

BOOK REVIEW

Lisa Lindsay. *Atlantic Bonds: A Nineteenth-Century Odyssey from America to Africa.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 328 pp. 26 illustrations. Map. Chart. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$35.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1469631127.

The biographical turn in the historiography of the Black Atlantic has seen the publication of many captivating life stories and micro histories. Lisa Lindsay's *Atlantic Bonds: A Nineteenth-Century Odyssey from America to Africa* is an important contribution to this field of studies, emphasizing as it does individual lives and family connections in the African Diaspora. The book chronicles the travails and triumphs of the Vaughan family, focusing on the life of James Churchill "Church" Vaughan, born in South Carolina to an emancipated slave father who in 1840 urged his children to go to Africa. As death and economic hardship descended upon the Vaughans, the family began to consider emigrating to Liberia. In 1853, Church Vaughan made the momentous choice to leave his family and sail for Monrovia, knowing that he would be unable to return to the United States, as the in-migration of free people of color to South Carolina was illegal.

In Liberia, Church assumed the rights and duties of citizenship that had been denied to him as an African American: a land grant, voting rights, and economic viability as a carpenter. Yet within three years he left Liberia for Yorubaland, a region roiled by warfare and slave trading. The catalyst for this unexpected move was the fortuitous opportunity to follow the Southern Baptist Church mission as a carpenter for a new mission station at Lagos. From Lagos to Abeokuta and then Ijaye some 150 miles inland, Vaughan followed the mission into the insecurity of Yorubaland at war. In an unexpected setting, he built for himself a kind of freedom that would have been impossible in South Carolina, owning a house in Ido and being self-supporting through carpentry and farming. But this freedom was precarious, and Vaughan was forced to escape capture by Ibadan forces during the Ibadan-Ijaye war. Moving to Lagos, he married and started a family. Shifting his occupation from carpentry to trade, he became a prosperous merchant.

The narrative of the trans-Atlantic Vaughan family juxtaposes post-bellum South Carolina and early colonial Lagos, two areas experiencing dramatic changes related to the abolition of the slave trade. Lindsay underscores the crucial contextual difference: In Lagos, blacks from the diaspora

could achieve considerable wealth and social recognition despite a context designed to favor European commerce. A key theme of the book is the impact of changing ideas of race in the Euro-American world in the “Scramble for Africa” era: the white supremacy of the Southern Baptist Church followed Vaughan to Lagos. A dispute with racist missionaries at Lagos led to the formation of the Native Baptist Church, the first non-missionary Christian congregation in West Africa. The book’s concluding chapters trace Vaughan’s role in this important if relatively understudied moment in Nigerian church history. Lindsay characterizes the Native Baptist Church as a “watershed in history of Nigerian nationalism” (205) for establishing institutional separation from white oversight. This is perhaps an overstatement; the notion of a *Nigerian* nationalism was decades away. But the book’s main contribution to Nigerian history is an examination of missionary movements in Yoruba territory beyond the well-studied Church Missionary and Methodist Missionary Societies.

Lindsay tackles the fragmentary nature of the archives (Vaughan left only one letter) to piece together the trajectories of individuals often omitted from official sources. The narrative weaves together colonial and missionary archival sources, newspapers, magazines, and family history. Through repositories in the United States, Britain, Nigeria, and Liberia, the Vaughan family story emerges as simultaneously fragmented but uniquely rich for enslaved peoples and their descendants. Vaughan appears irregularly in his travails from South Carolina to Liberia and Nigeria, and he is often absent from Lindsay’s narrative for several pages at a time. *Atlantic Bonds* fills the lacuna with descriptions of the broader world Vaughan inhabited and navigated, contextualizing a life across the nineteenth century Black Atlantic.

Vaughan’s life, as recorded in family tradition and recounted in a 1975 *Ebony* magazine article, remembers him as a Yoruba man. Lindsay discreetly untangles a not-entirely-accurate family history of a man who supposedly returned to his ancestral African homeland and found people bearing his father’s “tribal marks,” and then returned to South Carolina to create a cross-generational link between Africa and America. The truth is that he never did return to America but rather spent the rest of his life in Africa. However, Vaughan’s story is far less about ancestry, culture, and belonging. His strategy of survival and success in the face of racism, oppression, and exclusion was less about finding belonging than about building wealth and security for his family.

The book does not engage with some of the thornier issues of biography and the Black Atlantic: of representativeness and the potential pitfalls of focusing on mobility, hybridity, and “lives in between.” Other works (including other recent publications by Lindsay) have more to say about the merits and limitations of biography and microhistory within a field long dominated by quantification. *Atlantic Bonds* instead drops us immediately into a trans-Atlantic family history, parsing family stories with archival insights. With its trans-Atlantic scope and accessible writing style, this is a

useful and engaging book for African and African Diaspora history courses while at the same time a meaningful addition to Yoruba and Liberian historiography.

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For more reading on this subject, see:

- Allen, William E. 2010. "Liberia and the Atlantic World in the Nineteenth Century: Convergence and Effects." *History in Africa* 37: 7–49. doi:10.1353/hia.2010.0028.
- Law, Robin. 2010. "Madiki Lemon, the 'English Captain' at Ouidah, 1843–1852: an Exploration in Biography." *History in Africa* 37: 107–23. doi:10.1353/hia.2010.0020.
- Lindsay, Lisa A. 2017. "Biography in African History." *History in Africa* 44: 11–26. doi:10.1017/hia.2017.1.