

New Fields, Conventional Habits, and the Legacy of *Atlantic Double-Cross*

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In 1986, literary critic Robert Weisbuch published a study of the American Renaissance entitled *Atlantic Double-Cross: American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson*.¹ In this study, he focused on a number of canonical US authors and showed how they wrote both with and against their British predecessors and peers: Herman Melville and Charles Dickens; Walt Whitman and Matthew Arnold; Henry David Thoreau and William Wordsworth; Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thomas Carlyle. Weisbuch used these specific pairings to illustrate some more general claims about the relation of US to British literature, among them that US literature is what he called “actualist” where British literature is realist, and that British authors see themselves as belated with respect to the national literature they have inherited where US authors see themselves as premature with respect to a national literature that does not yet exist. Underlying these claims was a conception of influence that Weisbuch borrowed from Walter Jackson Bate by way of Harold Bloom.² Where Bate and Bloom saw influence as generational, Weisbuch re-cast it in national terms. The authors of the American Renaissance, in his account, felt a profound rivalry with the British and expressed this rivalry through what would prove to be a productive enmity.

Weisbuch could have presented *Atlantic Double-Cross* as belonging to the field of US literary studies: after all, F. O. Matthiessen had emphasized the significance of British literature for the American Renaissance in the study that gave the period its name. But instead Weisbuch presents *Atlantic Double-Cross* as belonging to no existing field at all. Identifying it as the first study to “investigate texts extensively to get at a

Atlantic Double-Cross: American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson, Robert Weisbuch. University of Chicago Press, 1986.

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characterization of Anglo-American influence,” he goes on to call for more such studies to be written:

We will need many more books after this one to get to a satisfying assurance of major understanding. . . . Nevertheless, I will boast that this study represents something new. It means to inaugurate a new field, or subfield, of literary study. The conventional habits by which departments of English and comparative literature organize themselves have made for a vacancy where a rigorous study of Anglo-American literary relations should have been occurring. (xx)

Two things are crucial here. First, that Weisbuch aspires to create a “new field or subfield,” and second, that he imagines this “new field” will somehow circumvent the “conventional habits of departments of English.” In what follows, I will show that *Atlantic Double-Cross* did play a crucial role in establishing a new field, the one we now call “trans-Atlantic studies.” But, I will suggest, the establishment of this field had an unintended consequence: it permitted English departments to pass through our recent transnational turn with their “conventional habits” largely unchanged.

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1. A New Field or Subfield

No book can create a field on its own: that happens only in its reception. When *Atlantic Double-Cross* first appeared, it was reviewed widely and very seriously, with the kind of rigor that distinguishes books judged to be important enough to argue with. The arguments, in this case, proved to be unusually rich. Two of its first reviewers, Jonathan Arac and Lawrence Buell, either had written or would write foundational trans-Atlantic works of their own, *Commissioned Spirits: The Shaping of Social Motion in Dickens, Carlyle, Melville, and Hawthorne* (1979) and “American Literary Emergence as Post-Colonial Phenomenon” (1992), respectively, while another, Harry Levin, was a distinguished comparatist. So it is hardly surprising that their reviews, along with the reviews of several other critics, proved to be remarkably prescient in both recognizing the significance of *Atlantic Double-Cross* and in identifying its limitations.

All of the reviewers had reservations about some of Weisbuch’s readings, and all took exception to his energetic style, but nearly all saw the value of his efforts to create a new field. Only two reviewers took the book to be straightforwardly Americanist, praising it for offering “an expansive view for future

scholarship in American literature” (Allison 103) and calling it a “standard and indispensable tool for anyone studying nineteenth-century American literature” (Gray 421).³ The rest took it to belong to a field for which they did not yet have a fixed name. Richard Ruland called *Atlantic Double-Cross* an “important beginning” for “Anglo-American literary studies” (498), Buell identified it as a new contribution to the study of “Anglo-American relations” (656), and Arac recognized that it aspires to be a “major book” in the “comparative study of British and American literature” (633).

But while these reviewers supported Weisbuch’s ambitions to create a new field, they had serious objections to the model he had established. In particular, they objected to the account of influence on which his argument depended. Ruland pointed out that influence might well give rise to feelings other than rivalry or enmity, while Arac argued that the Old World often learns from the New, and Levin argued that Anglo-American relations are more likely to be reciprocal than one-sided, more likely to rely on “dynamic interchange” or “cross-fertilization” (183). Some made more specific objections, noting that a different selection of authors would have given rise to quite different generalizations. Arac suggested that an attention to John Stuart Mill and Thomas Macaulay would have shown that not all British authors felt themselves to be belated, while Levin suggested that attending to Edgar Allan Poe and James Fenimore Cooper would have prompted Weisbuch to think not of Britain, but of France. Other critical objections concerned Weisbuch’s exclusive focus on canonical literature. Richard Gray deplored Weisbuch’s decision to ignore recent efforts to expand the canon of US literature, while Buell asked whether other cultural forms might be more useful than canonical literature in exploring intercultural relations more generally.

While these reviews were, on balance, quite critical, the seriousness with which they discussed *Atlantic Double-Cross* conferred on it the status of a significant book, and that status has only been reinforced by subsequent reception. Over the intervening 20 years, *Atlantic Double-Cross* has been cited again and again, more and more frequently with each passing year, until it has become one of the most often-cited works in trans-Atlantic studies.⁴ This is not because Weisbuch’s argument has proven to be particularly influential. On the contrary, while a number of critics do quote his readings of specific works and some refer to the analytical categories he established, such as actualism and cultural prematurity, very few accept his model of cultural rivalry. Nor should this lack of acceptance be understood in Bloomian or

Batesian—or Weisbuchian—terms. Weisbuch’s argument is not some powerful precursor that succeeding generations must challenge and overcome; it is simply ignored or dismissed.

And yet, *Atlantic Double-Cross* has nonetheless played a crucial role in the writing of the “many more books” that Weisbuch called for. It does so not by influencing these books, but by authorizing them. It is not so much cited as invoked, briefly mentioned as a foundational text and thereby confirming the existence of the trans-Atlantic as a legitimate field. We can see this process at work most clearly when critics use *Atlantic Double-Cross* to legitimate work in adjacent transnational fields, projects on such diverse subjects as twentieth-century popular music, contemporary popular film, the emergence of Brazilian literature, and the rise of the Russian novel.⁵ The significance of *Atlantic Double-Cross* is thus more institutional than intellectual, but it is no less significant for that.

In this way, *Atlantic Double-Cross* has presided over the development of a field that has moved away from many of Weisbuch’s own presumptions—mostly along the lines that his first reviewers predicted. The reviewers asked for a conception of influence that did not solely rely on US rivalry, and Elisa Tamarkin has shown that US culture was also deferential, even devoted, in its relation to Britain, while Paul Giles has shown that the US loomed as large in the British imaginary as Britain ever did in the US.⁶ The reviewers had also asked for an approach that did not confine itself to canonical literature or even to literature at all, and Paul Gilroy and Joseph Roach have attended to the cultural practices that were transmitted along with the forced migration of the slaves, a project that has since been furthered by Brent Edwards.⁷ The result was a more fully Atlantic trans-Atlanticism, one which has been replicated in the transamericanism of Kirsten Silva Gruesz and Anna Brickhouse and the trans-Pacific turn advocated by Shelley Fisher Fishkin.⁸

But the most important development in trans-Atlantic studies is one that the first reviewers did not predict: its intersection with book history. Scholars have always known that the US did not ratify international copyright law until the end of the nineteenth century, but only very recently have some, Meredith McGill most prominently, begun thinking seriously about what this might mean for those fields whose existence we have long taken for granted, namely, British and US literature.⁹ These fields are twentieth-century formations, retrospectively imposed on a literary world that book history reminds us was fundamentally Anglophone. For nineteenth-century critics and reviewers, the categories of “British” and “American” were, as I have elsewhere shown, only

sometimes meaningful subdivisions within the larger field that was called “literature in English.”¹⁰ Book history thus demonstrates that trans-Atlanticism is not an impulse that some authors feel or some critics pursue: rather, it is the condition under which all works in many periods were written, published, read, and reviewed, a condition that the scholars of those periods are therefore obligated to account for.

As it has developed intellectually, trans-Atlantic studies has also established itself institutionally. There are now three scholarly journals devoted to trans-Atlantic literary studies—*Atlantic Studies*, *The Journal of Trans-Atlantic Studies*, and *Symbiosis*—and two publishing houses that have created trans-Atlantic lists—Ashgate and the Edinburgh University Press. At least one anthology is explicitly trans-Atlantic in its focus, *Trans-Atlantic Romanticism: An Anthology of British, American, and Canadian Literature, 1767–1867* (2006), and there is now a trans-Atlantic studies reader as well. There are many conferences on trans-Atlantic topics and even more special issues and special sessions, as well as research institutes at universities in the US, Great Britain, and Canada. Most importantly of all, more and more job announcements list “trans-Atlanticism” as a desired subfield; indeed, it is becoming hard to find a job listing that does not. And so it is hardly surprising that Buell would announce, in an essay published a few years ago, that “these look to be boom times for trans-Atlantic studies” (“Rethinking” 66), or that the historian David Armitage would say, in reference to a similar turn in the study of history, that “we are all Atlanticists now” (11).

2. Conventional Habits

Thus far, I have been giving *Atlantic Double-Cross* pride of place in the story that trans-Atlantic studies most likes to tell about itself: the story of its rapid and unchallenged rise to the status of a field, one that is as theoretically sophisticated as it is institutionally secure. But now I want to draw attention to what is obscured by this story of success. These may be “boom times” for trans-Atlantic studies, we may “all be Atlanticists” now, and yet the English departments in which we work continue to go on with their “conventional habits” largely unchanged. Chief among these habits is an unthinking resort to the nation as the organizing principle for both our scholarship and our teaching. There are, to be sure, many projects and courses for which the nation makes sense as an organizing principle, just as there are others that might better rely on period, genre, or region. But some quick glances at

journals and departments suggest that the nation is still functioning, all too often, as our default.

With respect to scholarship, the advent of trans-Atlanticism has made less of a difference than we might expect. There have always been scholars who worked across national boundaries, as Matthiessen's example reminds us, and it is not clear that trans-Atlanticism has significantly increased their numbers. At least, this is what my reading of the annual summaries in *American Literary Scholarship* suggests. When Weisbuch published *Atlantic Double-Cross* in 1986, he was far from alone in bringing together British and US authors: fully 11% of the books, articles, and essays that were published about the American Renaissance that year did the same thing. This percentage has fluctuated over the intervening years, dipping to 5% in 1991 before returning to 11% in 1996, and holding steady at 12% in 2001. (The most recent year for which information is available, 2005, shows a jump to 19%, and it will be interesting to see whether this represents another random fluctuation or the long-delayed effects of trans-Atlanticism.) These percentages tell a very different story than the one we would gather from the pages of *American Literary History*. This journal has been an early and constant supporter of trans-Atlantic work, publishing essays by Buell and Tamarkin as well as a recent review essay by Laura M. Stevens, and it has generally been a champion of a more worldly US literary studies. But outside venues like this, the ordinary business of literary studies has gone on largely unchanged between Weisbuch's day and our own.

While many departments are now eager to hire trans-Atlanticists and to offer some courses on trans-Atlantic subjects, most continue to structure themselves around a US-Britain divide. At least, this is what is suggested by my study of 30 English departments, randomly chosen from three different Carnegie classifications.¹¹ Of these 30 departments, 23 require that their undergraduates fulfill distribution requirements that are nationally defined. Two of these departments, at Trinity Christian College and the University of Arizona-Tucson, complement these national requirements with specifically trans-Atlantic surveys, such as "British/American Literature: 1789–1865" or "Survey of British and American Literature from Beowulf to 1660," but the other departments allow the nation to stand unchallenged as the organizing principle of literature. Only two of these 30 departments make reference, when explaining the major to undergraduates, to the trans-Atlantic or more broadly transnational turn of the past two decades. Brown University describes itself as a "leader . . . in the turn toward a transnational perspective on literature and culture

and away from the static national model informing, most prominently, the isolation of ‘American’ from ‘British’ literary studies” and goes on to announce that it has reorganized its course offerings and requirements around three historical periods.¹² Rockford College explains that, “Traditionally, English departments have offered survey courses focused on either British or American literature” and then notes that its own survey courses now “fuse these traditions and also include texts from other cultures, translated into or written in English.”¹³ But except in these few departments, most students are still being taught to think of literature in national terms.

Why has the rise of trans-Atlanticism done so little to alter the “conventional habits” of English departments? The answer lies, I suspect, in the fact that it was institutionalized as a field. That Weisbuch and his reviewers were thinking in terms of “new fields or subfields” is hardly surprising, since they were writing in an era that was devoting considerable energy to creating the fields of African-American studies, women’s studies, and the like. But African-American studies and women’s studies make sense as fields because they combine new approaches with new objects of study. Trans-Atlanticism, by contrast, is a call to reorganize our existing objects of study in new ways. Properly understood, it is not a field at all, but a provocation within fields, a challenge to reconsider whether these fields should continue to structure our thinking and teaching. Once the trans-Atlantic was established as a field, however, this provocation was no longer recognized. The trans-Atlantic has taken its place alongside the existing fields, offering itself up as an alternative to them and, in doing so, implicitly reaffirming their existence. In the process, trans-Atlanticism has therefore become something that scholars and departments might choose to pursue—or choose to ignore.

It is in this context that we can understand why trans-Atlanticism was accepted so much more rapidly and readily than other new fields. Once trans-Atlanticism was recognized as an alternative to British and US literary studies, it became possible for journals to publish the occasional trans-Atlantic article, and for departments to offer the occasional trans-Atlantic course, without altering the structuring division between British and US literature, and without changing their “conventional habits” at all. It is in these habits, then, that the resistance to trans-Atlanticism can be found. There remains a deep attachment to the national that does not articulate itself in argument or polemic; it reveals itself instead in the ordinary business of article writing and curriculum organizing, when the trans-Atlantic is forgotten and the nation once more becomes the default.

Twenty years after *Atlantic Double-Cross*, it is time for us to confront this resistance in earnest. It is time for us to have the debates that we have so far been evading. For far too long, British and US literary studies have been shielded from the provocation of the trans-Atlantic, and for far too long trans-Atlanticists have not had to grapple with the strong defenses of the national fields that might very well be made. Twenty years after *Atlantic Double-Cross*, it is time for us to see our “conventional habits” for what they are and to begin thinking seriously about what the study of literature in English should be.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Margaret Hunt Gram, who not only helped me do the research for this piece, but also helped me think about what we found.
2. See Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (1970); and Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973).
3. Scholars of British literature also seemed to have taken for granted that *Atlantic Double-Cross* was Americanist, since it was reviewed in no journal focusing on British literature.
4. By my accounting, it has been cited in at least 48 scholarly monographs and in many articles as well.
5. See Perry Meisel, *The Cowboy and the Dandy: Crossing Over from Romanticism to Rock and Roll* (1999); Stacey Michele Olster, *Trash Phenomenon: Contemporary Literature, Popular Culture, and the Making of the American Century* (2003); Renate Ruth Maunter Wasserman, *Exotic Nations: Literature and Cultural Identity in the United States and Brazil, 1830–1930* (1994); and Monika Greenleaf and Stephen Moeller-Sally, eds., *Russian Subjects: Empire, Nation, and the Culture of the Golden Age* (1998).
6. See Tamarkin, *Anglophilia: Deference, Devotion, and Antebellum America* (2008); and Giles, *Atlantic Republic: The American Tradition in English Literature* (2007).
7. See Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993); Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (1996); and Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (2003).
8. See Gruesz, *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing* (2002); Brickhouse, *Transamerican Literary Relations and the Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere* (2004); and Fishkin, “Crossroads of Culture: The Transnational Turn in American Studies: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2007,” *American Quarterly* 57.1 (2004): 17–57.

9. See McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853* (2003).

10. See Claybaugh, *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World* (2007).

11. These departments are drawn from three Carnegie categories: baccalaureate colleges, master's colleges or universities, and doctorate-granting institutions (with very high research activity). The baccalaureate colleges I surveyed are Barnard College, College of the Holy Cross, College of the Ozarks, Elizabethtown College, CUNY-York College, Iowa Wesleyan College, Trinity Christian College, Wesley College, William Jewell College, and Winston-Salem State University. The master's colleges or universities are Appalachian State University, California State University-Los Angeles, Colorado Christian University, Houston Baptist University, La Roche College, Rockford College, University of the District of Columbia, University of Portland, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, and Ursuline College. The doctorate-granting universities (with very high research activity) are Brown University, Duke University, Indiana University-Bloomington, New York University, University of Arizona, University of California-Santa Barbara, University of Colorado-Boulder, University of Texas-Austin, Washington University, and Yale University.

12. See <http://www.brown.edu/departments/english/undergraduate/>.

13. See <http://www.rockford.edu/academics/english/surveys.asp>.

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