

Atlantic History and Interdisciplinary Approaches

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ERIC Slauter has taken an inventive approach to two difficult and important questions: how do historians and literary scholars make sense of each other's work, and how can we spark more satisfactory conversations among ourselves? I am grateful to him for the thoughtful analysis he has provided and for encouraging me to consider what interdisciplinary work may contribute to the study of the Atlantic world.

Carrying on a long tradition of early American scholarship, Slauter has constructed a declension thesis, one in which a field formerly reliant on literary approaches has fallen off. He asserts, for example, that "Atlantic history as a whole is apparently moving away from a focus on text-centered evidence." Yet was the field ever so text centered as he suggests? Slauter identifies Nicholas Canny and Anthony Pagden's *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World* as a crucial, "agenda-setting" text for comparative studies and points to this collection's literary and cultural approach. I am a big fan of these essays, but we should acknowledge that the volume's strengths lie in its examination of colonial elites in the western Atlantic. It does not have much to say about Africa or early modern Europe (apart from Ireland), nor does it take us deep into the structure of colonial societies. And though it is certainly true that in the 1980s many historians, inspired largely by the scholarship of cultural anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz, turned to cultural approaches, it was also still an era of social history, as Atlantic studies that preceded Canny and Pagden's collection indicate. Atlantic history's origins reflect the period's multiple strands of inquiry. When I consider the field's beginnings, I think of works such as Philip D. Curtin's heroic effort to calculate the scope of the Atlantic slave trade in *The Atlantic Slave Trade* or his powerful synthesis *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex*. Another crucial text came from the field of historical geography: D. W. Meinig's *The Shaping of America*.¹ These books mapped out—in

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¹ Eric Slauter, "History, Literature, and the Atlantic World," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 65, no. 1 (January 2008): 135–66 (quotations, 143, 142); Nicholas Canny and Anthony Pagden, eds., *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World, 1500–1800*

different ways, from different perspectives, and with different methodologies—what a panoptic or integrated history of the people and the places of the Atlantic world might look like.

Atlantic history requires, first and foremost, a geographic reorientation by practitioners. I had trouble connecting this Atlantic with the evidence Slauter presented in his essay. As their readers know, the two journals Slauter has analyzed specialize in the history or literature of early North America, with occasional forays into places further removed from this geographic home base. Scholars who work on North American history may produce work that is Atlantic in scope, but it is just as likely that they will not. The *William and Mary Quarterly* no more reflects trends in Atlantic history than any other journal that looks at one region on a continent around the Atlantic, whether *French Historical Studies* or the *Journal of Southern African Studies* or the *Colonial Latin American Historical Review*.

Just as important as the different questions that historians or literary scholars might pose of the primary sources Slauter sampled are questions about what these primary sources might look like if examined in an Atlantic context. Take, for example, the *Jesuit Relations*. They are wonderful sources but, if we are thinking about the Atlantic world, why not look at Jesuit writings more broadly and consider missionary accounts from Africa and the Americas, as well as the abundant activities of Jesuits in Europe, in tandem? There are ample opportunities for such comparisons, especially since so many missionaries (Anglican, Dutch Reformed, Jesuit, Moravian, and Quaker) moved around the Atlantic and wrote about their experiences in different locations among different indigenous populations. Likewise, why not put Mary Rowlandson's canonical narrative (if we cannot finally dispense with it altogether in favor of less familiar texts) alongside other captivity narratives, including accounts of redemption written by European captives in the Mediterranean, tales of Africans carried into captivity in all directions, or any number of others, that would take Rowlandson's text out of its place within early American history and set it instead in a different narrative tradition. In other words, the literary questions Slauter hopes

(Princeton, N.J., 1987). That social history was prominent in the 1980s is indicated by Atlantic studies that preceded Canny and Pagden's collection, including Peggy K. Liss, *Atlantic Empires: The Network of Trade and Revolution, 1713–1826* (Baltimore, 1983); John Robert McNeill, *Atlantic Empires of France and Spain: Louisbourg and Havana, 1700–1763* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1985). For pioneering works in Atlantic history, see Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, Wis., 1969); D. W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History* (New Haven, Conn., 1986); Curtin, *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex: Essays in Atlantic History* (Cambridge, 1990).

scholars will ask of these teaching materials may indeed *deepen* our understanding, but casting these sources in a new geographic framework might *transform* our understanding by putting together texts that have previously been considered separately and seeing what new issues and problems might then come into play.

Slauter's essay evoked two different possibilities as I considered the relationship between interdisciplinary work and Atlantic history. First, are specialists in other subfields of Atlantic history more inclined than scholars of North America to employ interdisciplinary methods? I suspect that had Slauter examined reviews in the *Journal of African History* or the *Colonial Latin American Historical Review*, he might have noticed that different fields of history have their own conventions regarding their competence in other disciplines and the centrality of those disciplines to their field. Glottochronology in African history and the long-standing interest in anthropology among historians of colonial Latin America are two obvious examples.

Second, if the Atlantic is indeed best approached through interdisciplinary methods, are some disciplines more useful than others? I wonder whether literary studies might ultimately be one of the least satisfactory methodologies for approaching the Atlantic. Focused as they are on the written word, literary approaches might distract historians from the experiences of the vast majority of those who inhabited the region, even if scholars deploy all of their skills to read these texts sensitively and imaginatively in search of the experiences of the powerless and illiterate. Moreover, given the linguistic limitations that many scholars, especially Americanists, labor under, privileging literary sources risks limiting us to the experiences of a tiny fraction of people. In terms of making sense of the Atlantic as a whole, of its varied collisions and contestations, of its asymmetrical power relations and its violent labor regimes, of the forced migrations that created and sustained it, any number of other approaches look equally if not more fruitful: anthropology, archaeology, art history, demography, economic history, environmental history, material culture. Slauter's essay brought to mind some of the works from other disciplines that have been helpful to me, especially in my teaching: the art historian Barbara E. Mundy's *The Mapping of New Spain*, for example, or the anthropologist Laura A. Lewis's *Hall of Mirrors*.²

Scholars who are interested in the Atlantic must pair a geographic perspective that requires them to gain some familiarity with multiple fields of history with a willingness to sample varied disciplinary

² Barbara E. Mundy, *The Mapping of New Spain: Indigenous Cartography and the Maps of the Relaciones Geográficas* (Chicago, 1996); Laura A. Lewis, *Hall of Mirrors: Power, Witchcraft, and Caste in Colonial Mexico* (Durham, N.C., 2003).

approaches. Fortunate to work within one of academe's most integrative disciplines, historians would be foolish to limit themselves to a single methodology instead of trying whatever works best to make sense of the problem under study. That might well be literary studies, and it might well be something else. Slauter has done a great service in reminding all of us how essential it is to reach out to other disciplines, to take all sorts of books off our libraries' new-book shelves, to dip into new journals, to sample unfamiliar disciplines, to talk to colleagues in other departments, and to enjoy the pleasure of discovering what we can see more clearly or entirely differently as a result.