Atlantic Practices: Minding the Gap between Literature and History

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, as authors 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.” Slauter’s diagnostic apparatus—in the form of numbers, notes, charts, and bullets—is impressive and wholly persuasive on 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 (the force of literary evidence and analysis with respect to historical trends or truths) 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 para-
digms. These different concerns have generated and continue to generate divergent scholarly values and aims that, despite a common Atlanticist framework of study, are worth careful delineation and consideration.

In his account of the development of Atlantic studies, Bernard Bailyn 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, in Bailyn’s account, 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.1 Standing in a location that was part of a key economic (and cultural) vector of Atlantic trade, Miller discovered an interest in America alone instead of in an Atlantic geography that linked early America to Africa.

Lest Miller be construed as exceptionally exceptional, it is worth noting that literary studies as a discipline had historically been related to a pedagogy of cultural nationalism. As Bill Readings argues, a “significant shift [took] place in the understanding of culture through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries”: literature replaced philosophy “as the major discipline entrusted by the nation-state with the task of reflecting on cultural identity.”2 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, or 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.” 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 prenational (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, more importantly for much of the work that followed, capitalist and imperialist in its definitional boundaries. 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’s work 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.”

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: history and literary studies 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.

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. 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.” 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 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.

NOTES


5. The rich vein of work in the field of Atlantic print culture is largely distinct from the transatlantic literary models of 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 the interpretation of those texts, though it also forcibly demonstrates that the interpretation of what is within a text requires an understanding of its production, circulation, and reception to make its cultural significance clear.

6. 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” (169).