



5-1-2009

Postmodernism and Transnationalism in the Black Atlantic

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Following the Middle Passage, during which continental Africans were subjected to varying systems of enslavement across the Americas and Caribbean, historians, literary critics, and social scientists alike have examined the political, cultural, and social significance of the transnational community we now know as the African Diaspora. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, sociologist Paul Gilroy undertakes the challenge of conceptualizing the diaspora as a community no longer bound by European oppression or social norms. Gilroy proposes “the Black Atlantic” as an interactive space in which black culture and thought transcends the national boundaries defined under slavery. However, in doing so, Gilroy, as a British scholar, remains rooted in Eurocentric and Americentric views of the African Diaspora that largely disregard the significance of the African continent and do not explore the social context of relationships between Africa and diasporic populations in the contemporary moment. While Gilroy identifies the major flaws in previous models of the African Diaspora, his limited scope precludes an analysis that explains the relevance and function of diaspora in modern society.

Early models of the African Diaspora—often put forward by Caucasian scholars—embrace a Western outlook that upheld the racial and cultural “authenticity” of the African continent, examining the relative “Africanness” of individual diasporic populations. In his 1941 work, *Myth of the Negro Past*, Melville Herskovits presents a “scale of Africanisms”—based on the relatively similarity of a diasporic culture to that of the African continent—with the “Bush Negroes of Suriname” representing the greatest similarity and the black American the least.¹ Later, Sidney Mintz and Richard Price’s classic text, *The Birth of African-American Culture*, first published in 1976, acknowledged the limitations of Herskovits’s study, which did not account for the complexity of diasporic cultures. This suggested that future studies “maintain a skeptical attitude toward claims that many contemporary social or cultural forms represent direct continuities from African homelands” as “the development of institutions must be viewed in their full historical setting.”² However, lacking an explicit critique of the unilateral model of diaspora, examining only the way in which culture of the African continent is reflected in disparate African populations of the Atlantic world, Mintz and Price do not adequately delve into the transnational nature of the African Diaspora.

On the other hand, Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* represents a noteworthy attempt at reconfiguring the nature and significance of the African Diaspora in the context of postmodernism. Citing the European travels of African American figures such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, James Weldon Johnson, and the Fisk Jubilee Singers, he theorizes a diaspora that is not concerned with the extent of African survivals, but rather the implications of such individuals’ movement upon their own conceptions of race, indicating a breakdown of the national barriers that limited the work of earlier scholars. Of prior studies of the diaspora, Gilroy writes: “It should be emphasised that, where the archaeology of black critical knowledge enters the academy, it currently involves the construction of canons which seems to be proceeding on an exclusively *national* basis—African-American, Anglophone Caribbean, and so on.”³

For Gilroy, this phenomenon is notably apparent in discussions of music, as hip hop—which arose in the South Bronx, New York following the introduction of the “sound system” and “breakbeats” by Jamaican-born DJ Kool Herc⁴ — is often presented as an exclusively American creation which “sprang intact from the entrails of the blues.”⁵ Accordingly, Gilroy wishes to challenge these inaccurate views of diaspora by constructing a postmodern discourse which rejects the nation-state altogether. However, in his choice to highlight the experiences of Du Bois, Wright, and others in various regions of Europe, the African continent is surprisingly absent. Throughout *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy clearly distinguishes Africa from a purportedly detached diaspora, which under further review of his featured subjects appears to be mistaken.

Concerning Du Bois, Gilroy argues that his consciousness of diaspora was heightened by his travels through the American South and Europe. His focus falls primarily on Du Bois’s experiences as a student at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee and the University of Berlin, where he was forced to confront “the problems of racialised ontology and identity—the tension between being and becoming black” that were “deeply inscribed in DuBois’s own life.”⁶ Similarly, his profile of Richard Wright emphasizes the way in which the West impacted his political leanings. Of Wright, Gilroy notes:

His distinctive perspective was decisively shaped by lengthy involvement in the official communist movement, by the interests in sociology and psychoanalysis which developed while he lived in Chicago and New York, and by the intellectual milieu of life in Paris where he made a new home for the last thirteen years of his life.⁷

While Gilroy successfully explores the importance of “routes” as well as “roots” in the formation of diaspora (as Edmund T. Gordon and Mark Anderson declare in their 1999 article “The African Diaspora: Toward and Ethnography of Diasporic Identification”), in centering his analysis on Europe, and reducing DuBois’s relationship with the African continent to a series of insubstantial images, he fails to recognize a critical moment in his development as an activist for the diaspora, and establishes Africa as a separate entity from the amalgam of transnational relationships that he terms “the Black Atlantic.”

Accordingly, Gilroy ignores the tangible connection between Du Bois and the African continent that grew into his close personal relationship with Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah, adoption of Ghanaian citizenship, and the development of Du Bois’s Pan-African consciousness.⁸ Instead, citing one of Du Bois’s earliest works, *The Souls of Black Folk*, he questions the relevance of modern Africa to his life’s work:

This analysis was so deeply rooted in the post-slave history of the new world that it became difficult for DuBois’s understanding of modernity to incorporate contemporary Africa. Africa emerged instead as a mythic counterpart to modernity in the Americas—a moral symbol transmitted by exquisite objects seen fleetingly in the African collection at Fisk University but largely disappearing from DuBois’s account, leaving an empty, aching space between his local and global manifestations of racial injustice.⁹

By remaining concentrated on Du Bois's early works that he would later distance himself from, Gilroy fails to note Du Bois's travels in Africa—chronicled in the April 1924 issue of *The Crisis*¹⁰—and the ensuing changes in his philosophy. For the October 1927 issue of *The Crisis* Du Bois penned “The Pan African Congresses: The Story of a Growing Movement,” outlining the need for Pan-African unity and the common socioeconomic struggle that exists across the diaspora:

Negroes everywhere need:

1. A voice in their own government
2. Native rights to the land and its natural resources.
3. Modern education for all children.
4. The development of Africa for the Africans and not merely for the profit of Europeans.
5. The re-organization of commerce and industry so as to make the main object of capital and labor the welfare of the many rather than the enriching of the few.
6. The treatment of civilized men as civilized despite differences of birth, race or color.¹¹

In this passage, Du Bois expresses a Garvey-esque call for diasporic unity, which should not be dismissed as a superfluous change of opinion. In the same way that Du Bois's early leanings were influenced by his education in Europe, so were his later views, following his first-hand experiences with the African continent. Thus, Gilroy's obsession with the community of the Black Atlantic is flawed even in the select examples he presents in the text.

However, beyond the case of Du Bois alone, Gilroy miscalculates the wider impact of the African continent on the Black Atlantic, and the reverse influence of black New World populations on the African homeland. In the same way that Wright and DuBois saw their worldview as African Americans challenged by their travels in Europe, did Malcolm X not find the same in his interaction with diplomats in West Africa?¹² Did Kwame Nkrumah not experience a similar maturation during his studies in the United States at Lincoln University and the University of Pennsylvania?¹³ Does the aforementioned Pan-African Congresses not represent an example of diasporic dialogue that includes the African continent?

Instead, Gilroy's presentation of the Black Atlantic portrays Africa exclusively as a “homologous point of reference”¹⁴ that reaffirms the notion of diaspora, but is never actively involved in the countless relationships that exist across the diaspora. In his discussion of diasporic music, he effectively takes note of the bilateral (or multilateral) nature of diaspora, Nelson Mandela's admission that he had listened to American Motown artists while imprisoned in South Africa. Of this situation, Gilroy reasons:

The purist idea of one-way flow of African culture from east to west was instantly revealed to be absurd. The global dimensions of diaspora dialogue were momentarily visible and, as his casual words lit up the black Atlantic landscape like a flash of lightning on a summer night, the value of music as the principal

symbol of racial authenticity was simultaneously confirmed and placed in question.¹⁵

The example of Mandela's indulgence in black American music, and later Nigerian musician Fela Kuti's incorporation of funk music into his unique genre of Afrobeat, should point to a model of diaspora that rejects popular notions of "authenticity" and "origins," instead focusing on the complex network that unites distinct populations across Africa, Europe, the Americas, and the Caribbean. But Gilroy's attention to Africa lacks the contextual depth to place Africa within his model of diaspora. Why was Mandela listening to the sounds of Detroit while imprisoned more than eight thousand miles away? Who or what introduced said music to South Africa? What experiences led Fela Kuti to create the *hybrid* music form of Afrobeat? By leaving these fundamental questions unanswered, Gilroy never fully reconciles Africa as a diasporic body within the Black Atlantic:

We have already seen in Chapter 3 that the circulation and mutation of music across the black Atlantic explodes the dualistic structure which puts Africa, authenticity, purity, and origin in crude opposition to the Americas, hybridity, creolisation, and rootlessness. There has been (at least) a two-way traffic between African cultural forms and the political cultures of diaspora blacks over a long period.¹⁶

Gilroy's suggestion of "two-way traffic" remains troubled by his inability to place Africa within the framework of "the Black Atlantic." Does a true bilateral relationship exist within the African Diaspora, or do Africa and the Black Atlantic constitute two separate entities? In excluding the African continent, he essentially renders the African Diaspora incomplete, or as Brent Edwards notes of "the Black Atlantic," "in studies of black transnational circuits of culture...the 'black Atlantic' would have to be set beside a parallel oceanic frame of the 'black Mediterranean' or the 'black Pacific.'"¹⁷ Thus, the concept of black "authenticity" or "purity" simply limits a discussion of the diaspora which examines diasporic relationships of the *present* in the context of a past, as it remains rooted in the historical view of diaspora as a direct result of enslavement. As Edwards suggests, "it is precisely the term *diaspora*, in the interventionist sense I have sketched here, that would allow us to think beyond such limiting geographic frames, and without reliance on an obsession with origins."¹⁸

Regarding music specifically, it is important to note the hybrid forms that now exist on the African continent. Taking into consideration the hybrid nature of Kuti's Afrobeat, and the spread of reggae and hip hop throughout Africa, we observe the "two-way traffic" at work. In this way, the connection between black American and Caribbean popular culture and their counterparts across the Atlantic indicates that the concept of an "authentically black culture" is imaginary.

The article "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture," written by Jamaican-born cultural theorist Stuart Hall, calls for a necessary discussion of black popular culture within the structure of a bilateral diaspora. He writes, "the point of underlying overdetermination—Black cultural repertoires constituted from two directions at once—is perhaps more subversive than you

think. It is to insist that in black popular culture, strictly speaking, ethnographically speaking, there are no pure forms at all.”¹⁹ In this respect, Gilroy’s preoccupation with Africa as the historical origin, but never an active participant in the Black Atlantic diaspora reinforces the construct of the nation-state, which he so desperately wants to break away from. Although, he suggests the existence of a bilateral diaspora, his analysis of diaspora both historically and presently offers what African historian Patrick Manning terms a “‘diaspora apart’ model,”²⁰ that separates studies of Africa from those of the diaspora.

This approach is critically lacking in the way it preserves a model of diaspora that need not acknowledge the significance of the African continent in relation to globalization, capitalism, and the ongoing struggles of black individuals *throughout* the diaspora. Gilroy, instead upholds legacy of enslavement in the consciousness of the Black Atlantic as the primary means by which diaspora is realized:

Plantation slavery was more than just a system of labor and a distinct mode of racial domination. Whether it encapsulates the inner essence of capitalism or was vestigial, essentially precapitalist element in a dependent relationship to capitalism proper, it provided the foundations for a distinctive network of economic, social, and political relations. Above all, ‘its demise threw open the most fundamental questions of economy, society and polity,’ and it has retained a central place in the historical memories of the black Atlantic.²¹

Recent scholarship, on the other hand, has challenged the assessment of enslavement as a means of distinguishing the “routes” of the Black Atlantic from its African “roots”. For instance, *Rethinking the African Diaspora: The Making of a Black Atlantic World in the Bight of Benin and Brazil*—written by historians Kristin Mann and Edna G. Bay—examines the long-standing, bilateral, relationship between Afro-Brazilians and West Africans both during and following the termination of the slave trade. In doing so, she calls for a “shift in paradigms according to which the Afro-Atlantic has been studied... [to see] Africans as mobile in the world, shaping the societies they journey to and from.”²² Furthermore, anthropologist Laura Pires-Hester’s study of Cape Verdean-Americans displays the bilateral diaspora model at work, as the mutual ties between the homeland and dispersed population have developed from “‘imaged/imagined”²³ —as the African Diaspora is often presented—into an explicit social and political relationship between the American and African populations. Of this development, she notes:

This new phase was first marked by the formation of a different kind of association, the National Coordinating Council for the Development of Cape Verde (NCCDCV)...Its primary goal was to “plan specific strategies to involve Cape Verdean-Americans as a group in a process which can generate economic assistance to the Republic and the people of Cape-Verde” (Manuel Pires Monteiro, 9/21/81:1). It would not replace but build explicitly upon the population’s long tradition of “people-to-people assistance,” using educational, political, intellectual, and expanded network assets of the ethnic population matured within the new homeland environment.²⁴

Considering that Cape Verdean-Americans effectively bridged between an imagined or perceived community into one with true sociopolitical implications indicates the salience of a bilateral diaspora in an increasingly global world. Africa as a mere image or reference point, as it is in the view of Gilroy, denies the existence or even potential for such a connection. Thus, the circumstances presented by Pires-Hester indicate the direction of African Diaspora Studies (to include Africana Studies, Africology, Pan African Studies), as well as the possibility of political cooperation across national boundaries of the diaspora.

The existence of such relationships points to a need to further integrate studies of the African continent and those of dispersed African peoples in *all* regions of the world in adopting what Patrick Manning terms the “‘homeland plus diaspora’ model.”²⁵ In doing so, explorations of the Black Atlantic can account for the complex set of associations between diasporic populations, and as a result, better explain the global phenomena of racial inequality, globalization, and the growth of mass media that social scientists desperately seek to unravel.

Although Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* crafts an interesting narrative of the history of enslaved Africans in the West, his attempt at a true sociological critique of diaspora is unfounded. African Diaspora Studies is not simply an investigation of enslaved Africans and their descendants, but rather the means by which one seeks to make sense of the modern world. Or, as sociologist Tukufu Zuberi observes, “it is against the background of these arguments against enslavement and a new vision of human freedom, justice, and equality that the African diaspora experience critically engages the study of society.”²⁶ Therefore, in the interest of tangible social change and cooperation across the diaspora, it is integral that social scientists engage themselves in a full view of the diaspora in practice when studying greater societal trends—as opposed to Gilroy’s heuristic analysis—accounting for tangible interaction within a bilateral diaspora that encapsulates the Black Atlantic as it exists today.

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¹ Herskovits, Melville. *Myth of the Negro Past*. (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1941), 16.

² Mintz, Sidney W. and Price, Richard. *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 52-64.

³ Mintz, 33.

⁴ Rhodes, Henry A. “The Evolution of Rap Music in the United States:”
http://people.artcenter.edu/~acheng1/design_workshop/01.28.03/rap_evolution.pdf.

⁵ Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 34.

⁶ Gilroy, 116.

⁷ Gilroy, 155.

⁸ Afari-Gyan, Kwadwo. “Kwame Nkrumah, George Padmore and W.E.B. DuBois.” *Research Review*. 7.1-2 (1991): 7.

⁹ Gilroy, 113.

¹⁰ Du Bois, W.E.B. "Little Portraits of Africa." *W.E.B. DuBois: A Reader*. Ed. David Levering Lewis. (New York: Owl Books, 1995), 668.

¹¹ Du Bois, 672.

¹² Curtis, Edward E. IV. "Why Malcolm X Never Developed an Islamic Approach to Civil Rights." *Religion*. 32.3 (2002): 234.

¹³ Smertin, Yuri. *Kwame Nkrumah*. (New York: International Publishers, 1987), 15.

¹⁴ Gilroy, 123.

¹⁵ Gilroy, 96.

¹⁶ Gilroy, 199.

¹⁷ Gilroy, 63.

¹⁸ Gilroy, 63.

¹⁹ Hall, Stuart. "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture." *The Black Studies Reader*. Ed. Jacqueline Bobo, et al. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 260.

²⁰ Manning, Patrick. "Africa and the African Diaspora: New Directions of Study." *Journal of African History*. 44.3 (2003): 494.

²¹ Gilroy, 54.

²² Otero, Solimar. "Untitled Review." *African Studies Review*. 46.2 (2003): 127.

²³ Pires-Hester, Laura J. "The Emergence of Bilateral Diaspora Ethnicity Among Cape Verdean-Americans." *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities*. Ed. Isidore Okpewho, et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 490.

²⁴ Pires-Hester, 494.

²⁵ Pires-Hester, 495.

²⁶ Zuberi, Tukufu. "Sociology and the African Diaspora Experience." *A Companion to African American Studies*. Ed. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 260