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DeCorse

# Postcolonial or Not?

West Africa in the Pre-Atlantic and Atlantic  
Worlds



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**Christopher R. DeCorse**

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**Postcolonial or Not?**  
**West Africa in the Pre-Atlantic and**  
**Atlantic Worlds**  
**Christopher R. DeCorse<sup>1</sup>**

This lecture examines the roles of Atlantic history and postcolonialism in the reconstruction of the West African past. These topics have received extensive attention from researchers across the social sciences, though less so in some disciplines than others in West African scholarship. While each presents distinct conceptual vantage, they share themes and foci germane to our understanding of the past and views of modernity. Central to these themes is the history of Europe's intersection with the nonwestern world, how narratives of that intersection are presented, and the recognition of non-European pasts. As I will discuss, however, some of the themes represented, such as cultural and political domination, elite versus non-elite dichotomies and the presentation of certain narratives at the expense of others, are not unique to European expansion but also represented in social, political and cultural relations internal to Africa. The historiographies presented are equally relevant to the understanding of the past – that is, the impacts of initial European contact, the Atlantic slave trade, and colonization –

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as they are to the present; the social, economic, and cultural landscapes of modernity, and how our conceptualizations of the past shape these landscapes. The purpose of this essay is not to provide a detailed examination of each conceptual vantage but rather to consider the epistemological threads represented and their methodological implications for the study of the West African past. In particular, I examine the increasing focus on Atlantic history, colonialism, and postcolonial studies. While I underscore the hegemonic and transformative nature of the period of the Atlantic World, I equally emphasize the need to situate these developments within the wider scope and temporal depth of the African past. I further consider the source materials and the methodologies used in reconstructing these views of the past. In doing so, I stress archaeology's central role in providing a holistic understanding of African history, both with regard to its temporal depth and complexity, as well as its unique contribution to the understanding of the era of the Atlantic world.

### **The Atlantic World**

Discussion of the 'Atlantic world' surrounds us in an array of recent books, conferences, and symposia that trace its contours, confluences, and manifestations.<sup>2</sup> It is, therefore, appropriate that we reflect on the origin and emergence of this perspective in the context of the African past. The Atlantic World and Atlantic Africa have increasingly emerged as discrete areas of study in the last five decades. Indeed, during the 1970s when I first initiated research on archaeological sites in Sierra Leone associated with the period of the Atlantic slave trade the idea of an archaeology of Atlantic Africa as a defined focus was unrealized if

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2. Benjamin 2009; Cañizares-Esguerra and Seaman 2007; Canny and Pagdan 1987; Gilroy 1993; Mitchell 2005; Ogundiran and Falola 2007; Thornton 1992, 2012.

not largely unrecognized.<sup>3</sup> Its conceptualization has depended on substantive research; that is research into documentary source material, oral traditions, and archaeological data, as well as conceptual reframing and theoretical reassessment. The decades that have witnessed increased work on the African past have also witnessed the emergence of Europe's intersection with the non-Western world as a major focus of inquiry and theoretical syntheses within the social sciences. Yet Africa has not always been seen as central to this holistic Atlantic perspective.

In fact, in his 2005 formulation of Atlantic history's concepts and contours, historian Bernard Bailyn situates the genesis of Atlantic history in the post-World War II era, placing its roots in the sociopolitical agendas of the period. By 1960 the notion of an Atlantic system grounded in the shared experiences of the preceding centuries was increasingly taken for granted as a defined area of study. Yet the prevailing perceptions, Bailyn argues, placed the nexus of this Atlantic world in the northern hemisphere with the progeny of Western civilization, most particularly the English speaking progeny; the points of Arthur Whitaker's Atlantic triangle being Latin America, English America, and Europe.<sup>4</sup> Bailyn's intellectual framing of the Atlantic system is best seen within the sociocultural context of the mid-twentieth century and the sociopolitical alliances and agendas of the post-World War II era. In this coign of vantage, if Africa was part of the Atlantic world its history was not generally perceived as central to it. Indeed, well into the second half of the twentieth century it was still possible for some scholars to assert that Africa had no history. In 1963, Hugh Trevor-Roper, then Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford University, described the African past as "the unedifying gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but

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3. DeCorse 1980, 1991, 2001b, 2012; also see Posnansky 1984, 2001, 2002, 2012; Ogundiran and Falola 2007.

4. Arthur Whitaker, cited in Bailyn 2005: 25.

irrelevant corners of the globe”.<sup>5</sup> For Trevor-Roper documentation – written documentation – was paramount for the writing of history.<sup>6</sup> He was not alone in this perspective.<sup>7</sup> Such scholarly imaginations reify popular images of Africa as the Dark Continent that rests beyond the knowable past.<sup>8</sup> In light of such observations, demonstrating that Africa has a history has remained a persistent theme in studies of the African past. As Frederick Cooper observed, “African history was subaltern studies by default”.<sup>9</sup>

Suffice it to say that others have drawn the genesis of the Atlantic World and Africa’s engagement with it quite differently than in the contours and concepts outlined by Bailyn.<sup>10</sup> It is of more than parenthetical note that historian W. E. B. Du Bois’ examinations of African and African American history, Eric Williams work on the Atlantic slave trade, and anthropologist Melville Herskovits’s early anthropological studies of African and American cultural connections

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5. Hugh Trevor-Roper in a 1963 televised lecture on “The Rise of Christian Europe”, quoted in Oliver 1997:284, 291-292; also see Trevor-Roper 1964: 9; 1969: 6; cf. Connah 1998; Davidson 1995:xxii-iv; Davis 1973; Deveneaux 1978; Fugelstad 1992; Krech 1991; Posnansky 1969: 13-14, 1982: 348.
  6. In his study of the last days of Adolf Hitler, Trevor-Roper reviewed oral information but was highly critical of it, appropriately so in this case, concluding that: “Anyone who undertakes an inquiry of such a kind [the study of oral histories] is soon made aware of one important fact: the worthlessness of mere human testimony” (Trevor-Roper 1995: xxi). Yet oral sources, like documentary, must be evaluated in the contexts that produced them and there are rich illustrations of their potential.
  7. Feierman 1993.
  8. Hammond and Jablow 1992; Mayer 2002.
  9. Cooper 1994: 1525.
  10. For recent perspectives of the Atlantic World with much wider perspective see Benjamin 2009; Cañizares-Esguerra and Seeman 2007; Canny and Pagdan 1987; Gilroy 1993; Mitchell 2005; Ogundiran and Falola 2007; Thornton 1992, 2012.

are unmentioned in Bailyn's 2005 assessment of the margins of Atlantic history. Yet, in a variety of works prior to World War II, Du Bois had examined African history, the slave trade, and the interconnections of the Atlantic world.<sup>11</sup> Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery*, published in 1944, re-sited the causes of abolition and laid the foundation for future generations of Caribbean scholars.<sup>12</sup> In a similar vein, Herskovits' historical contextualization of African-American culture in terms of its African antecedents, articulated before 1940, remains foundational in studies of the African Diaspora.<sup>13</sup> While not explicitly labeled as such, these perspectives were the precursors of the inclusive narratives central to postcolonial vantage. The 1960s and 70s saw increasing research on the Atlantic world, as well as a burgeoning amount of work on local and regional histories in Africa. The demography of the slave trade also emerged as a major focus within African history.<sup>14</sup> The number of foundational studies in African history published during the 1960s and 1970s is remarkable, notable all the more because of the number of contributions by African scholars.<sup>15</sup> These might be called the golden decades of precolonial African history. In light of this research, Bailyn's contours of the study of the Atlantic past seem ill-drawn and restrictive.

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11. Du Bois 1896, 1924, 1930, 1939, 1947.

12. Williams 1944; Solow and Engerman 1987.

13. Herskovits 1933, 1936, 1941.

14. Curtin 1969. Bailyn (2005:32) recognizes Curtin as 'discovering' the South Atlantic system. Although Curtin's work was critical in focusing scholarship on the slave trade and quantifying it, Du Bois, Herskovits, and others had grappled with the slave trade and the interconnected nature of African and American history decades earlier.

15. E.g. Abraham 1978; Ajayi and Smith 1964; Ajayi and Crowder 1971, 1974; Akintoye 1971; Alagoa 1964; Bascom 1969; Brooks 1972; Curtin 1975; Daaku 1970; Diop 1960; Feinberg 1969; Flin 1976; Fyfe 1962a; Fyle 1979; Fynn 1971; Hopkins 1973; Jones 1979; Kea 1974; Klein 1968; Kup 1975; Law 1977; Lovejoy 1974; Vansina et al 1964; Oliver 1977; Peterson 1969; Polanyi 1966; Rodney 1966, 1970; Ryder 1969; Smith 1969; Thornton 1977.

## Postcolonialism, Subalternity, and Other Voices

The increasing recognition of Africa in the early Atlantic world was not simply description of culture histories, but the examination of the theoretical relevance of these early interconnections to the modern world. Africa emerged both as a place of autonomous development and as an integral part of the world economic system.<sup>16</sup> Also inherent in many of the emerging studies of the non-Western world were critiques of the metanarratives produced by the former colonial powers. Walter Rodney published *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* in 1972. Recognition of the wider economic structure of the Atlantic world was coupled with increasing appreciation of regional variation, the distinctive character of cultural manifestations, and locally shaped trajectories, examples being Joseph Inikori's volume *Forced Migration* and Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People Without History*.<sup>17</sup> On one hand these studies seek to chart the impacts of European expansion and hegemony on African societies and the wider non-Western world. On the other, they are more broadly concerned with revealing the histories of the 'native' societies with which Europe interacted and whose stories had often been untold in dominant historiographies.

Postcolonialism and subaltern studies emerged as defined foci of research during the last three decades of the twentieth century and they have become pervasive themes in the social sciences. While they share aspects of conceptual vantage and have to some extent been conflated in many writings, they nonetheless have distinct intellectual histories, theoretical underpinnings, and current usage. Postcolonialism emerged in the decades following the independence of nations that had been colonized by Europe. It is not, however, a temporal period beginning

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16. For example, the intersection with Europe was integral to Wallerstein's (1976:4) formulation of world-system theory. For a review African history and its transformation in the context of world histories see Feierman (1993).

17. Joseph Inikori 1982; Eric Wolf 1982.

after independence,<sup>18</sup> but rather the engagement with and destabilization of the power relations, social hierarchies, and metanarratives of the former colonial powers. European hegemony and imperialism are central to postcolonial theory and, subsequently, the interrelationships of Europe and the non-Western world are central areas of study. Although Edward Said's [1968] *Orientalism* is often viewed as foundational to postcolonial scholarship, similar themes, including many of the nuances of theoretical framing, had been articulated earlier by other writers, West African examples being Chinua Achebe [1959], Kenneth Onwuka Dike [1956],<sup>19</sup> Cheikh Anta Diop [1960],<sup>20</sup> and especially Jacob Festus Ade Ajayi [1961a, 1961b, 1968].<sup>21</sup> Subaltern Studies emerged in the 1970s with a group of English and Indian historians interested in providing views of the colonial past from the perspective of the colonized rather than the colonizers. Subaltern perspectives seek to give voice to the lives of marginalized populations such as newly arrived immigrants, the impoverished, and women.<sup>22</sup> It has subsequently been incorporated into postcolonial studies by scholars working on other formerly colonized areas particularly Latin America, the Caribbean and, to a lesser extent, southern and east Africa.<sup>23</sup> Both terms have become widely used across the social sciences.

While some researchers have viewed postcolonialism and subaltern studies as having clear definitional parameters, the terms have

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18. It is, however, often used in this sense in African history, the "Post-Colonial Period" following the "Pre-Colonial" and "Colonial" periods.

19. Also see Nwaubani 2000.

20. Also see Holl 1990; 1995.

21. Also see Ajaye and Smith 1964; Hess 1971.

22. E.g. Spivak 1988. The revealing of subaltern voices was integral to post-colonial studies but Spivak (1988) problematized the idea of retrieving them.

23. E.g. Cooper 1994; Ludden 2002; Temu and Swai 1981. Postcolonialism as a theoretical vantage explicitly labeled as such has not been a central theme in West African scholarship, but has received some attention, as discussed below (see Holl 2009; McIntosh 2009).

become increasingly ambiguous with regard to their theoretical positionality, conceptual framing, and application.<sup>24</sup> Hence, for example, the contributions in Peter Schmidt's edited volume, *Postcolonial Archaeologies in Africa*, range widely in terms of their engagement with specific postcolonial and subaltern literature. On one hand they confront the legacies of colonial infrastructure, and how these have shaped and continue to shape the practice of archaeology in Africa.<sup>25</sup> On the other, stories of young West African academics that have been marginalized and given limited access to resources reflect both colonial legacies and the power dynamics of post-independence Francophone West Africa. As Roderick McIntosh observes, some asymmetries of power were inherited wholesale from the colonial experience, while others were created anew,<sup>26</sup> a postcolonial vantage thus becoming a trope for any marginalized voices in historical reconstruction both within and outside of contexts of European colonization and hegemony.

With regard to West Africa, mapping of the postcolonial landscape is particularly challenging. While sharing an Atlantic past and transition to modernity, the colonial and independence experiences represented across the region are by no means uniform in terms of the indigenous

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24. Ludden 2002; Munene and Schmidt 2010; Schmidt and Patterson 1995.

25. Schmidt 2009a. In particular see the chapters by Schmidt (2009a:4-6); Holl (2009); and McIntosh (2009: 118-124). Also see Croucher and Weiss 2011; Munene and Schmidt 2010; Schmidt and Patterson 1995; Schmidt and Walz 2007a, 2007b.

26. McIntosh 2009: 116. For McIntosh (2009: 117) the ultimate goals of a postcolonial archaeology are: "1) The fullest, unencumbered investigation of the African contribution to the variety of human responses to social, environmental, and cognitive change; 2) The honest dissemination of that knowledge so that it can be 'presented' for the ultimate improvement of the lives of African peoples; 3) The widest dissemination of that knowledge elsewhere in the world so that African alternatives can help suggest counter versions of causation and sequences in distant regions perhaps still constrained by standard narratives of prehistory."

sociocultural institutions present, the contact settings represented, and the historical trajectories followed. Individual colonial enterprises were quite varied and fluid; “an incomplete suite of experimental projects and ideological justifications”.<sup>27</sup> The entire African continent was partitioned into spheres of influence and it can thus be said to be one of the most thoroughly colonized regions of the world. Yet compared to some world areas, the period of formal colonial rule in West Africa was relatively brief. The first British Crown Colony was established on the Freetown peninsula, Sierra Leone in 1808 as a homeland for freed slaves. Most other European colonies were not established until the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries.<sup>28</sup> This did not minimize European hegemonic impacts and their legacies. While the imposition of colonial rule came in the nineteenth century, the process of Africa’s incorporation into an increasingly global economy and the generation of narratives of Africa’s positionality *vis a vis* the colonial powers began long before.<sup>29</sup>

The history of scholarship with regard to the different nation states of West Africa has also been dramatically different; this in and of itself being a colonial legacy.<sup>30</sup> The areas that today have some of the most developed university and research infrastructures are ones that were the locations of early colonial research centers, including the *Institut Français de l’Afrique Noire* (now the *Institut Fondamental de l’Afrique Noire*) in Dakar, the University of Ghana at Legon, and

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27. Richard 2011: 211.

28. Pakenham 1991.

29. Dike’s (1956) seminal work on the Niger Delta affords a nuanced view of the progression from the economic imperialism of the precolonial period to formal colonial control.

30. See Robertshaw (1990), especially chapters by de Barros (1990); Holl (2009) and Kense (1990).

the University of Ibadan.<sup>31</sup> There are now dozens of practicing archaeologists in these areas, in stark contrast to areas such as Sierra Leone, the Gambia, and Liberia which have no indigenous archaeologists or related infrastructure. The paucity of knowledge about Atlantic and pre-Atlantic history has dramatic implications for the interpretation of the past: In Sierra Leone, history texts – written by Europeans and Sierra Leoneans alike – out of necessity, largely begin with the European arrival and primarily focus on the African polities and transformations during Atlantic period.<sup>32</sup> ‘History’ only emerges through the lense of the increasing prevalence of European documentary source material. These views of the African past lie in stark contrast to areas such as Nigeria where archaeological research at sites such as Igbo Ukwu, Ife, Benin City, and Old Oyo are testament to African technological, cultural, and sociopolitical complexity long pre-dating European contact.

Regardless of the disparities in scholarly research across the region, it is clear that the study of Atlantic world has become an important if not the predominant theme in studies of the West African past. This is the result of trends in both academic research and popular history. West African scholarship to some extent parallels the focus on colonial and post-colonial history (here referring to the post-colonial, independence era) and the expansion of ‘historical’ archaeology as a discrete area of

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31. Posnansky 1982; Robertshaw 1990; Holl 2009.

32. E.g. Alie 1990: 31; Fyfe 1962b. Fyfe (1981:7) discusses the potential contribution of archaeology, but underscores the limited work undertaken. The paucity of documentary evidence for early Atlantic history has led some scholars to suggest that Sierra Leone was occupied by hunter gatherers until the formation of the first settled agricultural communities between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries (Siddle 1968, 1969; cf. DeCorse 2012). In fact, archaeological data, particularly from Yengema Cave in southern Sierra Leone, suggest occupation for at least the last 10,000 years, with indirect evidence for agriculture (ground stone celts and ceramics) dating to between the second and third millennium AD (Coon 1968).

study in other world areas. The development and marketing of heritage tourism specifically aimed at Africans in the Diaspora and projects such as the UNESCO Slaves Routes Project has also resulted in increasing interest in the history, traditions, and archaeology of sites associated with the period of the Atlantic trade; especially in Ghana, Benin, and the Senegambia.<sup>33</sup> The refocusing of archaeological research on these areas has come at the expense of other research, such as ethnohistory, and Iron Age and Stone Age studies.<sup>34</sup> In a similar vein, historical research has increasingly focused on the history of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>35</sup> This conceptual reframing has implications for the types of research and source materials considered.<sup>36</sup> To some extent the analytical and methodological approaches utilized, as well as accumulation of the relevant substantive data, have not developed in tandem with the theoretical and conceptual themes explored.

### **Methodologies of the Past**

Postcolonialism and subaltern perspectives have dramatic implications with regard to the data used and how narratives of the past are constructed. Narratives of the past are contextualized by the social, political and cultural complexes that created them. Thus many postcolonial researchers have underscored the inherent bias of the documentary source materials created by the colonizers and, indeed, in the creation of the colonial archives. Inherently, their content and construction are imbedded in European hegemonies and they thus serve to reify European narratives of progress, capitalism and modernity.

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33. DeCorse 2008a; Schramm 2010.

34. Holl 2009: 140-141.

35. Chouin 2012.

36. The increasing focus by historians on the colonial or postcolonial periods in part is driven by the comparative paucity of documentary source material for earlier time periods.

Praveena Gullapalli, for example, underscores the problems inherent in “engaging with a colonial archive that by its very nature favors and supports analysis of the colonizer at the expense of the colonized, the elite at the expense of the subaltern”.<sup>37</sup> Yet regardless of the limitations of the colonial archives, to ignore them is untenable; the holistic interpretation of the past depending on the substantive and critical appraisal of the array of sources represented.<sup>38</sup> Careful analysis and the contextualization of documentary source material allow subaltern voices to be teased out. A pioneering case in point of the use of colonial archives to provide an African voice is Kenneth O. Dike’s *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta*, published in 1956. Dike’s study, substantively grounded in archival sources, stepped outside many of the then prevalent tenets of African history. It is all the more notable for its foregrounding of African agency; Europeans being viewed as only one set of players in the Atlantic landscape.<sup>39</sup> Colonial archives also afford unique insight into colonizers: the colonial enterprise, the processes of colonialism, and the colonizers themselves are legitimate foci of study in their own right and have, to some extent, been understudied.<sup>40</sup>

Nonetheless, recognition of limitations of European source material has led researchers trying to give voice to subaltern lives to explore other source material, such as oral traditions and archaeology. In this

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37. Gullapalli 2008: 58; cf. discussion in Schmidt 2009a: 1-2.

38. DeCorse and Chouin 2003; also see DeCorse 2008b; Falola and Jennings 2003; Philips 2005; Stahl et al 2004.

39. Yet while the substantive grounding of Dike’s work in documentary sources and its emphasis on African agency can be lauded, many of the criticisms directed at his analyses of the internal history of the Niger Delta could have been addressed through the greater use of oral traditions, as discussed below. For expanded discussion see Nwaubani 2000.

40. E.g. Cooper 1994: 1529-1532. Indeed, virtually no archaeological work has been undertaken on European sites or the colonial period, work having remained focused on structural histories or associated African settlements (E.g. Richard 2011).

respect, research into the African past has a long standing tradition of utilizing non-documentary source material; a counterpoint to perspectives that privilege written documentation.<sup>41</sup> This view of the past, which recognizes the limits of different knowledge categories, inherently engages with postcolonial and subaltern perspectives. It has resulted in distinct methodologies that, in Peter Schmidt's words, open "new theoretical perspectives in postcolonial studies, especially in the recovery and use of subaltern histories that challenge and help to deconstruct colonial narratives about the past, as well as provide truly multivocal views of the past."<sup>42</sup>

This interdisciplinary approach recognizes the reality that, for that majority of sub-Saharan Africa, there is no documentary source material until the nineteenth century. While there are examples of indigenous West African writing systems, including the Vai script in Liberia, the *Nsibidi* script in Nigeria, and the hieroglyphic writing of the Bamum, these sources provide limited spatial, topical and temporal coverage.<sup>43</sup> For the majority of African cultures, the chosen means of transmitting cultural information was not written characters but oral expression. It is in this form that the majority of precolonial African cultures maintained their traditions and this source provides the most substantive emic perspective of the African past. Given the paucity of written sources and the centrality of oral traditions in many cultures it is not surprising that the interpretation oral source material has received substantial attention from researchers working on the African past. Oral historical data have long been central to African studies and African scholars were among the first to grapple with their methodological and analytical

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41 E.g. Vansina et al 1964; also see Agbaje-Williams 1986; Andah and Opoku 1979; DeCorse and Chouin 2003; DeCorse 1996; Feierman 1993; Philips 2005; Schmidt 1990, 2006, 2009b.

42. Schmidt 2009a: 2, 2009b.

43. Andah, Bodam, and Chubuegbu 1991.

challenges.<sup>44</sup> As a source of indigenous perspective they have been viewed as central to scholars of subaltern studies seeking to eschew a reliance on colonial archives, their inherent postcolonial voices providing a cornerstone of subaltern views. In particular, Schmidt has emphasized the use of ‘deep-time’ oral texts to provide unique insight into the African past and counter narratives to colonial and other dominant historiographies.<sup>45</sup>

Yet oral source material presents its own methodological and interpretive problems. While it has been shown to reveal unique insight into both the colonial and precolonial pasts, it too must be evaluated in terms of the social cultural and political contexts in which it was created.<sup>46</sup> Many cultures lack formalized cultural mechanisms for the retention and transmission of oral information, something that itself may be a relic of the Atlantic world. A case in point is provided by the frequently fragmented nature of oral traditions in areas such as northern Sierra Leone that were subjected to extensive slave raiding during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>47</sup> These narratives often represent partial, collapsed, or even created lineages that begin in the distant past with mythical or semi-mythical events and then present the genealogy of the current chief, thus validating present authority patterns. In contrast, in other settings oral narratives of nation-states, dominant cultural groups, and the elite often oppose and silence narratives of subordinate groups. These submerged narratives need to be recognized and explored to reveal contrasting historiographies. Yet even counter narratives may in

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44. E.g. Andah and Opoku 1979; Miller 1980; Henige 1983; Vansina 1985; Schmidt 1990.

45. Schmidt 1990, 2006.

46. Andah and Opoku 1979; Vansina 1985; Henige 1982.

47. DeCorse 2012. Though it should be noted that memories of the slave trade may be preserved in a variety of ways (e.g. Shaw 2002; Lane & MacDonald 2011).

turn silence those of other marginalized populations, what Brian Peterson has referred to as “silences within silences”.<sup>48</sup>

Just as postcolonial vantage has reshaped frames of study, so too have new foci of study emerged. The shaping of past to meet emergent heritage tourism industries has demonstrated the importance of the past in shaping current discourses. Increasing emphasis in the Atlantic past and heritage tourism has resulted in an increasing search for indigenous knowledge of the slave trade. Descendants of slaves in Africa are often reluctant to reveal their histories or perhaps prevented from doing so, positioned in the cultural categories traditionally assigned to them.<sup>49</sup> The oral tradition recounted by a woman from Gorée Island, Senegal regarding her slave past and her demand to be included in historical reconstructions from which she had been excluded is notable because of its rarity in a settlement whose population had once primarily consisted of domestic slaves.<sup>50</sup> Slave villages, such as those associated with some of the Danish plantation sites in southern Ghana, are largely unrecognized and the descendants of the enslaved Africans who inhabited them reluctant to talk about their past.<sup>51</sup>

While oral information has provided new insight into the period of the Atlantic trade and opens the possibility of subaltern views of the Atlantic past, some of the work undertaken has been driven by governmental tourist development schemes that frequently have limited grounding in historical research and present poorly constructed glosses of the past. I have been led to sites of supposed memory by guides

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48. Peterson 2008; also see Trouliet 1995. MacEachern (1993) provides of example of how an interdisciplinary approach using archaeology and oral traditions reveals the past of populations historically marginalized by dominant African polities.

49. Klein 1989.

50. Thiaw 2008.

51. This is something observed by both Bredwa-Mensah (2004) and I (DeCorse 1993).

who are not from the local ethnic group, have little or no idea of the area's history, and present engaging, though entirely fictional, stories of the past.<sup>52</sup> Historical data, including both documentary sources and oral traditions, question these narratives. Analytically, the fictive aspects of such presentations are better referred to as "historical production"<sup>53</sup> or "commentary"<sup>54</sup> to indicate their creative elements. Yet such fictive narratives can become more pervasive in popular culture than historical reconstructions based on factual data.

### **Archaeological Views of the Past**

Much of my own entrée into the African past has been through the archaeological record. Archaeology has always been closely allied with African history, a disciplinary symbiosis that is not shared in many other world areas. My research and that of the Syracuse archaeology program has focused on the impacts of European contact, the Atlantic slave trade, and the integration of Africa into an increasingly Eurocentric global economy.<sup>55</sup> Archaeology is not tangential to an understanding of the African Atlantic. It is, in fact, archaeology that provides the primary means of revealing the transformations that occurred in African societies over the past 500 years. Archaeology, especially archaeological practice

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52. For examples of interpretive problems with slave sites in Ghana see Benson and McCaskie(2004) and Schramm (2010). Perbi's (2007) work on indigenous slavery in Ghana also draws extensively on oral traditions or testimony. However, much of this oral data is unverifiable with other source material or is contradictory to it. For example, the "Hand-dug out plates" in bedrock at Salaga and Paga supposedly created by slaves are grinding hollows and their association with slaves is speculative (Perbi 2007: Platesiii, vii).

53. Austen 2001; Thiaw 2008.

54. See Vansina 1985:10-11.

55. See DeCorse 1991, 2001a, 2001c, 2012. For work on the archaeology of Atlantic Africa by the Syracuse program see: Carr 2001; Chouin 2009; Cook 2012; Gijanto 2010; Horlings 2011; Kankpeyeng 2003; Pietruszka 2011, Richard 2007; Smith 2008; Spiers 2007; Swanepoel 2004.

that documents variation, is well suited to revealing aspects of the past that do not fit into dominant narratives. Archaeological research has uncovered the varied nature of the African societies that participated in the Atlantic exchanges, challenging narratives that tend to view African societies as a single entity. Africa is, rather, revealed as a place with difference, complex meanings, and varied power relations, some of which were exploited by arriving Europeans. While my work has drawn on archaeology, my methodological grounding has been interdisciplinary in vantage. This perspective has been widely articulated by Africanists.<sup>56</sup> My research further utilizes an approach to documentary source material that underscores the careful translation and contextualization of the sources represented.<sup>57</sup>

Archaeological data make it clear that the Atlantic era was a period of dramatic change in the African past.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, it is only relatively recently that archaeological research, as well as theoretical and methodological insights, has allowed an archaeology of Atlantic Africa to be realized. To a large extent the potential of archaeology to contribute to the understanding of Atlantic Africa was still unrealized if not unrecognized four decades ago. Development of regional chronologies and assessment of changes in settlement patterns that would reveal the transformations in African societies during the period of the Atlantic world were as yet uncharted. More importantly, even in cases where work had been undertaken on African archaeological sites of the relevant time period they had often not been approached or contextualized with

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56. E.g. Agbaje-Williams 1986; Andah 1995a, 1995b; Andah and Okpoku 1979; Ogundiran 2002; Posnansky 1969, 1975, 1994; Schmidt 1983; 1990, 2006, 2009a, 2009b; Stahl 1994, 2001; Vansina et al 1964.

57. DeCorse and Chouin 2003. This is illustrated by the work of Robin Law, Adam Jones, Gerard Chouin, and the late Paul E. H. Hair (e.g. Barbot 1992; Chouin 2011; De Marees 1987; Jones 1986, 1987).

58. See DeCorse 1991, 2001a; 2001b; 2001c. The question of impact, or lack of it, has received significant attention from historians (e.g. Fage 1969; Lovejoy 1989; Manning 1990; Rodney 1966; Wrigley 1971).

an Atlantic perspective in mind. Emphasis was rather placed on the development of basic archaeological sequences, delineation of artistic traditions, the tracing of ethnic and cultural origins, or particularistic description.

There were beginnings. In particular, many of the European forts and castles in West Africa were located and mapped during the 1940s and 50s. This included early work on Gorée Island in Senegal, James Island in The Gambia, and Bunce Island in the Sierra Leone Estuary.<sup>59</sup> The majority of work was, however, undertaken in Ghana, where the greatest number of forts and outposts had been established. Yet, while now increasingly seen as iconic of the Atlantic era, the early studies of European forts were largely descriptive; structural histories undertaken within the context of restoration work. The research foci, however, were much more about the European forts than the enslaved Africans who were confined in them. The outposts have often been left unsituated within the wider African landscape and the sociopolitical contexts of which they were part. The associated artifactual material from the forts was virtually unreported.<sup>60</sup> Sadly some of the recent work on these sites has remained particularistic and limited in scope, affording little insight into the fort's inhabitants as players in the Atlantic exchange.<sup>61</sup> Doig Simmonds' limited excavations in Cape Coast Castle were unique in focusing specifically on the slaves' living conditions.<sup>62</sup> The European forts and castles, the most tangible monuments to Africa's intersection with the Atlantic world, have only emerged as symbols for

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59. DeCorse 2008a; 2010; Lawrence 1963; Posnansky and DeCorse 1986: 5-6. The first explicit mention of the Atlantic system in French literature was by Raymond Mauny in the 1960s (Holl 2009: 135).

60. In fact, it appears that at least in some cases archaeological deposits were intentionally removed to facilitate mapping.

61. See comments by Holl 2009: 140-141.

62. Simmonds 1973.

Africans in the Diaspora in the past few decades.<sup>63</sup> They stand as monuments to European capitalism, colonial intrusion, and narratives that frame the African past in terms of European contact and colonization.

While initial archaeological research in West Africa was dominated by studies of the Stone and Iron ages, there was increasing research into the more recent past and in the vast hinterlands beyond the coastal margins, though to a large extent this was not undertaken with the impacts of the Atlantic World in mind.<sup>64</sup> Not surprisingly, the archaeologists of the newly independent nations of the 1960s placed emphasis on the archaeological records of the component populations.<sup>65</sup> In Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah specifically saw archaeology both as a means of nation building and as a way of furthering pan-Africanism. The National Museum of a newly independent Ghana included displays of archaeological material from across Africa, as well as Ghana. The 1960s and 70s saw increasing work by expatriate researchers in many areas, as well as the continued expansion of archaeology programs in African universities and research institutes. To a large extent these institutions were partially if not fully staffed by African scholars by the early 1980s. By this time there were three times the number of archaeologists working in Africa as there had been two decades before. There was, indeed, reason to say that the pioneering era had passed and African archaeology

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63. Bunce Island in Sierra Leone may have been the first European fort in West Africa to be proposed as a monument to the slave trade. In 1922, J. B. Chinsman suggested that the City Council of Freetown purchase the island from the British Colonial government “so that its caves and tombstones could be preserved as historical monuments of the slave trade” (quoted in Wyse 1990: 24; also see DeCorse 2008b). Nothing appears to have been done and efforts to preserve the site are still underway. Since the 1990s, other sites such as Goreé Island in Senegal, James Fort in the Gambia, Cape Coast and Elmina castles in Ghana, and Ouidah in Benin have increasingly been seen as places as memory for Africans in the Diaspora.

64. See DeCorse 1991; 2001b:2-3.

65. Posnansky 1982; Holl 1995, 2009: 140-141.

had “come of age”.<sup>66</sup> The tempo and direction of work continued to increase during the 1980s. In this respect, the decades between the mid-1980s and the present might be seen as the beginning of golden age of the archaeology of Atlantic Africa, akin to the coming of age of precolonial African history in the 1960s and 1970s. This period has witnessed the start of many projects, some still underway, in Nigeria, the Senegambia, Ghana, Benin, Cameroun, Mali, Chad and other areas.<sup>67</sup> As was the case with the earlier growth of African history, the archaeological research undertaken in the past three decades is made all the more striking by the dramatic increase in the amount of research undertaken by African scholars.<sup>68</sup> Yet this burgeoning of research is more

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66. Posnansky 1982, 2001.

67. See discussions and reviews in Andah 1982; Anquandah 1982; Atherton 1983; de Barros 1990; DeCorse 2001a; Kense 1990; Holl 1995, 2009; Monroe and Ogundiran 2012; Ogundiran 2005; Posnansky 1970, 1975, 2001; Posnansky and DeCorse 1986.

68. The amount of research, particularly work by African doctoral students both in the United States and Africa is very impressive, especially with regard to Nigeria. The range of work cannot be fully surveyed here. For examples of research focused on sites of the last five hundred years undertaken during this period see: Adediran 1980; Agbaje-Williams 1983; Agorsah 1983, 1985, 2003; Akinjogbin 1992; Alabi 1996; Aleru 1993; Andah and Akpobasa 1996; Anquandah 1985; Apoh 2008; Aremu 1990; Bellis 1972, 1982; Boachie-Ansah 1986; Bredwa-Mensah 1996, 2002, 2004; Chouin 2002, 2008; Chouin and DeCorse 2010; Connah 1975; Cruz 2003; David et al 1988; David & Sterner 1999; de Barros 1985, 1988; DeCorse 1980, 1989, 1993, 2001c; DeCorse and Spiers 2009; Effah-Gyamfi 1979, 1985; Eyo 1974; Gavua 2000; Gosselain 2000; Gosselain et al 1996; Goucher 1981, 1984; Herbert and Goucher 1987; Hill 1970; Kelly 1997a, 1997b; Kense 1981; Kiyaga-Mulindwa 1982; MacEachern 1993, 2001; Mayor 2010, 2011; Monroe 2003, 2007; Monroe and Ogundiran 2012; N'Dah 2009; Norman 2008; Oghuagha & Okpoku 1984; Ogundele 1990; Ogundiran 1990, 2000, 2002; Ogundiran and Falola 2007; Posnansky 1987, 2004; Richard 2011; Shinnie and Kense 1989; Stahl 1994, 1999, 2001; Stahl and Cruz 1998; Sterner and David 1991; Swanepoel 2005; Thiaw 1999; Usman 1998.

the case in some areas than others. While archaeological chronologies for some regions have been well established and research has been extended into many new areas, much of the research has continued to concentrate in the countries where early colonial research centers had been established.

These decades also witnessed the development of historical archaeology as a discipline in the Americas, particularly the United States. The foci and objectives of Americanist historical archaeology have varied, ranging in view from being an ancillary of historical study, to the study of the modern world, particularly the expansion of European capitalism.<sup>69</sup> An important contribution of these studies has also been in revealing the lifeways of peoples within colonial populations often marginalized or unmentioned in written documents, especially enslaved Africans.<sup>70</sup> These studies reflect substantive research, as well as varied theoretical and interpretive vantage. However, since its inception American historical archaeology has retained a pervasive focus on sites associated with the European presence – colonial settlements, forts, missions, plantations, military, and trading sites – and the indigene

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69. Schuyler 1978; Orser 1996: 23-28. In one of the most widely read books on American historical archaeology, James Deetz noted a popular definition of historical archaeology as “the archaeology of the spread of European culture throughout the world since the fifteenth century and its impact on indigenous peoples” (Deetz 1977: 5). In fact, in wider, global perspective a variety of archaeological research focusing on pre- and post-fifteenth century periods ranging from classical to Medieval and Islamic archaeology make use of written sources and can be appropriately referred to as ‘historical archaeology’.

70. Yet if its potential was recognized, general acceptance of its contribution was not universal or quick in coming. In 1981 the Prime Minister of Jamaica could comment, with regard to Afro-Jamaican archaeology, that “the slaves had nothing so there was nothing to find” and further that tourists were “more interested in the tangible remains of the Spanish and the English such as their stone churches, sugar mills and plantation homes” quoted by Merrick Posnansky (2002: 46).

communities directly associated with them, lesser attention being focused on Native American settlements of the wider hinterlands, these generally remaining the purview of prehistorians. While this Americanist perspective of historical archaeology has sometimes been employed with regard to Africa,<sup>71</sup> to the extent the term has been used it has been more generally defined in terms of the presence of written source material, whether Arabic or European, and oral sources.<sup>72</sup> The disciplinary concentration of American historical archaeology on capitalism and European expansion has been challenged by scholars working in Africa who see it as too limiting in terms of its stress on European expansion and associated documentary sources.<sup>73</sup>

In practice, the research foci of West African archaeology have increasingly shifted from an early focus on the archaeology of the Stone Age and Early Iron Age to the archaeological record of the more recent past. Notably, while this research often makes extensive use of archival and oral source material, it has often not been defined as historical archaeology by its practitioners. The trend is such that Holl has observed that in West Africa “Early and Middle Stone Age research is virtually extinct.”<sup>74</sup> The amount of data on the archaeological record of the post-fifteenth century period has, however, allowed for changes in artifact inventories, settlement patterns and associated sociopolitical changes,

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71. E.g. Robertshaw 2004: 376.

72. Africa has a long history of other ‘historical’ archaeologies, encompassing the archaeology of early Islamic settlements known through Arabic sources and Iron Age African history assessed through oral histories. As Behrens and Swanepoel (2008: 25) observe “If colonial contact, however broadly defined, delimits historical archaeology then much of Africa’s past is left outside of history (prehistory), or rendered non-historical.” Also see Agbaje-Williams 1986; Behrens and Swanepoel 2008; DeCorse 1996, 1997, 2001b; Feierman 1993: 183; Hall 1997; Horton 1997; Reid and Lane 2004.

73. E.g. Agbaje-Williams 1976, 1986; DeCorse 1996, 2001b.

74. Holl 2009: 140.

to be placed in context in a way that was previously impossible. These data provide both a context for the study of the African Diaspora and demonstrate the dramatic transformations that occurred in African societies during the Atlantic era.<sup>75</sup> The parallel development of Diaspora archaeology and the archaeology of Atlantic Africa makes Akin Ogundiran's and Toyin Falola's<sup>76</sup> recent volume bringing together contributions from both sides of the Atlantic particularly timely, signaling the emergence of a truly transatlantic archaeology. Foregrounding Africa and the African past will address some of the concerns that Africanists have long expressed with regard to the lack of engagement with African material that characterizes many archaeological studies of the African Diaspora.<sup>77</sup>

## Conclusion

The expansion of European capitalism is arguably the defining event of the modern world and thus represents an essential research focus. And that cannot be minimized. But is the Atlantic world *the* topic, *the* most important theme, in the understanding of the West African past? It is certainly important given the impact of the Atlantic world on West Africa and West Africa's role in shaping that world. Yet to underscore this intersection as the defining event of the modern world ultimately limits our conceptual vantage. Both the African past and the emergence of the modern world are wider spatially and temporally than the bounds of European contact and expansion. West Africa did not rest isolated and unconnected with other regions prior to the advent of European contact. The trans-Saharan trade and the economic and cultural exchanges it engendered – including the spread of Islam – both predates

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75. DeCorse 1991, 2001a, 2001b; Posnansky 1984.

76. Ogundiran and Falola 2007.

77. DeCorse 1999; Hauser and DeCorse 2003; Kelly 2004; Posnansky 1984, 2002.

the arrival of the Europeans on the West African coast and continues to impact the landscapes of modernity. While there is no question that European capitalist economy and its associated technologies had dramatic consequences, these were nonetheless articulated within the framework of local responses and cultural traditions. Understanding of the transformations that occurred during the Atlantic period and the full complexity of African history necessitates the study of Africa's deeper past. My own perspective has sought to place the transformations of the Atlantic World within these wider contexts. Hence my research has not solely focused on sites of the Atlantic period, but equally on both pre-Atlantic and Atlantic pasts. Studies of the transformations of the past five hundred years cannot view African societies through the static lenses of ethnohistories constructed from limited documentary sources and archaeological data dating centuries after the advent of the Atlantic world. Nor can the archaeological examination of these transformations be simplistically evaluated on the basis of changes in artifact inventory.

Such broad perspective and pre-Atlantic vantage are by no means unique; they are well represented in studies of the West African past and foundational in West African, especially Nigerian, scholarship since the 1960s. Dike, Ajayi and others of the Ibadan School situated the colonial period as a brief episode in African history, a history grounded in African agency.<sup>78</sup> These perspectives are not without disciplinary critique. The point here, however, is their framing of views of the past that privilege African history and African agency. In many respects, these works prefigure and engage the thrust of postcolonial and subaltern literatures. The periodization of the past has been a reoccurring theme in West African archaeology; a necessity in structuring the chronological dimensions of the material record. Yet researchers have often fluidly crossed these temporal boundaries. An early illustration of this is seen in

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78. E.g. Ajayi 1968. Similar views have also been expressed with regard to former French colonial enclaves (see Piault 1987; Awasom and Bojang 2009).

Raymond Mauny's *Tableau Géographique de l'Ouest Africain au Moyen Age* (1961), which afforded both conceptual and substantive underpinning for future work. His treatment of the more recent past, as well as earlier periods, counterbalanced the prevailing emphasis on the Stone Age. Reviewing West African archaeological research of the past five decades one is struck by the number of studies that span the entirety of the first and second millennium CE, in some instances the 'boundaries' of European arrival and the advent of documentary sources passing unnoticed.<sup>79</sup> This reflects both the lived past and the archaeological record, which lie unbounded by the presence or absence of written or oral source material. Similar themes resonate with essays on precolonial Nigeria in Akin Ogundiran's edited volume in honor of Toyin Falola. The volume underscores Falola's perspective of the need to contextualize political, social and cultural developments in terms of their deeper historical contexts and seeks to transcend "the artificial and theoretically impoverished dichotomies between traditional and modern, prehistory and history, precolonial and colonial to demonstrate how dynamic, complicated and deep the history of Nigeria was before the late nineteenth century."<sup>80</sup> The study of Africa's deeper past is crucial to both the understanding of the transformations that occurred during the Atlantic period and the full complexity of the African past. Studies of the contact period, resistance to conquest, and the advent of colonialism must equally grapple with the social, cultural, and political nuances of African societies both before and during the Atlantic period. They must also examine the varieties of European contact and colonialism, and the varied guises of hegemony.

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79. E.g. Agbaje-Williams 1983; Agorsah 2003; Akinjogbin 1992; Chouin 2009, 2012; Chouin and DeCorse 2010; Cruz 2002; DeCorse 2001a, 2001x, 2001b, 2012; Effah-Gyamfi 1985; Eyo 1974; Kankpeyeng 2003; Kelly 1997b; Kiyaga-Mulindwa 1982; MacEachern 2012; N'Dah 2009; Ogundiran 2005; Richard 2007; Smith 2008; Spiers 2004; Stahl 2001; Thiaw 2008.

80. Ogundiran 2005:3-4.

Such holistic perspectives are inherently ‘postcolonial’ – counter-colonial – in vantage. They transcend notions of ‘prehistory’, ‘protohistoric,’ and ‘historic’, and their reincarnations into ‘precolonial’ and ‘colonial’ narratives. Rather they eschew these artificial periodizations of the past.<sup>81</sup> Africa is shown to have had its own historical trajectories, technological developments, and sociopolitical enterprises. The arrival of the Europeans and the documentary record are not viewed as the preeminent events in the African past. Often the Atlantic world, nascent capitalism and European contact are unreferenced; the historiographies presented inherently challenging and subverting pervasive metanarratives of European expansion and hegemony. Africans are shown to have been well adept at seizing economic opportunities, markets, and outlets beyond the confines of Atlantic, colonial, or neo-colonial frameworks.<sup>82</sup> Africa also presents its own unrepresented, marginalized, subaltern voices, outside of the contexts of European contact and interactions. Such vantage necessitates a view of the past engaging with, but unconfined by the presence or absence of the documentary record.

Understanding of Africa’s deep, pre-Atlantic past is germane to this perspective. If we fail to place West Africa in these wider vistas we run the risk of inadvertently reifying interpretations that begin African history with the arrival of the Europeans. The point is not to underscore the ‘precolonial’ or ‘colonial’ past as more important or of greater significance than the other. Rather, the objective is to recognize the breadth of the African past and not increase the focus on one interpretive vantage at the expense of another. As Gerard Chouin and I point out in a recent *Journal of African History* article, the Atlantic factor in African history, as well as Africa’s role in the Atlantic past, are essential themes

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81. This resonates with trends in historical scholarship (e.g. Feierman 1993).

82. As Cooper (1994:1529-1532) observes, a consequence of avoiding the study of the colonizer has left some aspects of African agency in the colonial period understudied.

in the study of the modern world.<sup>83</sup> Yet a predominate focus on the Atlantic past at the expense of pre-Atlantic history runs the risk of subsuming the African past into a footnote in European expansion, European hegemony, and the irresistible spread of capitalism outside of its European cradle. Such a Eurocentric view of Atlantic history is not consistent with historical realities.

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83. Chouin and DeCorse 2010.

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What do the labels 'Historic period', 'historical archaeology', and 'Colonial' imply about the source materials drawn on, the time periods covered, and the conceptual vantages taken in interpreting the West African past? The historiographies presented are equally relevant to the understanding of the past—that is, the impacts of European contact, the Atlantic slave trade, and colonization—as they are to the present; the social, economic, and cultural landscapes of modernity, and how our views of the past shape these landscapes. This essay considers the varied epistemological threads represented and their interpretive implications. Although the hegemonic and transformative nature of Africa's intersection with the Atlantic World is underscored, the need to situate these developments within the wider scope and temporal depth of the African past is also emphasized. Archaeology's central role in providing a holistic understanding of the temporal depth and complexity of African history, as well as archaeology's unique contribution to the understanding of the Atlantic world, is underscored.

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