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Review of Born in Blackness: Africa, Africans, and the Making of the Modern World, 1471 to the Second World War

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***Born in Blackness: Africa, Africans, and the Making of the Modern World, 1471 to the Second World War.* Howard W. French. New York: Liverwright Publishing Company, 2019. 499pp. ISBN: 9781631495823**

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As Haitian scholar Jean Casimir reminds us, the perspective from which we examine and write history matters. Rather than viewing Haitian history “from the boat,” or from the perspectives of Europeans, he invites us to center history “from the shore,” or from the perspectives of the people of Hispaniola. Pushing against similarly Eurocentric narratives of modernity, Howard French’s *Born in Blackness: Africa, Africans, and the Making of the Modern World, 1471 to the Second World War* urges us to shift the lens—what happens when we put Africa and Africans at the center of history?

The resulting volume is impressive and sweeping, covering nearly 500 years of history in under 500 pages. The introduction lays the groundwork well: while most works about modern history begin with Europe and the “Age of Discovery,” such a lens “obscures the true beginnings of the story of how the globe became permanently stitched together” and “dramatically miscasts the role of Africa” in world history (p.2). According to French, histories of modernity must begin with Africa, as this is where Spanish and Portuguese sailors honed their sailing and mapmaking techniques—the very techniques that made transatlantic voyages possible. Furthermore, African and African diaspora history is central to the rest of modern global history, a point that he makes in the introduction and returns to throughout the book. Africa, he argues, made “nearly everything that is today familiar to us possible,” yet that history has been largely ignored (p.13). French works to set the record straight and does not stay on the African continent for his analysis, connecting African history to the history of the African diaspora in the Caribbean and North and South America.

The book is organized in 38 chapters across five main parts: “The ‘Discovery’ of Africa,” “The Essential Pivot,” “The Scramble for Africans,” “The Wages of the Python God,” and “The Black Atlantic and a World Made New.” In the first part, French analyzes African kingdoms, the influence of Islam, and African encounters with Europe during the centuries leading to Spanish and Portuguese exploration of Africa and the Americas. I particularly appreciated that the first section focused on African history itself, rather than Africa’s relationship with Europe. However, as the first part comes to a close, readers learn about the important connections between Portugal and West African kingdoms in particular. This relationship, he argues, is particularly important for understanding the creation of “our familiar world,” a point that will challenge many popular narratives of European exploration and discovery (p. 83).

The second part focuses on shifting global trade dynamics and the conditions that created the transatlantic slave trade. French begins with Elmina, arguing that Portuguese trade in West Africa “helped accelerate Europe’s economic integration, and helped fuel a continent-wide price revolution” as African gold and the trade in enslaved captives fundamentally shifted Europe’s place in the emerging global economic order (p. 115). Furthermore, he argues, São Tomé became an important laboratory for plantation agriculture produced by enslaved laborers, a model the

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Portuguese then brought to the Americas. While other histories might portray Europe's increasing global power as beginning with the conquest of the Americas, French places Portuguese activity in West Africa as the first major step of Europe's changing role in the world. He is also careful to focus throughout on the stories and roles of Africans in this story, from narratives of resistance to enslavement to the cunning governance strategies of African rulers.

The third part spans the Atlantic, covering European competition over African territories and the conditions of plantation slavery and the sugar industry in the Americas. These histories are intimately connected, but often treated separately in the scholarship. By placing these histories side by side, French helps his readers to better grasp the histories of European imperialism in the African continent and the emergence of capitalism out of plantation slavery in the Americas. As he argues, these intertwined processes created European power and wealth and changed the course of world history. In doing so, he responds thoroughly to critics of Eric Williams who try to deny the importance of slavery and sugar production to European wealth and power.

The fourth part focuses on the effects of the transatlantic slave trade in West Africa and European wars with African kingdoms, which depopulated and destabilized what had once been powerful African states. These processes, French argues, fundamentally affected Africa's position in the world and "hobbled the continent's prosperity" (p. 326). The slave trade in particular inflicted deep wounds in African social systems and created generational traumas that persist to this day. The fifth part focuses on resistance to enslavement, colonialism, and racism across the Black Atlantic (borrowing Paul Gilroy's term), from the Haitian Revolution to African American music like blues and jazz. In doing so, French highlights the resilience of people who survived slavery and its manifold traumas. He also emphasizes the importance of slavery to American history, particularly American economic power, and the brave efforts of African Americans to claim their humanity in the face of dehumanizing, racist systems that persisted long after the abolition of slavery.

Photographs and maps supplement the information covered in the book. Despite the length of the book, the chapters are short (typically around 12 pages), which helps to break up the narrative into shorter pieces that are more digestible for an undergraduate or general audience. Despite the heaviness and complexity of the subject matter, French writes in a way that is accessible for non-experts. Instructors of undergraduates will find the book particularly useful, whether they assign the full monograph or specific sections. I could see a history class organized entirely around the themes of the book, with *Born in Blackness* serving as the main text. Overall, this book is a needed and welcome addition to scholarship about Africa and the African diaspora and will go a long way to correct misconceptions about the important contributions of African and African-descended people to world history.