

Atlantic Practices: Minding the Gap between Literature and History

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TO the ear of the literary scholar, a plaintive note rings with particular clarity throughout Eric Slauter's analysis of the trade gap between literary and historical scholarship on the Atlantic world. Literary scholarship, Slauter demonstrates, exhibits an unrequited interest in the work of historians of the Atlantic. Poetically put, literary scholars seem to occupy the melancholic signifying position described by Emily Dickinson: "This is my letter to the World / That never wrote to Me."¹ Slauter's diagnostic apparatus—in the form of numbers, notes, charts, and bullets—is impressive and wholly persuasive as to the lack of reciprocity between scholarship in literature and history, but the enterprise of the essay as a whole and the affective subtext that threads through it raise for me questions about value and desire that seem to underpin the issues of evidence that receive primary attention in Slauter's probing essay.

Slauter begins by holding up a mirror of abjection to literary scholars. Like wallflowers at a dance, literary scholars hover in the margins of the field of Atlantic studies, watching the polished moves of historians, harboring hopes that someday they too will be asked to step into the spotlight. Compounding the misery is literary scholars' late arrival to the dance: whereas historians turned their attention to Atlantic studies with full force beginning in the late 1980s, most literary scholars are only beginning to recognize the significance of the field. This picture suggests that the primary difference between work in Atlantic history and in Atlantic literary studies is that literary scholars were slow to arrive in the field and have not made much of an impression since their ill-timed entrance. A look at the differing disciplinary trajectories that led historians and literary scholars of early America to the field of Atlantic studies, however, indicates that distinct and separate concerns animated the move toward an Atlantic paradigm. These different concerns have generated and continue to generate divergent scholarly values and aims

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¹ Emily Dickinson, Poem 519, in R.W. Franklin, ed., *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 1: 527.

that, despite a common Atlanticist framework of study, are worth careful delineation and consideration.

Bernard Bailyn's account of the development of Atlantic studies traces the origins of historical engagement in the field to political strategies of Atlantic alliance among Western nations following World War II, evident in such multinational organizations as NATO or in what journalist Walter Lippman called the "profound web of interest which joins together the western world." This approach was bolstered and cemented, according to Bailyn, by economic studies of early America that increasingly focused on the network of financial relations that structured the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. Yet post-World War II politics had a different effect on the field of American literary studies; the study of American literature, instead of broadening its focus to include connections with European nations, arguably found its *raison d'être* as a discipline in the cultural nationalism attendant on the United States' emergence as a world power. Rather than joining the logic of an Atlantic alliance as a result of the war, American literary studies stepped out from the shadow of the study of European literatures to become a field of its own for the first time. The nationalistic impetus intensified and accelerated the role of exceptionalism in the study of American literature and culture, a thesis that emphasized the particularity of U.S. culture over its embeddedness within the larger historical frame of the Atlantic world or world systems in general. Amy Kaplan's memorable critique of exceptionalism in American literary studies takes as emblematic Perry Miller's autobiographical account of his revelation, while laboring in Africa in the 1920s, that America and America alone was the chosen object of his scholarly calling.² Standing in a location that was part of a key economic (and cultural) vector of Atlantic trade, Miller discovered an interest in

² Walter Lippman in Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), 54. For the postwar emergence of American literary studies as an independent field, see Elizabeth Renker, "Resistance and Change: The Rise of American Literature Studies," *American Literature* 64, no. 2 (June 1992): 347–65. Renker demonstrates that, after years of struggle against a perception that American literature was not worthy of serious academic study, following the Second World War "American literature scholars increasingly argued that the literature of one of the most powerful nations in the modern world was certainly worth studying. World War II reinforced . . . tendencies toward cultural nationalism and finally consolidated the 'size and virility' of American literature studies" (ibid., 358). For a brief account of the Cold War origins of American Studies as a field (including the "Myth and Symbol" school, which reserved a central role for literature), see Janice Radway, "What's in a Name? Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, 20 November, 1998," *American Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (March 1999): 1–32. For Amy Kaplan's critique of exceptionalism, see Kaplan, "'Left Alone With America': The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture," in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham, N.C., 1993), 3–4.

America alone instead of in an Atlantic geography that linked early America to Africa. During the Cold War development of American Studies as a discipline, Miller's work and vision was foundational within the field of American literary studies

Lest Miller be construed as exceptionally exceptional, it is worth noting that literary studies as a discipline has historically been related to a pedagogy of cultural nationalism. As Bill Readings argues, from the nineteenth century forward literature served "as the major discipline entrusted by the nation-state with the task of reflecting on cultural identity."³ Though history, as a discipline, certainly bears the weight of forming nationalized citizens as well, the object of history (the archival fact, the historical trace) does not have the same status as a bearer of meaning that the literary text does. The literary text is taken to embody a meaning that is cultural, national, and aesthetic. If more recent developments in the field of literary studies have added "historical" to the kinds of meaning derived from the literary text, they have done so, at least initially, as an adjunct to the baseline logic of cultural nationalism that informs the trajectory of the field as a whole.

The shift among literary scholars to an interest in the field of Atlantic studies may, on this account, seem inexplicable, but two factors have contributed to a fairly recent change in the status of transatlantic work in literary studies. The decline in the authority of the nation-state itself in the era of globalization has required a rejiggering of the logic of literary study: as Grantland S. Rice and others have suggested, the shift in power from nation-states to global corporations has caused universities to adapt "by transforming [the] early modern mission of producing a nation's citizenry into that of providing marketable and transferable skills to a global workforce."⁴ And the weakening link between nation and culture has enabled the exploration of alternative containers or frameworks of culture and literature to emerge in recent decades. The postnational era of globalization thus generated an interest in the pre-national (and particularly pre-United States) era of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Atlantic world.

The Atlantic framework for literary studies first received significant attention with the appearance of Paul Gilroy's paradigm-shifting study, *The Black Atlantic*. Gilroy's work had a profound effect on the field of literary studies because it proposed an alternative framework for the study of literature and culture, diasporic and African but, equally as

³ Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), 70.

⁴ Grantland S. Rice, "New Origins of American Literature," *American Literary History* 13, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 816.

important for much of the work that followed, capitalist and imperialist in its definitional boundaries as well. Gilroy's work was followed by Joseph Roach's similarly influential *Cities of the Dead*, a scholarly work that built on Gilroy's framework but emphasized that the networks of exchange that constituted the culture of the Atlantic world were richly "Eurocolonial," African-diasporic, and Native American in their makeup. Importantly, Gilroy and Roach may be said to have shifted definitions not only of the container of culture but also of the nature of culture contained. Both works turn away from—or at least propose radically new definitions and understandings of—canonical literary texts and nonetheless retain an interest in the formal and aesthetic dimensions of cultural meaning. Gilroy explores a diasporic "counterculture" of modernity that includes music and memory characterized by an aesthetic of indirection; Roach focuses on performance broadly defined as a circulatory culture of substitution and "surrogation."⁵

To be sure, there are versions of Atlantic literary scholarship that owe little to Gilroy or Roach; however, the innovation and influence of their work in the larger field of literary studies have been instrumental in enabling a shift in the mode of analysis of New World literary texts from the proto-U.S. teleology of a previous generation to the new possibilities opened by an Atlantic model of circulation. Further, what has animated the "field imaginary" of transatlantic studies within the realm of English departments is distinct from the moving forces behind the development of an Atlantic paradigm within history departments. Accordingly, where Slauter argues that "literary history and history are both historicist enterprises: they are simply committed to historicizing different things," I would point instead to a large area of noncoincidence between the aims and desires of literary studies and historical studies, a noncoincidence apparent in the disciplinary trajectories I have briefly sketched out here.⁶

⁵ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 1; Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York, 1996), 2. For a useful discussion of Paul Gilroy's impact on early American literary studies, see Jonathan Elmer, "The Black Atlantic Archive," *American Literary History* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 160–69. Elmer reviews four books that rely on Gilroy's reframing of the field: Vincent Carretta and Philip Gould, eds., *Genius in Bondage: Literature of the Early Black Atlantic* (Lexington, Ky., 2001); Joanna Brooks and John Saillant, eds., "*Face Zion Forward*": *First Writers of the Black Atlantic, 1785–1798* (Boston, 2002); Gould, *Barbaric Traffic: Commerce and Antislavery in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003); Alan J. Rice, *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic* (London, 2003). None of these books frames the field of Atlantic studies in the terms outlined by Bernard Bailyn.

⁶ Eric Slauter, "History, Literature, and the Atlantic World," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 65, no. 1 (January 2008): 135–66 (quotation, 152). The rich vein of

At the June 2007 joint meeting of the Society of Early Americanists and the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, in response to a question concerning how literary scholars could best respond to the trade gap between literature and history, Slauter recommended (with some irony) “trade protectionism” as a remedy. His essay eschews the overt disciplinary territorialism of trade protectionism in favor of a more moderate course of action: Slauter suggests that the trade gap can be narrowed by means of collaborative work across the divide. But I confess a strong predilection for the less conciliatory approach of trade protectionism.⁷ Literary scholars of Atlantic studies should not feel the need to become (belated, secondhand) historians but should pursue the analysis of culture (texts, broadly defined) and signifying practices in the Atlantic world. Literary formalism has been particularly devalued as lacking in historical purchase, yet it is precisely in the analysis of form and genre—whether the captivity narrative, New World journal, shipwreck account, treaty, bill of sale, runaway advertisement, parade, novel, dance, or dramatic performance—that signifying practices and their meanings within the Atlantic world and within modernity as a whole emerge.

Jacques Rancière, in a discussion of the relation between politics and aesthetics, argues that “man is a political animal because he is a literary animal who lets himself be diverted from his ‘natural’ purpose by the power of words.”⁸ Literary scholars of the Atlantic world should allow themselves to be diverted by the power of words and led astray from the demographic centers of gravity that characterize the work of many (though not all) Atlantic historians. To be led astray in this manner is to find an essential aspect of the community generated by the advent of an Atlantic world: namely, a set of signifying practices (and erasures) that shaped the world we inhabit today. I fully agree that historians and literary scholars should read one another’s work and that they

work in the field of Atlantic print culture is largely distinct from the transatlantic literary models of Paul Gilroy and Joseph Roach; however, much of this work is more invested in tracking the history of the circulation and production of texts than in interpreting those texts, though it also forcibly demonstrates that interpreting what is within a text requires an understanding of its production, circulation, and reception to make its cultural significance clear.

⁷ I take this to be the force of Eric Slauter’s specific comments about the importance of attending to genre and form in relation to historical texts: for instance, he is particularly clear about the need to “consider the importance of generic or literary convention, the significance of writing as a practice, or the relationship between textual form and meaning.” See Slauter, *WMQ* 65: 154.

⁸ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London, 2004), 39.

have much to learn from one another, but the gap between the two does not need to be bridged so much as attended to: we need to mind (or mine) the gap, not to erase the different methodologies and aims that generate divergent scholarship in the field of Atlantic studies.