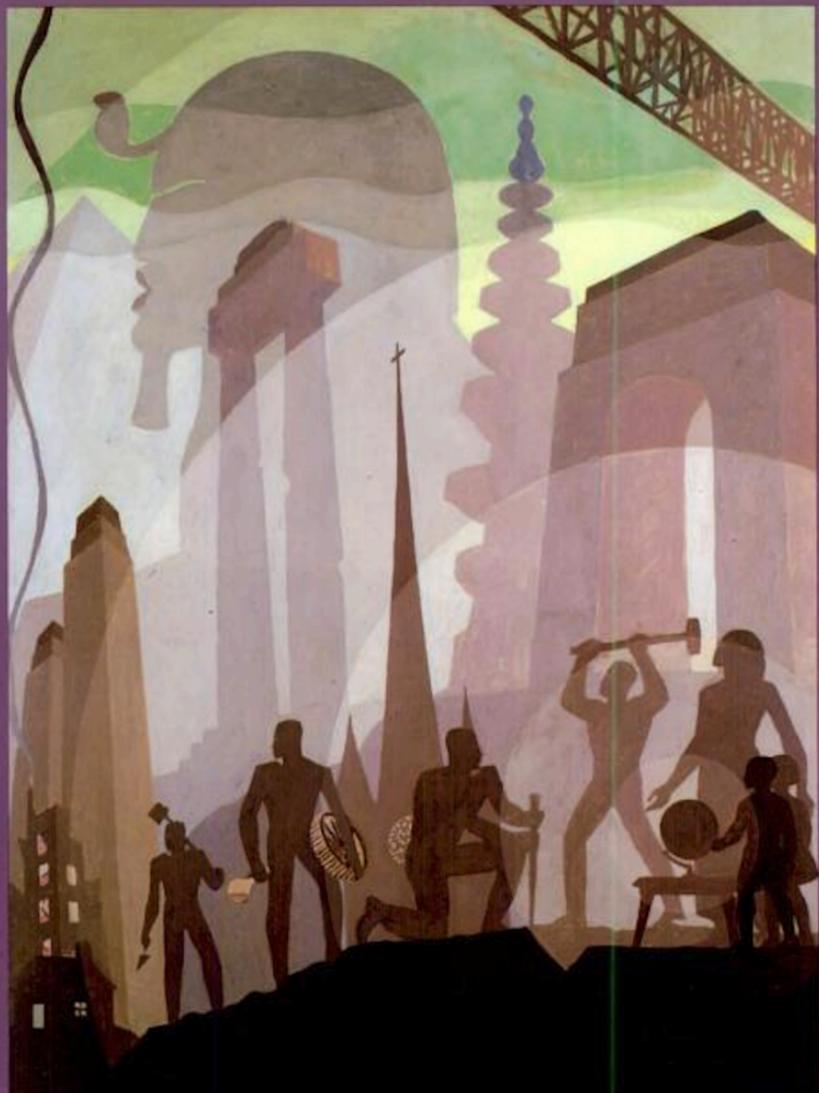


# THE BLACK ATLANTIC

Modernity and Double Consciousness



PAUL GILROY

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*Modernity and Double Consciousness*



PAUL GILROY



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London • New York

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Gilroy, Paul.

The black Atlantic : modernity and double consciousness / Paul Gilroy.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-674-07605-2 (acid-free paper) (cloth)

ISBN 0-674-07606-0 (pbk.)

1. Blacks—Intellectual life. 2. Afro-Americans—Intellectual life. 3. Afrocentrism. I. Title.

CB235.G55 1993

305.896'073—dc20

93-16042

CIP

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# Preface

**T**HIS BOOK WAS FIRST CONCEIVED while I was working at South Bank Polytechnic in London's Elephant and Castle. 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 not 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. To make things worse, these lectures were very early in the morning. With the help of writers like Michel Foucault, Marshall Berman, Richard Sennett, Fredric Jameson, Jurgen Habermas, Stuart Hall, Cornel West, Jane Flax, bell hooks, Donna Haraway, Nancy Hartsock, Sandra Harding, Janet Wolff, Seyla Benhabib, and Zygmunt Bauman, as well as a good dose of the classics, I would try to persuade them that the history and the legacy of the Enlightenment were worth understanding and arguing about. 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 concerns.

*The Black Atlantic* developed from my uneven attempts to show these students that the experiences of black people were part of the abstract modernity they found so puzzling and to produce as evidence some of the things that black intellectuals had said—sometimes as defenders of the West, sometimes as its sharpest critics—about their sense of embeddedness in the modern world.

Chapter 1 sets out the dimensions of the polemical arguments that are developed in more detail later. It shows how different nationalist paradigms for thinking about cultural history fail when confronted by the intercultural and transnational formation that I call the black Atlantic. It 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.

Chapter 2 was prompted by the absence of a concern with "race" or ethnicity from most contemporary writings about modernity. It argues that

racial slavery was integral to western civilisation and looks in detail at the master/mistress/slave relationship which is foundational to both black critiques and affirmations of modernity. It argues that the literary and philosophical modernisms of the black Atlantic have their origins in a well-developed sense of the complicity of racialised reason and white supremacist terror.

Chapter 3 pursues these themes in conjunction with a historical commentary on aspects of black music. It offers an inventory of queries about the ideas of ethnic authenticity that are routinely constructed through discussions of that music, the gender identities it celebrates, and the images of "race" as family that have become an important part of both producing and interpreting it. The chapter tries to demonstrate why the polarisation between essentialist and anti-essentialist theories of black identity has become unhelpful. It proposes that analyzing the history of black Atlantic music might play a useful role in constructing a more satisfactory set of anti-anti-essentialist arguments.

Chapter 4 examines a small part of the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, whose stimulating theory of "double consciousness" provides one of the central organising themes of my own work. It questions the location of his work in the emergent canon of African-American cultural history and explores the impact of his Pan-Africanism and anti-imperialism on the elements of his thinking that were configured by a belief in African-American exceptionalism. This chapter is intended to show how black Atlantic political culture changed as it moved out of the early phases that had been dominated by the need to escape slavery and various attempts to acquire meaningful citizenship in post-emancipation societies. I suggest that Du Bois's travels and studentship in Europe transformed his understanding of "race" and its place in the modern world.

Chapter 5 continues this line of argument with a parallel discussion of Richard Wright's work and critical responses to it. In his case, black Atlantic politics is re-examined against the backgrounds of European fascism and the construction of post-colonial, independent nation states in Africa and elsewhere. Wright is defended against those tendencies in African-American literary criticism which argue that the work he produced while living in Europe was worthless when compared to his supposedly authentic earlier writings. He is applauded for his attempts to link the plight of black Americans with the experiences of other colonised peoples and to build a theory of racial subordination that included a psychology.

The book concludes with a critical discussion of Africentrism and the way it has understood the idea of tradition as invariant repetition rather than a stimulus toward innovation and change. This chapter includes a

meditation on the diaspora concept which was imported into Pan-African politics and black history from unacknowledged Jewish sources. I suggest that this concept should be cherished for its ability to pose the relationship between ethnic sameness and differentiation: a *changing* same. I also argue that exchanges between blacks and Jews are important for the future of black Atlantic cultural politics as well as for its history.

It is essential to emphasise that there is nothing definitive here. Black Atlantic culture is so massive and its history so little known that I have done scarcely more than put down some preliminary markers for more detailed future investigations. My concerns are heuristic and my conclusions are strictly provisional. There are also many obvious omissions. I have said virtually nothing about the lives, theories, and political activities of Frantz Fanon and C. L. R. James, the two best-known black Atlantic thinkers. Their lives fit readily into the pattern of movement, transformation, and relocation that I have described. But they are already well known if not as widely read as they should be, and other people have begun the labour of introducing their writings into contemporary critical theory.

There are two aspirations that I would like to share with readers before they embark on the sea voyage that I would like reading this book to represent. Neither aspiration is restricted by the racialised examples I have used to give them substance. The first is my hope that the contents of this book are unified by a concern to repudiate the dangerous obsessions with "racial" purity which are circulating inside and outside black politics. It is, after all, essentially an essay about the inescapable hybridity and intermixture of ideas. The second is my desire that the book's heartfelt plea against the closure of the categories with which we conduct our political lives will not go unheard. The history of the black Atlantic yields a course of lessons as to the instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being remade.