

Book Review

- *The Brink of Freedom; Improvising life in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World*, by David Kazanjian. Duke University Press, 2016 & *The Black Urban Atlantic in the Age of the Slave Trade* by Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra et al. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016

David Kazanjian thought he had an original idea. He found two sets of correspondence originating in entirely different parts of the Atlantic world, both featuring letters from the year 1847, authored by protagonists of movements that have been considered failures: the colonization movement of Liberia by former North American slaves and Yucatán's Caste War. He decided to put the letters in context, connect them, and argue that the movements were not failures at all. Never mind that these case studies were so different from each other that it would be a *tour de force* to link them. His solution was to borrow the term “transversal,” intended to put the movements alongside each other “without linking them through the familiar coordinating conjunctions” (p. 10). Unfortunately, this notion (or the way in which it is employed) does not tie them together and doesn't make up for the fact that in reality the movements had nothing to do with one another, apart from occurring in the same era. In his book Kazanjian furthermore fails to produce evidence that either movement was successful.

When stripped of its needlessly complex theories and jargon – which will leave behind most readers – this is what the book actually reveals: unlike the project's organizers, Liberia's colonists did not imagine themselves as returning to an African homeland. These ex-slaves were initially critical of the way some fellow settlers used their newfound freedom and implicitly extolled their own industriousness. After an estranging experience in a foreign continent, they often fantasized about returning to the United States and mingle with friends and family. At the same time in Yucatán, Maya rebels complained about the many contributions and taxes imposed by the creole authorities, writing that “what we want is liberty and not oppression.” The Maya shuttled between positioning themselves as fighters in a war between whites and Indians and seeing themselves as part of a God-ordained world inhabited by multiple ethnicities.

These findings apparently did not suffice for Kazanjian. He tried to imbue the documents with ideas about slavery and freedom, which are, however, largely absent from the correspondences. It is puzzling to read that Liberia's settlers supposedly sought freedom by returning to the United States (p. 76) or that they reworked the relationship between master and slave (p. 129). As such statements suggest, Kazanjian has overread the documents, although that charge does not seem to bother him. He presents overreading as a virtue, thus ignoring basic rules of scholarly research. He even remarks that the charge of overreading wrongly "presumes a strict separation between historically contextualized reading and ahistorical reading" (p. 33). This separation is, of course, a pillar of the historical profession. Without it, any theory about the past could gain currency, especially when – as here – embellished with quotes from the likes of Derrida and Hegel, bound to dazzle some readers without enlightening anyone.

In contrast with Kazanjian's musings, the volume on *The Black Urban Atlantic in the Age of the Slave Trade* is a work of scholarship. The editors (Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, Matt D. Childs, and James Sidbury) judiciously selected contributions from specialists of four different empires and juxtaposed chapters on Africa and Europe to essays on the Americas. They ensured coherence by having the authors refer to each other's chapters to point out similarities. Nonetheless, the chapters differ substantially in content. While most authors address the types of labour performed by urban blacks, and two essays are organized around particular trades (British American ship pilots and Brazilian *barbeiros*), the chapters on Ouidah and Sierra Leone omit all references to the professional lives of African urbanites. Professional pursuits were crucial, however, in the attempts of blacks to carve out the autonomy they desired. In the Americas, numerous slaves worked and even lived on their own, often as artisans, in arrangements that required them to regularly hand over a share of their income to their owners. Blacks, free and enslaved, also created an autonomous sphere by using lay religious brotherhoods to their own ends. Such sodalities – which had roots in both West Africa and the Iberian Peninsula – provided a venue for recreation, organized festivals, financed the burials and medical expenses of their members, and sometimes helped defray the costs of manumission. In Havana such associations each represented a different African background as they were organized along "national" lines like Lucumi, Congo, Mina, and Carabali. The autonomy attained by these associations was sometimes feared by white residents, as in Mexico-City in the early seventeenth century. In 1612, the leader of a local *cofradía* organized a march that ended in an attack on the archbishop's palace and the building used by the tribunal of the Inquisition. Such revolts, however, seldom occurred. As David Geggus writes in his chapter: "Although the social flux and anonymity of urban environments gave slaves opportunities to conspire, the concentration of whites, and notably soldiers, in towns made urban revolts extremely rare in the Americas" (pp. 120-1). Yet white masters throughout the Americas feared black insubordination in the form of

alliances between urban slaves and maroons, as Jane Landers stresses in her contribution on seventeenth-century Cartagena de Indias.

As these snapshots suggest, this book offers fresh perspectives on the world of urban slaves and free people of colour, which differed so markedly from the experiences of plantation slaves. The collection bristles with insights and encourages further research on the “black urban Atlantic.”

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