

[Back to index](#)***Dislocations: Transatlantic Perspectives on Postnational American Studies*****Reconfiguring American Studies?: The Paradoxes of Postnationalism****Stephen Shapiro  
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Thoreau said that patriotism was like a maggot in the mind. Soon we, too, will look back on nationalist-defined criticism with the same nausea we feel after reading declarations of racial or sexual prejudice in our, until then, favorite authors. The once respectable field of Oriental Studies has long since become a cliché for scholarly complicity in legitimizing imperialism. Recently, American Studies has begun seeing itself in the same light. Donald Pease, among others, has shown the elective affinity between Cold War agendas and the post-War institutionalization of American Studies. Postnationalist criticism seeks to provide relief from the mental damage caused by relying on the Nation-State as an innocent, immanent category. But any disclaimer against earlier formulations of American Studies ought to judge itself before the same bar. Since there is not any consensus about what constitutes a postnationalist thesis, object of investigation, or syllabus of primary and critical texts, there is still time to avoid foreseeable pitfalls.

The recent call for postnationalism responds to three key post-1989 developments: the impact of new information technologies, like the internet, as devices that further erode time-space distinctions; the end of the first Cold War, which problematizes organic notions of the West, as the Soviet Union's break-up unleashed a wave of "white nation" decolonization; and the increased awareness about corporate techniques of globalization and their use of meta-state institutions, like the IMF or WTO, to privatize national social welfare schemes, while relying on local police to safeguard private property and suppress democratic protest. Given that all three trends have worked to reinstall U.S. global authority, to what degree does postnationalist criticism reinforce the current reconfiguration of American hegemony under the different conditions of the inter-millennial phase?

The "American Century" rose with Fordist corporate structures and modernist slogans of abrupt renovation, which sanctified U.S. liberalism as the moral legatee of anti-Holocaust energies. This mode of U.S. eminence began dissolving throughout the 1970s and 80s, and Reaganite bluster simply suppressed awareness that the post-War bubble had burst. In times of systemic crisis, Gramsci argues, elites engineer a cultural transformation, or "passive revolution," that prefigures and preconditions a later political-economic one. The paradox of postmodern celebrations of the decentered subject's hybrid identity is that even as U.S. academics were under attack by cultural fundamentalists, the corporate interests simultaneously benefited from the university's propagation of new social attitudes that business leaders could not have engineered for themselves. The theoretical de-regulation effect of poststructuralist criticism, and a certain strain of micro-power critiques, helped make common sense the economic de-regulation needed to implement the Postfordist hollowing out of core production facilities and subversion of centralized union power through subcontracting. Celebrations of fragmentation harmonized with the rise of a postmodern liberalism, which rebranded the U.S.'s natural right to rule, this time as an exemplar of new age gumbo multiculturalism, rather than obsolete melting pot modernity.

While no potentially progressive critical endeavor can allow itself to be immobilized by the fear of appropriation, postnationalist criticism must ask itself how its formulations may be co-opted. One such tendency might be the recent use of "transatlanticism," as a term valorized by an increasing number of conferences, publications, and degree programs.

The trouble with transatlanticism lies with its conceptual inability to apprehend the cultural, economic, and ecological mechanisms that generate social history. At the epistemic level, transatlanticism invokes a

static binary that current criticism would otherwise avoid, if not seek to dismantle. By implicitly naturalizing and foregrounding the Anglophone poles of England and the U.S., transatlanticism once more avoids acknowledging how Euro-American productions are contingent on the matrix formed by Africa, the Caribbean, and the other Americas. Collapsing the Atlantic basin into a self-contained, mono-linguistic zone, transatlanticism risks reinstating a triumphalist Whig history, which disseminates an uncomplicated version of imperial events. By imaging cultural transmission in broadly lateral ways, transatlanticism marginalizes the “histories from the bottom up” that American Studies has often prided itself on excavating.

One example of a historical narrative that a weaker version of postnationalism can not recover appears with the 1789 *Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano* by Gustavus Vassa, the African. Born in what is today eastern Nigeria, Equiano was an Ibo who was captured and shipped to the Caribbean. After being bought by a Philadelphia Quaker, he later purchased his freedom. Settling in London, Equiano became active during the 1780s in abolitionist circles and the repatriation scheme to colonize Sierra Leone with free, mainly London, blacks. The project failed because of managerial corruption, and Equiano partially wrote the *Narrative* to exculpate himself from charges of graft. Today, the *Narrative* is often read to illustrate the construction of an ambivalent racial identity, seen with Equiano’s coterminous use of his free African and English slave name. This dualizing approach still overlooks what the *Narrative* can tell us about its geocultural conditions of production.

Oceanic slavery existed before the eighteenth century, but the English acquisition of the *Asiento* gave Britain the legitimate monopoly over the New World slave trade and cover to smuggle beyond the treaty’s legal limits. The story of England’s rise from the profits of slave-trading and sugar-planting in the period does not need repeating here. Less recognized is the cultural interventions that the trade flows put into play.

Slavers in the eighteenth century responded to problems of supply and demand. The speculative slave trade, like tobacco and sugar agriculture, constantly risked depleting its natural resources due to over-farming. Just as planters ultimately abandoned a worn-out Barbados for Jamaica, slavers shifted their geography of capture in relation to its yield. In the early 1700s, slavers primarily focused on the mid-west coast of Africa—the Gold Coast and Bight of Benin— as cache zones for the output of the interior slavery increasingly produced by inner-African conflicts. After some decades of slaving, fewer Africans could be acquired in these regions, especially given the expanding sugar market’s increasing demand for labor. Slavers thus moved their focus downward, along the African coast, to Angola. By the latter half of the century, the southern African regions, likewise, had fewer humans to offer, and the trade returned northward to the mid-coast, where time’s passage had allowed later generations to repopulate the regions.

The significance of the slave trade’s movement is that different regional and village claves (“tribes”) appear in the Americas at different phases during the century, and, consequently, transmit different customary practices that can’t simply be homogenized as “African.” Aggregating African cultures is like characterizing nineteenth-century immigration to the U.S. as “European” and thus erasing, for instance, the cultural and religious differences between the German and Irish immigrants of the 1840s and the Slavic, Jewish, and Italian immigration in the 1880s. Just as different sections of European claves had varying customs and preconceptions about extramural exchange and immigrant life even before they made the passage, the same was true for Africans. For example, the mid-African claves had already had long intercultural and trade experience with North African Muslims (and through them links to the Levant and India) that Angolese Africans lacked.

But even these regional distinctions need differentiation because slave traders responded to the planters’ anthropologizing of the African claves. Not all Africans were equally valued on the auction bloc. Ashantees or Mandingos were thought to be rebellious, but valued as hard-workers once they were “seasoned.” Least desired were Ibos, who were thought prone to depression and suicide, and thus a bad investment, except as house servants, since they were considered to be more graceful and elegant than other Africans. Needless to say, these opinions have more to say about white sociology than they do

about Africans, but the lack of reality does not remove the reality-effect of belief; Equiano is aware of these prejudices and he takes care to insist that Ibo society is naturally a happy and careless one.

Because Caribbean planters were less willing to purchase Ibos, slavers, who at times had difficulty seizing other slaves, were often left with unsaleable goods. Being canny traders, the slavers simply carried these Africans to the next market, which, according to the tidal flows, were the mid- and southern Atlantic colonies. U.S. planters shared the same prejudices against Ibos, but they had less choice in the matter as they had to take what their Caribbean colleagues refused. The social point here is that differences between Anglo-Caribbean/U.S. and Franco-Caribbean/Louisiana cultures may have as much to do with the different groups of Africans brought to these regions, and how they reacted with their European captors, than with any intrinsic national difference between the different European colonizers. If Haitian and New Orleans Black society has a more vibrant voodoo, or voodoo, culture than the U.S. Eastern Seaboard Black one, it may be because the Bamarras, who were primarily captured by the French, intersected with Franco-Catholic culture in ways that created a different social matrix than that produced by the intersection of Fantee with Anglo-Methodism/Baptism.

In *The World They Made Together*, Mechal Sobel demonstrates the ways in which white American culture was influenced by African customs, particularly in matters supernatural.<sup>[1]</sup> The difference between the First and Second Great Awakenings may largely belong to the latter's inclusion of African beliefs. Because Ibos were the predominate group among the last generation of Middle Passage slaves and in a more favorable position to transmit African customs into white households, since they tended not to be field hands, we might want to speak less about the *Africanization* of U.S. American culture, and more, specifically, about the *Nigerianization* of U.S. American culture as a means of specifying the lines of continuity. For instance, compare Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which concerns an infant-demon's haunting refusal to stay buried, with Ibo Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, which tells a story about a demon-child who must be exorcised in order to break the cycles of vengeful death and rebirth. Is Morrison mediating generally African or specifically Ibo cultural residues? Conversely, if Zora Neal Hurston went to Haiti to discover her narrative roots, she may have been observing a different Africa than that of most U.S. Blacks' descent.

Because Equiano only spent a few weeks inside U.S. territory, it's often asked why American Studies includes his narrative within its reconstructed canon. As a transported Ibo, Equiano typifies cultural flows that become incorporated and sustained in the U.S., especially after oceanic slaving slows after 1800, which gave the last passage generation a founding presence for the next century, when slavery relied on domestic (re)production. More importantly for postnational studies, Equiano's *Narrative* suggests how cultural links between the various Anglophone compartments, like the U.S. and England, arose not in direct relation with one another, but only as particular African slaves act as the bearers of cultural transmission.

After being freed Equiano floated to London, where he found it difficult to find work in a city where he had limited patronage claims. With spare time on his hands, he learns how to play the French horn. Equiano's choice was not idiosyncratic because other accounts of the period record London Africans playing the French horn. If Equiano may have picked up this brass because of its proximity to African instrumentation, then the period's ornamental fashions, which favored Africans as servants, hairdressers (another of Equiano's occupations), and musicians, may have been inflected by slaves indirectly transported from the British colonies, where the Africans had already acquired some awareness of white manners.

The longer he spent in England, the more Equiano moved within abolitionist circles. Ultimately, he supported the Sierra Leone recolonization project, arguing for slavery's end partially on the economic grounds that England could profit from Africa as a source for raw materials, like cotton, rather than inhuman mine for slaves. By the 1780s, English authorities were amenable to the idea of transforming Sierra Leone into a raw materials colony because, as Eric Williams showed, the government was shifting its imperial policy from a regime based on West Indian slaves and sugar to domestic industry and colonial (East Indian) resources. Sierra Leone represented an experimental step away from eighteenth-century colonialism towards the development of nineteenth-century imperialism.

But colonization cannot work without colonizers, and whites could not survive the high mortality rates of Africa's pathogenic frontier. Consequently, the Sierra Leone project relied on black colonists. This scheme had the additional benefit of resolving the new problem of a recent black, London underclass, which came about as an unintended result of the British offer to emancipate blacks who stayed loyal during the American War for Independence. These former slaves, mainly veterans like Equiano, came to England with the retreating British, but, unsurprisingly, they found urban poverty and unemployment their new fate. Most of the returned Africans clustered in the St.-Giles-in-the-fields parish, an already long notorious slum, and their concentration in the area gave rise to the period's phrase, 'St. Giles blackbirds.'

The Sierra Leone colonization project was, thus, like Oglethorpe's plan to populate Georgia from the pickings of the debtor's prisons; both were schemes that sought to relieve England from the presence of potentially disruptive, welfare budget draining poor. Yet, while the Sierra Leone project is often characterized as one of the first proto-black nationalist ventures, a third of its colonists were white women. Dorothy M. George calls these women "chiefly prostitutes," but this is a charge that would have been applied to any single poor female. Who might have these women have been? Most likely they were also inhabitants of St. Giles, which was primarily an Irish rookery, full of refugees from Ireland's own colonization by absentee landlords.

It does not take much, I think, to sense that the moment of Irish and Ibos moving to Sierra Leone can not really be explained as a *transatlantic* phenomenon. A better way to describe Equiano's paradigmatic transfers is *circumatlantic*. The conceptual advantages of abandoning transatlanticism in favor of circumatlanticism are three-fold.

First, circumatlanticism imagines the Atlantic basin as a matrix in which all sections exert intrinsic pressures that define the space, even if the movement of goods and people does not actually transverse the Atlantic, but travels along its perimeter. This is also to say that circumatlantic flows structure and encapsulate interior circulations, like that of the circum-Irish Sea or circum-Caribbean.

Secondly, according to Joseph Roach, from whose *Cities of the Dead: Circum-atlantic Performance* I take the term: "The concept of a circum Atlantic world (as opposed to a trans-atlantic one) insists on the centrality of the diasporic and genocidal histories of Africa and the Americas, North and South, in the creation of a culture of modernity."<sup>[ii]</sup> This is to say that the concept of the circumatlantic insists on the role of South America, all too often elided in the stock phrase triangular traffic, even though only 10% of captured Africans ended up in North America. And that the Caribbean acts as a plexus with the continental quadriga.

Thirdly, departing from Roach, the circumatlantic does not arise because of modernity in itself, but specifically capitalist modernity. The advantage of *circum* rather than *trans* is not a matter of replacing one geometric abstraction for another, a circle for a line, but that, even at the level of its name, the circumatlantic underlines how social geography is shaped by the circuits of capital flows, where the search for surplus-value contours the topography of encounters. Modernity as an abstraction did not lead to oceanic slavery; nascent capitalism compelled Europeans to chase peoples round the globe. The Columbine exploration was not financed by the Spanish nobility because of any commitment to Enlightenment rationalism and the search for cartographic clarity, but that Iberian interests sought a faster passage to India that would circumvent the Venetian stranglehold on Mediterranean sea lanes. African slavery was summoned because labor-intensive sugar-cane farming became the mode of English and French profiteering after their failure to break through Spanish naval barriers and directly appropriate South American precious metal mines.

The construction of the circumatlantic results from the various European powers efforts to emulate their competitors and then innovate in the bid for supremacy. Not a form, but a dynamic, the circumatlantic does not derive from the power of any one nation, but the inter-relation of many. Each Nation-State attempts to gain autonomy, this is why mini-circuits (like that between England, Ireland, and Scotland) arise, but cultural formations only truly emerge in the force-field created by inter-State competition. Equiano's displacements are comprehensible only in the context of eighteenth-century Anglo-French conflict, which squeezes him through space. For his journey to liberation comes as a result of being

enlisted as a tar in the English navy of the Seven Years' War. Consequently, when Equiano marks his passage to empowerment, he describes his loss of fear, not as his becoming like a white person, but his turning into "almost an Englishman," a negative term, meaning "not a Frenchman." Likewise, the Sierra Leone venture arose only after the debris of U.S. independence, a decolonization itself financed by the French as revenge for their defeat in the Seven Years War.

The circumatlantic competition between European powers does establish the conditions for new emergent formations, an object that postnationalism may aptly investigate. In their groundbreaking *The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker use Equiano as their concluding emblem to characterize the production of an Atlanticist inter-racial plebeian culture as an unintended result of the Restoration.<sup>[iii]</sup> Rediker and Linebaugh begin by asking what happens to the antinomian, revolutionary politics of the seventeenth century after political repression? Their answer is that these energies became circulated through England's nautical matrix as the newly landless and lordless men went to the seas. Enlisting with a mixture of desperation and coercion, these sailors, nonetheless, circulated the culture of resistance through the interstices of the English imperial machine, a sensibility that did not divide along racial lines. Sadly, Linebaugh and Rediker follow E.P. Thompson's nationalist history, which posits an English working class, rather than the working class in England and its dominions. Consequently, they fail to envision the larger horizon of their research, which bespeaks the generality of alternative networks throughout the Atlantic basin. Whenever European powers impressed aboriginal peoples, a group of aboriginals escaped to live an outlaw existence on the border, like the Jamaican Maroons, the blacks whose guerrilla-like existence in the mountains proved a constant thorn in the side of English authorities, and acts as the forebears of today's backcountry Ras Tafarian communities. Some English plebeians, escaping from Albion's class hierarchies, lit out for the territory and joined the maroons to form a mixed-race, lower-class culture. However, the modernity of maroon culture is not limited to one space or nationality, since the phenomenon occurs throughout the circumatlantic world, wherever insubordinate aboriginals and rebellious European plebeians come into contact as mutual refugees from capitalist reterritorialization. Maroonotopias are marginal spaces under constant threat of extinction, but they also generate, as a condition of this distress, a utopian postnational community that does not represent either an organic tradition of First Peoples or an unmediated European preeminence.

In the North American realm, traces of maroon experience appear in the context of encounter with the Indian nations. In her now classic *Captivity and Sentiment*, Michelle Burnham reads Mary Rowlandson's 1682 captivity narrative as an example of how a Puritan woman's contact with the Algonquin Indians provides her with the means of recognizing the gendered limits placed on her as a captive in patriarchal white society.<sup>[iv]</sup> Burnham finds Rowlandson's narrative exceptional because it grants the Indians subjectivity by recording, albeit in a limited way, their voices. Because the Indians present Rowlandson with an illustration of a more expansive role for women in the economy, Burnham argues that Rowlandson's pays them back, in a kind of narrative exchange, by registering their speech. While Burnham adroitly argues that captivity is productive for Rowlandson, she does not mention how Rowlandson's narrative mistakes the resurgence of Indian militarism as a native response to their own captivity. For the very conditions that led to Rowlandson's capture were caused by the crisis caused by the encroaching pincer movement of the French and English imperial conflict. The episode epitomizes a long crisis for the Algonquins and other Indians, who have been forced over time to be alienated from their non-profit relationship to Nature in order to service the European consumer market for furs. From small-pox decimation of the slaves to the penetration of trading demands that imbalance the slaves' traditional hierarchies, as hunter's now gain a higher status in the group, the Algonquins' actions are reactions to the emergency of the encroaching frontier, a frontier marked less by the advent of European bodies than that of the capitalist marketplace. Themselves captives to a process of historical transformation, Rowlandson's captors are not without their own fear for survival. When the Algonquins ask Rowlandson how much they should bargain for her ransom, they reveal their own tenuous understanding of these new social relations, where cultural exchange is marked in terms of profit, rather than use.

Like the maroon culture, Rowlandson's tale emerges out of the global conditions of peoples - white, black, and red - who are circulated through space as a condition of inter-state competition in the capitalist world-system. One task of postnationalist criticism would be to unpack the manifold results of the extra-national conditions that send groups clashing together.

Finally, for postnationalist criticism to make a difference, it must address what critical schools it means to replace. Here I mean less a retrograde nationalist criticism, than an older progressive tradition. Specifically, if the postnationalist imaginary calls for a criticism based on co-operative political solidarities, how does this differ from the socialist imaginary? What conceptual advantage do we achieve with postnationalism's proposed lexicon? Is postnationalism simply ideological in the negative sense, as it acts to displace or obscure the legacy of older left critical traditions? Frequently, it seems that the nascent postnationalist critique frames the debate as one between liberalism and social democracy. If the argument is going to be contained within the narrow defile of these limits, like the freedom to choose between Coke and Pepsi, then, for many, this is a debate that is not worth having. Reforming American Studies in ways that only reinterprets the U.S. in ways that synchronizes with its renovated hegemony is not a compelling project. The mission of a true postnationalist critique remains that old challenge: nurturing the rise of egalitarian co-operation.

#### Endnotes

[i] Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton University Press, 1993).

[ii] Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (Columbia University Press, 1996).

[iii] Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Beacon Press, 2000).

[iv] Michelle Burnham, *Captivity and Sentiment: Cultural Exchange in American Literature, 1682-1861* (Dartmouth College, 1997).