



Atlantic Exchanges Introduction.

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## Atlantic Exchanges Introduction

Dr. Katie Gough

First of all, I want to congratulate the editors and the contributors to eSharp's special issue on "Atlantic Exchanges." They requested that I say a few brief words on the history, or genealogy of Atlantic Studies, and some of the benefits of using an Atlantic model or framework.

As all of you can probably imagine the contours of Atlantic Studies – its epistemological origin stories -- vary widely depending on the discipline from which you begin, and how you conceptualise the cultural, political and economic exchanges that circulate in the Atlantic world.

In its first instance, the "Atlantic world" was a geographical expression – a way of understanding the modes of production taking place across a wide range of territories – of *spaces* – connected through colonialism, slavery, and migration. Indeed, in the field of geography, scholars have done far ranging work illuminating how various regions in the early modern Atlantic world were contiguously understood. Geographer W.H. Smyth has noted that as early as 1599 Richard Hakluyt declared: "not to meddle with the state of Ireland, nor that of Guiana, there is under our noses the great and ample state of Virginia" (Smyth 1). One year later an English government official noted that "if the princes of England knew what a jewel *Ireland* was, they would not seek the discovery of foreign lands to settle in." Moreover, in another contemporary account noted by D.B. Quinn in his book *The Elizabethans and the Irish*, "Ireland's location is given a dramatic new dimension when it is described as 'this famous island in the Virginian [i.e. American] sea'" (Smyth 1).

So in one arena, the “Atlantic” – as a geographic expression – illuminates the contiguous and synchronic colonial schemes taking place around the Atlantic world in order that we might better understand the way space was produced and organized. However, Bernard Bailyn – in his book *Atlantic History: Concepts and Contours* – notes that in the discipline of history, the Atlantic model came into prominence during and after World War II. He notes that the initial “impulses did not lay within historical study but outside it, in the public world that formed the external context of the historians’ awareness” (6). He mentions in particular the important political tract of Walter Lippman who – one month after D-Day – published *U.S War Aims*. In it he argued that the “the new postwar world order would, and should, be dominated by ‘great regional constellations of states which are homelands, not of one nation alone but of the historic civilized communities” (10). First among them, he said, should be the Atlantic community. This work -- and work like it -- helped to guide historians in thinking outside of bounded national frames (which had been in vogue since the nineteenth century), in order to consider regional, trans-Atlantic, and interconnected relations and alliances.

While some of the origin stories for Atlantic Studies go back several hundred years – or several decades – the use of the Atlantic model in other disciplines and area studies is more recent. However, this more recent work has had profound effects on how new knowledge is being produced across a wide spectrum of academic fields both within and outside Atlantic Studies. And I’ll return to this point in a minute.

Certainly, Paul Gilroy’s ground-breaking study from 1995, *The Black Atlantic*, is testament to this point. Similarly, in the field of performance studies, Joseph Roach’s *Cities of the Dead: Circum-*

*Atlantic Performance* provides other methodologies and employs a range of different kinds of evidence (including – but not limited to – the image, the spoken word and the gesture) to explore how cultures reproduce and recreate themselves across time and space. While he is certainly in conversation with Gilroy's work, Roach explains how "the concept of a circum-Atlantic world (as opposed to a transatlantic one) insists on the centrality of the diasporic and genocidal histories of Africa and the Americas, North and South, in the creation of the culture of modernity. In this sense, a New World was not discovered in the Caribbean, but one was truly invented there" (4).

In the field of literary theory, we could look to Ian Baucom's 2005 publication *Spectres of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery and the Philosophy of History*. His primary argument is that the infamous Zong voyage of 1783 – both as an event and its representations – are central "not only to the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the political and cultural archives of the black Atlantic but to the history of modern capital, ethics and time consciousness" (31). That is, according to Baucom, the twentieth century may not only be the inheritor of the eighteenth century, but may actually still be *a part of* the long eighteenth century.

So the kind of work that is carried out under this large umbrella idiom – this vast field of study – is trans-disciplinary, sometimes interdisciplinary and always very elastic. In some respects, this work is as vast and chaotic as the Atlantic itself and emulates the very forces that brought the Atlantic intercultural world into being. That is, scholarship in this area is often productively chaotic and necessarily contingent.

One's point of geographic departure: Britain, Ireland, various European metropolises, West Africa, South America, the Caribbean

Archipelago, North America; and one's disciplinary departure: history, geography, literature, performance studies, cultural studies, sociology, etc. – will necessarily dictate different methodologies and produce different interpretive models.

This last point is worth underscoring. Working with something like an Atlantic model has many challenges – not the least of which is that you are asked to position your work in multiple frames simultaneously. These are frames that allow your work to be legible to multi-disciplinary audiences within Atlantic studies, to those in your own discipline, and lastly – but perhaps most importantly – to those with no interest in Atlantic studies, but who find something particularly productive and compelling in your methodologies that allow Atlantic studies to enter into larger conversations about the production of new knowledge in a variety of fields.

Thus, the benefits of working within this model are not only about discovering new “content” but in discovering new methodologies and new conceptual frameworks for understanding and making use of this “content.” It is here that the works of Gilroy, Roach and Baucom have been so influential.

Finally, I just want to add that this is one of the things I had in mind when I read the abstracts of the essays that will be appearing in this special issue. Read alongside each other, these essays reveal a productive eclecticism – a real sense of the large scope of the “field” – and a chance to think through the modes of investigation that are happening across disciplines and can, hopefully, begin to inform each other. In this volume, we hear about Robert Southey as an Atlantic poet; the writings of Ishmael Reed and resistance in African American literature; American music in Nigeria as working not within an imperialist frame, but a synchronic one – in Bhabha's “third space”; Homecoming Scotland and Tartan Day in the U.S.;

and how the writings of Major-General Thomas Gage – commander and chief of the British armed forces – gives us insight into the tumultuous time period in the American colonies leading up to the American revolution, while also highlighting what it means to be a member of the “Atlantic” community. The essays are addressed to wide range of time periods, disciplines, questions of culture and politics, and provide us with a space to reflect upon what constitutes evidence across fields of study. While this is, perhaps, a humble addition to Atlantic Studies, it now takes its place in the larger conversation – one that is very exciting precisely because there is so much more work to be done.

Congratulations again to the editors and contributors – I’m sure that we all look forward to reading your work. Thank you.

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