TO the ear of the literary scholar, a plaintive note rings with parti-
cular clarity throughout Eric Slauter’s analysis of the trade gap
between literary and historical scholarship on the Atlantic world.
Literary scholarship, Slauter demonstrates, exhibits an unrequited inter-
est in the work of historians of the Atlantic. Poetically put, literary
scholars seem to occupy the melancholic signifying position described
by Emily Dickinson: “This is my letter to the World / That never wrote
to Me.”¹ Slauter’s diagnostic apparatus—in the form of numbers, notes,
charts, and bullets—is impressive and wholly persuasive as to the lack of
reciprocity between scholarship in literature and history, but the enter-
prise of the essay as a whole and the affective subtext that threads through
it raise for me questions about value and desire that seem to underpin the
issues of evidence that receive primary attention in Slauter’s probing essay.

Slauter begins by holding up a mirror of abjection to literary scholars.
Like wallflowers at a dance, literary scholars hover in the margins of the
field of Atlantic studies, watching the polished moves of historians, har-
boring hopes that someday they too will be asked to step into the spot-
light. Compounding the misery is literary scholars’ late arrival to the
dance: whereas historians turned their attention to Atlantic studies with
full force beginning in the late 1980s, most literary scholars are only
beginning to recognize the significance of the field. This picture suggests
that the primary difference between work in Atlantic history and in
Atlantic literary studies is that literary scholars were slow to arrive in the
field and have not made much of an impression since their ill-timed
entrance. A look at the differing disciplinary trajectories that led histori-
ans and literary scholars of early America to the field of Atlantic studies,
however, indicates that distinct and separate concerns animated the
move toward an Atlantic paradigm. These different concerns have gen-
erated and continue to generate divergent scholarly values and aims

Elizabeth Maddock Dillon is an associate professor of English at Northeastern
University.
¹ Emily Dickinson, Poem 519, in R.W. Franklin, ed., The Poems of Emily

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that, despite a common Atlanticist framework of study, are worth careful
delineation and consideration.

Bernard Bailyn’s account of the development of Atlantic studies
 traces the origins of historical engagement in the field to political strate-
gies of Atlantic alliance among Western nations following World War II,
evident in such multinational organizations as NATO or in what jour-
nalist Walter Lippman called the “profound web of interest which joins
together the western world.” This approach was bolstered and cemented,
according to Bailyn, by economic studies of early America that increas-
ingly focused on the network of financial relations that structured the
eighteenth-century Atlantic world. Yet post–World War II politics had a
different effect on the field of American literary studies; the study of
American literature, instead of broadening its focus to include connec-
tions with European nations, arguably found its raison d’être as a disci-
pline in the cultural nationalism attendant on the United States’
emergence as a world power. Rather than joining the logic of an Atlantic
alliance as a result of the war, American literary studies stepped out from
the shadow of the study of European literatures to become a field of its
own for the first time. The nationalistic impetus intensified and acceler-
ated the role of exceptionalism in the study of American literature and
culture, a thesis that emphasized the particularity of U.S. culture over its
embeddedness within the larger historical frame of the Atlantic world or
world systems in general. Amy Kaplan’s memorable critique of excep-
tionalism in American literary studies takes as emblematic Perry Miller’s
autobiographical account of his revelation, while laboring in Africa in
the 1920s, that America and America alone was the chosen object of his
scholarly calling.2 Standing in a location that was part of a key economic
(and cultural) vector of Atlantic trade, Miller discovered an interest in

2 Walter Lippman in Bernard Bailyn, Atlantic History: Concept and Contours
(Cambridge, Mass., 2005), 54. For the postwar emergence of American literary stud-
ies as an independent field, see Elizabeth Renker, “Resistance and Change: The Rise
Renker demonstrates that, after years of struggle against a perception that American
literature was not worthy of serious academic study, following the Second World War
“American literature scholars increasingly argued that the literature of one of the most
powerful nations in the modern world was certainly worth studying. World War II
reinforced . . . tendencies toward cultural nationalism and finally consolidated the ‘size
and virility’ of American literature studies” (ibid., 358). For a brief account of the Cold
War origins of American Studies as a field (including the “Myth and Symbol” school,
which reserved a central role for literature), see Janice Radway, “What’s in a Name?
Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, 20 November, 1998,”
American Quarterly 51, no. 1 (March 1999): 1–32. For Amy Kaplan’s critique of excep-
tionalism, see Kaplan, “‘Left Alone With America’: The Absence of Empire in the
Study of American Culture,” in Cultures of United States Imperialism, ed. Kaplan and
America alone instead of in an Atlantic geography that linked early America to Africa. During the Cold War development of American Studies as a discipline, Miller’s work and vision was foundational within the field of American literary studies.

Lest Miller be construed as exceptionally exceptional, it is worth noting that literary studies as a discipline has historically been related to a pedagogy of cultural nationalism. As Bill Readings argues, from the nineteenth century forward literature served “as the major discipline entrusted by the nation-state with the task of reflecting on cultural identity.”

Though history, as a discipline, certainly bears the weight of forming nationalized citizens as well, the object of history (the archival fact, the historical trace) does not have the same status as a bearer of meaning that the literary text does. The literary text is taken to embody a meaning that is cultural, national, and aesthetic. If more recent developments in the field of literary studies have added “historical” to the kinds of meaning derived from the literary text, they have done so, at least initially, as an adjunct to the baseline logic of cultural nationalism that informs the trajectory of the field as a whole.

The shift among literary scholars to an interest in the field of Atlantic studies may, on this account, seem inexplicable, but two factors have contributed to a fairly recent change in the status of transatlantic work in literary studies. The decline in the authority of the nation-state itself in the era of globalization has required a rejiggering of the logic of literary study: as Grantland S. Rice and others have suggested, the shift in power from nation-states to global corporations has caused universities to adapt “by transforming [the] early modern mission of producing a nation’s citizenry into that of providing marketable and transferable skills to a global workforce.”

And the weakening link between nation and culture has enabled the exploration of alternative containers or frameworks of culture and literature to emerge in recent decades. The postnational era of globalization thus generated an interest in the pre-national (and particularly pre–United States) era of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Atlantic world.

The Atlantic framework for literary studies first received significant attention with the appearance of Paul Gilroy’s paradigm-shifting study, *The Black Atlantic*. Gilroy’s work had a profound effect on the field of literary studies because it proposed an alternative framework for the study of literature and culture, diasporic and African but, equally as

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important for much of the work that followed, capitalist and imperialist in its definitional boundaries as well. Gilroy’s work was followed by Joseph Roach’s similarly influential *Cities of the Dead*, a scholarly work that built on Gilroy’s framework but emphasized that the networks of exchange that constituted the culture of the Atlantic world were richly “Eurocolonial,” African-diasporic, and Native American in their makeup. Importantly, Gilroy and Roach may be said to have shifted definitions not only of the container of culture but also of the nature of culture contained. Both works turn away from—or at least propose radically new definitions and understandings of—canonical literary texts and nonetheless retain an interest in the formal and aesthetic dimensions of cultural meaning. Gilroy explores a diasporic “counterculture” of modernity that includes music and memory characterized by an aesthetic of indirection; Roach focuses on performance broadly defined as a circulatory culture of substitution and “surrogation.”

To be sure, there are versions of Atlantic literary scholarship that owe little to Gilroy or Roach; however, the innovation and influence of their work in the larger field of literary studies have been instrumental in enabling a shift in the mode of analysis of New World literary texts from the proto-U.S. teleology of a previous generation to the new possibilities opened by an Atlantic model of circulation. Further, what has animated the “field imaginary” of transatlantic studies within the realm of English departments is distinct from the moving forces behind the development of an Atlantic paradigm within history departments. Accordingly, where Slauter argues that “literary history and history are both historicist enterprises: they are simply committed to historicizing different things,” I would point instead to a large area of noncoincidence between the aims and desires of literary studies and historical studies, a noncoincidence apparent in the disciplinary trajectories I have briefly sketched out here.


At the June 2007 joint meeting of the Society of Early Americanists and the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, in response to a question concerning how literary scholars could best respond to the trade gap between literature and history, Slauter recommended (with some irony) “trade protectionism” as a remedy. His essay eschews the overt disciplinary territorialism of trade protectionism in favor of a more moderate course of action: Slauter suggests that the trade gap can be narrowed by means of collaborative work across the divide. But I confess a strong predilection for the less conciliatory approach of trade protectionism. Literary scholars of Atlantic studies should not feel the need to become (belated, secondhand) historians but should pursue the analysis of culture (texts, broadly defined) and signifying practices in the Atlantic world. Literary formalism has been particularly devalued as lacking in historical purchase, yet it is precisely in the analysis of form and genre—whether the captivity narrative, New World journal, shipwreck account, treaty, bill of sale, runaway advertisement, parade, novel, dance, or dramatic performance—that signifying practices and their meanings within the Atlantic world and within modernity as a whole emerge.

Jacques Rancière, in a discussion of the relation between politics and aesthetics, argues that “man is a political animal because he is a literary animal who lets himself be diverted from his ‘natural’ purpose by the power of words.” Literary scholars of the Atlantic world should allow themselves to be diverted by the power of words and led astray from the demographic centers of gravity that characterize the work of many (though not all) Atlantic historians. To be led astray in this manner is to find an essential aspect of the community generated by the advent of an Atlantic world: namely, a set of signifying practices (and erasures) that shaped the world we inhabit today. I fully agree that historians and literary scholars should read one another’s work and that they

work in the field of Atlantic print culture is largely distinct from the transatlantic literary models of Paul Gilroy and Joseph Roach; however, much of this work is more invested in tracking the history of the circulation and production of texts than in interpreting those texts, though it also forcibly demonstrates that interpreting what is within a text requires an understanding of its production, circulation, and reception to make its cultural significance clear.

7 I take this to be the force of Eric Slauter’s specific comments about the importance of attending to genre and form in relation to historical texts: for instance, he is particularly clear about the need to “consider the importance of generic or literary convention, the significance of writing as a practice, or the relationship between textual form and meaning.” See Slauter, WMQ 65: 154.

have much to learn from one another, but the gap between the two does not need to be bridged so much as attended to: we need to mind (or mine) the gap, not to erase the different methodologies and aims that generate divergent scholarship in the field of Atlantic studies.