

# History and crossover practices: making marginalized stories visible

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Figure 1 Allan Edmunds, *200 Years*, 2008. Source: personal photograph Gabriele Proglia.

## Introduction

In this brief article, I will point out some crucial questions about the relationship between (the making of) history and the visibility of the past, focusing on the role of the historian – and more generally of the scholar in the humanities – in uncovering formerly invisible aspects of a (historical) topic or discovering forgotten stories. Invisibilization and forgetfulness often result not from fortuitous actions but rather from long-established practices stemming from a distinctive shared gaze on the past or on a specific (historical) research object. Therefore, practices of crossover between canonized narratives of a specific topic/issue and history (or,

more generally, the field of humanities) should be evaluated from the point of view of subjectivity.

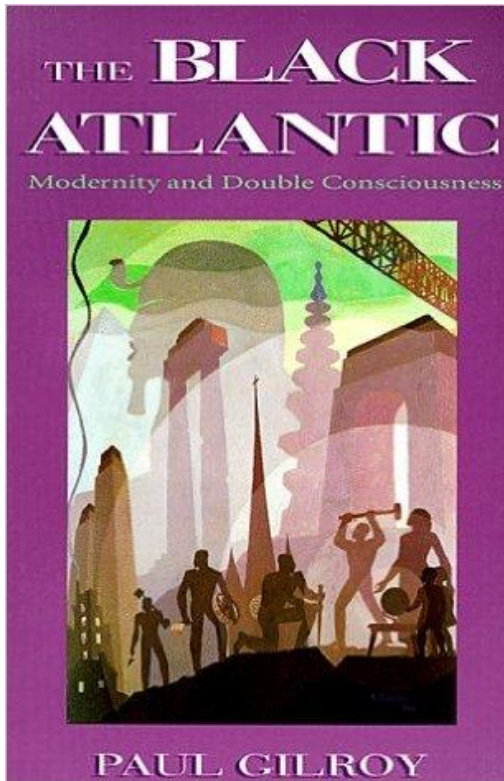
The term ‘subjectivity’ can be used to describe subject formation and performativity and it can be connected with ‘intersubjectivity’, a word that defines interaction and negotiation between individual subjectivities. From the point of view of intersubjectivity, a new gaze on history is possible thanks to both the work of individual historians and the presence of cultural exchange within a group/community. With an innovative approach to the study of human geography, the BABE project’s various research paths are interconnected and aimed at showing and problematizing the relationship between mobility and visibility of migrant people towards, across and beyond Europe. When research involves marginalized stories – as is most often the case with the BABE group’s research – the word ‘visibility’ becomes synonymous with a shift from silence to words, from the periphery to the center, from the imperceptible to a counter-geography. Methodologically speaking, I will focus my analysis on the seminal works of three scholars who, albeit in different ways, uncovered and shed light on fragments of global history that had faded into oblivion or were deliberately concealed.

### **Crossover practices**

Paul Gilroy, C.L.R. James and Walter Rodney addressed, in different ways and from different perspectives, the relationship between Europe and ‘other worlds’ such as Africa, Central and South America and the Caribbean. All of them stressed the relevance of power relations – in terms of economic, military and cultural presence of Europe outside its borders – to the description of a common and public representation of the world. Edward Said called ‘imagined geography’ the ability of different European discourses to narrate colonial or non-European and non-Western elsewhere(s); Gilroy, James and Rodney found fault with the Eurocentric representations of the past and more than that, their writings gave visibility to other stories emerging from the peripheries of Europe.

I would like to offer a few reflections based on three of their most important works. My aim is twofold: to focus on processes of re-visiting institutionalized histories and problematize the process through which formerly invisibilized or hidden stories are made visible. Certainly, as argued in cultural studies, these historiographical practices work to bring to light stories previously relegated to oblivion. From a different perspective, we can see these re-evaluations of narratives as new forms of visualization of the past – a past that was never told before. Even if we adopted the Foucauldian model of discourse to understand the role of narrative in history, we would not be able to explain how unusual stories can be made visible, nor would we be able to substantiate a different gaze on the same topic. Consequently, we can theorize that the idea of discourse alone cannot explain visibility and visualization of the past, which

might be due to the fact that Foucault's paradigm does not admit of any form of counter-narrative or resistance. In short, while discourse analysis can help us explain how narratives work, we cannot account for other kinds of historical gazes. A brief overview of the books in question can bring the issue more sharply into focus.

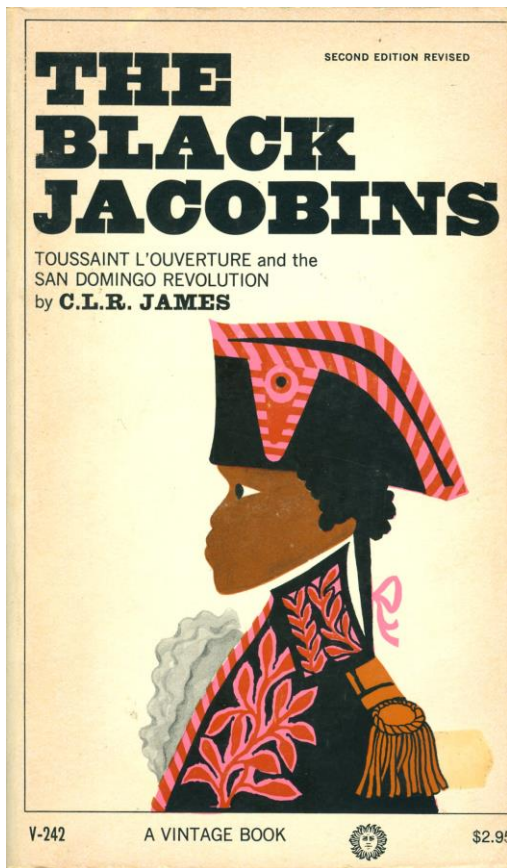


In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (1993), Paul Gilroy uses the metaphor of the Black Atlantic to examine the huge cultural space of slave deportation from Africa to America – “for him any serious study of black atlantic culture must include the influences of the European as well as the African American cultures” (Dwight McBride 1995, p. 338). In his opinion, intellectuals and historians have systematically obscured this chapter of the past, and the existence of cultural hybridity in particular. Accordingly, not only does *The Black Atlantic* criticize historical practices on slave trade but also contemporary political discourse on whiteness and blackness. Gilroy asserts:

Regardless of their affiliation to the right, left, or centre, groups have fallen back on the idea of cultural nationalism, on the overintegrated conceptions of culture which present immutable,

ethnic differences as an absolute break in the histories and experiences of "black" and "white" people. Against this choice stands another, more difficult option: the theorisation of creolisation, métissage, mestizaje, and hybridity. From the viewpoint of ethnic absolutism, this would be a litany of pollution and impurity. These terms are rather unsatisfactory ways of naming the process of cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity that exceed racial discourse and avoid capture by its agents (*Ibidem*, 74).

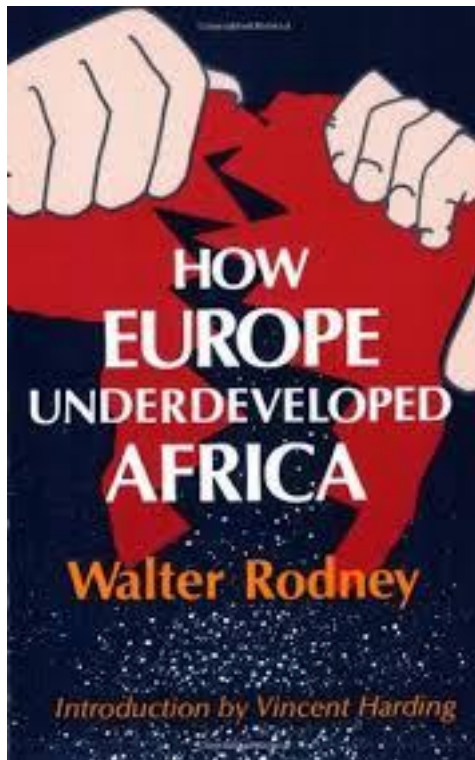
He challenges the widespread view that modernity is uniquely and distinctively western, expanding on W.E.B. Du Bois' notion of double consciousness and arguing that African-American culture is part of a transatlantic culture spanning from the Jubilee singers to Jimi Hendrix to rap. Hence, the Black Atlantic is a counter-culture of modernity – and now, we should add, a visual counter-narrative of the static European-Western “imagined geography”.



C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1989) points out that, before the French Revolution, the French West Indian colony of San Domingo supplied two-thirds of the overseas trade of France and was the greatest individual market for the European slave trade. "In August 1791, after two years of the French Revolution and its repercussions in San Domingo, the slaves revolted" (*Idibem*, X). In fact, the re-interpretation of the revolutionary motto *liberté, fraternité* and *égalité* provoked devastating and unexpected effects at the periphery of the French empire. Hence, contrary to the idea of the French revolution as expression of democracy, freedom and progress of the West, the political and cultural earthquake was not restricted to the French-European territory but also involved the colony of San Domingo. While *The Black Atlantic* opts for the re-evaluation of an area from the point of view of hybridity, *The Black Jacobins* highlights a plurality of gazes on such concepts and

historical topics as freedom and progress and their meaning in cultural-political perspective. In fact, Toussaint L'Ouverture, a black slave in San Domingo, adopts the keywords of the French Revolution in a bid to free his people. James argues:

The writing of history becomes ever more difficult. The power of God or the weakness of man, Christianity or the divine right of kings to govern wrong can easily be made responsible for the downfall of states and the birth of new societies. Such elementary conceptions lend themselves willingly to narrative treatment and from Tacitus to Macaulay, from Thucydides to Green, the traditionally famous historians have been more artist than scientist: they wrote so well because they saw so little. To-day by a natural reaction we tend to a personification of the social forces, great men being merely or nearly instruments in the hands of economic destiny. As so often the truth does not lie in between. Great men make history, but only such history as it is possible for them to make. Their freedom of achievement is limited by the necessities of their environment. To portray the limits of those necessities and the realisation, complete or partial, of all possibilities, that is the true business of the historian (*Ibidem*, XI).



At the core of Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1973) is underdevelopment in Africa – and the Western cultural concept of a black continent unable to develop on its own. As Rodney explains in the introduction, since the fifteenth century and throughout the colonial period, Africa has been regarded as a treasure trove of great resources – a vast fertile land full of natural riches. Africans, on the contrary, have been portrayed as unmindful of their fortune and lacking in the necessary know-how to take advantage of it. Rodney asserts:

[An] indispensable component of modern underdevelopment is that it expresses a particular relationship of exploitation: namely, the exploitation of one country by another. All of the countries named as ‘underdeveloped’ in the world are exploited by others; and the underdevelopment with which the world is now pre-occupied is a product of capitalist, imperialist and colonialist exploitation. African and Asian societies

were developing independently until they were taken over directly or indirectly by the capitalist powers. When that happened, exploitation increased and the export of surplus ensued, depriving the societies of the benefit of their natural resources and labour. That is an integral part of underdevelopment in the contemporary sense (*Ibidem*, 25).

Here, Rodney points out how the idea of underdeveloped countries is strictly connected to a certain power relation with Europe. His task as a historian is to deconstruct the world ‘underdeveloped’ and replace a geography based on the natural dominion of the First World over Africa (which is part of the Third World) with the complex system of narratives and economic practices that left the African continent impoverished.

From our project’s perspective, the three cases can be viewed as forms of visibility of the past. In the case of *The Black Atlantic*, the practice of mapping a transnational area is useful for reconsidering past and new identities and forms of belonging. C.L.R. James and his *Black Jacobins*, on the other hand, remarkably increase and multiply the meanings of a single word, idea or thought – as Edward Said, too, effectively proved with his traveling theory. Here various geographies, rather than a single cultural geography, act all at once engaging against one another.

I would like to conclude this article taking into account the Foucauldian idea of discourse in the perspective of historical visibility. In *L’Ordre du discours* (1971), Foucault does not take into account that language can be an open space – subjected to contact with other languages,

lexical borrowings and systemic errors that can at times be accepted or enter everyday ordinary speech. Furthermore, depending on socio-cultural dialogue codes, the identity of every subject and the use of words to achieve specific goals, words can assume different meanings even in the same sentence.

In this sense, when the three cases examined are further analyzed from the point of view of subjectivity, it is possible to note that Gilroy, James and Rodney are, to use a term by Jacques Derrida, not-only-European. In fact, Gilroy was born and raised in working-class London's East End to Guyanese and English parents and later educated at the University College School and Birmingham University, where he obtained his PhD with a research project on black British culture. As for C.L.R. James, he was born in Tunapunta, Trinidad, and educated at the English Queen's Royal College. He spent several years in England, where he worked as a sports journalist and joined a local Trotskyist group. Walter Rodney was born in the then British Guiana and attended the University College of the West Indies, in Jamaica, before moving to Tanzania.

This basic information is crucial to maintaining that their not-only-European-and-Western subjectivities were relevant in highlighting invisible or hidden stories. We can describe their positionalities as being 'in between' – as suggested by Homi K. Bhabha – or we can affirm that their identities are multiple. In either case, the process of "making visual" or "giving visibility" is deeply connected to a problematization of Eurocentric and Western knowledge. In this sense, there is a similarity between the stories of the diaspora from the Horn of Africa and those narrated by Gilroy, James and Rodney: they are neither African nor European, but rather European and African at the same time, with extensive contact – in terms of narratives, cultural memories and identities – between different imagined geographies.



*Figure 2* Kara Walker, *The Emancipation Approximation (Scene 18)*, 1999–2000. Source: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/kara-walker-the-emancipation-approximation-scene-number-18>

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