

WHEAT, David. *Atlantic Africa and the Spanish Caribbean, 1570-1640*. Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, VA, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2016.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2236-463320161414>

Tessa Murphy

Syracuse University, Nova York – NY, Estados Unidos da América
temurphy@maxwell.syr.edu

**New Geographies of the Atlantic World:
Connecting Lusophone Africa and Spanish America**

Recent studies of colonial and early national Brazil emphasize that the transatlantic slave trade forged not only economic but also cultural and political connections across the South Atlantic. As historians including Walter Hawthorne, Roquinaldo Ferreira, Mariana Candido, Paul Lovejoy, and James Sweet highlight how regular and sustained exchanges between West Africa and Brazil shaped societies on both sides of the ocean, they also offer new geographies for understanding the Lusophone Atlantic. In his new book, David Wheat engages with models of reciprocal exchange and inter-colonial connection in order to redraw the boundaries of the Atlantic World in an earlier period. Analyzing early modern Iberia, Africa, and Latin America as "complementary aspects of a single, unified history" (73), Wheat traces how developments in one area reverberated in the others. Doing so allows him to persuasively argue that the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish Caribbean should be viewed not as a precursor to the sugar colonies that later came to dominate much of the region, but as a natural extension of economic, social, and political precedents established in West Africa and the Luso-Atlantic world.

In addition to avoiding a teleological analysis of the rise of the plantation complex, **Wheat's** innovative and deeply-researched book contributes to a growing body of work aimed at reconceptualizing the Atlantic World and the roles of African people within it. Enslaved Africans and their descendants constituted a demographic majority not just in export-oriented plantation economies, but in settlements that relied on mixed agriculture. In slave societies of this nature, which were first established by the Portuguese in Atlantic islands such as São Tomé and later replicated by Spanish colonizers in the Caribbean, African people performed many of the same functions as peasants in contemporaneous Iberia. Wheat shows how **Africans'** diverse labors – as well as their very presence – strengthened Spanish expansion in the Americas. **Not unlike their fellow 'involuntary colonists' in eighteenth-** and nineteenth-century Brazil, these men and women also drew on their experiences in the broader Atlantic World in order to shape the foundations of new American societies in ways that historians are only beginning to appreciate. Drawing on archival materials housed in Colombia, Cuba, Spain, and Portugal, Wheat weaves together the histories and historiographies of Latin America, Iberia, and West Central Africa in order to emphasize a shared past that present-day boundaries tend to obscure. The resultant work highlights the possibilities of extending models of an interconnected Atlantic World backwards in time and across perceived political and geographic borders.

The first half of **Wheat's** book is firmly grounded in the history and historiography of West Africa. Responding to critiques of the 'foreshortening' of African history, chapter one highlights continuities in African political and cultural identities from the thirteenth through the seventeenth century and beyond. As Wheat surveys key territorial, ideological, and political contests between a host of African states in the Upper Guinea and Senegambia regions, he demonstrates how these conflicts gave rise to slave raiding, which in turn provided captives for export. Attention to the *tierra* or ethnonyms of these captives – which Spanish officials carefully recorded in sixteenth-century slave ship rosters – allows Wheat to reconstruct the geographic and cultural origins of the enslaved. The fact that these ethnonyms were recognized and retained specific meanings for both Africans and Iberians in the early colonial Americas is important. In contrast to the plantation era, in which the mechanisms of colonial control often reduced Africans to an undifferentiated

mass of people, in the early colonial period social and political identities forged in Africa continued to resonate in the diaspora. In his wide-ranging analysis of how events on the continent affected early colonial society, Wheat displays an impressive grasp of African history while also laying a compelling foundation for his interpretation of the Spanish Caribbean as an extension of West Africa.

Attention to the interconnected histories of Africa, Iberia, and the Americas carries into Wheat's second chapter, which focuses on Angola. While most of the earliest Africans trafficked to the Spanish Caribbean came from Upper Guinea, in the seventeenth century Angola became a major point of embarkation for enslaved people. Arguing that Portuguese colonization of Africa and Spanish colonization of the Americas "mutually reinforced one another" (103), Wheat traces how the creation of the Luso-African state generated many of the captives who were then trafficked to the Caribbean. Elites who profited from the slave trade in Luanda also played active roles as merchants in Caribbean ports, thereby extending their influence and commercial relations across the Atlantic and further cementing ties between Portuguese West Africa and the Spanish colonies. Owing to a combination of factors – including the nature of warfare in West Central Africa and legislation favoring the introduction of enslaved people under age seven – many of the people forcibly transported across the Atlantic in the seventeenth century were children. As Wheat explores in later chapters, this in turn shaped the character of Spanish colonial society, as enslaved children more quickly adapted to Iberian linguistic, religious, and social norms.

Chapter three further develops Wheat's argument that the character of Spanish Caribbean society was informed by Atlantic Africa. Wheat focuses on Portuguese *tangomãos*: merchants or mariners who 'threw themselves' into Africa, spending longer than one year and one day on the continent. In doing so, Wheat challenges the widespread misconception that the encounter between Africans and Europeans in the Americas always constituted a violent collision between two cultures with no prior experience of one another. Instead, Wheat shows that many men who went to the Caribbean did so after spending extended periods of time in Africa. These *tangomãos* then drew on their experiences to contribute knowledge of African languages and cultural practices that

would have been unknown to colonists who arrived in Spanish America directly from Iberia.

Many *tangomãos* formed relationships with African women during their time away from Europe, further facilitating both commercial and cultural exchange. These and other gendered relationships inform **Wheat's fourth chapter, in which he emphasizes the predominance and importance of women in free-colored communities in the early Spanish Caribbean. Wheat's attention to women** makes an important intervention in the historiography of early colonial Afro-Latin America, which often focuses on the role of African men as military agents. Equally significant is **Wheat's critique of two notions** that often inform discussions of interracial relationships in the colonial era: first, that unions between African or Afro-descended women and European men were generally viewed as illicit or socially unacceptable, and second, that these unions owed to a dearth of white women. While acknowledging the often unequal or exploitative nature of such relationships, Wheat works to dispel these notions by emphasizing the prevalence of legitimate – if often informal – interracial unions both in Africa and in Iberia.

Like their counterparts in Africa, Brazil, and elsewhere in the Atlantic World, women of color in the early Spanish Caribbean occupied a variety of roles. As sexual and marital partners, business people, and the owners of land and slaves, women were instrumental in shaping these societies. Wheat shows that African-born women who were incorporated into Spanish colonial society often shed their ethnonyms in favor of Iberian surnames, suggesting that changes in legal and social status accompanied changes in the identity that individuals claimed or were ascribed over the course of a lifetime.

Chapter five develops **Wheat's central argument that Africans and their descendants fulfilled the role of colonists in the early Spanish Caribbean.** By the turn of the seventeenth century, the demographic profile of the Spanish Caribbean had much in common with that of other slave societies throughout the Americas; Africans and their descendants constituted a majority of the population in western Cuba, Hispaniola, Cartagena, Panama, and probably Puerto Rico. The occupations and the experiences of these men and women differed dramatically from those of their counterparts in sugar colonies, however. In these 'African hinterlands' of Latin America, free and enslaved black

people grew food, raised livestock, and performed many of the same functions as rural peasants in contemporaneous Iberia. Wheat's expansive view of the early Atlantic allows him to show that Spanish reliance on Africans to fuel self-sustaining farming and ranching economies was not unique; the practice was already well-established by the Portuguese in the Atlantic islands, where enslaved populations labored on mixed-agriculture farms rather than monocultural plantations.

In the final chapter of his book, Wheat further advances the argument that Africans and their descendants played essential roles in expanding Spanish claims to territory and legitimacy in the Americas. Paying careful attention to the terms used to describe Africans in Iberian commercial, legal, and ecclesiastical records, Wheat focuses on the process of acculturation. He argues that the difference between a 'bozal' and a 'ladino' was more than just place of origin; rather, such terms reflected the possibilities open to individuals of African descent within colonial society. Once again, Wheat artfully reorients the geography of the Spanish Atlantic to include Lusophone Africa. Drawing on historians of the region such as John Thornton and Peter Mark, Wheat shows that acculturation began on the Africa's western coast, where decades of contact between Portuguese and African merchants provided a basis for mutual exchange. Although Wheat is careful not to overstate African agency, he explores the ways in which Africans helped shape key features of Spanish Caribbean society, situating them as actors rather than passive recipients of the acculturation process. Whether as interpreters or godparents, 'Latinized' Africans selectively borrowed elements of Iberian culture in order to adjust – and to help others adjust – to life in the Americas. Wheat also stresses that the acquisition of a European language or religious practice did not necessarily signify the loss of African culture; newly-baptized slaves often shared an ethnonym with their godparents, further illustrating how links forged in Africa continued to inform relationships in the diaspora.

The historiographic stakes of Wheat's work are high. In six chapters, he challenges the notion that the circum-Caribbean was a marginal or anomalous region of colonial Latin America; redraws the boundaries of the Spanish Caribbean to include Lusophone West Africa; and situates Africans as colonists—albeit involuntary ones—whose labor and presence underpinned Iberian colonial projects while simultaneously shaping early

American society. His many interventions promise to inform future scholarship on Latin America and the Caribbean, West Africa, and the role of the Portuguese in the early Atlantic World. Missing from this otherwise ground-breaking and cogently-argued work is a detailed consideration of how Iberian geopolitics impacted the colonial sphere. The origins and specific effects of the Iberian Union—a sixty-year period (1580-1640) during which the same Hapsburg rulers controlled both Spain and Portugal—remain somewhat underdeveloped. Wheat notes that the union facilitated the traffic of some 450,000 enslaved people, as well as the circulation of untold numbers of Portuguese merchants between Iberia, Africa, and the Americas. But one is left wondering whether the unified history he describes would even have been possible without a decades-long era in which the division between Castile and Portugal “was especially blurred” (16). Although Wheat’s decision to devote equal attention to West Africa and the Spanish Caribbean accurately reflects the primacy he affords to events on the ground rather than abstract legislation, drawing the Iberian Peninsula more fully into this story may have further elucidated the inter-continental and inter-imperial exchanges he uncovers.

Studies of the transatlantic slave trade and the rise of the plantation complex continue to offer important insight on African contributions to colonial societies in Brazil and beyond. With *Atlantic Africa and the Spanish Caribbean*, David Wheat pushes this model backwards in time, demonstrating the importance of African and Afro-descended peoples in a time and place where the plantation system did not predominate. His nuanced discussion of how events in Africa, as well as West Central Africans themselves, shaped some of the earliest settlements in the Americas significantly broadens and reorients existing understandings of the inter-connected nature of the Afro-Atlantic World. Viewed from the vantage point of West Africa and the Portuguese Atlantic, the early Spanish Caribbean looks not like an aberration in colonial Latin America history, but a natural product of longstanding relations and practices on the African coast.

Data de recebimento da resenha: 02/11/2016

Data de aprovação da resenha.: 23/11/2016