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Introduction

This book is about race. Specifically, it is about the development of racial thought from the end of the eighteenth century through to the second half of the nineteenth century. It starts with one war – Britain's epic struggle with France between 1793 and 1815 – and ends with another – the Anglo-Asante War of 1873–4, neatly sidestepping the American Civil War in between. It is apt that warfare bookends this study since the main focus of the book are the West India Regiments (WIRs), British army units composed largely of men of African descent. This book uses the WIRs as a lens to focus in on changing racial attitudes in the anglophone Atlantic.

Racial Thought

Race is a slippery concept. As a means of categorising peoples it has only a tangential relationship with biology.[1] It is far too subjective, and often personal, for that. As individuals we each perceive race differently, primarily via sight but with the other senses contributing as well, constructing a racial identity for ourselves and for others that may not concord with those of other people.[2] Someone whom I perceive to be white, for instance, might not be perceived by others as white, or indeed think of themselves as white. If race is confusing now, it was an even more plastic concept for most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, 'being determined by lifestyles, diet and, above all, by climate'.[3]

[1] Barbara J. Fields, 'Ideology and race in American history', in J. Morgan Kousset and James M. McPherson (eds.), *Region, Race and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 143–77.

[2] For the importance of all the senses in racial categorisation, see Mark M. Smith, *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation and the Senses* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

[3] Mark Harrison, *Climates and Constitutions: Health, Race, Environment and British Imperialism in India, 1600–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 11; Sharon Block, *Colonial Complexions: Race and Bodies in Eighteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 33.

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Skin colour, usually given primacy as a means of racial categorisation today, was just one means of classifying and describing bodies. As Edward Beasley has put it, before the late eighteenth century there was 'no idea of race as we have come to know it – no widely shared theory of biologically determined, physical, intellectual, and moral differences between different human groups'.[4] English trader Bartholomew Stibbs, visiting the Gambia River in 1723, remarked, without apparent irony, that the local inhabitants were 'as Black as Coal; tho' here, thro' Custom, (being Christians) they account themselves White Men'.[5] This lack of intellectual coherence left gaps that individual non-whites were able to exploit, asserting rights to freedom, land and even suffrage for a period, that were normally reserved for whites.[6]

But fluidity in racial thought did not translate to better treatment of non-whites. As Europeans explored the world, they were supremely confident of their own moral, religious and technological superiority over all non-European people, whether Amerindian, Asian or African.[7] After all, it was Europeans who instituted a system of plantation slavery in the Americas that involved the involuntary labour of millions of Amerindians and Africans, and the deaths of a high percentage of them.[8] Yet historians have noted a clear evolution in racial thinking during the later eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries. Skin colour became the predominant racial marker, and demarcations between whites and non-whites became clearer throughout the Atlantic World, both legally and culturally. Whites came to what Roxann Wheeler has described as a form of 'cultural consensus' about their rightful dominance over all others.[9] Whites ruled simply because they

[4] Edward Beasley, *The Victorian Reinvention of Race* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1.

[5] 'Journal of a voyage up the Gambia', printed in Francis Moore, *Travels into the Inland Parts of Africa* (London: Edward Cave, 1738), 243.

[6] T. H. Breen and Stephen Innes, *'Myne Owne Ground': Race and Freedom on Virginia's Eastern Shore, 1640–1676*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 10–17.

[7] The best short summary of English attitudes towards non-whites in the early modern period remains Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes towards the Negro* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 3–43. For the link between Iberian and Anglo-American attitudes, see James H. Sweet, 'The Iberian roots of American racist thought', *William and Mary Quarterly* 54 (1997), 143–66.

[8] Between 1640 and 1700, 264,000 slaves were imported into the British West Indies, but in 1700 the enslaved population was only 100,000. Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: the Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624–1713* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 314.

[9] Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 240.

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were white, and blacks toiled because they were black. Racial categories as a result became fixed and unalterable and were the most important way colonisers defined themselves in opposition to the colonised. Heathens might become Christian, the uncivilised might become educated, but black people could not be transformed into white people. Race had always been important, particularly so in the Americas, but, as one writer put it, by 1850 'race is everything', with political, economic and social ascendancy granted to whites and denied to others.[10]

A common explanation for this transformation of racial attitudes points to slavery as the culprit.[11] The most typical encounter between white people and those of African descent involved enslavement in the Americas, with the attitudes of those coming from Europe being continuously moulded by the denigration, mistreatment and objectification of black bodies.[12] When voices began to be heard challenging enslavement from the 1770s and 1780s on, new and powerful justifications for the system were required, spelling out the clear differences between black and white people. These rationales claimed, among other things, that black people were intellectually incapable of becoming truly civilised and needed white protection, guidance and supervision.[13] Despite slavery ending in the US northern states, and subsequently in the British Caribbean, racial attitudes in anglophone societies continued this hardening trend. Indeed, as Britain's imperial tentacles began to reach every corner of the globe, involving the subjection of an immense variety of different peoples, ideas concerning 'separate, stable, physically distinct, and physically inheritable races' firmly established themselves as the intellectual mainstream.[14]

But an alternative and complementary story can be told about evolving racial attitudes, one that does not revolve around enslavement. Slavery, in some senses, overly dominates of our understanding of how black people were perceived in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth

[10] Robert Knox, *Races of Men: a Fragment* (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1850), 7.
[11] Jordan, *White over Black*, 429–541; Seymour Drescher, 'The ending of the slave trade and the evolution of European scientific racism', *Social Science History* 14 (1990), 415–50.
[12] Winthrop Jordan, *The White Man's Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 26–54.
[13] See Jeffrey Robert Young (ed.), *Proslavery and Sectional Thought in the Early South, 1740–1829* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006). Examples of those speaking out include John Wesley, *Thoughts upon Slavery* (London: R. Haws, 1774); Anthony Benezet, *The Case of Our Fellow Creatures, the Oppressed Africans* (London: James Phillips, 1784); Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (London: for the author, 1789).
[14] Beasley, *The Victorian Reinvention of Race*, 1.

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centuries. Many of those writing about black people were really writing about enslaved people and concerned with denigrating or supporting the institution of slavery and not with blackness per se, though those two things were obviously intertwined to a significant degree. Free black populations existed throughout the Atlantic World, often eking out marginal existences in port towns, but few whites paid them much attention.[15] They appear in a diverse set of records generated by church vestrymen, tax collectors, census enumerators and court clerks, but rarely, if ever, systematically over a lengthy period. No one had the time or the inclination to study free black populations closely in order to establish a concept of blackness outwith the paradigm of slavery. This is where the WIRs fit into this story because they provide historians with a detailed and sustained look at a single group of black men where slavery is, for the most part, not a relevant factor.

Black Soldiers

Black soldiers were not unique to the British army, nor were they a sudden creation of the 1790s.[16] European powers had recruited black soldiers for service in the eighteenth-century Caribbean on several occasions, and in St Domingue, in a desperate last-ditch attempt to retain control, France had both ended slavery and accepted tens of thousands of former slaves into its service.[17] The WIRs stand out from

[15] See, for example, Stewart King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig: Free People of Color in Pre-revolutionary Saint Domingue* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001); Ira Berlin, *Slaves without Masters: the Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974); Gad J. Heuman, *Between Black and White: Race, Politics, and the Free Coloreds in Jamaica, 1792–1865* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981); Christopher Phillips, *Freedom's Port: the African American Community of Baltimore, 1790–1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

[16] See, for example, Jane Landers, 'Transforming bondsmen into vassals: arming slaves in colonial Spanish America'; Hendrick Kraay, 'Arming slaves in Brazil from the seventeenth to nineteenth century'; Philip D. Morgan and Andrew O. Shaughnessy, 'Arming slaves in the American revolution'; and David Geggus, 'The arming of slaves in the Haitian revolution', all in Christopher Leslie Brown and Philip D. Morgan (eds.), *Arming Slaves from Classical Times to the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). Peter M. Voelz, *Slave and Soldier: the Military Impact of Blacks in the Colonial Americas* (London: Garland, 1993). On black soldiers in the British army, see also Samson C. Ukpabi, 'Military recruitment and social mobility in nineteenth-century British West Africa', *Journal of African Studies* 2 (1975), 87–107; Glenford D. Howe, *Race, War and Nationalism: a Social History of West Indians in the First World War* (Oxford: James Currey, 2002); Richard Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers in the First World War: Race, Masculinity and the Development of National Consciousness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

[17] See David Geggus, 'The arming of slaves in the Haitian revolution' and Laurent Dubois, 'Citizen soldiers: emancipation and military service in the revolutionary French Caribbean', in Brown and Morgan, *Arming Slaves*.

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these other examples of black soldiers for the simple reason that, once established in 1795, they existed in one form or another until 1927. For 132 years the regiments were a fully fledged part of the British military establishment, not a temporary corps of colonials or an informal militia, meaning they were officered just as white regiments were, and, crucially, that they generated the same bureaucracy. In addition to a normal complement of majors, captains, lieutenants and ensigns, each WIR was assigned an adjutant (responsible for overall administration), a quartermaster (overseeing supplies), a paymaster (ensuring all men were paid properly), a surgeon and an assistant surgeon (with responsibility for sanitation and healthcare). These men generated paperwork – vast quantities of it. Each wrote letters and reports to the two command headquarters in the Caribbean, in Jamaica (covering Honduras, Jamaica and the Bahamas) and in Barbados (covering the Windward and Leeward Islands, as well as Guyana), and also completed routine reports to the War Office in London. Regiments were required to report on troop strengths on a monthly basis, including the numbers who were sick and had died since the previous report, as well as those who had been recruited, transferred or invalided from service. Moreover, each regiment was inspected on a bi-annual basis by a senior commander, who examined internal management and discipline to assess whether the regiment was fit for duty. In addition, the regiment generated internal records such as pay books, regimental court martial information and muster or succession books that detailed the name of every recruit, physical information (age, height, hair and eye colour), where they were born, when and where they joined the regiment, promotions or reductions and the date and reason they left the regiment (transfer, death or retirement due to ill health or old age).

Aside from the regiments themselves, the usual operations of the British Empire and its army also generated plentiful records pertaining to the WIRs. Military commanders kept in regular touch with government ministers in Whitehall, informing them of ongoing troop movements and active campaigns, as well as pointing out operational constraints. Colonial governments were just as active, compiling huge amounts of internal information including records of legislative debates and laws passed, colonial censuses, shipping and customs data, and letters. Much of this was sent to the Colonial Office in London. The WIRs feature in many of these records, particularly when they were engaged in active operations. As the first regiments in the army containing men of African descent, the WIRs were also objects of curiosity, featuring in visitors' accounts of the West Indies, in letters written by residents to relatives elsewhere and in both local and British newspapers. Put simply,

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the importance of the WIRs for the study of the evolution of racial thought in the nineteenth century lies in the fact that they are the best-documented group of black men in the Atlantic World. Each regiment contained at least 500 men, and some grew to more than a thousand. In 1802 there were twelve regiments of about 500 men each, or roughly 6,000 men in total, and at the end of the century there were still more than 2,500 men serving in the West Indies and Africa.[18] During the course of the nineteenth century, the cumulative total number of men who passed through the WIRs must exceed 100,000. Even the most complete sets of plantation records are nothing like as comprehensive and, of course, cover far fewer people, though they do add vastly to our knowledge of black women who are largely absent from the records of the WIRs.[19] The nearest comparable set of data is that collected about the black soldiers fighting for the Union army during the American Civil War. There were far more of them than ever served in the WIRs but, crucially, the data only covers a very short period.[20]

Although the WIRs, by the simple virtue of being on the regular army establishment, generated vast amounts of records, not all of the data has survived to the present day. Survival depended on a number of factors, including assiduous record keeping in the first place and remembering to transfer papers along with the regiment. The WIRs were regularly rotated around the various Caribbean islands, often serving in small detachments, and from the 1820s onwards they periodically spent time in Africa. All of the earliest records of the 2WIR were lost in 1825, after being left behind in Sierra Leone when the regiment embarked for the West Indies, while those of 1WIR 'were lost in the expedition to and from New Orleans' in 1815.[21] When regiments were disbanded the records were supposed to be deposited in London, but it is clear that many were not. Moist tropical climates are not particularly conducive to record survival, and natural disasters such as hurricanes also probably took their toll. It is also clear that a

[18] In March 1801 the monthly return for the Windward and Leeward Islands command listed 4,640 soldiers in ten West India Regiments. The 5th and 6th WIRs are missing from these returns as they were serving in the Jamaican command. WO17/2492. *Army Medical Department Report for the Year 1898* (London: HMSO 1900), 114, 123.

[19] Some wives and children of WIR men were attached to the regiment and were mentioned in regimental returns. The women seemed to have undertaken domestic chores such as cooking for their husbands.

[20] About 180,000 black soldiers served in the Union army; see John David Smith (ed.), *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

[21] J. E. Caulfeild, *One Hundred Years' History of the 2nd Batt. West India Regiment* (London: Forster Groom, 1899), 54. *St George's Chronicle and Grenada Gazette*, 25 March 1837.

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lot of records that made it back to London have subsequently been lost or destroyed. Regular reports from regimental surgeons after 1817, for instance, clearly existed in the late 1830s as they were used for statistical analysis, but few exist now. Regimental documents, including letters written to and from WIR commanders, were used for two regimental histories published towards the end of the nineteenth century, but following the disbandment of the regiment in 1927 these documents have also subsequently been lost.[22] Despite what might be termed normal record loss over the course of two centuries, vast quantities of documents remain. Many of the biannual inspection reports survive, as do some of the muster and succession books, all of the earliest pay books and most of the correspondence between commanders in chief and the War Office and between island governors and the Colonial Office. As a result, it is possible to know more about these men, how they were treated and what others thought of them, than it is for any other group of men of African descent in the nineteenth century. Generally missing, of course, are first-hand accounts written by the men themselves. We will never have a real sense of how the men understood or felt about their military service. Most black soldiers were illiterate, and even if some did acquire a form of literacy while members of the WIRs, writing equipment was expensive and not always in ready supply in remote locations. Thus, we are left with sources written by white people that need to be read with caution and awareness of pre-existing racial attitudes. It is partly for this immensely practical reason that this book focuses on how others perceived and interpreted the men of the WIRs.

As this book will demonstrate, those thinking about race as a concept in the early nineteenth century, how 'blackness' could be defined, measured or quantified as something tangible and in opposition to 'whiteness', turned again and again to the example of the WIRs. As Chapter 1 explains, the entire rationale for the creation of the regiments in the dying years of the eighteenth century rested upon ideas about black bodies and their resistance to tropical diseases that were exacting a heavy toll on white Europeans. During the early decades of nineteenth century, the surgeons attached to the WIRs helped to forge a notion, explored in Chapters 2 and 3, of the 'superhuman' black man, able to undertake physical challenges that were simply beyond the white man. This largely positive view of those of African descent neatly coincides

[22] A. B. Ellis, *The History of the First West India Regiment* (London: Chapman and Hall Ltd, 1885); Caulfeild, *One Hundred Years' History.*

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with Britain's era of humanitarianism identified by James Walvin.[23] The deterioration in racial perceptions of WIR soldiers occurs almost immediately after full emancipation in the British West Indies was achieved in 1838. Working with a vast array of medical data that compared white and non-white soldiers, military statisticians, discussed in Chapter 4, began to chip away at the idea of the medical supremacy of black soldiers and highlight their vulnerabilities instead. The popularity and pervasiveness of these publications spread far beyond British military or medical circles and had a significant international impact, which is the subject of Chapter 5. By the second half of the nineteenth century, old tropes about black resistance to tropical diseases had almost entirely been replaced by new ones, discussed in Chapter 6, that emphasised the new-found medical vulnerability of black troops, even in tropical zones. Studying the WIRs therefore allows historians to measure the evolution of racial thought in the nineteenth century relating to one specific body of men, where slavery is not the defining issue. Overwhelmingly, the data and discussion of the soldiers of the WIRs deals with them as black men, and not as enslaved black men, even though a number technically were enslaved until 1807. Some writers deliberately went out of their way to draw a distinction between the WIRs and the enslaved or, later, the newly emancipated West Indian population.[24]

Military Medicine

This book is also a medical history, specifically of military medicine in the nineteenth century. It is a history both of surgeons serving with the British army, either attached directly to the WIRs or to the general staff at command headquarters, as well as of medical thought. Hundreds of medically trained personnel served with, or alongside, the WIRs, observing the men up close and first-hand. Some were fresh-faced young men straight from medical school (most frequently graduating

[23] Britain's humanitarian spasm occurred between 1787 and 1838, ending with the abolition of slavery in its West Indian colonies. Afterwards, Britain underwent a bout of collective amnesia, claiming the moral high ground for abolition while forgetting about Britain's central role in establishing and driving the slave trade in the first place. James Walvin, *England, Slaves and Freedom, 1776–1838* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 19–20.

[24] For a discussion of the ambiguous legal status of some WIR soldiers, see Roger Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats: the British West India Regiments, 1795–1815* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 63–81. The purchased men were all formally emancipated in 1807, though the army had never treated them like slaves – none were sold for example.

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from Edinburgh University), others were veterans with many years of prior service with white regiments. Civilian doctors already based in the West Indies were sometimes drafted in to assist the army, particularly during wartime. One historian of military medicine has described an appointment to a WIR as the 'shortest straw' any up-and-coming physician could draw, but that characterisation is a little unfair.[25] In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the West Indies was the most likely place where army physicians would gain experience overseas during active operations.[26] And some of these physicians turned out to be the most eminent medical minds of their day, publishing widely and holding high office in the Army Medical Department. Surgeons serving with the WIRs dealt with every ailment that the men presented with, from the minor to the life-threatening, and arguably, since on average every man visited the hospital at least once a year, surgeons knew more of the men than any other single white officer.

Surgeons kept detailed records of every case they treated, noting symptoms, possible diagnoses, attempted treatments and eventual outcomes. These records were reported back to London, both in tabular form (where they would be used to collate vast quantities of medical statistics) and with an accompanying narrative. Since they spent a great deal of time trying to treat illnesses that, with hindsight, we know they had no means of curing, surgeons read treatises and medical journals that offered advice on the latest treatments. Occasionally they would contribute their own articles, highlighting regimens they considered particularly effective. Sometimes they published books on diseases common among armies or the possible cures for tropical fevers. Their experiences were inevitably shaped by their day-to-day encounters with mainly African-born men, but what made their writings particularly interesting to those beyond the army was that they often contrasted

[25] Marcus Ackroyd, Laurence Brockliss, Michael Moss, Kate Retford and John Stevenson, *Advancing with the Army: Medicine, the Professions, and Social Mobility in the British Isles, 1790–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 157, 165.

[26] See J. D. Alsop, 'Warfare and the creation of British imperial medicine, 1600–1800', in G. Hudson (ed.), *British Military and Naval Medicine, 1600–1830* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 23–50; R. L. Blanco, 'The development of British military medicine, 1793–1814', *Military Affairs* 38 (1974), 4–10; Michael Joseph, 'Military officers, tropical medicine, and racial thought in the formation of the West India Regiments, 1793–1802', *Journal of the History of Medicine* 72 (2017), 142–65; Suman Seth, *Difference and Disease: Medicine, Race and the Eighteenth-Century British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 94; Katherine Paugh, 'Yaws, syphilis, sexuality, and the circulation of medical knowledge in the British Caribbean and the Atlantic world', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 88 (2014), 227; Mark Harrison, *Medicine in an Age of Commerce and Empire: Britain and Its Tropical Colonies, 1660–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3–14.

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their treatments for black soldiers with those for white officers or, if working in a garrison hospital, with ordinary white rank and file soldiers. There were very few medical environments in the early nineteenth century where black and white bodies were treated side by side, allowing surgeons to observe the ways in which the two responded differently to treatment. The cumulative weight of this unique literature began to shape wider debates about black and white bodies, and later influenced discussions about the different 'races' of humanity.[27]

This book builds on the work of several scholars who have highlighted the link between the publications of army surgeons and the shaping of racial ideas in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Mark Harrison, for example, observed that physicians based in the West Indies, many of whom had associations with the military, 'had an important bearing upon the development of ideas about race and susceptibility to disease'.[28] John Rankin's study of the British in West Africa in the nineteenth century acknowledged that 'race was an important part of British military plans in West Africa', determining the composition of garrisons for instance, while Suman Seth's exploration of medicine and race in the British Empire in the eighteenth century makes repeated use of the publications of military physicians to demonstrate how they helped to shape early racial attitudes.[29] These works, despite being excellent contributions to the wider field, make little, or in some cases no, use of the extensive records relating to the WIRs. Indeed, several fail to acknowledge that some of the most important military-medical writers of the eighteenth century, including Benjamin Moseley and Robert Jackson, served alongside black soldiers at some point during their careers. Rana Hogarth's engaging and informative *Medicalizing Blackness* does deal briefly with the WIRs, but then moves swiftly on to a broader discussion about diseases believed to be peculiar to enslaved people in the United States.[30] In short, this book aims to

[27] For an excellent discussion of this relating to the eighteenth century, see Erica Charters, 'Making bodies modern: race, medicine and the colonial soldier in the mid-eighteenth century', *Patterns of Prejudice* 46 (2012), 214–31. See also Catherine Kelly, *War and the Militarization of British Army Medicine, 1793–1830* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011), 11; and Wendy D. Churchill, 'Efficient, efficacious and humane responses to non-European bodies in British military medicine, 1780–1815', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40 (2012), 137–58. Churchill's otherwise excellent article is let down by a failure to make use of War Office and Colonial Office papers in the UK National Archives.

[28] Harrison, *Medicine in an Age of Commerce and Empire*, 108.

[29] John Rankin, *Healing the African Body: British Medicine in West Africa, 1800–1860* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2015), 135; Seth, *Difference and Disease*.

[30] Rana A. Hogarth, *Medicalizing Blackness: Making Racial Difference in the Atlantic World, 1780–1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

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