

Crossing *The Black Atlantic*:

Jon Sensbach, Paul Gilroy, and the Historiography of Colonial Black America

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In his 1903 work *The Souls of Black Folk*, African American historian W. E. B. Du Bois laid the foundation for modern racial theory through his conceptualization of *double-consciousness*. According to Du Bois, African American identity was based on “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (7). Despite Du Bois’ plea for “whites [to] recognize blacks as Americans, as people with an honorable, if tragic, place in the nation’s past,” and the efforts of 1970s social historians such as Eugene Genovese, John Blassingame, and Richard Dunn, who shifted scholarly focus towards marginalized and dispossessed groups including the first “New World” slaves, the black colonial experience continued to remain outside the mainstream historical profession until the early 1990s (Sensbach 394).¹

In an attempt to fill the scholarly void that existed in black colonial studies, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, one of the leading journals of early American history and culture, devoted its April 1993 issue to the “Past and Future” of colonial American studies. According to Jon Sensbach, whose article on early African American history was featured in this pivotal issue, American scholars were experiencing “historical amnesia” with respect to Du Bois’ message that “blacks were Americans too”; as a result, in Sensbach’s opinion, their history was in dire need of recuperation (395). While Sensbach did acknowledge that

1 Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1976); John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); and Richard Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972).

black historians from the first half of the twentieth century such as Luther Porter Jackson and John Hope Franklin had made attempts at “illuminating corners of our multiracial past,” in his opinion, it was only in the 1970s that the *entire* profession came “to the simple but dramatic realization that, contrary to previous contentions . . . colonial records contain plentiful evidence of African Americans” (396).² As Sensbach stated, “the lessons [from this discovery] were at least two-fold. First, black Americans emerged from long-buried documents as important in their own terms, as people whose lives and struggles mattered intrinsically and could point the way to a fuller understanding of the development of African American culture. Second, their stories had the potential to alter fundamentally our conception of early American history [and the roles that the first Africans assumed within the colonies]” (396).

While this “discovery” ignited interest in black history, and motivated historians to examine the role that African Americans played during the colonial era, especially with respect to slavery and interracial relations, as Sensbach conveyed, “much unfinished business remained” (397). He called for historians to participate in the “cross-cultural investigation of the African presence in early America,” especially African American participation in the colonial Atlantic world (397). He also encouraged historians to engage in a “renewed focus on the master-slave relationship . . . slave resistance, accommodation, and African American cultural formation and change” (400). Sensbach also maintained that historians needed to “incorporate more aggressively the burgeoning knowledge of Africans in early America into the broader stream of historical scholarship” (404). As he noted, “if, as Du Bois would have it, we are to study the lives of black Americans—and by extension all of American history—[we must do so] carefully and honestly” (405).

The year 1993 is significant in the historiography of colonial black America not only because it marks Sensbach’s “call to action,” but because it also was the year in which post-colonial theorist Paul Gilroy published his groundbreaking work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*. In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy complicates Du Bois’ definition of diasporic African identity by claiming that “nationality, ethnicity, authenticity, cultural integrity and modernity” also construct racial identities and discourses. As Gilroy illustrates, one such discourse is “the theorization of ‘black and white,’” or the processes which produce creolization, miscegenation, amalgamation, metissage, mestizaje,

2 Luther Porter Jackson, “Virginia Negro Soldiers and Seamen in the American Revolution.” *The Journal of Negro History* 27.3 (1942): 247-287; and John Hope Franklin, *Slavery to Freedom: A History of African-Americans* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1947).

hybridity, and the “mulatto.” While, as Gilroy elucidates, these terms have been used by scholars to describe race-mixing, in his opinion, they are “unsatisfactory [for they do not] consider the process of cultural mutation” (Gilroy 2). Thus Gilroy responds to the challenge posed by this intersection of race, culture, nationality and ethnicity by positing a new conceptual framework into the post-colonial lexicon: the “black Atlantic.” This theoretical contribution would not only revolutionize the way in which scholars conceive of race in the colonial world, but, alongside Sensbach’s “call to action,” would influence historians’ inquiries into early black America for what has become almost two decades.

Negotiating the Waters of the Black Atlantic: Hybridity and African Diasporic Identity

Like W.E.B. Du Bois, Gilroy contends that blacks experience a double-consciousness which is derived from the antagonism between “thinking, being, and seeing”: “being black encompasses the personal experience of white domination and the group valuation of an independent, long-standing Afro-centric consciousness” (52). Gilroy complicates the boundaries of black identity by positing that “there is a culture that is not specifically African, American, Caribbean, or British, but all of these at once; a *black Atlantic* culture whose themes and techniques transcend ethnicity and nationality to produce something new and, until now, unremarked” (2). In Gilroy’s opinion, what creates this black Atlantic and what holds blacks together in various, but also continuously evolving subcultures, is the experience of slavery and the lack of a distinct homeland (i.e., the African diaspora). Thus, Gilroy offers the concept of the “black Atlantic” as a “political and cultural corrective, which argues the cross-national [and] cross-ethnic basis and dynamics of black diasporic identity and culture” (Crisman 453). In other words, Gilroy formulates the black Atlantic as a theoretical instrument which, in the context of the African diaspora, illuminates the meaning of “blackness” and acts as a counter-site of resistance to modernity.

Central to Gilroy’s theory of the diasporic black Atlantic is the “ship”: a symbolic representation of European naval power as well as the “roots/routes” of African bondage. While considered by many to be an icon of oppression and brutality, the “ship,” as Gilroy illustrates, can also serve as an analytic tool, illuminating our understanding of race, ethnicity and culture. According to Gilroy, the slave ship was “a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion...it focused attention on the...circulation of ideas and activities, as well as the movement of key cultural and political artifacts” (Gilroy 4). The slave ship was thus a “vehicle” of cultural and political exchange: it permitted cultural

interaction between blacks and whites, and encouraged the criss-crossing of ideas between different ethnicities and races.³

According to Gilroy, one of the results of the diasporic African world-migration has been the production of a multi-cultural identity (i.e., hybridity) which challenges the alleged homogeneity of white society. Gilroy posits that “blackness” is not truly a racial category, but rather a hybrid ethnic and cultural identity, for it has historically developed alongside, and has been influenced by, dominant white culture and ethnicity. According to Gilroy, ethnic and cultural identities, such as “blackness,” are therefore not pure or stagnant, but change in response to new circumstances and social influences. This clearly challenges the notion of ethnic, racial and cultural absolutism, for it asserts that ethnicity, race, and culture are not inherited, but are rather socially-constructed.

Gilroy’s conceptualization of “double consciousness,” hybridity, the “black Atlantic,” and the African diaspora not only obscure the boundaries of race, culture, and ethnicity, but also “challenge Marxist . . . [and capitalist] accounts of the development of modernity as a self-contained European process based on the principles of rationality, economic productivism, Enlightenment egalitarianism, and wage labour” (Chrisman 454). Although Gilroy criticizes Jurgen Habermas’ definition of modernity for de-emphasizing race, ethnicity, and culture, as Laura Chrisman notes, “he does not reject modernity altogether, but rather accentuates slavery as an unacknowledged part of it”: “Modernity is apprehended through its counter-discourses and often defined solely through the counter-factual. Yet, its analysis remains virtually unaffected by the histories of slavery and barbarity which appear to be such a prominent part of the widening gap between modern experience and modern expectation” (Chrisman 454; Gilroy 49).⁴ Thus for Gilroy, modernity is not defined by economic exchange; rather, it is defined by *cultural* exchange between white and black, free and enslaved, and the mainstream and margins.

Jon Sensbach, Paul Gilroy and the Reconceptualization of Colonial Black American History

Ira Berlin’s “From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African American Society in Mainland North America,” was yet another pivotal

3 A fascinating eighteenth-century primary account of this “nautical” cultural exchange on the “black Atlantic” can be found in Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, Robert J. Allison, ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s Press, 1995).

4 Habermas’ definition of modernity is: “the consciousness of novelty that surrounds the emergence of civil society, the modern state, and industrial capitalism” (Gilroy 49).

junction in redefining historians' ideas about colonial Africans. Until this article was published in *The William and Mary Quarterly* in 1996, as Jon Sensbach delineated, many historians viewed early Africans as monolithic groups of slaves working either on the plantations of the Old South or in the Caribbean. Drawing inspiration from *The Black Atlantic* and Gilroy's theory of hybridity, Berlin was one of the first historians of early black America to look beyond the tropes of colonial paternalism and the binary of the benevolent "colonizer" and the savage "colonized" (Berlin 255). There, in the crevices of the African American experience, Berlin discovered a group of diasporic Africans, whom he called "Atlantic Creoles," who challenged traditional discourses on the power and autonomy held by the first black "Americans." Like the inhabitants of Gilroy's "black Atlantic," who lived in "a culture that was not specifically African, American, Caribbean, or British, but all of these at once," Berlin's Atlantic Creoles were Africans whose "experience, knowledge, and attitude were more akin to that of confident sophisticated natives than of vulnerable newcomers" (Gilroy 2; Berlin 253-254). Although they were the genetic and cultural offspring of the Africans and Europeans who met on the west coast of Africa during the colonial period, Atlantic Creoles eventually became members of the "Atlantic World": "a netherworld between the colonies which . . . was a meeting ground between Africans, Europeans, and British colonists." Consequently, they were neither slaves nor completely free men or women. Rather, they were part of the colonial "middle ground": "intermediaries [who] employed their linguistic skills and their familiarity with the Atlantic's diverse commercial practices, cultural conventions, and diplomatic etiquette to mediate between Africans . . . Europeans [and Americans]" (Berlin 254-255).

Although Berlin's Atlantic Creoles represent only a "tiny outcropping in the massive social upheaval that accompanied the joining of the peoples of two hemispheres," their presence in American colonial society was significant because, to a certain extent, they were independent of the social system in which they participated. Many were sent to "distant lands, with commissions, to master the ways of newly-discovered 'others' . . . while some entered [polite European society] as honored guests, taking their places in royal courts as esteemed counselors, and marrying into the best of families" (Berlin 255). Other Atlantic Creoles became prosperous merchants, trading with whites, accumulating property, and establishing kinship networks with other free blacks. However, the golden age of the Atlantic Creole, was short-lived. By the first few decades of the eighteenth century, Atlantic Creoles had already begun to assimilate into American colonial society. Others became victims of slavery, the institution which they had managed to elude for a few short generations.

Nevertheless, even though this group of remarkable individuals existed for only a brief moment in time, their presence clearly suggests that social negotiation occurred between colonial blacks and whites, which, in this case, resulted in a completely new, and rich, hybrid culture.

In *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Low Country*, Philip D. Morgan also attempts to fill the scholarly void described by Du Bois and Sensbach by using the theoretical contributions of Gilroy and other early post-colonial scholars (e.g., Octave Mannoni, Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi and Fernando Ortiz).⁵ Morgan's project, however, is to examine how land and labor shaped the culture of two eighteenth-century metropolises of slavery: the Chesapeake and Low Country (i.e. the Carolinas). Like Berlin's "From Creole to African," *Slave Counterpoint* is remarkable for the way in which it deconstructs the traditional "aggressive master-passive slave" binary, and reconstructs the master-slave relationship as a theoretical space in which culture was negotiated, and redefined, as a hybrid synthesis (much like Ortiz's process of neo-culturation). Morgan elucidates this bi-directional, mutually-formative cultural exchange, or "counterpoint," through a detailed examination of the private lives of slaves, their social interactions (e.g. language, play, and religion), family ties, and kinship networks. While Morgan is acutely aware of the fact that the cruel and inhumane reality of bondage restricted slaves' self-determination, he makes the important point that regardless of socio-economic limitations, the colonial slaves of the Chesapeake and Low Country were able to use interracial counterpoint to make sense of their existence, transcend disciplinary regimes, and create their own cultural identities.

At the heart of Morgan's thesis lies Gilroy's theories concerning modernity, race, and counter-hegemonic black resistance. Although slaves were considered to be non-citizens and non-humans, their "counter-hegemonic endeavors point to . . . analytic possibilities with a general significance far beyond the borders of black particularity" (Gilroy 6). As Morgan reaffirms in his analysis, the ship served as a unifying force, particularly among slaves: the "associations [that were forged on these ships] became important to Africans in the New World." The interchange, or "counterpoint," that occurred on these vessels, as well as the "ready recognition of the 'shipmate' tie between two slaves," reinforced the

5 Their classic post-colonial works include: Octave Mannoni, *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1956); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks (Peau Noire, Masques Blancs)* (Paris: Seuil, 1952); Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957); and Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc, 1947).

importance of the middle passage and the symbolic, hybrid nature of the ship itself (Morgan 448-9).

As Morgan illustrates, once on plantations, most slaves did not suffer passively, but rather engaged in active campaigns of resistance, subversion, and rebellion, particularly against masters and their economic profits. The spectrum of resistance ranged from mild to extreme. Slave marriage (although civilly impossible) was one way in which colonial Africans attempted to preserve their families and disrupt the patriarchal authority of their owners. Storytelling and the singing of spirituals provided slaves with emotional support, as well as a benign outlet through which they could enjoy the thrill of victory over their masters (at least vicariously). Practicing unsanctioned African religious rituals (i.e., those that contradicted Protestant Christianity) and becoming literate in secret (like Nat Turner) were also ways of transcending bondage. Subverting the plantation's profits, of course, was far more risky, and included placing rocks into cotton bags before they were weighed, feigning illness and idiocy, sabotaging equipment (e.g., breaking shovels, hoes, plows, rakes, etc.), and mistreating livestock. Escaping and engaging in outright rebellion were, by far, the most dangerous forms of subversion.

Morgan exposes the complex relationship between blacks and whites, and the extent to which they shaped each other's cultures through his analysis of Southern art, music, dance, language, yeoman culture, and "play" (i.e., entertainment). This "counterpoint" functioned as yet another form of slave resistance, which as Gilroy explains, "substituted for the formal political freedoms slaves were denied under the plantation regime" (57). These creative "practices of everyday life" served as autonomous spaces, or sites of resistance, against the surveillance and cultural hegemony of the modern disciplinary society by providing personal escape through voyeurism, observation, and the disruption of regimentation. Moreover, they allowed slaves to produce their own experiences and personal representations—representations which continue to form the basis of modern Southern culture and society.

Slave Counterpoint is also noteworthy for its theorization of interracial sexuality. Even though, as Morgan conveys, female slaves were undoubtedly raped by white planters, "consensual interracial sex" did occur between white men and black women, *and* white women and black men (10). Interracial "romance" was a particularly effective form of counterpoint because it allowed slaves to negotiate discursive power within the oppressive framework of slavery (Morgan 10). The "mulatto," or the offspring of interracial sex was, arguably, the *ultimate* form of counterpoint and black resistance: the existence of mixed-race

children challenged colonial efforts to maintain the purity of racial bloodlines, and served as visible proof of the cultural, social, ethnic, and racial transgression that was occurring on plantations. The presence of racially-mixed individuals not only made the sexuality that accompanied slavery observable, but it also exposed the cultural and ethnic *hybridity* and power negotiations that transpired, on a daily basis, between master, slave and mistress. No aspect of plantation life created more anguish among plantation mistresses than miscegenation. It existed in almost every elite family, and was the undeniable price that planter women had to pay for the rewards of their race, class, and gender. Thus, racial “amalgamation” became a site of dispute, for at its heart lay a radical challenge to the notion of a monolithic white, American identity.

Criticisms of *The Black Atlantic* and the Future of African American Colonial Studies

While hybridity has clearly contributed to academic investigations of race, ethnicity, culture, and modernity, hybridity has also been theoretically problematic. Its “transmutability” has compelled scholars, such as Robert Young, to ask whether—and how much—“ideological networks and cultural categories have actually changed . . . for in constructing difference, hybridity encourages sameness, and in constructing sameness, it promotes difference” (Mitchell 540; Young 27). According to Katharyne Mitchell, “hybridity is . . . a loaded historical term, [an analytic category] that changes, yet contains its past within it.” Thus, while in theory, hybridity as theorized by Gilroy was designed to focus on post-modern conceptualizations of ethnicity and race, and the liberating possibilities of “in-between-ness,” in practice, the contemporary usage of the concept generally ignores its “shady past” (i.e., its connections to Social Darwinism and scientific racism). Moreover, Gilroy’s “abstracted cultural emphasis conceals hybridity’s historical provenance, and obscures the on-going material effects of colonial [knowledge-power]” (Mitchell 540). Such formulations marginalize the implications of miscegenation, and the reality that colonial racism was based on the conflict between sexual desire and observable difference. Moreover, as Young has claimed, “its dialectical structure has illustrated that hybridity is still repeating its own cultural origins of racism, and that it has not slipped out of the mantle of the past, even if, in its appropriation by black cultural theorists (such as Gilroy), hybridity has been employed against the very culture that invented it in order to justify its divisive practices of slavery and colonial oppression” (Young 25).

While clearly these seminal works are not without their theoretical blind spots, the dozens of monographs published on black colonial America since the

1990s is only one indication of the immeasurable impact that they have had on African American studies (in fact, *The Black Atlantic* has been so influential that Harvard UP reissued it in 2007).⁶ Whether consciously or not, scholars such as Sensbach, Berlin, Gilroy and Morgan engaged in their own brand of “counterpoint”: they played on each other’s theories regarding colonial life to create a more accurate depiction of early African Americans. Rather than relying on previous discourses on the black colonial experience, these individuals challenged the academic hegemony by creating a new way of conceptualizing Africans in early America: as empowered individuals with their own unique diasporic stories. Their place in the historiography of colonial black America has made it certain that they will continue to influence future generations of scholars for years to come.

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6 Some notable, recent works on colonial black America include: Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2000); Charles J. Heglar, *Rethinking the Slave Narrative* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001); James O. and Lois E. Horton, *Hard Road to Freedom: The Story of African America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2001); Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 2002); Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York: WW Norton & Co., 2003); Joseph E. Holloway, ed., *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2005); and David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford UP, 2006).

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