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**Article:**

Fisher, L.D., Dodds Pennock, C., Earle, R. et al. (2 more authors) (2016) Roundtable - Jace Weaver, *The Red Atlantic: American Indigenes and the making of the modern world, 1000-1927* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press Press, 2014, £29.95). Pp. 360. ISBN 978-1-4696-1438-0. *Journal of American Studies*, 50 (4). pp. 1109-1126. ISSN 1469-5154

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875816001031>

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## Roundtable: *The Red Atlantic*

### Caroline Dodds Pennock, University of Sheffield

In 1875, seventy-two Native Americans were imprisoned at Fort Marion in Florida. Survivors of the Red River War, they had been transported hundreds of miles from their homelands and incarcerated on the Atlantic littoral. There, in a seventeenth-century Spanish fort, rechristened for a Revolutionary War hero, the prisoners became the subjects of a civilising experiment. Their commander, Richard Pratt, determined 'to bring the Indians into best understanding and relations with our people', issued them with military uniforms, instructed them in military drill, art, English and religion, and supported them in small commercial enterprises, selling alligator teeth and chartering boats to local tourists. One of Pratt's 'greatest successes' was the Cheyenne 'Oakerhater' (Okuh hatuh or Making Medicine), who was ordained an Episcopal deacon in 1881. After helping Pratt to establish the first Indian boarding school, Oakerhater worked as a missionary, preacher, Cheyenne chief and medicine man until his death in 1931 (74-85).

For Jace Weaver, Fort Marion in Florida is 'a station on the Red Atlantic' (75), one focal point for a diverse web of experiences and influences which Weaver groups into three key aspects: material; technological; and human physical or intellectual 'transportation'. Weaver's work is wide-ranging and, as might be expected of a literary critic with degrees in law and religion writing on a historical topic, strongly interdisciplinary, grappling with 'not only at how Natives and non-Natives interacted across the Red Atlantic but also at how they thought about it, conceptualized it and articulated it' (xii-xiii).

Weaver has a good eye for an arresting image, and the book is full of lively portraits of Native American life. Importantly, he makes a plea for the inclusion of 'bicultural' people in the Red Atlantic, arguing that they have previously been seen as somehow 'diminished in Indianness' (xi). This is an essential corrective to previous studies which have tended to place the 'authentic' indigenous experience in opposition to the cosmopolitanism and *mestizaje* of the Atlantic world and it results in some extraordinary and important inclusions; Paul Cuffe, the famous 'African American' Quaker abolitionist and the richest American man of colour in the late eighteenth century was actually both son and husband to women of the matrilineal Wampanoag tribe and very much a forgotten Native figure (87-98).

As a project of recovery, Weaver's work is outstanding. By taking the widest possible definition of the Red Atlantic, he reinstates figures such as Cuffe to their rightful place as part of indigenous history, uncovers forgotten individuals and provides fresh perspectives on what are often well-known stories. The book undoubtedly sheds light on a sorely neglected aspect of Atlantic history and offers plenty of enjoyable surprises. Weaver rightly dismisses the paternalism which has reduced the comparatively small numbers of indigenous travellers to 'precious' curiosities (17) and reasserts their individuality, agency and importance. But in a world where entangled histories have become mainstream,

even the most diehard Eurocentrist is hardly going to be surprised by the fact that indigenous people were active and independent agents in the Atlantic world. And, short of pointing out Indians in unusual places, it is not clear what this Red Atlantic offers that other approaches such as ethnohistory, 'entangled histories' or the New Indian History do not.

Like much Atlantic history, the framing also seems incongruously Eurocentric at times. The book's narrative starts with Columbus, and the Red Atlantic is 'inaugurated' (or 're-inaugurated') by European debates over the humanity of indigenous captives. For a book which aims to invert our understandings of the Atlantic, recentring the story and undermining established accounts, this is surprisingly well-trodden territory for the 'white Atlantic', as Weaver astutely dubs the traditional Atlantic history of Armitage et al (4). Weaver, for whom 'most periodizations are arbitrary anyway' (xi) sees the Red Atlantic as beginning in 1000 CE with the arrival of the Vikings and ending with Charles Lindbergh's solo flight across the Atlantic in 1927 which 'changed forever how people interact with the Atlantic Ocean' (16). But these dates seem not just rather arbitrary (particularly given that, as Weaver points out, regular transatlantic plane service only began in 1939), but also frame the study in terms of American interactions with non-Native peoples, implicitly sidelining indigenous understandings of the Atlantic. Native Americans did not first discover the Atlantic when Europeans arrived, any more than their own story started when they were 'discovered' by Columbus. Although their interactions with the Atlantic may have been more localized, Americans were engaged in oceanic activity long before the Viking contacts of the tenth and eleventh century CE. The strong seafaring tradition of the ancient Maya has been uncovered by the Proyecto Costa Escondida (Hidden Coast Project), for example; archaeological investigations at the Maya port of Vista Alegre show evidence of intermittent activity as early as 800 BCE.

Aiming to do for Native Americans what Gilroy's famous *Black Atlantic* did for Africans, Weaver hopes to correct our perspective, 'to restore Indians and Inuit to the Atlantic world and demonstrate their centrality to that world' (x). But while equal in ambition, and far more accessible than Gilroy's densely theorized and jargon-heavy text, *The Red Atlantic* lacks the precision which marked Gilroy's work. *The Black Atlantic* was sharply conceptualized and theoretically sophisticated, seeing the Atlantic as a 'single, complex unit of analysis' which was capable of producing 'an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective' (*The Black Atlantic*, 1999, 15). Weaver's Red Atlantic, on the other hand, is a miscellany of ideas and associations; this has the advantage of linking diverse issues and highlighting many neglected aspects of the Native American experience, but this 'shopping basket' approach also makes it difficult to identify the Red Atlantic's distinctive significance.

The Red (or Indigenous) Atlantic can be a powerful tool for reasserting indigenous agency in global history and understanding the unique and cosmopolitan roles played by Native Americans in 'the making of the modern world' (to steal Weaver's subtitle). But for me, the Fort Marion prisoners exemplify the unrealized potential of *The Red Atlantic*. Weaver crafts a

compelling tale, carefully unpicking the complexities of the white/indigenous encounter, but I am not convinced that he is telling an Atlantic story. For Weaver, it is the prisoners' coincidental proximity to the ocean which draws them into the Red Atlantic and the ocean impinges on their lives only as background, neither facilitating nor shaping their story in any distinctive way. Survivors of the war for the Great Plains, the Indians confined at Fort Marion may have lived by the ocean, but their story is really one about land. It is a familiar tale of western expansion and frontier conflict, the decimation of natural resources and the 'pacification' of the plains, of white settlements and indigenous reservations. The Fort Marion Indians certainly saw the Atlantic, they were imprisoned next to it, they fished it, drew it, even sailed on it, but their engagement with the ocean was largely peripheral, its presence coincidental to their story. Here the Atlantic is merely a maritime canvas for a traditional picture of borderland encounter. Weaver's Red Atlantic is a context where things happen, not a concept which shapes what happens, it is a descriptive rather than an interpretative framework.

Nonetheless, *The Red Atlantic* is an entertaining and interesting read which covers an ambitious range of material, although I would have liked to see Weaver focus more on analysing the 'substantial primary research' (xiii) he mentions in the preface. The scope of this book makes the use of other scholars' research utterly reasonable (Weaver himself admits this is partly 'a synthetic work' [xiii]), but I was surprised by the extensive quotation from secondary literature and heavy reliance on the few previous studies of this topic (especially Vaughan, Flint and Foreman). As a scholar working in this field, I also found it particularly frustrating to encounter the occasional vague footnote. For example, the estimate of 600,000 for the number of indigenous slaves being shipped to Europe (17) is referenced as 'based on my reading of the British, French, and Spanish sources, as well as on the secondary texts' (181-2, n.31). It is reassuring to read that 'I have run the estimate by several historians of the field who agree that it is reasonable', but the lack of any source or secondary references makes it very difficult to verify, develop on, or indeed challenge, Weaver's conclusions. Similarly, I could not easily trace the source of some very interesting military dispatches of 1886 discussing the possible surrender of the Apache (p.294, nn. 79, 81, 82, 84).

*The Red Atlantic* is a landmark study, and it has been a long time in coming. In a field so inclusive and now so mainstream as Atlantic history, it is astonishing that for more than a decade the only well-known 'Red Atlantic' was a radical, Marxist ocean, while indigenous histories remained largely terrestrial. I was excited to see the publication of a major work focusing on indigenous Atlantic history; *The Red Atlantic* opens the door to fresh and exciting conceptual ground, but it does not set out a clear path for others to follow. Weaver has strong claims to be the 'father of the Red Atlantic', but if it is to thrive then this fledgling paradigm will need a more disciplined upbringing. Without a clear sense of what exactly the Red Atlantic is, it has proved hard for Weaver to articulate why it matters. For the Red Atlantic to be a meaningful historical model, it needs to be imagined beyond its literal (or littoral) borders. The Red Atlantic has the potential to transform our understanding of history, but for that to happen it must be a conceptual space, not just a geographical one.