



FIGURING ATLANTIC LEGACIES

Impossible Archives, Missing Histories,
Literary Counter-Memories

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. Fukù americanus , or more colloquially; fukù—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World. Also called the fukù of the Admiral because the Admiral was both its midwife and one of its great European victims. [...]

Junot Diaz, *The Brief, Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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Part of the larger process of trans-national reconfiguration undergone by American Studies in the past couple of decades or so, *neo-* or *new-* Atlantic studies (Boelhower) has evolved out of a notion of the Atlantic as “a watery site of cross-cultural exchange and struggle,” (Gabaccia 1) and has gained currency throughout the 1990s in scholarship related to the history of Africa, Europe, the Americas, and the Caribbean and their commercial, cultural, and human relations. In literary studies, the investigation of relations between the trans-Atlantic world and the formation of national cultures in a time frame that encompasses the entire arc of modernity, from the *discovery* and *conquest* of the New World to the contemporary Global World, has prompted the emergence of an ambitious research project that aims at describing processes of symbolic and material exchange, dissemination, and transformation of literary cultures, identities, and objects that first came into contact by virtue of the intercontinental

crossing of the Atlantic Ocean. While this transition has so far proved dramatically productive, it also forces a reconsideration of the field of American cultures studies and opens important methodological questions concerning the definition of research areas, objects, textual practices and their impact on literary historiography, on canon revision and on the definition of an Atlantic archive. This paper considers how neo- or trans- Atlantic studies conceives of the Atlantic and its legacies in relation to the idea of archive, that is, of a body of works related to traces of a trans-Atlantic American past, to its principle of organization and analysis for literary studies, and to the critical project it casts on future descriptions of American Cultures in the context of a long trans-Atlantic network.

I. ATLANTIC LEGACIES

In literary studies the recent turn to Atlanticism has at least two points of origin: Robert Weisbuch's 1986 monograph, *Atlantic Double-Cross: American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson*, and Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993).¹ Together these critical works have prodded the two main lines of development of Atlantic studies and have established chronologically the shift from old Atlantic to new, Trans-atlantic studies. Weisbuch's call for "a rigorous study of Anglo-American literary relations" (Weisbuch xx) both foregrounded and contested the Anglo-American special relation implicit in the *old*, "white" Atlanticism focused on the study of European imperialism and on Anglo-American cultural traditions, and inspired a new generation of literary scholars to recontextualize those traditions within the dynamic trajectory of transatlantic exchanges and dislocations.² The persistence of a surreptitious

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1. See the special issue of *William and Mary Quarterly* edited by Eric Slauter, with contributions by Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, Allison Games, Eliga Gould, and Bryan Waterman. I have discussed in detail the emergence of the neo-Atlantic studies shift elsewhere. See Iuli.

2. Focalizing especially on the colonial period, the early Republic, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, Abolitionism and, more recently, modernism, this version of critical work on Atlanticism, pioneered, for instance, by Paul Giles, is framed by Anglo American cultural and linguistic bounds, even if the scope of the "Transatlantic Imaginary" defined by Giles is meant to encompass

Eurocentrism in this body of works, however, is underscored by the Anglo-American cultural and linguistic orbit of its investigations (Boelhower).

The “black” genealogy of Atlantic studies is rooted in the trauma of slavery and the history of the African diaspora, and is unanimously acknowledged as the foundation of what William Boelhower, in his important methodological essay, has defined as “The Rise of the New Atlantic Studies Matrix,” (Boelhower 1) a research perspective that takes off from the “abrupt perspectival reversals” injected in Atlanticist scholarship by post-colonial and cultural studies methodologies. Although significant overlaps between these two lines of research can be detected across the long list of publications they have inspired, the special awareness of “the heteronomic and multilingual condition of Atlantic studies themselves,” and the parallel questioning of “the very concept of Europe as a unified, integral entity,” (Boelhower 86) tend to distinguish Black Atlantic from Anglo-American transatlantic studies.

The Black Atlantic matrix is disseminated across most studies of transatlantic culture: one could argue, indeed, that Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* midwifed *transatlantic* American Studies from its (white) *Atlantic* matrix into its (black? Critical-racial?) post-postcolonial and militant horizon. Gilroy’s study, inviting scholars to “take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective,” (Gilroy 15) was immensely influential precisely because, by reintroducing the history of the middle passage and its dissemination back into the history of Western modernity, it bound the field of Atlantic/Neo Atlantic studies to a rewriting of modernity that operates both historically and conceptually, thus pressuring scholars “to rethink modernity via the history of the black Atlantic and the African diaspora into the western hemisphere” (Gilroy 17).³

the “interiorization of a literal or metaphorical Atlantic world in all its expansive dimensions” (Giles 5).

3. Scholars agree that *The Black Atlantic* as “the most influential and field-defining” of several works around which a recent, critical Atlantic discourse has developed. I discuss this point in detail in Iuli.

And yet, an Atlantic discourse focused on the retrieval of the “actual dis-junctures that have characterized the Atlantic historical and geographic components,” (Games 741) is both necessary and problematic. It is necessary to recall and investigate the repressed matrices of modernity and to deconstruct their universal prescriptions; it is problematic because its ambitions transcend the American or North-American specificities of the Atlantic experience, and indicate that its scope is effectively circum-Atlantic, potentially (and problematically) encompassing the near totality of the terraqueous globe.⁴ Interrogated as the matrix of modernity and as a nexus of relations emergent from the events of the “discovery” and the “conquest” and from the cycle of the colonization of lands, deportation of people, appropriation of resources and primitive accumulation⁵ that prompted and structured western modernity, the Atlantic is conceived, in Boelhower’s view, as a “field of emergence and transformation”(93); a fluid, relational, excessive, and perhaps inexhaustible conceptual domain which is necessarily “more than itself” both historically and spatially. In this view, the Atlantic is a heuristic construction meant to evoke the material and symbolic reservoir of information lost at sea, carried by the cross-currents of the ocean through the centuries, and whose historical intelligibility is bounded to the narrative of European modernity as an outcome of the dual process of expansion of the (North) Atlantic world and of capitalism (Trouillot 221). The long, dual history of Atlantic modernity entailed the reorganization of global space for explicitly political or economic purposes, as world capitalism naturalized a foundational and incessant rendering of modernity while simultaneously hiding its colonial darker side, and linked, irreversibly, distant sites and unequal temporalities across the Atlantic Ocean.⁶ Instantiat-

4. The term “circum-Atlantic” was first used by Joseph Roach in his very influential monograph, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. Roach’s study was greatly inspired by Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, but expanded the definition of the Black Atlantic to encompass the African-diasporic, Native American, and Caribbean dimension of Euro-Colonial Atlanticism in the perspective of a Euro-colonial modernity.

5. See Singh.

6. From a different vantage point, understanding the Atlantic Ocean as a crucial historical space for addressing the formation of empires and the rise

ing the modern world *with* the new, colonial order *on/of* the world, European capitalism brought up the Atlantic world together with modernity and coloniality, producing what Walter Mignolo has called the foundational “colonial difference” on which modernity instituted itself; a difference that neo-Atlanticism must address within that constellation of concepts, if it is to be critically different.⁷

II. MISSING HISTORIES

Trans-Atlantic studies does, indeed, derive much of its rationality from the investigation of the roots, the traces, and the effects of the capitalist/modern/colonial world order as it expanded across the unbounded space of Atlantic crossings. As is perfectly allegorized by the invisible *Fukù Americanus* in Junot Diaz’s novel, that order has not ceased to produce its effects, no matter if the proofs of its instantiation are missing: just like the condition of modern *and* colonial subjectivity was brought about by the maps and ships that instituted and installed modernity, so the *Fukù*, midwifed on the Antilles by the Admiral Christopher Columbus—who was also “one of its great European victims”—haunts the trans-Atlantic present, and binds cultures and histories ever since: “No matter what its name or provenance, it is believed that the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the *fukù* on the world, and we’ve been in the shit ever since. Santo Domingo might be *Fuku*’s kilometer zero, its port of entry, but we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not” (1–2).

of capitalism, but centering it on the “specific maritime technology” that made both possible, the historian Marcus Rediker has linked maritime commerce and the ship as a specifically inhabited environment in his reconstructions of “the ocean as a real, material place of human work and habitation, a place where identities have been formed, where history has been made.” (Rediker 18) Rediker’s works has inspired revisionist literary study of the Atlantic such as Laura Doyle’s influential *Freedom’s Empire* (2008).

7. The conceptualization of modernity as a North-Atlantic phenomenon is discussed by Michel-Rolph Trouillot. Trouillot’s reading dovetails with the analysis of modernity developed by decolonial critics: Anibal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, Walter Mignolo, and Silvia Winter. For an illuminating reading of the project in the context of a race-critical Enlightenment critique, see Winter. For a good synthesis of the decolonization project in the context of transnational American studies, see Lenz.

In the narrative dramatization of the Fukù, the space of the Atlantic is made legible as the phantasmatic manifestation of a spectral epistemology that escapes the archival recording of the conqueror's chronicles, journals and letters and yet haunts back the visual economy of conquest that routinely makes the discoverer and conqueror the protagonists of the vision and the natives its passive objects. But while the relational and potentially inexhaustible Atlantic horizon is so ingeniously processed and so remarkably brought to literary generativity in this novel, its material indeterminacy defies—conceptually and materially—*both* historical knowledge, which depends on the availability of archival records, *and* literary-historical knowledge, which depends on a *corpus* and on methodologies predicated on linguistic, rhetorical and hermeneutic analysis. While—as I argue—the Atlantic world may thus operate as a productive *poetic* concept generative of literary counter-memories of (global) Atlantic modernity, its status as *archival* concept remains problematic, metaphorical at best, because it cannot provide the epistemological grounds for an archival apparatus that aims to identify, sort out and organize the heterogeneity of Atlantic cultures, and to consign their traces to the sheltered space of the historical archive. The very vastness, scale and horizon of intelligibility of the Atlantic as a concept defy both the archival methods of literary historiography and the selective methods of source-based historiography, warning us that any attempt to bring together a “whole” Atlantic world may be, as Eliza Tamarkin has observed, “[...] only an anachronism of it—one that reflects an impulse to imagine histories beyond the presence of the nation, that an earlier [...] moment has passed down to us” (Tamarkin 267).

Boelhower is aware of the risks this project involves, and smartly averts casting some version of totality as the potential domain of neo-Atlantic analysis by shifting the methodological weight of his proposition from the concepts of place and space to the concept of relation, and spatializing time according to a view inspired, beside Gilroy's black Atlantic, by Fernand Braudel's historiography, Édouard Glissant's poetics of relation, and Michel Foucault's concept of genealogy. As he puts it: “The armature of Atlantic studies, we might conclude, is nothing less than the changing

historical relation between land and sea understood as two different symbolic and geopolitical orders” (Boelhower 92). The constituents of the object of study, of the research methodology, and of the archive this matrix projects, however, remain as elusive as an act of critical awareness, located as they are in the “extended phenomenological awareness [...] of the shifting historical relation between them,” [i.e. land and sea] (Boelhower 92). Neo-Atlanticism then, we may observe, is not even constituted by the history of the *relations*, by the material and immaterial traces those relations have sedimented in time, but only by the *awareness* of those relations: “Awareness of this shifting relation [...] has generated the Atlantic world’s first language and arguably its first archives” (92).

What/where/how can the sources an Atlantic archive so conceived be determined so as to operate functionally for literary historical purposes? In his expansion of the Black Atlantic order to the global horizon of the watery realm, Boelhower identifies the space of the Caribbean archipelago—“the Atlantic world in microcosm”—and two foundational texts of *the Black Atlantic*: Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African Written by Himself* (1789), and Edouard Glissant’s *Poétique de la Relation* (1990)—as exemplary indexes of an *affirmative* trans-Atlantic archive, providing the materials and traces on which a *positive, neo-Atlantic* archive is conceivable. It is an archive not so much mobilized to diagnose the structural and historical gaps of memory and history, but rather to affirm the global interdependence of traces in Atlantic history; it is less serviceable to asking what transatlantic world such an archive leaves undisturbed in the abysmal depths that connect the Gold Coast of Africa to the Caribbean, punctuating them with “scarcely rusted balls and chains” (Glissant 6), than to affirm the positivity of a surfacing Atlantic world. And yet, Boelhower’s selections point to an ambiguity and a conceptual paradox that surfaces once neo-Atlanticism departs from its black Atlantic matrix to expand into a more comprehensive paradigm for literary criticism: unmoored from the traumatic archive of slavery, its heuristic and epistemological value becomes intellectually seductive but historically and conceptually weak, because it is left

without a principle in relation to which an oceanic logic may be adjudicated as preferable to a territorial one, on both empirical and conceptual grounds.

Unhinged from the history of the Black Atlantic as “a structure and a system,” as Gilroy framed it, even the expanded new-Atlanticism so much invested in the deconstruction of Western modernity and its symbolic expressions loses its epistemological anchorage, leaving unclear why an oceanic logic should be more radical than or preferable to a terrestrial one, as—among others—Jonathan Elmer and Etsy have pointed out. Scholars of the Black Atlantic can rely on surviving cultural forms that, as Alan Rice has demonstrated, are sea-based, forged in the diaspora, transcend national boundaries, and “speak of and to a mobile proletariat that has diasporan Africans at its core.” (Rice, *Radical* 24) Shanties and African-American oral narratives “constructed about the Atlantic during slavery in the South and later in the post-emancipation Northern and Southern ghettos” are some examples of the cultural forms mobilized by scholars and activists to challenge white Western amnesia with counter memories generative of counter-archives (Rice, *Radical*; Rice, “Tracing”; Broeck). But identifying the pivots of a neo-Atlantic counter-memory of modernity not centered on the Black Atlantic is immensely more problematic and cannot be satisfactorily addressed with the tools of conventional historiography. Indeed, in the history of the Atlantic diaspora, what supplements the archival erasure (of knowledge, histories, documentation) of native and slave populations and their histories are the popular, vernacular, artforms—such as folktales—that, as Édouard Glissant put it, “zero in on our absence of history” (Glissant 85). But in the neo-Atlantic project Boelhower charts, poetic and/or performative interventions play no part in the fabrication of a counter-memorial project. Nor it is obvious why “the changing historical relation between land and sea understood as two different symbolic and geopolitical orders” has to remain ultimately bounded to sea, and to an Atlanticism that is either too abstract for conventional historiography, or too narrow for a genuinely critical history of global capitalism and modernity.

The point has been made, I think, by alternative investigations that have addressed the complex relation between the production

of colonial difference in the global history of modernity and capitalism, and the inscription of colonial absence in the archives of modernity from the vantage point of a poetic or performative historiography which entails a reorientation from a neo- to a circum-Atlantic horizon, and a shift from archival knowledge to a recuperative methodology based on the creative work of performance and the imagination. In this perspective, as Sabine Broeck has emphasized, because “chronicles” of the dates and facts of colonization from the vantage point of its muted subjects do not exist, then “the pervasive ellipses of Western historiography will only be pointed out and filled by way of the (literary) imagination” (Broeck 24) In her feminist study of the Black diaspora, Broeck laid out a critical/creative methodology to which we can align not only Joseph Roach’s claim that “the scope of the circum-Atlantic intercultural may be discerned most vividly by means of the performances, performances traditions and the representations of performance that they engendered [...] because *performances so often carry within them the memory of otherwise forgotten substitutions*” (Roach 5. My italics), but also recent work on performativity and memory and comparative circum-Atlantic spectrality by, respectively, Diane Taylor and Adam Lifshey, as well as those contemporary, past, and classic works of the imagination that have interrogated the infrastructural historical voids of modern Western amnesia.

On a similar note, the reorientation from neo- to circum- Atlanticism, as Joseph Roach’s put it, is not meant to “deny Eurocolonial initiatives their function in this history [...] but it considers the results of those initiatives as insufficiently acknowledged cocreations of an oceanic intercultural” (Roach 5). And it is, indeed, from one crucial, foundational event in the historicization of the Atlantic slave trade—the journey of the slave ship *Zong* and the spectrality its history installed “in the archive of circum-Atlantic discourses and texts that have gathered around that massacre in the course of the past two hundred years,” that Ian Baucom reconstructs the centrality of that event and of its representations “not only in the history of the Atlantic slave trade and for the political and cultural archives of the Black Atlantic, but in the history of capital, of ethics and of the awareness of modern temporal-

ity.” In other world, for a philosophy of history of circum-Atlantic modernity (Baucom 31)

Identifying a functional, neo-Atlantic Archive may well be impossible, but it may also be beside the point. After all, even Boelhower’s emphasis on historical narrative and away from historical causation suggests that what is at stake in neo Atlantic studies is not so much the designation of a fresh disciplinary domain or of a new canon as the articulation of a philosophy of history that addresses the “general system of the formation and transformation of statements” concerning the Atlantic world; the historical a-priori which operates as the “condition of reality for statements” (Foucault, *Archeology* 170) and highlights their conditions of emergence (technical, ideological, grammatical, syntactical) in discursive practices. In other words, at stake is the affirmation of a post-post colonial, genealogical, critical philosophy of history that engages the archive of the Atlantic world not as a repository of traces defining the beginning of a history, or ascertaining its incompleteness, but, to paraphrase Ian Baucom, as the site of production of a constitutive, aporetic void that disrupts the lines of continuity of Atlantic modernity, of its historicist impulse and of its positive narratives by inscribing in the representations of the historical scene of trans-Atlantic modernity an irreducible fracture between erasure and writing, between experience and documentation, and by making that gap generative of performative and/or imaginative historical explanations. The critical task of this neo-Atlantic philosophy of history is primarily to keep that fracture open and productive by addressing the “gaps in the archive” (Baucom 4) that makes the history of the Atlantic world, and to activate “the silence it writes into the histories of empire and the modern,” in order to assemble “a counterarchive” (textual, performative, material), that, itself haunted by originary loss, may disclose “a reassembled history of the modern” (4).

Following the tracks of scholarship of Black Studies and decolonial thinking, this philosophy of history will seek the silence inscribed in opaque sources, among the linguistic deterritorialization that constitute the matrixes of modernity and of the poetics of relation and transform them narratively or hermeneutically. According

to Glissant, those matrixes are the slave ship and the plantation, but in the history of North-American cultures we should also add the settlement, the fort and the camp. Wherever we find gaps in the narratives they authorize and govern, we can be confident to be witnessing “gaps in the archive,” the silent traces of operations of “colonial difference” working in the intersection between the time of the archive and the time of archivation, as well as between the space of archivation and its time. We can conceive of this difference as *différance* in Derridean terms. But we can also read it in relation to the epistemology of documentation along the distinction Paul Ricoeur set between *witnessing* (the deposition)—what “does not end its trajectory with the institution of archives” but resurfaces in “representations of the past in stories, rhetorical artifices, images” (Ricoeur 226)—and *the archive*—“the moment in which the historiographic operations enters writing” (235) by means of a formal and logical procedure that installs a discontinuity between saying and what is said by the deposition, and between the documentary trace and its transformation into a document by virtue of its capacity to become writing, to be transformed into a story by means of a deposition. As a witnessing that can be written, the deposition is the condition of possibility for the formation of archives, and archives are “the material places that protect the destiny of this kind of trace [...] the documentary trace” (226).

But what does it mean to protect this kind of trace, with respect to the *impossible* Atlantic archive? How to address that trace, if the archive, besides being a material and a virtual place, is also a social place and a technical device, and thus, intrinsically subject to semantic instability? A place whose meaningfulness always depends on a fragile balance not only between an inside and an outside, i.e., between what is remembered and documented and who (or what) remembers, but also by a double and inextinguishable tension between who (or what) remembers and how (one) remembers; that is, if meaningfulness also depends upon on a constitutive and technical relation between archival objects and the individual and collective dimensions of memory? If—as Derrida has repeatedly insisted in his reading of the Freudian text—“writing is unthinkable without repression,” then the archive—

that, as we have seen in Ricoeur, marks the entrance of history in writing—can not *not* be, also, the operation that erases, displaces, represses, censors, and silences traces of the past and forms of social knowledge irreducible to writing, as Diana Taylor has forcefully shown in *The Archive and the Repertoire*. As a memory device, the archive is thus also a device of silence, a supplement that “seems to add itself as a positive to a positive,” while, in fact, it “supplements” the present of the past, reconstructing it a posteriori as the present that never was there. Thus the archive is a mnemonic prosthesis; It is what takes the place of a gap in memory and fills it. It occurs in the “place of original structural weakness of memory” (Derrida, *Archive* 11), where it reintroduces the specter of an exteriority (or a void) that breaks the illusion of a direct, unproblematic access to meaning making.

In the history of the American continent, the silence inscribed and repressed between the time and the space of archivization of Atlantic modernity refers to the lives, cultures and forms of knowledge that have been lost, materially destroyed, silenced or delegitimized in the “Circum-Atlantic Vortex” (Roach) through the process that Diana Taylor has defined of “rejection by documentation,” that is, denial by documentary incorporation of forms and techniques of native historical knowledge—ancient, non-western, and non-writerly—instrumental to the affirmation of colonial power. To make visible those processes of erasure and the impact of the violence around which the foreclosure has occurred—to unleash the specter of exteriority haunting the Atlantic Archive—is the aesthetic, political, and counter-memorial purpose of a circum-Atlantic philosophy of history.

III. LITERARY COUNTER-MEMORIES

If the first voyage of Columbus marks the official beginning of Atlantic history, it also institutes and exemplifies the spectral epistemology of trans-Atlantic knowledge, as Adam Lifshey has argued in *Specters of Conquest*: “the diary of Columbus’s first voyage remains in a very real sense the foundational text of the transatlantic itself” (Lifshey 11), and like other foundational texts that forged “America,” “it is haunted by aboriginal ghosts born of an originary and westward mapping” (3), and imagines

“its transatlantic commencement as inseparable from the production of absence as resistance” (5). But Columbus’ narrative of the first voyage is spectral also in the sense that, itself a ghostly palimpsest in which points of view, voices, and “first” accounts alternate under the orchestration of Bartholomé de Las Casas, it initiates and consigns to posterity the *factual*, *historical*, and *archival* events of the Conquest—the selection, classification and presentation of archival elements—by means of paradigmatic narrative that binds the material and written inscriptions of the New World to the void marked by the disappearance of the original traces, subjects, and even the original document of their inscription.⁸ In so doing, the (missing) *Journal of the First Voyage* grounds the epistemology of a New World archive and of (an imagined) America as punctuated by elisions, absences, and erasures, and since the former is the condition of emergence of the latter, it paradoxically engenders as asymmetrical coextensions the documentary and the spectral; the bodies of natives and native environments and their disappearance; the European, universalist history of the modern, (white) Atlantic, and the post-postcolonial resistance of the black (trans) Atlantic; *the Archival* (the scripted, inscribed) and its conditions of exteriority, that is, *the vanished*.

The double trans-Atlanticism thence surfacing is so grounded in foundational narratives of the New World and in North-American mythologies, that two centuries before Adam Lifshey theorized its heuristic potential for criticism, Washington Irving gave it full resonance in his own narrative of Columbus’ journal of the first voyage, highlighting the structural paradox that governs its archival status:

It is evident that a great part of this fancied intelligence was self-delusion on the part of Columbus; for he was under a spell of the imagination, which gave its own shapes and colors to every object. He was persuaded that he had arrived among the islands described by Marco Polo, as lying opposite to Cathay, in the Chinese sea, and he construed everything to accord with the account given of those opulent regions. (Irving 56)

8. It also coexisted with coeval and supplementary accounts of the lost manuscript of the *Journal of the First Voyage*, including Ferdinando Colombo’s *Historia*, Chapters XVI-XLII, and Bartolomé de Las Casas’s *Manuscript of the Original Journal of the First Voyage*. See Dunn and Kelley.

In Irving's words, Columbus' inaugural narrative is both the outcome and a tool of that "geography of imagination and geography of management" Michel-Rolph Trouillot sees as instrumental to the establishment of North Atlantic modernity (221), and illuminates what Diane Taylor calls "scenarios," that is, "paradigmatic setup[s] [that] exist as culturally specific imaginaries—sets of possibilities, ways of conceiving conflict, crisis, or resolution—activated with more or less theatricality" (13), whose reiterated stagings across time and contact zones attest to their cultural and historical power, and whose intended theatricality suggests the possibility of appropriation, parody, subversion by social actors enacting communal, non verbal forms knowledge not incorporated in archival records, and yet circulating as social affect (Taylor 28).

All inaugural scenes of colonial possession from the sixteenth-century onward, for example, as Taylor highlights following Michel de Certeau, are cast as the reiteration of the same "scenario" of conquest: "inaugural scene: after a moment of stupor, on this threshold dotted with colonnades of trees, the conqueror will write the body of the other and trace there his own history" (de Certeau in Taylor 23) But scenarios operate and/or are implied in literary narratives across centuries of (North) American Literature. Literary narratives about the American past are punctuated by stories of the Atlantic world in which inaugural scenarios are played out or enacted. For instance, to remain with Washington Irving, his conflation of Columbus' notational anxieties with the performance of imperial power in the very first act of *modern* colonial slavery Columbus performs on the American Continent: the abduction of seven *indians* as agents of infiltration/mediation, as translators instrumental to filling the imperial text with the details of its first transatlantic archive. Columbus's scripted act memorializes the form of colonial violence that foreshadows the future inscriptions of slave bodies on *the space* of the colonial settlements and later of the Republic.

But examples abound: Walt Whitman's vanishing Indians resurfacing in "Starting from Paumanok" as place-names—literally place holders for a narrative of indigenous populations already disposed of, culturally and materially extinct; Hart Crane's poetic body-parts, fragments of the subterranean history of transoceanic contact, and certainly missing material for an circum-Atlantic archive,

occasionally re-surfacing to be washed ashore by submerged currents and communications lines, as we read in “At Melville’s tomb”

Often beneath the wave, wide from this ledge
The dice of drowned men’s bones he saw bequeath
An Embassy. Their numbers as he watched,
Beat on the dusty shore and were obscured. (Crane 100)

These are “Specters of the Conquest,” as Adam Lifshy calls them, which have haunted the history of American literature since the first written accounts of the country, starting from Captain John Smith’s plotting *The General History of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* (1624) as a romantic narrative of native self-sacrifice under the forces of modern proto-capitalism. Similarly: William Faulkner’s evocation, in *Absalom! Absalom!*, of the 1791 slave revolution in Haiti, for instance, uses an anachronism to cast a spectral shadow on the improper foundations of Sutpen’s plantation, in what has been called a suspicious act of “literary counter-revolution” (Godden 206); or Jack London’s 19th century cast scenarios of conquest and colonization on the background of the gold rush in *White Fang*. Those narratives and so many other have inscribed and re-told the disappearance of bodies, settlements, animals, environments, languages, and cultures from scenes affected by circum-Atlantic, modern capitalism by supplementing its archival histories with the gaps, fissures, and silences they create.

Framing foundational scenes in the history of American literature from the vantage of a circum-Atlantic philosophy of history so conceived, allows us to intercept the silent occurrences that punctuate the literature of the United States and read them against the grain of a pacified modernity. It helps us focus on those occurrences as site-specific events in the larger, global network of material, cultural, human relations and powers that brought up the Atlantic space and the modern world it generated. It also means to deconstruct from the inside the patterns of “repudiation through documentation” (Taylor 25) foregrounding the history of trans-atlantic modernity as a script of “fancied intelligence” which inscribes in the Conqueror’s words the ungraspable materiality of a long-dreamed continent.

This point is explicitly made, for instance, in Laila Lalami's *The Moor Account*, where the reiteration of the inaugural scene of modernity is cast on the scenario of the 1527 expedition to Florida of Don Panfilo de Narvaez, a disastrous enterprise narrated by Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca in the famous deposition "Shipwrecks" and retold, in Lalami's story, from the vantage point of the Moorish slave Esteban:

Until Senor Albaniz had arrived at the promises and threats, I had not now that this speech was for the Indians. Nor could I understand why it was given here, on this beach, if its intended recipients had already fled their village. How strange, I remember thinking, how utterly strange were the ways of the Castilians—just by saying that something was so, they believed that it was. I know now that these conquerors, like many others before them, and no doubt like others after, gave speeches not to voice the truth, but to create it. (Lalami 10)

To think critically about a trans-Atlantic imaginary in relation to a transatlantic archive, demands *a witnessing of the witnessing that has disappeared from the historical record*, but that, however, has not been entirely erased from cultural traces. This, I understand, means to return to Ricoeur's understanding of what witnessing means as the condition for the deposition to occur and enter the archive, but also as what does not end its trajectory in the archive, and surfaces and resurfaces instead, time and again, in "stories, rhetorical devices, images." It does not mean to imagine a totality, or to re-establish a positivity, a fullness to memory, but to conceive a philosophy of history that endorses the meaningfulness of foreclosures and repressions of events in the archive, and that considers the gaps in the thought and the writing of history. This philosophy of history demands a pedagogy of reading aimed at capturing the traces of such silences, gaps, displacements, and voids in the inscriptions (non-referential and not necessarily textual) of the violent, originary repression and erasure occurred in processes of cultural transmission.

To return to the new-Atlantic studies matrix with which we started, perhaps its weakness is to be sought in its affirmative inclination toward a notion of history and the archive, while—as we have seen—cultures forged in the Atlantic crucible challenge acts of interpretation non only from the affirmative

side of linguistic deterritorialization and cultural hybridization, but also from the negative side of the production of absence; from the gaps in the deposition that—after all—could technically have been given, given the co-presence of a variety of languages and of different skills on the microcosm of the slave ship not only during the intensified 18th century conditions of the *middle passage*, but already in 16th century trans-Atlantic voyages (Rediker). There is no archival trace of those languages, eventually creolized by virtue of what Glissant calls “the most completely known clash between the power of the written world and the impulses of orality” (5), and yet, they have not been completely cancelled, but have often survived in unofficial, folk knowledge, in rituals and in cultural scenarios, as Diane Taylor has argued.⁹

It is by attending to those residual cultural traces enacted in representations, performances, rituals, language uses, scenarios and all that survives alongside archival documentation, and in a supplementary relation to it, that a circum-Atlantic poetics of the memory seems to affirm itself. Operating on a scale epistemologically weak, but imaginatively strong, this poetics suggests a sort of performative para-archive, perhaps a negative archive, irreducible to the temporality of historical linearity and originary archival violence. It gets manifested in recurrent, repeated performances of foundational scenes in the history of America and of Atlantic modernity, where, as Adam Lifshey puts it, “the enactment of scripted presence [...] is matched by a corollary enactment of an unscripted absence” (2). America here, in Lifshey’s, is not conceived as a specific place, but as a “reiterated foundational narrative” of the Conquest; the latter being

not a single entity or act but a fluctuating, polyphonic, grotesque, and macabre experience of genocide and ecocide that began with the first voyage of Columbus and has continued, in forms only sometimes mitigated, through our present day. Each manifestation of the Conquest is characterized by different details of who is attempting to inscribe whom, and where and how that takes place, and under which terms. But each microcosmic America that appears is not so much an inscription as a re-inscription, which is to say a performance, one endlessly repeated, each staging a restaging, each production of presence a reproduction of absence. (Lifshey 3)

9. See, for instance, Dillon.

As Lifshy demonstrates, for instance, in his reading of Columbus's *Journal* and of Thomas Pynchon's *Mason&Dixon*, the over-writing of the entire phenomenological world—humanity, environment, landscape—in the code of the Conquerors inaugurates an archontic process of writing that occurs simultaneously with the incomplete symbolic and material extermination of what was there before archivization. The process is incomplete, though, he claims, because every historical representation it enacts and installs as a presence (“each microcosmic America that appears”) also inscribes and reproduces the enactment of an unscripted absence, in a recursive process of incomplete repressions and erasures that installs the paradox of America as the result of an always partial, always incomplete Conquest, and of conquered subjects as always carrying conflict and resistance.

The reading pedagogy elaborated and exemplified by Lifshy is heavily indebted to theories of performance, particularly, as we have mentioned, to the thesis of Joseph Roach and Diana Taylor. The first has defined circum-Atlantic performance as “a monumental study in the pleasures and torments of incomplete forgetting” (7), the latter has developed a definition of recursive scenarios akin—in many ways—to Propp's structural elements of the fairytale: “formulaic structures that predispose certain outcomes and yet allow for reversal, parody, and change” (Taylor 22). Scenarios are scenes to be enacted, devices that abridge “past and future as well as the here and there. [...] Never for the first time, and never for the last, yet [scenarios continue] to be constantly reactivated in the *now* of performance” (Taylor 58). Scenarios are enactments of dramatic events/moments in national history, such as Columbus arriving at the New World, planting a flag before gathered indigenous people, and proclaiming territorial ownership (the subject of both Taylor and Lifshy's analysis), or—we can add—Captain John Smith rescued by Pocahontas; the Declaration of Independence; the Nat Turner insurrection—to name a few. These dramatic sequences have been played out in many places and media several times, since their occurrence. And yet, they remain powerful, because—Taylor suggests—they “make once again visible what is already there: the specters, the images, the stereotypes. The discoverer, the conqueror, the “savage” and the native princess, for instance”

(Taylor 28). But scenarios and their re-writing are also, as literary scholars know well, the stuff of which literature is made of.

IV. CONCLUSION

In literary history, the explanatory power of a concept depends on its capacity to organize and give logical, rhetorical, ideological, aesthetic, and chronological, consistency to otherwise heterogeneous material, thus providing the ruler that “spans the distance from literary history as narrative to literary history as reference archive.” (Arac 1) To date, there is no comprehensive literary history of the Atlantic, but one could speculate on what such project would be like, methodologically. Would it be a narrative history organized around the supra-personal, collective concept of the Atlantic, which would hold together and explain the vast archive of the drawn and submerged traces of *trans-*, *circum-*, and *cis-* Atlantic space and the historical and literary modernities it co-evolved with? Just like 19th century narrative literary histories, would this history also show a plot (the history of the Atlantic as a conceptual fold)? Unlike its positivistic predecessors, it would not be directed by a teleology (of the nation, of freedom, of emancipation, of conquest, or any other). It would perhaps be coextensive with the history of modernity, capitalism, enslavement and coloniality, but it could not be organized by any one of those concepts as its metanarrative. On the contrary, and like most post-modernist literary histories, by selecting, organizing, generalizing and explaining from a circum-Atlantic perspective diverse cultural and historical elements, material and discursive phenomena, actual and imagined events occurred in time and in relation to a geopolitical space, this history would likely struggle to counterbalance the impulse to encyclopedically include the boundlessness of the modern Atlantic world, with the impulse to organize it narratively. In this respect, it would not be methodologically different in kind from literary histories by now rather familiar that aim to retrieve “the context in the text”—as Hayden White put it long ago—and to provide historical reconstructions of the complex network of relations around textual objects by resituating them in specific material zones of production, representation, appropriation, and use. Such a history would also be genealogically oriented to “cultivate the details

and accidents that accompany every beginning,” to “seek the subtle, singular, and subindividual marks that might possibly intersect in them to form a network that is difficult to unravel” (Foucault, *Language* 142), and that connect asymmetrically, *in disparity*, modernity and the Atlantic as “a space of dwelling “in” and a way of reflecting “on” the modern [beginning of things]” (Baucorn 4).

But then, would this history be an asymmetrical yet parallel narrative that sidetracks official histories of worlds across the Atlantic? Would it be a history written, as the erudite Moroccan slave Esteban in Lalami’s novel claims: “to correct details of the history that was compiled by my companions” who, “in accordance with the standards set by their positions [...] were led to omit certain events while exaggerating others; suppress some details while inventing others?” (1). Perhaps. But only with the important rejoinder, as long as “correcting the details” does not mean to add “a positive to a positive,” and means instead attending to that *witnessing* that has not ended its trajectory in the archive, so that it may surface and resurface, time and again “in stories, rhetorical devices, images.” Just like Esteban’s story.

The discourse that develops from Baucorn, Roach, Taylor and Lifshy, and that has guided this essay, points toward a similar direction. It allows for a framing of the relation between cultural knowledge and the transatlantic archive that acknowledges and sidetracks the aporias intrinsic to the gap between *witnessing* and *writing* in Ricoeur’s sense of the terms. It allows us to think about a politics of *archive fever damage control* by means of a hermeneutic reading inspired by deconstruction and performance studies, and attentive to re-signify the structural gaps and silences of archival practices toward the production of a different, counter-memorial knowledge, because those gaps “contest from a position of history,” and yet not historicist, “a prevalent representation of a state of things” (Lifshy 7). This kind of reading, which I would like to call a poetics of the archive, forestalls the closure of the narrative on the replenished memory of scenarios of discovery, conquest, rebellion, and racialization attempted by the histories of the conquistadores and their never silenced descendants.

Literature, I think, remains the best technology we have for this task, because it thrives in the difference between the saying

and the said of any deposition by punctuating texts with repressions, erasures, and other unresolved elements, and by displacing inherited repressions, silences and erasures in/as alternative narratives, or, counter-memorial practices that mediate between an unknown past and an unforeseen future.

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