

# Book Review: The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness

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Paul Gilroy In his book, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, argues that, at least when considering Black Atlantic culture, no one theory or piece of evidence can be taken as definitive or the gold standard. As compared to the former, he thinks the latter is little, and its history is ignored. During the course of the book's four chapters, Gilroy raises crucial and thought-provoking themes about diaspora and the metaphor of the trans-Atlantic ocean trip or journey. All the book's chapters revolve on his quest to identify black people "as agents, or individuals with current racism". (Gilroy 5)

Gilroy delves deep into the "cultural politics" of race, ethnicity, and country in the first chapter titled *The Black Atlantic as Counterculture of Modernity*. By highlighting the connection between black diaspora cultures and "contemporary political and intellectual formations", he hopes to revitalize the Black Atlantic and black agency. In this seminal book, he takes aim at the ways in which Culture, Ethnicity, Nationality, and Identity are often seen as synonymous. Gilroy bases his understanding of how (racial) identity is established due to the consequences of cultural and political processes. Slavery, tradition, ethnicity, race, and modernism are some of the most significant concepts explored in the book.

According to Gilroy, the counter-culture of the Black Atlantic is Modernism, which is usually considered the backdrop of study of race, ethnicity, culture, and nationality. In directing historians' attention to the Black Atlantic, he elucidates his stance on modernity:

"I want to develop the suggestion that cultural historians could take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective". (Gilroy 11)

It is a representation of the Black Atlantic as a whole, embodying many different cultures. Being able to reexamine "nationality, geography, identity, historical memory" concerns is a potent symbol of the ongoing crisscrossing travels of black people. It prompts a reevaluation of "modernity", a concept that has been built on extremely Eurocentric ideas like Liberalism, Reason, and Rationality.

Gilroy argues, within the context of his examination of culture and ethnicity, that culture and ethnicity are to be regarded as dynamic and fluid since we may find both similarities and contrasts within the same black group. Gilroy disagrees with the growing trend of viewing nations as unified cultural entities, which is what prompted him to harshly criticize the "absolutism" of ethnic identity. He argues that this view ignores the diversity that exists within the black communities and strips political and cultural legitimacy from ethnic and racial micro-societies. Gilroy uses 'ship' as a metaphor for this 'absoluteness'. As a cultural cliché, the ship represents 'race' as the historical result of displacement and migration within the Atlantic World, including European, American, and African peoples. The ship serves as a symbol for reconsidering modernity:

“...for all these reasons, the ship is the first of the novel chronotops presupposed by my attempts to rethink modernity via the history of the black Atlantic and the African diaspora into the Western Hemisphere”.(P.47)

Black people, including black philosophers and academics, had been moving about and visiting other parts of the Atlantic region, and this had significantly altered people's conceptions of Black Preeminence. Gilroy gained perspective on racial identities as a result of his travels. Chapter 4 delves further into the concept of "double-consciousness", which Gilroy introduces through Martin.R. Delany and argues it as is framed by the Black Atlantic's 'politics of place'.

Based on his research on the interconnectedness of racial, cultural, national, and ethnic categories, Gilroy argued for the transnational and intercultural development of a Black Atlantic. These ideas are the connecting thread between "English cultural studies" and "the ideology of contemporary European aesthetics that is continually constituted by the appeal to national and even racial particularity". Gilroy claims one must have a dual identity because of the experience of being European, American, and black all at once. Gilroy went out on a mental journey across the Atlantic to better comprehend this duality and cultural mingling, and he discovered that "in Black America's history of cultural and political discussion and organization", the trap of ethnic particularism and nationalism is also there. Paul Gilroy, in the second chapter titled "Masters, Mistresses, Slavery, and the Antimonies of Modernity", urges readers to reconsider the connection between modernity and slavery. That historians and thinkers have documented slavery, black subordination, and resistance from a very mono-cultural and remote ethno-centric, even euro-centric point of view is the central argument that Gilroy uses to define his proposition. This has fundamentally led to the degeneration of the modern black cultural history structured by the transnational dislocations between Europe, America, and Africa, or what is wholly named the Black Atlantic zone.

Gilroy, in an effort to reject a modernity predicated largely on European doctrines and politics, goes above and beyond this vantage point to describe the central conflict between white supremacy in the areas of physical (lynching, racial terror), political, and economic spheres, and black aspirations of freedom of expression, autonomy, and citizenship. Among Gilroy's compelling arguments, his forthright criticism of assigning the "history of slavery to blacks" is particularly effective in debunking this insufficient and inconsistent concept of modernity. To him, this past is only a "unique quality", not a crucial component of Western civilization's contribution to moral and intellectual development. He rejects the fundamental idea of modernity, which is predicated on concepts like "progress", "reason", and "rationality" and which really merely re-creates slavery under other labels. According to Gilroy, the experience of slavery is unique to African Americans and has nothing to do with the ideas of contemporary philosophy. As such, the book, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* provides an entry point for reconsidering these concepts.

Gilroy exposed the contemporary times and the White supremacy as complicit in the institution of Slavery. He argues that 'modernity' should not be limited to the contemporary Western world but rather should include elements of the past (History) as well. Examining the 'tradition' as a direct response to 'modernity', Gilroy claims that it has been kept alive by black cultural and political movements seeking self-expression, self-emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship. To get the "political liberties they were denied under the plantation rule", black people successfully used the traditions to

advocate for their rights. These movements are a response to what they see as the contemporary complicity in the oppression of black people in areas of economics and politics. They have made significant contributions to establishing the dark aesthetic and bridging the divide between the Enlightenment debates that have traditionally kept art and reality apart. Acceptingly, Gilroy explains:

“...art became the backbone of the slaves’ political cultures and of their cultural history. It remains the means through which cultural activist even now engage in “rescuing critiques” of the present by both mobilizing memories of the past and inventing an imaginary past-ness that can fuel their utopian hopes”.(P. 56)

Gilroy's research and commentary on the work of black authors, critics, artists, and intellectuals like Frederick Douglass is a proof of this. This latter person's singular exposure to slavery lends credence to the claims that his works are based on first-hand accounts of life on a plantation during the time of slavery. Slavery and the plantation system were seen by him as a "archaic institution out of place". Gilroy writes:

“Douglass has been a slave himself. He is generally remembered for the quality and passion of his political oratory and his writings continue to be a rich resonance in the cultural and political analysis of the black Atlantic”.(P.60)

His writings were easy to read and full of detail, offering several criticisms of modernism. His writing style highlighted "the aesthetic elements and dark modernity" in his works. These things distinguish him as an alternative to Hegel's creation of the lord-bondsman battle. Again, Fredrick Douglass shifted Hegel's meta-narrative of ‘power’ into the meta-narrative of ‘liberation’. His ability to adapt to life on a slave plantation may have stemmed from the fact that he was both African and American; only after experiencing the constraints of this dual heritage could he develop his need for Absolutism. To Douglass, "Hegel's metaphor which accurately puts slavery at the natal center of contemporary sociality..." is completely false, and neither the slaves' love for bondage nor their willingness to accept death are acceptable. He even went so far as to say that slaves preferred death than being exploited in the deplorable circumstances of plantation slavery. A slave's death might be the result of either the slave's own suicide or his own attempts to free himself from his master's control. At this juncture, Douglass had shifted his stance to one of avowing the necessity and compulsion of violence against the complicities of civilization and cruelty disguised as modernity.

Black Americans resisted the terrible treatment that they were subjected to by using both violent and non-violent tactics. The Black community became self-aware and politically active via black art and political movements rather than of looking to their oppressors for answers. Using the notion of the revolution in artistic works, the black community took action to document their experiences via literary works, musical works, dance works, sculptural works, and other forms of creative expressions. Douglass contributed significantly to the maturation of the slave's discourse by way of debates on race politics, gender, and the contemporary world. Black Atlantic Modernity's inner aesthetic character has grown thanks to Gilroy’s writings and stories about enslavement and the fight against bondage. According to Richard Wright, these stories shaped the aesthetics of personalism, which reflected the African approach to creative expression; provided that the black community saw itself in a positive light, and made it evident by them that the black aesthetic paradigm would help in forming a black cultural identity.

Gilroy examines the ‘music’ of the Black Atlantic within the context of the heritage of ‘slavery’ and its essential role in black people's liberation in chapter III, "Jewels Delivered from Bondage": Black Music and the Politics Of Authenticity. This chapter poses a number of important questions about how to approach artistic products and aesthetic codes that are exposed to alternatives because of displacement, dislocation, and relocation; the traditional of musical expression; the importance of transitions in understanding the black diaspora in relation to modernity; the problematic of the relationship between politics and aesthetics while discussing modernity; and so on. Gilroy demonstrates by argument how black diasporic forms of artistic expression uniquely reimagine and deconstruct themes of Western modernity. Saying that "music, gesture, and dance are modes of communication, just as vital as the gift of word", is not anything new among us (P.75). Slaves were given music as a reward for improving their ability to communicate and express themselves, two things they were denied during an age of oppression and dominance known as Slavery.

Being a form of communication that goes beyond words, ‘black music’ has been modernized and refined to become an effective tool. It is a serious threat to the statusquo of written and spoken language as the primary means by which people communicate their thoughts and feelings. Heagel's view of art as contrary to philosophy and the lowest form of connecting "nature and limited reality" was substantially disproved by the slaves' musical forms, which were a powerful counterargument. Gilroy argues, as do other black academics like Toni Morrison that ‘music’ may serve as a site where black people's memories can be reconstructed across cultures and where black people's consciousness can be reshaped via the creative process:

“Black Americans were sustainable and healed and nurtured by the translation of their experience into art above all in the music. That was functional”. (Gilroy 78)

Throughout the chapter, black music is portrayed as potent because of its practicality and the way it blends improvisation, montage, and dramaturgy. This is because black music is a singular amalgamation of various black artistic practices, which was ultimately approved as a bridge from "music into other modes of cultural expression." Some utilize music as:

“...an aesthetic, political or philosophical marker in what might loosely be called their critical social theories”. (Gilroy 79)

Gilroy proclaims that ‘Music’ was effective enough to connect the many elements of the Black Atlantic zone—Caribbean, American, and African—to create the supreme expressive mode of black cultural particularity that makes the black community distinctive in the contemporary global context. According to Gilroy, black people's musical expression is crucial to the formation of their cultural autonomy and authenticity. Its dual nature as American-made and addressing black people's concerns gives it a strong sense of national and racial identity. Overall, the chapter features a thorough depiction of black music as a last choice in the construction of slavery to articulate the unspeakable. According to Gilroy, music was not only a passive conduit through which ideas and styles were disseminated; rather, it actively participated in this process. All of these factors injected a new level of intensity into the discussion about the real identity and the meaning of modernity. The themes of travel, migration, displacement, and relocation are explored in depth in the fourth chapter, "Cheer The Weary Traveller": W.E.B Du Bois, Germany, and the Politics of (Dis)placing. Early on, Gilroy emphasizes the need of tracing one's cultural and ethnic origins, which may be seen as a challenge to reevaluate and rebuild racism, which has

historically denied the validity of the black experience and the authenticity of black cultural practices. Gilroy cited Ralph Ellison, saying that black identity might be more constrained by hardship and experience than by the Race. The "organizational forms, cultural politics, and political cultures established by African diaspora" must be mentioned and analyzed due to Gilroy's use of the concepts of displacement and mobility as active means in the process of constructing a "black cultures' distinctive state of existence". He summarizes these styles on three tiers: the first is a self-emancipation movement that seeks and finds humane living circumstances. The second is a growing push for a new citizenship that explicitly rejects slavery. For the third, the movement is seen as a quest for independence, which labels it as anti-social.

One of the most significant results of these movements was the emergence of a black self-awareness that W.E.B. Du Bois called a "double consciousness", one that was in harmony with the politics of fulfillment and the other with the politics of transfiguration. During slavery, black people's aspirations for a better life were severely thwarted, and as a result, many blacks became defensive and anti-social. As Du Bois's life provides a real example of the racial experience of being and becoming black, it is clear why Gilroy chose Du Bois's life and works as the foundation stone of this chapter. Du Bois's move from the North to the South has allowed him to learn about and experience new black cultures. Being born into a black family and growing up in the South under slavery are two different things. Because of his own introspection, Du Bois was able to grasp the problems faced by the black community. As he came to terms with his neighborhood and his identity as a black man, he discovered a new way of writing about the world around him. With the publication of Du Bois' seminal work, *The Souls of the Black Folk*, he became the first black leader due to, in large part to his decision to shift his focus from historical study to the fields of psychology and sociology in order to better represent the black community's perspective. Gilroy, drawing on Du Bois's understanding of 'modernity', asserts the relevance of the sections of the "modern black political cultures" in relation to the allegations of 'modernity'. According to Du Bois, this awareness is more often manifested in cultural rather than political processes and actions. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* is an example of such a cultural manifestation. It has helped, and is seen as helping, black people become more aware of the significance of the shared cultural experiences that mediated their lasting, debilitating impacts of fear and sufferings. Along with these common vernacular cultures, Du Bois also developed and advocated the concept of "connectedness", which highlights the similarities and distinctions that unite the black diaspora together, and is offered as the only way to go in the depth of cultural kinship among the black people.

*The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois's magnum opus, may be broken down into three sections. The first section deals with the black communities' efforts to combat "the structures of slavery" and win freedom from them. The second section focuses on the black people yearning for independence in the so-called bearing "Liberty, Justice, and Rights" democracies. Defending one's right to self-determination by creating a physical buffer zone is the third stage of the book. Gilroy says that the three buildings or three stages are based on the idea that one's body, one's culture, and one's language are not to be seen as commodities but as avenues for self-creation and self-expression.

Finally In the fourth chapter, of the book, Gilroy demonstrates the obvious link between the themes of 'travel' and the politics of 'place' and black people's quest for liberty and self-creation. These latter topics are portrayed as crucial to the study of "identities and political cultures" of the black people and are examined at length in the chapter. The chapter provides insight into the distinctive travel and



exploring experiences of black people, focusing on black African Americans. Gilroy argues that being outside of Africa as slaves and then again outside of America as tourists or professors to Europe profoundly altered their experiences and knowledge of race, self, and society. According to Gilroy, the concept of the 'Black Atlantic', which is the antithesis of Du Bois's concept of 'Double consciousness', is the result of the evolution of African-Americans towards the newer position of life, as of being Afro-European. The Black Atlantic is seen as a window into black people's unique experiences of uprooting, displacement and restlessness; and this idea of Gilroy suggests an increased friction between the 'roots' and the 'routes' framework as proposed by Du Bois and other Black cultural critics.

**Bio note:**

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