

HYBRID IDENTITY AND RACE RELATIONS IN PAUL GILROY'S *THE BLACK ATLANTIC*: MODERNITY AND DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS AND DU BOIS' *THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK* IN THE NEW WORLD STUDIES

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Abstract

*What appealed to us when we first encountered Paul Gilroy's book was his radical critique of essentialisms about race, ethnicity and nationalism, as well as his attempt to reshape the genealogies of black political thought in ways which took its intersections with the Euro-American political thought into account. However, it was not as if nothing of this had ever been done before. An important synopsis has been provided by Gilroy's many references to the work of the late C.L.R. James, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois and Eduard Glissant. The time of Gilroy's writing of *The Black Atlantic* was, of course, a time of significant optimism about the prospect of solidarities across historical boundaries of race, class and nation—and it was after all written in the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and, also in the years of the dismantling of the formal legal and political edifice of the apartheid regime in South Africa after 1990. But our interest here is to explore the politics of hybrid identity and race relations.*

Introduction

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Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, a major testament in African New World Studies, is, on the one hand, a wounded witness to the trans-generational trauma of slavery—the disgraceful history of slavery, and colonialism in the black Atlantic world. On the other hand, it is a re-examination of the wider relevance of the slave trade that led to the formation of cultural hybridity in the new world society. The history is very much about the narrative of slave tragedy, as well as the formation of multiple identities. Du Bois' work is equally central in the configuration of race relations and identity formation. It remains a cardinal reference in African-American Studies for many black writers. Therefore, this paper explores identity politics in Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. The book are part of the surviving documents that open up the field of Transatlantic Studies in our modern time.

The Black Atlantic...has been accused of an unbridled enthusiasm for, and the celebration of hybridity, creolization, globalization and it is easily rendered as an

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instrument for neoliberalism. For instance, so important is Gilroy's work that the legacy of transatlantic connections was not critically explored until the emergence of Gilroy's ground-breaking book. In agreement, Lang Peter (2015) asserts that,

Although the triangular relations between Africa, Europe and the Americas started more than five hundred years ago, they were for centuries either misrepresented or even ignored. The silence around the shameful history of slavery and colonisation, on the part of both victimisers and victims, also led to a refusal to see the inherently heterogeneous nature of the societies shaped by the slave trade. With the expectations of some individuals, in particular writers and thinkers from Caribbean who were confronted perhaps more visibly than others with the legacy of the transatlantic relations, the topic had not been thoroughly examined and debated until the publication in 1993 of *The black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1).

Thinking but Lang's argument within the broader context of Transatlantic Studies, Gilroy uses the very concept of "Black Atlantic to define the African experience in its intercultural and transnational dimensions" (ibid). This is one significant aspect that brings about the indispensability of Gilroy's book in Black Atlantic scholarship today. As a follow-up, critics as well as reviewers have shown that many have come to study Gilroy with excitement. Gikandi Simon (1996) attests to the fact that the book valorises "a new and positive paradigm for analysing black experiences in an increasingly unified but at the same time dissonant global culture" (1). More, Gruesser Cullen John sees *The Black Atlantic...* "as a necessary bridge between the work of African-Americanists and post-colonialists, and has thus encouraged efforts to bring down the boundaries separating the two fields" (4). Substantiating the strategic relevance of The Black Atlantic, some cultural institutions have emerged to further develop the Black Atlantic projects. Lang cites some of the examples in as:

In the early 2000s the Black project, based in Berlin, brought together a group of artists and scholars who set up a series of interdisciplinary events around the African diaspora in the Western hemisphere. Since 2002 the Scotland's Trans-Atlantic Relations (STAR) project at the University of Edinburg has explored the relations of Scotland with the Americas, and particularly the Caribbean... In 2007 the International Slavery Museum opened in Liverpool, one of the British hubs of the slave trade, while on the other side of the English Channel the museum housed at the Château des ducs de Bretagne in Nantes now devotes part of its permanent collection to the history of the transatlantic trade that provided the French city with much of its wealth (4).

However, the project has also given rise to several criticisms such as Lucy Evans' apt but brilliant criticism. Evans (2009) points out that "his insufficiently grounded metaphors of free-floating hybridity, his unduly cheerful take on the effects of transnational journeys, and his privileging of culture over politics as a tool for effecting social change" (266). Aside Evans' criticism as levelled against Gilroy's book, there is a paucity of slavery history. And because of the manner in which the book turns the narrative into a sort of metaphor, critic Joan Dayan has remarked that, "[w]hat is missing is the continuity of the Middle Passage in today's world of less obvious, but no less pernicious enslavement" (7). In other words, the book is largely silent on the Middle Passage history because of the obvious crime, terror and horror associated with it. Undoubtedly, however, the emergence of Gilroy's book has given rise to further explorations of the triangular relations between Africa, Europe and the Americas from fresh and multiple dimensions.

Lang (2015) adds, "...that [has] undoubtedly increased our understanding of the societies in which we live, but [has] also helped us to unravel the complexities of the literatures produced by the representatives of this

cultural field” (3). Gilroy building on his original concept, in another book entitled *Darker than Blue* (2010), Lang demonstrates that he “relies once more on readings of W.E.B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon to illustrate issues of black consumption within a capitalist culture, the politics of race and anti-racism, and the circulation of black music as showcased in Jimmy Hendrix and Bob Marley” (3). But again, another shortcoming revealed by Lang in *Darker than Blue*, is the either conscious or unconscious failure on “Gilroy's part to open up the scope of his analysis to locations outside North America and the Caribbean or else to such important issues as gender or religion” (3). And of course, the issues of gender and religion matter in the formation of identity in any society.

It is the very thread that links the old and the new worlds together hence Transatlantic Studies. Therefore, we will begin this discussion with Transatlantic Studies and what the field represents. From the Atlantic-based themes of Gilroy's book, I have come to understand that Transatlantic Studies refer to the movement of people, writings, ideas, books, goods, stories, etcetera, around the Atlantic Ocean, the meeting point of Europe, Africa, and the Americas as well as the inclusion of the Caribbean in the eighteenth century. In other words, Transatlantic Studies are also known as Atlantic Studies.

Basically, transatlantic scholarship concerns itself with what happened around the Atlantic. It concerns itself with the exchange of black bodies as slaves, goods, books, ideas as well as other items of trade. Many surviving documents have focused scholarly attention on the criss-crossing link between the old and the new worlds. In view of the criss-crossing interrelationship between the two divides, the eighteenth century was described as an age of empires, of migrations, and very much as an age of reason, revolutions and sensibility. Our understanding of Gilroy's book is, therefore, weaved into the mesh of “counterculture of modernity” which is one of the major thrusts of his thesis. “The Black Atlantic as a counterculture of modernity,” discusses the complexity of “identity.” According to *The Cultural Reader*, Gilroy contends that, “being both European and black requires a type of double consciousness (a term borrowed from Du Bois)” (1). *The Cultural Reader* goes further to add:

This assertion alone already attacks exclusivist discourses of either/or that often characterize nationalistic stances. The dual identity of the western black is not composed of essential historical roots for both their original identity and the European modern world have undergone transformation and reconfiguration over time. Gilroy claims that the subjective dichotomy of black and white, introduced in modern times, is far from a thing of the past, and they still continue to function by relating the concept of nationality with that of culture (1).

The point Gilroy is trying to make here is that the notion of hybridity is both ways that Europeans themselves were influenced by the cultures of their subordinates. “Gilroy is trying to examine the impact that black thought had on what he calls the 'cultural insiderism' on nationalistic thought, stemming from the notions of cultural differences” (1). The blacks were not only able to impact on the “cultural insiderism” but also create their own identity resulting in multiple identity formations in the new world society. Jamella N. Gow in *Debating Difference: Haitian Transnationalism in Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic*, (2012), weaves a broader web of multiple identity formations through a collection of short stories, poetry as well as personal records of diasporic Haitians in the United States. He says and I quote: “The idea of diaspora as read in the text of *The Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora in the United States*, (2001), emphasizes that the more fluid and encompassing terms of hybridity and transnationalism more accurately describe the geographical movements and consequential amassing of black identification within Paul Gilroy's concept of the 'Black Atlantic’” (1). Through hybridity, the blacks give themselves a more serious context in to create a hyphenated identity and adopt the transnational label hence hybrid transnational people.

Gow's thesis is however supported by post-colonial theory that focuses squarely on transnationalism and diasporic studies—using Stuart Hall, as well as W.E.B. Du Bois's idea(s) of “double consciousness.” Equally relevant in this case is the work of a political theorist called Ernesto Laclau. Laclau's argument in *On Populist*

Reason, (2007), focuses on “group identity and demand.” In relation to this, Gow argues that “Gilroy's concept of the 'Black Atlantic' has many similarities to Laclau's notion of the 'empty signifier' as a way for people to form groups for collective action” (ibid). Laclau's notion for Gow, remains integral to an inquiry into black identity for his exploration of Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*.

Critical Evaluation of Modernity and Double Consciousness

Gilroy's book is a milestone document in Transatlantic Studies which reshapes European cultural history in the light of modernity. In his attempt to reread the experiences of black slaves in the context of cultural institution(s) of the West began with his foundational perhaps memorable statement. He nurtured the idea while teaching at the South Bank Polytechnic in London. He says, in what I call his foundational statement: “It grew from a difficult period when I was lecturing on the history of sociology to a large group of second-year students who had opted to study that subject as a major part of their degree. The flight from sociology was, for many of them, a deliberate sign of their disengagement from the life of the mind” (ix).

This was what sparked off the writing of the book because he wanted to convince his students that, “the history and the legacy of the Enlightenment were worth understanding and arguing about” (ibid). He adds, “I worked hard to punctuate the flow of the Europe-centred material with observations drawn from the dissonant contributions of black writers to Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment” (ibid). However, the book has attracted a lot of printed responses from eminent scholars such as Joan Dayan, Simon Gikandi, Natasha Barnes, Julia M. Wright, Kevin Hutchings, and etcetera. These scholars recognise the prime importance of his book after William Blake's. According to Julia M. Wright and Kevin Hutchings,

Two hundred years after Blake, Paul Gilroy's ground-breaking book, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), revised the Western cultural history to address the significance of a coherent “black Atlantic” culture that works aslant dominant Western culture in part by countering the ethnocentric and territorial conceptualization of the modern nation-state. Following Gilroy's lead, a growing number of scholars are investigating other transatlantic contexts to account for a complex variety of economic, political, cultural, and other material exchanges (1).

Gilroy's book, to a large extent, challenges a variety of cultural categories connected with Western modernity. And it is by dint of its ideological and intellectual relevance that Gilroy's work is regarded as the forerunner of postmodern globalisation today. Gilroy's transatlantic contexts provide a uniquely interesting area of study. Philip Kaisary in *The Black Atlantic: Notes on the Thought of Paul Gilroy*, (2014), remarks that, “...The Black Atlantic...remains remarkable for its introduction of the validity of 'race' as an analytical category in presenting the 'Atlantic' as a discrete geo-political unit in the modern capitalist world-system” (1). He goes further, “The book elaborates a richly provocative critique of cultural nationalism, against which Gilroy posits black diasporic cultural and intellectual production” (1). Gilroy himself admits in his preface that the book was “prompted by the absence of a concern with 'race' or ethnicity from most contemporary writings about modernity” (ix). But there is too much of a sensitivity to the burdens of a past of racialized terrors in the name of white supremacy and its traces in the present for that to qualify as an assessment characterized by fidelity to Gilroy's own thesis.

Race relations matter in exile discourse since exile itself deals with race, class, ethnic, tribal and gender issues.

The Black Atlantic...clearly delineates a diversely modern, cultural-political space that is not particularly for example, American, African, Caribbean, British, etcetera but, rather, a mix of different cultures at once. In mapping the transatlantic project of cultural hybridity, the critic, Laura Chrisman in “Journeying to Death: Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*” cited in *Postcolonial Contraventions: Cultural Readings of Race, Imperialism, and Transnationalism*, (2003), carefully provides some examples of

[The] most incisive of these when she notes that Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*, was very much a 'sign of the times,' meshing neatly with 'the 1990s metropolitan academic climate, which saw the rise in popularity of concepts of fusion, hybridity and syncretism as explanatory tools for the analysis of cultural formation' as well as the rise of 'culturalism' as the appropriate means of social analysis” (ix).

Notwithstanding, Gilroy makes a definite assertion that his book "...makes some political and philosophical claims for black vernacular culture and casts a fresh eye on the history of black nationalist thought that has had to repress its own ambivalence about exile from Africa" (ix). Ironically, the book for the most part, is silent on the history of the Middle Passage, the crime, the terror as well as the dehumanisation of the black slaves. It is on this account that Dayan Joan, one of the staunchest critics of Gilroy, gives his book a hard knock; stating that,

Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*-a cartography of celebratory journeys-reads like an expurgated epic history. *The Black Atlantic* refers to, and stresses again and again, the rites of the Middle Passage, the journey from Africa to the New World, as a kind of origin myth for later chosen tales of ocean crossings by Wright, Du Bois, Douglass, and others who make a modern journey from the Americas to Europe (7).

Gilroy does not escape the acid criticism of Dayan in a sharply observed way. Dayan is increasingly worried about the fact that Gilroy comes short of "questioning the choice of exile and passage by a minority educated elites [sic] whose names we remember: Delany, Douglass, Du Bois, and Wright..." (7). But, on the other hand, she appreciates Gilroy's call for "retrieval of a past either ignored or misrepresented" (7). She queries Gilroy's argument against

Afrocentrism and its cult of Africa-the nostalgia for Pharaoh's treasures instead of the liberation of the Exodus story-in Gilroy's story, the slave ship, the Middle Passage, and finally slavery itself become frozen, things that can be referred to and looked back upon, but always wrenched out of an [sic] historically specific continuum. What is missing is the continuity of the Middle Passage in today's world of less obvious, but no less pernicious enslavement (7).

The point is the choice of "hermeneutics over history" which Dayan again says "gives culture a vast and vague power to enhance 'life.' Life, yes; but for whom and against whom?" (13). Gilroy's attempt to de-centre mongrel identities, she says is "not anchored in the semiotic trappings of race or color" (13), and that "allows his tactical move away from the overdetermined discourse of the blackness that Fanon has called 'a white man's artefact'" (14). Swirling about the debate is the lack of proper grounding in theories of race and historiography. For Dayan, "There is an odd way in which the Caribbean colonies drop out of Gilroy's historiography. For Gilroy seems haunted by the ghosts of terms already defined by the metropolitan definers" (8).

In a similar way, Natasha Barns takes the debate to another level of critique. Barns in her poignant view of Gilroy's book, gives strength to Dayan's position on historiography that, "Reading Gilroy, one gets unsettling feeling that America is the diaspora, and that black modernity cannot take place without it" (107). As if that is not enough,

The unannounced America-centeredness of *The Black Atlantic* is a tad surprising coming from a cultural commentator of Paul Gilroy's ilk. Not only does this move do little to challenge the historiography that already places modernity in the landscape identified as the industrial West, but raises more serious doubts about efficacy of the "global perspective" and its revisionist claims (107).

She angrily sums up that "Any effort to give intellectual meaning to the patterns of 20th-century black life and culture in 225 pages [sic] is to ask for trouble" (ibid). But, on the other hand, she softens her reaction in a way that perhaps, "shooting for trouble is an efficient way to inspire new agendas and methodologies in the fast-growing discipline of cultural studies in the American academy-at least it gets people thinking" (107).

Split Personality and Double Consciousness of Self

The idea of split personality and double consciousness in a racially divided society combined with the narrative

of exile has a heavy psychological stigma as well as identity crisis. In the black African-American experience, for example, double consciousness, carries a growing perhaps the conflicting idea of being American but not fully American as well as being African but not fully African hence the in-betweenness of self. It is a fluctuating sort of thing, a shifting personality in which there is much travel within the individual consciousness. This fluctuating sort of life, the identity crisis that causes mongrel hybridity within the individual mind, constitutes what Du Bois refers to as double consciousness in which the shifting self has no definite location in his/her identity. Du Bois' paradigm of race theory, identity politics, fits into my frame of analysis as regards *exilic compromise* and the implications thereof.

However, Meghan A. Burke in *Encyclopaedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society: Double Consciousness*, traces “The term *double consciousness* is used in reference to W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, when referring to a dual awareness developed by Black Americans in the United States: knowledge of one's own individual identity, as well as knowledge about how one will be read through a racial lens” (2). Double consciousness which marks the very beginning of the first chapter of Du Bois's “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” the concept makes a good and solid foundation for what I call the hermeneutics of *exilic compromise*. Double consciousness and *exilic compromise* connect in the very sense of what the experts refer to, in medical psychology as “cases of split personality and in literature speaking of a transcendental division between the divine and the material world, which inhabited true self-realization” (2). Meghan sharply expatiates, “In the psychological literature, the idea of double consciousness, made popular by several cases of split personality highlighted in *Harper's* magazine, made clear that the two selves were not only distinct but fundamentally opposed to each other” (2). The idiom of split personality (double-consciousness) shows how implicated the exile becomes in adopting the free-floating badge of hybridity. Aijaz Ahmad has condemned essence of hybridity as that which “partakes of a carnivalesque collapse and play of identities” (13). Mumia Abu-Jamal calls it “dehumanisation by design” (90). Another touching account of this term is the symbolic use of double-consciousness like the chain.

To Dayan Joan, “The use of chain-what one Arizona warden calls 'the public display of chain'-is the exploitation of a powerful symbol. Once attached to a person, it claims that person as part of a history denigration and abuse, assuring the methodical exclusion of certain folks outside the pale of human relation and empathy” (12). Thinking but these words in the context of exile or, rather, to find a new idiom of engagement with the narrative of identity politics, the hyphenated life in what translates to the convenient term of “global hybridity” today, is in large measure responsible for the idea of transnationalism.

Furthermore, the discourse and transnationalism itself involves the negotiation of multiple selves that are not pegged to a particular nationality or geographical location. Gow links Du Bois' notion of “double consciousness,” to multiple identities. To him, “the balance of these multiple identities produces guilt as one cannot dedicate one's cultural experience to simply one nation. For others, this multiplicity becomes a source of celebration and pride as experiences come to shape who one is and become an accumulation of experiences that only further develop one's identity” (25). This guilt if further demonstrated in Francie Latour's story in Haiti. “. . . her struggle with identity became a conflict of interests as she felt that her physical distance from Haiti as a transnational meant a betrayal of her Haitian identity” (26).

One interesting thing about split personality (double consciousness) is, most people use it as a defence mechanism, a coping way of survival in difficult situation. And those who have split personality as well as multiple personalities (multiple-consciousness) often forget, no recollection whatsoever in the other personalities but only remember what happens in the current personality they live. An example of the Haitian metaphor of suitcases and cultural collages by Maude Heurtelou will suffice. She says, “What I didn't know then is that my suitcases were not only physical but also cultural. These suitcases, both cultural and physical, have been essential to my survival as an immigrant in three different countries” (89). Also, Marie Nadine Pierre, views herself as a “collection or, a 'collage’” (178). Her experience as an immigrant typifies the forgetfulness in multiple-consciousness in a way that identity itself becomes more open, flexible and less static. This case will be more helpful later when we will return to memory and trauma.

But to create a liberal and also a non-damaging metaphor, Du Bois speaking about “the dignity of this struggle for African-Americans...to synthesize an integrated self out of two conflicting identities” (3). From this synthesis of integrated self and in attempt to create a middle ground for the two conflicting identities say, African-American, in the most liberal sense of it, is a give-and-take venture in order to bridge the racial gap, as well as other forms of discriminations in the new world society. The notion of double consciousness is very much connected with the idealised notion of split personality in medical psychology. This claim is central to the discourse of space of lack and in this space of lack, that is, lack of identity, comes the politics of self-location through negotiation, nationalist struggle as well as compromise in the host community; because the debates often verge on the political currency of exile. The grand “trendification” of compromise in the context of exile for survival, has been the defining feature that runs through exile literature both then and now.

But, this trend can be potentially toxic in as much as it is often deployed as a coping way of living for most exiles. The exiles are doubly conscious people referred by Gilroy as “transnational hybrid citizens” (19). Much of this claim is substantiated by Gow (2012). Reading Stuart Hall and W.E.B. Du Bois, Gow argues, “Hall and Du Bois' conception of blackness, identity functions as a continuous navigation of selves. The transnational self acknowledges these multiplicities and accepts them. Instead of a debate of authenticity and generalizability, the “black Atlantic” as an 'empty signifier' needs to remain as such” (5). Maintaining his line of argument, he posits, “Rather than functioning as a blanket term that seeks to blur difference and simply define the marginal difference as hybrid, the “black Atlantic” should investigate this difference and celebrate it. These differences should not serve to divide the “black Atlantic” but should instead further define the “black Atlantic” for what it is: a diverse group of people whose shared history contains slavery, but which has continued to grow into strong nations, distinct cultures, and unique expressions of both unity and difference” (5).

Conclusion

Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* is, on the one hand, a wounded witness to the trans-generational trauma of slavery and, on the other hand, a re-imagination of the importance of the slave trade that led to the expropriation of black slaves from the continent of Africa to the formation of hybrid culture in the Atlantic. The book is one of the surviving documents that open up the field of Transatlantic Studies to our modern time. It is the very thread that links the old and the new worlds together hence Transatlantic. Therefore, we began this discussion with Transatlantic Studies and what the field represents. From the Atlantic-based themes of Gilroy's book, we have come to understand that Transatlantic Studies refer to the movement of people, writings, ideas, books, goods, stories, etcetera, around the Atlantic Ocean, the meeting point of Europe, Africa, and the Americas as well as the inclusion of the Caribbean in the eighteenth century. In other words, Transatlantic Studies are also known as Atlantic Studies.

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