

Atlantic History and the Literary Turn

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ATLANTIC history is a notoriously fluid construct. There is no static historical unit for Atlantic historians to analyze, no one religion, culture, or political tradition shared by what Bernard Bailyn calls the basin's "multitudinous . . . people and circumstances," and, despite the subject's continued growth and popularity, no dominant historiography that can begin to explain the innumerable histories within its sprawling parameters.¹ If this statement is true of Atlantic history generally, it is only slightly less so of Atlantic history's English-speaking component. Should we be surprised, therefore, if historians within this vast and protean expanse are currently consuming less work by literary scholars, whose field often, if somewhat inaccurately, associated with the analysis of a relatively small coterie of metropolitan writers? As Atlantic historians seek to transcend the confines of metropole and nation, should we not expect their attention to move in other directions?

As ought to be clear to any reader of Eric Slauter's thoughtful essay, these are in many ways unfair questions—so much so, in fact, that I wonder whether the trade gap between Atlantic history and Atlantic literary studies is quite as wide as he suggests. Although Atlantic history in its present form grew out of several decades of scholarship on historical topics such as the demography of the African slave trade, the structure of the Atlantic economy, and the transmission of European ideas to America, the work of literary scholars played an important role in conceptualizing the early modern Atlantic as a sort of "imagined community," one sufficiently coherent to merit analysis in its own right. Indeed the field of Atlantic history almost certainly would not have achieved its current prominence without the cultural turn of the 1980s and early 1990s. Not only did cultural history suggest new methodologies for analyzing literary and textual sources that circulated freely throughout the Atlantic world, but historians' increased receptivity to cultural and literary theory raised a host of new questions, many having to do with national and imperial identity, that could only be answered by adopting broader geographic perspectives. Although this debt was perhaps more apparent ten years ago than it is

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¹ Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), 61.

today, historians have continued to draw on the work of literary scholars, a good example being Joseph Roach's idea of a "circum-Atlantic" world, which David Armitage subsequently used as one of his "Three Concepts of Atlantic History." As befits this interdisciplinary genealogy, Stephen Greenblatt, Paul Gilroy, and Edward Said remain familiar presences on Atlantic history syllabi to the present day. And for some topics—notably the history of race and racial consciousness—the influence of literary studies has yet to subside.²

If matters are not quite as dire as Slauter suggests, however, it is true that historians tend to use literary sources and methods on their own terms. In fact the pervasiveness and success of history's cultural turn has practically ensured such an outcome. As Slauter notes, a number of early invocations of the phrase Atlantic history occurred at the hands of historians interested in questions of identity and consciousness. Obviously, these questions were also of tremendous importance to literary studies, yet for most cultural historians textual analysis was never the whole story, nor did the methodological insights that informed cultural history come exclusively from literature. As exemplified by books such as *Telling the Truth about History* by Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob,

² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 3d rev. ed. (New York, 2006); Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York, 1996); David Armitage, "Three Concepts of Atlantic History," in *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800*, ed. Armitage and Michael J. Braddick (New York, 2002), 16. For the Atlantic as a kind of imagined community, see John Gillis, *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World* (New York, 2004). See also Jack P. Greene, "Beyond Power: Paradigm Subversion and Reformulation and the Re-Creation of the Early Modern Atlantic World," in *Interpreting Early America: Historiographical Essays* (Charlottesville, Va., 1996), 17–42. The most important early center of historical inquiry was the Program in Atlantic History and Culture, which started at Johns Hopkins University in 1971; the first Atlantic Seminar, also convened at Johns Hopkins, was in 1967. Although the evidence for the claim that literary scholars maintain their place on Atlantic history syllabi is necessarily impressionistic, a keyword search of the fifty-six syllabi for courses in Atlantic history posted on the Web site for Harvard University's International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World produced the following: five syllabi and one bibliography with titles by Stephen Greenblatt, three syllabi with titles by Paul Gilroy, and two syllabi with titles by Edward Said. By comparison, searches of the same data set yielded six syllabi and one bibliography containing titles by Nicholas Canny, five syllabi with titles by Jack P. Greene, four syllabi with titles by Karen Ordahl Kupperman, and two syllabi with titles by Ian K. Steele. Most of the syllabi were posted from 1998 to 2004, so it is not clear whether this pattern, such as it is, still exists. For the persistence of literary studies' influence on the history of race see, for example the deep engagement with literary sources and scholarship in James Sidbury, "Early Slave Narratives and the Culture of the Atlantic Market," in *Empire and Nation: The American Revolution in the Atlantic World*, ed. Eliga H. Gould and Peter S. Onuf (Baltimore, 2005), 260–74; Sidbury, *Becoming African in America: Race and Nation in the Early Black Atlantic* (New York, 2007). Although some of the works cited in Sidbury's early essay are now dated, the notes mention works by Vincent Carretta, Philip Gould, and Roxann Wheeler, all published within the last decade.

many historians—including many cultural historians—remained suspicious of research that relied exclusively on printed and literary sources, and there was a widespread sense that cultural history ought to be grounded to some extent in manuscript and archival research. Although cultural historians today freely acknowledge the benefits of applying textual analysis to a full range of historical documents and artifacts, no matter where the documents and artifacts originated, they often look to other historians for their theoretical models and methods. In the case of the American Historical Association's book prize in Atlantic history, the three most recent winners (as of 2007) all fit within the general rubric of cultural history, as Slauter notes, but without incurring noticeable debts to literary studies.³

Among Atlantic historians this selective embrace of literary evidence and scholarship intersects with and has almost certainly been compounded by a second, more pronounced, determination to move beyond the limits of metrocentric and national frameworks. As is clear from the cognate field of British imperial history, historians continue to make extensive use of literary theory and sources to investigate questions of imperial culture and identity. In a recent volume on the "new" imperial history edited by Kathleen Wilson, nearly one-third of the contributors teach in departments of English or literature, and the ten-page bibliography brims with references to literary scholars such as Srinivas Aravamudan, Eitan Bar-Yosef, and Laura Brown (who appear among the first six references on the bibliography's first page). From Slauter's brief discussion of Mary Rowlandson's often-taught captivity narrative—the Neal Salisbury edition that he mentions is one of twenty-eight currently in print, most produced for classroom use—there is no question that literature (broadly conceived) is capable of performing the same duty for early Americanists, allowing historians and literary scholars to explore porous, often-fragile boundaries of religion, race, gender, class, and nationality in the colonies.⁴ Nor have such interdisciplinary borrowings been confined to the North Atlantic or to literary works by European writers, as

³ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York, 1994). The three most recent winners of the James A. Rawley Prize in Atlantic History are Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004); Londa Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004); Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006).

⁴ Kathleen Wilson, ed., *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840* (Cambridge, 2004), 363. The literary scholars who contributed to the volume are Eitan Bar-Yosef, Harriet Guest, Felicity A. Nussbaum, Gillian Russell, Kate Teltcher, and Hans Turley. My figure of twenty-eight editions of Mary Rowlandson's narrative currently in print is based on a Sept. 23, 2007, search for books written by Mary Rowlandson on <http://www.booksinprint.com>.

is evident from the continued popularity of Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* among scholars and teachers.

If literary evidence and methods are an important part of complicating familiar narratives, however, their use can also be problematic. Texts by European and European creole writers inevitably foreground the historical perspectives of their authors, but even when historians and literary scholars are sensitive to the resulting biases, relying too heavily on literary sources runs the risk of privileging the history of literate centers over the histories of inarticulate peripheries. Despite its strengths as a classroom text, Rowlandson's narrative is very much the work of a Puritan from hyperliterate New England and may not be representative of captivity in Virginia or the West Indies. Because most firsthand accounts of Africa by Africans were in fact written by people living in Britain and North America, the same caveat holds for autobiographies such as Equiano's. "The first recorded discussions of 'African' identity," observes James Sidbury of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century black writers who sought to make connections with their ancestral homeland, "arose in tension with, and in partial opposition to, memories and experiences of the indigenous cultures of Africa, rather than directly out of them." It is probably no accident that in Wilson's volume on the new imperial history, all six contributions by literary scholars deal with the manifold ways in which "the empire penetrated Britain" (in the words of Felicity A. Nussbaum), whether through racial imaginings on the London stage, the metropolitan response to the English travels of the Polynesian Omai, or the East Indian letters of George Bogle to his family in Scotland.⁵

This is not to suggest that literary-based histories must always give priority to the history of literary metropolises in Britain and America. Although early New England produced a disproportionate number of captivity narratives (and literary sources in general), Linda Colley's *Captives* is a reminder that the Indian captivity narrative was a transatlantic genre produced by writers throughout Britain's Atlantic empire; nor should we forget that Indian captivity in North America was closely tied in many authors' minds to captivity elsewhere in the Atlantic,

⁵ Sidbury, *Becoming African in America*, 14–15 ("first recorded discussions"); Felicity A. Nussbaum, "The Theatre of Empire: Racial Counterfeit, Racial Realism," in Wilson, *New Imperial History*, 71 ("empire penetrated Britain"). On the difficulties of recovering "the subaltern as a subject outside the elite discourse," see esp. Gyan Prakash, "Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism," *American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (December 1994): 1475–90 (quotation, 1480). For the development of African identity, see Vincent Carretta, *Equiano the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens, Ga., 2005). For examples of literary scholarship on the new imperial history, see Harriet Guest, "Ornament and Use: Mai and Cook in London," in Wilson, *New Imperial History*, 317–44; Kate Teltscher, "Writing Home and Crossing Cultures: George Bogle in Bengal and Tibet, 1770–1775," *ibid.*, 281–96.

including the taking of European sailors by Barbary corsairs on the high seas and the shipment of African slaves to America. Still literary and textual sources are bound to have played different roles in literary centers such as London and Boston than in places where, as David D. Hall has written of the seventeenth-century Chesapeake, “the history of printing, publishing, writing, and reading . . . is a history of absences.” Significantly, the cultural history of the Chesapeake drew much of its early inspiration not from literary scholarship but from ethnographic studies such as Rhys Isaac’s *The Transformation of Virginia* and Mechal Sobel’s *The World They Made Together*. Although Isaac’s recent book on Landon Carter’s diary shows the rich possibilities to be found in mining the literature of the Chesapeake, it is hard to imagine a historian or literary scholar doing for the Old Dominion what Hall achieved in his work on religion and print culture in early New England.⁶

Given these disciplinary realities, the trends that Slauter illuminates do not strike me as altogether surprising, yet I do not think that they should cause Atlantic literary scholars or literary-minded Atlantic historians to despair. Historians are a notoriously omnivorous bunch. In its short lifespan, Atlantic history has borrowed from adjacent disciplines as varied as anthropology, cultural geography, demography, environmental science, and international relations. Surely there is no reason to doubt that literary studies will again play a central role in shaping the field. Indeed that moment may already be at hand. In a *William and Mary Quarterly* Forum on the implications of postcolonial theory for the history of early America, the principal essay by Jack P. Greene includes multiple references to work by literary scholars, with a particular debt to chapters that Peter Hulme and Michael Warner wrote for Robert Blair St. George’s edited volume *Possible Pasts*. According to one of the Forum’s respondents, Greene’s use of postcolonial theory is insufficiently attentive to its subtleties (especially, one suspects, its subtleties as understood by literary theorists); another wonders whether the move from colonial to postcolonial history represents a “turn too far.” Time alone will tell which—if any—of these positions finds favor within the broader field of Atlantic history. But the mere fact that they are being debated is a reminder that literary scholarship is still making “a real contribution to

⁶ David D. Hall, *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book* (Amherst, Mass., 1996), 98 (quotation); Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1982); Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton, N.J., 1987); Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York, 1989); Linda Colley, *Captives* (New York, 2002); Isaac, *Landon Carter’s Uneasy Kingdom: Revolution and Rebellion on a Virginia Plantation* (New York, 2004).

historical knowledge” and seems likely to continue to do so.⁷ In a history graduate colloquium that I am currently teaching on the world of the American Revolution, the same Hulme and Warner essays are required reading. I would be willing to bet that I am not alone.

⁷ David Armitage, “From Colonial History to Postcolonial History: A Turn Too Far?” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 64, no. 2 (April 2007): 251–54; Eric Slauter, “History, Literature, and the Atlantic World,” *WMQ* 65, no. 1 (January 2008): 135–66 (“real contribution,” 159). For the *William and Mary Quarterly* Forum on postcolonial theory and history, see Jack P. Greene, “Colonial History and National History: Reflections on a Continuing Problem,” *WMQ* 64, no. 2 (April 2007): 235–50; Michael Zuckerman, “Exceptionalism after All; Or, The Perils of Postcolonialism,” *ibid.*, 258–62. See also Peter Hulme, “Postcolonial Theory and Early America: An Approach from the Caribbean,” in *Possible Pasts: Becoming Colonial in Early America*, ed. Robert Blair St. George (Ithaca, N.Y., 2000), 33–48; Michael Warner, “What’s Colonial about Colonial America?” *ibid.*, 49–70.