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The transnational turn, Houston Baker’s new southern studies and Patrick Neate’s Twelve Bar Blues

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Abstract This article considers Houston Baker’s take on the ‘new southern studies’ in Turning South Again (2001) in relation to the transnational turn in American studies and Paul Gilroy’s theory of the ‘Black Atlantic’. The article begins by pointing out that the vision of ‘the South’ formulated in southern (literary) studies during and after the 1950s frequently cut against the nationalism and exceptionalism central to the development of American studies in the same period. However, southern literary critics and writers (both white and black) developed their own exceptionalist and nativist models of identity, including Donald Davidson’s ‘autochthonous ideal’ and the ‘Quentissential fallacy’ – in William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom!, Quentin Compson’s claim that ‘you would have to be born’ in the South to understand it. A transnational turn displaces such southern exceptionalism and nativism. However, Baker’s ‘new southern studies’ approach to African-American experience (from slavery to ‘United States black modernism’) proceeds through a predominantly regional-national framework and privileges ‘the South’ and his own native southern authority. From a transnational perspective, Baker’s approach becomes problematic when it facilitates the ‘Quentissential’ repudiation of Gilroy’s Black Atlantic. The article concludes by discussing the transnational South of Patrick Neate’s novel, Twelve Bar Blues, with reference to Gilroy and songs by Billie Holiday and Eric B and Rakim.

Keywords autochthony ● Black Atlantic ● blues ● hip-hop ● nativism ● southern studies ● transnationalism
The vaunted ‘transnational turn’ in American studies over the last decade or so has involved a critique and rejection of established disciplinary modes of thinking that, wittingly or not, reinforced the ideology of the US nation-state and myths of ‘American exceptionalism’. Transnational American studies is developing a comparative critical model that re-reads and resituates (for example) American literature in wider, more ‘worldly’ frameworks that move beyond national borders. However, it is not yet entirely clear how transnational American studies will deal with a problem that is, so to speak, closer to home: the problem of regionalism within the USA. In his recent volume *Virtual Americas* (2002), Paul Giles fruitfully interrogates the national imaginary of American literature by reconfiguring older, more or less canonical works (by Melville, Frost, Douglass, and others) as ‘transnational fictions’ that engage with a ‘transatlantic imaginary’. But what about literatures that previously have been regarded as regional? Might not regional US literatures, too, have taken the transnational turn?

These are particularly pertinent questions within the field of southern studies, and with reference to southern literature. Giles observes that:

The area studies model endorsed most frequently by American studies has involved the attempt to encompass a particular bounded territory – characteristically, a nation, but also smaller variants of the nation space, such as a region or a city – and through this enabling circumscription to treat that space allegorically, as emblematic of a particular kind of identity. (Giles, 2002: 7)

Certainly, southern studies has tended to mimic the methodological approach of American studies by reading southern literature as emblematic or allegorical of the South itself as a socio-historical and socio-spatial entity and identity. Indeed, southern literary scholars are notorious for speaking ad nauseam about the ‘sense of place’ that supposedly characterized the region’s identity and literature. Giles has a point, too, when he alludes to scholars ‘who now acknowledge themselves sceptical in principle about formulations of national or regional cultures [but who] nevertheless continue in practice to endorse their familiar, comfortable lineaments – sometimes with an ironic aside about their necessarily “fictive” nature’ (Giles, 2002: 266).

Southern literary scholars have been grappling for nearly 20 years now with the idea that ‘the South’ is less natural or historical than ‘written’ or ‘invented’. However, many have continued to configure ‘southern regionalism’ in parochial and self-perpetuating terms, without comparative reference or range beyond the South (or the ‘fictive’ idea of ‘the South’) and the US nation-state.

Nevertheless, transnationalists should be very wary of simply conflating ‘national or regional cultures’ when talking about the ways in which America has been studied. For in important ways, the established methodology – and ideology – of southern studies has not been synonymous with the US nation-state, or with American studies. Indeed, not
only southern studies as an academic field but also southern identity more broadly conceived has frequently been written or invented in regional and neo-national terms that explicitly situate ‘the South’ against ‘the North’ and national myths of exceptionalism. In his classic essay ‘The Search for Southern Identity’, historian C. Vann Woodward theorized the South as the exception to American exceptionalism, arguing that ‘Southern myths’ challenged ‘national myths, American myths’ (Woodward, 1968: 13, 19), and that the South’s (he meant, of course, the white South’s) history of military defeat cut against the national experience of triumph and the attendant myth of American innocence. Also in the 1950s, the burgeoning field of southern literary studies was largely defined by and through a version of southern exceptionalism that drew heavily on the thought of the Nashville Agrarians, especially Allen Tate. In 1945, Tate’s essay ‘The New Provincialism’ had launched a spirited attack on the ‘foolish’ American literary nationalism of Bernard de Voto, Alfred Kazin, and Van Wyck Brooks (Tate, 1968: 535–6). Frequently working in the Agrarian rather than American (studies) grain, southern literary critics during and after the 1950s followed Tate and his accomplices by defining ‘southern literature’ through tropes of regional identity figured in binary opposition to supposedly northern or national motifs: rural versus urban, agrarian versus industrial, community versus individualism, place versus placelessness, and so on.

One of the most prominent notions of southern regional identity promulgated by the Agrarians was Donald Davidson’s ‘autochthonous ideal’. For Davidson the southerner, and the southern writer, operated in unself-conscious harmony with his environment: his identity was naturally rooted in the rural southern soil. Davidson’s concept, first formulated in 1926, proved remarkably resilient in southern studies; it was reworked as recently as 1991 in Fred Hobson’s The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World. But probably the most famous and frequently cited expression of regional identity in all of southern studies comes not from the Agrarians or even a real person, but a fictional character: Quentin Compson, in William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! (1936). Towards the end of Absalom, Absalom!, Quentin’s room-mate at Harvard, the Canadian Shreve McCannon, takes the provocative position of a voyeur, seeing the South as an exotic other within both the USA and a wider North American imaginary:

Because it’s something my people haven’t got. Or if we have got it, it all happened long ago across the water and so now there aint nothing to look at every day to remind us of it. We dont live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves . . . and bullets in the dining room table and such, to be always reminding us to never forget. What is it? Something you live and breathe in like air? . . . a kind of entailed birthright father and son and father and son of never forgiving General Sherman, so that forever more as long as your children’s children produce children you won’t be anything but a descendant
Here, Shreve in 1909 – or Faulkner in 1936 – anticipates Woodward’s theory that (white) southern exceptionalism was realized, in an irony of southern history, through Confederate military defeat. Quentin takes umbrage, however, and seizes upon Shreve’s historical error regarding Pickett’s charge at Gettysburg to assert that, ‘You can’t understand it [the South]. You would have to be born there’ (Faulkner, 1990: 289). In these famous lines, Quentin not only assuages his dislocation as a Mississippian living in Massachusetts, but also effaces his non-southern friend’s claim to interpretative legitimacy by invoking the notion of (his own) native-born knowledge. In other words, by securing the authority of southern autochthony for himself despite his decidedly un-Davidsonian sense of displacement at Harvard, Quentin refutes an alternative transnational (Canadian) perspective on the South postulated from a northern place.

Commenting on Quentin’s rebuke of Shreve as an example of how southerners produce and naturalize ideology to forestall ideological intervention from without, Michael Kreyling has observed that ‘[a]ccording to Quentin’s rules, only a southerner can dispute a southerner, and no sort of dialectic is ever possible’ (Kreyling, 1998: 6). And yet, as Kreyling notes, Faulkner’s character has repeatedly been cited by scholars engaged in the ‘study of southernness’ in order to legitimize (their own) ‘southern cultural discourse’ (Kreyling, 1998: 105). In the process, Quentin’s problematic sense of displacement is glossed over, and his discursive but undialectical model of southernness becomes as ‘natural’ as Davidson’s autochthonous idealism. The claim that ‘you would have to be born there’ might usefully be termed, to borrow Kreyling’s neologism, the ‘Quentissential’ fallacy. For the Quentissential fallacy reveals the limits of southern exceptionalism and autochthonous idealism, not least in traditional southern studies – limits that preclude dialectical national or transnational perspectives from beyond the South itself.

So far, I have been talking like Woodward about white southern identity and cultural discourse. But black southerners, too, have sometimes been tempted by autochthonous idealism, despite their profound awareness that the deep structures of white racism imperil such an idealism. I have already noted that Fred Hobson adopts Davidson’s term, but he also adapts it in a revisionist, anti-racist fashion (Davidson was, after all, an outspoken white supremacist and segregationist). For Hobson, the writer whose work and worldview most ‘admirably fulfils Davidson’s autochthonous ideal’ (Hobson, 1991: 94) is an African American from Louisiana, Ernest Gaines. Hobson posits that Gaines’ fiction reveals that rural black southerners embody ‘place, community, man’s ties with the natural world’ (Hobson, 1991: 92), despite their being put ‘in their place’ by white slave- and landowners. As support for
Hobson’s argument, one can point to Gaines’ novel *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983). Here, Johnny Paul’s eulogy to his community’s rooted relationship with the landscape – a distinctly agrarian (and Agrarian) way of life apparently in danger of being uprooted by mechanized farming – can be seen as an expression of autochthonous idealism (as well as the pathetic fallacy). However, Johnny Paul’s idealized vision of ‘black people’ and nature entwined as one against the machine in the garden is counterbalanced by his grim recognition that rural black southern life has been inextricable from a social history of brutally unrelenting and unrewarded labour:

Like now they trying to get rid of all proof that black people ever farmed this land with plows and mules – like if they had nothing from the starten but motor machines. Sure, one day they will get rid of the proof that we ever was, but they ain’t go’n do it while I’m still here. Mama and Papa worked too hard in these fields. They mama and they papa worked too hard in these same fields. They mama and they papa worked too hard, too hard to have that tractor just come in that graveyard and destroy all proof that they ever was. I’m the last one left. I had to see that the graves stayed for a little while longer. But I just didn’t do it for my own people. I did it for every last one back there under them trees. And I did it for every four-o’clock, every rosebush, every palm-of-Christian ever growed on this place. (Gaines, 1992: 92)

Another black southern writer, Alice Walker, anticipated Hobson by some two decades (and *A Gathering of Old Men* by 13 years) when she celebrated Gaines’ ability to write about rural black southerners in her 1970 essay ‘The Black Writer and the Southern Experience’. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Walker’s essay, however, is the way in which she both celebrates and authenticates (her own) rooted, rural ‘southern experience’ by setting it against a non-southern way of life and knowledge. Walker notes that she does not want ‘to romanticize the Southern black country life’ because ‘I hated it, generally’ (Walker, 1984: 19); thus she writes against Quentin Compson’s notorious refrain, ‘I don’t hate it [the South]! . . . I don’t hate it!’ (Faulkner, 1990: 303). But Walker goes on to present her own experience of the rural South in nativist and organicist terms figured explicitly – in an echo of Quentin’s rebuke to Shreve – against an outsider perspective:

Perhaps my Northern brothers will not believe me when I say there is a great deal of positive material I can draw from my ‘underprivileged’ background. But they have never lived, as I have, at the end of a long road in a house that was faced by the edge of the world on one side and nobody for miles on the other. They have never experienced the magnificent quiet of a summer day when the heat is intense and one is so very thirsty, as one moves across the dusty cotton fields, that one learns forever that water is the essence of all life. In the cities it cannot be so clear to one that he is a creature of the earth,
feeling the soil between the toes, smelling the dust thrown up by the rain, loving the earth so much that one longs to taste it and sometimes does. (Walker, 1984: 20–1)

It would not be quite right to suggest that Walker ‘privileges’ the South and her own southern identity here – rather, she foregrounds her “underprivileged” background. Like Gaines, Walker challenges complacent readers (whether black northerners or not) who tend to see the South simply as a rural site of white racism and (ergo) black poverty, and who as such are surprised and even disturbed by Walker’s celebration of her organic relationship with the southern soil that seeps ‘between the toes’. Yet the irony of southern autochthony is that Walker’s worldview might be more recognizable to Davidson and his fellow Nashville Agrarians than to Walker’s ‘Northern brothers’.

As Jon Smith and Katherine Henninger have argued in recent review essays, a transnational turn in southern studies, as well as in American studies, enables us to get beyond exceptionalisms and autochthonous idealisms of both the US national and southern regional kinds (Smith, 2004: 144–7; Henninger, 2004: 177–9). On one hand, such a transnational turn challenges any lingering area studies inclination to read the South as simply a regional microcosm of the nation – and, by extension, to see southern studies as simply (in Giles’ term) a ‘smaller variant’ of American studies. On the other hand, a transnational turn might guard against that tendency described by Woodward, and prevalent in traditional southern studies, to regard the region and regionalism as the corrective to American nationalism, as the exception to American exceptionalism. More specifically, and most importantly for my purposes here, a transnational approach displaces the autochthonous ideal and the Quentinessential fallacy, generating the kind of dialectic from which Quentin excludes the Canadian Shreve, and which Walker seems to deny to northern urban blacks.

For scholars in contemporary American studies, and especially African-American studies, Paul Gilroy’s ‘Black Atlantic’ has been a particularly useful theoretical model; it has had rather less currency in southern studies. Yet the Black Atlantic model might help to reveal the limitations of not only ‘African-American exceptionalism’ – something which Gilroy’s work explicitly challenges – but also the similar tendencies towards notions of (neo-)nationalism, nativism, essentialism, autochthony, authenticity and rootedness that have informed traditional southern studies. The value of the Black Atlantic to southernists is tantalizingly suggested in Robert Gross’ landmark essay on the transnational turn in American studies. Glossing Gilroy, Gross suggests that the South can be seen as routed and transnational, as well as rooted and regional, and for blacks as well as whites: ‘Forget the sentimental search for roots in any native soil, whether a lost Africa or a deep South. . . . In the black Atlantic, people and cultures have always been in motion, trading, influencing,
appropriating from one another, and leaving a record of “inescapable hybridity and intermixture of ideas”’ (Gross, 2000: 378).

But even as debate rages about the transnational turn and southernists grapple with its implications for their own field, prominent scholars within American studies have been calling for, and are beginning to enact, a ‘new southern studies’. Arguably the key text for this ‘new southern studies’ is Houston Baker Jr.’s Turning South Again: Re-Thinking Modernism/Re-Reading Booker T. (2001). Turning South Again demands attention because here we have an eminent ‘Americanist’ (rather than an established ‘southernist’) heeding his own recent, rousing claim (made in American Literature, rather than, say, Southern Literary Journal) that ‘a new southern studies’ should be central to ‘current American Studies scholarship’ (Baker and Nelson, 2001: 231–2). In the prologue to Turning South Again, Baker asserts that ‘a new southern studies is long past due’ because, among other things, it will remind us that African-American experience is bound up with the South (Baker, 2001: 9). Baker is not calling for a return to parochially regionalist scholarship, however. On the contrary: he wants to focus on the South because ‘the deep-rootedness of the very worst of southernness’ (Baker, 2001: 22) – white racism – has been and remains prevalent throughout the nation. Baker’s argument that Americanists must ‘turn South again’ in order to comprehend the nation as a whole is as persuasive as it is impassioned. A sceptic might point out that situating ‘a new southern studies’ at the centre of contemporary American studies risks reproducing a distinctive fault of traditional American studies: the tendency to privilege a region (New England, the West) as, in Giles’ phrase, ‘synechdocic of American culture as a whole’ (Giles, 2002: 7). Baker negotiates this potential pitfall by paraphrasing Malcolm X (‘Mississippi was anywhere in the United States south of the Canadian border’ [Baker, 2001: 10]) and John O. Killens (‘America was all regionally southern, consisting of down south, up south, and out south’ [Baker, 2001: 24]). In other words, the South has never been merely the narrow synechdocic of the nation; the nation was – and is – what we usually call ‘the South’. Or, as Baker and Dana Nelson put it in the American Literature preface, ‘“The South” is the US social, political, racial, economic, ethical, and everyday-life imaginary written as “regionalism”’ (Baker and Nelson, 2001: 235).

But while Baker usefully interrogates established notions of region and nation, his emphasis on the region-nation interrelationship is also problematic. The problem has less to do with Baker’s perceptive exposé of the suppressed homologies between the southern regional and US national imaginaries than the way he focuses on these homologies over and against an alternative, transnational approach: that of the Black Atlantic. In a ‘concluding meditation’, Baker offers a brief but revealing critical discussion of Gilroy’s The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (1993): less revealing about Gilroy’s book, however, than Baker’s own critical posture. For in order to resituate the regional South...
within his predominantly national American(ist) framework, Baker downplays the possibilities of seeing the South in a transnational (Black Atlantic) context.

Baker begins his critique of *The Black Atlantic* with a point that has real merit: that Gilroy’s ‘organizing symbol’ of ships in motion across the Black Atlantic cartography of Europe, America, Africa and the Caribbean ‘remains surprisingly abstract’. Baker subsequently becomes more assertive, but also more reductive. He declares that Gilroy is less interested in developing a detailed ‘multilocalational’ analysis of the relationship between ships, plantations, and the transatlantic slave trade than in ‘issuing a sprightly monograph in the service of black diasporic music criticism’, through which Gilroy supposedly wants to revisit his ‘halcyon years when his chief preoccupation was popular music criticism’. The attack intensifies as Baker argues that Gilroy’s ostensibly ‘diasporic’ approach actually contracts further into ‘an at times Britishly “provincial” repertoire of black popular song’ that ‘ultimately rings (at least for me) a surprisingly English “changing same” on the old popular imperialist anthem “Rule Britannia! Britannia rules the Waves”’. For Baker, then, Gilroy’s transnational model is rendered largely redundant by the return of a (barely) repressed British-English imperialism. Finally, Baker sets up the Black Atlantic as the abstractly global yet also provincially British-English model against which he legitimizes his own project: ‘I turn away then from Gilroy because I want to bring together ships and plantations, determinately fixing attention on the privileged, locative site of my entire discussion – namely, the “South”’ (Baker, 2001: 85; emphasis in original).

Baker’s point that ‘global’ conceptual paradigms like Gilroy’s may not actually provide ‘analytical efficacy for any given locale’ (Baker, 2001: 84) is a usefully sobering warning to transnationalists. But there is a suspicion that Baker’s own local and ‘locative’ position involves recourse to both African-American exceptionalism – a tendency in US black studies that Gilroy critiques in *The Black Atlantic* – and a form of southern nativism. Baker seems to imply that Gilroy’s British-English perspective (apparently ‘British’ and ‘English’ are synonymous) precludes his being able to gauge the ‘privileged’ importance of the USA, and particularly the US South, to the study of transatlantic slavery and the black diaspora. Having initially expressed qualified approval of ‘speculative breaks [like Gilroy’s] with ethnocentrism, particularism, provinciality’, Baker scores *The Black Atlantic* for failing to provide ‘the specificity of time, place, and detail one requires to read (and perhaps, empower) black United States modernism’ (Baker, 2001: 84). The ‘specific’ importance of national (African-American) modernism is thus rhetorically re-empowered through the rejection of that more abstract transnational discourse on ‘global modernity’ to which *The Black Atlantic* contributes.

However, I am less interested here in identifying traces of African-American exceptionalism than in the resemblance between Baker’s reductive dismissal of Gilroy and Quentin Compson’s undialectical rebuke of
Shreve McCannon. To be sure, *Turning South Again* makes abundantly clear throughout that Baker’s relationship to the region is not and never has been simply, happily autochthonous; it has been liminal and, at best, ambiguous. But an autobiographical southern nativism – if not quite (yet) Quentissentialism – is evident and authoritative from the outset. From the first paragraph of the prologue, Baker narrates his scholarly analysis of the region with repeated reference to his own autobiographical status as a native of Kentucky, and his recent return to the South (from the University of Pennsylvania to Duke, rather than from Harvard to Jefferson). He foregrounds his own ‘black southern mind’ moving syncretically back and forth ‘between oceans and landfalls of memory’ – particularly growing up in Louisville within the deep structures of segregation and racism – and ‘gazing today out clear glass in North Carolina dawn’ (Baker, 2001: 2). Most intriguingly of all, Baker overtly rejects any comparison between his own ambivalence about ‘my southern home’ and ‘Quentin [sic] Compson’s majestic and justifiably famous repetition compulsion: “I don’t hate the South! I don’t hate the South!”’ (Baker, 2001: 18).

Of course, there is nothing inherently suspect about Baker’s autobiographical impulse. On the contrary: when Baker explicitly declares against Quentin that ‘surely do I hate the South’ (Baker, 2001: 18), the depressing reality of white southern racism which Baker relates back to his personal experience drives home that *Turning South Again* is rather more than a wry intertextual spin on *Absalom, Absalom!* But when Baker writes early on that ‘The particular song of a southern summer bird . . . The special smell of jasmine and early-evening humidity powers up southern memory for me’ (Baker, 2001: 17), he also echoes Alice Walker’s more ambivalent ‘under-privileging’ of an organic southern identity. And as with Walker, so with Baker this assertion of identity does resemble Quentin’s to the degree that it is premised upon thick ‘natural’ knowledge that is apparently unavailable to non-natives. Like Quentin vis-à-vis Shreve, both Walker and Baker invoke their native southern identities to rebuff outsider views: where Walker narrates her ‘under-privileged’ black southern experience against her ‘Northern brothers’, Baker posits the ‘privileged, locative’ autobiographical-regional authority that he has established throughout his text against Gilroy’s ‘privileging of “the Atlantic”’ through a ‘Britishly provincial’ lens. It is at this particular point, then – during the brief critique of Gilroy – that Baker’s strategic and deeply ambivalent southern nativism tips over into Quentissentialism. In the ‘concluding meditation’ to *Turning South Again*, as in the concluding chapter of *Absalom, Absalom!*, we witness a (displaced) southerner refute the foreigner’s alternative, transnational perspective.

That Baker so summarily dismisses Gilroy’s transnational, diasporic model of black identity is surprising given that, earlier in *Turning South Again*, Baker himself convincingly argues that rural black southern life can be seen as part of a global ‘Afro-modernity’. After all, ‘black southern, grassroots organizational and political resolve’ influenced the anti-apartheid
movement in South Africa; black southern expressive culture infiltrated ‘such an international movement as négritude’; and ‘black-South cultural resonances’ informed the work of Frantz Fanon, C.L.R. James and others. But Baker also emphasizes that all this was ‘finally less relevant with respect to the monumental significance of black-South experience than the metonymic black, southern performance of modernity in and of itself – and on native ground’ (Baker, 2001: 25; emphasis in original). I do not mean to dispute this point per se: to do so would be to deny the huge and empowering significance of the civil rights movement within the South itself. But this privileging of ‘southern ground’ (Baker, 2001: 25) is also consistent with and helps to facilitate – prepares the (native) ground for – Baker’s subsequent Quentissential opposition to and over-simplification of Gilroy’s Black Atlantic.7

Recently, Riché Richardson has observed that Baker’s book is one among a number of ‘“turns” toward the South in a number of [disciplinary] areas’, and that Turning South Again ‘titularly echoes’ V.S. Naipaul’s 1989 travelogue A Turn in the South (Richardson, 2003: 557). Yet the cosmetic ‘echoes’ between A Turn in the South and Turning South Again mask a deeper disparity between Naipaul and Baker’s narratives. As Anne Goodwyn Jones points out, ‘If Baker’s title is signifying on Naipaul’s, the key word in Baker’s title is “Again”. Whereas Naipaul took a turn in the South as an outsider and observer, Baker’s title emphasizes the South as his place of origin’ (Jones, 2004: 145).

A Turn in the South defamiliarizes southern nativism whenever Naipaul makes comparative observations like this: ‘The houses [occupied by rural black southerners] I was taken to were bigger than the houses many people in Trinidad or England might have lived in’ (Naipaul, 1989: 11).8 Turning South Again dramatically undermines any residual assumptions that southernness means whiteness, but Baker’s own narrative authority falls back upon a version of southern nativism that, as I have tried to demonstrate, is not exclusive to white discourse. Ultimately, there is a sense that ‘turning South again’ involves ‘turn[ing] away from’ both the Black Atlantic turn in American studies and Naipaul’s transnational turn in the South.9

In the remainder of this article, I want to suggest the value of a transnational turn in southern studies by briefly discussing Twelve Bar Blues, a novel by the young British-born novelist Patrick Neate that in 2001 won the prestigious Whitbread Novel Award. With reference to Gilroy, and with an emphasis upon the transnational dimensions of putatively ‘southern’ or ‘African-American’ music, I want to demonstrate how, in Twelve Bar Blues, ‘black’ identity is constructed through diasporic cultural routes rather than southern or African-American roots.

The formal fabric of Twelve Bar Blues is woven from three intertwined narrative strands that move between the USA, England, and the fictional African nation of Zambawi. The primary (or in the novel’s playful jazz lexicon, ‘tonic’) narrative concerns Fortis ‘Lick’ Holden Sr., the African-American descendant of a Zambawian prince, Zike, who in 1804 was
caught by slave-traders and transported from Luanda in Angola via Jamaica to New Orleans. Born in 1899, Lick grows up in the (fictional) Cooltown district of Mount Marter, just outside New Orleans, near the former slave plantation where Zike died. The narrative traces Lick’s career of sorts as a jazz musician in the fabled Storyville district of New Orleans and his love for his step-sister, Sylvie. In 1924, just as Lick and Sylvie are planning to escape to New York together, Lick is murdered by Sylvie’s white ‘good time boy’, Johnny Frederick. The pregnant Sylvie subsequently arrives in New York alone and marries an Italian-American, Tony Berlone, who adopts Lick and Sylvie’s child, Bernadette. The tertiary (‘subdominant’) narrative takes place in Zambawi, and focuses on the lives of a local chief (and Zike’s spiritual descendant), Tongo, and his zakulu (witchdoctor), Musa. The tonic and subdominant narratives, and the USA and Zambawi, are connected through Musa’s travels to the USA and Tongo’s experience of transnational cultural shock and exchange during his encounters with Coretta Pink, who is both the niece of Lick and Sylvia and a University of Chicago anthropology professor visiting Zambawi on a field trip.

Here, though, I am concerned with the secondary (or ‘dominant’) narrative strand, which begins in 1999 at Heathrow Airport and introduces Sylvia di Napoli, a woman about to fly to New York in search of her heritage. Sylvia has a distinctly transnational background: she is Bernadette’s daughter (and unbeknownst to herself at this point, Sylvie and Lick’s granddaughter), but she was born and raised in England after her parents moved from New York to London in 1953 to open a pizzeria in Soho. It is Sylvia’s highly ambiguous ‘blackness’, rather than her more immediate Italian-American inheritance, which has dominated and destabilized her lifelong attempt to forge a secure racial and national identity, and which is now prompting her to board a plane to New York.

This lifelong search for identity has been difficult not least because, as a ‘black’, ‘half-caste’, or ‘exotic’-looking woman and (since her teens) prostitute, Sylvia’s subjectivity has tended to be defined by others: mostly white men, and often in sexualized and commodified as well as racialized terms. Most notably, Sylvia has been rejected by her Italian-American father, ostensibly because aged 16 she began dating an Afro-Caribbean boy called Dalton, but really because he always suspected that Sylvia’s dark skin is the proof and product of a liaison between Bernadette and a black man during the 1953 Atlantic crossing: ‘So what I do that was so wrong, Bernadette? Why you have ah go and screw a coon?’ (Neate, 2002: 160; emphasis in original). Sylvia herself has since internalized this false genealogy, re-imagining it more specifically in terms that, in a skewed sense, evoke Gilroy’s ‘organizing symbol’ of ships operated by black sailors crossing the Atlantic: ‘So I was conceived aboard the Queen Mary. Can you believe that? My father was some black sailor or something’ (Neate, 2002: 164; emphasis in original). However, Sylvia conceives (of) herself in terms far from the liberating ‘internationalist radicalism’ of
black sailors discussed by Gilroy and Alan Rice (2003: 9). Sylvia’s Black Atlantic is a non-place, a fluid, rootless void that, from her own perspective, evacuates any claim she might have to a stable familial, racial, or national identity: ‘A child of the fucking ocean. That’s me. A fucking nowhere baby’ (Neate, 2002: 164).

Given that Sylvia figures her selfhood in such a distinctly self-negating sense, it is not surprising that she yearns to discover stable racial and national roots in the USA. Yet even at Heathrow and during the flight to New York, it becomes evident that Sylvia’s identity continues to be defined by others, often in conflated racial-national terms. The airline official at the Heathrow ticket counter refuses to recognize her claim to Englishness, instead figuring her racially and nationally – or racially as nationally – as American: ‘She wasn’t “black black”. That was the way the official put it in his head. Not “black black”, nor half-caste. Probably an American. Because they have all kinds of different mixtures over there’ (Neate, 2002: 142). During the flight, Sylvia is seated next to a man called Bob Peck who presumes her to be a fellow American because, like the airline official, he cannot conceive of England as anything other than a locus of whiteness (Neate, 2002: 143).

Sylvia’s search for her American roots begins in earnest upon arrival in New York: she and her newly acquired travelling companion, Jim Tulloh, track down her great-uncle, Fabrizio Berlone, to an apartment in Harlem; Sylvia hopes that he might be able to tell me . . . who I am’ (Neate, 2002: 166; emphasis in original). Having initially confused Sylvia with his regular prostitute and compounded her sense of racial and national dislocation (‘Not just a nigger but an English nigger’ [Neate, 2002: 221]), Fabrizio tells Sylvia that her grandfather was ‘some jigaboo from down South’ (Neate, 2002: 229). It is this information that will eventually take Sylvia and Jim to New Orleans, but not before they take a detour via Chicago where, Fabrizio informs them, ‘Sylvie had some sister [Thomasina, Coretta’s mother] there who married a minister [Reverend Isaiah Pink, Coretta’s father]’ (Neate, 2002: 230). Finding the southside church where Reverend Pink was once the pastor, Sylvia and Jim meet the current incumbent, Reverend Joseph T. Jackson III, popularly known as Boomer. At first, Boomer dismisses Sylvia’s search: ‘you’re black the same reason as me; ‘cos you got African blood in you. Simple as that’ (Neate, 2002: 258). But Sylvia’s encounter with Boomer takes a significant turn when Billie Holiday’s version of ‘Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?’ starts playing on the reverend’s car stereo. The song has a certain resonance for Sylvia: in the 1980s, she worked part-time as a jazz singer and recalls having sung this song ‘a thousand times down in that wine bar in Streatham’ (Neate, 2002: 261). Now, singing along with Holiday, Sylvia taps into the blues impulse of the song to the extent that Boomer is awed by the affective power of her voice. However, he is also distinctly troubled. When the song finishes, he asks Sylvia, ‘What about New Orleans? You ever been there?’ When Sylvia
replies that she has not, Boomer enquires, ‘where you think about when you sing that sad song?’ Sylvia cites Notting Hill, and Boomer suddenly becomes triumphant: “There you go”, Boomer said, as if this proved a point he’d never made. “That’s your problem. Y’all need to be thinkin’ bout the Big Easy” (Neate, 2002: 262).

I want to suggest that here Boomer has recourse to a notion of southern authenticity, if not quite southern autochthony, that approximates the Quentissential fallacy. Despite being moved by Sylvia’s blues voice, Boomer denies its affective power, and the legitimacy of Sylvia’s claim upon the song, by dismissing her life experience in London as inauthentic. He does not quite say, as Quentin Compson might, that ‘you would have to be born there’ to know what it means to miss New Orleans, but he does imply that, at the very least, Sylvia needs to go there to know there. Boomer also implies that the song expresses some essential quality of New Orleans: a sense of placeness, of ‘Big Easy-ness’, that is easily understood by those from or properly familiar with the city, but which is supposedly untranslatable to Sylvia’s life in London.

However, the scene subsequently takes another significant turn – a turn away from the South and Quentissentialism. Just before Sylvia and Jim depart, Boomer takes Jim aside and offers him the cryptic advice: ‘It ain’t where you’re from, it’s where you’re at’. Jim is baffled, and believes that Boomer is talking in Christian ‘doublespeak’. Boomer reveals, however, that these are the wise words of Rakim Allah, a Muslim rapper (Neate, 2002: 262). In order to unpack this reference in more detail, I want to turn to Gilroy, for at this point Neate’s novel dovetails with Gilroy’s 1991 essay, ‘It Ain’t Where You’re From, It’s Where You’re At: The Dialectics of Diaspora Identification’. In this essay, which was subsequently recast as part of chapter one of The Black Atlantic, Gilroy critiques ‘the idea of nationality in accounts of black resistance and black culture, particularly music’ (Gilroy, 1993a: 121). Noting the ways in which forms of black culture are seen as ‘somehow automatically expressive of the national or ethnic differences with which they are articulated’ (Gilroy, 1993a: 122), Gilroy homes in on how hip-hop is ‘interpreted as an expression of some authentic Afro-American essence’ and written about in ‘an assertively nationalist way’ (Gilroy, 1993a: 125). Against the kind of neo-nationalist narrative which assumes that hip-hop ‘sprang intact from the entails of the blues’ (Gilroy, 1993a: 125), Gilroy himself posits ‘popular music as a vehicle for political sensibility which transcends nationality’ (Gilroy, 1993a: 131) and argues that hip-hop in particular has always been transnational, a ‘hybrid form rooted in the syncretic social relations of the South Bronx where Jamaican sound-system culture, transplanted during the 1970s, put down new roots’ (Gilroy, 1993a: 125). Gilroy is alluding here to a founding father of hip-hop, Jamaican-born, Bronx-based DJ Kool Herc – as a passage in The Black Atlantic makes explicit (Gilroy, 1993b: 103). But the Long Island rapper Rakim is also important to Gilroy’s transnational vision of hip-hop because ‘Rakim has persistently returned to the
problem of diasporic identification and the connected issue of the relationship between local and global components of blackness’ (Gilroy, 1993a: 142). For Gilroy, then, the lyric ‘It ain’t where you’re from, it’s where you’re at’ – from Eric B and Rakim’s seminal cut ‘I Know You Got Soul’ (1987) – aphoristically expresses such glocal, diasporic identity formation.10

But how to link Gilroy’s essay back to *Twelve Bar Blues*, and to the US South? I have already suggested that, when Boomer claims that Sylvia’s ‘problem’ is that she does not know New Orleans, he comes very close to the Quentissential fallacy. There is a problem here, however: Boomer himself lives and works in Chicago, not New Orleans; nor does he say anything to suggest that he is from, or has even been to, ‘the Big Easy’. From where, then, does he draw the authority that enables him to ‘prove [his] point’? I would argue that Boomer’s authority derives from a subtle – indeed, silent – shift from regional, southern Quentissentialism to national, African-American exceptionalism. In narratives of African-American musical history, the South is usually figured as the original site of blues and jazz music – black musical forms that later transferred to, and were transformed in, northern cities. For example, the metanarrative of African-American music shifts from Dixieland jazz and rural southern blues, to the urban blues of Chicago (and the Motown soul of Detroit), to the hip-hop culture of Brooklyn; but ultimately, the music remains essentially African American. So, even as Boomer is asserting that the specific Holiday song is rooted in New Orleans, he is also intoning that broader, ‘entrailed’ metanarrative of African-American music which Gilroy critiques as essentialist and nationalist. This metanarrative may situate New Orleans as a site of origin, but it can also encompass Boomer’s hometown as a site of migration: the place where southern blues became urban, electric ‘Chicago blues’. Crucially for Boomer’s non-verbalized claim to authority (‘a point he’d never made’ explicitly), although blues music is ‘routed’ from South to North, it is always already African-American. It is this nationalist, exceptionalist model of expressive black culture, intermixed with a selective southern Quentissentialism, which enables Boomer to discredit Sylvia’s blues impulse as inauthentically other: as English and transnational.

However, as I have already noted, the scene takes another significant turn. By telling Jim ‘it ain’t where you’re from, it’s where you’re at’, Boomer rejects (albeit cryptically, and chauvinistically addressing Jim rather than Sylvia) both the Quentissential fallacy and African-American exceptionalism. Boomer’s parting reference to Rakim amounts to a belated acknowledgement that Sylvia’s dialectical, diasporic identification with Billie Holiday’s performance is just as ‘authentic’, emotionally and expressively, from the routed perspective of London as it would be if it were Sylvia rooted in (or mournfully displaced from) New Orleans.

Importantly, Sylvia comes to this realization herself. When she and Jim finally arrive in New Orleans, Sylvia does, in a narrow genealogical sense,
discover the ‘blackness’ she has been looking for. By now she has met Musa, the *zakulu* who not only provides an ancestral link back to her distant ancestor Zike and to Zambawi, but also helps her to search the French Quarter and find Fortis Holden, Lick’s son by his first marriage. Yet for all his mystical abilities and his African origins, Musa is no more able than anyone else to help Sylvia achieve the kind of essential or biological ‘blackness’ which she still at times yearns for. Musa’s wry responses to Sylvia’s searching questions about her identity recall Boomer’s refusal in Chicago to define or conflate her ‘racial’ identity in glib local or national terms:

‘Where do I come from?’

‘Chicago.’

‘No. Originally.’

‘England.’

‘Originally!’

‘Where are you going?’

Sylvia stared at him and pinched the bridge of her nose between thumb and forefinger. But curiously she wasn’t frustrated; just confused. And she was used to confusion.

‘Why am I black?’

‘You are black,’ Musa said. With the depth of his voice, Sylvia couldn’t figure out whether a question mark was tagged to the end of his sentence and she didn’t reply.

Yet Sylvia has learned something since her encounter with Boomer in Chicago: ‘Instead [of questioning Musa further], she remembered something Jim had told her; something told to him by the curious Reverend Boomer Jackson. ‘It ain’t where you’re from, it’s where you’re at’ (Neate, 2002: 326). In New Orleans Sylvia is beginning to realize, by way of Boomer’s citation of Rakim, that her identity cannot and will not be discovered through a search for authentic ‘racial’, regional or national roots in either (as Robert Gross puts it) ‘a lost Africa or a deep South’:

What was she doing in New Orleans? What was she doing in New Orleans with a crazy African witchdoctor and a well-meaning white kid (but a kid none the less)? What did she hope to gain? Was her ancestry – or rather her blackness – really so important to her?

Sylvie only knew one thing for sure: she wanted to go back to London (Neate, 2002: 368). Sylvia now recognizes that it is not the USA generally, or New Orleans specifically, that is important – either as an authentic site of ‘blackness’, or as the (up)rooted locus of her family history: ‘names or backgrounds
or races were never going to give Sylvia . . . the sense of identity she craved’ (Neate, 2002: 365). Somewhat more significant is the story that Fortis passes on – of his father and her grandfather, Lick Holden – and to which Musa contributes the African dimension by linking Lick back to his ancestor Zike in Zambawi. But even this narrative of roots is only useful to the degree that it will help facilitate a ‘sense of identity’ in Sylvia’s everyday life in London – and Sylvia’s definition of this everyday life is hardly auspicious: ‘Of course there was nothing for her there [London]; no home, no family, no waiting partner. . . . But at least it was a nothing she knew’ (Neate, 2002: 368). Yet she will return to England with a much stronger sense of her own subjectivity – an understanding that it is transnational and hybrid rather than national and racial. Finally, Sylvia’s identity is not rooted in New Orleans, but routed through Zambawi, Luanda, Jamaica, New Orleans, Chicago, New York – to be remade through her everyday life in London.

While drawing on Gilroy’s critique of African-American exceptionalism, this article has concentrated on the similarly nativist notions of authenticity and autochthony that have been prevalent and problematic in southern studies. To be sure, the notion of authenticity can be alluring even to sceptical non-natives. While promoting *Twelve Bar Blues*, Neate, in a moment of weakness, told an interviewer that he had visited New Orleans to do extensive research before writing the novel. In fact, he had never been to the city. But this does not mean that Neate’s representation of New Orleans should be disregarded as inauthentic, any more than Sylvia’s rendition of ‘Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans’.\(^1\) That Neate could write the city by undertaking internet research, reading other literary texts, and drawing on his knowledge of African-American musical history suggests the extent to which our collective understanding of New Orleans is mediated, and not only through the highly commercialized carnivalesque of the French Quarter that *Twelve Bar Blues* satirizes. *Twelve Bar Blues* features fictional takes on both Louis Armstrong and the legendary cornet player Buddy Bolden, and in the acknowledgements Neate appreciatively cites both Armstrong’s biography and Michael Ondaatje’s fictional meditation on Bolden, *Coming Through Slaughter* (1979) – a book that, while providing a Canadian (-Sri Lankan) perspective on the South more favourably received than Shreve McCannon’s, is not usually considered part of ‘southern literature’. Yet even within southern literary studies, canonical texts like Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899) and Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* (1961) have mediated our collective imagining of New Orleans’ history. *Twelve Bar Blues* invites more extensive comparative analysis with Percy’s novel in particular. Perhaps most notably, Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer* is, like Sylvia di Napoli, on a ‘search’. But whereas Binx ends up redeeming New Orleans as an authentic site of white southernness, the dimensions of Sylvia’s search are transnational and diasporic. Whereas Binx attacks Chicago as a metonymically ‘northern’ non-place in order to recover his own fragile sense of southern identity (see Bone, 2000: 68–71), it is in Chicago that Sylvia begins to realize that her search for roots may be misguided. After all, Chicago is the liminal site through which her diasporic family has routed itself, and not just from the US South to the US North.

Contrary to the Reverend Boomer Jackson’s (initial) claim, even ‘Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?’ is not exactly rooted in, or essentially expressive of, the so-called Big Easy. To be sure, the song is associated with New Orleans native Louis Armstrong as well as the Baltimore-born New York resident Billie Holiday; this alone may generate a certain aura of authenticity. And the lyrics are thickly redolent of ‘naturally’ southern (in Eudora Welty’s phrase) ‘sights and smells and seasons’ (1984: 95): ‘Miss them moss covered vines, the tall sugar pines/ Where mockin’ birds used to sing/ And I’d like to see that lazy Mississippi hurryin’ into spring/ The moonlight on the bayou, a creole tune that fills
the air/ I dream about magnolias in bloom, and I’m wishin’ I was there’. Such evocative images of the narrator/singer at one with southern nature (rather than the more obviously urban aspects of New Orleans) recalls the dislocated autochthonous idealism of Quentin Compson, and anticipates evocative ‘natural’ images of black southern experience in the writing of Gaines, Walker, and Baker. Holiday’s own relationship with the song generates rather different associations, however. She originally recorded it in Hollywood for a 1946 movie ‘called New Orleans and supposedly about it’ (Holiday, 1984 [1956]: 119) – a scenario of dislocation and mediation which recalls Binx Bolling’s observations on New Orleans ‘certification’ by way of another film of the period, Panic in the Streets (1950) (see Percy, 1998: 63). But in her autobiography, Holiday is far more scathing than Binx about the city’s ‘supposedly’ authentic cinematic representation: ‘They had taken miles of footage of music and scenes in New Orleans, but none of it was left in the picture. And very damn little of me’ (Holiday, 1984 [1956]: 122). Billie Holiday, then, was no more a native or even an aficionado of New Orleans than Sylvia di Napoli; nor was New Orleans ever likely to make her so, given that she was cast, according to racial stereotype, as a maid (Holiday, 1984 [1956]: 119). Yet who would deny the affective power of Holiday’s performance of (missing) New Orleans? Pace Quentin and the scholars of southern studies who quote him, you do not have to have been born there – or even, as Holiday sings, ‘wishin’ I was there’. Rakim or Boomer might respond that it ain’t where you’re from, it’s where you’re at.

Notes

1 See also Giles (2002: 262) on the South and the ‘holistic imperatives’ of American studies in the 1960s.
2 See also Giles (2002: 325, n. 33), which reveals that Giles’ criticism refers specifically to Richard Gray’s Southern Aberrations: Writers of the American South and the Problems of Regionalism (2000).
3 Not only southerners have invented the region as exceptional or ‘other’ within the nation. As Jennifer Rae Greeson has aptly demonstrated, the South has been figured as the deviant, aberrant ‘other’ in the national imaginary ever since Crevecour published Letters from an American Farmer in 1782 (Greeson, 1999). I am concerned here, however, with the way in which southerners themselves, especially southern(ist) scholars and writers, have defined ‘the South’ against the nation.
4 For more on Tate’s attack on ‘our literary nationalists’ and the neo-Agrarian, regionalist development of southern literary studies, see Bone (2004: 224–6).
5 According to Baker and Nelson, other key new southern studies texts include Patricia Yaeger’s Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930–1990 (2000), Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan Donaldson’s edited volume, Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts (1997), and Gray’s Southern Aberrations. Notably more transnational – or ‘transatlantic’ – in conception and methodology is Helen Taylor’s penetrating Circling
Dixie: Contemporary Southern Culture Through a Transatlantic Lens (2001). Much valuable work is also being done on the intersection between southern studies and New World studies – between the US South, the Caribbean, and Latin America. This area of and approach to transnational southern studies is outside my (Black Atlantic) scope here, but a wide-ranging selection of essays can be found in Smith and Cohn (2004).

6 Even during childhood, Baker saw his Louisville, Kentucky birthplace not as a rooted place but as ‘a regional borderland’: the ‘Gateway to the South’, but also, less officially, southern blacks’ liminal conduit of escape across the Ohio River (Baker, 2001: 16).

7 It should be noted that Baker’s definition of himself ‘as a black male scholar positioned at a southern site of enunciation’ is provocative and even radical, given that at such a site ‘there are major rewards for sycophancy, for solacing talk of “race transcendence” by putatively new black “Public Intellectuals”’ (Baker, 2001: 10). However, Baker’s use of the phrase ‘southern site of enunciation’ may also be revealing to the degree that it intones a distinction Baker has made elsewhere between the different ‘sites of enunciation’ of US black studies and black British cultural studies. In their introduction to Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader, Baker, Stephen Best and Ruth H. Lindeborg note the profound influence of black British cultural studies in the American academy, and especially US black studies. However, Baker and his editorial colleagues qualify their praise by identifying a distinct contrast between the ‘assumed sites of enunciation’ (Baker et al., 1996: 9) of US black studies and black British cultural studies. According to Baker et al., as US black studies emerged in the 1960s, its relationship to vernacular politics (the civil rights and black power movements) and its formulation of the idea of blackness ‘bridged the distance between the black masses and black cultural workers . . . in universities’ (p. 10). ‘It is not nearly as easy, however, to infer who precisely black British cultural workers intend when they say “we”’ (p. 13). This representational conundrum for and in black British cultural studies has partly to do with shifting, diversifying conceptions of a ‘black British’ identity previously seen as homogeneous. But Baker and his colleagues also suggest the problem has arisen because black British cultural studies has been too intellectual, too abstracted, to connect with ‘the black masses’ in the way that US black studies did. Proceeding to note the more recent ‘transnational’ direction of black British cultural studies, Baker and his fellow editors hypothesize that, in an era of political conservatism, ‘a politics that offered both status and “transnational” work for people of diverse “ethnicities” was far more appealing than an academic project such as US black studies, which seemed to require an ideological melanin test for admission’ (p. 14). The editors of Black British Cultural Studies do not themselves advocate ‘the “roots” essentialism of the referential liberational politics of black power’ (p. 14) which empowered early US black studies. But they do suggest that the transnational turn in black British cultural studies is politically and theoretically problematic for practitioners of US black studies – and by extension, for the US ‘black masses’. It seems to me that this scepticism towards black British cultural studies’ ‘site of enunciation’ turns up again in Turning South Again, when Baker scorns the abstraction of The Black Atlantic’s ‘organizing symbol’ (the ship) and privileges his own
While Richardson emphasizes the 'echoes' between Baker and Naipaul's 'southern turns', she has also – in her earlier review of *Turning South Again* – usefully distinguished between them. Rightly noting that Baker 'explicitly foregrounds' a national frame of reference over a global one (Richardson, 2002: 598), she identifies Naipaul's book as a way of 'complementing . . . a consideration of the South in relation to America as a national context with an examination of dispersals of "the South" into global contexts, including the African diaspora' (p. 610). This is not the place to discuss at length the possibilities of and problems with Naipaul's transnational turn in the South. See, however, the sceptical assessment by Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn – who acknowledge that *A Turn in the South* takes 'a step beyond traditional southern nativism' (Smith and Cohn, 2004: 11) before implying that Naipaul then takes two steps back.

Among the many extensive and positive reviews of *Turning South Again*, Jones' is the most critical and controversial. However, Richardson's review is the only one I have read which even mentions Baker's criticism of Gilroy (Richardson, 2002: 610). By contrast, Judith Jackson Fossett links 'Baker's embrace of a new brand of southern/American studies' to 'multi- and interdisciplinary studies of the Atlantic world' such as Gilroy's but fails to mention that Baker *attacks* Gilroy's Black Atlantic in *Turning South Again* (Fossett, 2002: 573).

In the same passage, Gilroy also notes the Hispanic 'input into and appropriation of' early hip-hop culture, particularly breakdancing (Gilroy 1993b: 103).

The lyric is introduced as follows: 'Now if you're from Uptown, Brooklyn-bound,/The Bronx, Queens, or Long Island Sound,/ Even other states come right and exact,/ It ain't where you're from, it’s where you’re at'. Rakim here moves beyond the idea of New York as the authentic, autochthonous home of hip-hop to insist that rappers from outside the city, and outside New York state, are just as capable of partaking of and expressing hip-hop culture. (He is rapping before the late 1980s rise of West Coast gangsta rap, or the more recent emergence of the 'Dirty South' scene centred in Atlanta.) Rakim may be referring to states rather than nation-states, but it is not hard to see how these lines point beyond nativism, whether local or national. To drive home his transnational point, Gilroy emphasizes the rapturous reception of 'I Know You Got Soul' in 'London's soul underground' (Gilroy, 1993a: 142).

This is not to say that *Twelve Bar Blues* is per se 'authentic', or that Neate does not make errors in representing (African-) American/southern dialogue. Reviewing the novel, Adam Mansbach observed that 'Neate’s New Orleans period-dialogue [i.e., during the Lick–Sylvie sequences circa 1890s–1920s] is highly stylized, full of downhome color and non-standard constructions', but concluded that the risk 'pays off – his characters’ speech is evocative and authentic'. By contrast, Mansbach argues, 'Neate loses his ear for dialogue once the action moves to present-day America', and cites the characterization of Boomer as 'every inch a cliche' (Mansbach, 2003) As evidence of Neate's 'loss of ear', a (southern-based) southernist friend of mine points out that Boomer (mis)uses the usually plural 'y'all' of southern/African-American dialect while addressing Sylvia in the singular
(‘Y’all need to be thinkin’ ’bout the Big Easy’). Mansbach pointedly observes that ‘A stereotypical moment goes a long way toward compromising a book especially given the fact that’ – and here is the crunch – ‘Neate is a white writer inhabiting black characters’. At least one other reviewer, Peter Hutchings, from the University of Western Sydney, has gone much further, defining Neate as ‘a white writer from London, clearly absorbed by narratives of blackness’ because he ‘craves contact with something authentic and lived’ (Hutchings, 2002). Hutchings’ criticisms are bracing, but also predictable and reductive; moreover, they are premised upon his own preconceptions about what constitutes ‘racial’ (and national) authenticity, as regards both ‘the black experience’ and Neate’s supposed inability to write about that experience given his status as ‘a white writer from London’. Hutchings might at the very least have engaged with the ways in which Twelve Bar Blues itself tries to deconstruct and satirize notions of ‘racial’ (and racial-as-national) authenticity.

References

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