WORLD HISTORY AS OCEANIC HISTORY: BEYOND BRAUDEL

David Armitage

ABSTRACT: Until recently, most historians shared a prejudice in favour of the history of land, territory and their human inhabitants. Yet two-thirds of the world’s surface is water and much of human history has been conducted on its shores, around its seas and across its oceans. This article proposes reimagining the history of the world through its oceans and seas and examines the multiple genealogies of oceanic history, Mediterranean, Pacific and Atlantic among them. It argues that these models do not exhaust the potential for an oceanic history of the world. It takes the example of the Atlantic and its history to show how models from other oceanic arenas can help us to open up new histories, of regions within larger oceans, of the transnational connections between oceans and of the world beneath the waves.

Historians, no less than other humans, are prone to terrestrial prejudice, an attachment to happenings on land, to the comforts of terra firma, to the gravitational pull of territory in all our lives. We might call this attachment terracentrism, a short-sightedness about our species, its environment and our connected history that is just as reassuring but also quite as debilitating as other prejudices, such as Eurocentrism in history or logocentrism in philology. Terracentrism, of course, runs much deeper, into our seeming destiny as animals of the land who are not at home on the sea. To venture onto the ocean was long thought to be somehow unnatural, with shipwreck and drowning the fitting rewards for hubris in rejecting our destiny as terrestrial creatures. And yet 70 per cent of our planet’s surface is water: the Pacific basin alone could hold the entire land-surface of the world with room to spare. It

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is, therefore, something of a paradox that our planet is called Earth when it is so thoroughly dominated by the sea: “Ocean” would be a much more appropriate and accurate name. In this regard, our home may be exceptional among the known planets, but it is not alone within the solar system and beyond in having oceans, even if these extra-terrestrial “water worlds” – on Mars, or on Saturn’s moons, for instance – remain for the moment beyond the reach of historians.3

The intellectual effort to overcome our ingrained terracentrism is, of course, nothing new. By the late 1990s, historians and geographers were beginning to claim that the spaces and scales of world history might be reordered on the basis of natural boundaries of oceans.4 Yet it was only early in our own century that scholars put the ocean into history, revealing changes in the sea as earlier pioneers in the field had mapped changes in the land.5 By then, there was already a widely watched movement to promote a so-called “New Thalassology”, attending to the oceans and seas of the world. In one sense, this was not so new, as most of its promoters assumed the primacy of Mediterranean models for oceanic history and frequently referred to Fernand Braudel’s work on the Mediterranean as germinal.6 More recently, the Harvard historian Bernard Bailyn promoted Atlantic history as a field in itself, distinct from other oceanic histories in its scope and its origins.7 However, scholars of other oceans and seas have persuasively critiqued and recontextualised this genealogy, by showing how thinkers, narrators and historians have written of

the oceans beyond the Mediterranean – and, by extension, the Atlantic – over long periods before the rise of scholarship on seas in Europe and the United States: the “new” thalassology now appears to be not quite so new in light of the longer genealogies of the Pacific and Indian Oceans, for example.  

Before most of these watery regions had historians, they had histories, in the plural, most of which extended back millennia rather than centuries, as shown by the continuity of human migration and mobility in the Pacific, Red Sea, South China Sea and Black Sea, among others. The deep histories of oceans and seas provide better frameworks for historical understanding than Eurocentric categories like modernity and Enlightenment. From a terrestrial standpoint, what Herman Melville in *Moby-Dick* (1851) called “the sea which will permit no records” could appear to be outside history and beyond time. This was the implicit claim behind a long series of attempts to place the prime meridian offshore, in the eastern Atlantic or through the Bering Strait, before it was finally planted at Greenwich in the late nineteenth century. Even then, the oceans slipped the bonds of modernist webs of universal time. It has been hardly a century since time zones were extended from land to sea: “Until 1920, oceans and seas remained timeless.”

Oceans may have been formally timeless until recently, but they were enmeshed in multiple temporalities. Many students of oceans and seas claim *longue durée* ambitions for their studies, picking up the traditions of narration of Arab cosmographers, or explicitly and implicitly recalling Braudel. This is with good reason and application for some oceanic spaces, but for others it plainly fails to encompass the incommensurable temporalities of non-Western cultures. Human history in the Pacific, for example, is recounted generationally and genealogically by some islanders, in a productive challenge to historians considering oceanic pasts. Even in the Atlantic, that

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seemingly most time-bound of oceans, enslaved Africans experienced time quite differently from their masters and those who profited from their labour: the Atlantic, like parallel regions, was a sea of histories, not an ocean with a single history. Oceans were arenas for the competition of timescales and the negotiation of histories. Artificial efforts to demarcate and define them, whether by inscribing territorial limits, slicing them longitudinally with treaty zones or date lines or bisecting them across the equator, were only writ in water.

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To illustrate the potential and promise of oceanic history in the twenty-first century, I turn now to the Atlantic Ocean, for some the paradigmatic ocean of history, for others the Mediterranean of modernity itself. In response, I want to argue that the Atlantic is but a suburb of the world ocean and, therefore, inextricably part of world history, over geological time as well as on a human scale, despite the best efforts of international organisations to mark it off from other oceanic regions. This unbounded Atlantic had multiple, fluid histories long before there were Atlantic historians to record them. There were histories around the Atlantic, along its shores and within its coastal waters. There were histories in the Atlantic, on its islands and over its open seas. And there were histories across the Atlantic Ocean, beginning with the Norse voyages in the eleventh century and then becoming repeatable and regular in both directions from the early sixteenth century onwards, long after the Indian and Pacific Oceans had become so widely navigable. For almost five centuries, these memories and experiences comprised the history of many Atlantics – north and south, eastern and western; Amerindian and African;
enslaved and free; Spanish and Portuguese; 17 British, French, Dutch, creole and “hybrid” 18 – but not yet a single Atlantic history. More comprehensively Atlantic histories began to appear in the late nineteenth century; later, various species of political and geopolitical Atlanticism flourished after two world wars, but it would take until the latter part of the twentieth century for self-identified Atlantic historians to come onto the scene. Only in the early part of our own century did Atlantic history briefly emerge as a discrete field of study before oceanic history and global history engulfed it once more. 19

Before there was Atlantic history, there were many segmented and discontinuous Atlantics – even if they were not known by that name or placed in that frame. 20 There were no westward probes across the ocean until centuries after eastward-moving peoples had created pathways across the sea: to this extent, the history of the ocean’s becoming “the Atlantic” must still start with Europe and with Europeans. Until the fifteenth century, most navigation was coastal, leading to cartographies both mental and formal that resembled road maps more than navigational charts, much like early modern Japanese representations of a “small eastern sea” rather than of an open Pacific ocean. 21 The Norsemen who settled in what is now Newfoundland likely thought they were in Africa; Christopher Columbus probably went to his grave believing he had reached Asia. The waters they crossed joined known parts of the world but did not display vast novel vistas; they would not appear on maps, or in European minds, until sixteenth-century Spanish navigational manuals and Dutch cartography began to reveal the full extent of what stood between Europe and Africa on one side and the Americas on the other. Yet even then, what oceanographers now think of as “the” Atlantic long remained divided into sub-oceanic regions, particularly along a north–south axis bisected by the Equator. Oceanic currents, such as the Gulf Stream – first


mapped by Benjamin Franklin in the late 1760s, though undoubtedly familiar long before in sailors’ artisanal knowledge – created routes through the ocean that reinforced the distinctions. At least until the early nineteenth century, denizens and historians of the ocean had to reckon with “both Atlantics”, as the pioneering hydrographer James Rennell termed them around 1830. As late as the 1870s, the northern portion could still be called, in a reference work from the United States, “the Atlantic proper”, in contrast to the “Ethiopic” sector, or South Atlantic.24

Until the late nineteenth century, then, there were at least two Atlantics. Above the Equator, lay the “Mer du Nord”, the “North Sea” or, as Britons called it, with their eyes turned towards North America, the “Western Ocean”. Beneath the Equator, there was a mostly separate oceanic system that emerged with voyaging back and forth between Africa and South America, particularly in the context of the trans-Atlantic slave trade: this was, variously, the “Oceanus Ethiopicum”, the “Mare Aethiopicum”, “Oceano Australe”, “Oceano Meridionale”, or “Mare Magnum Australe”. The Afro-Latin Atlantic, with Brazil and Angola at its extremities, was the arena for the “longest and most intense forced migration of the modern era”, in which almost five million enslaved persons were transported westwards from Africa between 1556 and the end of the Brazilian slave trade in 1850. As Luiz Felipe de Alencastro has persuasively argued, that mid-nineteenth-century moment marked a major watershed in Atlantic history by diminishing the significance of one maritime system – the South Atlantic Gyre, in which currents and winds had determined routes of travel in the age of sail – at just the point when steamships were liberating mariners and their vessels from the winds and allowed the northern and southern Atlantic systems to be more firmly


sutured together.25 “The Atlantic is crossed daily by steamers,” wrote the American oceanographer Matthew Fontaine Maury in 1861, “the Pacific not once a year.”26 It was not a coincidence that perhaps the greatest emancipated voice of the age, Frederick Douglass, proclaimed in 1852 that “Oceans no longer divide, but link nations together. From Boston to London is now a holiday excursion. Space is comparatively annihilated. Thoughts expressed on one side of the Atlantic, are distinctly heard on the other.”27 Douglass was no doubt thinking of “the Atlantic proper”, but his words increasingly described the Atlantic basin as a whole, north and south as well as east and west.

The emergence of this integrated Atlantic – post-emancipation, post-colonial, if not quite (or perhaps ever) post-imperial – made possible the imagination of larger Atlantic histories in the sense of historical accounts that took the Atlantic basin as their bailiwick. Indeed, a narrative arising from this moment and constructed around the rise and fall of the slave trade and the histories of slavery and emancipation, may be the most promising point of origin for Atlantic history itself. W.E.B. Du Bois’ *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638–1870* (1896) is emblematic of this post-emancipation historiography, a history of the black Atlantic a century before the sociologist Paul Gilroy made the term fashionable while using Du Bois’ own concept of “double consciousness” as a lens.28 Du Bois’ work was a study on an intercontinental scale over a *longue durée* of almost 250 years. It represented a black Atlantic history that appeared almost before there was any other Atlantic history, and it placed bondage and the forcible displacement of subaltern populations at the heart of the Atlantic story.

The next wave of Atlantic histories came during what, from an Atlantic perspective, was the interwar period.29 In the closing stages of World War
I, the American journalist Walter Lippmann began to write of an “Atlantic community”, which was initially North Atlantic in scope but which he later extended to include various Latin American countries. His idea went underground during an era of American isolationism but resurfaced later as the backstory for the institutionalised Atlantic community erected after the next great war. Lippmann emerged afresh as a promoter of Atlanticism as a species of internationalism in the era of US-led building of international institutions, from UNESCO to NATO, that is often held to be the seedbed for Atlantic history as an integrated field of focus.\(^{30}\) It is from this moment that we get the initial conception of the “Atlantic world” as a geopolitical expression of an Atlantic community and as a historical entity, mostly in the writings of diplomats and legal internationalists.\(^{31}\)

The post-World War II genealogy of Atlantic history underpinned a narrative with a durable chronology and implied geography. European westward expansion into oceanic space led to waves of emigration premised on the dispossession of indigenous peoples and the destruction or transmutation of their communities in order to facilitate settler colonialism, initially under the supervision of European metropoles. The increasingly insatiable slave trade pumped expendable labour into a system of early capitalist production, leading to escalating inequality and racial domination. Those hierarchies did not collapse when perceived political oppression and the creole response to it sparked a series of “Atlantic revolutions” that led to political independence, the formation of new nation-states (which were retrofitted with their own national histories) and, with a delay of decades and sometimes as a result of civil war, the emancipation of the enslaved. This was the teleological narrative that informed Atlantic history at the height of its fortunes in the early twenty-first century. It settled into a timeline between the late fifteenth and the first third of the nineteenth centuries but inevitably missed the watershed of 1850 and the later Brazilian abolition of 1888 and only belatedly incorporated the Haitian Revolution as a pivotal event. It was,

\(^{30}\) Bailyn, Atlantic History, pp. 6–30, is the classic account of this genealogy of Atlantic history.

by accident or design, but still without acknowledgment, an Atlantic history whose chronology revealed its geography as still centred on that “proper” Atlantic above the Equator. This was a history of the North Atlantic as strung between European expansion and early industrialisation and informed by a liberal story of oppression relieved by revolution and emancipation, both personal and political.

Until the explosion of self-consciously Atlantic history in the late 1990s and early 2000s, scholarship flowed largely in the channels cut after World War II. These intellectual conduits directed Atlantic history into imperial and national histories, within a chronology from encounter to emancipation between the late fifteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The major exceptions were those African historians like Philip Curtin who followed Du Bois and his successors in studying the long-term dynamics of the slave trade: their work necessarily affirmed the established periodisation of Atlantic history, but it penetrated deeper into the South Atlantic context and into Africa, it integrated the Caribbean more firmly within Atlantic history and it focused on a slave-system driven by national entities, in Portugal and Britain especially, but decidedly supranational and intercontinental in scope.

The challenge for Atlantic history in the late twentieth century was threefold: first, to integrate the various streams of Atlantic history – political, economic and cultural; black and white Atlantics; national and transnational histories; second, to press against conventional chronological and geographical boundaries; and third, to define the identity of the field without cutting it off from other areas of historical inquiry. The rapid maturation of Atlantic history only partly rose to those challenges. As seminars and conferences, monographs and articles proliferated in the early 2000s, Atlantic history offered an expansively integrative approach at just the moment when historians were becoming increasingly sceptical that a national frame was adequate to capture the processes, both local and global, in which they were interested. In 2002, amid this explosion of self-confidently Atlantic studies, I proposed three concepts of Atlantic history to anatomise existing approaches and to point up prospective pathways for the field: these were circum-Atlantic history, trans-Atlantic history and cis-Atlantic history. By circum-Atlantic history, I meant “the history of the Atlantic as a particular zone of exchange

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and interchange, circulation and transmission”: in short, Atlantic history as transnational history. Trans-Atlantic history is “the history of the Atlantic world told through comparisons” between empires, nations, states and similar communities or formations, such as cities or plantations – that is, Atlantic history as international, interregional or, as we might now say, interpolity history. And cis-Atlantic history comprises “the history of any particular place – a nation, a state, a region, even a specific institution – in relation to the wider Atlantic world”, or Atlantic history conceived as local history and even as microhistory.

This typology was not exhaustive and I intended the three categories to be mutually reinforcing: circum-Atlantic history made trans-Atlantic history possible and both depended on cis-Atlantic histories; these emerged in turn from circum- and trans-Atlantic connections and circulations. At the time, and for many years after, they adequately captured the bulk of work conducted as the history of an Atlantic world that was largely defined against inter-oceanic and global connections, conceived of as a holistic, multi-continental system and viewed as the sum of experiences above the waves and on the territories adjoining and within the Atlantic Ocean. By now, they no longer seem as comprehensive as they once did, not least because they were derived mostly inductively, from existing practices within Atlantic history itself. The evolution of oceanic history in the last decade suggests a pressing need to extend my original trichotomy to take account of more recent developments, within and beyond Atlantic history, and to imagine new prospects for Atlantic history itself. With these goals in mind, let me offer three more concepts of Atlantic history in addition to my original triad:

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1. Infra-Atlantic history: the subregional history of the Atlantic world
2. Sub-Atlantic history: the submarine history of the Atlantic world
3. Extra-Atlantic history: the supraregional history of the Atlantic world

These three new concepts supplement, but do not supplant, my earlier trichotomy. Taken together, they can offer novel ways to reenergise the field of Atlantic history and to increase its integration with other areas of historical analysis. They can also stand proxy for some of the most promising futures for world history as oceanic history more generally.

Infra-Atlantic History

Infra-Atlantic history is the inverse of circum-Atlantic history as "the history of the ocean as an arena distinct from any of the particular, narrower, oceanic zones that comprise it". In contrast to that integrative approach, it focuses instead on those more specific and bounded regions that flow into or abut on the larger ocean but which have their own integrity as islands and archipelagoes, littorals and beaches, straits, gulfs and seas in their own right. It is the history of the peoples who inhabited these sub-regions, who lived by the sea or pursued maritime lives in coastal and insular waters. This is not the Atlantic as a congeries of cis-Atlantic histories, because there is no assumption that those places should be connected to a larger circuit of communication. Nor is it the Atlantic as a "world" or a "system" but instead as a series of distinct spaces and the competing visions that emerged from them. To paraphrase a distinction Greg Dening made for Pacific history, it is history in the Atlantic rather than history of the Atlantic.

Infra-Atlantic history draws inspiration from adjacent oceanic histories that have also attempted to break down wider oceans into their component parts. As one historian of the Red Sea has noted, “most maritime spaces are innately fractured, fragmented and unstable arenas”; this affirms the argument of Nicholas Purcell and Peregrine Horden that the Mediterranean should be spared from Braudelian synthesis by decomposition into many microecologies or Sugata Bose’s similar claims in favour of the dizzyingly various “hundred

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David Armitage

It has been suggested that the future of global history in an age of resurgent nationalism, populism and anti-globalism lies in narrating disintegration as well as integration. On this view, a segmented Atlantic has as much to reveal as a coordinated one. This is because it is more likely to reflect particular experiences than to fall into the traps of Eurocentrism – the assumption that the Atlantic was a European preserve or invention – or the teleological premise that Atlantic integration was inevitable, even perhaps irreversible.

Infra-Atlantic history can be discovered first throughout the islands of the Atlantic. That search takes us back to one possible root of the term "Atlantic" itself. Around 355 BCE, Plato in the *Timaeus* imagined the island empire of Atlantis, in the western ocean beyond the Mediterranean "frog-pond", which warred with Athens before disappearing in a cataclysmic flood. The first European voyages into the Atlantic lent his myth fresh plausibility – or, at least, utility in accounting for earlier links with the Americas – though it later became a western analogue to the Indian Ocean's Lemuria, a sunken superpower around which identities later swirled. The first recorded westward explorer of the Atlantic was Plato's near-contemporary, the island-hopping Pytheas of Massalia (Marseille), who made it to Britain, the Orkneys and Shetlands and possibly even Iceland in the fourth century BCE. Long thereafter, the Atlantic would be a realm of imaginary islands – the Fortunate Isles, St Brendan's Isle, the Island of the Seven Cities and Ultima Thule, among others – before Europeans learned that it was indeed a sea fringed with many insular formations, from the Canaries and the Azores to the Greater and Lesser Antilles. All had their own infra-Atlantic

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histories before trans-Atlantic contact and their inhabitants would continue to live such histories even when they became more deeply implicated in an emergent Atlantic world.

The Atlantic gradually came into focus as a sea with islands, but was it also a sea of islands? Pacific studies prompt the question. In that oceanic history, the paradigm of a sea of islands expresses indigenous consciousness of attachment and importance; it reframes as plenitude what outsiders put down as the absence or insignificance of territories in the “Earth's empty quarter”. There were no indigenous Atlantic equivalents to the immense colonising voyages of the Polynesian navigators, which made islands into stepping-stones across vast oceanic expanses. The “Atlantic Mediterranean”, populated by islands from the Canaries to the Azores and joined together by Atlantic winds, could hardly compare with these, though the Caribbean islands and the adjacent coastal regions of southern North America and northern South America have a claim to be a “trans-oceanic Mediterranean” or even an “Atlantic Oceania”, albeit on a far smaller scale than anything within the Pacific. Territories such as Ascension Island, Tristan da Cunha and St Helena remained remote from each other and from the five continents until well into the twentieth century, and for much of the eighteenth century, St Helena had functioned as a gateway to the Indian Ocean world while the Falkland Islands “open[ed] … facilities of passing into the Pacifick Ocean”. These were islands in the Atlantic, but not quite of it.


Mediating between the Atlantic, its islands and the lands that surround it are its coasts and beaches. All maritime activity begins from these regions where land and sea meet but their potential within Atlantic history has only just begun to be explored.\footnote{For more general inspiration, see Alison Bashford, “Terraqueous Histories”, The Historical Journal 60 (2017), pp. 253–273.} Within the historiography of the Pacific, the beach holds a special place as a metaphor for the meeting of cultures and a space where mutual understandings and misunderstandings were performed and identities continually reshaped.\footnote{Greg Dening, Beach Crossings: Voyaging across Times, Cultures and Self, Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Publishing, 2004.} The beach has not functioned as illuminatingly in Atlantic historiography, perhaps because of a later European association with the seaside as a location for leisure and pleasure, aesthetics and athletics.\footnote{Alain Corbin, The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World, 1750–1840, trans. Jocelyn Phelps, Cambridge: Polity, 1994.} Infra-Atlantic history might restore significance to such spaces by doing what Henry David Thoreau punningly called “\textit{littorally} … walking down to the shore, and throwing your line into the Atlantic”, to look for more local and bounded objects of study where the “ocean is but a larger lake”.\footnote{Henry D. Thoreau, Cape Cod (1865), ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988, pp. 92, 98.} Here were points of interaction between the human and the natural (especially protein-rich resources such as fish) and between land and sea – oceanic histories in miniature, in effect.

The histories of frontiers and borderlands have been largely terrestrial and located within the interiors of continents but there is great potential for examination of the “saltwater frontier” where incomers and indigenes, especially, met from the early fifteenth century in Africa and from the early sixteenth century onwards in the Americas, both Caribbean and continental. Exchange and interchange, followed often by conflict and dispossession, took place first in these liminal spaces, as native habitations were transformed into bridgeheads for settlers to protect themselves by sea or project their power over land, for example along the eastern seaboard of seventeenth-century North America.\footnote{Andrew Lipman, The Saltwater Frontier: Indians and the Contest for the American Coast, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.} “The American coasts can be said to have been Europe’s initial New World frontier,” and that idea can be extended around the edges of the Atlantic world, especially along its western shores.\footnote{John R. Gillis, The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012, p. 91.}
Infra-Atlantic history extends well beyond the moment of early interactions. After the initial period of encounter and occupation, European powers attempted to integrate new territories and subjects into their networks of sovereignty and authority. Imperial entanglement was always incomplete because a patchwork of corridors and enclaves rendered empires uneven in their penetration and, like any network, made up as much of holes as linkages. Within the Atlantic world, coasts, rivers, estuaries and islands were sites for the elaboration of empire, both on the fringes of continents and in archipelagoes like the West Indies where empires competed for control cheek by jowl with one another in contested “interpolity microregions” well into the nineteenth century.54 When examined at this granular level of micro-regions, infra-Atlantic history shows that two features of Atlantic history, usually assumed to have an elective affinity, connectivity and integration, were only contingently related: to be enmeshed within Atlantic networks was not necessarily to be part of an ever more entangled Atlantic world. Yet infra-Atlantic history may still appear superficial, in the literal sense of the term. Like most species of Atlantic history, it starts on the surface of land and ocean and builds upwards and outwards from there. To go deeper, we need to consider “sub-Atlantic” history.

Sub-Atlantic History

Sub-Atlantic history is history from below – not in the traditional, social-historical, meaning of that phrase, but rather meaning history that took place “below the water line” or “below the waves.”55 The term itself seems to have emerged at that pivotal moment in the middle of the nineteenth century when the two Atlantics were increasingly united by the advent of steam navigation and when both sides of the Atlantic were joined for the first time by the telegraph: for example, the Oxford English Dictionary’s earliest instances of “sub-Atlantic” come from 1854 and 1875, respectively: “subatlantic

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telegraphy” and the “subatlantic cable enterprise”. More recently, the word has been invoked, with reference to Caribbean thinkers such as Édouard Glissant and Derek Walcott, to cover the realm of “the sub-Atlantic as a repository of historical memory”. Sub-Atlantic history can cover all these senses and more, to denote the world beneath the waves of the Atlantic, its currents, sea floor and waters, as well as the denizens of marine ecosystems, human interactions with the natural world of the Atlantic, and the history that took place within the ocean itself.

Sub-Atlantic history remedies the striking absence of “one area of inquiry […] from Atlantic history: the ocean itself”, considered as “a single oceanic unit, a huge bioregion differentiated by human activities at different rates in specific subregions.” It can be an adjunct to infra-Atlantic history, as the examination of a particular segment of the ocean and its interactions with animals, land and humans. Oceans may appear to be timeless, the profound and unchanging stage for what, in Braudelian terms, might appear to be the spume of events on the crest of its waves. By contrast, sub-Atlantic history reveals the history of the sea as a variable and shifting entity transformed by human activity (for example, through overfishing or by polluting) as well as by more overarching processes like climate change. Sub-Atlantic history accordingly brings Atlantic history more fully into alignment with environmental history as a whole.

Sub-Atlantic history should also encompass the histories of activities beneath the ocean. The Atlantic does not have the same large migratory populations of aquatic animals on the scale of the Pacific, with its whales, fish and pinnipeds, for example; human migration and settlement in pursuit of those creatures has not shaped Atlantic history to the same degree as it has the human history of the Pacific. However, humans have long hunted whales

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56 Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “sub-Atlantic”.
61 Jones, “Running into Whales”.

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up into the high Arctic reaches of the Atlantic, and demands for protein from
dried fish determined sailing and settlement patterns in the North Atlantic and
colonial linkages between New England and the Caribbean (for provisioning
the enslaved population) in the eighteenth century. Access to the products of
mammals and fish thereby shaped forms of Atlantic integration for centuries,
as did the winds and currents of the basin until the advent of steam. Much
Atlantic history has taken for granted the ocean and its inhabitants that drove
these developments. Future oceanic historians will want to look at the ocean,
as well as across it, to discern its true historical dimensions.

Consciousness of the ocean qua ocean also forms part of sub-Atlantic
history. Because most white inhabitants of the Atlantic world until the early
nineteenth century shared a post-Roman prejudice against swimming, “it is
most certain that the Indians, and the Negros excel all others in [the] Arts
of Swimming and Diving”. For this reason, Africans, African Americans and
Native Americans were on the leading edge of submarine knowledge-gathering
in the Atlantic, for example working to recover specimens for Sir Hans Sloane
in Jamaica, diving for pearls or salvaging materials from wrecks. They were
also more likely to fall victim to ferocious fauna like sharks: “the shark and
the slave trade had gone together from the beginning.”6464 More generally, while
the geography of the Atlantic was reasonably well known by the late sixteenth
century, its oceanography and hydrography only began to be explored in the
late eighteenth century. Before then, although fishermen and sailors possessed
vernacular understandings of the winds and waters of the Atlantic and its
animal populations, exploration of the ocean was confined to coastal waters.
The first deep-sea sounding of the Atlantic took place from HMS Racehorse
in the Norwegian Sea in 1773 but major scientific work on the deep ocean did
not take off until the late nineteenth century, with the Challenger expedition

62 See, for instance, David J. Starkey, “Fish and Fisheries in the Atlantic World”, in
Coffman, Leonard and O’Reilly, The Atlantic World, pp. 55–75; Peter E. Pope, Fish into
Wine: The Newfoundland Plantation in the Seventeenth Century, Chapel Hill, NC: Univer-
sity of North Carolina Press, 2004; Christopher P. Magra, The Fisherman’s Cause: Atlantic
Commerce and Maritime Dimensions of the American Revolution, Cambridge: Cambridge

63 Delbourgo, “Divers Things”; Kevin Dawson, “Enslaved Swimmers and Divers in
Thévénot, The Art of Swimming: Illustrated by Proper Figures with Advice for Bathing, Lon-
don, 1699, sig. [A11’], quoted, ibid., 1333.

64 Rediker, “History from Below the Water Line”, 286.
The invention of sonar allowed much deeper investigation and led, in the 1950s, to the great achievement of Marie Tharp and Bruce Heezen in mapping the mid-Atlantic ridge – a breakthrough not just for sub-Atlantic history but also for the emergent theory of plate tectonics. More than half a century later, the Atlantic, like much of the rest of the world’s deep oceans, still remains largely uncharted territory – an inner space awaiting scientific exploration but ripe for historical investigation as well.

The world beneath the waves of the Atlantic may be the least developed form of Atlantic history for the moment. However, it is likely to burgeon as oceanic history becomes more deeply shaped by environmental history. The non-human history of the Atlantic – the historical study not only of its other creatures, but of its waters and winds and how they have in turn interacted with human activity – is only likely to expand, as we can already see from recent work on Caribbean hurricanes, for instance. Meanwhile, the world beneath the waves – shipwrecks, drowning, the imagining of the depths – is already attracting literary attention. The submarine realm may be the final frontier for Atlantic history but advances in history from below the waves in other oceanic historiographies suggest its time will soon come, especially as it combines with emerging work on the exploitation, management and

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governance of the oceans in other fields.\textsuperscript{69} When it does, it will be one more means to join Atlantic history with adjacent oceanic history. To see the promise of that conjunctive turn, we now turn finally to my third and last additional concept, extra-Atlantic history.

\textit{Extra-Atlantic History}

Extra-Atlantic history is the history of the Atlantic told through its linkages with other oceans and seas. On its eastern side, it opens into the Mediterranean; on the western shore, only the Isthmus of Panama, less than 80 kilometres at its narrowest, separated it from – or linked it to – the Pacific before the digging of the Panama Canal. Like the Pacific, the Atlantic is part of the Great Ocean Conveyor Belt and its climate is subject to the variations of the El Niño/Southern Oscillation.\textsuperscript{70} At its southern extremes, the Atlantic joins the Pacific, the Indian Ocean and the Southern Ocean; and thanks to climate change and the retreat of the ice, the widening Northwest Passage will soon link the Atlantic with the Pacific through the Arctic Ocean again. As sub-Atlantic history reveals, the oceanographic connections among the oceans ensure that any attempt to separate them will be artificial and constraining: there is a myth of oceans as well as a myth of continents. The means to bust such myths is by acknowledging those continuities: oceans connect.\textsuperscript{71} Atlantic history connects to many other oceanic histories. If taken in isolation, its own history might simply appear to be arbitrarily infra-oceanic. And if the Atlantic is too large to capture some historical processes, it is certainly too small to encompass those that operated on interoceanic, transregional and global scales.

From the fifteenth century onwards, historical actors would never have mistaken the Atlantic for a discrete oceanic realm. For Columbus, what would later be known as the Atlantic was a gateway to Asia, an alternative to a Mediterranean and trans-continental route increasingly blocked by the Ottoman Empire. His successors in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who sought a northwest passage likewise assumed the Atlantic was not bounded and landlocked. Throughout the early modern world, globetrotting cosmopolitans – sailors, soldiers, merchants, clerics, pilgrims and the like – moved between oceanic worlds, the Mediterranean, and the Atlantic and Indian


\textsuperscript{70} Zalasiewicz and Williams, \textit{Ocean Worlds}, p. 89.

Slave traders and planters who carried forms of staple production and of enforced labour from the Mediterranean and the Atlantic islands across the ocean assumed, like promoters of import substitution for goods like wine, olives and silk, from Richard Hakluyt to John Locke and beyond, that climate connected the Atlantic Americas with the lands around the Mediterranean in southern Europe and North Africa. With the large-scale extraction of silver from mines in Mexico and Peru, the first empire on which the sun never set – the Spanish Monarchy – became the vehicle for the first circuit of early modern globalisation with the Manila galleons as its conveyor belt from 1571 to 1815. When the Philippines were administered from the viceroyalty of New Spain, it was clear even by the late sixteenth century that the Hispanic Atlantic world extended deep into the Pacific. Indeed, in the eyes of European powers well into the eighteenth century, the North American continent remained a geopolitical bridge between the Atlantic and Pacific worlds.

The political economy of empires and transnational trading companies likewise shaped the linkages between the Atlantic and other oceanic regions. The English East India Company could not have functioned in the Indian Ocean without its Atlantic outpost on St Helena; its Scottish successor and competitor, the short-lived Company of Scotland Trading to Africa and the Indies of the late seventeenth century, proposed a bi-hemispheric vision of global trade centred on the Isthmus of Darién (hence its popular name, the Darién Company). Until the opening of the Suez Canal, the Cape of Good Hope was the pivot between the Atlantic world and the Indian Ocean, a “tavern of the seas” where empires joined and oceans connected: up until 1869, the two oceanic worlds could not be distinguished. Commodities such as rice,
indigo and breadfruit were transplanted from the Indian and Pacific oceans into the Atlantic as staples for settlers and the enslaved and as products for intercontinental commerce; the tea dumped into Boston harbour on the eve of the American Revolution came from China to North America in East India Company ships. Later demands for labour especially after emancipation, drew Chinese and Indian workers into the region, joining Atlantic migration to global circuits of migration and transportation in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was only in the twentieth century that the Atlantic was perceived to be a “world”, entire of itself, and distinct from global history more generously conceived. Now is the time to reconnect it to that broader history, and to bring Atlantic history out of almost one hundred years of solitude.

All three of these newer Atlantic histories, infra-Atlantic, sub-Atlantic and extra-Atlantic, expand and deepen Atlantic history, both in time – beyond its default boundaries within early modern history – and in space: beneath its surface, across its waters and into the broader reaches of the World Ocean as a whole. By drawing methods and inspirations from other oceanic histories, they may help to bring Atlantic historiography into a more productive and enduring dialogue with oceanic history tout court. If Atlantic history does have a future, it will be as a subset of world history viewed through the lenses of oceanic history.

We are all global oceanic historians now – even the avowed Atlanticists among us.

Harvard University


