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Curating the Black Atlantic: An Overview of Exhibitions, 1989-2022

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As the follow-on from a class project, this article presents a critical history of art exhibitions on the Black Atlantic between 1989 and 2022. Four common curatorial themes are identified: in-situ resonance; space as structuring motif; the medium of portraiture as a prominent artistic genre; and a negation of the visual.

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Although the name of Paul Gilroy most readily comes to mind when talking about the Black Atlantic, the term has a longer genealogy. It was, in fact, an art historical concept years before it became a working hypothesis to interrogate the national insularism of British cultural studies. In the latter field, Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (1993) pointed out the centrality of transatlantic migration in the formation of Black consciousness. The enforced movement of people during the centuries of the slave trade as well as chosen migrations have shaped cultures of the Black Atlantic, which are defined by their syncretic navigation of elements (intellectual, aesthetic, spiritual, among others) from the African continent, the Americas, and Europe.

Less commonly brought up in this discussion is the name of Robert Farris Thompson. Thompson, an art historian who specialised in African art history and its migration to the Americas, coined the term "Black Atlantic" in his *Flash of The Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, published a full ten years before Gilroy's work. I do not evoke these beginnings to imply an elided "truth" about the Black Atlantic, a troubling premise that risks delivering the concept's explanatory power back into the hands of a white man (Thompson) at the risk of neglecting Gilroy and others pioneering intellectuals of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora. However, Thompson's background in art history does motivate my choice here to focus on the Black Atlantic's presence as an organising principle of art exhibitions over the last three decades. Indeed, I look at how the Black Atlantic has been curated, not simply focusing on individual artworks, but also the strategies adopted by exhibition-makers to present the concept in space to a general public (considering thus scenography, site-specific resonance, and didactic materials).

This angle also enables me to reflect on the digital exhibition that I co-curated with students at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, France, in 2022. I will draw out the (albeit unconscious) echoes between our show and a longer historiography of Afro-Atlanticism in exhibition studies. I'll reflect on common themes as well as the challenges of curating the Black Atlantic. After a discussion of the first show on the Black Atlantic in 1989, the essay moves onto four recurring features of the exhibitions of the last two decades: in-situ resonance; space rather than time or chronology as structuring motif; the medium of portraiture as a prominent artistic genre; and a negation of the visual. This will then allow me to develop on absences and critiques of the Black Atlantic, and potential curatorial futures for this concept.

Black Atlantic *avant la lettre*

In *Flash of the Spirit* and *Face of the Gods*, Thompson named a "Black Atlantic visual tradition" defined by "[t]he rise, development, and achievement of Yoruba, Kongo, Mande, and Ejagham art and philosophy fused with new elements overseas [...] linking the women and men of West and Central Africa to black people in the New World." His book set cultural hybridisations from Vodun in Haiti to bottle trees in the "Old Deep American South" in a history of spiritual "originating impulses" from across the ocean. Displaced Africans, forced into slavery, were guided by this "special inner drive and confidence," [1] as a means to thrive despite atrocity.

It would be another six years before the show *Another Face of the Diamond: Pathways through the Black Atlantic South*, which was curated by Judith McWillie for the INTAR Latin American Gallery in New York City. The first show (to my knowledge) to feature the words "Black Atlantic" in the title, *Another Face* brought together eleven artists from Georgia, Alabama, and other areas of the US South, two of whom were women (Mary T Smith and Minnie Evans). McWillie stated that the creative process of the show's

artists involved navigation of both the spiritual and profane worlds. This transpired, as she claimed, in these artists' use of found objects (to name a few examples: television sets and wooden planks as canvas in John B Murray's and Mary T Smith's paintings, metal scraps in Charlie Lucas's sculptures).

In the show's catalogue, McWillie drew an analogy between the syncretisation of Roman Catholic Saints in Cuba, Haiti, Brazil with Yoruba *orisa* and Kongo *minkisi* and the suffusion of the Biblical themes with the recycled objects of modernity, "the mass-produced icons of free enterprise." [2] These were descended from a Kongo-derived lineage that Thompson (who also contributed to *Another Face*'s catalogue) had earlier pointed out: bottle trees in the US South emulated the sacred qualities of the sphere for the Bakongo people, charms made out of shells, buttons, pieces of porcelain, nails and other everyday objects adorned the Kongo *minkisi* (spirit-possessed objects used to deliver people back to health).

In 2020, the *Afterlives of the Black Atlantic* at the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, emphasized the West African "originating impulse" [3] by positioning viewers to contemplate a Beninese or Togolese *bocio* statue from the early twentieth century and a carved Angolan elephant tusk (1875-1880) placed in a call-and-response setup either side of the visitors' bench. Equally, two contemporary works called up Afro-Atlantic transformation of West African spirituality: José Rodriguez's towering installation 'sə-kər\ (the phonetic spelling for both "sucker" and "succor") from 2019, combined a lace bonnet and velvet cape with pennies assembled in the form of a mermaid's tale on the floor, and the presence of seashells and water, an allusion to the Afro-Cuban version of the Roman Catholic Virgin of Regla transformed by Yoruba deity of water, Yemallá. On an adjacent wall was Willie Cole's 1989 *Proctor Silex* (*Evidence and Presence*), a mixed-media installation involving a "West-African styled horned figure" on a wooden plinth made from parts of an old iron, transforming the burn marks on the hanging tapestry behind (an index of the cruelty of slavery) into a "veil of power" [4] as reviewer and art historian Kathy Curnow remarked.



View of *Afterlives of the Black Atlantic*, curated by Andrea Gyorody and Matthew Francis Rarey. 2019-2020. Centre-left: visitor's bench. Foreground, right-of-centre: Beninese or Togolese *bocio* statue from (early 20th cent.). Background far-left: carved Angolan elephant tusk (1875-1880). Centre background: José Rodriguez, 'sə-kər (2019). Background left: Willie Cole, *Proctor Silex (Evidence and Presence)* (1989).

Source: © Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College



Left: Willie Cole, *Proctor Silex (Evidence and Presence)* (1989). Background, left-of-centre: José Rodriguez, 'sə-kər (2019)

Source: © Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College

In-situ meaning

The transformation of suffering into strength in Cole's work nonetheless squarely places the Oberlin show in an intellectual lineage begun by Paul Gilroy. As Christoph Singler argues, Gilroy placed greater stress on countercultural resistance than did Thompson, whose tendency was towards fleshing out ancient African origins in Black Atlantic art rather than modern and contemporary transformation afforded by transatlantic travel. A focus on present-day space and *in-situ* resonance have been a primary motor of demonstrating resistance to the trauma of racism and slavery.

In collaboration with Fatima El-Tayeb and Tina Campt, Gilroy himself worked on curating *Der Black Atlantic* in Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt in 2004. As part of the show's public programming, visitors were offered a bus tour of the German capital. They were invited to reflect on the history of Black Germans in a former powerhouse of the Third Reich and seat of the infamous 1884-1885 conference that divided up the African continent among the Europe empires.

Likewise, the location of the 2010 Tate show *Afro Modern: Journeys through The Black Atlantic* in the city of Liverpool was no chance affair. Sandwiched between the river Mersey, a waterway of the transatlantic slave trade, and the Albert Dock, *Afro Modern* concentrated on the history of Black Atlantic artistic resistance from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, from Harlem Renaissance painter Aaron Douglas to "post-black" artists like Glenn Ligon. The show functioned as a pocket of critique, albeit a temporary one, in today's trendy space of the Albert Dock, whose historical trauma—its warehouses once stocked the goods harvested by the enslaved (tobacco, sugar)—has been covered over by urban developers,

retailers, and the Tate Liverpool itself. In one of the show's galleries *Reconstructing the Middle Passage*, US artist Ellen Gallagher's mixed-media collage *Bird in Hand* (acquired by the Tate in 2007) sat in creative tension with the surrounding cityscape. *Bird in Hand* depicts a chimerical figure whose "hair" consists of abstract, marine-like creatures spread out in all directions as if underwater; seaweed wraps around the figure's pegleg. Said to allude to the slaves who, despite the odds, acquired expert knowledge of seafaring in Cape Verde, the birthplace of Gallagher's father, *Bird in Hand* was an Afro-futurist retelling of history from the Southern Atlantic. *In-situ*, this artwork challenged what was once the largest slave port in the North Atlantic.

A similar encounter between untold histories found in deep waters and contemporary art was established in the 2022 show, *Black Atlantic*, on at Brooklyn Bridge Park. Co-curated by Daniel S. Palmer and featured artist Hugh Hayden, this group show was comprised entirely of "site-responsive commissions" (Public Art Fund Press Release), making confrontation with the surrounding urban setting palpable. Dozie Kanu's *On Elbows* and Hayden's *The Gulf Stream* insinuate the reappropriation of European and Euro-American art canons. Kanu's empty *chaise longue* invited audiences to sit in psychoanalytic-like contemplation while possibly also positioning participants as akin to the Orientalised muse of the Odalisque. Meanwhile, Hayden's *The Gulf Stream* recreates in three dimensions the wooden boat of Winslow Homer's 1899 painting of the same name; as Ted Barrow argued in his *Artforum* review of the concurrent show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art *Winslow Homer: Crosscurrents*, Homer's *The Gulf Stream* has been unduly praised as sign of the painter's sympathy for the bare-chested Black figure struggling against the elements at the centre of the composition–indeed, taken together, the artist's painted ocean scenes ultimately attribute triumph over the waves to fully-clothed white mariners. Hayden's empty boat, whose name was carved into its stern, appeared a ghostly rendition of this much-mythologised painting.



Dozie Kanu, *On Elbows*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Project Native Informant, London. Photo: Nicholas Knight. *On Elbows* was commissioned by Public Art Fund and presented as part of Black Atlantic at Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York City, May 17–November 27, 2022

Source: Courtesy of Public Art Fund, NY.

Recipients placed in public space, *On Elbows* and *The Gulf Stream* (Hayden's version) were participatory artworks that encouraged visitors' thoughts on the forgotten hypocrisies hidden in the city infrastructure laid out before their eyes. Before the abolition of slavery in New York in 1827, the Brooklyn economy depended on slavery, a fact elided in favour of the memory of the Northern state's anti-slavery stance during the Civil War. Now a space for leisurely strolls and health-seeking joggers, the Brooklyn Bridge Park looks out onto Manhattan—where Wall Street was a slave trading market in Dutch colonial times—and warehouses of pier where the goods of slavery might have been stored. Hayden's *The Gulf Stream* urged reflection about ill-begotten urban wealth; his boat did not float in life-sheltering water but amidst a sterile pile of rubble, a shambolic contrast with the neat lines of the iconic Manhattan skyline opposite.



Winslow Homer, *The Gulf Stream*, 1899, reworked 1906. Oil on canvas. 71.4 x 124.8 cm

Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Catherine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Wolfe Fund, 1906



Hugh Hayden, *The Gulf Stream*, 2022. Photo: Nicholas Knight. *The Gulf Stream* was commissioned by Public Art Fund and presented as part of Black Atlantic at Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York City, May 17–November 27, 2022

Source: Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery / Courtesy of Public Art Fund NY



Hugh Hayden, *The Gulf Stream*, 2022. Photo: Nicholas Knight. The Gulf Stream was commissioned by Public Art Fund and presented as part of Black Atlantic at Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York City, May 17–November 27, 2022

Source: Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery / Courtesy of Public Art Fund, NY

For our exhibition at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne (also called *Black Atlantic* and held between 19^th May and 19^th June 2022), my students similarly sought to foster a dialogue between the artworks and the theme of water. This grew out of a discussion about decolonising the "White Cube," the standard whitewashed format of walls and floors in the contemporary gallery once considered "neutral," which has been problematized as racially encoded. Conjuring up *in-situ* meaning in the anonymous space of the digital sphere, my students elaborated a graphic chart to which they would adhere in curating the exhibition: an array of dark and lighter brown, peach and light blue for the wall and object texts, black, and indigo to represent the ocean. The group decided to set the overhead banners for each section of the digital exhibition (the introduction, the exhibition's three digital galleries, a page which displayed all the artworks together, a participatory forum, and a member space) in black and blue water ripples that recalled the exhibition's theme.

After deciding that such a complex pattern nonetheless distracts the viewer's eye, the students set the individual artworks and the extended object and wall labels against a simpler, monochromatic indigo background. All these patterns and colours blended particularly well with co-curator and contributing artist Laura Alfred's work, *Echo I* (2021). The two-part installation, an image and a video, capture translucent wave-like glass sculptures in various hues of blue (cyan, neon, navy and midnight) while the artist and Romain Alfred re-tell the story of family ancestor Adonis Pasbeau (born c. 1795), a member of the Kongo people removed by slavers from West Africa and brought to Capesterre-de-Marie-Galante in Guadaloupe (he was only liberated in 1848). This video is not only about tragedy but also survival and hope; the artist expresses a resolve to restore these forgotten histories via her art.

Navigating the challenges of the flat-screen digital interface, the student's graphic chart and in particular the choice of pale pink text for the extended object labels also brought out some of the material complexity of Ellen Gallagher's *Watery Ecstatic* (2007). This work is another example (similar to the Tate collection's *Bird in Hand*) in which the artist recasts the Middle Passage as a Black Atlantis. The sunken heads of the hybrid marine creature at the bottom of this water scene stare defiantly back at the viewer. In our show, the seemingly blanched background of the canvas appeared more closely aligned with the non-white colour of the text on closer inspection; this helped to bring out the manifold layers of *Watery Ecstatic* (composed of crushed mica, cut paper, ink, and watercolour). Indeed, this chimed with a structuring motif defined in our show's introductory wall label: that the syncretism of Black Atlantic identities is often transposed onto the artist's canvas via mixed media.



Ellen Gallagher, *Watery Ecstatic*, 2007. Ink, watercolor, crushed mica and cut paper on paper,140 x 190 cm

Source: © Ellen Gallagher. Courtesy Gagosian

Space, not time

As is evident in Gallagher's Black Atlantis, the Black Atlantic involves revisiting the past from the moment of the present or an imagined future. This feeds a broader point about chronological blurring and space rather than time taking precedence in curatorial approaches to the Black Atlantic.

The largest show to date on the Black Atlantic, with over four hundred artworks, and involving curatorial teams from both Brazilian and US museums, *Afro-Atlantic Histories* grouped artworks around unifying themes instead of common periods. As associate curator Kanitra Fletcher put it, "past and present speak an endless conversation" (National Gallery of Art. "Afro-Atlantic Histories: Two-Minute Tour". 00:16-00:18). Upon entering the show in D.C.'s National Gallery of Art, Hank Willis Thomas's *A Place to Call*

Home (Africa America Reflection) from 2020 hung opposite Frank Bowling's *Night Journey* from 1969-1970, the former reflecting the latter back at itself to evoke Black artists' artistic recalibrations of maps (a tool of imperialism) across the decades; in the *Enslavement and Emancipations* galleries, John Philip Simpson's *The Captive Slave* (1827) figured alongside Aaron Douglas's *Into Bondage* (1936) and Eustáquia Neves' digital photograph *Untitled*, from the series *Memória Black Maria* (1995, printed in 2019) to suggest that bondage and exploitation are connected to the past but remain with us today. The show has, itself, covered thousands of miles of space, starting out life in São Paolo's Instituto Tomie Ohtake and MASP in 2018 before moving to the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and DC's National Gallery between 2021 and 2022.



Afro-Atlantic Histories, 2022, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. Foreground left: Hank Willis Thomas, *A Place to Call Home (Africa America Reflection)* (2020). Background right: Frank Bowling, *Night Journey* (1969-1970).

Source: © National Gallery of Art



Afro-Atlantic Histories, 2022, Washington D.C. Background left: John Philip Simpson,* The Captive Slave* (1827). Background centre: Aaron Douglas, *Into Bondage* (1936). Background right: Eustáquia Neves, *Untitled*, from the series *Memória Black Maria* (1995, printed in 2019)

Source: © National Gallery of Art

Perhaps the spatial qualities of the Black Atlantic are nowhere better encapsulated than in Kara Walker's *Fons Americanus*, commissioned by Hyundai for the Tate Modern, and displayed in the Turbine Hall in 2019. Walker's gigantic clay sculpture audaciously remolds the canonised works of art history in one vertically-structured fountain where time periods interlock and collide in a denunciation of the history of Black suffering under slavery and colonialism. Here, a motley crew of artists known for nautical motifs are taken up and repurposed, from Boticelli to J.M.W. Turner. At the bottom of the fountain, Homer's *The Gulf Stream* (1899) is redefined as the words "K. West" are inscribed on the boat's stern in a gesture akin to the scrawling of "R. Mutt" in the (equally illusory) *Fountain* (1917/1964) of Marcel Duchamp. The playful allusion to Kanye West positions the struggling figure in the boat as the rapper himself, haphazardly navigating the shark-infested waters of contemporary white supremacy despite the seeming safety of his much-touted support for Donald Trump.



J.M.W. Turner, *The Slave Ship*, 1840. Oil on canvas. 90.8 x 122.6 cm.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Walker's towering fountain brought colonial-era and contemporary ills to the fore in a historical moment when public monuments are being torn down for glorifying slavery and imperial conquest. In the accompanying text projected alongside the fountain on the nearby brick wall, the artist invited viewers to "Marvel and Contemplate *The Monumental Misrememberings* Of Colonial Exploits Yon" and to "Gasp Plaintively" even as the fountain did the deconstructive work and forced us to "Gaze Knowingly." With this circus-like rhetoric, *Fons Americanus* leveraged the Turbine Hall's reputation for hosting the "spectacular." [5] An "artist-as-curator" of sorts, Walker claimed that her fountain was a "one woman World's Fair," [6] repurposing the empire-consolidating universal exhibitions of the nineteenth century for her own ends.

Walker's *Fon Americanus* created a suggested group show of white male artists, inviting us to rethink the gendered and racial intersectional biases of historical artworks that we associate with the Black Atlantic. Her re-appropriative gesture reverses a history, critiqued in the very first show on the Black Atlantic *Another Diamond* (1989), in which white male avant-gardists (from Picasso to Henry Moore), wrested themes and motifs from African art for their own aesthetic and commercial gain. Ultimately, it is a Black woman who triumphs in *Fons Americanus*: a Black Venus-like, Afro-Brazilian "Candomblé/Macumba/Santeria priestess" (the artist's description) crowns the fountain. Seemingly stereotyped, this allegorical figure's heaving bosom sprays out water, a reference not simply to the Afro-Brazilian religions but also to the Yoruba deity, Yemallá. The life-giving properties of this spiritual figure rain down—pitifully, redemptively—on the artwork of white men below her.

Portraiture

Water is not, however, a *sine qua non* of group shows on the Black Atlantic, and there has been an equal and opposite emphasis on people and portraiture inhabiting spaces well away marine backdrops. This is particularly true for the curation of the Black Atlantic in the North American context. As it travelled from Brazil to be adapted to the US, *Afro-Atlantic Histories* (in Houston and DC, 2021-2022) added new galleries dedicated to the theme of portraits, missing from the São Paolo shows in 2018. For portraiture's ability to privilege Black personhood and individuality, the gallery dedicated to *Portraits* were the most replete section of the D.C. show.

Though not a physical exhibition, *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* foregrounds the Black Atlantic as the binding agent bringing together over one hundred photographic portraits owned by Canadian collector Richard Montague. *As We Rise* may be considered an exhibition in print. While "the Black Atlantic" is the shorthand given to Montague's collections of photographs by Black artists across the diaspora from Seydou Keïta in Mali to Carrie Mae Weems in the United States and Vanley Burke in the UK, as Teju Cole states in the book's preface, Black portraiture, made by and for Black people, is, by definition, a reappropriation of a genre that has historically been dominated by white photographers.

The Black Atlantic is, here, calibrated to the personal story of the private collector: *As We Rise* owes its name to a Montague family motto of collectively propelled upward social mobility. (Montague founded the Wedge Collection in 1997, from humble beginnings, in the narrow hallways of his own home, but has since become a major collector's voice on Black art and advisor to the Tate and Art Gallery of Toronto). *As We Rise* dwells on Vanley Burke's *Winford Fagan in Handsworth, Birmingham, 1970*, which holds a special place in Montague's heart and his collections. In this black and white image, a boy stands in a road, a knowing half-smile on his face, his hand confidently on his hip as a Union Jack billows in the breeze from the makeshift mast of his bicycle. Montague was immediately drawn to Burke's image because it reminded him of his own childhood "waving Jamaican and Canadian flags" [7] in constant negotiation of his double identity. From Britain to Canada, the photograph charts a transatlantic narrative in the mind of the collector. The image also seems to stare down Paul Gilroy's earlier claim alluded to in the title of his 1987 book: *There ain't no Black in the Union Jack*.



Vanley Burke, *Boy With Flag*, Winford in Handsworth, Birmingham, 1970. Image Courtesy The Wedge Collection and the artist

Source: © Vanley Burke. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London.

Portraiture allows exhibitors to escape the cliché that Black Atlantic identities are bound to oceanic or seafaring imagery, and the history of transatlantic slavery that the latter inevitably connote. My students were drawn to the genre because of its significant, and shifting, place in art history. White artists have tended to mobilise portraiture to consign Black people to the background, to be associated either with nature (such as in David Martin's oil painting *Portrait of Dido Elizabeth and Lady Elizabeth* (c. 1778)) or blended with a looming darkness (typified by Manet's *Olympia* (1863)). These historical patterns have nonetheless been retooled by several contemporary Black portrait artists. Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's oil paintings tend to stress muted colours (sombre greens and various shades of dark brown and black) and blended fore- and backgrounds. This choice indeed helps tease out a sense of nuance from skin colour and texture and the uniqueness of her Black sitters—a tender painting style that complements the dignified and/or loving postures of her subjects. We selected *Complication* (2013) for our show for these reasons.

We also chose Amy Sherald's artwork for similar reasons as Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. As we noted in our introduction to our section *Pride and Recognition*, Sherald has taken inspiration from the images of dignified self-representation found in the photographic portraits of African Americans at the end of nineteenth century to develop her signature style of portraiture. Her sitters are rendered in colourful clothing, against vividly hued but generally objectless backgrounds. Skin is painted in a *grisaille* style (a symbolic mix of black and white), emulating the texture and colour of stone statues. One of the works we included in our show, *Guide Me No More* (2011), suggestively downgrades the role of trauma in defining the Black Atlantic via portraiture. The hand of the sitter acts as a plinth for a model ship, while the cushion

of air between sculpture and his palm implies a magician's powers. The painting's title complements the defiance of the sitter's stare. *Guide Me No More* stages the reduction of the ship and sea—ciphers of slavery—in representations of Black diasporic identities.

Contemporary Black portraiture enacts a kind of cannibalising force on the Atlantic Ocean—either scaling down this space of trauma to the size of a model ship (Sherald's *Guide Me No More*) or absenting the ocean entirely from view. Both *Afro-Atlantic Histories* and *Afro Modern* built on the Brazilian vanguard notion of *anthropofagia* to emphasise artistic cannibalism as a catalyst for pluralism. This gobbling up and spitting out of the past is taken to its most extreme endpoint in exhibitions that refute the visual altogether.

The Visual as Absence

At the base of Kara Walker's *Fons Americanus* several sharks emerge from the water; their angular fins are as piercing as their teeth are sharp. These formidable creatures deliberately recalled Damien Hirst's monstrous, *Jaws*-like shark preserved in a formaldehyde-filled vitrine, *The Physical Impossibilities of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), an iconic work that earned Hirst the status of a shock-tactic "Young British Artist" of the early 1990s. Walker redubs her own sharks *The Physical Impossibility of Blackness in the Mind of Someone White*; [8] it is not something as lofty as one's own immortality that is held to be un-imaginable in her version of shark-infested waters; rather, it is the very quotidian reality of whites seeing Black people through the prism of stereotypes that she targets.

Because of this lurid white gaze, it is not surprising is that Black Atlantic art exhibitions have turned to opacity and visual absence as sources of empowerment for both men and women. In our show, we discussed the case of Edmonia Lewis, whose sculptures are still much-underdiscussed and under-exhibited even though Gilroy explicitly mentions her. [9] Lewis, escaping US racism by moving to Italy in the late nineteenth century, knowingly concealed the Black women in "Europeanised" facial traits in her neoclassical sculptures, aware of the-then prevailing impossibility of perceiving feminine "beauty" outside of a white standard. In the exhibition catalogue of *Afro Atlantic Histories*, Kanitra Fletcher observes the importance of a similar pattern of "Absence/Negation" in contemporary Black portraiture.

In particular, the artwork of Glenn Ligon was featured in both *Afro-Atlantic Histories* and *Afro Modern*, his conceptual style being harnessed to stage a negation of the gaze on the Black body. In *Runaways* (1993), displayed in *Afro-Atlantic Histories*, ten nineteenth-century lithographs of runaway slaves head a body of text that describes the fictive escapee, "Glenn." Imitating a form familiar to the curator—images accompanied by their explicatory object labels—each text ironically performs the opposite function of an exhibition wall label, not drawing our attention to what is in the image but to what is missing in these indistinct and featureless faces created by and for whites. Ligon asked his friends to imagine that he had gone missing and to describe him as if helping the police to complete a missing person's notice; the textual descriptions contain precise details that are absent from the lithographs, and they manifest a tender affection for the Black man unavailable in the visual register: "He has quite light skin tone (faded bronze)"; "Wide lower face and narrow upper face. Nice teeth"; "He has a sweet voice, is quiet"; "Mild looking, with oval shaped, back-rimmed glasses that are somewhat conservative".

In the Tate Liverpool show, all traces of the corporeal disappear from Ligon's canvas. The US artist's *Gold Nobody Knew Me #1* and *Gold When Black Wasn't Beautiful #1* (2007) were placed in the final gallery, *From Post-Modern to Post-Black*, the latter term referencing Studio Museum curator Thelma Golden's

critique of the art market's overdetermination of Black artists according to their racial identity (there is no equivalent "White Art"). Ligon reprints comedian Richard Pryor's wry quips undermining the idea of African authenticity in the Black is Beautiful movement. Ligon additionally demands viewers' optical exertions because black stains mingle with and threaten to mangle the text. To the visual opacity of *Gold Nobody Knew Me #1* Ligon adds a comment from Pryor that could be read as the polar opposite of Richard Farris Thompson's claim about the "originating impulses" of Black Atlantic identity lying in the African continent: "I went to Africa. I went to the Mother land to find my roots! right? Seven hundred million black people, right? Not one of those motherfuckers knew me."

Indeed, such denials of the visual resonate to a greater extent with an exhibition tradition that has grown up around Gilroy's version of the Black Atlantic (at the expense of Thompson's). In his scholarship and in the exhibition he co-curated *Der Black Atlantic* (2004) Gilroy has placed great emphasis of the memory of Black Atlantic identities carried in musical styles such as Hip Hop, Dancehall, and Funk. For our show, we were lucky to be assisted by Adjoa Armah and Adeena Mey who are part of The Black Atlantic Musem digital research project housed at Central Saint Martins in London. They reminded us that orality and oral traditions were a key part of the Black Atlantic. [10] With that in mind, and to build on the objectives of inclusion and diversity that my students had set to help foster a decolonised museum space, all our wall labels were transformed by text-to-speech software into audio files. Far from perfect, the result ended up serving us in a critical reflection on the challenges of digitally curating the Black Atlantic: as we pointed out in our introduction, free software tends to offer the illusion of accent standardisation in the Anglophone world (Australian, English, US-American); we were not able to make these audios reveal the rich and infinite inflections of English offered by African American communities, the Caribbean, and African nations.

Such challenges feed into the difficulties of the Black Atlantic as a "curatable" concept. The final trait common to many recent exhibitions relates to the very (il)legitimacy of this term.

Critiques of the Black Atlantic

As Christoph Singler notes in the catalogue of *Beyond the Black Atlantic*, exhibition-makers have considered the Black Atlantic more as a working hypothesis than fixed in stone ever since it started to circulate in the curatorial world. [11] Gilroy's concept, situated in the disciplinary realm of British cultural studies of the 1990s, has been accused of being too focused on North Atlantic, especially English-speaking (US-UK), cultures. In addition, ever since the scholarship of Richard Farris Thompson, the Black Atlantic has positioned "Africa" as a continent at the (pre-modern) heart of Creole cultures of the Carribbean, North America and Europe—not a land that has, in turn, witnessed its own "Creolisation."

Yet, according to curator of Documenta 11 in 2002 Okwui Enwezor the"sites of creolization" in the contemporary world are innumerable:

> *Cities in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean constitute a mosaic of fragmented spaces differentially articulated as a result of national, regional, and global forces. New typographies have emerged. Cities are today's sites of creolization. New diasporic formations have reconfigured the urban space. Markets, dance halls, bars, and restaurants constitute spaces in which the strategies of creolization are played, deployed, and reworked. Is every post-modern city a site of Creolization?* [14]

Enwezor's final question would seem an appropriate accompaniment to the promotional slogan of *Afro-Atlantic Histories*: "Africa is everywhere." While the statement is alluring because it debunks the commonplace misperception that Europe is the beating heart of all art history, it also opens onto the problem that I repeatedly brought up and pushed my students to think about in writing the didactic materials of our own (more modestly-sized) show: if "Africa is everywhere" (*Afro-Atlantic Histories*) and "every post-modern city [is] a site of Creolization" (Enwezor), *how* exactly do we define the Black Atlantic in the twenty-first century without the term losing all specificity? How do we avoid it simply becoming a synonym of "Black" art, with all the freighted implications that this latter nomenclature—with no equivalent in whiteface—entails?

One of the solutions proposed to this latter question would seem to lie neither in returning to Thompson nor holding fast to Gilroy: curating the Black Atlantic involves *neither* a naïve return to Africa as the pre-modern kernel of Black art in America (Thompson) *nor* stopping at its manifestations in the North Atlantic region of the US, Canada, and Europe (Gilroy). On the former, our selection of Ange-Arthur Koua's *Vagues* (2022) aimed to recapture "the forgotten geographical area of the Black Atlantic, Africa" [12] without the reduction of Black diasporic identities to the idea of the "original" continent. Koua reworks the belief of the Akan people of the Ivory Coast that a person's spirit, once deceased, clings to their clothes. At the centre of the canvas (which is in fact made up of plastic sheets) the words "Côte d'Ivoire" becomes a material cipher of these people, while the surrounding jute sack conjures up the idea of transportation and journeys. This reinforces the sense of travel bound up in the denim, which proliferates across this mixed media artwork. *Vagues*, whose very title ("Waves") urges viewers to consider transoceanic histories, recalls the indigo seeds used to dye jeans as originally one of the "cash crops" of US plantation fields brought over to the Americas and cultivated thanks to the specialist knowledge of enslaved Africans. The strewn human forms exude collectively a ghostliness as these forgotten journeys of the garment are retold. In their modern popularity, jeans make this artwork neither reducible to African, "pre-modern" origins, nor to the transatlantic slavery in the Americas. Probably the most ubiquitous item of clothing on the planet, they are situated in global networks of exchange; as metonymy of the Black Atlantic, they extend the concept outwards to new waters.

On the underexamined realms of the Black Atlantic, the work of the Afterall Art School digital mapping project will be, once finished, particularly exciting. The project, which is headed by Adeena Mey and Adjoa Armah, will mobilise the Black Atlantic as a locus to interrogate and look anew on British art in the contemporary setting. In our interview with them during the preparatory stages of our show, they evoked the history of Afro-Asian connections (forged, for instance, in the wake of the Bandung conference of the non-aligned countries of 1955) and the Black Mediterranean to complexify Gilroy's notion and how we understand its import for art history and theory. [13]

The strength of the Black Atlantic, in other words, resides in the imprecision that the term constantly flirts with, which acts a galvanising force for curators looking for new, unplumbed depths. Such depths are particularly ripe for exploration in France, where (to my knowledge) the exhibition on British avant-garde writer and anti-colonial activist Nancy Cunard in 2014 is the only example to have applied Gilroy's term "the Black Atlantic" in any major French museum show. Hosted by Paris's Musée du Quai Branly, "L'Atlantique Noir de Nancy Cunard" (translated as "The Black Atlantic of Nancy Cunard") centered on Cunard's publication multifaceted *Negro Anthology* (1934) which brought together her images, press clippings, and musical scores of Black America and sub-Saharan Africa between 1910 and 1930.

Yet there is much potential for expanding the concept on French soil beyond Cunard's work. A future show might draw on the rich history of African Americans' migration to France (perceived as a freer land than the segregated US) in the pre- and post-World War II decades. For example, Abstract Expressionist painters Beauford Delaney, Ed Clark, and Herbert Gentry all moved to France in the 1950s, and were able to live comfortably as artists (like many white American men) thanks to the Marshall plan-inspired GI Bill. Looking to more contemporary examples and less obvious candidates, exhibition-makers in France might consider acquisitions already here (in particular given the current drive away from international loan shows which leave a massive carbon footprint in their wake): a work like David Hammons' *Orange is the New Black* (2014), part of the François Pinault collection, recalls the hit Netflix series about America's Prison Industrial Complex and its racial injustices, but also maps a journey from the US to West Africa, finding a visual kindred spirit in the protective *nkisi* nail statuettes on display at the nearby Musée du Quai Branly. Whether or not a major group show will eventually take place in France, there is no doubt that the Black Atlantic's constant dance with renewal and rebooting will make it remain a curatorial concept in the years to come, with no one exhibition—despite common traits such as those mentioned here—exactly resembling another.

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NOTES

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2. Judith McWillie, introduction to *Another Face of the Diamond: Pathways through the Black Atlantic South*, ed. Judith McWillie (New York: Intar, 1989), 7.
3. Thompson, *Flash*, xiv.
4. Kathy Curnow, "Exhibition Review: *Afterlives of the Black Atlantic*," *American Arts,* Winter 2021, 80.
5. Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 71.
6. Kara Walker, "Fons Americanus," in *Kara Walker: Fons Americanus,* ed. Clara Kim (London: Tate Publishing, 2019), 55.
7. Wedge Collection. *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* (New York: Aperture, 2021), 181.
8. Walker, "Fons Americanus," 58.
9. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 18.
10. Adjoa Armah and Adeena Mey. Zoom call with the author. 7^th April 2022.
11. Christoph Singler, *Beyond the Black Atlantic* (Vienna: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2021), 23.
12. Paris 1 Student Curators. Caption to Arthur Koua, *Vagues*, 2022. *Black Atlantic*, 19^th May-19^th June, 2022. Wix (offline).
13. Armah and Mey, 2022.
14. Okwui Enwezor, "Créolité and Creolization." *Platform 3_Documenta11* (online, 2001).