

## Culture



# Paul GILROY, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993

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Volume 15, Number 1, 1995

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083729ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083729ar>

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### Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

### ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Rethmann, P. (1995). Review of [Paul GILROY, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993]. *Culture*, 15(1), 92–93. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083729ar>

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public soudain éveillé à l'existence de ce petit pays d'Afrique centrale par la couverture médiatique de ses récentes calamités. Car, par son étude spécifique d'une des régions frontalières importantes du Rwanda, l'auteur éclaire en profondeur le long processus de double colonisation qui a conduit le pays à la révolution de 1959 et qui permet de comprendre, en partie seulement et sans jamais les justifier, les épouvantables luttes intercastes qui ont jalonné l'histoire rwandaise des dernières décennies. Un livre que les spécialistes médiatiques du Rwanda feraient bien de lire.

Paul GILROY, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993.

By Petra Rethmann

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In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy develops a framework to interrogate the common notion of modernity deeply ingrained in recent debate. Generically, modernity is understood politically and culturally as a European problem, undoubtedly having impact on other parts of the world, intrinsically linked to the Enlightenment and free of gender and race. By contrast, Paul Gilroy is a relentless and creative interrogator of precisely this "common sense" modernity. Invoking the Black Atlantic not only as metaphor but as cultural space, Gilroy examines the political and aesthetic practices that shaped the lives of Blacks across the Atlantic.

Black English and Black Anglo-Americans were caught in the double grip of two great cultural assemblages, the Black world and the modern European context. This ambiguity defines the life-world of Blacks, their literary production, music, political programs, and discourse between Black and European intellectuals, as in the case of Du Bois and Wright. Fluctuation and equivocity signify Black identities, not the unilateral politics of race often appropriated in debates about nationality and authenticity. Simplified versions of ethnicity and nationality turn a blind eye to the complexities, ambiguities and brokenness of Black identities. Gilroy launches a critique against both English and North-American cultural studies programs which show an inclination to cohesion and unidimensionality that streamline notions of iden-

tity. For Paul Gilroy, Blackness is not the critical indicator when talking about Black identity, but only one among others. The intellectual heritage of the Enlightenment and successive disputes over this legacy affect both White and Black culture equally. These disputes generated bifocal cultural forms originated by Blacks and dispersed within structures of feeling. Bifocal, bilingual cultures represent the Atlantic world, the Black Atlantic, where identities are not secure but are flexible, fluctuating and like ships, constantly in motion.

This brings me to Gilroy's second metaphor. Ships sail across the Atlantic transporting not only goods and people but information, news, inventions, and ideas. The Atlantic is a transcultural space that provides constant communication, the exchange of thought, and the barter of sentiments and philosophies. Ships, machines of modernity, are micro-systems of linguistic and political hybridity. Ships sailing to and fro incorporate and embody disclosure and extension. The ship and the sea counterpose the unilateral representation of Blacks in American and English historiography, anthropology, and cultural studies as an exclusive identity and an unfragmented nation. The ship and the sea remain the most important conduit of communication among Blacks and Europeans, superseded only by the appearance of new communicative technologies.

In order to show the liminal space modernity afforded Blacks, Gilroy ponders on literature and music, particularly Frederick Douglass, Toni Morrison, the Fisk Singers, Jimi Hendrix, Leroi Jones, Miles Davis, and Quincy Jones. Frederick Douglass, who had himself had been the son of slaves, belabors in his novels slavery, terror, and bondage. Like Toni Morrison, he is concerned with questions of the political and conscious subject. His pessimistic outlook on the political and cultural predicament of Blacks favors the possibility of death to attain freedom over the continuing condition of inhumanity on which systems of dominance and terror depend. Only a masculinity strong enough to combat enslavement might relieve Blacks from the yoke of oppression. In her treatment of Margaret Garner's story in *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison confronts similar issues but in a very different vein. During the flight from their master, Margaret Garner and her family were trapped by the "owners" in the house of a relative. Upon their entry into the house Margaret Garner attempted to kill all three of her children, but could

only get hold of the youngest one. A trial followed in which Margaret Garner confessed to the attempt of killing her children. Asked for her reasons, she explained that any death is better than the hardship and suffering they would have to endure as slaves. Gilroy's rendition of the Garner-*Beloved* story corresponds closely to Douglass' novels. Both authors refuse to concede any legitimacy to slavery and ask for the recognition of Blacks as political subjects, a subjectivity that Hegel understands as the precondition to modernity.

Gilroy's second discussion of aesthetics forgoes questions of political citizenship in favor of moving to questions of cultural citizenship. In discussing Black music and the politics of authenticity, he shows how the syncretic complexity of Black expressive cultures defies notions of an untouched, primitive, and pristine Black other. Through stage performances, Black culture impressed itself into and was absorbed by the desires of Europe. Conversely, Black musicians were interested in European music styles and translated this attraction into their music. The notion of pure and authentic Black music is a fiction that has its source in the desire to maintain unpolluted borders and an immaculate sense of national space. Gilroy continues this argumentation by analyzing the works of W. E. D. Du Bois and Ronald Wright, two Black intellectuals who successfully combined the particularities of Black culture in the United States with the philosophies of Hegel, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Marx. Both authors expressed a strong interest in European modernity, and left the United States to spend the last years of their lives in Europe. Although both authors pursued different agendas, they met in their desire to exceed the confinements of Black America and open themselves to other communication partners and experiences. Both analyzed racial subordination as the process of social and technical progress and development known as modernization. Racial hatred finds expression in severe humiliations, sexual mutilations, and physical and symbolic violence. But Du Bois and Wright not only shared the influence of European theory in their work, they represented in Europe a vibrant part of America's intellectual life. They were renowned thinkers and writers in their time. Even though they were largely ignored or unacknowledged by the European scholarly community (for example, Simone de Beauvoir), the latter nevertheless depended on the accomplishments of Du Bois and Wright to understand the issues of race and racism; yet, it was in the end

racism itself that accounted for the silence covering their influence.

Throughout his work Gilroy pursues a relentless inquiry into the making of race, sex, culture, and nation. His sensitivity to underlying sexist assumptions in the works of several authors discussed by him is diligent. The framework he provides to read modernity as discourse in which race and Blackness occupy a central place is exciting and creative. Converting Bakhtin's chronotype into praxis, Gilroy presents a sharp and challenging book that should not be ignored in cultural, historical, and anthropological discussions.

Charles David KLEYMEYER (dir.), *Cultural Expression & Grassroots Development. Cases from Latin America and the Caribbean*, Boulder & Londres : Lynne Rienner, 1994, 293 pages.

Par Isabelle Druc

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Charles David Kleymeyer réunit dans ce volume différentes contributions relatant des projets qui lient expression culturelle et développement rural en Amérique latine et dans les Caraïbes. Le livre fait état de 17 ans d'activités de développement (de 1973 à 1990) appuyées par la Fondation interaméricaine (*Inter-American Foundation* ou IAF). L'IAF favorise des actions de développement des communautés rurales ou minoritaires fondées sur une approche culturelle et, plus particulièrement ici, sur l'expression culturelle comme moteur de développement. Les rapports de dix des 215 projets subventionnés par l'IAF sont présentés pour illustrer une approche encore nouvelle de développement, fondée sur la revalorisation des traditions culturelles, l'action participante et le contrôle des projets par les bénéficiaires (approche émergente, «*bottom-up*»), dans le but d'initier des changements sociaux et économiques durables et équitables. Les projets, de petite échelle, sont initiés et conduits par des personnes du milieu; ils sont extrêmement divers et issus de préoccupations spécifiques et locales. Les bénéficiaires (communauté ethnique ou individus) participent à toutes les étapes du projet, de la formulation à l'accomplissement. L'assistance extérieure n'est que secondaire et ponctuelle.