



Ian Baucom. *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery and the Philosophy of History.* Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005. x + 400 pp. \$84.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-3558-0; \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-3596-2.



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History to Be or Not to Be?

Ian Baucom's book *Specters of the Atlantic* positively sizzles and sparkles with ideas, philosophies, scholarship and references, yet this is a book which purports to be something it is not. Much as a rich coffee cake pretends to have some connection with coffee (the fundamental and stimulating drink and *raison d'être* of café society), the coffee cake still remains a cake, something to be eaten alongside one's coffee, an article of flour and water, not roasted beans and boiling water, even though, at its heart, the coffee cake has the essence and flavor of coffee.

Baucom's book is not a book of history, it is a book of literary theory and ideas: a book of language, a book about books, words and meanings, but not of history, even though, at its heart sits a historical story. For a historian this book is that most annoying of artifices: the product of a postmodern social and literary theorist and critic applying his skills, academic experience, readings and understandings, and, indeed, the language of his own discipline to a completely different and alien discipline, in this case History.

Over the last couple of decades or so, within the areas of review and academic discourse, it has been almost

a sacrilege to criticize or question the rights, expertise or appropriateness of our learned colleagues within the Social Sciences, particularly our postmodern friends in the English and Cultural Theory departments, steeped as they so often are, in French critical and cultural theory and linguistic deconstructionist cant, who apply their literary talents and ideas to disciplines outside of their own areas of expertise. Cultural and Social Theorists talk about meanings as well as the word, signifiers and the signified. They talk of symbols and contexts, abstract ideas and theories, yet history is a discipline of events, of webs of cause and effect, rivers of influence and impact. The reading of history is certainly just that, a reading, but at its heart something actually happened and happened within a wider narrative and context of many happenings. In this case, the event was the throwing overboard and drowning of 133 black Africans, who had been caught up, amongst other things, in a system of capital exchange, called slavery. This real event of 1781 then became the basis of a court case, which in turn became an abstract argument over issues of ownership, recompense and ideas of insurance and capital liability. The court case also became one amongst many rallying points within

the complex development of the anti-slavery cause, led by sections of the British Establishment.

From this complex historical story Baucom has constructed a wonderful, explosive, insightful, dialectical word play, which he then applies as the basis for a theory concerning, amongst other issues, the nature and unfolding structure of abstract, global speculative finance. Now, my concerns here do not lie in Baucom's theorizing, nor in his word play—I personally love the intellectual construct he has given us to play with. I do worry, however, at the constant assumptions and un-constructed, under-developed historic inferences he draws from the historical facts which sit at the heart of his work. There is little narrative yet much construction and conjecture.

By weaving his theorizing around an isolated historical event without mounting an over-arching historical narrative or argument, nor embedding the historic event within its wider historic context, Baucom's theory, which includes a vast number of interwoven threads, is left floating aimlessly in a sea of complex words and speculations. Hugh Thomas in his *The Slave Trade* (2006) takes 822 pages to tell the story of slavery, of which the cruel events of the Zong are but one small part. Daniel J. Boorstin took three completely different books to explore and contextualize some of the areas which Baucom, in part, covers.[1]

Long before the polemic historian Keith Windshuttle embroiled himself in the vicious Australian History Wars, he wrote a book titled *The Killing of History* (1996), in which he also railed against the very same issues I am complaining of in the work here under review. Essentially it is the taking of a single historic event from the past, removing the event from the timeline within which it sits and the context of its wider historic surroundings,

then constructing a vast, complex and de-contextualized theory of the event's meaning and impact without ever considering the historic narrative within which the event sits in the past or how the wider narrative impacts across time. Both John Lewis Gaddis, in *The Landscape of History* (2002), and Richard J. Evens, in *In Defence of History* (1997), write at length concerning the importance of the river of history, the broad sweep of the story, not just the parts or single events.

In essence, what I find so disturbing in this use of a historical event to mount a work of speculative social theory and literary criticism is that the forensic heart of the historic discipline and the enlightening narrative of the historic story get lost in a deluge of jargon-laden concepts; constructed, indecipherable words and speculative word play. For example, when did an Associate Professor of English ever accept words such as “undecidability,” “troping,” “antimetaphoric hyperrealism,” “introjective,” “reiterativity,” “introjecting,” or “cryptonymic” as clear English from a student, yet all of these words are from only two pages of Baucom's book.

I am sorry. But, for as much as I enjoyed the intellectual game, the erudition and depth of Ian Baucom's literary references and scholarship, and his speculative construction of a historic moment, I failed to be moved or convinced that this book was anything other than an intellectual exercise in indulgent word play and the history was nothing more than a point of departure for a game of empty and, in the end, meaningless words.

Note

[1]. See Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Discoverers* (New York: Vintage, 1985); *The Seekers* (New York: Vintage, 1994); and *The Creators* (New York: Vintage, 1999).

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