The Black Atlantic in the Twenty-First Century: Artistic Passages, Circulations, Revisions

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THE BLACK ATLANTIC

IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Artistic Passages, Circulations, Revisions

Peter Erickson

We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone.

Edouard Glissant

Paul Gilroy’s 1993 book gave extraordinary prominence to the term *Black Atlantic*. Gilroy mapped the geographical and symbolic travels of black writers to show that, far from being confined to the stereotypes of “primitive” folk art, these black figures participated in the creation of modernism. Henceforth the story of modern culture could not be told without considering their contributions as central. My purpose here is to extend the concept of the Black Atlantic from the world of literature into the realm of visual art, and thereby to create a more broad-ranging cross-disciplinary field. In making this transition from literary to visual media, it’s all about the water, as Martinican critic Edouard Glissant’s appeal to “The Open Boat” in the opening section of his *Poetics of Relation* suggests.
The Black Atlantic is both a literal and a metaphorical place. As a geographical zone, it is the body of water bounded by Europe, Africa, the Americas, and the Caribbean. As a political location, it marks the historical site of the Middle Passage, the triangular routes of the slave trade. As a cultural arena, it represents the imaginative space over which artistic passages and exchanges have crisscrossed and flourished.

The recalibration of the conventional dynamic of the center and the margin is exemplified in our contemporary moment by the career of Derek Walcott. His entire life’s work is devoted to traversing the Atlantic. The journey is not to one destination but involves multiple directions. Of his two great epic poems, Omeros (1990) looks to Africa, while Tiepolo’s Hound (2000) faces Europe.4 The latter contemplates Tiepolo’s Apelles Painting Campaspe (1725–1726) with the Moor, “silent with privilege,” “watching from the painting’s side” (129). The former takes its inspiration from Romare Bearden’s Sea Nymph (1977), one of a series of twenty collages that reconstruct and repurpose Homer’s Odyssey into Bearden’s Black Odyssey.5

Walcott’s trips are not one way: the ultimate goal is to return to the point of origin—the home base in the Caribbean. In his artistic evocations of the Atlantic, Walcott rejects an exclusive focus on the Middle Passage in favor of opening up new alternatives, generating new paths, new experiences, and new power. His emphasis is not only on recovering the past but also on reimagining the present. The routes may be familiar but, thanks to the creative freedom of art, the outcome can be very different.

The work of the five artists in the Williams-town symposium draws inspiration from this generative, galvanic image of the Black Atlantic.6

I. Crossing the Generic Line from Derek Walcott to Isaac Julien


Subsequently, the films Paradise Omeros (2002) and Encore: Paradise Omeros Redux (2003) follow Derek Walcott back to Saint Lucia, which is also the point of origin of Julien’s parents. The extraordinary meeting between Walcott and Julien is recorded in Créolité and Créolization, the symposium held on Saint Lucia in conjunction with Okwui Enwezor’s Documenta 11. In his contribution, “ Créolizing Vision,” Julien notes that the “question of créolité in my own practice” is pursued in Paradise Omeros through the “relation with the creole cultures of England and St. Lucia.”7 Julien’s encounter with Walcott is explicitly incorporated in the Paradise Omeros films through the appearance of Walcott reading from his Omeros. When Walcott recites a passage beginning “because this is the Atlantic now,” we are in the “Black” Atlantic. The adjective goes without saying, and Julien brilliantly “translates” Walcott’s verse into a visual medium.

Near the beginning of Paradise Omeros, Julien presents a triple-screen scene on the oceanside promontory with a distant shot of an older man resembling Derek Walcott, back arched like the two tree trunks behind him, on the right; the young protagonist, played by Hansil Jules, unmissably on the left gazing outward; and the sea in the middle. Julien pauses and holds this moment to establish the figures’ binding relation to the sea and to each other. Returning to this moment in the single-screen Encore, Julien first evokes the scene only through voices: we hear Walcott’s reading echoed by Jules’s tenor aria. But we then watch as Walcott’s close-up profile slowly pivots to face the camera, and us, directly. The original moment is recapitulated when the identical image of Hansil Jules gazing intently at the ocean briefly reappears to complete the transfer from Walcott to Jules.

Julien in effect starts over again where Walcott ends Tiepolo’s Hound. Walcott’s line of verse—“Let this page catch the last light on Becune Point” (163)—stands in parallel with the last of Walcott’s own twenty-six paintings included in this book-length poem: Breakers, Becune Point looks back out at a panoramic seascape. From here Julien takes the plunge: we see the black man who will
make the journey from the Caribbean to London enter the water in his waiter’s uniform and sub­merge, to be suspended underwater upside down and spun around, with naked torso and face at times turned toward us.

Cumulatively, Isaac Julien’s imaginative jour­neys add up to a reformulation of the circum­Atlantic world. His most recent film installation, WESTERN UNION: Small Boats (2007), again plunges us into the physical and emotional turbu­lence of ocean and migration.

II. Fred Wilson’s Global Art
Fred Wilson uses globes to challenge and change the way we see the world. After the ironic place­ment of the found globe emblazoned with TRUTH in capital letters in Mining the Museum (1992), Wilson creates his own versions. In Atlas (1995), the tiny waiter obligingly serves up the huge globe covered with black sails and black pins that evoke the conquest and control of African populations, but also signal the latent power in these dispersed but proliferating clusters. In The
Wanderer (2003), the globe becomes the head fused with the body of the black servant whose subservient posture bears the burden.

Most explicit is the recent piece, *The Unnatural Movement of Blackness* (2006). As though oozing black, this globe is completely enveloped by hanging black drops. Compared to the tiny black pins in *Atlas*, these black forms are huge and fluid. The bodies of water are black—Wilson literally shows us the Black Atlantic. The encrusted surface of the globe is reminiscent of the material from two pieces in Wilson’s 2003 Venice Biennale exhibition *Speak of Me as I Am*. The black beads evoke Drip, Drop, Plop and the black glass pieces could have come from *Chandelier Mori*. Altogether the new globe is a condensed expression of Wilson’s line of artistic development that culminates in this insistent vision of the power of blackness, however “unnatural” this may seem.

A similar pointed ironic twist on the word “unnatural” can be heard in the title of Wilson’s first exhibition in the Caribbean, *An Account of a Voyage to the Island Jamaica with the Un-Natural History of That Place*, at the Institute of Jamaica in Fall 2007. Wilson’s title plays off Hans Sloane’s very long title of 1707: *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica; with the Natural History of the Herbs and Trees, Four-Footed Beasts, Fishes, Birds, Insects, Reptiles, &c. of the Last of those Islands, to which is Prefix’d ... an Account of the Inhabitants*—it goes on. But Fred Wilson’s substitution of “Un-Natural History” for Sloane’s “Natural History” points to the contradiction between Sloane’s celebration of nature as a source of aesthetic wonder and his denigration of black human beings. Wilson shows Sloane’s opened folio volume in a display case. Nearby on the wall above, Wilson places the interior design of the slave ship. In the midst of the “Flora of Jamaica” collection with its elaborate archival labels, Wilson slips in the human dimension with its concise description: BLACK HAIR.

Wilson’s exhibition included a garden installation containing plants that the artist observed hanging from electrical wires around Kingston. For Wilson, “this plant that blows in from far
away” evokes the “whole notion of being blown here that somehow speaks to slavery.” In Wilson's extended diasporic metaphor, “it really is about ending up and holding on, then growing from where you are and making it work.”

III. Going Underwater in Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons’s Art

Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons’s 2007 exhibition *Everything Is Separated by Water* offers a perfect metaphor for the beauty and anguish of the Black Atlantic. As a Cuban artist of Nigerian ancestry who is now located in Boston, Campos-Pons herself connects three distinct points on the cross-Atlantic compass and at the same time registers their distance. In the piece *Everything Is Separated by Water, Including My Brain, My Heart, My Sex, My House* (1990), a column of water in the middle splits the body in half. In his contribution to her catalog, Okwui Enwezor’s essay, “The Diasporic Imagination,” begins with Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* and ends with Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*. These two key figures articulate the concept of the ocean as the site of passages and migrations, circulations and revisions—as the cultural space that surrounds, immerses, and separates but also inspires and sustains. This is the fluid medium in *Elevata* (2002) that Campos-Pons navigates with a visual energy that turns her backward and upside down. In contrast to the static water column in the earlier piece, the blue here conveys a sensation of aqueous suspension, flow, and swirl. Overcoming the grid, the delicate, powerful network formed by the dispersal of threads of hair and extensions begins to suggest that “Everything Is Connected by Water.” The intensely blue liquid environment that envelops the human figure continues in works such as *G.E. Mask* and *Scarification* (1998) and *Man Spirit Mask* (1999), Willie Cole creates self-portraits in which the marks and prowline outline of the steam iron associated with the imprint of the slave ship are seemingly emblazoned on his face. But the strong, steady gaze looks out, undaunted. This strength is reinforced by the double meaning contained in the pun on G.E. in the special context created and embodied by the artist: General Electric as the manufacturer of ubiquitous household appliances is countered by the deeper significance of the underlying facial composure akin to the “Ge” masks produced for performances by the Dan peoples of Liberia.

Hank Willis Thomas creates his own vision of a global economy by circulating familiar advertising icons in modified forms. In his photography-based works in the *B(r)anded* series, the Nike swoosh is literally branded onto the profile of a faceless black man’s head. The international reach of credit cards is mocked by making the card bear different identities of travel. The *Afro-American Express* card features the deck of a slave ship in the center. Rows of repeating images of the kneeling black man in chains who pleads “Am I not a man and a brother?” are imprinted across the entire surface. But the card is bordered on three sides by a wraparound line of packed slaves. The owner of the card, Hank W. Thomas, has been a member of the Williams College Museum of Art. Both Cole’s *Stowage* (1997) and Thomas’ *Absolut Power* (2003) employ branding critically to fix the “tight-packing” diagram of the slave ship’s hold as the emblem of the original journey, the Middle Passage—to confront the history in order to change it.

Willie Cole’s “Anxious Objects” cross back and forth between the United States and Africa by means of a double take. The objects often allude to an African aesthetic tradition, yet their hybrid composition conveys a different cultural location. The uncanny way these constructions are simultaneously both African and not African is what makes them—and us—anxious. The dislocation and recontextualization that Cole’s art performs enables him to renegotiate the kinds of transatlantic exchanges that are possible, thereby allowing us to rethink the Black Atlantic. In *G.E. Mask and Scarification* (1998) and *Man Spirit Mask* (1999), Willie Cole creates self-portraits in which the marks and prowline outline of the steam iron associated with the imprint of the slave ship are seemingly emblazoned on his face. But the strong, steady gaze looks out, undaunted. This strength is reinforced by the double meaning contained in the pun on G.E. in the special context created and embodied by the artist: General Electric as the manufacturer of ubiquitous household appliances is countered by the deeper significance of the underlying facial composure akin to the “Ge” masks produced for performances by the Dan peoples of Liberia.
Composition of 16 Polaroid 20 x 24 camera using Polaroid Polacolor #6 film, 96 x 80 in.
Courtesy of the artist, Howard Yezerski Gallery and Julie Saul Gallery.
since 1619, the date that the first African slaves arrived in Virginia.

V. Small Boats

Paul Gilroy’s primarily literary account of the Black Atlantic begins with a visual image: Turner’s painting Slave Ship (1840). This painfully vivid image represents the industrial-size transportation incisively analyzed in Marcus Rediker’s 2007 book The Slave Ship, with the Turner as the jacket illustration. Yet, as Isaac Julien’s Small Boats reminds us, we must also consider the Black Atlantic in terms of smaller-scale transportation, for which Winslow Homer’s Gulf Stream (1899) provides the model.

It is to the black man on Homer’s raftlike broken boat that Derek Walcott shouts recognition in Omeros:

Then round a corridor
I caught the light on green water as salt and clear

as the island’s. Then I saw him, Achille! Bigger
than I remembered on the white sun-splintered deck
of the hot hull. Achille! My main man, my nigger!

circled by chain-sawing sharks; the ropes in his neck
turned his head toward Africa in The Gulf Stream
which luffed him there, forever, between our island

and the coast of Guinea

In imagining the black man looking from his Caribbean location out toward Africa, Walcott completes the circuit that defines the Black Atlantic.

In the immediate context of this passage, Walcott’s segue from Homer’s black figure to Melville’s white whale produces a sharp juxtaposition:

But those leprous columns thudding against the hull
where Achille rests on one elbow always circle
his craft and mine, it needs no redemptive white sail

from a sea whose rhythm swells like Herman Melville.
Heah’s Cap’n Melville on de whiteness ob de whale—

"Having for the imperial colour the same imperial hue . . .

Melville celebrates the “power of blackness,” but it is a blackness that resides inside the genius of a white writer: “For spite of all the Indian-summer sunlight on the hither side of Hawthorne’s soul, the other side—like the dark half of the physical sphere—is shrouded in a blackness, ten times black.” And it is a blackness that is kept within the circle of the seminal bond shared by two white authors: “But already I feel that this Hawthorne has dropped germinous seeds into my soul” (529). Despite his romanticized attraction to blackness, Melville ultimately invests authority in the whiteness, to which he so passionately appeals in the chapter explicitly named “The Whiteness of the Whale.” Walcott’s bald sarcasm with Melville’s rhetoric exposes and undercuts Melville’s vision of white supremacy. The ocean
Melville portrays as presided over by the white whale is reclaimed by Walcott as a Black Atlantic navigated by the survivor Achille.

Walcott’s instant identification with Winslow Homer’s black man concerns his boat’s small scale—a motif on which Walcott lavishes detailed, loving attention in the description of making canoes at the poem’s outset. Later artworks play with permutations of the range between large and small as ironic visual economies of scale. Large boats become tiny in August Wilson’s Gem of the Ocean (2004) when Citizen Barlow travels to the City of Bones in a small paper boat made from a Bill of Sale.21 Phylicia Rashad, who played Aunt Ester in the 2004 Broadway production, reports that Wilson began writing the role when he heard the character’s voice: “She said she couldn’t talk about the water, but the water was all she talked about” (xvii). In using the song “Gem of the Ocean” as his play’s title, August Wilson changes the emphasis from the patriotic celebration of America as the Gem to the rediscovery of the Ocean as the Black Atlantic.

In Kara Walker’s film 8 Possible Beginnings or: The Creation of African-America (2005), boats become cutouts in the first segment, “Along a Watery Road,” which recreates the Middle Passage.22 Her drastic reductions permit us to focus differently, to zoom in, to concentrate, but also to cut down to size and to mock. Walker’s latest book, After the Deluge (2007), presents Turner’s Slave Ship and Homer’s Gulf Stream as key visual coordinates in what she calls “a narrative of fluid symbols in which that fluidity is figurative and sometimes literal.”23 Her allegory of “the story of Muck” (7) asks us to engage these paintings—as well as her own Middle Passages series (2004)—to find a way forward to a new narrative so that, in

**Joseph Mallord William Turner**, *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)*, 1840. Oil on canvas, 90.8 x 122.6 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Henry Lillie Pierce Fund, 99.22.
her words, the “murky, toxic waters [of racism] become the amniotic fluid of a potentially new and difficult birth” (9).

VI. Diaspora in William Kentridge and Julie Mehretu

To expand the visual horizons of the Black Atlantic further, I want briefly to suggest how the image of the Black Atlantic can manifest itself as an underlying motif even when not obviously present on the surface. This paradox is exemplified by William Kentridge and Julie Mehretu, whose recent exhibitions are very much part of the ongoing conversation about art, migration, and diaspora but do not directly address the issue of the Black Atlantic.24 The respective artistic processes of Kentridge and Mehretu overlap in their use of techniques of layering and erasure that nonetheless reveal rather than conceal. Their modes of perception can be seen as especially resonant for rendering oceanic transactions and interchanges among Africa, America, and Europe.

The Kentridge print exhibition displays Portage (2000), a striking example of the white South African artist’s outpouring of numerous versions of procession, with black figures walking ceaselessly in single file bearing awkwardly balanced objects. Another current Kentridge show, Tapestries (2008), contains the Porter Series, including Amérique septentrionale (2007) and Egypte (2006), whose background maps define the boundaries of the Black Atlantic from Mer des Antilles on one side to Afrique and Ocean Atlantique on the other side. Gabriele Guercio’s catalog essay, “Becoming Aware in a World of People on the Move,” situates this art in the context of continual diaspora.25

William Kentridge appears to be a land-based and landscape-oriented artist. In the Porter Series, for example, the silhouettes positioned above and against landmasses are engaged in overland journeys. Yet the bodies of water surrounding the continents are represented in a way that makes us aware that the figures also have a relationship to the ocean. Their nonstop motion implies a momentum that carries them across the water and hence traces ocean routes, whose scope includes the cross-Atlantic travel between the Antilles and Africa. In Kentridge’s large-scale maps, landscape
thus modulates into seascape. A striking instance where this interchangeability occurs is Kentridge’s film *Mine* (1991). The underground of the black miners is transmuted into the staggering underwater losses associated with the slave trade through the explicit turn to the image of the slave ship. Kentridge comments on the associative nature of the leap from land to sea: “The image of the North Atlantic slave ship was thrown up by the plan of the mine shafts” (118). Suddenly, the Black Atlantic becomes the point of reference by which we must orient ourselves.

Julie Mehretu’s *Dispersion* (2002) speaks the language of diasporic diffusion. Though the scope of global movement that Julie Mehretu surveys is vast and her dynamic vectors signal modes of transportation and fluidity that may appear more aerial than oceanic, her starting point is the Black Atlantic trajectory from her birthplace in Ethiopia to her growing up in Michigan. In her introduction to *Looking Back to a Bright New Future* (2003), which depicts the nations as fluid forms on a world map in the process of reshaping themselves, Mehretu marks the difference in generational location between her parents and herself:

I was born to an Africanist, an Ethiopian, and an American who’s a Montessorian, both modernists, both in certain ways utopianists .... Two thirds of the world being decolonized, this shift to being your own individual nation—that’s the history that I am coming from. We were the children of the people who were making this new world, who believed in this new possible world. That informs not only who I am and this desire of this belief, but also it has created those socialist and utopian ideas
and theories—they almost haunt me. Not necessarily these things that I can believe in, but you can believe in parts of them. But they’re there—it is the desire—it haunts my thinking.

In relation to more recent works from 2006 on, Mehretu develops the imagery of “haunting” into a commitment to “making ghost paintings.” Speaking of Vancere (2007), whose title means “to vanish,” she describes where this ghostlike direction leads:

In the center it was getting so intense and mucky and grey. And at one point I went into the painting to just sand it back. And I hadn’t really done that. In the past what I did, that was the work. That was the action; it was a record of this action. So in here to remove the action was a newer kind of gesture. And as I sanded away the center and erased it and then I turned around to look at the painting, all of a sudden the painting seemed complete to me. That erasure was the action . . . In the next phase, it made so much sense for the language and the evolution of this language, that erasure would be as ripe a place for that type of political potential as the subversive nature of the marks themselves.

At first sight Vancere displays shapes that we can recognize as a landscape of mountain ranges and valleys with storm clouds unleashing a tempest above. Yet, before our eyes, the shape-shifting action performs a metamorphosis and the scene recomposes into wavelike forms and motion on the high seas. On the painting’s left side the rows of tightly lined-up marks become reminders of the packing design of slave ships. The painting’s metamorphic mobility thus brings our attention to its metaphoric range: the haunting and ghosting that motivate Mehretu’s work refer in part to the Middle Passage. From this perspective,

Vanescere is an abstract reincarnation of Turner’s Slave Ship. The refusal here of the full, gaudy color spectrum she uses elsewhere in favor of the reduced, muted palate of blacks, grays, and off-whites conveys the somberness of her subject and her approach. Turner’s color burst is emphatically withdrawn.

Mehretu’s artistic erasures recapitulate the ocean’s erasures. But, in Mehretu’s act of erasure, the ocean’s destructive power to erase is opposed by the artist’s power to intervene—critically to expose and make visible this negative process of erasure with positive erasures of her own making.

VII. Black Atlantic Questions

I think there is no retreat from the multicultural mixing of peoples and cultures. So the question—what I call the multicultural question—the question is how people from unevenly developed societies from different cultures, religions, languages, and histories, can occupy the same space and negotiate to not eat one another and not just divide into separate warring tribes. I think that is the question, that’s the dark side of globalisation. The transnational corporation and the global movement of peoples, some of them expelled from their homes, et cetera. Huge tides of peoples which mix. I don’t think that the multicultural question’s gone away.

But when the rest goes away—programmes of equal opportunity end and politicians are talking assimilationism—unstoppable multiculturalism multiplies the cultures and languages; there are now ninety languages in London’s schools. What is that? It just multiplies. That is a kind of hope. We have to take hope where we can get it.

Stuart Hall
Fifteen years after the publication of Paul Gilroy’s book, the most pressing question is how globalization affects the idea of the Black Atlantic. My answer is that, while the Black Atlantic now needs to be situated in the much larger geographical context of overall global migration, the Black Atlantic also retains its validity as a specific location because of the distinctive history of the Middle Passage. The major change comes from the role that contemporary visual art plays in enlarging and enhancing our understanding of the Black Atlantic in the twenty-first century. This ongoing intellectual coherence and metaphorical resonance are further strengthened when we crisscross—and combine—the fields of literature and art. Investigation of crossing the Atlantic is sharpened by cross-media work that asks us to keep crossing back and forth over disciplinary boundaries.

New visual work shows that the conception of the Black Atlantic as a special focus is still relevant as an analytic framework capable of generating new images, insights, and critical perspectives. In particular, the examples discussed here demonstrate that contemporary art forms can explore trans-Atlantic voyages that are not limited to the memorial project of recovering and remembering the Middle Passage. The renewed cultural vision of the Black Atlantic also opens up possibilities of a different kind—passages of creative transformation. These artistic ventures allow us to continue to imagine and to invent revisionary alternatives for—in Julie Mehretu’s eloquent phrase—“this new possible world.”

Peter Erickson, currently Visiting Professor of Humanities at Williams College, is the author of Citing Shakespeare: The Reinterpretation of Race in Contemporary Literature and Art (2007) and the coeditor of Early Modern Visual Culture: Representation, Race, and Empire in Renaissance England (2000).

Notes


2 Gilroy has anticipated the need for this disciplinary expansion through his involvement in Der Black Atlantic (Berlin: Haus de Kulturen der Welt, 2006).


6 This article is based on my introduction to the symposium, Artistic Crossings of the Black Atlantic, in Williamstown, Massachusetts, on March 1, 2008, which featured five artists: Isaac Julien, Fred Wilson, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, Willie Cole, and Hank Willis Thomas. The event was a collaboration between the Williams College Museum of Art and the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute.

Walcott’s two italicized lines are directly quoted from the novel (New York: Palgrave, 2007), pp. 517-32; quotation from p. 521.


The two related works by Cole and Thomas were shown in Unchained Legacies, January 26–June 29, 2008, in the Williams College Museum of Art.

The best source for Thomas’s work is his website: www.hankwillisthomas.com.


Herman Melville, “Hawthorne and His Mosses” (1850), in Moby-Dick, ed. Herschel Parker and Harrison Hayford, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2002), pp. 517–32; quotation from p. 521. Walcott’s two italicized lines are directly quoted from the novel (p. 159). I discuss challenges to white domination in...
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