

2018-6

Review of the books *The Edinburgh Companion to Atlantic Literary Studies*, by L. E. Eckel & C. F. Elliott (Eds.) and *Teaching Transatlanticism: Resources for Teaching Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Print Culture*, by L. K. Hughes and S. R. Robbins (Eds.)

Robert Morace

Daemen College, rmorace@daemen.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.daemen.edu/faculty_scholar



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Morace, R. (2018). [Review of the books *The Edinburgh Companion to Atlantic Literary Studies*, by L. E. Eckel & C. F. Elliott (Eds.), & *Teaching Transatlanticism: Resources for Teaching Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Print Culture*, by L. K. Hughes and S. R. Robbins (Eds.)]. *The Wenshan Review of Literature and Culture*, 11(2), 189-192. [https://doi.org/10.30395/WSR.201806_11\(2\).0009](https://doi.org/10.30395/WSR.201806_11(2).0009)

This paper is posted at Daemen Digital Commons. https://digitalcommons.daemen.edu/faculty_scholar/55
For more information, please contact jdion@daemen.edu.

Leslie Elizabeth Eckel and Clare Frances Elliott, eds, *The Edinburgh Companion to Atlantic Literary Studies* (Edinburgh Companions to Literature), Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2016. 432pp. £150.00. ISBN 139781474402941.

Linda K. Hughes and Sarah R. Robbins, eds, *Teaching Transatlanticism: Resources for Teaching Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Print Culture*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2015. 312pp. £90.00. ISBN 139780748694457.

*Robert Morace**

While it is almost always risky to speak in hyperbole, one seems apropos here. Never, in its short history, has Transatlantic Studies (now Atlantic Studies) seemed so necessary. The refugee crisis and Brexit were the most visible of the early warning signs of the Euro-American retreat from trans-anything, a Hungarian-style hard right away from engagement and nuanced complexity towards closed borders and open racism. Trump is Brexit writ large, like his licensed name on the buildings and businesses he does not actually own. His is the braying voice of narcissistic American exceptionalism, the embodiment of xenophobic post-postmodern Know-Nothingism. Instead of “discursive mobility,” Trump offers walls and the enclosed space and reduced attention span of a tweet. Instead of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “energized space and its currents,” Trump and his Tory counterpart (and first Transatlantic visiting head of state) Theresa May offer Fortress America and Little Englandism.

In his magisterial introduction to *The Edinburgh Companion to Atlantic Literary Studies*, Paul Giles charts a very different course: the rise and fall of a distinctive national, and nationalist, American literature against which “Let’s Make America Great Again” sounds not so much nostalgic as cynically manipulative, not unlike the verbal eruptions of Uncle Sam in Robert Coover’s Rabelaisian masterwork, *The Public Burning* (1977) which Coover wrote while living in England and intended as a sardonic Bicentennial birthday gift to his home country. Given the central role that slavery played in jump-starting Transatlantic Studies (Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*), it

* Robert Morace, Distinguished Professor of English, Daemen College, United States (rmorace@daemen.edu).

seems a further sign of these parlous times that the only African-American in Trump's cabinet has recently reimagined slaves as immigrants aspiring to a better life in America (presumably "by any means necessary"). The interdependence that Atlantic Studies seeks out (Elizabeth DeLoughrey's "routes and roots") and that the two collections under review so ably demonstrate sharply contrasts with the current essentialism that combines the worst of neo-liberalism and blinkered ethnic nationalism. US literature, as institutionalized in anthologies such as the Norton, which has grown to near-archive size—and various literary histories of the US—now seem far less authoritative than before, in keeping with—and in keeping up with—challenges to authority in all forms and to an understanding of literature as less an expression of an essential national character and more the result of complex as well as contingent forces.

Liberation from essentialist and exceptionalist views of American and Anglophone literature is not without risks. One is succumbing to "the innate provincialism that scholarship always seems to foster" which was evident in early resistance to Transatlanticism and to which it, as decidedly interdisciplinary in theory and in method, would seem to be immune. Indeed, as several essays in the two collections show, the very term Transatlantic has been deemed parochial in emphasizing the US-UK relationship and in failing to account for factors from outside the Atlantic which have influenced that relationship. As Giles points out, "Atlantic literary studies now carries a wide global resonance" (12). "Planetary perspectives," "hybrid aspects," and "global networks" are very much in Transatlanticism's favor, but they also hint at a second risk. This is not the provincialism to which all critical approaches tend, but alignment with the globalization against which 2016 saw such a violent and widespread reaction on the part not just of ideologues and opportunists but of those who benefitted least or not at all from cosmopolitan capitalism. The third risk is perhaps best seen as an opportunity: the need to make Atlantic Studies more politically engaged. Atlantic Studies is already implicitly political, but because it mainly looks back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it risks becoming or being seen as merely antiquarian and in this way susceptible to the same criticism leveled by Emerson, himself often the subject of Transatlantic studies: "Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers." Having established a loose methodology, an evolving underlying theory and a geographically expanding range, Atlantic

studies would do well to devote more attention to contemporary texts and cultural phenomena.

To indicate where Atlantic Studies should go is not to criticize where the two collections under review have just gone. Just the opposite, and not just because the individual essays are all of high quality and make noteworthy contributions to the field. Especially welcome are the essays in the *Edinburgh Companion* that deal with contemporary topics: Sinead Moynahan's on Colm Toibin's *Brooklyn* in relation to return migration at the time it was written rather than the time it is set; Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson's on contemporary American novels and the problem of defining the US in an age of "leaking borders"; Catherine Morley's on the post-9/11 novel; and Christopher Gair's on the transformation of pop music from ephemera to art in the 1960s. Gair's essay brings to mind other areas for Atlanticists to explore, including screen, small and large; Sarah Street's *Transatlantic Crossings: British Feature Films in the United States* (2002) being an early example. The essays on 19th century environmental journalism, urban reform movements, feminist periodicals and celebrity, gender and sexuality point to other topics worth pursuing in a more contemporary setting. Three especially stand out: Leslie Eckel's on the radically different utopias imagined by nineteenth century black abolitionists and colleagues, Martin R. Delaney and Frederick Douglass; Juliet Shields's on North American poets who used elements of pastoral and georgic to "contrast the social ideals of their new settlements with Goldsmith's portrayal of English economic disparity and moral corruption" in *The Deserted Village*, and Eve Tavor Bannett's on imitation and originality in relation to nationalism and exceptionalism.

As its title indicates, the *Teaching Transatlanticism* volume provides practical suggestions and models for designing and implementing courses, both graduate and undergraduate. The subtitle, "Resources for Teaching Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Print Culture," deliberately narrows the chronological focus but does so in a way that not only connects Transatlanticism to US higher education's current emphasis on global awareness but also proves especially suggestive and adaptable to twentieth and twenty-first century topics and literary media. Here are just a few of the collection's many highlights. There is sound advice on the use and advantages of digital databases—and their limitations in that they provide access to texts separate from their material form. Kate Flint reminds us that the term

“Anglo-American” is misleading in that it continues to give Canada the short end of the Transatlantic stick.¹ “Print Culture” redirects attention away from narrowly text-based analysis (that had characterized the American new criticism and that is again the focus in the widely adopted Common Core in the US) and towards contextual matters as Andrew Taylor demonstrates so well in his chapter on Herman Melville’s *Israel Potter*, which Taylor reads in relation, in part, to *Putnam*’s, which published it, and *Putnam*’s relationship to the older, much more politically conservative *Harper*’s. In his essay on creating an undergraduate version of a seminar on Race in Nineteenth Century Transatlantic Print Culture, Daniel Hack pairs texts such as Douglass’s *Narrative* and Shelley’s *Frankenstein* as part of a much broader attempt to have students approach texts and their meanings as mobile in time and space: “How does attention to the transnational circulation, reception, and afterlife of literary texts alter our understanding of those texts themselves, of literary history, of the nature of creativity and authorship, and of the cultural work of literature?” The editors make a similar point about Atlantic studies itself: about “opening up the ever-larger questions about where, exactly, the boundaries of transatlanticism start and stop” and bringing these questions into the classroom. The collection, which includes a companion website, also brings in the voices of students who took the Transatlantic Studies courses at Rutgers and Texas Christian University, where the editors, one a specialist in British literature the other in American joined forces to create their course and now this immensely useful collection.

The covers of these two collections underscore the concerns mentioned above: on the *Edinburgh Companion* a map of the Atlantic Ocean currents and on *Teaching Transatlanticism* the Eastern Telegraph Company’s system map, with its extensive connections across the Atlantic and Europe to India and China as well. It is inevitable that just as Transatlantic Studies has expanded its range across space to encompass the entire Atlantic and beyond, Atlantic Studies will continue to expand its range across time to deal more extensively with more contemporary literary issues and their wider cultural political contexts and consequences.

¹ As *Beyond “Understanding Canada”: Transnational Perspectives on Canadian Literature* demonstrates, the term Canadian literature requires additional scrutiny as well, especially from an Atlantic Studies perspective (ed. Melissa Tanti and Jeremy Haynes, U of Alberta P, 2017).