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Atlantic History and the Literary Turn

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Atlantic History and the Literary Turn

Eliga H. Gould (bio)

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 field'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 field are currently consuming less work in Atlantic literary studies, scholarship 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. Though 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 **[End Page 197]** answered by adopting broader geographic perspectives. Though this debt was perhaps more apparent ten years ago than it is 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, the writings of

Stephen Greenblatt, Paul Gilroy, and Edward Said remain a familiar presence 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, 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. Though 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...

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