

# Postcolonial Studies and Black Atlanticism

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Two theoretical frameworks currently dominate contemporary African cultural studies: those supplied by postcolonial studies and black Atlantic studies. To date these frameworks have worked in mutual isolation. Postcolonial theory has focused on the relationship between colonized and colonizer, while black Atlantic studies focuses on the relationship between colonized Africa and black diasporic communities of the 'New World'. Both have tended to position African subjects as reactive. Postcolonial studies give primacy to the imperial metropole or colonial administration as the 'center' to which African nationalist cultures respond by producing, in Partha Chatterjee's words, a 'derivative discourse' that may 'subvert' but depends upon the epistemology of that centre. Black Atlantic studies give primacy to diasporic Africans as the exemplars of a modernity that Africans seek to emulate. I want today to probe both of these models by looking at the example of early black South African nationalism, its complex relationship to black America and its equally complex relationship to the British imperial metropole. From this example, I want to derive a view of African political culture as a pro-active and critical transatlantic interlocutor, rather than an emulator.

The critical era of black Atlanticism began in 1993, with the publication of Paul Gilroy's seminal book *The Black Atlantic*. The book's focus on the cultural, political and economic relations of Africa, Europe and the New World was not original. Such a focus has been the concern of African and African diasporic thinkers from at least Equiano onwards. Rather, what distinguished Gilroy's work was its theoretical and political thrust. This was firmly anti-nationalist. The values of black nationalism were, Gilroy argued, 'antithetical to ... the transcultural, international formation' of the black Atlantic' (p. 3). He contended, in brief, that nation-centred conceptions of culture are incompatible with the values of cultural hybridity that had been generated through the black Atlantic. Gilroy also viewed the political concerns of nationalism as fundamentally opposed by the transnationalist disposition of black Atlantic politics.

The anti-nationalist persuasion of Gilroy's book continues to animate black Atlantic cultural and intellectual research. So does the book's aestheticism -- its presentation of art as the best or (at times) the only medium of social and political transformation. I argue here for the importance of rethinking black Atlanticism. Rather than view anti-colonial nationalism, organised struggle, and economic analysis as the polar opposites of black Atlanticism, we need to recognise more complexity in their relations; at times, I suggest, black Atlanticism and black nationalism are interdependent, not antithetical, practices.

As Gilroy's work has travelled from diasporic to African studies, it has gained a new component: the construction of African Americans as a global vanguard, whose role it is to lead continental Africans into

modernity. Gilroy's own work does not argue the utility of diasporic modernity for continental Africans, nor does he suggest that Africans seek to emulate African Americans. But this is exactly the vanguardist spin given to black modernity in Africanist work as diverse as Manthia Diawara's and Ntongela Masilela's.

In fact, Masilela's black Atlantic work sums up all the tendencies that I have been outlining. His writing presents black modernity as essentially a cultural condition, not a political economic and cultural process. Modernity as a condition then becomes easily transposable from America to Africa and strikingly devoid of nationalism, political struggle, and Marxism. Describing the early twentieth century 'New African' movement in South Africa, Masilela argues that:

The construction of South African modernity by New African intelligentsia who modelled themselves on the New Negro Talented Tenth is inconceivable without the example of American modernity: the New Africans appropriated the historical lessons drawn from the New Negro experience within American modernity to chart and negotiate the newly emergent South African modernity: the Africans learned from African-Americans the process of transforming themselves into agencies in or of modernity. (p. 90)

I want to interrogate this a little bit, particularly its suggestion that New African intelligentsia 'modelled themselves on the New Negro Talented Tenth'. If we look at the definition of the New African provided by one of its chief exponents, H.I.E. Dhlomo, in 1945, there is very little trace of talented tenthness and still less of the USA: the New African is a

class [that] consists mostly of organised urban workers who are awakening to the issues at stake and to the power of organised intelligently-led mass action and of progressive thinking African intellectuals and leaders. The new African knows where he belongs and what belongs to him; where he is going and how; what he wants and the methods to obtain it. Such incidents as workers' strikes; organised boycotts; mass defiance of injustice -- these and many more are but straws in the wind heralding the awakening of the New African masses. What is this New African's attitude? Put briefly and bluntly, he wants a social order where every South African will be free to express himself and his personality fully, live and breathe freely, and have a part in shaping the destiny of his country; a social order in which race, colour and creed will be a badge neither of privilege nor of discrimination.

As we see, Dhlomo's original definition of the New African rests on the conception of racialised labour. New Africans are 'organised urban workers' as much as they are progressive intellectuals, who co-ordinate mass actions to achieve a non-racist society. Note how Dhlomo's direction remains firmly national: the New Africans seek agency to 'shape the destiny of his country'. This self-definition of New Africans as nation-centred and politically mobilised is unrecognisable in Masilela's post-Gilroyian definition, which makes the New African an imitator of black Americans in an act of cultural self-fashioning.

If one challenge now is to reconceptualise the national, political and economic dynamics of black Atlanticism,

then another challenge is to reconceptualise the reception of black American thought by African intellectuals. I argue that this reception was considerably more complex, and critical, than has generally been recognised. Not only did African intellectuals on occasion question the transplantability of black American political practice, cultures and thought to their respective African colonies, they also questioned the adequacy of black American thought for black America itself. The peculiar density of this modern critical black Atlanticism is one that allows African intellectuals both to instrumentalise African America as a fictional space of self-actualisation and to demystify that construction; to position slavery and colonialism as comparable yet incommensurable historical experiences; to delineate a universal racial identity that depends, dialectically, on the notion of political particularity, the struggle and possession of national sovereignty.

That critical black Atlanticism invokes both national difference and racial unity, conjoins cultural affirmation with political critique of African Americans, is clear from as early as 1865, in the writings of black South African clergyman Tiyo Soga. He writes during the historical moment of the American Civil War and before the consolidation and centralisation of white South African colonialism. The past determinacy of New World slavery, contrasted with the present indeterminacy of African colonisation, allows Soga to champion Africans as politically superior both to Europeans and New World diasporic Africans in their retention of national autonomy:

Africa was of God given to the race of Ham. I find the Negro from the days of the old Assyrians downwards, keeping his "individuality" and his "distinctiveness," amid the wreck of empires, and the revolution of ages. I find him keeping his place among the nations, and keeping his home and country.

A great contrast to the African are the slaves 'in the West Indian Islands, in Northern and Southern America, and in the South American colonies of Spain and Portugal', who are, according to Soga, 'opposed by nation after nation and driven from ... home' (p. 569).

In the same breath Tiyo Soga can proudly place Africans as politically superior to diaspora black populations yet culturally inferior: he praises the Liberian project for allowing black Americans to return 'unmanacled to the land of his forefathers, taking back with him the civilization and the Christianity of those nations' (p. 569).

By the 1910s, however, the political advantages that Africans could claim over African-Americans had largely vanished through European imperialism. In my rethinking of black Atlanticism, I want to present the period between 1865 and 1910 as witnessing the reversal of Tiyo Soga's cultural-political balance. For now political self-determination (in the form of citizenship) has become--at least in theory-- the domain of the African-American, through the passage of universal male suffrage, while the majority of continental Africans have lost that political self-determination, through the advent of systematic colonialism. And at the same time this period witnesses some nationalist continental Africans starting to question the cultural supremacy of the 'Christianity and civilization' with which Tiyo Soga credits diasporic Africans and Europeans; their diverse cultural productions reveal a highly uneven admixture of Frantz Fanon's assimilation, nativist and fighting stages. Thus African relations with African Americans now can simultaneously involve valorisation of black diasporic political possibility and scepticism towards their cultural assimilationism. The shift from nineteenth-century negative to

twentieth-century positive perception of African American political status is clear in the comments of A.N.C. founder Sol Plaatje when he visited the USA in 1922. What he saw led him to write to a friend:

It is dazzling to see the extent of freedom, industrial advantage, and costly educational facilities, provided for Negroes in this country by the Union government, the government of the several states, by the municipalities and by the wealthy philanthropists. Those who die and those who remain alive continually pour their millions of money towards the cause of Negro education; and it is touching to see the grasping manner in which Negroes reach out to take advantage of the several educational facilities. And, oh, the women! They are progressive educationally, socially, politically, as well as in church work, they lead the men.

It is very inspiring to get into their midst, but it is also distressing at times and I can hardly suppress a tear when I think of the wretched backwardness between them and our part of the empire ... I cannot understand why South Africa should be so Godforsaken, as far as her political and industrial morality is concerned.

Plaatje's perception of African-American achievements here develops from his observation of the national specificity of the USA. Admire African-Americans as he does, Plaatje admires even more the objectively superior social, educational and economic opportunities that the USA as a country supplies its black citizens. As he sees it, these material conditions supply the possibility for Negro accomplishment. That he feels inspired by African Americans' example might seem to bear out Masilela's contention that black South African intellectuals were led to imitate African-Americans. But the inspiration is quickly offset here by Plaatje's despondent recognition of the incommensurability between the two countries. Without a similar material base, modern African-American activities cannot simply be transposed to South Africa, their achievements imitated within black South Africa. It is the need for a specifically national, and nationally specific, material transformation that Plaatje's account suggests.

The complexity of this critical transnationalism becomes clearer if we look at the relationship between Sol Plaatje and W.E.B. Du Bois. Before becoming the A.N.C.'s general secretary in 1912, when the organisation was founded, Plaatje worked as a court interpreter and then in the media as founder, editor and journalist of some of the earliest African nationalist newspapers. That there was an intense transnational traffic between Plaatje and Du Bois, which had intellectual, financial, and professional dynamics, is clear. Plaatje, who was eight years younger than Du Bois, starting reading Du Bois's work early on in his newspaper career. Du Bois was responsible for the American publication of Plaatje's book *Native Life in South Africa*, and arranged for Plaatje to participate in the 1921 annual N.A.A.C.P. convention. These were more than personal connections: there were significant parallels between the official political practices and values of the organisations the two men were active in. The early A.N.C., the Niagara movement and the N.A.A.C.P. overlapped in their constitutionalist, integrationist version of black nationalism: their formal emphasis fell on the franchise as the means to social justice and opportunity, and the legal protest against racial injustice.

The case for Plaatje's intellectual 'influence' by Du Bois seems to grow when we look at his 1916 masterpiece *Native Life in South Africa*, which is haunted by Du Bois's 1903 *Souls of Black Folk*. Like *Souls*, *Native Life* is a

travelogue in which the writer chronicles the lives of black people under white racism. Both writers use a first person narrative to explore their own relationship to the black communities they represent. Each book features a chapter given over to the public vilification of a black leader who is criticised for capitulating to white interests: Booker T. Washington in Du Bois's case, Tengo Jabavu in Plaatje's. And each book contains a chapter that charts the passing of the author's infant son.

But here the similarities end. The radical differences are suggested by the contrast between their organising tropes: 'the Veil' of Du Bois, and the '1913 Natives' Land Act' of South Africa. Plaatje belonged to a mission-educated class that had historically perceived the British Empire as a system of liberal 'equality', epitomised in the colour-blind Cape franchise which allowed men of certain property or income to vote. The 'liberties' of this province sharply contrasted with the Boer republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, which excluded African people from the franchise. But in 1910 British and Afrikaner provinces united to form the nation state of South Africa. This initiated the systematic assault on Africans which began with the devastating Land Act that removed land ownership and sharecropping rights from rural Africans, forced them into 'native reserves' and brutal economic exploitation by white farmers. This is the context for the composition of Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa*, which focuses on the origins and terrible consequences of that legislation.

Plaatje's book then emerges from an immediate historical event, whereas Du Bois's *Souls* emerges more broadly from a racial condition. The objective differences between their national situations create differences of approach. But not all the differences are objective: these nationalists differ profoundly in their ideologies. Plaatje's book, I suggest, performs a deliberate commentary on Du Bois that criticises his Talented Tenth elitism. The cohesive if diverse racial community that Du Bois evokes is not readily available to Plaatje's black South Africa, any more than is the legal equality theoretically offered by the US constitution. The Natives' Land Act had exacerbated the inequalities that already fractured the African peoples of South Africa. Some, like Plaatje, still had the franchise; most were now dispossessed of any title to the land. These inequalities make it very difficult for Plaatje to articulate a national black 'imagined community'. They also, I argue, push Plaatje into a concern with the legitimacy of his own leadership, something that does not trouble Du Bois. It seems that for Du Bois, talented tenth mobility -- his ability to mediate life behind and beyond the Veil -- ratifies his intellectual and political leadership. For Plaatje, however, this same mobility unsettles his leader's ability to represent his people.

Scrutiny of the intertextual relationship between Plaatje and Du Bois reveals several areas of significant ideological difference, two of which I want to focus on here. One concerns the operations of black leadership, the problems of political representation triggered by the existence of subaltern peoples. The second concerns the value accorded to aesthetic culture. It is only by putting these texts in comparative framework, and seeing the multiple ways that Plaatje engages with Du Bois, that the complex contours of their own specifically national projects emerge.

Plaatje's *Native Life* was written in 1916, while Plaatje was part of an A.N.C. delegation in England, petitioning the British government to repeal the unjust Natives Land Act. Plaatje, that is, was officiating as a political representative of the A.N.C., performing the role of constitutional liberal nationalist whose political validation

and ideology centred on England. It is at this highly English moment that he chooses to engage black America as an object of dialogue. Plaatje's text uses Du Bois not only to criticise Du Bois's own vision, but also as a means of transcending his own party's line. In other words, it is through Du Bois that Plaatje articulates a critical distance from A.N.C. as well as from Du Bois; Du Bois's text becomes the means to introduce non self-identity into African nationalism itself.

This complicated transnational affirmation and critique of nationalist self and other is sharpest in the most openly autobiographical discourse of Plaatje's text, the chapter devoted to the death of his infant son which is directly lifted from Du Bois's own chapter on the passing of his first born. Du Bois never tells us his child's name. This suggests that the child is to be viewed not as an individual but as an anonymous representative of his race. His name is, effectively, 'Negro and a Negro's son' (p. 170). Since the son is an abstraction for the race, his loss comes to represent the losses experienced by the race as a whole. Du Bois's narrative accordingly works to consolidate both his authority and his representativeness. The death and burial of Du Bois's son then relies on, and produces, a homology of race, family and nation that is not unsettled by class differences.

In Plaatje's account, the ostentatiously privileged paraphernalia of his own son's funeral, and the version of national symbolism that accompanies it, rhetorically give way to his acute concern with the newly dispossessed Africans, subalterns who stand outside the limits of black middle class representation. Plaatje initially appears to endorse the bourgeois nationalist narrative embodied in his son. His son is born in the year of the A.N.C.'s own birth, 1912: one could not produce a neater allegory of official nationalism. And almost too neatly confirming Benedict Anderson's thesis that print capitalism was crucial to national consciousness, Plaatje the newspaper publisher has named his son after the originator of the medium. As he tells us: 'He first saw the light ... on the very day we opened and christened our printing office, so we named him after the great inventor of printing type: he was christened Johann Gutenberg' (p. 142). Thus, Plaatje's son is very much named, while Du Bois's son is not; one is aligned with the print nation, while the other is aligned with the black race.

However, Plaatje's own nationalist equations swiftly implode. There is in fact a nameless dead black child in his narrative, just as there is in Du Bois's, but this child is not his own; it is the child of the Kgobadi family, rendered fugitive through the Natives' Land Act. When the child dies its family has nowhere legally to bury it. Plaatje has informed us that:

This young wandering family decided to dig a grave under cover of the darkness of that night, when no one was looking, and in that crude manner the child was interred--and interred amid fear and trembling, as well as the throbs of a torturing anguish, in a stolen grave, lest the proprietor of the spot, or any of his servants, should surprise them in the act. (p. 90)

Plaatje's careful chronicle of his son's urban funeral is interrupted by his recollection of this dispossessed family and their illegal burial: 'Our bleeding heart was nowhere in the present procession, which apparently could take care of itself, for we had returned in thought to the July funeral of the veld and its horrid characteristics' (p. 147). This catapults him into 'spirit of revolt' against white racism, culminating in an explosion of apocalyptic

rage that borrows from Shakespeare's King Lear to curse 'ungrateful man' (pp. 146-7).

Plaatje effectively splits Du Bois's racial symbolism in two. Where Du Bois's own, unnamed child embodies the race, Plaatje instead dramatises the glaring social contradiction between his own, named urban child, and the unnamed child of the dispossessed rural family. Plaatje also, implicitly, pushes the symbol of this fugitive family into critical contrast with Du Bois's privileged family. While Du Bois can voluntarily and temporarily migrate, this African family has no such choice; they are forced into permanent relocation. Du Bois takes his dead child up North because, as he explains:

We could not lay him in the ground there in Georgia, for the earth there is strangely red; so we bore him away to the northward, with his flowers and his little folded hands. In vain, in vain! -- for where, O God! beneath thy broad blue sky shall my dark baby rest in peace, -- where Reverence dwells, and Goodness, and a Freedom that is free? (p. 173)

At this point in Du Bois's text, his material freedom to move around the country and select a burial ground is for him less significant than the existential unfreedom suffered by all American black people: what troubles him is figurative, not literal slavery. In contrast, Plaatje, all too aware of the legal dispossession ushered in by the Land Act, is more concerned with the literal unfreedom of an impoverished family to conduct a consecrated burial anywhere.

If Plaatje's politics emphasise material over existential dispossession, they also emphasise that the loss of one African life is a loss to all African political community; that all lives carry equal value. This deliberately if subtly criticises the casual elitism that characterizes Du Bois's account, for instance when Du Bois rhetorically asks of Death:

Are there so many workers in the vineyard that the fair promise of this little body could lightly be tossed away? The wretched of my race that line the alleys of the nation sit fatherless and unmothered; but Love sat beside his cradle, and in his ear Wisdom waited to speak. (pp. 174-5)

Du Bois wants Death to claim one of the homeless 'wretched of my race' instead of his beloved son. In other words, the loss of a potential talented tenth member appears more lamentable to him than a loss from the ranks of the non-privileged majority. Plaatje's position is diametrically opposed to this: what prompts him to rhetorical rage is not his own son's death but, precisely, that of one of 'the wretched of my race'.

So far I have highlighted how Plaatje's concern with subaltern Africans prompts him to question the legitimacy of his own political representation -- he is not representative, therefore he cannot adequately represent. And that this concern emerges from and reinforces a very different, collectivist and relatively egalitarian conception of black identity than the patrician Du Bois possesses at this point in his career. The differences lead Plaatje to produce an indirect critique of Du Bois's Talented Tenth elitism. This critique extends from political representation to aesthetic culture. Du Bois's Souls suggests that his entitlement to black leadership rests on his possession of 'high' cultural capital. Thus, for instance, the famous passage:

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the colour line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls ... So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil'. (p. 90)

Du Bois unequivocally affirms European culture as an absolute value; its cultivation provides access to a 'Truth' that sets him above the majority of black people who are under the Veil. European culture here consists of a club of great individuals that the black person can join through hard labour. Plaatje interrogates both the individualism and the aestheticism of Du Bois's construction; his positioning of Shakespeare is as a useful collective resource for passing judgement on contemporary racialised capitalism. Plaatje does not sit with Shakespeare but instead, ventriloquises him. This instrumentalisation allows Plaatje to articulate a radical politics at odds with the A.N.C.'s liberalism and that of the American N.A.A.C.P. The black rage and revenge that Du Bois warns against in *Souls* is exactly what Plaatje uses *King Lear* to promote.

The intertextual occasion for Plaatje's Learian moment is Du Bois's apostrophe to a personified Death. Du Bois perceives Death as a personal assault:

O Death! Is not this my life hard enough, -- is not that dull land that stretches its sneering web about me cold enough, -- is not all the world beyond these four little walls pitiless enough, but that thou must needs enter here, -- thou, O Death? About my head the thundering storm beat like a heartless voice, and the crazy forest pulsed with the curses of the weak; but what cared I, within my home beside my wife and baby boy? Was thou so jealous of one little coign of happiness that thou must needs enter there, -- thou, O Death? (p. 172)

This is a perception of totalising racist persecution that by invading the domestic space refuses black people the sanctuary of a home and parental fulfilment. The parallel point in Plaatje's discourse is his Shakespearean rhetorical outburst attacking the injustice that, in contrast, casts his people out into the veld. Plaatje chooses the moment when Lear's illusions about his daughters are dissolved; cast out into the heath, he recognises that their will to power makes a mockery of legal contracts or morality. Plaatje/Lear wishes for something to

Strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world!  
Crack Nature's moulds, all germens spill at once!  
That make ungrateful man! (p. 147)

Where Du Bois's exclamation is directed at the abstraction Death, and a correspondingly abstract racism, Plaatje's is directed at very concrete human subjects: the 'ungrateful men' who have profited by expropriating black South African labour and now proceed to dispossess them further by removing their ability to buy and rent land. That Plaatje has black labour in mind, and capitalist exploitation, is clear from the build up to this Learian moment. He writes:

What have our people done to these colonists, we asked, that is so utterly unforgivable, that this law should be passed as an unavoidable reprisal? Have we not delved in their mines, and are not a quarter of a million of us still labouring

for them in the depths of the earth in such circumstances for the most niggardly pittance? Are not thousands of us still offering up our lives and our limbs in order that South Africa should satisfy the white man's greed, delivering 50,000,000 pounds worth of minerals every year? (pp. 146-7)

Plaatje's nationalist discourse here, one might say, bursts out of its civil constitutionalist form. His deathwish against the moulds that 'make ungrateful man' marks a radical shift, and signals desire for total destruction of the conditions of this white South African nation, and ring the space for the creation of a new, autonomous black nation.

I have suggested that Plaatje deploys Lear as a figure for the historical African population, rewriting the individual monarch as a collective sovereign that has been betrayed into surrendering its precolonial autonomy to the white society whose growth it has assisted. I have also suggested that Plaatje compounds this by presenting this population as a modern black proletariat. In other words, the collective voice that ventriloquises Lear to curse white power consists of both an historical African and a modern black voice.

But this voice carries a further and contradictory code. I have argued that Plaatje calls into question his own and Du Bois's legitimacy as leaders; their very privilege qualifies their capacity to adequately represent the majority of black people. I want to suggest that the figure of King Lear is still another way for Plaatje to problematise his own representativeness. Not only is the collective population embodied by Lear; so, too, is Plaatje, who is effectively the titular national 'sovereign' here, disqualified from proper rule by his own aesthetic and educational privilege as well as by the white colonial power that denies his people citizenship. In giving Lear these mutually exclusive significations -- that of his own compromised leadership and that of a modern black South African subaltern majority -- Plaatje underscores the barriers to the production of an effective racial national community.

I am arguing that, in sharp contrast to Du Bois, Sol Plaatje is sceptical about the absolute value of European aesthetic culture: he renders that aesthetic culture a tool for political and economic critique, not a goal as it is for Du Bois. To adhere uncritically as Du Bois does here to European aestheticism is furthermore to endorse the unjust structures of economic accumulation that make possible such iconic constructions of art. Plaatje's open invocation of black anti-capitalist rage through the aesthetic device of Shakespeare's king needs to be seen as an assertion of the inextricability of aesthetic, economic and political concerns for black nationalist struggle.

I hope through this textual discussion of Plaatje and Du Bois to have introduced different ways to think about black Atlanticism and postcolonial studies, as a critical dialogic relationship that questions some of the paradigms for analysis created by Paul Gilroy, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha. I am arguing that the transatlantic political and cultural flows between black South Africa, the UK and African America need an analysis that is alert to the historical variability and complexity of the dynamic. Plaatje's critical engagement with Du Bois refutes any suggestion that Africans were uncritically modelling themselves on African-Americans, or that African America supplies a vanguard global class. Plaatje's example also suggests that postcolonial and black Atlantic analysis should not marginalise the nationalist and anti-capitalist components of black thinkers.

The anti-racist nationalism of Du Bois and of Plaatje is the condition from which their transnationalism emerges; the two work together, not in opposition.

I am aware however that many of my criticisms of current critical constructions of black Atlanticism arise from particular applications of black Atlanticism within the academic culture of the USA. A very different story is the exploration of black Atlanticism by academics and creative artists within the United Kingdom. Particularly significant is the recent attention given to the memory and meanings of slavery. The black Atlantic connections being made in these explorations have a very different context in which white British amnesia of slavery's historical role in British national development has been kept company by black British tendencies to prioritise the post-Windrush historical moment. Not just the context but the 'drift' of these British black Atlantic works is very different from the US variants I have criticised in this talk. For these works -- I am thinking, among others, of recent work by Fred D'Aguiar, Bernardine Evaristo, Caryl Phillips and Marcus Wood -- synthesise the material with the subjective dynamics of black Atlanticism, uncover mutual imbrications of the national and the transnational, combine colonialism with slavery, and recognise the historicity of their subjects. In other words, this British work does what I am suggesting the US work does not.

Since I want to end by recognising the situatedness of my own analysis and critique of black Atlanticism, I need to add a further qualification. For within the USA too there is a great deal of black Atlantic academic work being produced that does not follow a Gilroyian path. Since much of this work emerges from the social sciences and history rather than literary and cultural studies, I am beginning to wonder if black Atlanticism is more susceptible to disciplinary difference than we recognise.