



Atlantification: Facing the Atlantic from the Arctic – a provocation

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INTRODUCTION



Atlantification: Facing the Atlantic from the Arctic – a provocation

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ABSTRACT

Atlantic Studies now enters its third decade, and the ecological consequences of human entanglement with (or whelmedness by) the ocean will only intensify environmentally, politically, and culturally. How does the “Atlantic” in *Atlantic Studies* figure in this expansion and acceleration? This provocation meditates on the scientific term “Atlantification.” The Arctic Ocean has seen a significant strengthening of the inflow of Atlantic waters into the Arctic, which leads to the “Atlantification” of circumpolar seas. Atlantic water is warmer and saltier than Arctic water (icebergs, glaciers, and multiyear sea ice are freshwater, not salt), and Atlantification drives sea ice loss and profoundly disrupts the marine ecosystem. As *Atlantic Studies* looks to the future, the journal might respond to a charge of intellectual Atlantification: an ongoing, systemic study of the intermingling and deliquescence of boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, the past and the future, the Atlantic and the world.

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For twenty years *Atlantic Studies* has fostered multidisciplinary conversations that have been as changeable as the journal’s namesake sea. In study of the Atlantic world (and oceanic or blue humanities more broadly), scholarly attention in the past decades has moved from a focus on European transatlantic imperial activity to encompass more capacious inquiries and methodologies for study. These include the ongoing consequences of enslavement and settler colonialism; new materialist understandings of the oceanic world; human mobility and migration; Black and Indigenous and Global South oceanic theories and cosmologies; the oceanic reach of climate change; and maritime infrastructural studies. Ten years ago, I edited a cluster on Oceanic Studies in *Atlantic Studies*, and geographer Philip Steinberg’s essay in that volume is (as of this writing) the most cited article in the journal’s history. Steinberg’s “Of Other Seas: Metaphors and Materialities in Maritime Regions” stressed the necessarily partial nature of human encounters with the ocean in its call for “an epistemology that views the ocean as continually being reconstituted by a variety of elements: the non-human and the human, the biological and the geophysical, the historic and the contemporary.”¹ As the work of Steinberg and other environmental humanists has documented, the human body is both permeated and co-constructed by ecological forces, and ongoing sea level rise, microplastic

dispersal, human climate displacement, and ship-borne refugee crises in recent years continue to bring the consequences of this interpenetration forcefully into view. Yet the trace of the human in the sea has a long history, whether in the form of pollution and runoff, or in the water cycles that preserve the remains of enslaved and jettisoned Africans during the Atlantic Middle Passage which, as Christina Sharpe writes in *In the Wake*,² perpetually recirculates histories of anti-Black and imperial violence.

Atlantic Studies now enters its third decade, and the ecological consequences of human entanglement with (or whelmedness by) the ocean will only intensify environmentally, politically, and culturally. How does the “Atlantic” in *Atlantic Studies* figure in this expansion and acceleration? Consider the following scientific term (which I encountered on a National Science Foundation-sponsored Arctic climate expedition through the Northwest Passage in 2019): *Atlantification*. The Arctic Ocean has seen a significant strengthening of the inflow of Atlantic waters into the Arctic, which leads to the “Atlantification” of circumpolar seas. Atlantic water is warmer and saltier than Arctic water (icebergs, glaciers, and multiyear sea ice are freshwater, not salt), and Atlantification drives sea ice loss and profoundly disrupts the marine ecosystem. My scholarship in recent years has been invested in bringing the Arctic from the periphery to the center of conversations about how the Atlantic and oceanic worlds shape human modernity, with a particular focus on the timelines of climate extremity. The language of finality or extinction characterizes the tone of contemporary reportage on the circumpolar regions, couched in environmental grief or eco-melancholia. Climate activists have pushed back against extinction or doomsday rhetoric on the logic that it discourages change: if annihilation is assured, there is neither time nor reason to act. What my polar humanistic research in the Arctic has emphasized to me, however, is that the idea of the Arctic as remote, untouched, unspoiled, or empty of cultural detritus is as false today as it has been for the thousands of years that Inuit and other Indigenous Northerners have lived above the Arctic Circle. To lament Atlantification, to lament the contamination of the Arctic by global forces, is to indulge in a form of ecomelancholia that, like photographic ruin porn of blighted urban structures, fetishizes extinction and renders it both inevitable and abstracted.

In my Arctic travels my experience has not been of remoteness or geophysical extremity, but instead a sense of a reorienting assimilation into an already-entangled environment. I am thinking anew of Steinberg’s intervention, of his description of the ocean as “continually being reconstituted by a variety of elements,” as I consider what a sense of Atlantification might mean not just for the Arctic ecosystem, but for scholarly conversations emerging from Atlantic Studies and eddying and rippling outward in response to planetary imperatives. Oceanic travel and exploration throughout modernity have been driven by colonialism, imperialism, resource extraction, and the so-called advancement of science. Is it possible for twenty-first century humanistic study of the Atlantic to participate in forms of knowledge-gathering that do not replicate the historic harms of exploration? I wonder how, in other words, scholars might practice ethical humanistic research – described often, still, as discovery or exploration – in an age of ecological and institutional crisis, amid the ongoing, centuries-long crises of slavery and of settler colonial exploitation of Indigenous lands and water environments, amid the planetary catastrophe of fossil fuel extractive industries whose depredations bear exaggerated effects in the polar regions and the seas, and

amid the higher education labor crisis driven by institutions and states choosing to liquefy once-stable full-time academic positions.

Consider how the precipitous decline of polar sea ice in recent years and its current and projected effects on human and nonhuman life has been documented in a number of recent popular science and environmental books on ice and climate change: titles include *Our Ice is Vanishing*, *A World Without Ice*, *A Farewell to Ice*, *After the Ice*, *the Future of Ice*, *Lines in the Ice*, *The Right to Be Cold*. The scientific operation of Atlantification is one factor driving this loss. But if you remove the word “ice” from these titles you can insert any number of nouns equally facing systemic collapse: English majors, say, or humanities Ph.Ds. The language of crisis saturates both climate discourse and reflections on the state of the academic humanities. While environmental and higher educational crises may not occur on the same planetary scale, both are fueled by short-term thinking: marshaling and expending resources for the sake of expedience and profit, rather than doing the work of long, patient readjustments of infrastructures and habits. As *Atlantic Studies* enters its third decade, the journal might respond to a charge of intellectual Atlantification: an ongoing, systemic study of the intermingling and deliquescence of boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, the past and the future, the Atlantic and the world.

Notes

1. Steinberg, “Of Other Seas,” 156–169.
2. Sharpe, *In the Wake*.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Hester Blum is Professor of English at Penn State University. She is the author of *The News at the Ends of the Earth: The Print Culture of Polar Exploration* (Duke 2019) and *The View from the Masthead: Maritime Imagination and Antebellum American Sea Narratives* (UNC 2008), and the editor of a new Oxford edition of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (2022), among other volumes. She has participated in several research trips to the Arctic and Antarctica, and her awards include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.

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