Portuguese involvement in the transatlantic slave trade was by far the longest of that of any European empire, beginning in the 1440s and continuing until Brazil finally abolished slavery in 1888 (the last place in the Americas to do so). In this period, lasting well over 400 years, Portuguese vessels carried over 45 percent of the Africans who were forcibly transported across the Atlantic. Portugal’s lone colony in the Americas, Brazil, was the single-largest destination, receiving over 40 percent of all arrivals. Half of the slaves who arrived in Brazil came from the Portuguese colony of Angola, which was also the most important source of slaves for all of the Americas, accounting for approximately 25 percent of total slave departures. This southern wheel of the slave trade was not just remarkable for the number of slaves it involved, but also for the direct connections that developed between Angola and Brazil, with relatively less European involvement compared to other arms of the trade. Transit and contact between these two Portuguese colonies, which lay at the same latitude (taking into account Brazil’s significantly larger size), was facilitated by the southern Atlantic’s systems of winds and currents. Thus, the so-called Portuguese slave trade, more so than any other, had a distinctly colonial bent.

Despite its importance, the historiography of the Portuguese slave trade has received proportionally less attention in the scholarship, especially compared to the British trade. The now classic work is Joseph Calder Miller’s 1770-page tome, Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830 (1988), which situates the Portuguese slave trade in the wider context of imperial transformations throughout the pivotal eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Beyond filling a significant gap in the historiography of the slave trade, Miller’s groundbreaking work greatly enhanced our understanding of the contribution of the trade to the political economy of empire, and it provided a detailed regional study of Angola and analyzed the close ties that developed between Angola and Brazil. The quarter century since Miller’s work was published has seen an explosion in research about all aspects of the slave trade, bolstered in no small part by the data made accessible by the online Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (first published as a CD-ROM in 1999 and launched as a public website via Emory University in 2008). More recent trends in the historiography have tilted toward a microhistorical and biographical approach, seeking to put a human face on the people who were involved in the trade, and also documenting the complexities and messiness of the various human exchanges that made up the trade.

Roquinaldo Ferreira builds on Miller’s foundation, venturing into the Angolan hinterland and also tracing connections between Angola and Brazil, while following the more recent historiographical trends by framing his work around a series of case studies. Although the book is rooted in Angola, it explores the colony’s close ties to Brazil, both by following several individuals back and forth across the Atlantic, and by highlighting the role of Brazilian merchants who lived in Angola. The two Portuguese colonies functioned as an integrated region linked by the ocean, Ferreira argues, even after Brazil’s independence in 1822. The first three chapters outline the role of Africans in developing extensive itinerant trading networks deep into the interior of the region, as well as their role in changing colonial legal systems, in response to Brazil’s increasing demand for slaves throughout the eighteenth century. The second half of the book examines transformations in the political, religious, and cultural landscapes of Angola as the trade exploded throughout the eighteenth century.

Ferreira shifts the focus from imperial processes and structures to colonial subjects, relying on a series of colorful vignettes to make his point. There are two important take-aways here: first, that the African role in developing source regions for the slave trade—the people, politics, and cultures beyond empire—is vital for understanding the trade’s complexities; second, that the trade was intertwined with significant cross-cultural ties between Africa and the Americas, which had their own dynamic beyond those of empire. For all the richness of the case studies, there are some limitations to the microhistorical and biographical approach. There are places where more attention to wider political and economic frameworks of empire would have been helpful. Given the book’s emphasis on cultural exchange, the brief discussion of creolization, confined to the epilogue, is rather perfunctory, and the offhand dismissal of the concept of Atlantic creole (seemingly applicable in some form to many of the people who populate the book) is somewhat puzzling. That said, the book is an important contribution to the historiographies of the Atlantic world and the transatlantic slave trade. Ferreira has made his case that “Brazilian history is an integral part of Angolan history, and vice-versa” (p. 240), with evidence drawn from a wide variety of archival sources from around the Atlantic. Although the Angola/Brazil nexus was in many ways sui generis, the documentation of trans-colonial exchanges is a useful model for historians of the Atlantic world who eschew a top-down approach. The book contributes to a growing body of work that analyzes the complex, multi-faceted contributions of Africans to the cultural formations of the Atlantic world.

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slaving voyages between 1514 and 1870. Of these, perhaps 11 million survived the Middle Passage across the Atlantic Ocean. Five million of those Africans arrived in Brazil, five million in the Caribbean islands, four hundred thousand in the United States, and the remainder in various locales in South America. African slaves labored on farms and plantations, in mines, in port cities, and at sea. They resisted enslavement in various ways, including rebellion, self-liberation (such as flight from an owner), and the creation of wide-ranging networks of communication. Focusing on the “century of emancipation” (1780s–1888) (p. xii), Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie points to the necessity of comparative analyses of the macrohistories of liberation and the “thousands of small emancipations across the nineteenth-century Americas” (p. 54).

A major problem in the teaching and publications related to slave emancipations in the nineteenth century has been a focus on the North Atlantic world and on “conventional spatial, temporal, and conceptual categories” (p. xvii). As one example among many, numerous U.S. universities offer courses on the Civil War and Reconstruction with minimal attention to the critical role of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) in giving animus to defenders and critics of the institution of slavery and at sea. They resisted enslavement in various ways, including rebellion, self-liberation (such as flight from an owner), and the creation of wide-ranging networks of communication. Focusing on the “century of emancipation” (1780s–1888) (p. xii), Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie points to the necessity of comparative analyses of the macrohistories of liberation and the “thousands of small emancipations across the nineteenth-century Americas” (p. 54).

Kerr-Ritchie makes it clear at the outset that his goal is to shed new light on international abolition by centering his analysis on people of African descent and their capacity to look and move beyond local, ethnic, and national boundaries (p. xviii). Self-liberators seized opportunities to break their chains of enslavement. They took off and headed north (to Canada), south (to Mexico or Florida), to the U.S. West, and to Caribbean islands. During the wars that raged across the Americas during the Age of Revolution (1750–1850), thousands of slave soldiers fought for their freedom. They joined both patriots and loyalists during the American Revolution. They defeated powerful armies sent from France, England, and Spain to the island of Hispaniola. They played a decisive role in victories achieved by the patriot armies of generals José de San Martín and Simón Bolívar and the Union Army of General Ulysses S. Grant. Indeed, “war was the mother of emancipation as slaves seized opportunities for liberation during political upheavals” (p. 106). During the “General Strike” carried out by slaves during the U.S. Civil War (as W. E. B. Du Bois described it), many of the 500,000 slaves who arrived to Union lines were women and children (p. 108). Former slaves continued to engage in general strikes after liberation, which profoundly impacted labor relations and political consciousness among freedpeople. Based on a wealth of data, the author notes that across the Americas commodity production quickly declined after emancipation. As a result, planters and elites looked to other sources of labor (indentured workers, immigrant workers, various types of coerced labor).

A theme that runs through the book is the ways in which African and creole (born in the Americas) slaves pondered their histories and strategies of resistance. The beacon of Haiti’s revolution shined brilliantly across the Americas and throughout the Atlantic world after independence was declared in 1804. Slaves and freedpeople gained inspiration from this event. It was also Du Bois, a keen observer of comparative emancipations, who, a century after the upheaval in Haiti, in The Souls of Black Folk (1903), alluded to “Toussaint the Savior.” Kerr-Ritchie also discusses slave resistance over two generations in southern Louisiana. A conspiracy in 1795 near Pointe Coupee was followed by the forging of a slave army of 500 under the direction of Charles Deslondes with plans to attack New Orleans in 1811 (recently described by Daniel Rasmussen as “America’s largest slave revolt”). Thirty years later another “systemized plan” caused widespread panic between Bayou Sara and Natchez (p. 77). And then, in 1862, an insurrection broke out along the Mississippi, upriver from New Orleans. Kerr-Ritchie writes that “this suggests a tradition of slave revolt over generations in a coastal region linked to the Caribbean and broader Atlantic world” (p. 78). I had hoped that the author would have written more on this topic. There can be little doubt that news of Haiti, the Great African Slave Revolt of 1825 in Cuba, Jamaica’s “Baptist Revolt” of 1831, and of Frederick Douglass filtered into upcountry Louisiana and Mississippi and inspired slaves to resist.

Kerr-Ritchie adeptly weaves together rich social history and international political economy. This is no small task. He provides a lot of evidence to support his analyses, along with an extensive bibliography. Freedom’s Seekers: Essays on Comparative Emancipation is subaltern history at its best. This work is one of the most informative and important books focusing on emancipations and the Atlantic world published in the last two decades.

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This book offers a whirlwind tour of the public memory of slavery around the Atlantic Basin, from Gorée Island in Senegal, to the African Burial Ground in New York City, to the Church of Our Lady of the Rosary of Black Men in Salvador, Brazil, to name only a few of its many stopping points. New information and powerful insights...