

Fall 2009

## Review of Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*.

Robin Blackburn

*New School for Social Research; University of Essex, UK*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc>  
[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Blackburn, Robin (2009). Review of "Review of Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*," *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 8 : No. 1  
Available at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/vol8/iss1/4>

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/vol8/iss1/4>

For more information, please contact [repository@brynmawr.edu](mailto:repository@brynmawr.edu).

**Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005. 400 pp. ISBN 9780822335962.**

**Reviewed by Robin Blackburn, New School for Social Research; University of Essex, UK**

*Specters of the Atlantic* is an ambitious and in some ways impressive book, based on archival research as well as a good knowledge of postcolonial theory, economic history, the philosophy of the Enlightenment, the requirements of late eighteenth-century marine insurance, the history of abolitionism and the Atlantic slave trade, and a variety of other difficult, indeed sometimes arcane, fields. Despite the demanding nature of the book, it is already finding a readership—checking on the holdings of a major New York library I note that it has already been borrowed by over a dozen readers. While there are certainly people out there with an appetite for theory, there remains the issue of whether theory itself should always ultimately be put to tests of clarity, consistency and material relevance rather than treated as sovereign.

This is a book about the significance of the *Zong* massacre and the lawsuits to which it gave rise, yet there are many preliminaries before the reader is offered a brief narrative of what happened and of what issues were in contention. By assembling together the information given on pages 92-4, 123-38, and 222-7, one can begin to build a picture of a complex and contested sequence, turning on the decision of the captain of the *Zong*, a slave ship, to throw overboard 133 sick slaves, with the aim of claiming their insurance value—rather than bearing the all-too-literal "dead loss" that would follow if they died a "natural" death, or proved unsellable.

The captain knew that there was a poor market for these slaves in Jamaica even if some had survived. His excuse for "jettisoning" the sick slaves was that the ship had almost exhausted its supply of water and that it faced adverse weather conditions. Throwing the sick slaves overboard was, the captain claimed, absolutely necessary to the survival of the ship, with its crew of seventeen and some three hundred slaves. The ship's underwriters were sceptical and their doubts were intensified by information gathered by the abolitionist pioneer Granville Sharp, who had in turn been invited to examine the case by Olaudah Equiano, a former slave who became active in the abolitionist cause in England. Sharp and the underwriters both challenged the supposed necessity of the captain's action. But at times they expanded their argument to call in question the treating of human beings as insured property.

Baucom nowhere supplies a concise summary of what transpired on the ship and in the trials, and he leaves out much information that would have been relevant. Of course the incident gave rise to conflicting interpretations, so care is needed to avoid any too tidy or smooth telling of the story. The first trial was won by the ship's owners with the court finding that the claim for insurance was justified in English law. An appeal was lodged by the underwriters, with Granville Sharp, the abolitionist pioneer, lending support. The appeal was held before Lord Mansfield, the Chief Justice. Curiously Baucom does not explain that in a famous prior case, the *Somerset* judgement of 1772, Sharp had pushed Mansfield to rule on whether a slaveholder in England had the power to order his servant—being a slave—to return to Virginia. Mansfield had ruled that he could find no law justifying such action and that certain vital slaveholder powers could not be exercised in the metropolis. Mansfield certainly did not intend to question the lawfulness of the

trade in slaves taken from Africa to the Americas in British ships, and his observations in the *Zong* trial made this clear.

As I have said any neat summary would fail to illuminate the complexity of what happened on the *Zong* and of the subsequent chain of events in the course of which the massacre became a prime reference point for the rise of the British campaign against the Atlantic slave trade which led to legislative abolition of the British branch of the trade in 1807. I do not deny that most of the theoretical considerations addressed by Baucom are perfectly relevant and illuminating. Indeed I would suggest that he could have brought other theoretical models to bear—I suspect that a materialist reading of Bruno Latour's theory of networks could have further helped him to unravel the connections among merchant bankers, marine insurers, ships officers, the ship's cargo, the concepts of the lawyers on all sides, the still-living slaves, the massacred, those who resisted their fate and so forth. But all such theoretical models need to be checked against the evidence. The absence of a usable summary—complete with queries, doubtful issues, larger contexts and so forth—renders even some of the author's most fascinating insights moot and, in a rather straightforward sense, "undecidable."

In effect, Baucom assumes the event not to need close interrogation. The murder of the sick slaves is, understandably no doubt, taken as the heart of the matter—when actually that murder was part of a chain tied to many practices and institutions which are barely registered in *Specters*. Thus the book tells the reader little or nothing about the *raison d'être* or functioning of the slave plantation or of the role of plantation produce in the English culture of consumption. The *Zong* massacre was important not because the captain's decision brought out the deadly implications of a traffic that had already killed two million captives and that was geared to further killing since it replenished the slave labor force more cheaply than would a slave regime based on natural reproduction. Baucom does not explain the calculations that led the slave traders to pack their ships so tightly, with three times as many people per ton as on ships with voluntary passengers.

Delving into such issues would have placed demands on the reader, but so does an approach that assumes a degree of familiarity with Žižek's account of capitalism, Badiou's concept of the "truth event," or Spivak's observations concerning the "singular" and the "native informant." Though some might, I do not object to these extended discussions. Firstly because the author supplies explanations of these problematics and secondly because, whether or not one is already familiar with the concept or author, there is always the option of looking up the cited text. But this option is not readily available for the transcript of the trials and certain other key documents relating to the trial. The author informs us that the transcript is available in the holdings of the naval museum at Greenwich, but a search of their website suggests that it is not yet available in hypertext. If Baucom had been writing about *Hamlet* one would understand his sparing resort to quotation but not in this case.

There are several books that briefly relate what happened on the *Zong* and afterwards but no substantial or book-length treatment, so *Specters of the Atlantic* is first in the field. Baucom is to be congratulated on having seen how richly significant this episode is. Thirty or forty years ago there was a tendency to downplay the economic significance of the slave trade, but recent work by historians has for some time been moving in the other direction. It is now more commonly

accepted that the profits and products of slavery had a major impact on the British economy in the epoch of industrialization. Baucom rightly insists that he is dealing not just with capitalism but with finance capitalism. One of the more important ways in which plantation profits fed into the accumulation process was via mercantile credit. Early manufacturers had enough resources to buy capital goods but they needed plenty of credit if they were to wait to be paid for exported goods. Colonial merchants supplied much of the needed credit. Baucom rightly draws attention to the "bills of exchange" and their role in the advancing British economy.

Appreciative as one might be for Baucom's generally perceptive discussion of regimes of accumulation, how does it illuminate what happened on the *Zong*? Baucom insists that preoccupation with the captain's argument from "necessity" failed to register the more basic question of the humanity of his actions. Baucom's severely analytic account leads to a powerful and moving passage which actually quotes the trial transcript. The passage concerned is the attorney's attempt to put the owners and the officers appointed by them on the spot as to the common humanity of the jettisoned slaves. A ship's officer is asked:

"[Did the slaves] not pray or earnestly request and with tears in their Eyes or how otherwise or some sign or gesture signs or gestures express or signify a desire that he or she might not be thrown overboard or did not they . . . signify some desire that he or she be permitted to live? And what effect on the said defendant, Mr Kelsale and the other Officers and Crew and which of them [did this] produce? [Did it] produce any Remonstrances, Expostulations or Expressions from them?"

Baucom argues that Mansfield successfully brought the trial back to narrow questions of necessity but his argument is less than conclusive. The captain of the *Zong* did not live to see the trials and much of the evidence that might have thrown light on his actions—such as the ship's log—had perished (or, most likely, been destroyed as part of a cover-up). But the owner's case was nevertheless that the captain had acted out of necessity and that if he wished to save the ship and the rest of those on board then he had to reduce the number needing to be fed and watered. From the evidence we have, this claim was deceptive and false. Yet one cannot argue that the very possibility of such an appalling predicament is ruled out. If a passenger ship was foundering or running out of supplies, it would not justify jettisoning the passengers. Instead a captain mindful of his honor would have saved the women and children first and would, if necessary, have gone down with his ship. What happened aboard the *Zong* was rather unusual. Nevertheless it illustrates the way the slave system was premised on racial murder. While moving in the right direction, *Specters* does not quite register the routine reduction of life produced by tight-packing of the ships and over-working of the slave gangs. But *Specters* abstracts from both the slave producer and the English consumer. (Zizek's "parallax view" is hence missing.)

Whenever Baucom gets close to the event, he makes strong points. Thus he points out that ten slaves refused to wait their turn and instead cast themselves overboard. Mansfield's reaction to this, we are told, was to explain that, whatever the overall outcome, the owners could not claim compensation for the value of these slaves since they had died by their own hand. As Baucom puts it: "They had withdrawn themselves from speculation."

This is one of the few occasions where Baucom's emphasis on structure allows a type of agency. More typically attention is focused on the structure of an event but not networks of actors. Thus Equiano is briefly mentioned, but there is no discussion of his strategy for advancing the abolitionist cause. The author's reluctance to tell a story at least has the effect of lending a little extra drama to his rare narrative forays, like this noting of the eventual fate of the *Zong*'s main owner: "On April 21, 1807, the year the slave trade was abolished, the year the bank he had founded with his father went bankrupt, John Grigson, former mayor of Liverpool, made his last decision. The son of a former rope maker, he took a rope and hanged himself in the home he had inherited from his father" (169).

In a passage on Nike, *Specters* offers some stringent reflections on parallels with today's corporate labor outsourcing. Also relevant would be the central role of so-called CDOs and CDSs in the so-called "subprime" crisis. The subprime mortgagees were mostly poor black people whose mortgages became the object of speculation because they were supposedly fully insured against default.

Yet a debacle for the ruling order, no matter how spectacular, only rises to the level of a world-historical truth event when—in Kant's famous formula—it simultaneously reaches back to the past and forward to the future. The *Zong* massacre was revelatory, and resonated in the early history of abolitionism, but if we are looking for a world historical truth event at this time then it would have to be the great slave rising in Saint Domingue in 1791 and the Haitian revolution which flowed from it. While the *Zong* trials helped to launch the first wave of British abolitionism, the goal of ending British participation in the Atlantic slave traffic was not won until 1807, three years after the setting up of the Republic of Haiti.

For readers with the necessary patience and determination *Specters of the Atlantic* will be a rewarding book. While it is a pity that the book does not convey more of the fascinating research upon which it is based, those prepared to work at it will be well rewarded. More generally I believe that it does succeed in showing the special insight that can be achieved by combining the historian's archive with the interpretive techniques of comparative literature.