

## **“THE SEA IS HISTORY”: EXPLORING THE ATLANTIC**

Carmen Brikle and Nicole Waller, eds.

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The field of Atlantic Studies has acquired renewed interest as a result of a paradigm shift in the study of history, literature and culture in the last twenty years. Even though in its inceptions Atlantic Studies scholarship dealt almost exclusively with tracing economic and socio-cultural interconnections between Britain and the US after the latter's independence from its former colonizer, the field has expanded to include a body of works that follow what has been called a 'circum-Atlantic' perspective. Shifting towards a multidirectional approach, the Atlantic paradigm seeks to bring to light the multiplicity of economic and socio-cultural transnational connections that have existed between Europe, the Americas and West Africa from early modern times. Within this supranational framework, Atlantic History developed as a discipline aimed at providing adequate description of historical events happening at the same time in different locations across the Atlantic Ocean, from the first encounters in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, marked by attempts of the European imperial powers to establish a European civilization in the Americas up to the present day. It includes the development of trade routes between Africa, Europe and the Americas during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the exchange of ideas associated with the Enlightenment during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that contributed to the process of independence of the different colonies throughout the Americas and the Caribbean (Bailyn 2005: 62-107). Carmen Birkle and Nicole Waller's "The Sea Is History": Exploring the Atlantic" (2009) brings together a set of articles by scholars like Bernard Bailyn,

William Boelhower, Donna Gabaccia and other Atlantic historians that explore cultural links and connections in what Mary Louise Pratt would call the ‘contact zones’<sup>1</sup> of the Atlantic world. Borrowing from the title of Derek Walcott’s celebrated poem, the essays in Birkle and Waller’s volume excavate the Atlantic archives aiming to contribute a cultural perspective to the study of the circum-Atlantic.

*“The Sea Is History”: Exploring the Atlantic* is number 177 in the American Studies’ Monograph Series published by Universitätsverlag Winter, a series edited on behalf of the German Association for American Studies by Reinhard R. Doerries, Gerhard Hoffmann and Alfred Hornung which, since the 1950s, has established itself as one of the leading publications in the field of American Studies in Germany. The volume is comprised of ten articles preceded by an introduction by Birkle and Walker in which the two editors set the theoretical underpinnings for the compilation, reviewing various approaches to the study of Atlantic History and establishing links between the developments of this field and the emergence of Atlantic Studies in the 1990s as a discipline that combines the concerns of Atlantic historians and economists with those of scholars of literary and cultural studies (Birkle and Waller 2009: 2).

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The ten articles in the volume provide a fine example of the multidisciplinary of the field, putting together a set of contributions ranging from critical analysis of historical documents and events, popular culture rewritings of canonical texts, filmic, narrative and theatrical pieces, as well as accounts of personal transatlantic experiences. The collection thus illustrates what William Boelhower describes as the “complexity and fluidity” (Birkle and Waller 2009: 11) of the field. Inspired by Ferdinand Braudel’s notion of “total history”, in his “Atlantic Studies Complexities: Routes across Cultures”, the first article in the volume, Boelhower welcomes what he terms the “new Atlantic studies matrix” (16), characterized by an intense interdisciplinarity that results from a conception of the world as a pluriverse “caught up in processes that are both intra- and inter-civilizational” (16). After contrasting Bailyn’s traditional approach to the study of history with Braudel’s defense of a holistic research method, Boelhower turns to philologist Erich Auerbach in support of what he interprets as a “shifting interpretative space” for Atlantic Studies that demands a cross-cultural understanding of historical and literary texts. Hence, Boelhower’s article complements in many ways Birkle and Waller’s introduction by expanding on the theoretical grounds of the project.

Matthias Krings’ article “*Black Titanic: African American and African Appropriations of the White Star Liner*” well serves the purpose of exposing interconnectedness in the Atlantic world by examining various reinterpretations of the sinking of the Titanic in African and African American media representations. In his analysis, Krings argues that African and African American singers and filmmakers have addressed the lack of black passengers aboard the infamous ship

in several ways in an attempt to “claim for black people a part of history from which they were excluded” (26). By focusing on the ship motif, these authors are also making a statement on the relationship between the Atlantic triangular trade, the Middle Passage and slavery, while at the same time reflecting on current conditions for African migrant and diasporic populations whose history continues to be linked to boats and the sea in an increasingly globalized world.

Black Atlantic experiences are also the central topic in Anne C. Bailey’s “Beyond Boundaries. Learning the ways: Ghana, West Africa”, where she narrates her own trip from the US to Ghana in search of “stories that were still told about the Atlantic Slave Trade” (45). In this piece of creative non-fiction, Bailey recounts her experiences in West Africa in an attempt to establish connections between the untold stories of the Middle Passage and those of the dispossessed African American communities in New York City. Likewise, Amina Blackwood Meeks points to the links between Jamaican and African histories and oral traditions in her “Depths of Memories: Honouring the Makere People”. Focusing on the events organized to commemorate the Bicentenary of the Anniversary of the Abolition of the TransAtlantic Trade in Enslaved Africans in Jamaica in 2007, Meeks explores oral, textual and material underwater sources, her aim being to unearth the palimpsestic nature of black Atlantic history.

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Drawing on a close examination of names in historical records, Erna Brodber traces the presence of African American enslaved workers and white loyalist settlers in Jamaica at the time of the American War of Independence, in an attempt to examine the complex cultural exchanges between black communities arriving from North America and Africa at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and those already living on the island. In her “Atlantic Crossings of the Late Eighteenth Century”, Brodber thus challenges the alleged heterogeneity of black peoples in the Caribbean, revealing the already existing diversity among African and Afro-descendant populations, while, at the same time, mapping out Atlantic routes outside the traditional established triangle. Also working within the Jamaican context, Wolfgang Binder’s “‘Where the Remote Bermudas Ride’: Exploration, Expansion, Transport(s), and Two Texts on Jamaica” examines two travelogues written by two British authors in the early 1810s in which they describe their experiences travelling to and living in the West Indies. In both texts—the first one, a diary written by Maria Nugent, the English governor’s wife, and the other one, a journal by professional writer Matthew Lewis—the narrative voices face a redefinition of their Englishness as a result of coming into contact with the uncanny natural environments of the Caribbean region.

Moving over to fiction, Carmen Birkle’s first contribution to the volume establishes a dialogue between two distinguished nurse practitioners of the nineteenth century: Mary Seacole and Florence Nightingale. By comparing their first person narrative accounts, in “Traveling Nurses: Mary Seacole and the Nightingale Encounter. A

Transatlantic Story”, Birkle discusses racial and gender issues in medical practices and transatlantic travel. After a careful analysis, Birkle argues that if both nurses defy the gender roles assigned to them in their societies by breaking down the division between the private and the public spheres and by participating in the scientific discourse of their times, Seacole, as a black British-Jamaican subject, also crosses “national, cultural, social, and ethnic borders” (105), thus becoming an active participant in the creation of the black Atlantic world.

Nicole Waller’s “Filmic Representations of Circum-Atlantic Complexities: Steven Spielberg’s *Amistad*” moves beyond the literary to take a look at contemporary cinema in her discussion of Spielberg’s *Amistad*, and the reinterpretation in the film of the *Amistad* mutiny and subsequent legal process. After a close analysis of the historical event, in which Waller details the political implications of the case in the context of the US/Spanish struggle over the Caribbean territories and circum-Atlantic space, Waller examines Spielberg’s adaptation of the events for a 1990s audience. In her view, although she agrees that the film’s focus on the characters of the white lawyers and the abolitionists results in the erasure of any agency as speaking subjects on the part of black Africans or black Americans, Waller contends that some of the narratological structures behind Cinque, the leader of the Mende rebellion, work to challenge the right of Western nations to establish control over oceanic space, therefore claiming the African presence not only at the level of individual heroism but also of Atlantic politics. In “*Slaves in Algiers*, or, Susanna Haswell Rowson’s Transatlantic Negotiations”, Carmen Birkle aims to explore the literary routes traced by Haswell Rowson in her play *Slaves in Algiers; or, A Struggle for Freedom: A Play, Interspersed with Songs. In Three Acts* (1974). Focusing on the experiences of Rebecca, a white American who is captured in North African shores and kept as an enslaved worker, the play stages a reverse of the black Middle Passage, thus offering a complementary view of slavery across the Atlantic. In the last article of the volume, Annette Trefzer examines and compares Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Andrew Lytle’s *At the Moon’s Inn*, in an attempt to identify analogies between the processes of colonization in Africa by British colonizers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and of the Americas by Spain during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. With this in mind, in “The Cannibal Feast in Andrew Lytle’s and Joseph Conrad’s Circum-Atlantic Imagination”, Trefzer argues that “in depicting the voracious greed of European colonialism, Conrad and Lytle share a moral point of view and a literary technique that renders the economics of capitalism in the trope of cannibalism” (161). A close examination of this particular trope as the colonizers’ hunger to devour the Other’s natural resources, bodies and minds leads Trefzer to a deep critical understanding of the global geopolitics of the early transatlantic world.

The wide range of topics and approaches covered in the different essays included in “The Sea Is History” exemplifies the disciplinary shift that Atlantic Studies as a discipline puts forward. In this sense, the volume will be a valuable contribution to the field, particularly as it compiles a set of articles that combine concerns of history, cultural studies and literature in papers exploring different aspects of the circum-Atlantic experience in various times and locations. However, if as stated in the introduction, the volume seeks to depart from Eurocentric approaches to develop more inclusive analyses for the study of the Atlantic world, and to take issue with geopolitical location along with social class, gender, race, and ethnicity, closer attention should be given to scholarly practices and methodologies that take these categories into consideration. With a few notable exceptions, there is a certain lack of attention to black and Caribbean scholars and black Atlantic scholarship in spite of the fact that seven out of the ten articles revolve around the racialized experiences of black Atlantic communities. In spite of this shortcoming, the volume contributes to the advancement of the “new disciplinary matrix of the circum-Atlantic world” (“Editorial” n.p.) by offering a panoramic view of recent developments and cross-disciplinary approaches in the field, and by propitiating a much-needed conversation between the Social Sciences and the Humanities.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>. Pratt devises this term to “refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths” (1992: 7).

## Works cited

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