

How to Read *The Black Atlantic*:  
A Cautionary Warning for Studying African Diaspora

I.

Paul Gilroy's highly influential book, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, takes up the daunting task of understanding race by establishing the Atlantic slave trade as a "heuristic" (Gilroy, xi). This task is daunting because the project of explaining race is so historically complicated and the stakes are so high. Gilroy is attempting to describe blackness, diaspora, and, hence, modernity—each of which could be an impossibly large task alone—through a paradigm "that [he] heuristically called the black Atlantic world" (Gilroy, 3). While the black Atlantic<sup>1</sup> may be useful for those concerned with certain aspects of New World slavery, this paper offers a cautionary warning for using it as our only methodology for understanding African diaspora. In other words, Gilroy's heuristic is useful, but only insofar as we realize that it is one limited account and many more theories must be incorporated.

If we read Gilroy's understanding as the complete story of African diaspora—or even African slavery—we risk establishing a Eurocentric, essentialist paradigm. In what follows, there are three portions of Gilroy's model that I will argue cannot be universalized without silencing other experiences: section II will critique the concepts of "Africanness" as reducible to "blackness," section III will problematize the idea that the Atlantic Ocean speaks for all diasporas from Africa, and section IV will critique the conclusion that modernity can thus be described by the Black Atlantic. My hope is to encourage scholars to understand the multiplicities of experience that constitute the African diaspora, rather than assuming one, singular history of slavery. Hence, this paper offers "a corrective to [the] myopic vision"

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this essay, I will use the black Atlantic to refer to Gilroy's heuristic, not to be confused with Gilroy's book which I will reference as *The Black Atlantic*.

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(Larson, 143) that scholars of the Indian Ocean refer to as “the ‘tyranny of the Atlantic’ in slavery studies” (Allen, 328).

Before moving into my three critiques of a universal reading of Gilroy’s text, it is important to quickly summarize what premises *The Black Atlantic* puts forward. Gilroy wishes to critique “the continuing lure of ethnic absolutisms in cultural criticism” that is “supported by a clutch of rhetorical strategies that can be named ‘cultural insiderism’” (Gilroy, 3). He is attempting to change the paradigm of cultural description from one that is highly nationalist and essentialist to one that is more “rhizomorphic” (Gilroy, 4). To speak of a more fluid, historically contingent form of identity, Gilroy turns to the ship on the black Atlantic: “[t]he image of the ship—a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion—is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons” (Gilroy, 4). The slave ship takes on immense importance, as it signifies people moving through cultures and nations that will forever destabilize identities (Gilroy, 16). The ship, as a heuristic, shows that we are not “fixed,” but in “shifting places,” making the black Atlantic similar to “theorisation of creolisation, metissage, mestizaje, and hybridity” (Gilroy, 16; 3). Hence, we can view Gilroy’s work in line with that of other post-structural scholars of identity, such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Stuart Hall.

Whether Gilroy wishes to universalize his theory of the black Atlantic to describe all African diaspora is unclear from the text. While at times Gilroy uses language that makes his theory sound universal—something that has been critiqued by George Elliott Clarke, who claims the text is “fraught with contradiction” because of its internal essentialism—Gilroy also claims that *The Black Atlantic* is focused on one historical phenomenon and not the entire world (Clarke, n/a). Within the first few pages, he notes: “[t]his book addresses one small area in the grand consequence of this historical conjunction” (Gilroy, 3). Additionally, in the preface, Gilroy

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explicitly states: “my conclusions are strictly provisional. There are also many obvious omissions” (Gilroy, ix). Hence, I believe the intention of the book is not to describe all African diaspora, although it is unclear if Gilroy succeeds in meeting this goal. Discovering Gilroy’s intention, however, is neither the aim of this essay nor pertinent to its importance. Irrespective of how Gilroy wishes to answer the question of universalizability, what is relevant for this paper is how we, as scholars, *ought to* understand the text; my focus is on what would give this heuristic the most academic value.

## II.

Throughout *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy uses the term “black” as a signifier that is synonymous with African. For example, in the second paragraph of chapter one, Gilroy slips between the language of black and Anglo-African when he states that “black English, like the Anglo-Africans of earlier generations and perhaps, like all blacks in the West, stand between (at least) two great cultural assemblages” (Gilroy, 1). Here, the terms “black English” and “Anglo-African” are synonymous, as both are between the assemblages of English culture and African history (Gilroy, 2). In addition, Gilroy seamlessly switches between using the term “black” and “African-America” when referring to the United States (Gilroy, 4). This slippage becomes central to the black Atlantic, as the black Atlantic is synonymous with the events of the Middle Passage—or moving Africans to the Western world (Gilroy, 4). In other words, the black Atlantic *is* the movement of Africans across the Atlantic by slave ship, where the word black inherently signifies African identity. Hence, the idea of “blackness” *as* “Africanness” seems evident in Gilroy’s theory, making it likely that readers will interpret the two words as being synonymous.

The idea that Africans are seen as black, however, is not universalizable. While Gilroy speaks of England, the Caribbean, and the United States, where it may be historically appropriate

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to link “blackness” and “Africanness”, if one were to interpret this rule as being able to be applied across both space and time they would risk exporting a Eurocentric model of race. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza highlights the importance of thinking about the terms we use and the “national and transnational contexts that frame them” in “African Diasporas: Toward a Global History,” a text that will guide this section (Zeleza, 6). The conflation between “blackness” and “Africanness” is predicated on the “conception of ‘Africa’ as ‘sub-Saharan Africa,’ a racialized construct that haunted African studies in Euroamerica over the last century and that some African scholars have desperately sought to deconstruct” (Zeleza, 6-7). Because most Euro-American interaction with Africa, particularly in the slave trade, occurred in sub-Saharan, most Western scholarly work speaks of sub-Saharan Africa. This trend, Zelza explains, is highly problematic: “[t]he conflation of African diaspora formations with the histories and geographies of Atlantic slavery disregards the histories of other African diasporas” (Zeleza, 7). Confining our study of Africanness has caused scholars to miss diasporic movements. Current migrations from Northern African countries may not fit into the prominent black paradigm (Zeleza, 8). Hence, we might want to refrain from thinking of Africa solely in terms of “blackness.”

The second Eurocentric assumption in play when scholars allow “blackness” to supplant “Africanness” is that slaves only went to places where they were darker than other inhabitants, as in the West. However, outside of the Western world, Africans may be considered to have lighter skin. While surprising to those who theorize race in terms of blackness, “there are many Asians who are as dark as many sub-Saharan Africans and as light as many North Africans. Color, in this case ‘blackness,’ therefore, is not always a reliable indicator of ‘Africanness’” (Zeleza, 13). If black skin does not correlate perfectly with African heritage, then assumptions that our Euro-American understanding of race will hold internationally would be dangerous. It appears that the

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understanding of race as derived solely from studying Atlantic slavery “is not terribly helpful in deciphering the full dimensions and complexities of African diasporas in Asia” (Zezeza, 13).

Hence, if one were to universalize the idea of “blackness” as “Africanness,” they would be stuck with a Eurocentric model that is globally distorting, particularly in parts of Asia.

Is this, one might ask, an attempt to say that any use of “blackness” as “Africanness”—be it historical, political, or theoretical—ought to be eradicated? If we cannot say that all Africans are black, does it make sense to use the terminology of “blackness” to speak of the historical treatment of race in Western areas? While this section, thus far, may sound like an attempt to annihilate concepts of “blackness,” the only concern is with the universalization of “blackness.” The point is not that we should eliminate the concept of “blackness”, but that we must be wary of it becoming our default tool when attempting to speak of African diaspora:

‘Africa’ and ‘Africans’ of course include ‘blacks’ but are not confined to them, and before the twentieth century some Africans went to Europe and Asia as enslaved people, but not all, perhaps not even the majority, and their identities were not always framed by American-style regimes of racialization. Other social inscriptions and ideologies such as religion sometimes played a more salient role. (Zezeza, 9)

Hence, with caution, I believe that Gilroy’s concept of “blackness” could be appropriate. Even Zezeza, who is critical of Gilroy, notes that “[s]ome of the scholarship on ‘Black Europe,’ ‘Black Britain,’ ‘Black France,’ and so on, is illuminating, but much of it ... is clearly problematic” (Zezeza, 9). Therefore, it is necessary to use “blackness” carefully in order to avoid Eurocentricism.

### III.

The conflation of sub-Saharan Africa with its interactions with the West also highlights the second point that I would like to analyze: the focus on the Atlantic Ocean. Using the Atlantic

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as a heuristic implies that the journey across this ocean clarifies an experience for African diasporic people. This is shown by Gilroy's focus on the slave ship, which is always theorized in relationship to the Atlantic Ocean: "[s]hips immediately focus attention on the middle passage" (Gilroy, 4). One reason that Gilroy uses ships as a motif is that "[s]hips also refer us back to the middle passage, to the half-remembered micro-politics of the slave trade and its relationship to both industrialisation and modernization" (Gilroy, 17). Hence, readers are constantly faced with the idea that movement from Africa is equivalent to sea travel on the Atlantic and, again, faced with the question: ought we universalize the Atlantic slave trade as standing in for all diasporas? Here, using support from both history and historiography, I would caution readers to see the Atlantic only as a single experience that explains where some people, such as Gilroy, can find their history, but does not speak for all of those who have an African past.

Universalization of the Atlantic to African diasporic studies risks masking historical events surrounding Africa, particularly in the Arabian Peninsula and the Indian Ocean. Yet, the practice seems commonplace for many academics. "There is no question that the Atlantic model dominates African diaspora studies," Zeleza notes, while calling for scholars "to de-Atlanticize and de-Americanize the histories of African diasporas" (Zeleza, 4-5). One leading scholar who is challenging the role of the Atlantic is the historian Richard B. Allen, who recently wrote *European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500-1850* because of the "reluctance of many historians of slavery, slave trading, and abolition to look beyond the confines of the Atlantic" (Vink, 139).

The fact that the Atlantic slave trade was neither the only form of African diaspora nor a model that could be universally applied throughout the world is not a new revelation. This field has been slowly rising. In 1997, Edward Alpers's article "The African Diaspora in the

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Northwestern Indian Ocean: Reconsideration of an Old Problem, New Directions for Research” gained attention among scholars, such as Richard Allen, yet Alpers was not the first to raise this criticism. He quotes Joseph Harris from over a quarter century earlier, claiming:

[O]ne must acknowledge that the African diaspora in the East has not received the study it deserves. . . until serious, more up-to-date studies appear, hopefully by Asians, on the Asian dimension of the African diaspora, we will remain grossly uninformed about the scope and impact of the global dimension of the African diaspora which clearly has been an important factor. (Alpers, quoting Joseph Harris, 62)

Alpers himself, however, gained a lot of new information since Harris’s complaint. The Islamic slave trade, for one, generated an African diaspora of considerable importance, as did the import of slaves by Portuguese Indians (Alpers, 64-65). Yet Alpers demanded more from researchers.

Today, much more literature about non-Atlantic African diasporas is present, yet most scholars still “tend to focus on the Atlantic world” as a result of “methodological nationalism and Euro-centrism” (Allen, 328-329). The importance of the Indian Ocean for the existence of the Atlantic slave trade is often ignored. Before Europeans decided it would be viable to bring slaves to the New World, they used Indian Ocean islands, such as Mauritius, as “the crucial test case” (Allen, 328). Leaving these islands out of our understanding of slavery is a huge methodological flaw as “[m]ore indentured laborers landed in Mauritius than in any other colony” (Allen, 328). Hence, even for those interested in the Atlantic slave trade, the Indian Ocean is of importance.

Furthermore, we now know that the Indian Ocean served as a path for African slaves and migrants to move East. As early as 650 C.E. it is estimated that slaves were taken on the Indian Ocean, with sufficient data to satisfy many scholars (Larson, 129, Hooper and Eltis 365). From 650 C.E. until 1750 C.E., “the demand for slaves in the northwestern Indian Ocean was expanding” and there was little to no “direct European influence” on this process (Hooper and Eltis, 368). Even once European control effected the African slave trade, the primacy of the

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Atlantic was not a given. It was not until late in the chronology of African slave trades that the Atlantic began to outpace the Indian Ocean as the primary demand for slaves. As Jane Hooper and David Eltis note, “for most of the seventeenth century, the numbers carried off from Southeast Africa to Asia by the various large European East Indies companies would have exceeded the size of the captive flow into Atlantic” (Hooper and Eltis, 355). These early trades to Asia often involved the Indian Ocean, moving African slaves by small dhows that carried less than 100 people at a time—a form of trade that contrasts deeply with the large slave ships used in the Atlantic Ocean’s Middle Passage that Gilroy references (Hooper and Eltis, 357-366).

Size of ship is not the only way the slave trades that resulted from the Indian Ocean were different than those to the Western world from the Atlantic. In countries across the Middle East and Asia, slaves “entered domestic units as wives, concubines, household helpers, and laborers, or government service as administrators, servants, and soldiers” (Larson, 136). This stands in contrast to the New World, where slaves were used mainly for cultivating agricultural lands (Larson, 136). It is, however, worth noting that some slaves in the Mediterranean were forced to work in salt marshes with terrible conditions, similar to in the West (Larson, 137).

Another major difference in slavery was the treatment of men, women, and children. While the West was often more interested in obtaining male slaves for labor, Islamic countries preferred women. Some suggest that African slave women outnumbered slave men two to one (Larson, 137). Furthermore, in the Islamic, if slave women were married to free men they were often freed. These laws were the same in “the Hijaz, the Maghreb, Oman, the Persian Gulf, and North India,” showing some level of regional consistency (Larson, 137). Under such laws, any child born with a free father was free, even if the mother who birthed the child was a slave (Larson, 138). Finally, historians claim that “slave concubines who bore children to free men

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were themselves to be manumitted” (Larson, 138). Hence, child birth was highly tied to freedom. These customs on slavery, marriage, and reproduction are highly dissimilar to the practices in the Western world. In America, a slave master would rarely marry or free a slave: “practices of marriage and manumission were usually publicly shunned or disallowed by law” (Larson, 138). Children of female slaves were themselves slaves. If the father was a white slave owner, this made no difference (Marquis, 101). Therefore, we can see that the gendered role of African slaves differed based on culture and location. Hence, if we would like a fuller, less Eurocentric history, these nuances—among many others—are necessary to understand.

#### IV.

Finally, I would like to evaluate what is at stake in the black Atlantic for Gilroy: modernity. The purpose of this heuristic, above all, is “to rethink modernity via the history of the black Atlantic” (Gilroy, 17). For Gilroy, the slave ship holds such significance because it “provides a different sense of where modernity might itself be thought to begin,” critiquing the Western tradition of seeing modernity as enlightenment (Gilroy, 17). It is, however, worth observing that while beginning modernity with the Atlantic slave trade holds utility for Gilroy, it cannot be applied as a global change in epoch. In other words, universalizing modernity may be problematic because it depends not only on time, but also place (Silvia and Vieira, 75).

In a critique of Jürgen Habermas’s view of modernity as enlightenment, Filipe Carreira da Silva and Mónica Brito Vieira argue that understanding modernity as singular is historically inaccurate. If Gilroy is correct that we are to look for “the hidden internal fissures in the concept of modernity,” then it is important not only to pay attention to how the view of enlightenment as modernity has obfuscated Euro-American exclusion, but how alternative views of modernity may be problematic (Gilroy, 38). Because Gilroy’s project “is to conjure up and enact the new

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modes of friendship, happiness, and solidarity,” it is necessary to account for all modern experiences (Gilroy, 38). Claiming that there is a singular modernity, however, does the opposite. As Silva and Vieira explain, “far from acknowledging its huge internal variety and contradictions, to conceive of modernity as a single phenomenon results in a fatally flawed understanding of it,” where many histories are lost (Silva and Vieira, 65). If the experiences with both diaspora and slavery are pluralistic, then starting modernity in the Atlantic is inaccurate and risks masking the trauma of non-Western modernities. The trend of reducing one culture’s modernity to global modernity risks “the limitations of self-centric cultural conceptions, ‘Eurocentrism’ being one of the most influent and pervasive” (Silva and Vieira, 67). Hence, we ought not conclude that a singular set of experiences can describe modernity for all.

Gilroy’s concluding connection between modernity and the Atlantic slave trade reveals what is at stake in conflating Euro-American understandings of race and diaspora into larger conclusions about modernity. What is offered here, then, is a different hermeneutic for reading historical accounts of slavery. I hope I have displayed the importance of thinking in pluralities of messy history that cannot neatly follow a singular story or theory. History, here, is a never-ending proliferation of events that we cannot fully pin down, yet must not stop searching for, as each event helps to understand our current position. Lastly, and most importantly, this is not a call to stop positing heuristics to understand the world, but a call for a multiplicity of paradigms that are situationally available, to better our understanding. Hence, while *The Black Atlantic* served here as a departure for my critique it was by no means the end, only a singular point of scholarly intervention that must be expanded upon.

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