Review of *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* and *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line.*

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* Reviews should be of texts relevant to the study of ethnic and third world
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* Length: Reviews of fiction and poetry should be 500-750 words; reviews of non-
  fiction, 1000-1250 words.
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* At the top of all submissions the following information should appear:
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  title of text
  publication information (place, publisher, date of publication)
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  price
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too often remains hidden in the depths of the university library while the feel-good "history that hides" enjoys an ever-widening circulation in the public imaginary. While Hartman laudably refuses to make the traverse through slavery a pleasurable one, her inaccessible writing style may regrettably prevent her work from reaching as wide an audience as it deserves. Although admittedly a desolate vision, Hartman’s Scenes of Subjection is absolutely an important one.

Paul Gilroy
Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line
416 pages
Price: $29.95 (cloth)

Paul Gilroy
The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993
261 pages
Price: $25 (cloth)

By Babacar M’Baye

In Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line, Paul Gilroy revisits the theory of racial and cultural hybridism that he had developed seven years earlier in The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness. In both works, Gilroy represents racial particularity and cultural authenticity as antithetical to modernity. Gilroy’s thesis is pivotal since it centers on the double consciousness that is intrinsic in the cultures of the Blacks of the Diaspora. Yet Gilroy’s theory is partially flawed because it neglects the importance of collective racial experience in African-American culture and history. By representing communal notions of racial identity as essentialist types of identity politics, Gilroy gives the wrong impression that racial memory is meaningless and antithetical to modernity.

In The Black Atlantic, Gilroy used the term “Black Atlantic” to describe the “rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation” of modern Black cultures that oppose the nationalist focus “common to English and African-American versions of cultural studies” (4). Gilroy defined “modernity” as the period from the end of the eighteenth to the beginning of the nineteenth centuries when the ideas of “nationality, ethnicity, authenticity, and cultural integrity” that sustain contemporary cultural studies in the West were first developed (2). Gilroy wrote:

The conspicuous power of these modern subjectivities and the movements they articulated has [not] been left behind. Their power has, if anything, grown, and their ubiquity as a means to make political sense of the world is currently paralleled by the languages of class and socialism by which they once appeared to have been surpassed. My concern here is less with explaining their longevity and enduring appeal than with exploring some of the special political problems that arise from the fatal junction of the concept of nationality with the concept of culture and the affiliations and affinities which link the Blacks of the West to one of their adoptive, parental cultures: the intellectual heritage of the West. (2)

In Against Race, Gilroy discusses his Black Atlantic theory further by detailing the ideas of racial and cultural particularity in the cultures of the Black Diaspora. He writes: “The creative acts involved in destroying raciology and transcending ‘race’ are more than warranted by the goal of authentic democracy to which they point” (12). Gilroy’s rejection of race as a major instrument of struggle is based on the premise that Blacks and other groups who have been oppressed in the U.S. have, historically, found effective ways to resist oppression without invoking the idea of race. Gilroy writes: “Under the most difficult of conditions and from imperfect materials that they surely would not have selected if they had been able to choose,
these oppressed groups have built complex traditions of politics, ethics, identity, and culture” (12). Gilroy’s critique of the importance of race as a tool of resistance is equivocal, since it focuses on the ruptures between the historical and contemporary experiences of Blacks rather than on the connections between them. For example, in Against Race, Gilroy discusses the intimacies between Blacks in the West and those in Africa in terms of discontinuities:

Several generations of Blacks have been born in Europe whose identification with the African continent is even more attenuated and remote, particularly since the anticolonial wars are over. Both the memory of slavery and an orientation toward identity that derives from African origins are hard to maintain when the rupture of migration intervenes and stages its own trials of belonging. (130)

Gilroy’s ideas about the sterility of race and the discontinuous relations between Blacks of the Diaspora and those of Africa are controversial representations of the relations between African-Americans and Africa. There is a serious problem in Gilroy’s belief that Black anti-colonialist struggles will increasingly disappear, making old concepts of Pan-African racial unity and ethnic nationalisms obsolete. Contrary to Gilroy’s predictions, the increasing cultural, ethnic, and religious conflicts in the world and the persistent poverty among the neo-colonized Black populations around the globe show that nationalisms are far from obsolete or superseded by modernity. In this sense, the notions of collective racial and cultural identities that groups within certain Black communities create as tools of liberation will multiply rather than decrease.

In Against Race, Gilroy creates another controversy by arguing that in the history of Blacks of the Diaspora, the “assertions of a common, invariant racial identity cannot plausibly be projected through the idea of a common culture; rather, they find alternative expression in a significant return to aspects of an older racial science” (211). This statement shows that Gilroy is not prone to criticize the racist representation of Blackness in Western culture, suggesting that his theory of race is solely concerned with the essentialism of Black people. This impression was manifest in The Black Atlantic where Gilroy argued that the representation of African-American culture and history as “local” and “exceptional” in cultural studies is antithetical to the global formations of modern Black cultures.

The problem in Gilroy’s argument is that its criticism of “ethnic particularism and nationalism” seems to be directed to “Afrocentrists” intellectuals only, giving the wrong impression that such critics develop agendas that run counter to diversity and modernity. In The Black Atlantic, Gilroy irreverently said that the “Afrocentrists” have an “easy, instrumental relationship with tradition” that is “complemented by the argument that the unique civilization to which the West lays claim is itself the product of African civilization” (190). Earlier in the book, Gilroy wrote: “Asante dismisses the idea of racial identity as a locally specific, social, and historical construction” (189). Gilroy misunderstands both Afrocentrism and Asante’s theory of culture by representing them as essentialist and opposed to cultural diversity. In this sense, Gilroy fails to account for Afrocentricism as one of the modern intellectual movements that evolved out of the Western hemisphere in the context of struggles for freedom, equality, and diversity.

The above comments show that Gilroy’s Black Atlantic theory has limitations that need to be explored and addressed in the future. Yet, instead of representing Gilroy’s thesis as flawed, one should consider it a significant contribution to the study of the relations among Black cultures. For example, Gilroy’s work can help us better understand the connections among Black cultures without using essentialist notions of racial and cultural difference or authenticity. Even though Gilroy has not given much attention to Africa and its relations with the Black Diaspora, he does not deny the continuity of African traditions in the New World. In simple terms, Gilroy just wants us to acknowledge the fact that the Africans who were enslaved in the Western world and their descendants have developed multicultural and complex identities that cannot be represented as African only. As Gilroy rightly points out in Against Race:

We can, of course, identify elements
in Wheatley’s work which betray the residual presence of African animistic religion and sun worship. And although we can locate African words and accurate ethnological detail in Equiano’s narrative, his work, like Wheatley’s, was also influenced by Pope and Milton. They ask to be evaluated on their own terms as complex, compounded formations. (117)

In perceiving the works of Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano as “complex” and “compounded formations,” Gilroy forces scholars to rethink the monolithic interpretation of African-American culture, allowing them to make connections between the experiences of Blacks of the Diaspora and Blacks of diverse cultures. In this sense, Gilroy broadens our conception of Black identity while urging us to reconsider works of Black writers such as Wheatley and Equiano that need to be reinterpreted.

Gilroy’s Black Atlantic theory is a major contribution to the study of modern Black cultures. His representation of Black cultures as “fractal” and “discontinuous” shows that Black cultures have maintained an allegiance to local Black identity while undermining commitment to a transnational African culture. As Gilroy rightly puts it in Against Race, in Black Atlantic histories, “The modes of behavior articulated through appeals to the power of sovereign territory and the bonds of rooted, exclusive national cultures, are contrasted with the different translocal solidarities that have been constituted by diaspora dispersal and estrangement” (8). Bearing in mind Gilroy’s remark in The Black Atlantic that Black cultures are massive and their histories so little (xi), one should recognize the hybridism and double-consciousness in Black cultures. However, contrary to Gilroy’s premise, such diversity should not lead us to perceive racial and cultural particularity as futile and antithetical to modernity.

Flashback Review

W.E.B. Du Bois
The Souls of Black Folk
New York: Penguin, 1995 (1903)
278 pages
ISBN 0-451-52603-1
Price: $4.95

By Jennifer Williams

One hundred years after the publication of The Souls of Black Folk (1903), Du Bois’s most influential text, one might ponder its significance to contemporary race relations in America. Du Bois’s time-honored statement, “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line,” seemed to forecast the racist violence and subsequent civil rights struggles witnessed throughout that century. Yet in a post-millennial political and intellectual climate, characterized chiefly by global and transnational concerns, how might we describe the problem of the twenty-first century? As racial and economic disparities persist in the United States beneath the shadow of the affirmative action backlash, what lessons can we glean from this classic text?

An exploration that is part ethnography and sociology, part poetic prose and personal narrative, Du Bois’s Souls of Black Folk explores the psychological and economic aftermath of racial slavery in the post-Reconstruction South. Much of the book’s brilliance lies in the author’s ability to balance his inquiry into the economic crisis of the black South with a revealing look at the psychological despair and existential crises of America’s new black citizenry. Like an Oedipus attempting to solve the riddle of the Sphinx, Du Bois seeks to explain “the strange meaning of being black” at the turn of the twentieth century (41). He uncovers his answers in fourteen essays which tackle issues of black poverty, leadership, religion, education and ways of life within the “veil” of race.

Du Bois’s journey within the veil takes him southward. He offers an account of the failures and successes of the Freedmen’s Bureau (Chapter II “On the Dawning of Freedom”) to provide a framework for understanding the living conditions of the rural peasantry. He sums up the results of this short-