Beyond Gilroy’s Black Atlantic: 
The Experience of the African Diaspora

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It is beyond dispute that Paul Gilroy’s The Black Atlantic, published in 1993, marks an important turning point in the study of diasporas. And it is perhaps no exaggeration to say that, more than any other, this book embodies the theoretical positions associated with the rise of “cultural studies” in the 1990s. Gilroy develops Stuart Hall’s equally important and similarly innovative conception of diaspora. What these two works have in common is their application of new conceptualizations to the case of Africans in the Americas, who are figured for Gilroy as the “Black Atlantic” and for Hall as the “Afro-Caribbean.” What is most significant about both is that they make the people issuing from the painful experience of the Atlantic slave trade and subsequent slavery emblematic of a new way to think about diasporic peoples. While the Jewish people serves as the archetypical representation of the classical notion of diaspora, in Hall and Gilroy’s conception the Black peoples of the Americas offer the paradigm of a new notion of diaspora. We are thus witnessing a succession of two interpretations of the diaspora as a phenomenon. The first, here called the classic interpretation, rests on a set of criteria set forth by a good many authors (Safran; Sheffer; Bruneau; Tölöyan; Cohen, Global Diasporas). At its core is the powerful idea of a dispersed people whose unified consciousness is sustained despite the devastating effects of separation. The maintenance of a real or imaginary bond with the place of origin from which the exiled people was dispersed makes the construction of this unity possible. The classic model is strongly associated with the principles of a unified, solidary community and a thematic of territory and memory. James Clifford has called this model “centered,” that is, based on the idea of a communal source or origin: in short, a model with the operative metaphor of roots. The writings of Gilroy and Hall propose the second interpretation, a model that privileges hybridity and can be called “hybrid.” The diaspora is no longer seen as unitary; instead, its sociality is seen as based on movement, interconnection, and mixed references. Formed in the
heart of Western modernity, the Black experience in and of the Americas is thus well suited to revealing an identity forged through the principle of joining contraries: neither modern nor traditional, it is both at the same time. The metaphor of roots is henceforth replaced by that of rhizomes (inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari), which conveys the notion of a network, of ties and exchanges among various locations. Not surprisingly, Gilroy’s writings were taken up by Clifford, who points out that this diaspora—and not the one he himself called “centered”—can be associated with “routes” and with those “traveling cultures” that break with the essentialism of the anthropological tradition, showing themselves to be diverse and unlocalized. Whereas the “hybrid” diaspora affirms the principle of mobility, at work even in the construction of identity, the classical conception tends to emphasize the permanence of community through time and space.

I propose in this article to reconsider the model of the “hybrid” diaspora as developed during the past decade. Like the pronounced and fairly recent investment in the imagery of “hybridity,” the succession of models that we are witnessing seems to highlight many questions about the procedures by which our concepts are made. Those questions raise others about the itineraries of the diasporic peoples themselves. Where does the notion of diaspora get its meaning? Does it owe that meaning to its having been found empirically adequate to a single experience of dispersed peoples? Or does it turn out to correspond more closely to the social projects of those intellectuals, academics, and researchers whose task it is to set the content of concepts? To take up such questions is to explore two perspectives. The first requires contextualization in the domain of practice and links the meaning of the concept to those who produce it. In this first perspective, the historicity of the notion is to be examined. The second, whose perspective is more internal to academic discourse, focuses on the epistemological grounding of the notion and the rationale for its construction. At issue here is the posture mobilized to account for the status of the concept: is it a “modern,” “objectifying” posture? A “relativist” posture? A “subjectivist” one? This procedure—distinguishing two domains of questions—is akin to that employed by David Scott employed in addressing Gilroy’s work, though it neither agrees with Scott’s nor follows the same steps. Scott sets out to conduct his critical reading of the conceptions of the “Black diaspora” from two angles: the author’s political strategy and his epistemology. The reason, Scott tells us (21), is that “a critical anthropology of the African diaspora has to be constituted through close attention to the history of its own categories.” As this convergence of views suggests, the “hybrid diaspora” has made it unavoidable, as never before, to embark on an exploration that takes into account the actors engaged in the work of conceptualization.
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I propose to explore Gilroy's contribution from two perspectives: first, through a contextualization of his discourse, ending with an examination of the ways in which a discourse becomes, for its producer, an instrument of self-positioning in a social network; second, a definition of the epistemological posture that, while expressing the status accorded to knowledge, also indicates the manner in which the object of that knowledge is appropriated. While proceeding this way, I will, however, be led to "risk a point of view," simply to avoid remaining in a merely critical enterprise that prudently ignores the possibility of a different interpretation. To begin, a rapid review of Gilroy's contribution seems necessary in order to situate the aspects of his analysis that I take up in this article.

The Black Atlantic

My introduction has already underlined the strong idea in Gilroy's book of bringing out the principle of connection. No cultural register developed in the Black diaspora is pure; everything has diverse sources issuing from the particularity of the contact between the African and European worlds. What emerges, therefore, is a profoundly "intercultural" culture, a counterweight to ethnicisms and nationalisms (15–29). In accordance with that alchemy of a mixing unenclosed in any exclusive ideology, the Black Atlantic can be defined, Gilroy tells us, "through this desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity" (19). Through the motif of the ocean and, even more, that of the ship (which he calls a "chronotope," a spatio-temporal marker), Gilroy means to represent the spatiality of that diaspora and to indicate that its history continues to be bound up with a topography of movement and a network of many places. The Atlantic slave trade and slavery were the foundation of that experience, the node from which the building of that "counterculture of modernity" became possible. With his use of the term "counterculture of modernity," Gilroy means to suggest not an anti-modern discourse but, rather, a culture equipped to defy the illusory separations of modernity. By placing horror and terror at the very core of the ideology of progress, slavery prepared the men and women who suffered it to live in intimate knowledge of the shock of contraries (37–8, 221). Slavery gave them "the capacity to explode the pretensions of 'the Modern'"—to borrow the phrase used by Neil Lazarus (331) in his analysis of Gilroy's book. One repercussion of that explosion is the emergence of a "polyphonic" culture that does not fit the enclosed ethical, political, and territorial categories of modernity.

This strong affirmation of slavery as the foundation of the diaspora experience stands opposed to the vision of the diaspora
developed by those whom Gilroy links with “the Afrocentric project” (188), to which he explicitly ascribes an “absolutist” (31, 188) conception that reifies racial and ethnic categories. Gilroy seems to be addressing himself to all forms of Black nationalism that invoke a racial and cultural identity constructed in reference to Africa. In fact, he reduces the various projects called nationalist to those of a single place, the United States, and to a pair of figures, Molefi Asante and Maulana Karenga (187–90). Thus, in the absence of further specification, the nationalist ideology castigated by Gilroy seems to be the one embodied in the afrocentrist movement proper, a primarily academic movement that has developed in the United States, especially over the past few decades, within the constellation of “Black nationalism” and pan-Africanism. This vision of a Black world wholly oriented to a noble, pure Africa is associated with these two figures: Asante, an academic fully on the institutional terrain of African American Studies, and Karenga, another African American academic, well known for having invented a ritual, Kwanzaa, aimed at revitalizing African roots. That Africa serves as a foundation for the dispersed Black community, thus eclipsing the role of slavery, which Gilroy regards as foundational. Gilroy's whole book can in fact be read as an answer to that nationalist, afrocentrist ideology whose project is to nurture a racial identity by looking to a pre-modern and pre-Western tradition, transmitted all the way to the present. To that sacralizing vision of a pure origin, untouched by slavery and the shock of the meeting of worlds, Gilroy opposes a “minimal” conception of tradition and wants to limit that term to “nameless, evasive, minimal qualities that make these diaspora conversations possible” (199); “an irreducibly modern, ex-centric, unstable and asymmetrical cultural ensemble” (198). Although he takes care not to fall into conceptualizing the diaspora “through the manichean logic of binary coding,” in the end Gilroy nonetheless juxtaposes two conceptions whose meaning arises from the dualistic scheme that he opposes: not tradition vs. modernity, however, but tradition vs. “non-traditional tradition” or the “living memory of the changing same” (198). Gilroy's thought unceasingly represents the diaspora through its “doubleness” and its “unsteady location simultaneously inside and outside ... modernity” (73). Even so, the meaning of this diaspora is given to us only because it contradicts the one provided by the version that claims an “authentic African culture.” Thus emerge two entities that are conceptual and ideological at the same time—one illustrated by the “chronotope of the road” (purity, authenticity) and the other by “the chronotope of the crossroads” (interculturality, hybridity) (199).
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the symbolism of unity and the other from mobility and changing referents. That cleavage re-echoes the two trends to be found in the academic application of the notion of “diaspora” to the Black world of the Americas. We can see this term used in a sense close to the classical one, which emphasizes the idea of dispersion from an original land (Africa) and the maintenance of a specific community identifiable by its cultural heritage. That approach (though not necessarily afrocentrist) is found in the first attempt to apply the notion of diaspora to the world (Harris). J.E. Harris’s book claims, besides, that the study of the diaspora should be placed in the service of a “pan-African” perspective so as to maintain and reinforce a “Black” consciousness (Drake 435). In the more recent meaning proposed by Gilroy, the term “diaspora” is utterly separate from any such perspective. Consequently, it is impossible to make a critical judgment as to the pertinence of the concept without first making a detour through the ideological or identity-based projects that show, in practice, how the notion is used by those who create its meaning.

On the Need to Contextualize Use of the Notion of Diaspora

The next step is to show why the use of the notion “diaspora” must be placed in context, a context of practices and of actors motivated by projects. It is important to pinpoint the notion’s social character as well as its historicity—that is, to connect it with that which makes any definition of the diaspora intrinsically dependent on its author’s participation in a socially situated universe. The need to do so emerges very clearly from the contradictions that, at least for me, have proved bothersome in reading The Black Atlantic. To avoid any ambiguity, let me specify right away that the trouble is not with the concept “diaspora” as defined by the idea of several registers of reference (modern, traditional, African, European ...), simultaneously present. It seems to me that this concept should be retained for the cultural forms created by the Black peoples of the New World, and particularly those of the Caribbean. Nevertheless, I find difficulties in Gilroy’s approach that can inhibit full appreciation of its conceptual value.

I locate the first significant difficulty in Gilroy’s coming-and-going between what I will call the political project, on the one hand, and the theoretical project, on the other. From the very first pages, Gilroy clearly announces his objective: “My concerns at this stage are primarily conceptual: I have tried to address the continuing lure of ethnic absolutisms in the cultural criticism produced both by blacks and by whites” (3). That strong statement seems to indicate that Gilroy proposes to devote himself entirely to a theoretical
project, albeit one placed in the service of a political posture. His theoretical project is to demonstrate the illusory character of any essentialist interpretation that views identity as the result of an immutable state rather than as a variable construct subject to historical circumstances. At the same time, Gilroy also intends to disassociate himself from the theories he calls “pluralist,” in which all social constraint disappears, leaving identities indeterminate. Here we encounter his famous formula of “anti-anti-essentialism” (x). On this point, it is important to keep in mind the double characteristic that Gilroy assigns to diaspora identities—that of being moved by contradictory principles simultaneously—which he illustrates with the idea (borrowing from Amiri Baraka) of the “changing same” (xi). In that respect, he fully concurs with Hall, who earlier described Caribbean identities as “framed by two axes or vectors”—of “similarity and continuity” and of “difference and rupture” (395). Recognizing the power of contradictory principles, Gilroy has not set out to avoid coming face-to-face with the nationalist expressions that are at work in the very heart of the Black diaspora. To the contrary, he affirms that “this model of national development has a special appeal to the bickering peoples of the Black Atlantic diaspora.... The idea of nationality occupies a central, if shifting, place in the work of Alexander Crummel, Edward Blyden, Martin Delany and Frederick Douglass” (35).

This observation having been made, we expect that the question of Black nationalism will be addressed. How is it possible to think of an identity that might be called “open” and non-exclusive that is also, and simultaneously, capable of projecting itself in explicitly ethnic and nationalist discourses and projects? Suppose, however, that we placed ourselves on the conceptual terrain, that we attempted a theoretical approach to understanding, and that, in the end, we conceded that essentialist theory can in fact be put down to an illusion. Could we say the same about the ideologies themselves, which have a reality principle that is by no means illusory? Does Black racial ideology remain an illusion when it presents itself not as a social theory but as a social and cultural orientation produced by specific groups? The problem of The Black Atlantic is its conflation of these two levels of reflection, with no possibility of dissociating the one from the other. The nationalism that is rejected as a social theory (with which I agree) is also rejected as an ideological reality. In other words, Gilroy’s model applies, in the end, only to those manifestations of the diaspora that lend themselves to recording all the possible ambivalences between racial or national claims, and to the rejection of ethnicism. But that model seems powerless to confront nationalism itself directly, and thereby tell us why it should not stand in refutation of the Black Atlantic’s principle of interculturality.
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The book thus avoids taking Black nationalism into theoretical and conceptual account. It sidesteps rigorous study of nationalist tendencies and their meanings, while resorting to such a high level of ideological generality that every discourse constructed with reference to a “racial” or even a merely “cultural” identity is treated as a nascent fascism. Evading the difficult problematic of the articulation between power and resistance is characteristic of The Black Atlantic. It earned Gilroy this critique from George Lipsitz:

While devastatingly accurate in his rebuttal of nationalist claims for a primordial, trans-cultural, and trans-historical essence uniting diasporic Africans, Gilroy unfortunately defines as “essentialist” just about any strategy that relies on ethnic solidarity. But people who catch hell just because they are Black, act logically and reasonably when they use blackness as a means of augmenting group power and solidarity.... Any “calculation of political choices” that takes place without respecting what people think, how they make meaning for themselves, what brings order to them in the face of chaos, what enables them to turn oppression into self-affirmation rather than self-hatred is certainly doomed to failure no matter how theoretically astute it may be. (196–7)

To be sure, one could object that Gilroy’s demonstration rests in large part on an analysis of writings by authors who participated in the creation of Black nationalism. This is certainly true for Martin Delany, a figure in the nineteenth-century movement that is a forerunner of Black nationalism in the United States. Far from ignoring the “hard” positions of Delany, Gilroy goes so far as to describe him as “probably the first black thinker to make the argument that the integrity of the race is primarily the integrity of its male heads of household” and to call attention to his designation of Africa as “the Fatherland” (25). Even so, Gilroy eventually discovers the alchemy of interculturality and transnationality in Delany’s novelistic writings. This exercise is doubtless easier for the other figures he chooses: Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, and W.E.B. Du Bois, whose activities and writings belong to a sphere perceived as fairly nuanced, of great intellectual quality, and, most of all, fully engaged in the struggle against racial discrimination. With such authors, is Gilroy not girding himself against confronting an ideology that is genuinely more ethnicist? Might it have been possible, for instance, to discern traces of the Black Atlantic’s hybridity principle in the nationalism of Marcus Garvey? Perhaps and perhaps not—but in avoiding the question, Gilroy seems to enter fully into the play of ideological and strategic positioning and thus to leave his theoretical project incomplete. Du Bois’s centrality...
in The Black Atlantic seems to announce a political choice. Is not Du Bois, who openly opposed Garvey, the man whose nationalist discourse has been described as “ambivalent” (Moses 228)? Is it not he who forged the concept of “double-consciousness” to express that simultaneous belonging to two universes (“double self”) that “make[s] it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American”?

No other notion created by the political leaders of Black American movements could better suit Gilroy’s conception.

By taking this discourse of Du Bois as “proof” of the principle of hybridity, meanwhile ignoring other discourses in which the idea of racial identity figures prominently, Gilroy persists in conflating his theoretical project with his ideological one. Other authors have found in Du Bois a basis for linking his notion of “double-consciousness” with “harder” positions less subject to the ambivalence so dear to Gilroy. For example, Lee Lott interprets him in this way: “African-American double consciousness involves a cultural identity that somehow must be merged with a race identity in order to pursue ‘Negro’ (or diaspora) ideals. This ‘merging’ would require diaspora black people to give race consciousness a greater priority over their socio-historically specific cultural identities” (205). For his part, Immanuel Geiss sees Du Bois’s position as having changed over the years, from the project of integrating Black people into American society to his “[coming] out in favor of Afro-Americans pursuing their own advancement in voluntary segregation” (233).

Since Du Bois’s vision eludes firm and unequivocal interpretation in light of the hybridity principle, we may well ask whether Gilroy’s reliance on the discourse of several figures from the political and literary spheres is the right choice. What is to be said of that more “ordinary” sphere, where the “cultural” is constructed day by day? Is it not there that the terms of social belonging are defined—with political-cum-literary discourse being only one among various modes of representation? In the end, it is nonetheless true that, while focusing on artistic and literary figures from whom Gilroy constantly manages to dislodge the element of “hybridity,” the choice and the interpretations always prove to be loaded with the intentionality of their author. It is as if the work of the model were to inform the sociality of the Black Atlantic, and not for that sociality to inform a particular theoretical reading. On this point, I am in entire agreement with A.L. Reed, Jr., according to whose analysis the notion of “double consciousness” is highly variable—not for Du Bois, but for succeeding generations who have appropriated it, from the “assimilationists” at the beginning of the twentieth century to the most up-to-date intellectual circles in the academy, and, along the way, the militants of Black Power and of ethnic pluralism. “We can see in each mode of appropriation the stamp of debates and intellectual orientations that were vital or prevalent among the
appropriators’ contemporaries. In each case Du Bois’s formulation is instrumentalized to support some current strategic argument about blacks and/or race relations” (97).

To counter the criticism that Gilroy “avoids” the harder components of Black nationalism, one might object that the last chapter of The Black Atlantic tackles head-on the element within the Black diaspora that has developed a radical identity project around the idea of the centrality of race. But Gilroy’s mode of addressing himself to that component—limited, apparently, to the academic afrocentrism of the United States—returns us once again to what is troublesome about the theoretical project. Gilroy seems, in fact, to want to treat afrocentrism as essentially a social theory. In this sense, it fits in with his theoretical project, which is to show the inconsistency of conceptualizing identities in terms of an essentialism drawn from an unchanging tradition. But while Gilroy throws out afrocentrism as a theory claiming to account for social life itself, he also throws out the ideology as such, together with its reality as a community orientation. Once afrocentrism becomes a political choice, it can no longer belong to the world of the Black Atlantic. That model is suited only to identifying forms animated by the principles of ambivalence. It fails to recognize as also belonging to the world of the Black diaspora those individual or community choices associated with the project labeled as “afrocentrist.” When he disconnects the two perspectives (195)—the Black Atlantic from the African-American (that is, the “afrocentrist”); when he defines the afrocentrist project by its “absolute and perverse reliance on a model of the thinking, knowing racial subject which is a long way away from double consciousness” (188, emphasis added); when he speaks of a political project based on a “narrowly ethnic definition of racial authenticity” to distinguish it from the one fed by “rhizomorphic, routed, diaspora cultures” (28); and when, finally, he opposes throughout the book the ideology of interculturality to that of nationalism, Gilroy does indeed invent two separate worlds: that of the Black Atlantic and that of the afrocentrist nationalists. What started out as a theoretical model has now become one of identity. It no longer encompasses “the diaspora” as a whole, but only certain of its segments, to the exclusion of others.

Is not Gilroy’s model subject, then, to the critique leveled at those who proposed the discourse of “creolity” in the French Caribbean? Although the project of creolity sought to define Caribbean identities by the principle of diversity (as an “annihilation of false universality, of monolingualism, and of purity”: Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant 90), it could also be analyzed as “consecrating another frontier between Self and Other” in deciding “the legitimacy or illegitimacy of cultural expressions” (Giraud 799). Rafaël Lucas discerned in the corresponding literary
current a tendency to reject “Africa, the Whites and the Mulattoes” so as to give sense to a “creole” being who cannot be situated in relationship to those three entities. Like creolity, The Black Atlantic might in this case serve as a means of pronouncing on what should and should not be part of the Black cultural world of the Americas. In a climate that derives as much from disputes over identity as from theoretical controversy, then, it is not surprising to find writings that interpret the project of creolity/hybridity as “a determined effort to deny the inescapable centrality of the African element in Caribbean culture” (Gutzmore 7).

Richard Price is quite right to observe that the critique addressed to the model of creolization that he proposed with Sidney Mintz is “militantly Africa-centric.” Instead of being “used in the service of greater contextualization and historicization ... informed by a rich knowledge of African history,” this critique sets out “to promote a generalizing, creolization-bashing parti-pris” (Price 38). In like manner, but inversely, is it possible that the contra-afrocentrist, contra-nationalist critique is nourished by an equally militant fervor that relegates procedures of knowledge about the diaspora to second place, thereby entering instead into a logic of identity that is motivated by an “Us/Them” deavage?

**Risking a Point of View**

A model that attempts to define the Black cultural world of the Americas without reifying any of its various cultural orientations strikes me as promising. For that reason, I think it necessary to try to open that model to approaches other than those that turn out, sooner or later, to operate on the basis of identity dynamics and ideological strategies. If Gilroy’s model is to be “saved,” should one not try to suspend, for now, the question of origin? Calling that question “fundamental” and “still unresolved,” Tiffany Patterson and Robin Kelley summarize it in this way: “To what degree are New World black people ‘African’ and what does it mean?” (15). In his enterprise of uncovering the “African roots” of Jamaican culture, Mervyn Alleyne does not ignore the processes of cultural change; far from it. Still, he regrets that theses interpreting “creativity” in the new world—hence, discontinuity vis-à-vis Africa—follow a more or less synchronic approach, to the exclusion of the diachronic approach, which might better reveal the African presence. But is there not something to gain from reverting to the “synchronic,” so remarkably left out of current debates about identities in the Black diaspora of the Americas and yet, in the interest of rigor, not to be dispensed with? Today, as in the recent past, what is it that shows us the collectivities, groups, and individuals that belong to this cultural universe? To me, it seems necessary to take a synchronic
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“break” in order to assess the relevance of certain arguments associated with Gilroy’s model. I propose to do so by offering certain points of reference, which, in the context of the present article, should be understood as no more than sketches.

To the question, Which elements of Gilroy’s model defining ‘speciﬁcities’ of the black diaspora should be retained? my answer would be the idea of diversity (Gilroy’s “multiplicity”). I understand that diversity as referring to the variety of collective orientations and to their interrelatedness in an open, de-centered community fabric. Adopting such a perspective seemed to me relevant in theorizing the religious experience of J amaicans in Great Britain (Chivallon, “Religion”). Religion does not, in this case, help to build unity, as it does for other diaspora peoples and other immigrants. Instead, religion is an arena of more or less permanent recomposition. The dynamic of creation and schism has its effect; so, too, does the behavior of the faithful. Their affiliation with a church is never regarded as final, varying, instead, according to the degree of satisfaction found, a judgment each individual is entitled to make.

That very dynamic situation in the religious arena resembles the one Denis Constant proposed, defining J amaica as a context “of religious innovation” (56). We do not encounter a religious and ideological centralism that could be called normative for the diasporic people. Instead, we see the establishment of a reticular conﬁguration, with no dominant pole identiﬁable as having a monopoly on the tools of symbolic representation. That particularity—the creation of several religious registers that operate simultaneously without being shut off from one another—crops up again in other domains of social life. The production of diverse community orientations might actually be taken as a characteristic form that Caribbean groups deploy in constructing their sociality. The sociologist Ken Pryce clearly identiﬁed that peculiar dynamic among the Caribbeans of Bristol, in the United Kingdom, when he noted the absence of “constraining community standards” or of “overriding considerations that people are forced to adhere to” (30). By having multiple registers of reference, be they political, ethical, or religious, the “community” escapes unitary construction and yet does not lose the capacity to “make relationships”—that is, the ability to maintain a whole bound together by systems of social ties that crisscross the various segments of the community. From this point of view, in order to understand why this dynamic of multiplication does not tend toward a ﬁnal division, we would probably have to turn to family ties as a space in which the various registers merge.

This capacity to neutralize community centralization is found in many other aspects of Caribbean life, even though it is not always analyzed in such terms. In my opinion, Philip Kasinitz ﬁnds the same trait in the Caribbean neighborhoods of Brooklyn, NY. He
writes in his study of community organizations that “the number and diversity of Caribbean voluntary associations ... is striking” (111). One of those he interviewed, a community leader, even said that “Within the Caribbean community, we have too many organizations. The proliferation is weakening us” (171). But does not that proliferation attain its goal, which is to escape the establishment of any dominant normative system—which can be seen as related to what Kasinitz terms “Caribbean ambivalence about leadership” (163)? It is perhaps the Brooklyn Carnival that provides the answer to that question when “the nature of the event” is said to be “anti-authoritarian” (158) or “centerless” (147). As a result, the Carnival “cannot be easily used to make a strategic statement: it is too anarchic to be manipulated” (148).

Again, is it not the same dynamic of “de-centralizing” that Cecil Gutzmore and Carolyn Cooper find in Jamaica when they explore the zones of conflictual interfacing? They call these “border clashes” and find them in the register of the dance hall as well as in the rivalries of DJs, sound systems, and their territories. But, as Gutzmore and Cooper point out, the idea of the “border clash” goes beyond music to other aspects of Jamaican culture. In the religious domain, for example, it includes even Rastafarianism, which is crisscrossed by dividing lines. “The notion of ‘border clash’ thus images the dissonant, confrontational politics of competing ideological systems in Jamaica and in the reluctant host societies to which Jamaicans constantly migrate” (6).

Whether considered from the conflictual standpoint of rivalry among ideological orientations or simply as the capacity to multiply the same ideological orientations, social diversity is indeed the striking trait. One could cite many other examples of studies suggesting this collective multiplicity that precludes the establishment of any particular project of community life. In the French Caribbean, sociological or anthropological research long emphasized that absence of community centralization, viewing it as the symptom of an eminently painful history. In this history, an “alienated” collective found itself deprived of its capacity to “sediment,” to form a body “one” and “united” (Affergan; Glissant, Le discours). In the most recent writings of Edouard Glissant (Poétique), another interpretation has taken over. This interpretation no longer sees that sort of collective scattering only as something missing in the idea of “community” or even of “nation”; seen instead is a particular manner of constructing social relations, distinct from the Western cultural model dominated by the “linear” mode of “descent” and “territory.”

It is necessary, it seems to me, to revitalize these synchronic ways of creating the social bond. And if the question of origin is to be brought back in, one can hardly ignore the five centuries of
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history that separate the Black peoples of the Americas from ancestral Africa. For how can one understand that particular manner of constructing the social bond, if not through intimate knowledge of the power relations that history generated? How can one not see this quite particular deployment of the social as a range of responses formulated in relation to the extreme constraint of power, as experienced by the peoples issuing from slavery? The Black cultures of the New World, and especially those of the Caribbean, seem motivated by an ever-present interest in remaining free to choose, as expressed in the collective proliferation that is never reducible to a center or to dominant norms. Wherever one finds the power to contain the Other in the violence of imposed categories—from the old spaces of plantation societies to the most recent places of migration—the collective, in its popular manifestations, seems to respond by that sort of vigilance against creating in turn a dominating order. In its own way, this is expressed in the poetic language of Glissant: “The plantation is one of the bellies of the world ... In the end, its closure was vanquished. The place was closed, but the speech deriving from it remains open. It is one measured part of the lesson of the world” (Poétique 89).

If one had to find an allegorical figure for that collective construction, Rastafarianism would be in a position to offer it. In my opinion, this politico-religious movement born in Jamaica has the most developed expression of this vigilance vis-à-vis power. Even while deploying a powerfully mobilizational rhetoric of particularizing symbols of identity (Africa vs. Babylon, Blackness vs. Whiteness), Rastafarianism operates in a space that is open and without constraining norms. Since the pathbreaking work of Barry Chevannes (31–2), it is now a commonplace to define this movement through its traits—astonishing for a nonetheless clearly identifiable “organization”—of having an “acephalous,” “fragmented and unorganized” structure and of expressing “resistance to centralized organization.” Still more astonishing is the fact that this resistance against order arises not from the difficulties any group might encounter in the effort to create a “structured organization” but, instead, from a genuinely ethical posture expressed through the philosophy of “I-an-I” (“I and I” in Jamaican creole, an affirmation of “We” as the meeting of two individualities). That posture undergirds the movement ideologically. Following other authors, E.B. Edmonds describes it in this way: “Epistemological individualism or authoritative individualism is rooted in the philosophic concept of ‘I-an-I,’ which leads to the Rastafarian insistence on radical freedom and democracy that is very resistant to centralization. ... The locus of authority is therefore in each individual” (352). Does the Rastafarian movement thereby realize within itself what the collectives of the Black diaspora in the Americas set in motion...
much more “unconsciously”—namely, a will to keep the social bond free from a system of oppressive and constraining norms?

If Gilroy’s model is to define the diaspora “through this desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity” (19), it could be suitable for designating the process by which multiplicity in community life helps to avoid the creation of an ethnicizing, authoritarian centrality. We would then be approaching the conception of Édouard Glissant and his idea of an “identity of Relation” (Poétique 27). Perhaps less ambiguous than hybridity, this idea renders a kind of sociality by reference to networks and transversality (“capacity of variation,” “capacity to give with”) and in opposition to ideas founded on the symbolism of territorialized descent through “totalitarian pulsion from a single root” (Poétique 156). On the other hand, if the purpose of the model is almost exclusively to seek the “hybrid” character of every discourse—of every artistic or cultural expression—then it is well on the way to ignoring that which really deserves to be called diversity (multiplicity) in the Black world of the Americas. And this is what Gilroy finally does, in his last chapter, when he tries to compare the trajectory of the Jewish people with that of the Black American peoples. To make this comparison possible, Gilroy must affirm that “easy parallels are undermined by factors like the lack of religious unity among New World blacks and the different ways that the different groups formalize their imaginary, ritual returns to slavery and its terrors. Blacks in the West lack the idea of descent from a common ancestor” (212). If that comparison between the Black and Jewish diasporic peoples must lead to eliminating the true specificity of Black people—namely, the diversity of community registers and the lack of unitary construction—do the results of such an approach have any chance of remaining pertinent? By ignoring diversity where it arises, Gilroy misses the insight that a comparison with the Jewish people might have provided. Instead of resembling one another, these two experiences respond to one another, or mirror alternatives that can give rise to knowledge about the traumas of oppression: on one side, the “community” response that takes refuge in the symbolism of territorial rootedness; on the other, the “diverse” response that avoids reproducing the violence of centralized community.¹²

The diversity in question is thus not the one that inhabits a single element (the discourse of Du Bois, of Delany, of hip hop ...) but the one that genuinely expresses possible relationships between several heterogeneous elements. Seen from that standpoint, the model can encompass in a single whole the diversity of political registers in the diaspora, without holding on to one as characteristic of diasporas. Like the afrocentrist project in its most radical claims for racial purity, the nationalist tendency forms an integral part of
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that plurality of registers, though without ever becoming reducible to the whole diaspora. But in order to reveal that (synchronic) ability of the diaspora to multiply and connect various community registers, Gilroy’s model should probably have rid itself of its tendency (except in the pages about music) to devote itself exclusively to the works of intellectuals (and, indeed, to the pan-Africanists among them). In concluding his work on “pan-Africanism,” Geiss warned that it involves only a group of intellectuals—“tiny minorities of the modern intellectual elites” (424). Does this mean that, by focusing only on the domain of a few men (and of Toni Morrison, it is true) who at one time or another produced a discourse that entered the public realm, Gilroy has bypassed the quotidian reality of the diaspora in its most modest and ordinary expressions? Here, no doubt, lies the second great difficulty of The Black Atlantic, a difficulty that arises from its epistemological position and to which I will return.

I cannot here develop the arguments that, it seems to me, define the need for a broader inquiry into the adequacy of Gilroy’s model for the reality it is meant to encompass. I would like, however, to make a last observation: to suggest the considerable interest of assessing the North American and Caribbean worlds differently. In this regard, my perspective is similar to that of Ibrahim Sundiata, for whom the diasporic situation of the United States is to be distinguished from that of the Caribbean, since “race” consciousness plays a more central organizing role in the first case than in the second. Consider the very different results of Garvey’s message: in the United States, it asserts something approaching the substrate of a nationalist conception; in Jamaica, it prompts the movement of Rastafarianism, which is marked by its rejection of order. There is every reason to think in terms of quite distinct diaspora universes.

On the Necessity of Clarifying the Epistemological Bases of the Study of the Diaspora

I come now to the second difficulty of The Black Atlantic, an epistemological obstacle. Robin Cohen (Global Diasporas, “Cultural Diaspora”) was quite right to link the development of the “hybrid” model to the rise of postmodernism. A comparative approach to the way in which the notion “diaspora” is used in Anglophone and Francophone milieux (Chivallon, “De quelques préconstruits”) confirms the presence of a similar succession of paradigms. Where postmodernism has flourished—in the Anglophone sphere—the Black world of the Americas has found itself veritably consecrated as diasporic and endowed with new qualities. In the Francophone sphere, which is still open to a more conventional sociology, the use of the term functions minimally or not at all for the same Black
American world, since that world is presumed to follow the contours of a classical diaspora, especially in the development of a powerful community consciousness.

This is not the place to detail the many respects in which the hybrid diaspora is in phase with postmodernism. I will simply note that it meets a twofold requirement in the sphere of postmodernism: first, undoing the practices of category-building and binary thought, both directly imputable to modernity; and, second, breaking with every essentialism of the subject in order to recognize the variability of identities. That second preoccupation is part of a wish to incorporate diverse and relative knowledges that are not subject to the imperative of universality and that are associated with what we may call “the return of the Subject.” Gilroy’s book seems to meet those requirements. His enterprise, though meant to keep its distance from excessive relativism, follows the postmodern line.

In his epistemological posture, once again, Gilroy operates by undermining the distinction between different things. Though he tells us his interest is above all “conceptual,” he does not clearly define what proceeding conceptually means for him. Will his work be conducted as a search for fit between the concept and manifestations of sociology’s “real”—which goes back to the (modern) effort of objectivation? Or does he want instead to maintain the relativist (postmodern) posture—which means rejecting knowledge that depends on links between empirical givens and theorizing? On this matter, Gilroy in fact says nothing, so as to shift the entire burden of the postmodern project to the “object” of his research (which, of course, he will not call by that name). For Gilroy’s book has to fit into postmodern rhetoric—at least, insofar as we understand that rhetoric as characteristically and constantly vigilant against anything that smacks of using (modern) categories and, accordingly, as taking refuge in terms, formulas, and figures that evoke the desired indeterminacy. The phraseology of The Black Atlantic must follow what amount to slogans, marching orders: reject “the manichean logic of binary coding” (198); go “beyond the binary opposition between national and diaspora perspectives” (29). Hence the invention of those quite peculiar formulas, “anti-anti-essentialism” (x) and “non-traditional tradition” (198). Hence also, no doubt, the absence of a clearly set forth epistemological position and, above all, the launching of this selfsame epistemological indeterminacy into the Black diaspora itself. After all, it is Gilroy himself who tells us, “I am proposing, then, that we reread and rethink this expressive counter-culture not simply as a succession of literary tropes and genres but as a philosophical discourse which refuses the modern, occidental separations of ethics and esthetics, culture and politics” (39). There cannot be a clearer expression of that leap between the epistemological project and the social situation that the sociologist
tries to present. Here Gilroy is operating “by proxy.” In the end, he delegates to the diaspora—and to it alone—the responsibility of showing us the break with the modern project. Such a diaspora must speak to us of hybridity, mobility, movements, dislocations, mixture, rhizome, interculturality, fluidity—the many traits that camp in the characteristic indeterminacy that the postmodern project nurtures.

In my opinion, to explain why two diametrically opposite, yet equally well founded, criticisms have been leveled at Gilroy’s unclarity, it is enough to consider his tendency to confound the epistemological project that he wants to set in motion and the diaspora that, as it turns out, bears the traits of that project. In his critique, Cohen (Global Diasporas 149–51) attacks a construct that he perceives as overly intellectualized and overly dependent on postmodernist canons. This sociologist calls for “reality markers” to demonstrate “empirically” that the existence of the Black Atlantic can be imputed not simply to the imagination of the writers and artists who interest Gilroy but to “the lived experience” of the migrants in the diaspora. Interestingly enough, moreover, when he undertakes to inventory certain of these empirical markers, Cohen (Global Diasporas, “Cultural Diaspora”) looks for the traces of a classical diaspora model (community consciousness, land of origin, ideology of return ...), as though he has not understood the essential idea in Gilroy’s model, which is precisely to break with the idea of community conceived in reference to the metaphor of roots.

By contrast, Scott’s critique attacks what he sees as Gilroy’s unacknowledged orthodoxy, reproaching him for not having gone all the way with the theoretical posture that consists of “breaking with rationalist historiography” (30). For Scott, Gilroy’s approach remains that of a “historical ethnography” (32) and continues to operate with what he calls “a truth apparatus” (33). Even if Gilroy’s approach complicates anthropology’s classical trajectory between empirical research and theory, it does indeed attempt, using literary and artistic practices, to identify the social plurality by which he defines the concept of the diaspora. Scott disapproves of precisely this search to identify facts that attest the “veridical” character of the diaspora. For him, the whole point is to throw out anthropology’s classically authoritative mode, “in order,” he tells us, to deal no longer in ethnographic proof but only in “conceptual adequacy” (32). In Scott’s view, working to achieve that conceptual adequacy comes down to fully digesting the idea that the diaspora is above all “discursively constituted” (35) and that it therefore embraces a sum of discourses (“maximal meanings,” 36) expressing the various ways in which representations of slavery and of Africa are appropriated.

These two opposite critiques—one regretting the absence of empirical content, the other considering this very content an
encumbrance—attest to the confusion Gilroy maintains between his epistemological posture and the object of his conceptualization. Whereas Cohen attends only to the theoretical discourse of this binome, which merges the intellectual construction of the diaspora with the diaspora itself, Scott sees only the object, namely, what is said about the ethos of the Black Atlantic.

Having pinpointed this confusion, we are entitled to ask whether that diaspora even exists. Can its contours be seen, and are they manifested in the real world? Is it possible to distinguish this diaspora from the intentions that necessarily motivate intellectual discourse about it? I think it necessary to ask such questions and to risk another proposition, with which I will end this article.

As I argued above, if Gilroy’s model were differently inflected, it would seem to offer the possibility of recognizing the diversity of cultural orientations produced in the Black cultural universe of the Americas, in particular that of the Caribbean. I readily agree with Scott when he says that the diaspora is in the end a community of discourses, in which the two figures, Africa and slavery, are found variously appropriated. The social diversity at work in the collectivities of the diaspora could be linked with these various ways of making the past meaningful and of incorporating it into multiple narratives. Such linking would be possible even though such an observation in no way explains how, or why, such a diversity occurs in this case whereas for other diasporic peoples (such as the Jewish people), the destiny of the community is related to a single narrative (that of the Bible). In any event, identifying diversity, even of a discursive sort, calls for the very thing that Scott rejects and Gilroy camouflages: procedures for constructing knowledge that preserve their attachment to the principle of “objectivation” and that seek adequacy between the concept and manifestations of the real.

Although Scott wants to escape that exercise of objectivation or empirical research (36), he does not escape the contradiction of finding “examples” to illustrate the plurality of discourses that he wants to point out (“for example, the dispute between W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey” (36, emphasis added)).

Likewise, he seems to consider the idea of “discursivity” to be a miraculous viaticum that renders any anthropological exercise pointless. It is as though speaking of “discourse” immediately plunged one into a fugitive reality, utterly without external and material forms of collectivity. But we know very well that discourses are the forms in which social life is constructed or materialized (Berger and Luckmann) and that, even when they appear in the weightlessness of talk alone, they belong to a set of social practices that can be approached empirically. To identify discourses as Scott does is necessarily to take on a process of objectivation that leads to identifying a meaningful “object.” It is also to arrive at a
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search for adequacy that is not, as Scott suggests, purely “conceptual” (what is a search for adequacy that does not relate one distinct element with another?) but seeks to express objects (here, discourses) through theoretical constructions (concepts, including the concept “discourse”).

These final observations should be understood as a plea for research on the Black diaspora of the Americas that does not lose itself in a vain quest for a posture founded on its distance from all epistemological precepts akin to objectivation. Postmodernism has taught us well about the vulnerability of the modern pretension to a research method thought to bring into view an objective reality. We have now grasped that that reality is situated in the discourses, values, and intentions of the “producers of models.” Perhaps now is the time when, strengthened by that experience, we should turn once again to the modern project—but not, of course, as a machine for categorizing the world and making it binary, nor, again, as a method of bringing forth a knowledge purified of all ideology. We should turn again to the modern project as a project of critical knowledge. We would practice “radical doubt” to the point of obsession, in the manner of Pierre Bourdieu’s project of reflexivity, a ceaseless effort to differentiate theoretical, epistemological, and ideological intentions. Such an effort is worth making if what is at stake is as much “the widening of the possibilities of intelligible discourse among peoples” (Geertz 145) as access to that which continues to contain peoples within powerfully constraining universes.

Notes

1. That difference between the two models of the diaspora—one “classic” and the other “hybrid”—and between the corresponding human experiences—those of Jewish and of Black people—emerges especially well from Hall’s contribution. In the last chapter of The Black Atlantic, Gilroy’s purpose is more to find resemblances between the experiences of the two peoples than to make them reveal the different content of different diaspora experiences.

2. Paul Gilroy was born in the United Kingdom to a Guyanese mother and an English father. A sociologist, he taught at the University of London (Goldsmiths’ College) before being recruited to Yale University. Among British intellectuals, he is regarded as one of the most influential on the renewed field of sociology in Britain. One of his first contributions dates from 1982, when he was a co-author of the famous collective work of the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain. Located in Birmingham and led by Stuart Hall, a native of Jamaica and recognized as one of the “founding fathers” of cultural studies (Mattefard and Neveu; Bonnet), the CCCS helped to launch a generation of very politically engaged Black intellectuals. Paul Gilroy seems to have taken up the baton. He dedicated a collective work in honor of Stuart Hall (Gilroy, Grossberg, and McRobbie).

3. Afrocentrism embraces a very wide spectrum, and its variants should be distinguished. Claims of an African heritage linked with a more or less racialized notion of culture represent one sort of position; quite another is the racist ideology that proclaims the genetic superiority of Black people and the degeneracy of white people. The latter ideology is most often associated with the
writings of the Black American psychiatrist Frances Cress Welsing (Van Deburg 295). In any case, the term “afrocentrism” seems to be reserved to designate the “Afrocentric school.” Developed in the United States by Molefi Asante, its project is to affirm a single, unified African civilization (cradled in ancient Egypt) as prior to, and the necessary condition of, Western civilization (see the account of Van Deburg). S. Howe, a British political scientist, devoted a polemical book to the denunciation of its errors. His method is to examine the scientific validity of the afrocentrists’ historical arguments. His discipline notwithstanding, Howe proceeds without giving even a moment’s attention to the sociological scientific question of what adherence to afrocentrism might mean. What is more, he does not distinguish adequately among the various afrocentrisms and other conceptions oriented to recovering the African heritage and racial dignity. In his hands, all Black nationalist discourses collapse into one, different as they might be from one another (those of Edward Wilmot Blyden, Aimé Césaire, Marcus Garvey, Jean Price-Mars, Frantz Fanon, Cheikh Anta Diop, Walter Rodney, and many others)—as though all tend “naturally” toward a single path, the restricted sense of afrocentrism as a cult of origin.

4. Kwanzaa is a December holiday in the United States, invented by Karenga as an alternative to the materialism of the Western Christmas. It is meant to restore connection with traditions drawn from the wisdom of ancient Egypt.

5. I would point out that all of these authors, Black American or of Caribbean origin, are associated with the classical Black nationalism of the nineteenth century (Moses).

6. All four are carefully chosen. Martin Delany is known for his “emigrationist” positions. At first skeptical about the project of returning to Africa, he later joined the African Civilization Society, founded in 1858, which upheld the project of returning to Africa from a nationalist and pan-African perspective and included, as well, the goals of “civilizing” and “Christianizing” Africa (see Moses). And yet, Gilroy contends, his fiction tells another, rather different, story. His contemporary Frederick Douglass, who invested his monumental literary and rhetorical gifts in the struggle to end slavery, was critical of all emigrationist projects, without distinction: not only that of the American Colonization Society, which sought to protect slavery by repatriating free Blacks, but also that of Delany. Gilroy’s interpretations of W.E.B. Du Bois and Richard Wright extend into the twentieth century this profile of militance, high intellectual achievement—and “double-ness.” As a novelist, Wright was dedicated to the struggle against racial discrimination. He was also an active member of the American Communist Party. He left the United States for the post–World War II intellectual scene of Paris in the 1950s, where he joined Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Du Bois emigrated to Africa in 1961, where he became part of Kwame Nkrumah’s newly independent Ghana. His 1903 collection of essays, The Souls of Black Folk, placed him in the forefront of African American political struggles. Thereafter, he was both a founder of the (racially integrated) National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the initiator of a series of pan-Africanist conferences. During his years in the NAACP, he moved between the battle for the integration of Black people into American society and a more radical, nationalist engagement—and, in addition, a socialist one as well. Harassed by American authorities during the McCarthy era, he voluntarily exiled himself to Africa. On the eve of his departure, he took out a membership in the American Communist Party.

7. As the founder (in Jamaica in 1914) of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, one of the most important Black political movements, Marcus Garvey (1887–1940) gathered a very large following in the United States, especially in New York during the 1920s. This was a time of intense discrimination, attacks against Black communities, and renewed lynching; but it was also the era of the “Harlem Renaissance.” While it is true that Garvey’s project was based on the oneness of the black race and involved separation from the Western world of white people, that project flourished in the same cultural universe as Delany’s. Presumably, therefore, it was subject to the same “hybridizing” influences. Yet, in Delany’s case, Gilroy finds evidence for such influences outside the emigrationist program; in Garvey’s, there is no indication that he looked for any. Had he looked at the very mixing of political and religious content in Garvey’s pan-Africanism, however, in contrast to that of Du Bois (and despite Garvey’s more radical tenor), he might well have found his “non-traditional tradition.” And furthermore, that very mixing of registers, creating a political messianism, may account for his having attracted a larger following than Du Bois.

9. Alleyne affirms that “it is axiomatic that culture is not inherent in a people but emerges within a given historical environment” while considering that cultural creations depend nonetheless on “inherited resources of the culture” (21).

10. For example, one finds this filigree-like proliferation in certain texts gathered by Mary Chamberlain (Caribbean Migration) on the identities of Caribbean immigrants. In these texts, the diversity of migratory trajectories, family itineraries, and relationships with history all suggest quite strongly the importance of a fluid rather than a rigid conception of community. See, in particular, the chapters by Chamberlain (“Family and Identity”) and Oostindie.

11. It seems important to me to specify that this logic of multiplication is not mechanical and should be contextualized. I have proposed elsewhere (Chivallon, “Du territoire”; Espace) a consideration of the “moments” of the Caribbean experience in which the return to a more territorialized and unitary community construction seemed to correspond to an experience freed from the coercive authority of colonial plantations. This is true of the period in which the peasantry developed, following the abolition of slavery in Martinique and on other islands, such as Jamaica.

12. My colleague Karen E. Fields, who translated this text, rightly draws attention to the fact that this resistance to order, this conscious or unconscious rejection of the classical form of community, may also be seen as resulting from years of oppression and from the prevalence of the policy of “divide and conquer.” It is this question that Glissant eventually poses as well. Proclaiming the virtues of a culture of “openness” and “nomadism,” he also queries it in very clear terms: “Is it not possible that the nomad is overdetermined by his conditions of existence? And could nomadism be not an exercise of freedom but obedience to constraining contingencies?” (Poétique 24). My view is that, in the cultural expressions of Afro-Americans, there is more than an “overdetermination” capable of operating independently of individual or collective will. There are, besides, broad areas of genuine social critique that arise from consciousness of conditions and are reflected in quite specific social constructs.

13. For a synthetic and critical approach to postmodern writings, see Chivallon, “Les pensées postmodernes.”

14. In using the term “objectivation” the author refers to that complex notion of French thought that combines two moves: the desire, essential to empirical disciplines, to connect certain linguistic terms to material and social realities that are not fully encompassed by language, but also the simultaneous desire to do this self-consciously, acknowledging that the object of a social science is never simply the object as it is in the world but, rather, an object of knowledge, the product of a construction. Such construction requires some externalization, some critical distance, and that unceasing effort to remain reflexive about the object constructed that Pierre Bourdieu named “radical doubt.”

15. Another rather remarkable contradiction occurs when Scott affirms that “identity is always constituted in part within a structure of recognition, identification, and subjection” (36). This statement is presented as if it were a law. How can such a statement be made when its author has just put in question all that is related to a “meta-discourse” and a “truth apparatus” (32)?

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