

SERIES
THE BLACK ATLANTIC
AT 30

Introduction

by Lara Choksey

On 5 May 2023, the UCL Department of English, the Institute of Advanced Studies (IAS) and the Sarah Parker Remond Centre (SPRC) held a day of conversation to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*. The day brought together doctoral students and early-career staff at UCL alongside three keynote speakers to discuss the book's resonance now, and how it has travelled since its publication in 1993. Lara Choksey introduces this Think Pieces series on 'The Black Atlantic at 30' with some reflections on the book and the day.

The Black Atlantic holds the peculiar summoning power of a history under reconstruction. That the book is also an invitation to join its project reflects the capaciousness of its historical interventions. Its routes seem more perilous and daring with each rereading: Frederick Douglass's journey north, Richard Wright and W.E.B. Du Bois in France and Germany, Martin Delany and Edward Wilmot Blyden in Liberia, the Fisk Jubilee Singers on their European tour. These back-and-forth plots structure the book's arguments as its subjects lend it their restlessness, allowing it to travel beyond its original cartography, and encouraging its readers to reconstruct other histories that might "vindicate the modernity of black life".

Issuing calls to a reader is a risky business. There is a disarming frankness to the one made in *The Black Atlantic's* preface: the book was conceived while an early-career lecturer gave early-morning lectures on the history of sociology to a group of second-year students who were otherwise in 'flight'. Gilroy encountered a familiar problem: how to make "a good dose of the classics" relevant to them? The answer he invented was to punctuate this canon with "the dissonant contributions of black writers to Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment concerns". Over the last few years, discussions around decolonising universities, museums and whole disciplines have generated lots of ideas for how these transformations might take place, building on those from previous decades. What stands out in this new phase of decolonial practices are the intensified investigations into exchanges between the sciences and the arts.

These investigations recall the opening to a famous paragraph in chapter three, 'Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity':

The current debate over modernity centres either on the problematic relationships between politics and aesthetics or on the question of science and its association with the practice of domination. Few of these debates operate at the interface of science and aesthetics which is the required starting point of

contemporary black cultural expression and the digital technology of its social dissemination and reproduction.

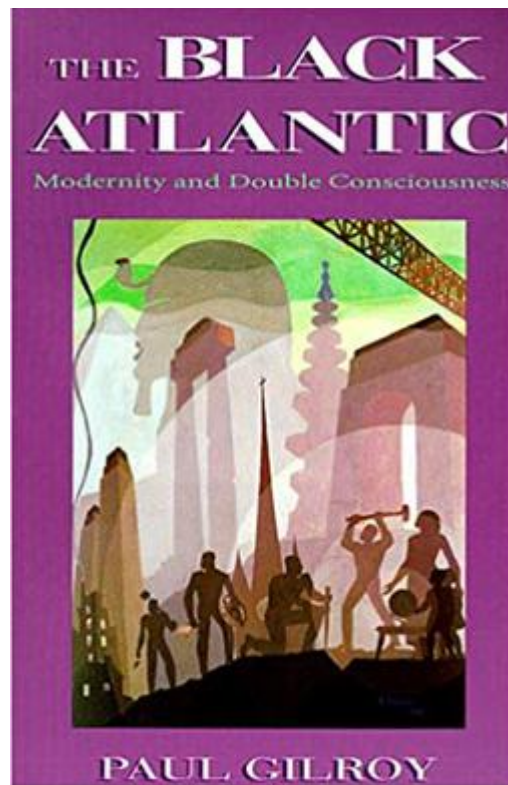
By starting at this interface of science and aesthetics, Gilroy argued that black expressive cultures could show that the mushrooming of “an all-encompassing textuality” was an incomplete critique. This was a bold claim to direct towards a field of postcolonial criticism then dominated by literary comparativists. At the time of its publication, *The Black Atlantic*’s critical autonomy came from its suspension between a version of postcolonial literary studies organised around poststructuralism, and a version of Black studies becoming increasingly organised around North America. The book’s relating of its protagonists’ difficult crossings across nation and sea, against currents that would otherwise forestall their intellectual, aesthetic, psychological and physiological emancipation, continues to offer a complementary counter-point to both. In recent times, this intervention has been related to cosmopolitanism; the phrase used more often by its author is “planetary humanism”.

Planetary humanism goes back to those lightning-rod sentences in the ‘Black Music’ chapter, and the invocation of an “interface of science and aesthetics” as the required starting-point for black

cultural expression. It seems no less complicated to determine the point at which observable phenomena move from aesthetic judgement to fact than it is to decide the point at which political bias contaminates artistic expression. The book's method is to choose examples that do not assume a unilateral relationship between empiricism and representation, and to use these case-studies to reprise some of the counter-cultural social relations that try to negotiate narrow definitions of human life. Borrowing from Toni Morrison's attempt to "reconstruct the texture" of black music in literature by "using found objects", Gilroy goes through sound: in the "bitter dialogues" of the Black Arts Movement he hears a cue to remember "a democratic, communitarian moment enshrined in the practice of antiphony which symbolises and anticipates (but does not guarantee) new, non-dominating social relationships".

Rereading the 'Black Music' chapter, I thought about William Wordsworth's unsung love song, 'To Toussaint L'Ouverture', first published in *The Morning Post* in 1803 while Louverture was jailed in the Fort de Joux prison on Saint-Domingue. The poem is a near-ghostly address that begins with an odd admonishment, like a schoolteacher speaking to a brilliant but trying student: "O miserable Chieftain! where and when / Wilt thou find patience?" Not peace, but patience. Any anticolonial

dissident serious about independence knows that wars of liberation are not won by patience alone. But the line is cut in two, as if Wordsworth can't help but somersault through his theme. What the speaker wants, quickly, in the space of fourteen lines, is to draw the hero's sense of his own actions out of historical circumstance and into the tempos of nature. An injunction that seems to want to offer comfort, "Yet die not!" might be an attempt to counteract the death of collective hope that often arrives at the end of a hero's life. Toussaint's achievement, for Wordsworth, is to have made the elements "work for thee – air, earth, and skies". Is Wordsworth urging a delay, or suggesting that Louverture has turned natural rhythms to his advantage? The dissonant hyperbole obscures the poem's submerged identification of a turbulent shift in world history in circumstances that exceed the poet's sense of natural time.



The Black Atlantic moves through the submersion of black modernity, finding a space for creolised forms loitering in fusions of black expression and romantic excess. In this space, music – the slave songs on plantations permitted as compensation for exclusion from modern political life – was “refined and developed” into “an enhanced mode of communication beyond the petty power of words – spoken or written”. Utopia could be on the make in these invented traditions, made audible by tuning into the lower frequencies where new desires, social relations and modes of association might be “played, danced, and acted, as well as sung and sung about”.

One of the initial prompts for the ‘*The Black Atlantic* at 30’ was to think about new chances at life for things that have fallen out of mass consciousness: in

remixes of nostalgic forms, what does the past do? The day began with a panel on displaced forms. Sam Caleb (UCL English) discussed George Lamming's 1954 novel, *The Emigrants*, where cricket comes to epitomise what Gilroy calls "the process of cultural mutation and restless discontinuity" of diasporic existence. Lana Crowe (UCL SPRC and English) addressed the role Gilroy ascribes to music in what she calls "the root of an artistic breach" for the Black Atlantic diaspora, displacing the "privileged conceptions of language and writing as pre-eminent expressions of human consciousness". Jess Breakey (UCL Geography) moved to another ocean, looking at the Black Mediterranean from the perspective of Southern Africa and troubled the construction of the Mediterranean "only as an extended European border". This was followed by a roundtable on diaspora and translation, where keisha bruce (UCL IAS), Guyanne Wilson (UCL English) and Sarai Kirshner (UCL SPRC) were in a discussion with Gala Rexer (UCL SPRC) that ranged from intimacies in digital diasporic spaces, to the disconnection between World Englishes in linguistics and postcolonial literary studies and the difficulty of making *The Black Atlantic's* utopian "politics of transfiguration" travel to the desert environments of Israel/Palestine. The endurance of the nation-state as a problem for utopian thinking was a topic returned to throughout the day.

In the afternoon, Phoebe Braithwaite (UCL SPRC), Gabriel Bristow (UCL SPRC), and James Reath (UCL English) spoke on politics and style, coming back to the shortcomings of language. Braithwaite discussed “the fusion of scientific metaphor and organic inquiry” and the written forms that Gilroy’s “pelagic thinking” take, working at odds to paradigms of transparent communication. Bristow moved to a more extended discussion of Amiri Baraka’s presence in the book’s “accent on music”, through linked concepts that suture Baraka’s later work and *The Black Atlantic*: the meaning of home, the power of the blues, and the possibility of a planetary humanism. James Reath delved into the complicated position the book occupies between postmodernism and Black studies, reading *The Black Atlantic* alongside essays by Cornel West, bell hooks, and Kwame Anthony Appiah that came out at a similar time. What does *The Black Atlantic* say to our own contemporary, “which has otherwise witnessed a near-total collapse of interest in postmodernism and its so-called ‘perpetual present’?” The second roundtable took this cue into a discussion of *The Black Atlantic* across disciplines, with Caroline Bressey (UCL Geography), Bea Gassmann de Sousa (UCL History of Art), and I discussing the spaces given to black expressive cultures in the history of modernism.

The day was also a celebration of Gilroy’s career

before he arrived at UCL in 2019 to found the Sarah Parker Remond Centre. The three keynote speakers reflected the ways the book has moved across parallel contexts. Iain Chambers (Oriental University, Naples) has interpreted the Mediterranean's "interrupted modernity" through the "intractable traces" of its colonial past. His talk drew together some "sounds of quantum history" to show how music can track crossing-places of these adjacent marine worlds. Jayna Brown (Brown University) was Paul's first doctoral student when he was Chair of the Department of African American Studies at Yale University. Brown asked what form the book would take if it were written now, in the light of increasing interest in African cultural forms in performance studies and made special mention of South African house and Afrobeats. Christine Okoth (KCL) did her PhD in the English Department at King's College London while Paul was teaching there, and has since returned as Lecturer in Literatures and Cultures of the Black Atlantic. Okoth showed us a 1972 photograph by Ming Smith, *Prelude to Middle Passage*, taken at the slave fort on Île de Gorée, Senegal, and discussed the dissonance between its curation and composition. Smith's "slight adjustment in composition" shifts the subject of the photograph from "a woman standing in front of an opening" looking out to the sea, to "the ocean embedded in a sea of black composed of a human figure and the uneven architectural features of the fort's window".

Across the day, the room kept changing as people from across the years dropped in. Lots of attendees commented on the feeling of good will that surrounded the day, taken to be a sign of the book's ability to generate its own spaces of conviviality: cueing people in and travelling vertiginously in compound bids for freedom.

Acknowledgments: Thank you to all the participants and attendees of The Black Atlantic at 30, to Gabriel Bristow, Lana Crowe and Emily Moore for helping to devise the day; to Nicola Miller, Marthe Lisson, Catherine Stokes and Lucy Stagg at the UCL Institute of Advanced Studies; to Mark Ford, John Mullan and Stephen Cadywold in UCL English and to Tariq Jazeel, Ashish Ghadiali and Paul Gilroy in the Sarah Parker Remond Centre.

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Proofreading by LEE GRIEVESON

Lead Image: *Detail Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery to Reconstruction* (1934),
Aaron Douglas.

The painting is in the collection of the New York Public Library, Schomburg Center
for Research in Black Culture, Art and Artifacts Division

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