



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Afterword: Outside the Black Atlantic

Simon Gikandi

Research in African Literatures, Volume 45, Number 3, Fall 2014, pp. 241-244  
(Article)

Published by Indiana University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/555721>

# Afterword: Outside the Black Atlantic

SIMON GIKANDI  
Princeton University  
sgikandi@princeton.edu

Whatever one may think about the book, the publication of Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) was a seminal event in the social history of the African diaspora at the end of the twentieth century. At a time when black communities in Europe and North America were struggling to figure out their relationship to the African continent after decolonization and the success of the civil rights movement in the 1960s had sapped the energies of Pan-Africanism, Gilroy provided his readers with a paradigm for thinking about cultural relations outside the torsion of anxiety associated with national belonging. The major success of his book was its systematic and critical exploration of cultural relationships across the Atlantic outside the traumatic experience of the Middle Passage and its stories of loss. For Gilroy, however violent it had been, the black subject's entry into modernity was part of a redemptive hermeneutics. Not only did Africans become modern subjects through this enforced passage, but they also became active agents in the production of a counterculture of modernity. Rather than being either mere chattel or passive subjects, blacks had been involved in multiple streams and cultural flows that changed the claims of modernity and its informing axioms.

But perhaps Gilroy's book has been central to a new black studies because of the debates it has triggered and the questions it has raised, many of them connected to what have been assumed to be the book's sins of omission. It has been argued, for example, that the redemptive hermeneutics informing the *Black Atlantic* was scripted at the expense of the negative dialectic of the Middle Passage, a narrative of loss, suffering, and social death. The question asked here was, in retrospect, inevitable. How can one imagine the story of the black Atlantic as the flow of cultural goods borne on ships in the nineteenth century without thinking about the hauntology of the slave ship, the infamous agent of social death? It would seem that Gilroy's redemptive narrative was only possible through the omission of this story of black suffering and the occlusion of Africa in the moral and social geography of the black Atlantic. As Yogita Goyal notes in her introduction to this special issue of *Research in African Literatures*, Gilroy was generally silent on the place of Africa in the counterculture of modernity, content to leave Africa to its devices either as the signifier of the unmodern or as the mute prisoner of an Afrocentric discourse.

Still, one of the enduring puzzles of the *Black Atlantic* was Gilroy's privileging of the black in North America. Why did Gilroy, a scholar passionately involved in intellectual debates on the black British subject, seem to assume that the major producers and cultural bearers of the counterculture of modernity were African Americans, not, let's say, Afro-Caribbean or African intellectuals who had been key architects of black thought for most of the twentieth century? Why did the African American subject function as the quintessential figure of black modernity, closely identified with, and located within, American popular culture and late capitalism? There are several possible answers to these questions: first, to the extent that Gilroy located popular culture, especially music, at the center of the counterculture of modernity, then the African American subject would seem to occupy a unique place in the circuits of cultural production that moved across the Atlantic. Second, like most works published in the 1990s, Gilroy's work was driven by a certain antipathy toward nationalist and Pan-Africanist projects. What this meant, among other things, was that the kind of Pan-Africanist thought associated with Afro-Caribbean and African intellectuals, from Marcus Garvey and George Padmore to Kwame Nkrumah and C. L. R. James, were suspect.

But the third and perhaps most important reason for the privileging of the African American in Gilroy's discourse was the most obvious—that a motivation for the book was Gilroy's long and persistent search for a paradigm that would enable him to locate the black person in Britain as a British subject. Gilroy's early work, most prominently, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987), was concerned with the difficult passage of Caribbean migrants from their social construction as an ethnos to the desired goal of full citizenship. The *Black Atlantic* emerged out of the crisis of citizenship associated with Thatcherism. In response to this crisis, black British intellectuals were turning to North America for lessons about how people defined as minorities could be acknowledged as citizens. Considered from a cultural studies perspective, then, the African American subject appeared to have successfully made the passage from the margins to the center and culture had enabled this. Once they were considered to be major producers of American popular culture, African Americans had to be recognized as citizens rather than subjects.

This contextualization is important to keep in mind because many critiques of Gilroy's relation to other zones of blackness, including his mother's Guyana, seem to assume, erroneously in my view, that he exhibits a certain terror toward forms of blackness that are not blessed by the hand of modern Europe. Instead of focusing on Gilroy's identification with his paternal European identity at the expense of his maternal Caribbean identity, the critique of his work should focus on the kind of work he was asking the black in North America to perform in order to provide a lesson to the black British. To put it simply, neither the African nor Afro-Caribbean subject could perform the conceptual work that Gilroy considered central to his project, namely an exploration of how culture could enable the minority to become a subject. In Africa or the Caribbean, the black could not claim the conceptual status of a minority; they couldn't provide lessons for how to negotiate powerful cultural edifices. The kind of marginality these spaces provided was of a different kind—not of race or racialism, but of economic and political marginalization in a modernizing world. So, the best way of thinking about the limits of Gilroy's book is not to dwell on its exclusions, but to expand its

range of reference and rethink the project of cultural flows and the counterculture of modernity outside the narrow Atlantic axis that was its condition of possibility.

In this respect, the articles collected here open up new spaces of inquiry because they resist the temptation to write back to Gilroy and, instead, set out to rethink the meaning of the African diaspora in a changed temporal context and in the widest geography possible. These articles are unified not by their use of Gilroy's book as a point of departure, but their acute sense of the changed context in which debates about Africa and its diaspora are taking place. Some comparisons of changed temporal frameworks—and their epistemic claims—are useful here. In the late 1980s, when Gilroy was conceiving his book, Africa was conceived as nothing less than a figure of crisis, a crisis that is now closely associated with the so-called structural adjustment initiated by the World Bank and multilateral financial organizations to stabilize African economies.

The devastating consequences of these measures, especially on the institutions of education and cultural production, cannot be underestimated. Massive cuts in funding for higher education effectively destroyed knowledge production in Africa, leading to the mass exodus of intellectuals and professionals to Europe and North America. Cultural institutions—theaters, writing and dance workshops, publishing houses, and even music studios—were put in mothballs and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOS), often singing to the tune of European donors who stepped in to fill the void. On the ruins of the institutions where African creativity and critique had once thrived, the search for the power of funding enabled European organizations to drive the African cultural agenda and to chaperone African artists and writers to unwittingly endorse Africanism and Afro-pessimism, the cornerstones of the old story of African pathology and failure.

Today, we find African knowledge and cultural production functioning in a changed situation. The youth of Africa, liberated by a growing economic base, new aspirations, and from the tutelage of both postcolonial governmentality and NGO patronage, have found their voices; they have brought new imaginative energies to a range of fields, including literature, dance, film, music, and painting, which defy the logic of Afro-pessimism. There is a new African renaissance in all fields of cultural production and, significantly, this has led to a new epistemological framework. During the period of crisis, intellectuals were often forced to rationalize their projects by valorizing their mastery of Euro-American thought and subscribing to Africanism in the name of poststructuralism and cosmopolitanism. In contrast, the new generation is comfortable being both local and global at the same time. While their elders lived under the fear of being considered essentialist (a now aging scarecrow itself), the young seek to understand the vital—and essential blackness—that thrives on the African street; yet they are unafraid to exploit their global connections in radical gestures of inversion. In the work of writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the extravagant paintings of Wangechi Mutu, to cite just two examples, we witness African locality animating and transforming the global universe.

Apart from their own keen sense of this changed context, the articles collected here function in the widest possible geography. This range is evident in the writers discussed here and the languages in which they write. The problematic of cultural exchange is expanded through engagement with black British, African American, and lusophone writers. It is further expanded by powerful revisionist

impulses that raise often-unasked questions. What does it mean to explore slavery and enslavement in the works of Flora Nwapa, or to think about the afterlives of slavery in contemporary literature? What does the reformulation of the *abiku* figure in the works of Helen Oyeyemi mean for tradition and individual talent? What are the implications of reading Langston Hughes's Spanish Civil War writings, or Melvin Tolson's classic *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, or figuring out Toni Morrison's focus on the idea of home for global blackness? What was the role of the Cold War in the transformation of the idea of diaspora?

The rethinking of cartographies of encounter in these articles is driven by more than the desire to go outside the black Atlantic as a conceptual problem space; it is also a form of epistemic disturbance or interruption. There are many excellent examples of this disturbance in the essays collected here, but two in particular interrupt familiar narratives of diaspora. The first is Fatin Abbas's discussion of Nubian writing in Egypt after the displacement of the group from Upper Egypt to give way to the Aswan Dam. What we have here is both a narrative of displacement, loss, and dislocation, which, nevertheless, demands reterritorialization through writing in the language of the other. Thinking about Nubian literature—a minor literature in Arabic—takes us to territory that Deleuze and Guattari may not have envisaged in their now famous work on Kafka. The other essay is Stephanie Bosch Santana's discussion of travel writing in what was the Central African Federation. Here, through a forceful archiving gesture, we are forced to rethink genres such as travel writing and what happens to them in the hands of Africans. Such archiving gestures are important challenges to the now established practice of reading African genres that seem to only speak to European or American theoretical concerns. In this article, we see how a mode of writing in African languages could travel across multiple spaces, suggesting a form of cosmopolitanism that needed its region and locality in order to thrive. As a whole, this collection is full of such archiving gestures and other forms of interruptions, all leading to the emergence, or rediscovery, of a critical practice that is not afraid to ask difficult questions and to affirm certain norms. These articles return us to a new age of criticism.