

The Atlantic in Black and White: A Critique of the Black Atlantic

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The concept of the “black Atlantic,” formulated by the British sociologist Paul Gilroy in 1993 in his study by the same title,¹ resonates with many of the approaches that characterized the thinking of identity, of nationhood, of tradition, of ethnicity, and of culture at that time. In his approach, which was strongly inspired by poststructuralism and the British school of Cultural Studies, Gilroy thus took up and radicalized the concept of the African diaspora, as post-war Africanist critics like George Shepperson (and his colleagues St. Clair Drake und Joseph Harris) had formulated it with close reference to the Jewish usage of the term.² What made Gilroy’s concept special was his turn against the Afrocentrist idea of Africa as a homeland or centre and towards the diasporic margins, and his suggestion to think of the Black Atlantic in terms of a rhizomatic structure complicatedly interlinking black communities worldwide. Gilroy insisted that the black diaspora—and by extension the idea of “black identity”—is a construct, the result of a history of ascriptions, projections, prejudices, and corresponding acts of self-fashioning. Black people the world over, he maintained, do not conceive of themselves as a community on the grounds of some shared and original “race” or even “culture” (although obviously, he does not deny that there are transnationally or transculturally committing black cultural traditions), but rather on the basis of historical experiences of oppression, marginalization and exploitation—Africans were “made” in the new world in the very first place.³

While I find this “decentralizing move” in Gilroy’s approach inspiring and original, I have more problems with his corresponding concept of the “black Atlantic” as a sort of “counter-modernity” “that defiantly reconstructs its own critical, intellectual, and moral genealogy in a partially hidden public sphere of its own”⁴—an idea that was enormously successful in the critical reception of Gilroy’s book. In the wake of it, many critics seemed to hope that the black diaspora, in fact any diasporic formation, could indeed function as a powerful alternative to established concepts of

1 Gilroy 1993.

2 Cf. Harris, on the history of this takeover see: Edwards, “Unfinished Migrations” and “The Uses of Diaspora.”

3 Cf. on this line of argumentation also Mayer, *Diaspora* 73-121.

4 Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* 37-38.

group identity formation—countering and effacing the outdated and dangerous blood-and-soil rhetoric of the national. Such hopes were not only based upon Gilroy's writing, of course, but upon a whole series of texts that appeared in the 1990s, forming what Robin Cohen called a "postmodern diaspora" debate.⁵ Perhaps the most important point of reference for this debate was Stuart Hall's essay of 1990, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," which anticipated in many respects the basic ideas of *The Black Atlantic* and became a foundational document for diaspora studies:

I use this term here metaphorically, not literally: diaspora does not refer to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea. This is the old, the imperialising, the hegemonising, form of "ethnicity." We have seen the fate of the people of Palestine at the hands of this backward-looking conception of diaspora—and the complicity of the West with it. The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of "identity" which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity.⁶

With the writing of Gilroy and Hall, or, to name some others, James Clifford and Khachig Tololyan, the editor of the journal *Diaspora*, a utopian tone entered the discourse around diasporas. The term "diaspora" no longer functions as a category of historical and social description, and its engagement does not primarily aim at an assessment of past and present formations and phenomena—diaspora studies rather point to the future. In the course of this reasoning, the concept of the diaspora is not seen as a variation on older concepts of communal self-fashioning, such as ethnicity or nationality, but rather employed to indicate a radical way out—a possibility of thinking group identity not by way of demarcations and boundaries, but rather in terms of flexible alliances and pragmatic groupings without exclusionary character. "Diasporas have rarely founded nation-states," James Clifford writes in close reference to Gilroy: "Israel is the prime example. And such 'homecomings' are, by definition, the negation of diaspora."⁷

Now Gilroy concedes that the concept of the diaspora gained an earlier prominence in the nineteenth century precisely because it fitted so nicely into the vocabulary of "nationalisms and subaltern imperialisms"⁸ of the day. But these days, Gilroy proceeds in a characteristic twist of argumentation, we need to cleanse the concept from its "authoritarian associations," so that it can become the point of departure for an alternative historiogra-

5 Cohen 129-134.

6 Hall 401-402.

7 Clifford 251.

8 Gilroy, "Diaspora" 207.

phy and a political reorientation in the present, “outside of and sometimes in opposition to the political forms and codes of modern citizenship.”⁹

Yet refashioned as a utopian principle, the concept of diaspora loses precisely the heuristic quality which makes it interesting to me in the first place. It does no longer serve to approach different phenomena of global exchange and contact in historical depth, but rather threatens to lay itself like a romanticizing veil over reality and history. “[Gilroy] delegates to the diaspora—and to it alone—the responsibility of showing us the break with the modern project,” Christine Chivallon puts it: “Such a diaspora must speak to us of hybridity, mobility, movements, dislocations, mixture, rhizome, interculturality, fluidity—the many traits that camp in the characteristic interdeterminacy that the postmodern project nurtures.”¹⁰ I see as the most problematic consequence of this “utopian tendency” in diaspora studies the danger that an exclusively positive understanding of diaspora obscures the perspective for conflicts and problems emanating from diasporic communities. This is most glaringly the case when a diasporic community shares or aspires to hegemonic positions. To get a grip on this problem, Robin Cohen formulated the concept of an “imperial diaspora,” as one type of diasporic formation next to “victim diasporas,” “trade diasporas” or “cultural diasporas”:

Nearly all the powerful nation-states, especially in Europe, established their own diasporas abroad to further their imperial plans. The Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, German, French and British colonists fanned out to most parts of the world and established imperial and quasi-imperial diasporas. “Quasi,” because in a number of instances, localization or “creolization” occurred, with the new settlers marrying into the new communities and turning against their homelands. [...] An imperial diaspora, by contrast, is marked by a continuing connection with the homeland, a deference to and imitation of its social and political institutions and a sense of forming part of a grand imperial design—whereby the group concerned assumes the self-image of a “chosen race” with a global mission.¹¹

Elsewhere in his study Cohen does concede that the different diasporic “types” are not as distinct and as separate as it might sound, that they blend into each other and that one particular group may very well fit into several of his categories at the same time. But this qualification points to a more fundamental problem than Cohen admits. After all, groups that fall “in between” the categories of, say, “victims” and imperialist “perpetrators” may very well constitute the majority of diasporic communities in the nineteenth and twentieth century. In consequence, I argue that these groups should not be dismissed as “fuzzy” and exotic exceptions to the rule, but rather deter-

9 Gilroy, “Diaspora” 207.

10 Chivallon 75.

11 Cohen 67.

mine our very focus on the problem and phenomenon of diaspora. Hauke Dorsch addresses this problem when he refers to the ambivalences of the history of the black diaspora:

To describe the African diaspora in terms of an imperial diaspora would be provocative, but it could be justified, since Africans were not only the victims or "others," but also part of the European-American imperialist project, be it that they were fighting the indigenous population on the side of Euro-Americans, be it that they took over the role assigned to them by European colonial powers as civilizing, Christianizing and modernizing agents on the black continent [...].¹²

One such precarious diasporic configuration that collapses the clear-cut categories endorsed in Gilroy's book and by many of his successors, is the so-called return movement which brought African Americans "back" to Africa in the nineteenth century. The scope of this paper does not allow for a delineation of the intricate patterns of self-fashioning and marginalization which characterized the processes of Liberian nation building. Suffice it to say that the very notion of transatlantic bonding and a black counter-modernity along the lines of Gilroy's model must necessarily appear questionable once one casts a closer look at the efforts of African-American settlers in Liberia to establish a sense of national identity in close conjunction with and in uneasy critique of the preceding project of national formation in North America. The African-American self-invention as Americo-Liberians (never Africans) was further complicated by the fact that their national self-invention forced indigenous groups of the area to embark on a similar project at the same time. One of the most fascinating cases may very well be the one of the West-African Kru, a markedly "invented" ethnicity of the region. The Kru tried to steer clear of the dangers of the slave trade and of colonization by installing themselves as a "seafaring people"—physically distinct from the other indigenous groups of the area on the basis of their practice of tattooing their forehead and nose in blue. Emerging as "a direct result of the historical evolution of Atlantic capitalism,"¹³ as British sociologist Diane Frost has pointed out, the Kru used their expertise in the international maritime trade in order to "trade arms and gun powder in preparation for armed conflict with the Liberian state."¹⁴ If you take these and many more projects of self-invention at the time into account, you end up with a highly variegated scenario of tensions, hierarchies, and resistances that casts doubt on the very notion of an alternative "black community."

12 Dorsch, *Afrikanische Diaspora 184* (my translation); cf. also: Dorsch, "Populärkultur" 33-34.

13 Frost, "West African Seafarers."

14 Frost, "West African Seafarers"; cf. also: Frost, *Work and Community* 10-11.

The rhetoric of diaspora and nationhood, Africanity and Americanness, blackness and whiteness, underwent (is undergoing, one should say) intricate revisions and inversions in the course of the "Liberia experiment." An—admittedly often told—anecdote might serve to highlight some of these tensions: In 1920, Langston Hughes traveled to Africa to find his "motherland." In his autobiography of 1940, which he titled, significantly enough, *The Big Sea*, he describes his encounter with a Kru sailor, which must have taken a similar course as many earlier encounters between African American travelers and Africans in the years preceding Hughes' trip:

"Here," [the Kru sailor] said, "on the West Coast, there are not many colored people—people of mixed blood—and those foreign colored men who are here come mostly as missionaries, to teach us something, since they think we know nothing. Or they come from the West Indies, as clerks and administrators in the colonial governments, to help carry out the white man's law. So the Africans call them all white men."

"But I am not white," I said.

"You are not black either," the Kru man said simply.¹⁵

"[A] central concern of *The Big Sea*," writes critic Kenneth Warren, "is not to hide, but to explore the various failures to secure black transatlantic aims."¹⁶ Seen that way, Hughes' text—just like the letters which African-American emigrants to Liberia sent back to the United States in the 19th century—indubitably functions as a document of the "black Atlantic," because it attests to a history of black cultural contact and exchange. Yet this history is as much marked by conflicts and misunderstandings as by solidarity and bonding. If Paul Gilroy calls this history a "counter history," he ignores the perhaps most intriguing, at any rate the most difficult aspect of this history: the fact that it is intricately—and by no means only negatively—interlinked with a global history of colonization and enslavement, subjugation and appropriation, nationalism and imperialism.

Joan Dayan thus rightfully writes that "[i]n Gilroy's potent images of the 'diasporic cultural innovation,' in what he calls 'the black Atlantic network,' he never once considers how political realities—a chaos of instrumentalisation and greed—merge with a destructive syncretism."¹⁷ Indeed, these days the concepts of hybridity and syncretism have gained such overall positive connotations that they seem paradoxically enough about to replace (rather than contest) the older value categories of purity and homogeneity. By consequence, the established system of cultural evaluations and hierarchizations is not being deconstructed but rather inverted.

But if you use hybridity and syncretism as categories of value rather than descriptive terms, the fact drops out of sight that the appropriations

15 Hughes 103.

16 Warren 401; cf. also: Mayer, "The Dangers of Diaspora."

17 Dayan 11.

and adaptations, the mergings and mixings which inform all sorts of cultural contact scenarios are not always positive for everybody involved. To return to the example of Liberia: there is no doubt about the hybridity of the country and its culture, or about the syncretic and artificial character of its traditions. But just as clearly the history of Liberia is not a success story in which the encounter of various ethnic groups—all of them black—discloses a radical alternative to the social and political status quo of imperialism. It is no accident that the country does not play a role in Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*. But then, Africa as a whole hardly makes an appearance in his study.

Ironically enough, after all, the current skepticism against essentialist and Afro-centrist models of thought and the fascination with hybrid and artificial categories of identity construction brought along a concentration on quite homogeneous "Western" contexts and constellations in Cultural Studies: the "black Atlantic," as Gilroy and many of his British and American followers conceive it, is very much an African American area of influence, and the global exchange which he is concerned with, takes place largely under the insignia of Western cultural forms of expression.¹⁸ "There is an ironic blind spot of Africa-diaspora studies," Patrick Manning recently wrote in a review essay on the topic, "the African continent itself is presented too often in oversimplified terms as an undifferentiated homeland." "Gilroy's desire to break free from the shackles of African 'tradition,'" he continues, "made it difficult for him to connect to modern Africa. [Except for selected references] Gilroy did not envision of Africans as contributing to the construction of modernity."¹⁹

Manning argued that Africa should be integrated into the studies on the "black Atlantic," but he may very well have underestimated the problems which such an extended focus implies. After all, the moment one takes into consideration black communities outside of Europe and North America, the difficult question of hierarchies, discrepancies, conflicts, and marginalizations within the black global world can no longer be avoided. The utopian visions of the black diaspora as counter modernity tend to romanticize contact zones and borderlands—especially when the people who enter in contact are black. Therefore the encounters between black Americans and Africans play such a minor role in current diaspora studies (apart from investigations into the explicitly political projects of anti-colonial struggle or Pan-Africanist alliances). After all, if one does take these encounters into consideration, it is much harder to ignore the underlying economic realities and intricate hierarchies organizing the contact zones, it is hard to present such areas of interaction in terms of future-oriented communion or a sub-

18 For a critique of Gilroy from similar premises cf. (apart from Dayan and Chivallon) Lazarus and Chrisman.

19 Manning 488, 494; cf. also Goyal.

versive, counter-cultural development.²⁰ But if we want diaspora studies to be historically and socially relevant, we cannot but take such tricky issues into account.

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20 In Gilroy's earlier work of the 1980s and early 1990s, this concrete and awkward reality of the black Atlantic' was more of a topic. In *Small Acts*, for example, he describes his own experiences with African American tourists in Egypt, focusing on their romanticizing search for a pan-African past, which takes place at the cost of an engagement with the current situation in the country. In this text, too, Gilroy's own involvement does not play a part (after all, he too has an exterior perspective, coming from Britain), but at least he does not revel in the vague enthusiasm which informs his current texts. Cf. Gilroy, *Small Acts* 214.

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