

# From Text/Context to “Situatedness” in Atlantic History and Literature

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TWO anecdotes from the recent Society of Early Americanists—Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture joint conference in Williamsburg frame my response to Eric Slauter’s provocative survey of the Atlantic studies disciplinary trade gap. First, my experience as a panel co-organizer for that conference: Christopher Looby and I proposed a session called “Representations, Sexualities, and the Politics of Seduction.” We received ten paper proposals, five each from historians and literary scholars. Two proposals in each discipline came from graduate students. In selecting our final panel, we aimed to preserve this symmetry. The final lineup included two historians and two literary critics; two were recent Ph.D.’s and two were associate professors. We wanted the panel to aim for the same cross-disciplinary dialogue that the conference hoped to foster, and I think our expectations were borne out. I, for one, found the audience participation following the papers to be stimulating, and my own historical thinking was refined by listening to historians talk about texts (courtroom narratives and diaries) that bore key similarities to texts I had been writing about (poems, newspaper notices, and novels). In turn, though the historians on the panel employed a broader range of methodologies than a typical literary historian (this observation was especially true of the paper on women’s self-defensive use of seduction narratives in legal situations), they could also be said to engage in some form of close reading of the texts they examined. The second anecdote involves a former graduate student from New York University’s doctoral program in Atlantic history, a brilliant member of the first graduate seminar I taught some six years ago. It had been some time since I had seen her, and she looked genuinely surprised when we passed in the hall. “What are *you* doing here?” she said, then caught herself and added, “Oh, I forgot this was a joint conference with SEA.”

If the first anecdote stands as an interdisciplinary success story, the second anecdote stings for two reasons. It suggests that some conference participants were apparently able to spend four days in the company of their counterparts from another discipline without realizing we shared the same

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program. (A casual yet self-conscious survey of audiences throughout the conference confirmed that many sessions were segregated by discipline.) Moreover, though I am employed in a literature department and think of myself as a literary historian or perhaps a cultural historian of writing, my graduate training, in a fairly traditional American Studies program, was interdisciplinary from the ground up, so I have always felt at home among members of history departments, sometimes more so than among literary critics. Indeed my former student may have been surprised to learn that this was not the first Omohundro Institute conference I had attended as a presenter.

My gut reaction to Slauter's piece is that he correctly diagnoses the disciplinary divide between historians and literary scholars of early America and the Atlantic world; this gap, I believe, parallels the blindness of some scholars of early modern British literature to the Atlantic world and to Europe's colonial periphery, as if even internationally published writers such as Anne Bradstreet or Benjamin Franklin deserve no place on a syllabus alongside John Milton, Daniel Defoe, and Alexander Pope. The implication of these gaps is that the material studied by early Americanist literary scholars simply is not as important as the material studied by historians of the period and that neither American history nor American literature (not to mention broader literatures of the Atlantic) seems to be as important to our British literature colleagues as the canonical works in their field, which, one assumes, has real bearing on a thorough understanding of the British Atlantic world. Early Americanists in English departments, in order to understand the writing we study, often make ourselves familiar with works in history and British literature, not to mention the new imperative to be conversant with texts from Spanish, French, and Dutch colonial enterprises. If knowing these materials better informs our study of early American writing, surely understanding the cultures of early American writing—including but not limited to “literary” writing—would enhance scholars' knowledge of other dimensions of early American and early modern Atlantic cultures, even those that depend on nontextual evidence?

To the extent that this rhetorical question echoes Slauter's conclusion, I think we concur in our hope that such interdisciplinary developments may continue. I worry, though, that the call for “genuine intellectual collaboration” across disciplines (though I know it already exists in many places and profit from it myself) may be a little irenic.<sup>1</sup> Slauter's essay minimizes the primary difficulty facing cross-disciplinary dialogue by numbering it alongside other, more minor, complaints lobbed back and forth between literature and history departments. That difficulty, as I see it, is a problem of method rooted in the status of close reading as a legitimate form of historical evidence. Certainly, many reading practices take the

<sup>1</sup> Eric Slauter, “History, Literature, and the Atlantic World,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 65, no. 1 (January 2008): 135–66 (quotation, 161).

name close reading, and some are more historically grounded and grounding than others. But historians' complaints about literary close reading combine two very legitimate concerns about practices that continue to enjoy pride of place in literary scholars' methodological toolbox. One concerns a (rightful) suspicion that the number of texts some literary historians assemble to make broad claims about a culture is insufficient; the other, that what we most often call close reading reveals much more about common preoccupations among modern literary critics than it does about past readers and writers or the cultures we take them to represent. (A third important objection, which I will not address directly, regards stylistic differences between the disciplines: I have heard literary critics refer to historians' prose as deadening, made up of simple declarative sentences, as often as I have heard historians complain about critics' impenetrable, jargonistic writing. I tend to side with the historians on this one.)

To some extent I share historians' skepticism about much of what travels under the name close reading, as do many of my literature department colleagues. (For example Mary Poovey, an eminent scholar of Victorian literature, tackles this methodological question head-on in *Genres of the Credit Economy*.) I do not believe, however, that all literary close reading should be abandoned or regarded as flawed. Even a historical masterpiece such as Alan Taylor's *William Cooper's Town* could have benefited from considering James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers* as a novel on its own terms—apart from what it may or may not reveal about the author's father—just as literary historians could learn from Taylor's painstaking observations on the makeup of William Cooper's library.<sup>2</sup> In the face of skepticism about close reading's efficacy in relation to historical inquiry, I do maintain that the rhetorical and stylistic analysis of texts, based on questions about genre, audience, and specific tropes or patterns in vocabulary, can direct scholars into lines of inquiry that may not have been possible otherwise. At the same time, I think that many literary historians need to not only familiarize themselves with current work produced by historians of the period they study but also make better use of a broader range of evidence to support their interpretive arguments, including aspects of print culture that fall outside the standard parameters of literary studies and even biographical inquiry, anathema since the New Criticism. It avails us to learn what we can about the people who produced the texts we study as well as about common readers, reading practices, and modes of literary circulation.

Of course calling for increased attention to these aspects of literary culture and history (as book historians in history and English departments have long done) does not simply boil down to asking literary scholars to

<sup>2</sup> Alan Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York, 1995); Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, forthcoming).

abandon one discipline for another. These are questions, after all, on which historians divide among themselves. To what extent should written sources in general be deemed suspect or insufficient records of the past? What relevance does inquiry into the lives of individuals (let alone individual texts) have to the larger cultural histories we hope to assemble? To what extent should the textual histories of the material we study affect the ways we read them now?

At the same time, it should be obvious that not all literary scholarship falls subject to the critiques Slauter summarizes. Consider a book such as Samuel Otter's magnificent *Melville's Anatomies*, a book that on first glance may seem to be a monograph focused solely on a writer who was not particularly significant in his own day.<sup>3</sup> Just as the significance of Herman Melville's work goes beyond what it can or cannot reveal about popular tastes in antebellum America, Otter's book reaches widely and deeply into Melville's culture, addressing dozens of additional writers, artists, intellectuals, and common people. As a result Otter's historical claims deserve to be taken seriously even by historians who are less preoccupied with literary culture than he is. If Otter is not at once contextual and textual in his approach, no one is.

At a workshop sponsored by the *William and Mary Quarterly* and the USC-Huntington Early Modern Studies Institute at the Huntington Library in early 2007, historian David Waldstreicher observed that "ideology historians"—the assemblers of the republican synthesis, for instance—tend to privilege contextless sound-bite quotations over a careful consideration of what he called the "situatedness" of a text. In this habit, I think, these historians bear some similarities to the new historicist critics they have often inspired, who tend to read for broad ideological resonance among texts rather than for the detailed circumstances of each one. Such habits, unfortunately, too often allow literary history to be bad history, as when critics make claims about the partisan politics of a literary text or make other (if unacknowledged) biographical assumptions based on perceived resonances between a literary text and a particular movement, though no evidence other than close reading may exist to support such an interpretation. "Situation" seems a more fluid concept than the old text/context dyad that is too often mapped onto a division between literary scholars and historians. Taking seriously Waldstreicher's implication that a text's situation matters to how we interpret it would improve all avenues of historical inquiry that depend on written texts as evidence. Such awareness, after all, would call on traditional tools of literary analysis as well as on new rubrics such as book history; it might push historians to think more like textual scholars and literary critics to think more like historians. A focus on a text's situatedness will call other texts—and other methodological imperatives—into view and allow for stronger interpretive claims. Most significantly, a single disciplinary approach may be insufficient for such a process, necessitating the cross-disciplinary dialogue Slauter's essay so earnestly desires.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Otter, *Melville's Anatomies* (Berkeley, Calif., 1999).