

Lindsay, Lisa A.: *Atlantic Bonds. A Nineteenth - Century Odyssey from America to Africa*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2017. ISBN: 978-1469631127; 328 S.

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Lisa A. Lindsay's book is a remarkable feat of microhistory and of historical scholarship in general. The monograph begins with a genealogical mystery. In *Ebony Magazine*, a 1975 article titled „The Vaughan Family: A Tale of Two Continents,“ recounted the incredible story of James Churchwill (J.C.) Vaughan's journey „back-to-Africa.“ Honoring his father's dying wish to find his family and home—lost when his father was sold across the Atlantic—Vaughan dutifully left South Carolina for Nigeria in 1853. In Yorubaland, he identified facial scarring similar to his father's—and thus, his ancestral origins. Settling in the bustling town of Lagos, Vaughan founded a prominent Yoruba family whose members became pioneering merchants and activists. They also remained in close correspondence with their family in America, who likewise retained memory of Vaughan's journeys. The subtitle of the *Ebony* article reads: „African and American descendants of former slaves have kept in touch for more than a century.“

But, as Lindsay discovers, this was not quite the full story. Instead, the tale that unfolds is far more sinuous and engrossing. As it turns out, J.C. Vaughan's father, Scipio Vaughan, was not born in Africa. He was born enslaved in Richmond, Virginia. And though he did insist that his children make their way back to the continent, it was not possible for J.C. Vaughan to have found his father's facial scarring in Yorubaland, for his father had no such scars. And in fact, Vaughan had first travelled with the American Colonization Society (ACS) to Liberia and fought as a settler against indigenous communities. He then made his way to Yorubaland in 1856 as a missionary with the white-run, nay white supremacist, Baptist Church, where he became involved in multiple slaving wars. As Lindsay writes: „With every move he made, Vaughan left one slave society only to arrive

in another“ (p. 8). The questions that launch Lindsay's stunning monograph are: How did Vaughan's journeys become retold as a story of ancestral reconnection—of finding long lost relatives? By what means and manners did his own settler family, planted in a foreign land, become prominent Lagosians? In other words, what *really* happened?

In order to uncover this story, Lindsay draws together events unfolding simultaneously in America and West Africa: a story of multiple modes of slaving, and indeed, of „bondage.“ Chapter 1 pieces together Scipio Vaughan's family history in South Carolina: the laws constricting people of African descent, and the tribulations that Scipio endured in his fight for freedom, concluding with the bedside wish that his children return to Africa. Chapter 2 follows J.C. Vaughan's trying journey across the Atlantic with the ACS, setting sail on the *Joseph Maxwell* in 1853. Chapter 3 details Vaughan's arrival in Liberia, and his immediate conscription to a punitive expedition against African leaders in Cape Mount, who were revolting against the aggressions of their colonizers. Though Lindsay has little evidence to show Vaughan's mentality at this time, she points to the shock that he must have experienced in realizing the ubiquity of slavery in Liberia. One contemporary traveller wrote: „In Liberia, there is as much, if not more, domestic slavery—that is, the buying and selling of God's image—as in the parent States of America, over which flaunts the flag of liberty“ (quoted on p. 98).

Chapter 4 follows Vaughan's exit from Liberia in 1856 to Yorubaland, travelling with the Southern Baptist missionaries. As Lindsay writes, his choice to ally with a white-run, even white supremacist, organization might seem surprising, but it was not atypical. The Southern Baptists believed that slavery was a means of bringing black people into the one true religion, and that this quest could be continued in Africa through mission stations. Vaughan arrived in Lagos and traveled with the Baptists into the interior, once again surprised by the pervasiveness of slavery. At this time, slaving wars were tearing the societies asunder. In one battle, Vaughan was held prisoner by Ibadan's *Balogun*. He eventually returned to the mission at Ijaye only

to become a sharpshooter when Ibadan declared war on Ijaye in 1860. Between 1860 and 1867, Vaughan's house is razed multiple times as he migrates across the region, seeking safety. By the end of the chapter, Vaughan flees Abeokuta, where Christians are being persecuted.

Chapter 5 and 6 detail Vaughan's new-found life in Lagos. Developing a carpentry store on the island, Vaughan quickly became one of many African migrants who prospered under colonial rule. In this respect, he began to fare better than his American family who, although now in an emancipated world, found themselves subject to the enmity of the white supremacist South. Lindsay writes: „White elites in the American South . . . wanted African Americans to fail in order to validate and perpetuate their subordination“ (p. 179). By contrast, the colonial government prospered through African middlemen, like Vaughan, who facilitated commercial trade. Nevertheless, this did not stop colonial society from reflecting the same tenets of racial supremacy. Vaughan responded to these limitations in 1888 when he and a small group of allies broke away from the Baptist church and formed their own church, later called Ebenezer Baptist Church. This became „the first nonmissionary Christian congregation in West Africa, and one of the earliest on the African continent“ (p. 180). It was the crest on the wave of an African separatist church movement, which swept the continent in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, forming the basis for a radical—eventually anticolonial—discourse.

So why was Vaughan's story reconfigured by his descendants on both sides of the Atlantic? Lindsay draws wisdom from Saidiya Hartman: „It is only when you are stranded in a hostile country that you need a romance of origins“ (quoted on p. 229). By painstakingly reconstructing the world of J. C. Vaughan, who left behind only one letter in the archive, *Atlantic Bonds* marks an amazing feat of scholarly achievement, setting a benchmark for any such work on microhistory and trans-Atlantic connections. As Lindsay reminds us: „Our understanding of the world and its inhabitants remains woefully lopsided if we only concern ourselves with those who

left evidence of their perspectives within easy reach“ (p. 7).

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