
Editor's Introduction

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“If I do not mistake, historians today are beginning to be aware of an entirely new history, a ponderous history whose time cannot be measured by any of our long-established instruments. Nor is it a history which offers itself to them as an easy discovery.” Thus spoke the famous French historian Fernand Braudel (1902-1985) in 1950, in his inaugural public lecture as chair of modern civilization to the Collège de France.¹

Braudel praised what was at the time a palpable sense of excitement among French historians at ‘discovering’ the possibility of studying everyday life in the long-term; of recovering histories of past material and mental life in their totality, even (or especially) in the distant past; of recapturing individuals, communities, societies, systems and even civilizations in terms of an *histoire globale* (*histoire totale*). This new structural, total, history moved much more slowly than the seemingly incomprehensible play of events and personalities, and was therefore much more revealing overall. For Braudel and his audience it was also limited largely to Europe, and to France in particular.²

A half-century later, his words likewise describe a new sense of ‘discovery’ among many historians today, especially those lodged in the early modern era (15th-18th centuries CE³), though ironically not so much in France.⁴ Since the 1990s (if not before), scholars have similarly become “aware of an entirely new history,” that is, of the Atlantic World. Explicitly transnational, multilingual and comparative (and interdisciplinary), this new approach to what at times in the past was considered maritime, imperial, colonial, ethnohistorical and/or subaltern histories, respectively, now aspires to be a subdiscipline in and of itself. The new Atlantic world history aims at an almost Olympian (or perhaps Neptunian) perspective. Scholars of this new globalized history argue that the Atlantic Ocean constituted a ‘world’, not unlike the Mediterranean for Braudel (or more recently the Indian Ocean for K. N. Chaudhuri)⁵, and furthermore one that can be studied similarly as a whole, as a single unit of historical analysis. Using all the methodological tools available to historians, and ideally materials in several languages, and sources from literary to archaeological, ‘Atlantic world’ scholars seek to rethink the increasingly linked histories of the several littorals of the Atlantic ocean (the Americas, western Europe and Atlantic Africa) from roughly the fourteenth through the early nineteenth centuries. That this general approach of new systemic, transnational histories has attracted scholars in a wide range of History’s disciplines, from economic and cultural to political and intellectual demonstrates the generative power of this emerging paradigm.⁶

In a longer view, it is clear that the explanatory power of the new Atlantic history itself reflects (in part) the generalized globalization of human affairs in the past generation. For example, at my institution, The University of Southern Mississippi, which largely serves the Gulf South region (the USA's 'third coast', and historically as much a landfall of the Caribbean Sea as a creation of antebellum American history and its many aftermaths), all students are required to take a two-course series in world history, among other general requirements. Even in the poorest and arguably still among the most provincial of states (though one is continually surprised⁷) in the U.S., higher education even or perhaps especially in Mississippi recognizes that university graduates today must have at least an introductory understanding of world history in order to reasonably compete in an increasingly globalized economy and society. Historians naturally have responded to this latent demand for globalized histories, and the Atlantic world beckons as a particularly compelling subject of study.

For the past decade, one of the deans of colonial American history, Professor Bernard Bailyn, professor emeritus at Harvard University, has directed an annual professional seminar on Atlantic history.⁸ Geared toward younger scholars, recent Ph.D.'s mostly in history but also in allied disciplines, the Atlantic World Seminar has brought together a wide range of people on an even wider range of subjects. In August of 2005, Professor Bailyn convened a tenth-anniversary conference, gathering in the 'clans' of his seminar to mark this milestone together.⁹ Over the four days, there were 32 sessions (plus three plenary ones) with about 110 participants. Topics included nearly all the possibilities, from thematic to ethnic to geographic subjects and far beyond.

In this special issue of *The Southern Quarterly*, we have gathered a small set of these universally fascinating and accomplished scholarly papers.¹⁰ As one of the inaugural 'seminarians' (1996), I am especially honored to present the work of my peers and colleagues across several temporal, thematic, and geographic bounds. In this issue, which we have titled "Imagining the Atlantic World," we chose work from social, cultural, intellectual, and literary historians, and an historical anthropologist, as well as an explicitly historiographical essay; these are younger scholars, as four of the six contributors are still assistant professors (the other two are associate). The historical geography of these essays encompasses Native America (North American and Caribbean), colonial North America and the British Empire, and Spanish and French perspectives; their authors live and teach in Canada, the U.S., Spain, and France, respectively. In a perfect world (without the practical constraints of publishing learned journals with necessarily limited budgets) we should have separate contributions on Africa, the 'Black Atlantic' and Brazil, as well as the Dutch (so often overlooked in Atlantic histories). But, alas and alack.

A reading of these half-dozen papers reveals a series of conversations or dialogues, including implicitly among the contributors themselves. Each of

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the papers raise serious questions, which often overlap. What is the 'Atlantic World'? And how shall we understand this 'new Atlantic history'? It is important to reiterate that these are papers by younger scholars who are actively shaping the various discourses that weave Atlantic historians into an imagined scholarly community. It is surprising to me how often this set of authors, who are working on quite different subjects, really, draw on classical Greek and Roman philosophers to help situate their own arguments. And the ambitions of their queries are matched by the breadth of their sources, which are reflected in the depth of their histories of history (their historiography).

I chose these papers in part to illustrate three compelling themes in the new Atlantic history: First, that the early modern Atlantic world represented the coming together of three 'old worlds' (Native America, Europe, Africa) which changed all three in novel, and often tragic, ways; Second, that the basic political-economic context was one of overlapping imperial systems, with centers and peripheries, though always in a state of flux and contestation; and Third, that the existential nature of Atlantic world societies was one of profound ambivalence, of in-betweenness (in technical jargon, of liminality). The Atlantic world, especially the Americas (but also, for some, in Europe and Africa) contained both places of opportunity and sites of extraordinary exploitation and violence. The western landfalls (and coastal Africa) were outlands, marchlands where 'the rules' were often suspended or reworked in ways that never would have been acceptable in the metropolises, and thus where servitude and slavery flourished, with all their attendant evils. But they also generated new concepts of liberty and freedom and consociation. As the twinned midwives of modernity, chattel slavery and individual freedom were the core contradiction at the heart of the Atlantic world. Indeed, one slice of Atlanticists sees slavery as the defining institution of the post-columbian New World (rather than, say, liberal republicanism). In this regard, some would disagree with Sandra Rebok who, in her altogether fine paper in this special issue, asserts that "the American experience was most decisively influenced by Europe." Certainly in much of the western Atlantic world (the Americas), what was most distinctively 'American' in terms of everyday life is, in my own view, derived much more from Africa and Africans and their enslaved descendants. But then, perhaps this is the difference between a social-cultural historical orientation and an intellectual-historical one; a matter of scholarly perspective.

For what I (and others) have termed the Black Atlantic, or the transatlantic African Diaspora, however, if we extend our perspective to seeing the Atlantic as a bridge as well as a barrier to cross-oceanic connections, especially in the era of the slave trade and slavery, we can center Africa and Africans in the history of the Atlantic world.¹¹ We may envision the early modern Black Atlantic (appropriating Shakespeare's metaphor for the early

settling of the maritime Americas) as a grand tempest or hurricane originating off the coasts of Atlantic Africa.¹² Revolving counterclockwise as it spins west, the original tropical depression of slavery was propelled by trailing feeder bands extending from the coastal entrepôts of stone forts and associated villages in Senegambia and the Gold Coast to the barracoons of Whydah and Bonny and southward on to Loango, Benguela and Luanda in Congo and Angola, the coasts and their hinterlands constituting an 'Atlantic Africa'; past the various 'doors of no return', expanding to storm strength while violently pulling in peoples and polities from the localized successor kingdoms of old Mali and Songhay in Upper Guinea, later radicalized by new jihadist Islamic movements in the eighteenth century; to the newly rising empires of Asante and Dahomey and lesser predatory states in 'Lower Guinea' in the same period, or, by the collapse into civil war of other empires such as Kongo in the seventeenth and Oyo in the nineteenth centuries; or, to the regional clash of local civilizations such as between the pacifistic Nri and the mercenary Aro in Igboland (the principal hinterland of the Calabar Coast, now southeastern Nigeria), the latter tied to the storm surge of slaving and the former lost in swimming against the rising tide of violence become a tsunami in which millions would suffer.¹³

And all carried involuntarily along the Equatorial Current across the Atlantic, gathering force until crashing into the coasts of Brazil and the islands of the Caribbean, wave after wave, from Barbados onward back to the Lesser Antilles, to Jamaica, St. Domingue, and finally Cuba, not to mention Dutch Suriname and the Spanish Main, wreaking havoc and depositing these swells of enslaved people in chains across a landscape flattened by the gale-force winds of slavery and then periodically rebuilt, plantations financed by quotidian stimulants like sugar and coffee and tobacco; and finally pushing on up the coasts of North America to the flatlands of Louisiana, the rice-swamps of Carolina, the rolling tobacco-farms of Virginia, and even stony New England, the tail ends of a much larger creative destruction.

This great tensile southern arc was carried on further by its own immense momentum, its fury largely spent, recrossing the Atlantic on westerly trade-winds to warm the great port cities of maritime Europe, from London and Bristol and Liverpool to Lisbon and Seville and Amsterdam and Nantes, from whence the capital and the demand that drove the whole system derived. The violent circulation of peoples and things and ideas was not simply a commercial system, nor the carving out of spheres of imperial influence – not just the competition among mercantile empires for territory and trade; nor a single central culture linked with a series of colonial societies or subcultures – not just a montage of centers and peripheries; nor simply an endless collection of roughhewn outlands where 'the rules' were suspended and people reinvented themselves in their extremity – not just marginal marchlands. The Black

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Atlantic was all of these and more. Peoples, places and products became inter-linked in an evershifting mosaic that conjoined the three basic western worlds, the European and African and American littorals of the Atlantic Ocean, into a single dynamic 'world', pushing the pace of change in each, and increasingly so along the transnational fault-lines of slavery and freedom.

Within this ongoing storm, displaced Africans like others forged new identities wherever they found themselves, asserting their humanity by establishing connections among each other, hoping to achieve what they could in the crucible of slavery, with the arrivants piecing together a collective discourse of belonging by renaming themselves according to regional historical logics, their very names initially collective *lieux de mémoire*.¹⁴ Throughout the Black Atlantic, as Shakespeare himself intuitively understood even at his early moment, Euro/American 'Prosperos' may have owned the magic books and commanded center stage, ultimately controlling the very weather in this place of hurricanes, but they closed out by declaiming 'set me free' (the last three words of *The Tempest*). Free from what, one may ask.

In the eye of the storm, however, it was the enslaved African/American 'Calibans' who would most directly embody the contradictions of freedom and slavery and, in the most concrete ways, they made the post-columbian New World. As Shakespeare had Caliban say, "you taught me language and my profit on't is, I know how to curse." Of course, African 'Calibans' brought with them their own languages and linguistic curses, as well as secret knowledges of *cursing* throughout the Americas (for example, Afro-Caribbean *ôbia/obeah* and North American *conjure*).¹⁵ Their creole descendants drew on these ancestral ideas, words and things and adapted them to the realities on the ground to survive their harrowing ordeal with their essential humanity intact.

Certainly Africa and Africans, and slavery and servitude, and bondpeople in general are not absent in this set of papers. But they are perhaps most present in Carson's contribution, and by extension in Vidal. Carson's work sets the stage for the rest of the issue. His deeply imaginative article is a tour-de-force brimming with manifold possibilities for re-imagining the Atlantic, both ocean and world, as "a collision of competing geographies." By doing so he reminds us that the Atlantic Ocean itself was not simply a 'natural fact'; peoples inscribed their various meanings in historically contingent ways, which often remained meaningful in their changed lives. The Atlantic (ocean, and world) was a culturally, and therefore historically, constructed space. How may one depict these plural histories, mutually intersecting and yet subdivided into "the first people, the invading people, and the enslaved people"?

This basic theme continues with Forte, though on another historical subject, that of Native or First peoples and their supposed 'extinction' in the Caribbean. The "extinction theme" (as he puts it) is a central trope of the post-columbian Americas, accepted almost uncritically as a sort of natural

fact within an oceanic historiography of inevitability. Demographic catastrophe – yes; but total extinction – no. As Forte so clearly shows, in the Spanish islands in particular, where the extinction myth is strongest, perhaps we should more realistically explore Spanish *indigenization* or *Amerindianization* as a key to *creolization* (or more generally, *Americanization*), rather than continue with old assumptions about “hispanization” and its subterranean discourses rooted in high-modern social evolutionism (and racism). This is a powerful corrective to the facile tendency of stressing the ‘disappearance’ of Amerindians, especially in the Caribbean.

Breuninger then shifts the discussion to intellectual history and the first British Empire. He uses the prolific writings of Thomas Pownall (1722-1805), one-time governor of Massachusetts and an eighteenth-century political philosopher of empire, to show how three strands of European political philosophy intersected in the British Atlantic. Pownall wrote at the historical moment when England’s maritime empire was coming together. Breuninger brilliantly walks us through the effect on Pownall’s thinking of Scottish Enlightenment thought on supposed stages of human development (‘stadial’ histories), of the importance of ‘natural bonds’ (sociability and benevolence) for Social Newtonians, and of classical theories about how empire (and liberty) tended to shift from east to west (*translatio imperii*). In confronting the rise of a self-consciously liberal empire in the Atlantic, Pownall drew on these philosophies of history and reasonings about ‘natural law’ (including commerce) to argue for its expansion. And yet he feared that the seat of this maritime commercial empire could, or perhaps inevitably would, remove westward from England to its possessions in America.¹⁶

Mason’s contribution, a literary history of British perceptions of its American colonies (and colonists), seems to contradict Pownall’s optimism, largely because of the central contradiction of coerced and slave labor in the New World. Mason argues that English (and other) writers imagined colonial Americans as degenerate, drunken desperadoes. Mason reminds us that indentured servants and chattel slaves were seen as “the heart of colonial society,” who all were, in the words of Defoe in his novel *Colonel Jack* (1722), “worked hard, lodged hard, and fared hard.” Hence we see colonial North America, in particular, as an imperial periphery peopled by despotic masters and abused forced-laborers, not simply as Old England transported across the Atlantic.

Rebok deftly uses the correspondence between two icons of the Atlantic Enlightenment, Thomas Jefferson and Baron Alexander von Humboldt, to suggest that by the early nineteenth century the Atlantic world had matured beyond largely political and commercial connections. Here were two men who maintained a long-running transatlantic scientific ‘conversation’ and exchange of information, the result of their mutual curiosity, mutual inquisitiveness, and, on Jefferson’s part, also practical politics, especially concerning

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Spanish America. While they agreed on many things, including a mutual skepticism about any dogmatic religion, including Christianity, there were also significant differences in their thinking, such as on slavery where Humboldt was an avowed abolitionist while Jefferson remained agnostic. Hence, through this trans-Atlantic conversation we can more clearly see “the political philosopher Humboldt and the politician Jefferson”; they also throw into relief differences between European and American forms of late-Enlightenment thinking.

We close this set of papers with an historiographical essay by Vidal. A courageous piece, both in its critical analysis of fellow French historians for their general lack of interest in the new Atlantic history and of the cumbersome academic bureaucracy in France which adds to the intellectual entropy, it is also a comprehensive ‘book shelf’ of relevant publications in French. This paper is a brilliant survey, at once comprehensive and critical; comparativist and instructive; panoramic and prescriptive. Not incidentally, she provides an object lesson in how contemporary political and social changes, and the unwelcome intrusion of the State into the Academy, can alter what is fashionable (or not) in historical inquiry. This is a clear-eyed analysis that reaches from the 1950s to our present, and by a major new voice in what one hopes will become a new historiography in France.

This leads us, then, back full circle to Braudel. I am reminded of an old saw: what begins as a movement becomes a business, and ends up a racket. In terms of the new Atlantic history, we are clearly now in the “movement” stage. These papers reflect this heady sense of anticipation and excitement in which I trust you, dear reader, will share. They also implicitly recognize the difficulty of this collective discovery, this historical imagining of an Atlantic World.

The tension between possibility and loss, between anticipation and ambivalence, is not unlike that of embarking upon a voyage. The post-romantic American poet Hart Crane (1899-1932) desperately sought to express a sense of oneness in a fractured world.¹⁷ In one of the ‘voyages’ poems in his first published collection, *White Buildings* (1926), he speaks to this tension, this sense of “ocean rivers, churning, shift / Green borders under stranger skies”; and where “The imaged Word [...] is the unbetrayable reply / Whose accent no farewell can know,” as excerpted here:

“Voyages, VI”

Where icy and bright dungeons lift
Of swimmers their lost morning eyes,
And ocean rivers, churning, shift
Green borders under stranger skies,

Steadily as a shell secretes
 Its beating leagues of monotone,
 Or as many waters trough the sun's
 Red kelson past the cape's wet stone;

O rivers mingling toward the sky
 And harbor of the phoenix' breast—
 My eyes pressed black against the prow,
 —Thy derelict and blinded guest

Waiting, afire, what name, unspoke,
 I cannot claim: let thy waves rear
 More savage than the death of kings,
 Some splintered garland for the seer.

The imaged Word, it is, that holds
 Hushed willows anchored in its glow.
 It is the unbetrayable reply
 Whose accent no farewell can know.

NOTES

¹ Published in English as "The Situation of History in 1950," in *idem*, *On History*, trans. Sarah Matthews (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 6-22, 12 (quotation); orig. publ. in French in 1969.

² This general approach became known as the *Annales* School, after a journal (*Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*) founded by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch in 1929, and which flourished after 1946, when it was renamed *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*; since its founding the forte of the *Annales* approach has been medieval and early modern (and often rural) French history. For an overview see Traian Stoianovich, *French Historical Method: The Annales Paradigm* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976). Perhaps the three benchmark *Annales*-type studies over time and available in English are: Marc Bloch, *French Rural History: An Essay on its Basic Characteristics*, trans. Janet Sondheimer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966; orig. publ. 1931); Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1972-74; orig. publ. 1949); and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Vintage Books, 1979; orig. publ. 1975). Even Braudel's three-volume masterpiece on the early modern period (15th to the 18th centuries), though formulated on a world scale, however, remained fundamentally Eurocentric; *idem*, *Civilization and*

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Capitalism, trans. Siân Reynolds, 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1981-84; orig. publ. 1979). One may suppose that, with Bloch's broad interest in the feudal era (rather than with France *per se*), had he not been executed by the Gestapo on 16 June 1944 (along with twenty-six others) for his activities in the Resistance, he would have joined Braudel in broadening the scope of *Annales* beyond what French historians still call 'the hexagon' (national France).

³Most historians have shifted to BCE/CE (Before Common Era / Common Era) which simulates BC/AD, but without the subtext of the Christian calendar.

⁴See Cécile Vidal's paper in this issue.

⁵K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An economic history from the rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); idem, *Asia before Europe: Economy and civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁶It is also resonating in literary and art history; and historical linguistics and archaeology and geography; and in the sciences, in demography and genetics, among others.

⁷For example, at my university, the English Department's acclaimed Center for Writers (a nationally recognized graduate program in creative writing) has built its considerable reputation precisely on its cosmopolitanism; as well, we have a very large international study abroad unit (formerly a separate college) presently located administratively within the College of Arts and Letters, with programs in countries as diverse as Jamaica, Britain, France, Austria and Vietnam, among others.

⁸The International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World is sponsored by the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History at Harvard, and supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Participation is by invitation, and the seminars run for about a week in August. There have also been a series of Workshops besides the annual Seminars; and all ably administrated by Pat Denault. See the Seminar's website at <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~atlantic>.

⁹"Atlantic History: Soundings; The Tenth-Anniversary Conference of the Atlantic History Seminar 1996-2005," Harvard University, 10-13 August 2005.

¹⁰The six authors represent the following Seminars: 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002 (2), 2004.

¹¹For the most recent argument along these lines, see Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); the classic statement remains John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1680* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992; and rev. 2nd ed., 1998).

¹²The literary reference of course is to William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (1612); for a recent edition see Robert Langbaum, ed. (New York: Signet Classic, 1998).

¹³Just as we have in our basic working historical knowledge an awareness of places like Lisbon, London, Paris, Amsterdam, and countries like Portugal, England, France, the Netherlands; – a truly 'Atlantic' perspective requires similar working knowledge of places like Gorée, Elmina, Whydah, Bonny, Luanda; and countries like Senegal, Ghana, Bénin, Nigeria, Congo and Angola.

¹⁴ 'sites of memory'; see Vidal below for extended references to this concept in French historiography.

¹⁵ Transparently African-derived religions in the Americas included Haitian *vodun* ("voodoo" in Louisiana), Afro-Cuban *santería*, Trinidadian *Shangó* (or *orísha*), Afro-Brazilian *candomblé*, Suriname Maroon *krománti*, Afro-Jamaican *kumina*, as well as *lumbalú* in Colombia and others such as conjure and gofering (*gris-gris* and *wanga*) in the U.S. South.

¹⁶ Indeed, in the early 19th century there were two cases in which the seat of maritime commercial empires were moved to their principal colony: 1807-1820 when the Portuguese Crown, after having been invaded by Napoleon removed to Rio de Janeiro in Brazil; and 1840-1856 when the Sultan of Oman formally moved his capital from Muscat to Zanzibar on the Swahili Coast of East Africa. See, respectively, Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade 1730-1830* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 526-527, 635-636; Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spice & Ivory in Zanzibar: Integration of an East African Commercial Empire into the World Economy, 1770-1873* (London: James Currey, 1987), 208-217.

¹⁷ He committed suicide by casting himself overboard a ship sailing some 100 leagues north of Havana, several months shy of his 33rd birthday. I thank my colleague Kenneth Watson, who will be joining *The Southern Quarterly* as associate editor, for putting me on to Crane; also, we welcome our new book review editor, Kyle F. Zelner, who supervised the several book reviews for this issue.

