



Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities

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Source: *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 111, No. 3 (June 2006), pp. 741-757

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#) on behalf of the [American Historical Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/ahr.111.3.741>

Accessed: 20/01/2011 20:45

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AHR Forum
Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities

ALISON GAMES

A historical study centered on a stretch of water has all the charms but undoubtedly all the dangers of a new departure.

Fernand Braudel¹

FERNAND BRAUDEL LAUNCHED his massive history of the Mediterranean with an epigraph by the sixteenth-century priest José de Acosta. “To this day,” wrote Acosta in his own equally massive *Natural and Moral History of the East and West Indies*, “they have not discovered at the Indies any mediterranean sea as in Europe, Asia and Affrike.”² The irony is delicious in hindsight. While Europeans never found their own Mediterranean in the Americas, historians have since discovered the Atlantic as a unit of historical analysis. The very ocean that Acosta crossed to undertake missionary work in America has become an organizing principle through which scholars investigate the histories of the four landmasses it links. Yet the Atlantic does not have the coherence that Acosta first identified for the Mediterranean, nor that Braudel proposed and delineated centuries later; nor, indeed, is it possible to speak with confidence of an Atlantic system or a uniform region. Attempts to write a Braudelian Atlantic history—one that includes and connects the entire region—remain elusive, driven in part by methodological impediments, by the real disjunctions that characterized the Atlantic’s historical and geographic components, by the disciplinary divisions that discourage historians from speaking to and writing for each other, and by the challenge of finding a vantage that is not rooted in any single place. But if a broad vision of the Atlantic such as the one Braudel sought for the Mediterranean is elusive, it nonetheless remains desirable. Scholars working in the field of Atlantic history have demonstrated the explanatory power of this geographic region as a unit of analysis: Atlantic perspectives deepen our understanding of trans-

I wish to thank readers who looked at earlier versions of this article, especially Wim Klooster and the anonymous reviewers for the *AHR*, and colleagues who heard and commented on aspects of this piece at conferences. I also thank Douglas Egerton, David Hancock, Kris Lane, John McNeill, Jennifer Morgan, Marcy Norton, Adam Rothman, John Tutino, Jim Williams, and Donald Wright for many helpful conversations on the challenges of teaching and writing regional, Atlantic, and global histories.

¹ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds, 2 vols. (New York, 1973), 1: 19.

² This precise phrasing is from José de Acosta, *The Naturall and Morall Historie of the East and West Indies* (London, 1604), 151. Braudel cited the 1558 edition, p. 94.

formations over a period of several centuries, cast old problems in an entirely new light, and illuminate connections hitherto obscured.

Braudel remarked in 1972 that he believed that two “truths” of his analysis remained “unchallenged.” His first truth was what he characterized as the “unity and coherence of the Mediterranean region.” The Mediterranean itself was, as Braudel put it, a “complex of seas,” but nonetheless the self-contained nature of the sea and the common features of the kingdoms and empires that it linked enabled Braudel and those who followed him to insist on the value of writing about the region in its entirety, privileging commonalities and connections over discrete and local features.³ As Acosta recognized, the unit had long historical precedent, made visible on maps of ancient empires whose holdings circled the sea and whose dominion provided political unity to much of the region.

Here we confront the first crucial divergence between the Atlantic and the spatial perspective that animated Braudel’s Mediterranean. The path of hurricanes on their western trek from Africa to the Caribbean and up the North American coast reminds us annually of the environmental connections of the Atlantic, but the landmasses surrounding the Atlantic are characterized by their enormous variety, with hundreds of microclimates, from the swath of the Sahara Desert to the tropical rainforests of equatorial regions to the tundra of Nunavut. The people who lived around the ocean inhabited different disease environments, and those who lived in the Americas had long enjoyed a geographic isolation that had catastrophic consequences in their lack of immunity to Eurasian diseases. Such coherence as Atlantic history might offer will not come from its environmental features. These differences were echoed in political and social practices. The challenges that Braudel identified in his history of the Mediterranean resonate deeply with historians of the Atlantic. His great regret (or so he avowed in his preface) was his uneven treatment of the states of the region. He deplored specifically his inability to come to terms with the Ottoman Empire. Magnify this challenge a thousandfold, and it is possible to begin to appreciate the difficulties of making sense of the individual pieces of the Atlantic and the ways in which these parts ultimately converged or interacted. The kingdoms, states, and empires that became involved in Atlantic exchanges together contained thousands of different languages (two thousand in the Americas alone, with considerably less variation in those European and African states oriented toward the Atlantic). The most fundamental features of many of the people of the Atlantic remain dimly understood. Historians debate population sizes in the Americas, and must estimate where, exactly, people lived. John Thornton’s meticulous efforts to map the political boundaries of Atlantic Africa remind us of the absence of some of the crucial building blocks for an ocean-based history: for three of the four landmasses surrounding the ocean, we do not know with the certainty that historians like who lived where, under what jurisdiction, and with how many other people.⁴

If the Atlantic is a less obvious and coherent unit than the Mediterranean, it is also an anachronistic one. Historians have first had to invent the region: the emer-

³ Braudel, *Mediterranean*, 1: 14, 17. My thanks to Markus Vink for sharing with me an early version of his “From Port City to World System: Spatial Constructs of Dutch Indian Ocean Studies, 1500–1800,” *Itinerario* 28, no. 2 (2004): 45–116.

⁴ John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* (New York, 1992; 2nd ed., 1998), x–xxxvi.

gence of the Atlantic as a single unit of analysis reflects trends in historical geography. What we call the Atlantic Ocean, our ancestors perceived as several distinct seas. The regions we have since labeled the North and South American continents are similarly modern creations.⁵ Well into the nineteenth century, no one had an accurate idea of what these landmasses looked like or whether they were even connected to the Eurasian landmass. The components of Atlantic history—two of the four continents and even the ocean itself—are modern impositions.

And yet this unit of analysis, however artificially constructed it might be from the perspective of historical geography, has become sufficiently compelling to drive historical scholarship. Who are these scholars, and what is their impetus toward an Atlantic perspective? In one of the first efforts to articulate the history of this emerging field and to explain the origins of the current interest in the region, Bernard Bailyn argued that Atlantic history was a product of twentieth-century political developments.⁶ But it is also possible to identify other converging strands of historical inquiry. Indeed, this North Atlantic diplomatic *longue durée* cannot alone explain the passion that has developed for all things Atlantic. Three converging strands have delineated different and sometimes incompatible Atlantics. First and foremost, historians of the transatlantic slave trade have been especially insistent about putting an Atlantic perspective at the center of their work, starting with Philip D. Curtin's painstaking efforts to calculate the size of the trade, and continuing with the innovative and extensive research on the African diaspora.⁷ This vital field has opened up the ocean as a coherent unit of study by following the captives who moved across it, fanning out to Europe, to the islands of the Caribbean and the Atlantic, and to the American landmasses, especially Brazil. This approach, unfettered by state borders, pursues the logical lines of the trade, and puts people at the center, tracking the transmission of all elements of culture, from political identity to material goods to language to religion, all around the Atlantic basin. No other field has been so aggressively engaged for so many decades in pursuing an Atlantic vision and in framing the field as a whole. One of the most important conceptualizations of the Atlantic emerged from this vantage in 1993, when Paul Gilroy published *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*.⁸

A second source of energy toward Atlantic perspectives comes from historians of colonial societies in the Americas. Three factors have prodded their geographic expansion into and across the ocean. First, colonial historians are often trained in early modern European history, in addition to the history of the region of their research, and thus an Atlantic perspective can be a natural outgrowth of graduate training and reading. Second, historians of colonial societies often take comparative approaches to their subject, reading, for example, about colonization in other European empires in addition to their own, thus opening up possibilities of at least

⁵ Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley, Calif., 1997).

⁶ Bernard Bailyn, "The Idea of Atlantic History," *Itinerario* 20, no. 1 (1996): 19–44. William O'Reilly shares Bailyn's emphasis on the link between twentieth-century politics and diplomacy and the emergence of Atlantic history. See O'Reilly, "Genealogies of Atlantic History," *Atlantic Studies* 1 (2004): 66–84.

⁷ Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, Wis., 1969).

⁸ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993).

hemispheric connections. A third impetus comes from the frustration of trying to write a colonial history within historiographic traditions centered around modern nation-states. In this respect, the Atlantic potentially shares what Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, in their essay on the Mediterranean in this forum, describe as the political neutrality of these new regions. It is precisely this political neutrality that encouraged scholars seeking to escape the restrictions of the nation-state to move toward the borderless world of the Atlantic. For them, the Atlantic offers the liberation of the promised land.

Finally, historians of empires have long encompassed the Atlantic (among other ocean basins) within their purview.⁹ The main constraint these approaches impose on the Atlantic is their tendency to see the region primarily from the perspective of Europe and to look mainly within a single imperial geography, an approach that can divvy up the world in strange ways—most apparent, perhaps, in studies of the islands of the Caribbean, each of which existed within its own imperial trajectory even while sometimes sharing space with a rival power and participating in common regional transformations. These two approaches (colonial and imperial) have converged most vigorously among historians of the British Atlantic. Both British historians and historians of colonial British America work within national paradigms characterized by exceptionalism: Britain's relationship to the European continent and the mythical exceptionalism of the United States traditionally set these two nations apart from their neighbors. Atlantic history offers scholars in both fields intellectual solutions to the burden of exceptionalism by privileging interactions and comparisons and by rejecting nationalism altogether for new analytic categories. It is no accident that the sole recent volume that exists for any single empire's Atlantic is David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick's edited collection *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800*, which offers a thematic analysis of subjects ranging from the economy to politics to race, all investigated deliberately within an Atlantic framework.¹⁰

Although the existence of explicit Atlantic orientations dates from the middle of the twentieth century, it was not until the 1970s that a cadre of scholars emerged who self-consciously embraced Atlantic projects. In that decade, the Johns Hopkins University Press launched a series, the Johns Hopkins Studies in Atlantic History and Culture. But it was the 1990s that saw the greatest explosion of Atlantic scholarship. Greatly bolstered by the support of Harvard University's International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World under the direction of Bernard Bailyn,¹¹ historians who are engaged in different aspects of Atlantic history—particularly those at the beginning of their career, for whom the seminar is intended—find regular opportunities to present research at seminars, colloquiums, and workshops. International conferences, particularly in North America and Europe, bring together scholars who investigate different aspects of the subject.¹² A new interdisciplinary e-journal, *At-*

⁹ The classic and seminal works include Charles Andrews, *The Colonial Period of American History* (New Haven, Conn., 1934–1938), and Clarence Haring, *The Spanish Empire in America* (New York, 1947).

¹⁰ David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (London, 2002). Benjamin Schmidt's *Innocence Abroad: The Dutch Imagination and the New World, 1570–1670* (New York, 2001) is a rare and exemplary study from the vantage of the European mainland.

¹¹ <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~atlantic/index.html>.

¹² The University of Leiden hosted one of the earliest such conferences in 1999, at which participants

Atlantic Studies, published its first issue in 2004. Colleges and universities advertise for positions in Atlantic history. Atlantic history is taught at the college level in both introductory and advanced classes. Graduate students at some institutions, including New York University, Michigan State University, Florida International University, and the University of Texas at Arlington, can pursue degrees in Atlantic history, and elsewhere students can cobble together informal fields in Atlantic history. Atlantic history has arrived with a vengeance, making a rapid transition between 1995 and 2005 from novelty to establishment. In January 2000, the AHA hosted a session whose title reflected the tentative nature of this new endeavor, "Atlantic History: Emerging Themes in a New Teaching Field." Only five years later, the AHA featured a "critical reassessment" of the field in Seattle. These trends together reflect the emergence of Atlantic history as a field in which people give papers and organize panel sessions for professional meetings, in which departments offer employment, in which publishers offer book series (such as Routledge's new series, "New World in the Atlantic World"), and in which the AHA now awards a prize, first offered in 1999.¹³

All this activity is a surprisingly recent phenomenon, given how long ago historians such as Curtin delineated some of the potential for a transoceanic history. These indicators may suggest that Atlantic history is hale and hearty. But there continue to exist a range of impediments to an oceanic history. Atlantic history means different things to different people, and it is for the most part appropriate that this breadth of opinion and perspective exists. But the Atlantic history that many historians produce is rarely centered around the ocean, and the ocean is rarely relevant to the project. Horden and Purcell point to the difference between history *in* and history *of* the Mediterranean. For Atlantic history, the relevant distinction is between a history of places *around* the Atlantic versus a history *of* the Atlantic. Of the former, there is an abundance. Of the latter, there are far fewer examples.¹⁴ In fact, a survey of work that professes to be Atlantic reveals a lot of exclusively land-based (and sometimes landlocked) history, material that looks, as James Williams has said, like old wine in new bottles, or in this case the old colonial history repackaged as Atlantic history.

were invited to summarize different aspects of Atlantic history. The papers were published as "Round Table Conference: The Nature of Atlantic History," *Itinerario* 23, no. 2 (1999): 48–173.

¹³ James H. Williams has tabulated the appearance of "Atlantic" panels or papers at the annual (or biennial) conferences of four different professional organizations—the AHA, the OAH, the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture (OIEAHC), and the Forum on European Expansion and Global Interaction (FEEGI)—between 1990 and 2002. His statistics reveal a modest presence of Atlantic history at the AHA, but in 2000, for the first time, "Atlantic World" was listed as a topic in the program index. "Atlantic" made its first appearance at FEEGI in 2000. The biggest growth industry was the OIEAHC, which in 2001 offered no fewer than thirteen Atlantic panels or papers. Williams, "The Atlantic World: An Idea in Need of Conceptualization," paper presented at the FEEGI biennial conference, San Marino, Calif., February 2002. The OAH has been less engaged in Atlantic history, which perhaps reflects that professional organization's greater emphasis on the national, not colonial, period in North America, but trends in the first years of the twenty-first century suggest a shift. The OAH *Magazine of History* (designed for history teachers) devoted a topical issue to the Atlantic world in 2004 (18, no. 3 [April]), and the OAH has featured "state of the field sessions" on Atlantic history at the regional and national conferences.

¹⁴ For exemplary studies of Atlantic history, see David Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735–1785* (New York, 1995), and David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (New York, 2000).

In a forum on oceans-based history, the Atlantic lurks on the sidelines like a surly middle sibling, tagging along behind the Mediterranean and the Pacific (for each of which there are now a range of journals specifically devoted to the study of the region and its various subfields; and, as Matt Matsuda tells us in his essay, the first chair in Pacific history was established at the Australian National University in 1954), and in the throes of an adolescent identity crisis. Atlantic history is all the rage, yet very few works exist that have attempted to capture the entire Atlantic across imperial, regional, and national boundaries.¹⁵ It is time to restore the ocean to Atlantic history: if circulation around and across the ocean—not simply north-south hemispheric connections between Africa and Europe or within the Americas, but transatlantic connections—is not a fundamental part of historical analysis and does not in itself provide explanatory power to the subject under discussion, then we would do well to define these projects by some other name. To be sure, a history that requires attention to the Atlantic ends up privileging certain kinds of interactions (the migration of people and commodities, for example), but many historians have also effectively traced the circulation of ideas, tastes, preferences, and other less easily calculated and quantified aspects of exchange.

Assessing the different ways in which historians approach the Atlantic, David Armitage has identified three types of Atlantic history: “circum-Atlantic history,” which takes the Atlantic unit as a whole; “trans-Atlantic history,” which emphasizes a comparative approach; and “cis-Atlantic history,” which looks at a particular place within an Atlantic context.¹⁶ Cis-Atlantic history is the most accessible way for historians, particularly graduate students eager to research and write a manageable dissertation, to get into an Atlantic perspective, since it is less likely to require archival research in multiple languages and countries. There are numerous good examples of local histories oriented toward the Atlantic. April Lee Hatfield’s *Atlantic Virginia: Intercolonial Relations in the Seventeenth Century* privileges English, Dutch, and indigenous economic and cultural interactions, depicting a Virginia vastly different from the one that has emerged over the past three decades from a historiography addicted to tobacco.¹⁷ Hatfield argues that we cannot understand the development of one place, in this instance colonial Virginia, without looking well beyond that place, across the Atlantic, to the complex variables and interactions that converged to produce a particular set of local conditions. Armitage’s “trans-Atlantic history” focuses on comparisons, and there is certainly a distinguished history of such approaches, long predating the current self-conscious passion for Atlantic history, and especially focused on some of the common processes and developments of societies in the Western Hemisphere.¹⁸ These works have tended to focus on the western Atlantic, comparing labor systems and colonial societies, and fall into an es-

¹⁵ The few works that profess to describe the entire Atlantic tend to have perspectives very firmly rooted in one place. Paul Butel’s *The Atlantic*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London and New York, 1999), for example, neglected to engage the relevant and abundant literature on Africa.

¹⁶ David Armitage, “Three Concepts of Atlantic History,” in Armitage and Braddick, *The British Atlantic World*, 11–27.

¹⁷ April Lee Hatfield, *Atlantic Virginia: Intercolonial Relations in the Seventeenth Century* (Philadelphia, Pa., 2004).

¹⁸ Slavery and labor systems are among the most typical points of comparison. For early examples of scholarly interest in these approaches, see, for example, Carl N. Degler, *Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* (New York, 1971), or Richard R. Beeman, “Labor Forces and Race

tablished tradition of a history of the Americas, something Herbert Bolton identified back in 1933 as “The Epic of Greater America.”¹⁹

It is circum-Atlantic history that remains the most challenging enterprise for Atlantic historians. From a circum-Atlantic perspective, Atlantic history is most literally the study of a large geographic region: the four continents that surround the Atlantic Ocean and the people contained therein. It especially focuses on those people whose societies were transformed by the intersection (or what Alfred W. Crosby referred to so memorably as the Columbian exchange) of the four landmasses after Christopher Columbus’s momentous voyage in 1492.²⁰ These societies are not necessarily places along the Atlantic Ocean itself: one thinks immediately, for example, of Peru, or of the western coast of North America, or of the region surrounding the North American Great Lakes, or of the river deltas and valleys reaching deep into Africa and South America. Places and people on the Pacific coast of the Americas were engaged in processes originating from the Atlantic, regardless of their actual geographic location. Africans who lived hundreds of miles from the Atlantic coast were nonetheless ensnared in the slave trade and its varied economic, social, demographic, and political repercussions, while diets everywhere were altered by the new products of the Americas. Many Native Americans found their world transformed by pathogens, animals, and plants well before they laid eyes on a European. Nor is Atlantic history only about the literal points of contact (ports, traders, or migrants, for example), but rather about explaining transformations, experiences, and events in one place in terms of conditions deriving from that place’s location in a large, multifaceted, interconnected world.

If the beginning point of Atlantic history is relatively fixed, with European and African trade interactions in the mid-fifteenth century and especially Columbus’s 1492 voyage generally providing a good starting point for an exploration of the emergence of an Atlantic world, its terminus is more fluid and contested, shaped largely by one’s perspective on the Atlantic. The so-called age of revolution and independence (through 1825) marks one possible ending, and the abolition of slavery (by 1888 in the Western Hemisphere, but not until the middle of the twentieth century in parts of Atlantic Africa) provides another: from a circum-Atlantic perspective, neither is entirely satisfactory, since both reflect developments of only local or hemispheric significance.²¹

This single region enjoyed a coherence for almost four hundred years, creating a viable unit of analysis within which we can understand the destruction and emergence of empires, the movement of people, the evolution of new cultural forms, and

Relations: A Comparative View of the Colonization of Brazil and Virginia,” *Political Science Quarterly* 86 (1971): 609–636.

¹⁹ Herbert Bolton, “The Epic of Greater America,” *AHR* 38, no. 3 (April 1933): 448–474. See also Silvio Zavala, “A General View of the Colonial History of the New World,” *AHR* 66, no. 4 (July 1961): 913–929.

²⁰ Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, Conn., 1972).

²¹ For a plea for an Atlantic history that moves into the modern era, see Donna Gabaccio, “A Long Atlantic in a Wider World,” *Atlantic Studies* 1 (2004): 1–27. One of the rare books oriented toward the classroom that takes Atlantic history through the late nineteenth century is Alan L. Karras and J. R. McNeill, eds., *Atlantic American Societies: From Columbus through Abolition, 1492–1888* (London, 1992).

the circulation of ideas. This coherence, however, has a specific chronology, and by the middle of the nineteenth century, the region was being drawn more fully into a world system even as patterns specific to the intellectual currents and political dynamics of the region (such as abolition) continued. The Columbian exchange illustrated this balance between the regional and the global from the first return trips across the ocean. The unique American commodities that crossed the ocean transformed diets not only in Europe and Africa, but in Asia as well. Silver from American mines traveled to Europe, but it moved in equal amounts west across the Pacific, into Asian economies.²² Europeans who occupied and profited from territory in the Americas were similarly, and often more fully, engaged in commercial and extractive enterprises around the globe. These global ties intensified in the nineteenth century. The nineteenth-century post-emancipation labor crisis illustrates three core features of these new webs of connection: sugar production and marketing in a world economy, a world labor market and transoceanic labor migrations, and global imperialism. The expanded need for labor derived from the continued global migration of sugar. The plant's journey out of the Mediterranean and into the Atlantic continued into the Indian and Pacific oceans, and the deployment of Indian indentured migration was linked to efforts by British sugar planters to expand production to new regions, including some in the Atlantic (Guiana and Trinidad) and others around the globe (Mauritius, Natal, and Fiji). The continuity and intensification of migration across the Atlantic continued to reinforce the region's ties, always numerically eclipsing the newcomers from Asia; yet these new laborers from outside the Atlantic indicated the global economic and imperial forces that would ultimately reposition the region within a world system.

Atlantic history, then, is a *slice* of world history. It is a way of looking at global *and* regional processes within a contained unit, although that region was not, of course, hermetically sealed off from the rest of the world, and thus was simultaneously involved in transformations unique to the Atlantic and those derived from global processes. The Atlantic, moreover, is a geographic space that has a limited chronology as a logical unit of historical analysis: it is not a timeless unit; nor can this space fully explain all changes within it. Nonetheless, like other maritime regions, the Atlantic can offer a useful laboratory within which to examine regional and global transformations.²³

This lengthy exploration of the region's geography and chronology, and of the shifting balance within the Atlantic between global and regional catalysts for change, points to the importance of flexibility in understanding and interpreting changes within the region. Some pointed critiques of Atlantic history have originated from scholars who insist on the superiority of world history perspectives, most notably Peter A. Coclanis.²⁴ But historians should work on geographic units that make sense for the questions they ask; the Atlantic is obviously not an appropriate laboratory for exploring all types of historical change. April Lee Hatfield has vigorously made

²² Dennis O. Flynn and Arturo Giráldez, "Cycles of Silver: Global Economic Unity through the Mid-Eighteenth Century," *Journal of World History* 13, no. 2 (2002): 391–427.

²³ Jerry Bentley, "Seas and Ocean Basins as Frameworks of Historical Analysis," *Geographical Review* 89, no. 2 (April 1999): 215–224.

²⁴ Peter A. Coclanis, "*Drang Nach Osten*: Bernard Bailyn, the World-Island, and the Idea of Atlantic History," *Journal of World History* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 169–182.

the case for the necessity of multiple perspectives for Virginia in the seventeenth century. "Each of these constructions—Atlantic world, Virginia, local region, international colonial America, North America, and English Atlantic—functioned in slightly different ways, and each was relevant under different circumstances. They coexisted and intersected. All are necessary for understanding the reality of life in seventeenth-century Virginia that was connected to different parts of its wider world in very different ways."²⁵ Her refreshingly sensible and expansive methodology offers a model worth emulating.

By any number of measures, this Atlantic world was interconnected, and indeed historians have relied on the metaphor of the bridge to make sense of these links.²⁶ We know that the diseases that ravaged American populations came from thousands of miles away in Europe and Africa; we know that the political opportunities that indigenous people in strategic locations enjoyed derived from imperial rivalries elsewhere; we know that demographic transformations in Africa that led to the practice of polygyny were consequences of the transatlantic slave trade and its gender imbalances; we know that new staple crops in Africa (the peanut or the yam) and in Europe (the potato) were species unique to the Americas that traveled across the ocean on European vessels. The Atlantic, in short, was linked in ways that disregard the modern political boundaries that have defined departmental field structures and specializations. Atlantic history ultimately privileges and requires history without borders. In this respect, it joins other challenges to conventional geographic regions as units of analysis. Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen have argued this point most forcefully in *The Myth of Continents*. They illustrate the intellectual histories (often self-serving to people with political power) of continents and the conflation of geography with politics and culture. While we might find ourselves moving someday toward a corollary "myth of oceans," we are not there yet, and a history centered on the region of the Atlantic offers a logically viable space of analysis for particular questions with a range of methodological and pedagogical benefits.²⁷

Atlantic history is more than simply the study of a geographic unit; it is also a style of inquiry that reflects the impulse that drew historians in specific fields to Atlantic history in the first place.²⁸ Within the space of these four centuries and these four continents, historians who adopt an Atlantic perspective explore commonalities and convergences, seeking larger patterns derived from the new interactions of people around, within, and across the Atlantic. The large geographic unit requires a different approach, one that by necessity deemphasizes any single place, although obviously some regions within and around the Atlantic enjoyed disproportionate political power at different points in time. If this is history without borders, then it should also be history without an imperial perspective. It thus implements some of the arguments about the intellectual construction of geographic space that Lewis and Wigen make in *The Myth of Continents*: Atlantic history can offer a case study of the ways in which historians can break down not only old regional barriers and para-

²⁵ Hatfield, *Atlantic Virginia*, 227.

²⁶ Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, 8–9.

²⁷ On the creation of oceans, see Martin W. Lewis, "Dividing the Ocean Sea," *Geographical Review* 89, no. 2 (April 1999): 188–214.

²⁸ For a thought-provoking view of the Mediterranean as process, see David Abulafia, "Mediterraneans," in W. V. Harris, ed., *Rethinking the Mediterranean* (Oxford, 2005), 64–93.

digms, but also modes of analysis based on modern cultural and political hierarchies. Atlantic history may deal with European dominion, but it should not be Eurocentric. It may cover a space dominated numerically by African migrants, but it need not be Afrocentric. The most dynamic changes of the period of contact may be most immediately evident in the Americas, but it should not be an expanded history of the colonial Americas. It requires a different kind of perspective, one ideally not fixed in any one location. Atlantic history poses paired challenges: linking several regions, in which no one historian can have the competence or expertise that scholars desire, and doing so through multiple perspectives.

This problem of perspective is only one of many impediments that hinder efforts to craft a genuine oceanic history of the Atlantic. A second challenge derives from the uneven interest in Atlantic history among scholars who work on the individual regions of the early modern Atlantic world. Some fields of history have been more aggressive than others in attempting to convey an Atlantic vision. The working papers presented at the Harvard Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World offer one rough indicator of this pattern and reveal a preponderance of scholars from the British Atlantic.²⁹ This measurement is merely suggestive, of course, since it reflects the availability and interests only of those who apply to the seminar and are accepted, not of the entire sample of all scholars working on the Atlantic. Historians of the African diaspora, for example, might find a more stimulating intellectual mix at the Harriet Tubman Resource Centre on the African Diaspora at York University, which hosts a similarly extensive series of seminars and workshops.³⁰

A number of unintended consequences have resulted from the disproportionate intellectual energy expended by historians of the North Atlantic. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra has faulted these historians for merely creating what he calls a “new paradigm [which] in fact sanctions Eurocentric cultural geographies for North America.” He also rejects an emphasis on transoceanic ties in favor of hemispheric connections and comparisons.³¹ His complaint obliquely addresses an important issue: the Atlantic tends to look very different when viewed from different vantages and within different imperial or commercial frameworks. While it is clumsy and counterproductive to divide the Atlantic into imperial or linguistic units, these divisions reflect fundamental organizing schemes of graduate programs in history. One central point about Atlantic history is that its evolution has been directly affected, and indeed defined, by peculiarities of departmental structures and fields. Historians need to find jobs, and, thankfully, history departments train graduate students to that end. But the consequence of this imperative for employment is that graduate stu-

²⁹ My own rough calculations suggest that out of 268 papers presented between 1996 and 2004, 115 focused on the British Atlantic (including non-British subjects in British territories, such as Dutch- or German-speaking or African inhabitants of British colonies), 57 on the Spanish Atlantic, 18 on the French, 12 on the United States, 9 on Portugal or Portuguese Brazil, 8 on the Dutch Atlantic, 5 on Africa, and 1 on the Danish. Of the remaining 43 papers, a few are explicitly comparative across national and imperial borders, some are topical (demography and commodities), some are centered on Europe, and a still larger number take a single land-based region as their unit of analysis but investigate it over a period of multiple imperial invasions. In North America, Louisiana and the region of New Netherland/New York fall into this category, as does Panama in central America.

³⁰ www.yorku.ca/nhp/.

³¹ Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, “Some Caveats about the ‘Atlantic’ Paradigm,” *History Compass*, www.history-compass.com.

dents are still trained within conventional fields because that is how most hiring takes place. Even positions advertised as Atlantic tend to contain other departmental agendas: an Atlantic historian often needs to be able to teach a regional or national field. So invariably historians initially approach the Atlantic from one vantage, from one national or imperial historiographic tradition, and within the context of limited language training.

It would be a mistake to assume that the ways in which people in one part of the Atlantic were transformed by their engagement with a larger unit would necessarily apply elsewhere: Africans and Americans had diametrically different experiences with European incursions. In Africa, Europeans traded at the largesse of African merchants and rulers, and secured political power in only a few places. In the Americas, Europeans occasionally replicated the culture of the trade factory, but they also pursued more bellicose styles of displacement and benefited from the demographic catastrophe visited on Americans. Some Europeans never pursued large-scale migration as part of their settlement strategy. The French and Dutch regions were characterized by tiny European minorities and large indigenous, African, subject, enslaved, or allied populations. Some European powers, especially the Dutch, were equally or more occupied by commercial activities elsewhere around the globe. If historians of the Anglophone world rarely doubt the existence of a British Atlantic, Pieter C. Emmer and Willem W. Klooster have argued that there was no Dutch Atlantic.³² There was, moreover, no uniform style of cultural encounter or exchange around or within the ocean, even within a single imperial entity. The French along the St. Lawrence River valley and those in Saint-Domingue interacted differently with the non-French people around them. It is impossible to talk about an “Atlantic” style of interaction, or a single “Atlantic” culture, or even, as Pieter Emmer has argued, an Atlantic “system.”³³ As these comments suggest, historians who work on the Atlantic have been sensitive to the complexity and variety within it, and this careful appreciation of diversity is essential.³⁴ Wim Klooster, building on Braudel’s multiple “skeins of history,” has proposed at least eight zones of Atlantic influence for the Americas alone.³⁵

The Harvard sample notably demonstrates the special enthusiasm of colonial historians for Atlantic history. An inadvertent consequence of this admirable initiative is that “Atlantic” and “Americas” have become conflated. Thus Atlantic history may resemble or mirror the history of colonial societies writ large. We can see this tendency in a number of indicators, most vividly in the ways in which historians have tried to conceptualize the period from 1775 to the 1820s as the age of revolution and the end of empire. This characterization is certainly appropriate for several places in the Atlantic, but not for all. Many of the colonies on the American landmass

³² Pieter C. Emmer and Willem W. Klooster, “The Dutch Atlantic, 1600–1800: Expansion without Empire,” *Itinerario* 23, no. 2 (1999): 48–69. See the different Atlantics that emerge through approaches centered around imperial expansion in the accompanying essays by Silvia Marzagalli, Carla Rahn Phillips, and David Hancock, *ibid.*, 70–126. In the same issue, Debra Gray White explores the Black Atlantic (127–140), and David Eltis sets the Atlantic in global perspective (141–161).

³³ Pieter Emmer, “The Myth of Early Globalization: The Atlantic Economy, 1500–1800,” *European Review* 11, no. 1 (2003): 37–47.

³⁴ In “*Drang Nach Osten*,” Peter Coclanis has criticized those who work on the Atlantic for over-emphasizing unity and integration.

³⁵ Wim Klooster, private communication with the author.

had achieved their independence by 1830, but many colonies remained (including Canada and the colonies on the northern coast of South America). Brazil was a kingdom, not a colony, and with the exception of Haiti, every single island in the Caribbean remained subject to a European power. And that is only in the western Atlantic, where clearly fewer than half of all colonies achieved independence in this period. In the eastern Atlantic, Europeans increased their trade presence in parts of Africa; and in some regions, outside powers (the French in Senegal, the British in Sierra Leone, the United States in Liberia) enhanced their political dominance. But in the Eastern Hemisphere, this age was neither one of the end of empire nor distinguished by the emergence of independence. Viewed from an Atlantic perspective, the period evokes themes of political redefinition for some and of political subordination for many. Revolution and independence cannot do the period justice.

Closely linked to this tendency to let one small part of the Atlantic define the whole are barriers caused by terminology. Both problems derive from the challenge of perspective: How do we escape historiographic conventions to find a language and a framework that encapsulates the whole Atlantic? Words get in the way. Historians continue to invoke the Americas with the Eurocentric "New World," despite the logic they may apply as Atlantic historians that, in fact, if the entire region is a logical unit of analysis, it is so precisely because it was a new world for all involved in it. Historians who approach the region from colonial or imperial perspectives are similarly inclined to slip into the language of imperial dynamics, speaking, therefore, about centers, peripheries, and margins. It is difficult to identify processes shared by the entire Atlantic region, and this challenge speaks both to the *lack* of coherence of the region and to the continued difficulties of assimilating so many different fields of scholarship.

All of these geographic markers reflect perspectives rooted firmly in national, regional, and imperial, not Atlantic, historiographies. It is similarly difficult to find models that are easily portable from one historiographic tradition to another. Take Ira Berlin's concept of the "Atlantic creole," an imaginative and original formulation of the Atlantic and its inhabitants.³⁶ Berlin coined the term to describe those polyglot Africans who moved so adeptly among different societies in the early decades of the slave trade. Derived from linguistics and employed to highlight cultural mixture, fluidity, and innovation, "Atlantic creole" generates some confusion for historians of the Americas, who generally have employed "creole" to describe people of European or African descent who were born in the Americas. "Atlantic creole" poses a second challenge viewed in an Atlantic context: it replicates many of the cosmopolitan characteristics that historians of the Americas have come to attach to the term "cultural broker," those people in the Americas, indigenous, European, or of mixed race, who moved freely between cultures and who played important roles in mediating the moments when mutually incomprehensible societies conflicted or engaged in any number of ways. Just like "Atlantic creoles," "cultural brokers" were people who were culturally bi- or multilingual. They also looked like *lançados* or Eurafricans. Words to describe indigenous people, African or American, constitute another semantic stumbling block, including "tribe," "Indian," "First Nation," and

³⁶ Ira Berlin, "From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series 53, no. 2 (April 1996): 251–288.

“native,” which can raise hackles in one place while being commonly used elsewhere. Atlantic historians need to think more self-consciously about the possibility of a common language.

The words that trip us up are reflections of a larger issue of reading broadly and deeply outside our customary fields, since few historians would knowingly use words that are so likely to grate on the ears and sensibilities of our readers and colleagues or to hinder their comprehension of our arguments. The Mediterranean, Braudel wrote, “speaks with many voices; it is a sum of individual histories.”³⁷ So, too, is the Atlantic, but for Atlantic historians it is especially urgent to delve into historiographies of other regions and people in order to sketch the patterns contained in the Atlantic. Our failure to do so produces some peculiar disconnects, easily illuminated by thinking about migration in the Atlantic. This gap between fields that are so logically connected is readily illustrated by looking at the ways in which historians of English and early American social history engaged in a protracted dialogue of the deaf in the 1970s and 1980s, a period characterized by an explosion of scholarship in early modern British social history. This was the great age of demographic history. English historians, starting with Peter Laslett, delineated an early modern English world characterized by high rates of migration.³⁸ Laslett demonstrated that the world we have lost was one of high mobility. At the very time that historians uncovered this unexpected world of high migration within England, historians who investigated migration from England to North America emphasized the static nature of relocation. They turned these migrants into “settlers” or “colonists,” as if this one transatlantic migration were an anomaly in otherwise sedentary lives. While historians of British parishes and towns employed local records to identify mobility, historians of British North America used town and church records to privilege stability and generated a score of town studies.³⁹ Far more troubling is another failure to communicate in the study of Atlantic migration. Some 12 million Africans and maybe 3 million Europeans in the same period migrated west across the Atlantic. Yet until the efforts of David Eltis to integrate multiple incompatible historiographies, these populations were treated separately, with “migrants” shaping one set of historiographic questions, and “slaves” another. Moreover, historians have been slow to pursue the implications of Eltis’s arguments and evidence.⁴⁰

IN LIGHT OF THESE MANY CHALLENGES, will the Atlantic find its own Braudel? If so, s/he is likely to approach the Atlantic from a few distinctive vantages, not necessarily geographic locations but rather methodological perspectives. Some of the most ex-

³⁷ Braudel, *Mediterranean*, 1: 13.

³⁸ Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (London, 1965).

³⁹ Virginia DeJohn Anderson was one of the first scholars to break through this impasse by putting mobility at the center of her history of New England. See Anderson, *New England’s Generation: The Great Migration and the Formation of Society and Culture in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1991).

⁴⁰ Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery*. See also James Horn and Philip D. Morgan, “Settlers and Slaves: European and African Migrations to Early Modern British America,” in Carole Shammas and Elizabeth Mancke, eds., *The Creation of the British Atlantic World* (Baltimore, Md., 2005), 32–74. Wim Klooster and Alfred Padula, eds., *The Atlantic World: Essays on Slavery, Migration, and Imagination* (Upper Saddle River, N.J., 2005), is an excellent example of an essay collection that explicitly connects a range of historiographic problems often regarded separately.

emplary works in Atlantic history have been written by historians whose topics have no necessary connection to or investment in a single nation or empire—environmental history, historical geography, the African diaspora, migration, economic history, the history of commodities. These fruitful approaches give us hints about what a Braudelian Atlantic might look like. It will be archival, not synthetic, because the most innovative work on the Atlantic continues to be anchored in original research. It will set the Atlantic more explicitly in the context of global transformations, thus emphatically embracing the cosmopolitanism that Peter Coclanis has called for, even if it does so within a single slice of the world, helping us to identify what exactly was particular to the Atlantic world and what this region shared with other ocean basins. It will be transnational, transregional, oceanic, and integrative.⁴¹

The most urgent and immediate challenge is to restore Africa to the Atlantic. Given the roots of Atlantic history, it is odd and disturbing that this needs to be said. Positions advertised as “Atlantic history” used to mean the *black* Atlantic; now those positions may encompass any field or subject.⁴² The comparative absence of Africa in conceptualizations of the Atlantic is a consequence both of the dominance of Atlantic history by historians of the North Atlantic and of enduring Eurocentrism. The first ocean voyages from Europe inaugurated sustained contact between previously isolated landmasses and, far more important, their inhabitants. But these voyages west—initiated by Europeans—have had an unfortunate lingering impact on the intellectual construction of the Atlantic, and many scholars still see the region as a story of Europeans and Americans.⁴³ Despite all the books and articles that Africanists have published to enlighten nonspecialists, other historians have been stunningly slow to find ways to put Africa fully into Atlantic history, not simply as a place associated with slavery and the slave trade. Donald R. Wright and James H. Sweet, for example, have illustrated two very different and equally fruitful ways of thinking about Africa and Africans and their varied relationships with the Atlantic and, indeed, wider world.⁴⁴ If non-Africanists fail to assimilate such approaches, Atlantic history will begin to look like a new comparative imperial history set within the laboratory of the Atlantic basin. The English translation of Paul Butel’s *The Atlantic* memorably referred to Africa as the “dark continent”—and this was as recently as 1999.⁴⁵ In 2005, Bernard Bailyn approached the Atlantic largely as the study of Europe and the Americas.⁴⁶

The study of people and the study of products suggest how historians might capture the whole Atlantic in their research, thus sketching a region that is liberated from any single national, colonial, or imperial framework. . Both subjects open themselves to the full methodological richness that historians savor, leading scholars toward culture, environment, ideology, quantification, or whatever one might wish to pursue. They also, moreover, put the ocean at the center of the analysis, since people

⁴¹ Coclanis, “*Drang Nach Osten*,” 181.

⁴² My thanks to Jennifer Morgan for stating this problem so clearly.

⁴³ Here I share Peter Coclanis’s concern with the tendency among Atlantic historians to overemphasize Europe’s importance within the region. Coclanis, “*Drang Nach Osten*,” 180.

⁴⁴ Donald R. Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa: A History of Globalization in Niimi, the Gambia* (Armonk, N.Y., 1997; 2nd ed., 2004); James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441–1770* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2003).

⁴⁵ Butel, *The Atlantic*, 185.

⁴⁶ Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), 59–111.

moved around the Atlantic, and commodities did as well. The ocean was not only the vehicle of circulation, but also the unique space within which goods and people were created, defined, and transformed.

People, especially migrants (European, African, or American), offer useful ways to see tangible evidence of the utility of a history without borders. Studies of migration across the Atlantic (almost invariably from east to west) have for decades offered large-scale assessments of one of the important processes by which the Atlantic became a region of study. The generation of computer-aided databases such as the monumental slave trade database further refined these studies, with the result that historians of European and African migrations have been able to delineate specific patterns of migration and settlement and to trace the migration not simply of people, but of distinctive cultures and subcultures.⁴⁷ Studies of return and repeat migration demonstrate how individuals knit the Atlantic world together and illustrate the cultural impact that even a very small contingent of return migrants had on their former home cultures.⁴⁸

There has also been an enhanced interest in the experiences of individuals who themselves lived in different parts of the Atlantic. These biographies help readers grasp the vitality and variety of the Atlantic. Some of these individuals circulated within single imperial systems. Such was the case for Ayuba Ben Suleiman, Little Ephraim Robin John, and Ancona Robin Robin John. All three men were ensnared in the slave trade in the eighteenth century; all three circulated in the British colonies; all three found their way first to England and then home again. Sir Walter Raleigh hosted several Native Americans at his home in England: some of these interpreters assisted English settlement efforts in the Americas, while others were more hostile to their erstwhile hosts.⁴⁹ Other individuals crossed imperial and national lines. Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua did just that. Enslaved in Africa, he was shipped to Brazil, escaped in New York, and lived in Cuba, the United States, and Canada before traveling (as far as his biographers can tell) across the Atlantic to Europe. These are, admittedly, picaresque tales.⁵⁰ Throughout their travels, these men, and others like them, had experiences that altered them. They learned new languages, they converted to new religions, and they made new friends and new enemies. The ocean was not just a place within which people circulated: it was itself the place within which they had transformative experiences.⁵¹ And this oceanic movement also permitted the circulation of news with each newly arrived ship and each garrulous passenger. With enough such stories, we might piece the Atlantic

⁴⁷ David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson, and Herbert S. Klein, *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM* (Cambridge, 1999).

⁴⁸ Kristin Mann and Edna G. Bay, eds., *Rethinking the African Diaspora: The Making of a Black Atlantic World in the Bight of Benin and Brazil* (London, 2001); Alison Games, *Migration and the Origins of the English Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999).

⁴⁹ Alden T. Vaughan, "Sir Walter Raleigh's Indian Interpreters, 1584–1618," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series 59, no. 2 (April 2002): 341–376.

⁵⁰ "Ayuba Suleiman Diallo of Bondu," in Philip D. Curtin, ed., *Africa Remembered* (Madison, Wis., 1987), 18–59; Robin Law and Paul E. Lovejoy, eds., *The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua* (Princeton, N.J., 2001); Randy J. Sparks, *The Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Odyssey* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004).

⁵¹ On the unique maritime and class cultures of the Atlantic, see especially Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, 2000).

together in new, richly detailed, complex ways, putting people in the middle of a chaotic kaleidoscope of movement.

Like people, commodities link the Atlantic in distinctive ways, through production, consumption, and commerce. They reveal the movement of people to produce them, the emergence of new or revitalized commercial centers whose fortunes rose and fell with single commodities in all places of the Atlantic, and the evolution of tastes and fashion. They can help us reach deep into households (European, African, and American alike) and factories and plantations and ranches and mines far from the ocean itself. Commodities are not necessarily Atlantic in scope, but they can be; and several illustrative studies argue forcefully that the Atlantic is the most appropriate context within which to understand certain products in specific historical periods. We can, moreover, see distinctive aspects of Atlantic history in the different goods that circulated within the ocean. Chocolate, of course, like so many other delectable and addictive American plants and products, came to have a career well outside the Atlantic. But its initial introduction in Europe was shaped by the unique context within which some Europeans—particularly Spaniards—encountered cacao and the many beverages with which it was made. Marcy Norton argues that the Spanish had to learn to like chocolate, and that they did so within the specific context of Spanish occupation and settlement in the Indies. The asymmetries of conquest, the peculiar demography of early Spanish migration to central America, the reliance of Spanish men on indigenous women, the challenges of Atlantic transport: all shaped the ways in which Spaniards learned to like chocolate and what kind of chocolate they would consume in Europe.⁵² Madeira offers a second example of a product that emerged in a uniquely Atlantic setting. David Hancock has set the wine's "product innovation" in the context of the eighteenth-century Atlantic: Madeira was invented as a result of conversation and exchange around and across the Atlantic between 1703 and 1807. Producers and consumers learned how to communicate tastes and preferences, and the result was a new drink.⁵³

If chocolate emerged in a unique colonial dynamic, and if Madeira wine resulted from communication within the Atlantic, sugar created an entire world in the tropics, but it was one that affected places far from the site of production.⁵⁴ The study of sugar links plantations to coffee houses, and slave ports in Africa to the rum used in European-Indian diplomacy in North America. Commodities and plantation production also wrought unique changes. Sugar, of course, nestled in the Atlantic as only part of its protracted world tour. But within the Atlantic, it generated its own peculiar world. This world of sugar production, J. R. McNeill argues, required the transformation of the tropics to make them more conducive to sugar cultivation and processing. Sugar created an unprecedented demand for plantation labor, which was met almost exclusively through the transportation of African captives. The unique convergence of European and African immigrants and creoles and a new disease environment characterized by mosquito-borne illnesses transformed the tropics and

⁵² Marcy Norton, "Conquests of Chocolate," *Magazine of History* 18, no. 3 (April 2004): 14–17. See also her article in this issue.

⁵³ David Hancock, "Commerce and Conversation in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic: The Invention of Madeira Wine," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 29, no. 2 (1998): 197–219.

⁵⁴ Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, 1985); Philip D. Curtin, *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex: Essays in Atlantic History* (New York, 1990).

shaped the rise and fall of Atlantic empires.⁵⁵ Tracing products and people within the Atlantic introduces us to the rich and varied world that the region contained and suggests ways in which the region emerges as a logical unit of historical analysis, providing a geographic space, for a fixed period of time, within which we can understand processes and transformations that otherwise might remain inexplicable.⁵⁶

Although there are numerous impediments to a Braudelian vision, more oceanic histories of the Atlantic are yet to be written. They will be generated by historians who work deliberately to integrate their particular findings into a larger unit, who read broadly, who are open to interdisciplinary approaches, and who are committed to moving beyond parochial frameworks dictated by conventional historiographic divisions toward an Atlantic perspective. Writing Atlantic history requires considerable optimism, fearlessness, and the conviction that a leap into the ocean will not end tragically in a wrecked heap in the Bermuda triangle, but rather will land you safely in a new, unexpected, and stimulating place. Jump in. The water's great.

⁵⁵ J. R. McNeill, "Yellow Jack and Geopolitics: Environment, Epidemics, and the Struggles for Empire in the American Tropics, 1650–1825," *OAH Magazine of History* 18, no. 3 (April 2004): 9–13; McNeill, *Mosquito Coasts: Plantation Ecology, Disease, War and Revolution in the American Tropics, 1640–1920* (forthcoming).

⁵⁶ Studies of rice and corn suggest a new interest in studying commodities and the environment within the Atlantic. See, for example, James C. McCann, *Maize and Grace: Africa's Encounter with a New World Crop, 1500–2000* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), and Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001).

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