

ESF Exploratory Workshop on
**European Perspectives
on the Black Atlantic**

Scientific Report

Huelva, Spain, 26 - 29 September 2007

Convened by:
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Executive Summary

The ESF Exploratory Workshop "European Perspectives on the Black Atlantic" was held at the University of Huelva (Spain) from 26 to 29 September 2007. Its aim was to bring together leading experts and younger scholars working in the field of the African Diaspora in order to (re)examine the concept of "The Black Atlantic" put forward by Paul Gilroy in his influential 1993 book and thereby come to a better understanding of the cosmopolitan societies in which we live. Due to last-minute cancellations, only 20 participants out of the 24 initially expected were able to attend the workshop which started with a dinner in the evening of 26 September. This first informal gathering proved an important factor of conviviality, as it enabled people to get to know each other and therefore facilitated the scientific exchanges that were to start the next day.

The meeting itself opened on Thursday 27 September in the morning with welcome speeches by the convenors addressing the organisational issues, introducing the role and aims of the European Science Foundation (in the absence of an ESF representative), and summing up the questions to be addressed, in particular the need for a critical reassessment of the transatlantic relations that occurred in the wake of the slave trade. Interestingly, Huelva proved an appropriate venue for this workshop: it has not only links with Christopher Columbus who set sail from the nearby port of Palos, but, in a strange reversal, the coast around Huelva has now become a major landing site for the African immigrants entering the European Union.

The workshop was organized around three main panels.

Entitled "The Uses of the Black Atlantic", the **first panel** offered a challenging reappraisal of the term "Black Atlantic" from different perspectives including history, literature and current affairs, and focussed on an interdisciplinary approach to Gilroy's concept. The objective was to launch a discussion on the merits and shortcomings of Gilroy's contribution from a multicultural, European multi-national point of view. The first four papers were followed by a conversation between Caryl Phillips and John McLeod on the theme "Who are you calling a foreigner?" Starting from a reassessment of Gilroy's concept, the exchange then concentrated on Phillips's latest novel, *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007), a book which addresses the tragic lives of three black men in England.

The aim of the **second panel** was to survey current research on the "Black Atlantic", not only in relation to large institutional research groups, but also in terms of smaller individual projects. In the first session, two big research projects dealing with the Black Atlantic, one in León (Spain) and the other one in Padua (Italy), were presented in two papers whose aim was to provide information on but also assess existing networks. These two presentations were followed by three provocative papers suggesting alternative ways of looking at the trans-Atlantic imagination. The second and third sessions of the second panel were devoted to six presentations by younger scholars, whose research represents the new directions in the field. Issues as varied as interdisciplinarity, categorization and literary history were addressed from different but thought-provoking angles.

The **third panel**, consisting of two papers, centered on teaching the Black Atlantic in Spain and in France. Its aim was both to inform on the existing teaching programmes and to assess the role of classroom practices in enhancing our consciousness of a multiethnic Europe. The discussion was particularly animated when the institutional problems linked to the teaching of the Black Atlantic were addressed. It indeed appears that in Europe Black Atlantic studies

generally enjoy less institutional support than apparently more mainstream topics and this may therefore sometimes hinder academic careers. The discussion also pointed out the need to federate interest in the Black Atlantic beyond disciplinary borders. Both panelists, as well as other members of the audience, expressed their frustration with resistance to change in the curriculum and research evaluation and promotion instruments that privilege more canonical approaches.

All the papers led to lively, constructive debates which highlighted the need to expand the notion of the "Black Atlantic" beyond its traditional racial, geographical, linguistic and cultural borders. All participants agreed on how important it was to adopt a more inclusive and diverse approach to the Black Atlantic, to focus on real life rather than merely on theory, to promote transnational and comparative rather than narrowly national practices, and to favour a political awareness of the present consequences of the Atlantic slave trade. Although no agreement was reached on an alternative label to replace Gilroy's admittedly reductive, yet useful, tag, the general feeling was that, in spite of its labelling problems, the field needed to be promoted because it kept an agency to disturb established historical truths and to go beyond traditional dichotomies, and therefore provided an essential tool for cultural understanding.

The lively discussions that followed each of the sessions were prolonged during the meals taken together during the workshop. These definitely contributed to creating an atmosphere of mutual trust leading to fruitful exchanges that are bound to have lasting effects on all the participants' future research and scientific commitments.

Scientific content of the event

Most of the papers had been circulated electronically before the workshop to enable the participants to gather information on the large variety of subjects to be addressed, including literature, history, cultural studies, folklore, religion and the cinema.

For a more detailed description of the presentations, please consult the abstracts included in annex 1.

Kathy Chater, an independent scholar, argued that while it is generally assumed that most black people in Britain during the long eighteenth century were enslaved, discriminated against and oppressed, detailed research on the lives of ordinary individuals (starting, for example, from parish records) reveals a different picture.

Laura Chrisman, from the University of Washington, examined the uses and abuses of the Black Atlantic model by interrogating several of the assumptions made by Paul Gilroy and considering the impact of his theory on African studies, more particularly in the context of the cultural interaction between South African and the black diaspora. She pointed out that transnationalism is not inherently liberatory and that one needs to look more into the role of the nation in Black Atlantic exchanges.

Guardian journalist Gary Younge started from the way in which the European press has reported on the Muslim reaction to the Danish cartoons of Mohammed in February 2006 to consider both what had changed and what had remained the same in Europe's racial dynamics, with a special focus on Britain, and thereby question many of the values and norms that are

often taken for granted. He mentioned the idea that religion was becoming the new 'race' and was now used for a new type of profiling.

John McLeod, from the University of Leeds, focused on literature, in particular on Jackie Kay's novel *Trumpet* (1997), to emphasize the need to go beyond Gilroy's formal and conceptual straightjacket. McLeod concentrated on Kay's metaphorical use of adoption with its exploration of the mutually inclusive impulses of filiation and affiliation which resist the protocols of critical theory because this entails pointing towards alternative sources of solidarity within the bounds of the nation, rather than beyond.

In his conversation with John McLeod, Caryl Phillips, prize-winning author and professor at Yale University, first stated that the Black Atlantic, in spite of its organisational validity, needed to be challenged because like many other terms used in academia it provided only a narrow prism through which to view a multifaceted reality. He then went on to examine his own practice as a creative writer and more particularly spoke about his latest work, *Foreigners: Three English Lives*, which looks at the dichotomy of belonging and exclusion in British life through the life stories of three black men.

Marta Sofía López's presentation of "AfroEuropeans", a research group based at the University of León, focused on the history of the project, on the many questions raised by its title, on the links that it had so far establish with other research groups in Europe, on its aims and on its achievements so far. The most useful information for the ESF participants related to the website and the e-journal of the group which can be found at this address: <http://afroeuropa.unileon.es/>

Annalisa Oboe provided a detailed overview of the "Sea Changes" research project based at the University of Padua. The main preoccupation of this community of scholars is to investigate the metamorphoses undergone by the cultures along the Atlantic rim as a consequence of their past and present history. It engages in a complex and polysemic dialogue on questions of identity, human rights, social memory and global vs local tensions in a circumatlantic perspective. She also summarized the activities that had already been organized in the context of this research project.

Kathleen Gyssels, from the University of Antwerp, highlighted in her paper the commonalities that bind the francophone and anglophone regions of the African diaspora. She more particularly addressed to what extent Gilroy's theory was indebted to Edouard Glissant's *Discours antillais* (1981) and underlined the crucial role of translation and of publishing policies in promoting (or not) a cross-lingual and cross-cultural dialogue within the Black Atlantic world.

Michelle Wright, from the University of Minnesota, questioned the validity of the concepts of slavery and the Middle Passage as epistemological underpinnings for Black Atlantic identities in the West not only because these promote an unrealistic view of Africa but also because there are a lot of non Middle Passage blacks. She suggested instead to use an epistemology based on World War II and see how this other major historical event operates for the different black communities now settled in the Western world.

Wumi Raji, from Obafemi Awolowo University, used Isidore Okpewho's latest novel, *Call me by my Rightful Name* (2004), to look at the concept of the Black Atlantic from an African perspective and to demonstrate, in the wake of a thinker such as Stuart Hall, that while black

cultural identity might be synonymous with dislocation and perpetual movement, it can also be associated with continuity and does have a point of origin which should also be remembered.

Esperanza Santos, from the University of Huelva, used a comparative approach in order to analyse the cinematographic representation of African and Caribbean migrations to Spain and the UK through *Las Cartas de Alou* (1990), *Flores de Otro Mundo* (1999) and *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002), three films which counteract the invisibility of the underworld by focusing on the everyday life of people in search of a better future. They address the politics of (im)migration and unveil related questions of gender and the commodification of migrant bodies.

The main argument put forward by Daria Tunca, from the University of Liège, was that it was increasingly difficult to define and circumscribe contemporary African literature, mostly because of its diasporic developments in the last few decades. She illustrated this with reference to present day Nigerian writing on which she was completing her doctoral dissertation. Her suggestion was to adopt a more flexible way of labelling literary traditions starting from the work of cognitive linguists like George Lakoff.

Elisa Diallo, from the University of Amsterdam, demonstrated through the example of the Guinean writer Tieno Monénembo how the cultural centre had changed for francophone writers of the African diaspora who now chose to migrate to the United States rather than France, a change partly due to institutional causes linked to the American educational system. While this new phenomenon may at first sight seem to promote a healthy circulation of idea between three continents – Africa, America and Europe -- it is actually causing the exclusion of Africa from academic debates.

Lise Sorensen described how she had been working within the context of the STAR Project, led by Prof. Susan Manning at the University of Edinburgh. This project deals with Scottish Trans-Atlantic connections, and one of its objectives consists in reappraising texts from an Atlantic-informed conceptual approach. Lise Sorensen pursued these questions on Henry Mackenzie's 1777 novel *Julia de Roubigné* after briefly engaging with Sarah Scott's *The History of Sir George Ellison* (1766). Her aim was to address how the overall message of the rhetoric of sentiment was disrupted by the slave system and its underlying structures.

Imen Najjar, from the University of Liège, started her presentation with a short history of the Trinidadian carnival which is partly a legacy of the Black Atlantic. She then went on to discuss Robert Antoni's *Carnival* (2005) and explained how the carnivalesque festivities were a metaphor for the characters' identity quest and an echo of their sense of belonging and unbelonging. She also referred to the novel's intertextuality which she viewed as another instance of carnivalization.

In her presentation, Ulrike Pirker, from the University of Freiburg, drew our attention to the narrative strategies used by writer Caryl Phillips and film maker Isaac Julien, two artists from the African diaspora whose work seems to match Paul Gilroy's definition of it as "a transcultural, international formation with a rhizomorphic, fractal structure". In their respective works, *The Atlantic Sound* (2000) and *Paradise Omeros* (2001), they express their discomfort with traditional generic borders which they do not hesitate to transgress in their rendering of the complexities of the Black Atlantic world.

University of Huelva's Mar Gallego's presentation covered a whole range of teaching experiences at B.A. and M.A. level carried out in Spain in the last two decades. She emphasized how the original impulse for the introduction of the Black Atlantic came from scholars working in the field of African American studies, particularly at universities like Salamanca and La Laguna, soon followed by those in the field of postcolonial studies (Oviedo and León). She also described some of the more innovative teaching practices, like those undertaken at the UNED (Open University).

Judith Misrahi-Barak, from the Université Paul Valéry, also informed us of the situation in France, but she focused more specifically on the role of individual instructors and academics in changing current curricula, and how many of these changes are in fact stifled by extremely rigid regulations concerning disciplines and areas of study within those disciplines. According to her, this is a crucial obstacle in the development of new epistemological approaches and cross-cultural research.

Assessment of the results

The “Black Atlantic” concept has proved to be very wide-ranging. It has been useful as a label but it is also too restrictive. In those two days of papers and discussions we have launched a critique of the term that has to do with the following aspects:

1. Its spatial limitations. Some of the participants raised questions as to other areas that could profitably be discussed using this framework, like Africa itself (in Laura Chrisman's and in Wumi Raji's papers) or Canada, but that have so far been neglected. Others posited the question of Ireland, but we were inconclusive about whether one can actually bring Ireland into an epistemological approach that basically derives from the Middle Passage.
2. Its neglect of other identity categories, such as gender, class, sexual orientation, and religion. Some of the papers pointed in that direction, and our final panel also emphasized the need to include these overlapping categories into the equation. Gender figured prominently in papers such as Lise Sorensen's or Michelle Wright's, sexual orientation in John McLeod's, class in Kathy Chater's, religion in Gary Younge's, to mention but a few. One can also perceive new forms of Otherness (based on religion this time) coming into being after 9/11.
3. The need for a more comparative approach that takes into account the circulation or lack of circulation of subjects and of cultural artifacts. Kathleen Gyssels made important points about the politics of translating and publishing, whereas Elise Diallo and Daria Tunca discussed the process and consequences of the circulation of writers and academics towards more affluent countries.
4. The need to study the local as well as the global. One should not forget the specific problems of daily life, as was pointed out in Caryl Phillips's and Esperanza Santos's presentations, or the influence of local traditions, as Imen Najar pointed out. Some research projects, like “Sea Changes” in Italy and “Afro-Europeans” in Spain, have embarked on that kind of local work without neglecting the transnational angle. However, we also ascertained tensions within the Black Atlantic paradigm. One might come to it from an Afrocentric perspective, privileging African origins, or from a

diasporic viewpoint, stressing travel and dislocation. In terms of Europe, these conceptual questions translate into the dichotomy national/transnational. We found that some scholars are working on African migration in their respective European countries while others engage in a transnational, multiple-location model.

5. The advisability of more interdisciplinary approaches in order to enrich our framework. History and arts other than literature in particular can provide exciting insights into the workings of the Black Atlantic, as was revealed through in the presentations of Kathy Chater and Ulrike Pirker.
6. The practical difficulties of bringing the Black Atlantic paradigm to bear into actual teaching and research practices within each European country revealed in the papers of Judith Misrahi-Barak and Mar Gallego as well as in the ensuing discussion. There is evidence of frustration at the slow pace at which the academia usually accepts new approaches and at how the imperatives of canonicity are still enforced to the detriment of more innovative productions.
7. The need to encompass the political into our study of Black Atlantic cultural productions. Several papers reminded us of the urgency of looking beyond aestheticism and of considering the working of specific political systems, institutions and practices. Slavery was the political and economic institution that had the farthest reaching effects but new ones have take its place in commodifying and exploiting black bodies.
8. More generally, all the presentations pleaded in favour of a less dichotomic view of the complex cultural changes inherited from history, and thereby promoted a more inclusive framework, one in which ambiguity may be considered not a limitation but an added value, and can be read as a strategy that unsettles received meanings and practices.

Finally, the panel discussed follow-up events. First we agreed that we needed to disseminate the main results of this meeting and participants suggested a number of appropriate venues: the newsletters of ESSE (European Society for the Study of English), EACLALS (European Association for Commonwealth Languages and Literatures Studies), and CAAR (Collegium for African American Research) as well as the websites of the STAR project at the University of Edinburgh, the Afro Europeans project at the University of León, and the CERPAC (Centre d'Études et de Recherche sur les pays du Commonwealth) website at Paul Valéry University. The conveners undertook to circulate the final report among participants for their approval and then make sure that it reaches these associations' newsletters and online publications, in the belief that these are important questions that need to reach as large an audience as possible.

Next we briefly discussed the possibility of setting up a distribution list but we considered that there might be overlapping with several other academic distribution lists already in place, so we decided against this action. In any case, we believe that in the last few months continued contact regarding the workshop has effortlessly evolved into a kind of informal network.

Third, we considered the possibility of a publication. Publishing revised papers was generally accepted as a good idea, with most participants expressing their interest, so the

conveners have contacted several academic publishers (Liverpool University Press and Cambridge Scholars' Press). Both have given encouraging replies and we are currently in the process of putting together a proposal. We were also in touch with one of the leading academic journal in the field (Journal of the African Diaspora), but we are still waiting to hear from them.

Last but not least, full consideration was given to other ESF instruments. We discussed the pros and cons of trying to continue our debate in the context of a larger research conference, as well as the ideas of setting up a research networking programme or a EUROCORE programme for collaborative research. Although we did not think that a research conference would take us much further than an exploratory workshop has, the latter options were not without appeal. Marta Sofia López at the University of León felt she was ready to take on the initiative of setting up a programme proposal, and other participants as well as the conveners offered their help and support.

Scientific Programme

European Perspectives on the Black Atlantic ESF EXPLORATORY WORKSHOP

Thursday, September 27th.

9:00-9:30 Welcome and ESF Presentation (Pilar Cuder, Convener). Introduction (Bénédicte Ledent, Convener).

9:30-11:30 Panel 1: "The Uses of the Black Atlantic." Papers in this panel will consider the ways Gilroy's theories have changed our current perceptions of African diasporas. Open discussion on the merits and shortcomings of Gilroy's contributions from a multicultural, European, multi-national perspective.
Chair: Caryl Phillips.

Kathleen Chater (independent scholar): "Black people in England and Wales 1660-1807: Fact and Fiction."

Laura Chrisman (Univ. Washington): "African connections: the uses and abuses of the Black Atlantic model."

Gary Younge (*The Guardian*): "Drawing a line between Europe and the Other."

John McLeod (Univ. Leeds): "Taking Shortcuts: literary perspectives of the 'Black Atlantic'"

11:30 Coffee Break.

12:00-13:30 Keynote address: "Who are you calling a foreigner?" Caryl Phillips (Yale Univ.).
Chair: John McLeod.

Lunch.

16:00-18:00 Panel 2 (session 1): “Current European research on the Black Atlantic.” Presentations of research projects from different countries. Open discussion and assessment of funding opportunities and networks for research in Europe. Chair: James Walvin.

Marta Sofia López (Univ. León) “AfroEuropeans: Black Cultures and Identities in Europe (Plan Nacional de i+d, ref. HUM2004/01469).”

Annalisa Oboe (Univ. Padova): “The Padua Sea Changes Project: Black Bodies, Practices, and Discourses around the Atlantic.”

Kathleen Gyssels (Univ. Antwerp): “The ‘Barque ouverte’ (Glissant) or *The Black Atlantic* as Caribbean interface; some considerations on submarine unity that desperately needs to surface.”

Michelle Wright (Univ. Minnesota): “World War II and the Debate on Collective Identities in the Black Atlantic.”

Wumi Raji (Obafemi Awolowo Univ.): “Call me by my rightful name: African literature of the Trans-Atlantic imagination.”

18:00-18:30 Coffee break.

18:30-19:30. Panel 2 (session 2): “New Directions of the Black Atlantic”. Young scholars present their research. Chair: Mark Stein.

Esperanza Santos (Univ. Huelva): “‘Who are you people? Why haven’t I seen you before?’ European cinematographic representation of Black Atlantic migrations.”

Daria Tunca (Univ. Liège): “Away from a Definition of African Literature(s)”

Elisa Diallo (Univ. Leiden): “The Francophone Black Atlantic.”

Friday, September 28th

9:30-11:00 Panel 2 (session 3): “New Directions of the Black Atlantic”. Young scholars present their research. Chair: Leen Gyssels.

Lise Sorensen (Univ. Edinburgh): “Scottish Perspectives on the Black Atlantic (the STAR project).”

Imen Najjar (Univ. Liège): “Carnival and Homecoming in Robert Antoni’s *Carnival*.”

Ulrike Pirker (Univ. Freiburg): “The Black Atlantic Agenda and Artistic/Narrative Strategies in Caryl Phillips’s *The Atlantic Sound* and Issac Julien’s *Paradise Omeros*.”

11:00 Coffee Break.

11:30-13:00 Panel 3: “Teaching the Black Atlantic: European experiences”. Presentation of current undergraduate and postgraduate programmes on the Black Atlantic. Particular attention will be given to their innovative classroom practices and teaching methodologies, and to how they contribute to enhance our cultural consciousness of a multiethnic Europe. Chair: Dionne Brand.

Mar Gallego (Univ. Huelva): “Teaching the Black Atlantic in Spain: Institutionalization and European convergence.”

Judith Misrahi-Barak (Paul Valéry Univ.): “Teaching Caribbean and Black Atlantic Studies in France.”

15:00-16:30 Panel 4: “Beyond the Black Atlantic”: Round table with proposals for follow-up activities or events. A schedule of further meetings can be drawn up in order to put together European research networks or liaise with existing ones. The purpose of this session is above all to ensure the creation of piloting projects on teaching and researching the black heritage in Europe. Chairs: Bénédicte Ledent and Pilar Cuder.

16:30 Closing.

21:00 Conference dinner.

List of Participants

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Statistical information on participants

Repartition by country of work:

BE	4	NG	1
DE	2	NL	1
ES	4	UK	3
FR	1	US	3
IT	1		

Repartition by gender:

Male: 4 Female: 16