high point in the distinguished genealogy of efforts to place the histories of Africans and African-descended peoples at the heart of Atlantic history, but, as Pekka Hämäläinen points out, the place of the histories of Native American peoples in the Atlantic paradigm has been much less secure. The relative novelty of our attempt to place the native experience near the heart of an Atlantic overview may help explain what might seem a contradiction in the responses of Claudio Saunt and Hämäläinen. Saunt takes us gently to task for overstating the disruption faced by Indians, thus ignoring the persistent centrality of place to Indian identity.⁶ Hämäläinen takes us less gently to task for understating the disruption Indians experienced by ignoring those people who, rather than

⁴ Patrick Griffin, “A Plea for a New Atlantic History,” *WMQ* 68, no. 2 (April 2011): 236–39.

⁵ Laurent Dubois, “Complications,” *WMQ* 68, no. 2 (April 2011): 224–26.

⁶ Claudio Saunt, “The Indians’ Old World,” *WMQ* 68, no. 2 (April 2011): 215–18.

experiencing “rejuvenating ethnogenesis,” suffered through “a shatter belt of dispossession, repression, and population collapse.”⁷ It would be comforting for us to say that both claims cannot be true. It is more accurate to acknowledge that both are right but neither undercuts the claims we seek to make.

Saunt’s focus on the persistence of core cultural-linguistic groups on their native ground is accurate for many of those around whom new collective identities arose and an important reminder that the cultural histories of Indian peoples cannot be separated from the legal and constitutional histories that so often place Europeans at the center. That specific native peoples have claims as sovereign nations predating the United States is not just historically true, it is of immense present-day economic and political importance to North American Indians. That the land they claim is land that can reasonably be traced through a collective genealogy reaching into pre-Columbian time sets those “new” native peoples apart from the new African- and European-descended peoples of the Americas, though not, it may be worth noting, from some of the new Atlantic peoples who emerged on Old World continents.

Hämäläinen and Griffin both insist that the disruptions that native peoples suffered were so much more severe than those suffered by European peoples as to be different in kind rather than degree. That may be true: the point at which a difference in degree becomes a difference in kind is largely in the eye of the beholder. As Sweet’s insistence on the importance of those Africans who failed to become part of new peoples illustrates, however, Hämäläinen’s suggestion that as a result “the Native American experience stands apart” is less convincing.⁸ One need not engage in fruitless games of comparative victimology to argue that the violence and forcible displacement visited on the peoples of West and Central Africa in the era of the Atlantic slave trade was much more similar to the devastation experienced by Native Americans than either was to the relatively voluntary dislocations experienced by European peoples.⁹ We tried to make that point in our essay, though we should have done so more forcefully. We do not consider what Hämäläinen calls “the sterile gauge of social adaptation” to be an instrument designed to pick winners and losers or to determine who succeeded or failed in the early modern Atlantic.¹⁰ Rather we hope to draw attention to the ways in which the violence and brutality experienced by Atlantic peoples, especially Africans and Native Americans, produced cycles of destruction

⁷ Pekka Hämäläinen, “Lost in Transitions: Suffering, Survival, and Belonging in the Early Modern Atlantic World,” *WMQ* 68, no. 2 (April 2011): 219–23 (quotations, 223).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁹ Patrick Griffin implicitly agrees with this claim, seeing the European experience as the one that stands apart.

¹⁰ Hämäläinen, *WMQ* 68: 222.

and creation. These cycles resulted in the rise of the Comanche Empire that Hämäläinen has so brilliantly chronicled and the disappearance or precipitous decline of many other Plains people as well as in the sustaining communities of Sakpata adepts that Sweet discovered coalescing around Álvares in Rio de Janeiro and the village cultures of Álvares's "Mina" homeland, many of which, Sweet reminds us, were almost surely wiped out in the waves of aggression in which Álvares was enslaved.

Our point is neither to celebrate the creativity that produced new peoples nor to mourn those who were destroyed, though we assume most people will do both. It is to highlight the dynamic that produced the peoples of the Atlantic and to place that dynamic, and thus the experiences of native and African peoples, at the core of Atlantic history. When Griffin suggests that focusing on ethnogenesis works better in analyzing the histories of Europeans than those of Africans or Amerindians, we think he substitutes a question about the degree to which those affected by cultural change controlled the forces creating change for a question about the ways that peoples changed and came into (and out of) existence. We agree completely that historical "catastrophes for Indians and Africans created opportunities for Europeans."¹¹ It is, in fact, the multiple and sometimes loose ways that the stimuli toward ethnogenesis were linked to one another, almost always (except perhaps in Africa) through asymmetries of power that privileged European actors, that make ethnogenesis an Atlantic phenomenon rather than simply a restatement of the truism that people adapt to changing circumstances.

It is the myriad permutations of interlocking identities, within asymmetrical relationships of power, that define the Atlantic. The mestizos of the Portuguese and Spanish Atlantic, therefore, need to be powerfully brought back to the center of narratives of North Atlantic ethnogenesis, as we suggest in our essay. We agree with Graubart that studies of ethnogenesis of each distinct community need to pay as much attention to rivalries within each racial group as to tensions among them to move the field beyond tired, predictable, moralizing narratives.¹² Ours, as much as hers, is a call for painstaking empirical research in archives that is mindful of the rich, varied regional historiographies.

Notwithstanding the appeal of joining a physics department—National Science Foundation grants and reduced teaching loads are dancing through our heads—we will resist Christopher Hodson's suggestion that we should have gone further and jettisoned identity with the creolization debates.¹³

¹¹ Griffin, *WMQ* 68: 238.

¹² Graubart, *WMQ* 68: 231 n. 1.

¹³ Catherine Desbarats and Fredrika Teute raised related questions in the discussion of our paper at the 2009 "Territorial Crossings" *WMQ*-EMSI workshop.

We are aware of Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper's critique of identity as an analytic tool and realize that it has often been used in vague or misleading ways, but if we are to abandon tools that some scholars misuse, we will soon be without tools. Hodson's point is different: however gently he phrased it, he thinks we are using identity in vague and misleading ways by defining it too loosely. By casting our net so widely, by "defining identity as necessarily inchoate, transitional, and multiple," we ensure that we will uncover it "everywhere we look."¹⁴ Hodson toys with advocating a division of what we discuss as identity into Brubaker and Cooper's three elements of categorization, self-understanding, and groupness, hoping that will supply greater rigor and specificity. But ultimately he finds even this too soft and calls instead for a harder social science approach to the experiences of Atlantic peoples: a turn away from the cultural turn.

We can happily endorse part of Hodson's prescription. All who have watched cultural history proliferate in the past two decades, especially those who have participated in its growth, recognize the need for a revival of the harder social scientific approaches to the study of the past that proved so productive during the 1960s and 1970s and helped lay the foundation for the cultural turn. But we part ways when Hodson argues that identity, like agency in the analysis of Walter Johnson, "is a modern gift that Atlantic historians have . . . been at pains to give to their subjects."¹⁵ On a trivial level, that does not accord with our sense of academics' usage. We do not recall conferences in which scholars spoke of giving historical subjects identity in the way that everyone can recall hearing papers that gave someone agency. Historians discover or uncover or reconstruct people's identities.

The difference is not simply rhetorical. Identities are messy, inchoate, and multiple, not merely in scholars' accounts but in the world. Nonetheless they are real. Our job is to be as clear as we can be about those amorphous but powerful beliefs. We understand identity to manifest itself in the stories that people tell about themselves as collectivities; they are the manifestation of people's understandings of their own histories. If one imagines the "Christian Utopian Closed Corporate Community" that Kenneth A. Lockridge wrote about in 1970, it is easy to envision those Puritans telling a single, nonmessy narrative of the place of Dedham, Massachusetts, in secular and sacred history.¹⁶ As one looks at larger communities, or at communities

¹⁴ Christopher Hodson, "Weird Science: Identity in the Atlantic World," *WMQ* 68, no. 2 (April 2011): 227–32 (quotations, 230).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 231.

¹⁶ Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town the First Hundred Years: Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636–1736* (New York, 1970), 16. We suspect that Lockridge would be less inclined to portray Dedham in such insular terms today; his brilliant book was a product of a different time. Our comments refer to the portrait of Dedham that he painted in 1970.

that are less closed than Lockridge's early Dedham, the corporate identity and the stories out of which that identity is constructed will be less unified, less cohesive, more fragmented. But they will still exist, reflect the way people understand themselves in time and as social beings, and shape the way people act in the world. The peoples of the Atlantic told stories about themselves and their ancestors that placed them in collective histories, and those stories gave their lives meaning. When warfare, slaving, and epidemics uprooted them, they sought desperately to find new communities in which they could construct narratives that gave them, once again, social existence. Some were stories of being a Nago in Brazil, others of being an African in Baltimore, others of being a Creek in Alabama, and still others of being a Virginian in Richmond or an American in Philadelphia or a *vecino* in Mexico City.

It is true that we often lack access to the stories through which our subjects encoded their understandings of their collective histories. We are left to reconstruct those stories through necessarily conjectural readings of historical groups' behavior: we often call them thick descriptions. No doubt the inferential leaps that are inherent in this kind of work open the door to presentist projections back onto the people we study. But the danger of eschewing this work in favor of attention to "interconnected collective actions, networks of kinship and economic interest, and individual cultural adaptations" is that, though we will often study what natives and Africans did, we will almost always end up contextualizing what we find with our much better documented understanding of what Europeans thought.¹⁷ Or that, at least, is our fear (though not, we should be clear, what we think Hodson is advocating).

Myriad new peoples emerged in Africa, America, and Europe during the first three centuries following Columbus's arrival in the New World. As most of our respondents point out, either explicitly or implicitly, they did so in ways that were at once deeply rooted in local conditions and idiosyncratic contingencies and linked through the movements of peoples, goods, and ideas back and forth across the Atlantic. By focusing on ethnogenesis as the product of the local as well as the global, we have sought to put the experiences of Africans and Amerindians right at the center of Atlantic history. And yet ours is a call for historians not to privilege the tiresome national and imperial narratives that have dominated the field but to dig out of archives the countless contingencies that shaped local experiences. We are grateful to our respondents for pushing us to grapple with (or at least acknowledge) some of the issues we gave insufficient attention to in our original essay, especially the role of gender in these processes and the degree to which our synthesis dropped or ignored the countless victims of Atlantic history who did not coalesce into new peoples.

¹⁷ Hodson, *WMQ* 68: 231.