

POST/BLACK/ATLANTIC: A CONVERSATION WITH THELMA GOLDEN AND GLENN LIGON*

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The first question I'd like to pose to you both concerns your senses of 'the [Black Atlantic](#)'. When did you first encounter the notion? How was it useful in thinking about your individual practices? What kinds of connections did the concept allow you to forge? And how has it come to frame your understanding of black culture's unfolding in the present?

GLENN LIGON

I first encountered the term in relationship to an exhibition created by David A. Bailey at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London called *Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire*.¹ What was interesting about the exhibition was that it brought together a number of artists who were prominent in Britain alongside artists from the United States, myself included. In addition to the show there was a conference organised around the issues raised by the [Black Atlantic](#), which introduced me to scholars like Paul Gilroy, Kobena Mercer, Stuart Hall, and Homi Bhabha. I realised that London was an intellectual hotbed, and being in that environment made me think about my relationship to black British cultural studies and to the work of artists like Isaac Julien and Steve McQueen.

THELMA GOLDEN

I first became acquainted with the idea of the [Black Atlantic](#) through Paul Gilroy's book *The Black Atlantic*, which allowed me to understand the historic connections between black progressive political movements in the US and in the UK; to come to a more nuanced understanding of the immigration patterns that created these similar but different communities; and to situate black cultural history in an international guise.² More specifically, I became very engaged with the [Black Atlantic](#) as it related to the visual arts in the same way Glenn did, through the *Mirage* exhibition and conference. For me those events opened up my world curatorially. At that point, I had been indoctrinated by multiculturalism and during the conference I discovered how parochial that indoctrination was because it looked only at the American experience, as if the experiences of other artists of African descent had happened in the past. I also met a number of the artists included in the exhibition for the first time, many of whom I have since come to work with in one way or another, allowing me to have a curatorial network that stretches around the world.

HC Both of your responses resonate with my own initial encounter with Gilroy's text, particularly, as you put it, Thelma, its importance in decentralising the African-American experience within the context of academic black studies. Just as crucially, I

think, *The Black Atlantic* offers a counter-hegemonic narrative of modernity that has profound ramifications for our understanding of the present. I wonder, then, how that aspect of Gilroy's formulation has offered you ways of critically interrogating prior historical moments as well as the contemporary art world, which is so often framed these days as global and dispersed?

TG I think the [Black Atlantic](#) allows us to rewrite and reflect on our own history in a more expanded way. For instance, another moment during which I spent time thinking about Gilroy's intellectual construction was in 2003 when Dr Lowery Stokes Sims, former director of the Studio Museum, curated a show called *Challenge of the Modern*.³ In that exhibition, Dr Sims aimed to frame the history of modernism as a history of modernisms. The show focused on the literal movements and migratory patterns that *The Black Atlantic* charted, and also explored artistic movements in the Caribbean, the US, the UK, and Europe. The [Black Atlantic](#) not only allows us to push back against an amorphously understood globalism, but also to become more precise with our history. One of the things I treasure about the book is that there is an Aaron Douglas painting on the cover and also that Gilroy frames the [Harlem Renaissance](#) within a larger [transnational](#) context.

GL What's also interesting about *The Black Atlantic* is that it acknowledges that ideas don't circulate in the same way across different historical moments. For example, one could argue that Aaron Douglas's Africa was an 'Africa of the mind', whereas now there is a more substantial dialogue between artists on this side of the Atlantic and artists in Africa as well as with African artists living in the United States, which for me has produced a rethinking of what is possible. In 2002 I had a residency in Germany where I worked on a cycle of text-based paintings using James Baldwin's essay 'Stranger in the Village'.⁴ In that essay Baldwin tries to come to grips with European culture in the 1950s and his relationship to it. Not just 'I'm here to write about my self-imposed exile from America', but also 'I'm here in this particular place at a particular time. What does that mean? What do I signify here as a black person? What's a black person's relationship to this cultural legacy?' And so during my time in Berlin I was trying not just to make 'American' work in Europe, but also to consider how other people have thought about what it meant to be a black person in that cultural space. In some ways, that approach was informed by the work of the black British artists I had met through Mirage who were thinking more expansively about their experiences, but also more specifically.

HC That notion of specificity, particularly as it relates to Douglas's fantasised Africa versus your actual working connections with African artists, puts me in mind of one of your paintings in the exhibition, *Gold Nobody Knew Me #7* 2007, which recasts a Richard Pryor joke: 'I went to Africa. I went to the Mother land to find my roots: right? Seven hundred million black people! Not one of those motherfuckers knew me.' What I find compelling about the work is how it uses humour to pull the rug out from under the notion that anyone might have some kind of instant access to 'Africa', at the same time that it visually and conceptually demands that we think about the difficulty of translating blackness from one context to another. In that vein, I wonder if you could comment on the ways that certain iconic black figures

become the ground for registering these processes of translation across the [diaspora](#), whether in your own work on Malcolm X, or in other pieces in the exhibition such as David Hammons's *African-American Flag* 1990, or Coco Fusco's video, on the visual production of Angela Davis, *a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert* 2004?

GL If we look at a figure like Malcolm X, we see that his message and image have been exported globally. Malcolm X has become an international figure, and during his lifetime, particularly after his pilgrimage to Mecca, he certainly imagined himself as an internationalist. What interested me in the series of works where I gave an image of him to children to colour in was how images get made and re-made and how they read differently from generation to generation. Each generation makes the Malcolm X they need. Many of the works that are in the show deal with this notion of re-making as a way to think about the particular historic moment that we're in and what those iconic images – of, say, Marcus Garvey's red, black and green flag, or Angela Davis, or Malcolm X – were about in the moment in which they emerged.

HC Such reiterations of the past are, of course, key to all kinds of advanced black diasporic cultural practice. So I wonder how you both understand the logic of these returns, particularly in the present moment when artistic citations of the 1960s and 1970s often seem to function as ways of adding value rather than of deeply thinking through? How do historical retrievals develop a kind of force, politically and formally, that makes an intervention in our conceptions of the present?

TG History matters, particularly in the practices we're talking about, because it signals a reference point that in many ways defines identity and place, which artists then claim and deploy in their work. You are right to say that sometimes the past is used simply as a point of departure or as a way to reference something else. I do think that in many of the works included in this exhibition it is also about an extremely innovative effort not so much towards reclaiming and reflecting on the past, but moving towards writing a new history from the present moment.

HC And, I think, towards differently locating all of us on the map of culture, which is not unlike what you and Glenn aimed to do in introducing the notion of [post-black](#) in the context of your 2001 Studio Museum exhibition *Freestyle*. That term named a new generation of African-American artists, who, as you put it, 'were adamant about not being labeled as "black" artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness'.⁵ Now, I don't have to tell y'all that since that time, [post-black](#) has been frequently mobilised and critiqued for a range of ends.⁶

TG I will take this opportunity to talk about the notion of [post-black](#). Glenn and I have had many conversations about art and I am completely grateful to him for his willingness to help me work through ideas, because often as a curator you're doing two things at once: you are looking and seeing, but you are also trying to frame ideas. When it works the two come together, and when it doesn't it can be a big train wreck. Coming to understand the difference means working through one's ideas. Glenn is an incredibly generous spirit in that he shares information, which

is another way of saying that he is not a hater. There has never been a time when Glenn has seen a young artist who he thinks is great and not shared that information with me, knowing that it could perhaps galvanise something for that artist. I say this to suggest how in my conversations with Glenn I came to formulate this concept of [post-black](#). Glenn and I have talked a lot about his work as it relates to history and what he uses as his reference points. There is a shorthand that we have adopted over time to speak about the various works that we might be looking at, or looking away from. [Post-black](#) was an abbreviation of [post-black](#) art, which really referred to our way of talking about a particular kind of practice at a particular moment that engaged with a particular set of issues and a particular ideology. For us, in those conversations of the late 1990s, it was often a way to talk about what we thought was coming next: saying a practice was [post-black](#) art was how Glenn would tell me that ‘this is an artist who has moved several steps beyond having to work out their relationship to a particular set of issues’. That working out could be a positive or a negative, a wrestling with or an ignoring of, which is why I feel it is necessary to say that [post-black](#) was not about a particular artistic strategy, but about what had happened over the last thirty years and how artists were moving beyond a place in history and to the present moment. I know that there are those who would like to think that we sat down and wrote a list of qualities and qualifications, but that was never the case. It was a way for me to take the next step curatorially, because I felt deeply invested in a group of artists who had come of age in the 1990s who were working with a set of issues that I had been able to consider within the context of several different exhibitions. I was also looking for a way to take the Studio Museum and its then thirty-year history around these issues to the next intellectual and programmatic step. It’s like we were at Lenox and I was just trying to get to 7th Avenue. I wanted to move forward by looking at a group of artists who generationally, for me, were new.

GL For me, the whole discussion of [post-black](#) art was really about a notion that there’s a generation of artists younger than myself that has a different relationship to images and history than my generation or the generation before me. So the kinds of debates that Thelma and I were deeply engaged in in the era of what we might call High Multiculturalism – the question of negative and positive images, for example – were debates that they felt distant from.

TG We felt distanced too!

GL I know, but I think we still had to engage those debates in a way that a younger group of artists don’t feel they have to. For them, that territory had been dealt with: ‘we’re in a new space. We’re going to have a different relationship to these images. We’re going to have a different relationship to this history. Your sacred cows are not our sacred cows.’ That was really what [post-black](#) art was about for me, the perception of a shift in terms of what you might generally call responsibility, or more precisely, a narrowly defined sense of our responsibility to a certain history and to certain kinds of images. These artists’ rethinking of that responsibility was very exciting and helpful for me as an artist in moving out of one way of doing things. It was like going from black-and-white TV to colour.

TG In fairness, I also found the debate around [post-black](#) somewhat fruitful, just because it allowed me to understand how hard it was for some people to imagine that we could have debates in this way and to ask why we couldn't imagine that in this space at this moment, there are different ways we can understand what's happening artistically. *Freestyle* was one way to engage these ideas, but there could be others as well. I think the notion that there is some singular narrative that we all have to be a part of doesn't seem fruitful for our understanding of contemporary practices. This is something I learned from being within an international context, in which the practices can unfold individually and still be a part of larger dialogue, but are not necessarily tied to one track of ideas.

HC Thelma, your discussion raises the question of [post-black](#)'s relationship to notions of internationalism, particularly within the context of the Studio Museum. Artists from various points in the [diaspora](#) were included in *Freestyle*, in part, it seems, because black cultural practitioners the world over are dealing with similar circumstances in terms of the media's production and reproduction of blackness, yet in palpably different ways. I want to ask, then, how has your thinking about the profile of the Studio Museum and its reach across the [Black Atlantic](#) shifted in the context of the [post-black](#)?

TG That is something I also need, in part, to credit to Gilroy's argument. Our mission at the Museum changed in the early 2000s, when Dr Sims was our Director and I was Deputy Director and Chief Curator. The former mission stated: 'The Studio Museum in Harlem collects, presents, preserves, and interprets works of African-American artists and artifacts of the African [diaspora](#)', which was valid at the time for an institution that was founded in 1968 in Harlem. That statement addressed the position of African-American artists at a time when the art world was still highly exclusionary, so it imagined the museum as a corrective to those exclusions. It was also an institution very much steeped in the cultural movements of the 1960s that were claiming the history of Africa as a living, breathing tool for the formation of black identity. Now, what it also meant, as you thought about the mission in a working way, was that there was a split between living, breathing African-American artists and artefacts of the African [diaspora](#), which suggested that Africa was our past and Afro-America was our present. The current mission states: 'The Studio Museum in Harlem is the nexus for black artists locally, nationally, and internationally, and for work that has been inspired by black culture. It is a site for the dynamic exchange of ideas about art and society.' This change was meant to acknowledge a few things. One being to recognise the global black presence in a way that created some parity to the differences in our histories, without necessarily needing to line them up with black American history, whether that meant showing artists of African descent working in the 1920s in Jamaica or artists of African descent working now in Amsterdam. The new mission, in some ways, also questioned established notions of the [diaspora](#), which often only mark out a historical conception of the migration patterns in which we have moved. 'Locally, nationally, internationally' is about anywhere we are, which means the Studio Museum is engaged with black artists regardless of their location or nationality.

Now, again, the Studio Museum grew out of a moment that looked at America through the lens of a black history, in which Harlem, Detroit, South Central Los Angeles, Chicago, Atlanta, and Washington DC were the cities in America with a large, defining black presence. At the Museum we were trying to represent a cultural phenomenon: the rebuilding and rebirth of these places that we owned, maybe not literally in financial terms, but that we owned as the places where we were. The new mission was also about breaking from that paradigm. It was about acknowledging Africa and the Caribbean and also acknowledging North America, South America, Europe, and so on. As a curator, the change allowed me to work in an institution that could show David Hammons, Adrian Piper, Isaac Julien, Edna Manley, Alma Thomas, Chris Ofili, El Anatsui, Julie Mehretu, Stan Douglas and Henry Tanner, among many others. It also allowed the institution to acknowledge the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic nature of Harlem and of black America right now, without again centralising four hundred years of African-American history as the black experience worldwide. The rewriting of the mission opened that conversation up so that we could look back at our collection and say, 'Yes, James Van Der Zee is right here at the centre, but Seydou Keita needs to be right here too.'

HC The way in which you describe the museum's brief now seems to move away from a certain [Middle Passage](#) epistemology, while not occluding the continuing histories of violence, dispersion and resistance that remain formative to the production of the black [diaspora](#).

GL I think it's about continuity and rupture, which is a way of thinking about the term [post-black](#) too.

HC That's also a useful way, I think, to consider the possibilities for artists of colour now. For instance, many of the practitioners included in the *Freestyle* exhibition have gone on to show with major galleries and to be included within the network of fairs and biennials, although racial limitations often persist in the discursive framing of their work. How do we think about both the continuities in the presentation of work by black artists and also the significant rupture that has occurred in terms of the opportunities available to them in the present?

GL Well, I think, as you've noted, one thing that has changed is the commercial and institutional presence of black artists. I think that for a lot of young artists there's an assumption that they will enter the market fairly quickly and that's been borne out. The question is, is that sustainable in the long term? Do these artists get the ten publications that their peers who are not black might have? Are they collected by museums over the life of their careers and not just at the beginning? That is something we'll have to see play out, but I do think that the presence of black artists has been – and maybe it's not the right word – normalised.

HC So, from [post-black](#) to normal-black?

GL But I also want to note that often there are shows where I think ‘I can name a half a dozen artists of colour that should be in this exhibition’, and they’re not. So, I think in the art world there still is this kind of narrowness.

TG It’s exclusion by self-imposed amnesia. I think for some people the exclusionary default is still satisfactory and the absence does not read as problematic because they are reinforced by a norm that has always been there. Even in this moment of more engaged dialogue about these issues within the art world and the cultural world in general, we can still think of whole groups of artists who remain on the outside. And that, for me, remains the great tragedy of this moment, because recent history has given us the opportunity to understand the range of artists working and the breadth of their work.

GL Especially when artists are taking up notions like [diaspora](#), which has been conceived historically, and exploring them in their contemporary forms. I think, for instance, of Isaac Julien’s *Small Boats* 2007, which is about migration to Europe, and not necessarily of Africans, but of all different kinds of people. Those migrations have profound resonance with notions of the African [diaspora](#), but also with discussions around European identity. What’s interesting to think about is how people have taken scholarship such as Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* and tried to apply it to other kinds of [diasporas](#). This is a fascinating moment in which we can see how that knowledge gets played out in contemporary artworks.

¹ *Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire*, exh. cat., Institute of Contemporary Arts/Institute of International Visual Arts, London, 1995.

² Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1993.

³ Lowery Stokes Sims, *Challenge of the Modern: African-American Artists 1925–1945, Volume I*, exh. cat., Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, 2003.

⁴ James Baldwin, ‘Stranger in the Village’, *Harper’s Magazine*, Oct. 1953, pp. 42–8. For accounts of Ligon’s engagement with Baldwin’s text and its relation to his practice more broadly, see Thelma Golden, ‘Everynight’, in *Glenn Ligon: Unbecoming*, exh. cat., Institute of Contemporary Art/University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1997, pp. 37–49, p. 44; as well as Huey Copeland, ‘Untitled (Jackpot!)’, in *Glenn Ligon: Some Changes*, exh. cat., Power Plant, Toronto, 2005, pp. 119–32.

⁵ Thelma Golden, ‘Post...’, in *Freestyle*, exh. cat., Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, 2001, p. 14.

⁶ Although the art historian Robert Farris Thompson used ‘[postblack](#)’ ten years earlier to suggest the limitations of analogous descriptive categories such as ‘postmodern’, it is Golden and Ligon’s mobilisation of the phrase that has subsequently been taken up by academics, critics and commentators in assessing, whether positively or negatively, the current states of African-American cultural discourse. For Farris Thompson’s use of [postblack](#), see his ‘[Afro-Modernism](#)’, *Artforum International*, Sept. 1991, p. 91. While the articles, symposia and authors that in some way engage Golden and Ligon’s formulation of [post-black](#) art are too numerous to list here, several texts are worth noting that suggest how the discourse has evolved: Cathy Byrd, ‘Is there a “[Post-Black](#)” Art? Investigating the Legacy of the *Freestyle Show*’, *Art Papers*, Nov./Dec. 2002, pp. 35–9; Elizabeth Alexander, *The Black Interior*, Saint Paul, Graywolf Press, 2004; and “‘[Post-Black](#),’ “Post-Soul,” or Hip Hop Iconography? Defining the New Aesthetics’, special issue of *International Review of African American Art*, 20.2, 2005.