Atlantic Studies: Prospects and Challenges. William Boelhower. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2019. ISBN: 9780807171639

The appeal of this book may initially seem to be, as William Boelhower suggests on the opening page, the opportunity to follow a veteran scholar as he casts "a backward glance" (1) at the field that he helped to establish. But *Atlantic Studies* is in many ways a stranger book than that. With its striving to rejuvenate the field and its hatching of esoteric terms, the book reads like an attempt to make a new field, or at least to enliven a thriving one, rather than as a retrospective. Boelhower regards himself as a mapmaker exploring a world both old and new, pointing to the latest trends in the field and adjusting the assessments of previous cartographers. He offers a partisan survey of decades of scholarship as well as a study of Atlantic cartography in both literature and history.

Part One, "Prospects and Genealogy," evaluates several decades of scholarship with formidable erudition. Some of the themes touched on here—the slave trade, the intersection of local and regional history, the ecologies of ocean environments—will be well known to historians of the Atlantic world, but the methodology will be less familiar, a fact which confirms Boelhower's point that disciplinary fences still divide the field. (Whether the dissolution of those barriers is desirable is a point worth arguing.) Of particular interest will be Boelhower's suggestion that Atlantic history is, at its best, distinctive in terms of its style as well as its subject matter; it is, for him, as much a unique poetics as a collection of themes. Atlanticist scholarship, he suggests, was developed in response to several French influences. These include Fernand Braudel's understanding of the different time scales of historical writing, which he calls *histoires événementielles*, *conjoncturelles*, and *structurales* (the last better known as the *longue durée*); Édouard Glissant's suggestion that telling the story of the uprooting of the Middle Passage requires a turn to non-linear narrative; and French structuralists' notion of narrative as bricolage,

recombining familiar themes into new, surprising historical montages. At his best, Boelhower's approach to history offers illuminating changes of perspective, such as his point that "if the Atlantic world as a new oceanic order was a European invention, it is equally true that 'Europe' was an invention of the Atlantic world," because Europeans could now see themselves from the outside as sharing an identity (29–30).

Part One also introduces the historian whom I take to be Boelhower's antagonist, the late Bernard Bailyn. *Atlantic Studies: Prospects and Challenges* is clearly a riposte to Bailyn's influential *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (2005). Boelhower contrasts his approach with that of Bailyn, whom he accuses of an unfortunate systematizing tendency. Boelhower argues that Bailyn's portrait of an Atlantic system reflects his own preoccupations rather than the historical reality, for "in the age of sail, Atlantic circulation could only be called a system by armchair metropolitan officials" (25). Yet Boelhower seems to forget that Bailyn identifies the signal achievement of Atlantic history as the laying bare of the "informal actuality" of international economic processes (such as smuggling), a reality which everywhere mocked the "formal designs" imperial administrators sought to impose on the Atlantic world. The real difference between *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* and *Atlantic Studies: Prospects and Challenges* is the former's interest in economics and ideology and the latter's foregrounding of geography and critical theory. While it may be true that Bailyn seeks patterns within economic processes, it is not true that Bailyn is simply reconstructing imperial designs; quite on the contrary, he demonstrates the way that those plans always failed. To claim that "*System* [Boelhower's italics] tends to cast aside anomalies, singularities, unconnected experiences, and disconnecting forces" (26) is simply to state a definition; but surely even the scholar who decides

to focus on unusual cases, rather than on points of connection and identity, must first have a preexisting understanding of a system from which those microhistories would deviate.

Part Two, "Case Studies Across the Humanities," turns to three literary texts. Though he resists confinement to disciplinary buckets, Boelhower's career as a professor of English makes it unsurprising that the three central chapters of the book concern literature. Interestingly, Boelhower does not so much place these works within the Atlantic world as offer Atlanticist interpretations, as he defines this approach. This looser approach might be said to contextualize literary works within historical geography rather than to place them in geographical history. For example, the chapter on Shakespeare's *Tempest* does not locate the play in the historical Atlantic, but instead contrasts the ways that Prospero and Caliban map space, producing a postcolonial interpretation that movingly links Caliban with Derek Walcott. Making a great deal of Prospero's declaration that he inhabits a "bare island," Boelhower argues that the deposed duke wants to imagine colonial space as empty rather than as populated by indigenous peoples. Yet geographical history might have produced a simpler, albeit perhaps less interesting interpretation, for Shakespeare was responding to the news of the *Sea-Venture*'s shipwreck on Bermuda, where there were no inhabitants due to the absence of fresh water.

In parallel fashion, the chapter on *The Scarlet Letter* is interested less in Hawthorne as a historian than as an imaginative geographer. Boelhower reads Hester Prynne's wandering as blazing routes through Massachusetts less regular than the paths followed by Puritan authorities. Seizing on a small detail, Boelhower argues that Hester's feet take us, imaginatively, to Peru—a detail that would make sense alongside the novel's many other Catholic motifs. Following Boelhower's own path as he charts tenuous links between Saint Hester and gift economies will

be tough going; her sacrifices, however, might well exemplify the informal economy described by Bailyn, though one that recognizes a broader range of motivations than self-interest.

In the chapter on Frederick Douglass's novella "The Heroic Slave," Douglass is the one doing the mapping. In Boelhower's view, Douglass's text, though a fiction, should be seen as a creative way of engaging with the historical archive. Douglass, in this view, treats the mind of the rebel Madison Washington much in the way Carlo Ginzburg reconstructs the worldview of Menocchio, while also adding features from his own personal experience. Yet Douglass's approach in his only fictional narrative might be described more simply as an argument for the necessity of creative reconstruction of the past when the historical archive fails, as it did when it came to the experiences of the enslaved such as Douglass's real-life hero Washington. Listening well (to play on the name of the white auditor of the narrative, Mr. Listwell) requires us to imagine those slave speeches which are not written down anywhere, but are lovingly represented in the fiction. In this respect, Boelhower's suggestion that Douglass's novella invokes conventions of Romantic historiography makes perfect sense; this insightful point would help us to understand Douglass's extensive use of apostrophe and prosopopoeia.

Part Three, "The Cartographic Challenge," treats early modern mapmaking as a creative activity. Boelhower treats maps as "semiospheres," or complete signifying systems in which territorial claims, place-names, and decorative emblems emerge from the raw materials of line, word, and image. Boelhower traces the evolution of medieval and Renaissance maps and the transition from sailors' portolan charts to planispheres, or projection maps. Boelhower's illuminating commentary on a series of maps demonstrates that "we can read the Americas as an inexhaustible memory theater and a graffiti board of almost endless opinions about the world" (186).

Even as he is aware of the brutality of the European emergence in the Atlantic world, Boelhower unabashedly identifies himself with the early explorers. This gives Atlantic Studies a sense of fresh possibility that it may now need. He suggests that

> the broader dilemma Columbus expresses [in his journals] … could easily be construed as that of today's Atlantic studies scholar. The desire to move from island to island in order to get a sense of the whole and the rival need to stop and learn a people's language, culture, and history represent a typically circumatlantic dialectic that early modern maps accounted for through their own developing practices, … namely surface travel and deep travel. (202)

This is surely a key to Boelhower's own book, which pauses to examine several literary texts and historical maps in depth, while also cruising past a wide range of historians, cultural theorists, and geographers. In doing so he successfully demonstrates that Atlantic Studies is still a new world.

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