

Kevin Dawson. *Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora.* Pittsburgh: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. viii + 351 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4989-7.

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Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora by Kevin Dawson is a deep dive into the “waterscapes” of the African diaspora. Privileging waterscapes over seascapes allows Dawson to draw connections between salt and freshwater systems to show how Africans and New World Afro-diasporic peoples imbued the bodies of water around them with rich cultural meaning.

Dawson’s book resides at the intersection of Atlantic and African diaspora history. As the author rightly points out, Africanists and African diaspora historians made critical contributions to Atlantic history by placing Africa and the diaspora in the same analytic field. Innumerable works of scholarship including biographies, composite biographies, and micro histories that trace transatlantic connections and explore the ways in which Africa was invoked, remembered, and recreated in the diaspora have opened the way for scholars like Dawson to unearth, or better said, dredge new diasporic histories.[1]

Challenging historians, including Atlanticists, to resist treating water as “a border for land-bound events” or “an intercontinental highway,” Dawson urges us to recognize the ways that Africans and their descendants understood bodies of water as “social and cultural spaces, not as intervals between places” (p. 2). Our tendency to

treat historical actors as people of the land *or* of the sea is also limiting, Dawson argues, as many Africans lived what he evocatively calls “amphibious lives” (p. 2). Challenging us to take an “intellectual plunge” and discover histories “below the surface,” Dawson argues that recognizing the amphibious character of African and Afro-diasporic experience is the key to an entirely new aquacentric history of the African diaspora (p. 5).

It may surprise some readers that Dawson begins his story not in the Atlantic world but in the Pacific, where inexperienced European swimmers terrified of drowning marveled at Hawaiian surfers’ “natural” grace. It seems an odd place to begin a book on the African diaspora until you realize that Dawson draws critical inspiration for *Undercurrents of Power* from scholars of Oceania who have taken a lead in challenging the terracentric biases that have caused profound misconceptualizations of that sea of islands. Building on the scholarship of Epeli Hau’ofa and Nicholas Thomas in particular, Dawson works to correct similar misconceptualizations of Afro-diasporic peoples and the ways they related to aqueous environments in Africa and in the diaspora.[2]

In twelve elegantly written chapters, Dawson traces aquatic cultures created by innumerable free and enslaved swimmers, divers, and paddlers of African descent. The book is organized into two

sections that complement each other nicely. Beginning with “Swimming Culture,” a section composed of six chapters, Dawson painstakingly details the ways that Africans and their descendants in the Americas swam, dove, surfed, and engaged in aquatic blood sport, fighting off alligators with bare hands. Challenging the prevailing notion that Africans in the Americas were frightened of or traumatized by water, Dawson proves that they not only excelled at swimming, but relished “the drink” and found temporary freedom from enslavement while submerged. Furthermore, Dawson posits that captives used water as a medium of cultural transference and connection with the homelands they left behind.

Section 2, called “Canoe Culture,” is composed of seven chapters dedicated to canoeing and paddling. While Dawson does an excellent job of tracing the importance of canoeing in economic, cultural, political, and social terms in both Africa and the Americas, it is his pages-long debunking of the idea that Africans learned canoe-making techniques from Amerindians or Europeans that exemplifies the historian’s craft at its finest. Expertly outlining how terracentric and pro-Western biases in foundational studies have shaped decades of scholarship, Dawson methodically disproves each of the underlying assumptions supporting the narrative that people of African descent in the Americas did not retain canoe-making techniques or employ them in the New World.

There are true gems throughout the text that stick with the reader, like the story of the young woman from the island of Fernando Po who laughed as she dove to safety, leaving her would-be British assailant frustrated and fuming (p. 19); the shackled African captives thrown overboard in the Bonny River by Spanish slavers who managed to swim to safety (p. 27); the Gold Coast children bound to boards by their parents who were the first recorded surfers (p. 29); the captive woman near Akwamu who tried to drown herself for thirty minutes before being reclaimed by her cap-

tors; mobile Caribbean dive communities of enslaved “aquanauts” who recovered treasure from wrecked ships (p. 64); the striking Gold Coast canoe men who refused to unload the *Mavis* until they were treated better (p. 125); a man enslaved in South Carolina named Charles Ball who drew on his African-born grandfather’s experience to teach his master the best techniques for making canoes (p. 176); and the watermen who sang their paddling songs just a bit out of time in order to control the pace of their work (p. 227). Stories such as these from diverse points in the Atlantic world are used to evocatively illustrate Dawson’s central argument, which is that by “situating canoeing and swimming beneath a broad arc of time and space while examining them through an Atlantic lens, we can logically conclude that slaves recreated and reimagined African traditions in New World waterscapes” (p. 251).

The evidence on which Dawson substantiates this claim is rich and varied and includes travel accounts, slave narratives, diaries, newspapers, plantation records, government documents, and ship logs. While it is true that the sources often do not concretely link Africa to the diaspora, which the author himself admits, the skill with which Dawson weaves bits of evidence together creating a rich and compelling tapestry of experience renders concerns about the fragmentary nature of the evidence secondary. If I could level one critique against this excellent work it would be that, while the evidence and analysis is substantial enough to sustain a great degree of speculation, there are a couple of places in the text where the author might have employed a bit of restraint. However, the book as a whole is so elegantly written, so richly documented, and so profound in its contribution that even this criticism seems nit-picky.

Undercurrents of Power is suitable for undergraduates and will appeal to graduate students and professional historians in US, Latin American, African, and Caribbean history. The book should

be essential reading for specialists in the African diaspora and Atlantic history generally.

Notes

[1]. The scholarship that has reshaped Atlantic and African diaspora history and opened the way for scholars like Dawson is vast, but works that are especially influential for this author include Jason R. Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Low-country South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007); Michael A. Gómez, *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and James Sweet, *Recreating Africa: African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

[2]. See Epele Hau'ofa, *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010); and Nicholas Thomas, *Islanders: The Pacific in the Age of Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

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