

The Pitfalls of (Anti)Essentialism: Pan-Africanism, Afropolitanism, and Global Blackness

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Abstract

Racial discourses of the Enlightenment have, for a long time, been subjected to criticism within the Black intellectual tradition. While certain Black theorists of race such as W.E.B DuBois, Edward Wilmot Blyden, have responded to racist ideations of humanism via discourses such as Pan-Africanism, others like Kwame Anthony Appiah, and Paul Gilroy have taken a much more critical stance regarding the expression of racial identity as a counter discourse to European modernity. In fact, they even question the racial foundations of this form of Black radicalism which, according to them, articulates the limits of approaching identities through the racial paradigm. This philosophical conversation creates two different currents in the Black intellectual tradition: a racialist school of thought that ontologizes Blackness to express a pan-Africanist discourse that liberates the Black subject from white hegemony and an anti-racialist school that denounces anti-Black racism by presenting European modernity as a cultural syncretism that transcends racial particularities. Both of these philosophical interventions on race, racism, and (Anti) Blackness influence contemporary articulations of postcolonial Black subjectivities which underscore an Afro-Atlantic experience, a rootedness in Western modernity, and a discourse of self-hood. I argue, therefore, that it is theoretically unfounded to concur, as Cheryl Sterling argues in “Race Matters: Cosmopolitanism, Afropolitanism, and Pan-Africanism,” that discourses of global Africanness like Afropolitanism, the Afro-Chic or Afro-futurism are exclusionary, and elitist therefore not pan-African. Africanness should be understood in the contemporary global context in its performative dimension as an expression of cultural difference that celebrates a rootedness in the Afro-Atlantic experience, an engagement with European modernity via the nation-state, and an articulation of self-worth that reimagines the future of people of African descent. In this lens, a Pan-Africanist understanding of these global iterations of Africanness lies in its reinvention as a humanist discourse grounded on these three principles: Black liberation and self-determination, postcolonial subjectivity, and (trans)national affiliation. These three principles show that manifestations of Blackness in the postcolonial era transcend Black people’s collective identification to a singular African root as it was advocated in Blyden’s iterations of a return to a Black Africa. It is rather a continuous exploration of the dignity of people of African descent whether in Africa or the Black diaspora, a reimagination, beyond the “racial contract”, of institutions of power such as the nation-state which constantly smother the prevalence of Black life, and an acknowledgement of the transformative dimension of Afro-Atlantic identities which value people of African descents’ experiences within and beyond the nation-state as they embark on self-restorative journeys in the African continent.

Keywords

Modernity, Pan-Africanism, Afropolitanism, Black Atlantic, Global Blackness, Diaspora

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Introduction

The first theoreticians of Pan-Africanism, namely Edward W Blyden, Alexander Crummell, and Martin Delany, etc., conceptualized the movement as a culturalist expression of race¹. These scholars used the idea of Pan-Africanism to conceive of a space, real or metaphorical, where people of African descent could live and flourish. As opposed to the modern dehumanization of people of African descent, they imagined “Africa” as a place that guarantees the freedom and humanity of people of African descent. In “Race Matters: Cosmopolitanism, Afropolitanism, and Pan-Africanism via Edward Wilmot Blyden,” for example, Cheryl Sterling states:

Pan-African ideations arose from the desires of the enslaved to return to Africa and it has been envisioned as a social, cultural, philosophical, and psychic call. It is a movement predicated on the construction of blackness and Africanness that presupposes a commonality in suffering faced by all Black peoples due to slavery, racial discrimination, colonial exploitation, and the movements for decolonization, which in turn, allows for a common form of identification that nullifies geographic, ethnic, social, cultural, and class differences. (p. 129)

In Sterling’s terms, Pan-Africanism is an anti-racist and anti-colonial discourse that disrupts institutional racism through the construction of Africa as an imagined physical place. This physical space offers, in turn, the conditions for developing a Pan-African identity that emphasizes a political yet static expression of Blackness, while overlooking cultural difference as constitutive of the Afrodiasporic experience. This racist understanding of Pan-Africanism has been challenged by more contemporary frameworks such as Afropolitanism which frames the global Black diasporic debate around difference².

There has been a dichotomous representation of the Black experience in light of recent discourses on Blackness. While, on the one hand, Pan-African thought is frequently presented as an obsolete essentialist political ideology, recent discourses such as Afropolitanism are viewed as more inclusive frameworks (Balakrishnan, 2018). In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) and *In My Father’s House* (1992), for example, Paul Gilroy and Kwame Anthony Appiah condemn Pan-Africanism as a racial ideology and characterize its forefathers as racists. Accordingly, Appiah proposes the notion of “rooted cosmopolitanism” as a framework that helps reconceptualize global Africa beyond the essentialization of race and along the lines of the Afropolitan understanding of difference, diversity, and fluidity. In this essay, I revisit the significance of Pan-Africanism in light of the Afropolitan framework and interrogate their categorization as, respectively, an essentialist and a pluriversalist expression of Black identity.

I argue that race is central to the Pan-African and the Afropolitan traditions. As a critique of the Euro-Modern paradigm, Pan-Africanist scholars have used race as a means to affirm Black humanity and organize Black liberation. And yet, despite

1 *In Pan-Africanism: A History* (2018), Hakim Hadi refers to these early Pan-Africanists as scholars that conceptualized the movement through a racist understanding of the experience of diasporic Blacks and advocated for their return to the continent.

2 Key concepts such as Black and Blackness will be capitalized throughout the text to maintain consistency and draw the reader’s attention.

its essentialist tradition, Pan-Africanism has laid the foundations of an African diasporic identity that enables the interrogation of the relevance of mobility, pluralism, diversity, and becoming within people of African descent's contemporary experiences. Pan-Africanism constitutes, thus, despite its racist particularities, a prelude to new developments in Afrodiasporic experiences. Its essentialist particularities are not antagonistic to the Afropolitan framework. Both intellectual frameworks advocate for a politics of self-determination, postcolonial subjectivity, and transnational belonging from an ethnic lens. While Pan-Africanists iterate the cultivation of racial difference as a liberating discourse in a Euro-Modern context, Afropolitans claim ethnic difference as a reference point for rethinking diversity, pluralism, and belonging within global Black communities. We can, therefore, argue that both of these discourses challenge Western narratives of modernity and institutions of power, such as the nation-state, by using *diasporic* identity as a paradigmatic reflection of *difference* in the contemporary global context.

Gilroy's Critique of Pan-Africanism: An incomplete argument

Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* constitutes one of the strongest critiques of Pan-Africanism in the past three decades. In this text, he revisits the philosophy of pioneers of the Pan-African tradition such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Delany, and Alexander Crummell. Gilroy presents Pan-Africanism as a racial ideology and labels these intellectuals as racist. That is precisely why he argues that "the more mystical versions of black communitarianism are frequently heard as part of the argument that an innate or fundamental unity can be found beneath the surface of the irreducible plurality of new world black styles" (Gilroy, 1993, p. 120). This condemnation of Pan-Africanism as a mystical version of Black communitarianism targets the use of race as a cultural category of difference that separates an essentially White Western subject from a subliminal Black other. Yet, this critique of racialism unveils an additional layer of essentialism anchored in Gilroy's reconciliation of the Black diasporic experience with Western modernity.

Gilroy's theory of diaspora developed in contradistinction to the Pan-African tradition presents a strong critique of the Western narrative of modernity. His interrogation of the various forms of essentialism present in modern racial discourses indicates that a new politics of cultural difference significantly changes contemporary engagements with the practice of diaspora³. Nonetheless, his obsession in discounting race constrains the relevance of his argument and undervalues its ethnic manifestations in the experience of people of African descent. For Gilroy:

The essential trademark of cultural insiderism which also supplies the key to its popularity is an absolute sense of ethnic difference. This is maximized so that it distinguishes people from one another and at the same time acquires an incontestable priority over all other dimensions of their social and historical experiences, cultures, and identities. (p. 3)

It is important to note that Gilroy's critique simultaneously targets representations of Euro-modernity and their counter-discourses. Not only does he denounce racial

³ This term references Brent Hayes Edwards's *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature Translation and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (2003) in which he presents an interdisciplinary understanding of the Black experience between the two world wars.

hierarchy and undermine Western representations of subjectivity, but he also critiques different forms of Black nationalisms that essentialize racial difference. This critique of racial essentialism that also discounts people of African descent's ethnic experiences prevents Gilroy from carefully engaging Pan-Africanism as a theory of difference that operates beyond the modern Western framework and outside the linear time and space of modernity.

Gilroy's inscription of diaspora into the linear modern timeline perpetuates the modern Western paradigm. Although he clearly demonstrates the limits of the modern Western framework through his denunciation of cultural insiderism, his theory of diaspora is still rooted in a Euro-American bias, manifested in his representation of the African experience as rooted in a mythical past. In "Outside the Black Atlantic," Simon Gikandi argues that "it would seem that Gilroy's redemptive narrative was only possible through the omission of this story of black suffering and the occlusion of Africa from the moral and social geography of the black Atlantic" (Gikandi, 2014, p. 241). This occlusion of Africa from modernity shows that the Black Atlantic is, in his view, inscribed into a linear narrative of progress which, in this particular case, distorts the Afro-Atlantic roots and routes of New World Blacks, and underrates the significance of Pan-Africanism. Moreover, his conception of the Middle passage as marker of a radical break between continental and diasporic Blacks expresses a truncated reading of the Black experience that represents Africa as an empty space that is meaningless to New World Blacks like Du Bois. For Gilroy:

Africa emerged instead as a mythic counterpart to modernity in the Americas – a moral symbol transmitted by exquisite objects seen fleetingly in the African collection at Fisk University but largely disappearing from Du Bois's account, leaving an empty, aching space between his local and global manifestations of racial injustice. (p. 113)

Gilroy's reductive representation of Du Bois's understanding of Africa simplifies Du Bois's rather complex and contextual philosophy and undermines Gilroy's own project, that is, his conception of the nation-state as a fundamentally heterogeneous community. In addition, while Gilroy's Atlantic framework shows that he is interested in difference and plurality, he approaches these two concepts within the confines of Euro-Modern thought. That is precisely why, in "Africa and the Black Atlantic," Yogita Goyal argues

For Hall and Gilroy, among many others, the concept of diaspora (with its connotations not just of trauma, rupture, and uprooting, but also métissage, creolization, and hybridity) was the best way to combat national narratives of homogeneity and to force open a closed notion of English identity as well as unpack blackness itself and unmoor it from a nationalist take. (2014, p. 8)

Gilroy is clearly more interested in accounting for what Michelle Wright describes as a "difference from within" the space of the nation.⁴ In this instance, Gilroy interrogates homogeneous representations of subjectivity in the Western tradition. This critique enables him to question racial difference without necessarily addressing people of African descent's transnational affiliation to the continent.

Discourses of homogeneity have always influenced people of African descent's engagement with institutions of modernity. They show that the modern Western

⁴ In *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (2004) she describes two understandings of otherness. The Black Other from within located inside the West and the Black Other from without located outside the West. This shows a two-folded understanding of difference that I also apply to echo racial difference and diasporic difference.

framework and its counter-discourses such as Pan-Africanism operate on an epistemic paradox. On the one hand, the need to discount Western modernity's single story remains a pressing issue for people of African descent. On the other, "race" is presented, in Gilroy's terms, as an ideological concept that inhibits a pluralist representation of world history. That is why Cheikh Thiam argues in *Epistemologies from the Global South: Negritude, Modernity and the Idea of Africa* (2023) that:

The critique of Pan-Africanism and Black Nationalism that Gilroy develops in *The Black Atlantic* is rooted in this critique of the paradox constitutive of the traditional conception and representation of modernity. Gilroy suggests that any critique of the representation of people of African descent in the modern world must reject the understanding of the modern teleology that led to the invention of a single world history (p. 100).

This teleological understanding of modernity sets fragmented Black experiences against each other and divides people of African descent into two different categories: modern Blacks and non-modern Africans. It is however important to underline that despite New World Blacks' historical presence in the West, their subjectivity is always questioned by their status as racial others because the nation-state as an institution of modernity has been framed as a homogenous entity along the lines of race. It is for this reason that Wright argues:

Nationality cannot fully accept difference within because nationality is concomitant with "difference without," or without difference. For those who lie within its borders as signifiers of differences – whether racial, ethnic, sexual, gender, or religious differences – they must necessarily be constructed as antithesis to the nationality's thesis. They serve as a marker of what the nation is continually attempting to overcome (2004, p. 38).

Therefore, New World Blacks are bound to constantly negotiate their sense of belonging to the nation-state because Whiteness, its defining principle, is fundamentally opposed to Blackness. This situation encourages people of African descent to envision their subjectivities beyond the nation-state because the latter dismisses the possibilities of Black self-fulfillment. Gilroy's understatement of this predicament led to his misinterpretation of Pan-Africanism as a racial ideology and his oversight of Du Bois as racist. In fact, a careful analysis of Du Bois's international experience, his activism, and his performance of racial belonging unveils his Africa-centered engagement with difference which can be read as a more nuanced iteration of Pan-Africanism.

"Race," Du Bois and the Performance of Africanness

Du Bois's and Gilroy's engagements with the Black diasporic experience display different understandings of race that influence our contemporary reenactment of Pan-Africanism. While the former uses race as a concept that unveils the precarious condition of Blacks in America mired into feelings of double consciousness, the latter denounces its limits by nuancing modernity's racialist ethos. Yet, Du Bois's engagement with the Black experience in America circumvent the spatio-temporal linearity of the modern nation-state and attributes to Blackness its true global

dimension. His interactions with different Black communities, spaces and cultures forged his “being at home in the world” and honed his global understanding of the racial concept⁵. That is precisely why Du Bois argues in *Dusk of Dawn* (1940):

It [race] was for me as I have written first a matter of dawning realization, then of study and science; then a matter of inquiry into the diverse strands of my own family; and finally a consideration of my connection, physical and spiritual, with Africa and the Negro race in its homeland (p. 67)

Du Bois’s global travel experiences cannot, thus, be subsumed, as Gilroy claims, to “his desire to demonstrate the internal situation of blacks, firmly locked inside the modern world” (1993, p. 121). Du Bois’s international experience influenced his personal, experiential, and cultural understanding of the “souls of Black folk”. That is precisely why his understanding of Pan-Africanism cannot be limited to a misconstruction of his racial ideology. Du Bois’s Pan-Africanism unveils, rather, performative expressions of belonging to global Black communities that re-center the inherent correlations and tensions between Americanness, Africanness, and global Blackness.

The expression of difference in Du Bois’s work is fundamentally linked to his articulation of the social significance of race. In opposition to Gilroy, Du Bois not only acknowledges an African cultural presence in the particular experiences of New World Blacks. In addition, his involvement with Pan-African congresses held in Paris (1921) and Manchester (1945) as well as his participation in the All-African conferences in Accra (1958) (Adi, 2018) displays his attachment to issues pertaining to Africa and the global Black world. This performance of belonging to the global Black community enables him to inscribe modern Black experiences in a diasporic timeline that allows New World Blacks to be simultaneously rooted in different spatio-temporal orders. Those orders, for Du Bois, comprise the time and space of the modern nation-state which contrasts with the temporality and trans-spatiality of diaspora. It is in this light that Du Bois uses Blackness as a tool that preserves the interface between the old and the New World. This political and cultural engagement with race (Blackness) illustrates Du Bois’s representation of Africa as a trope that conveys the continuities and discontinuities between continental and diasporic Africans. He argues:

Africa is, of course, my fatherland. Yet, neither my father nor my father’s father ever saw Africa or knew its meaning or cared overmuch for it. My mother’s folk were closer and yet their direct connection, in culture and race, became tenuous; still, my tie to Africa is strong (Du Bois, 1940, p. 59).

It is not surprising that Du Bois conceives of African diasporic identities through a racial lens. He is as much interested in questioning the racial subjugation of Blacks in America as forging alliances with the global Black community. However, his amalgamation of tenuous yet strong feelings about Africa legitimizes an exploration of the meaning rather than the essence of Pan-Africanism in Du Bois’s work. Indeed, Africa, for Du Bois, constitutes a trope that enables him to interrogate the (il)legitimacy of his presence in America while also laying the ground for a Pan-Africanism that is manifest in his efforts to rally people of African descent in the world around a global understanding of Blackness. Du Bois’s conception of a global Black identity should be understood as a form of being-in-the-world that articulates

⁵ In his introduction to the Oxford version of *Dusk of Dawn* (2014) edited by Henry L. Gates and Kwame A. Appiah, the latter explains Du Bois’s global activism as a mode of being at home in the world which also references Chielozona Eze’s framing of Afropolitanism as a new mode of being in the world.

the complex experiences of a community that still undergoes the effects of Western modernity. These effects include the constant interrogation of their legitimate presence within the modern nation-state and the (im)possibility of their affective relationship with a continent that is constantly portrayed as a legacy of the past.

Du Bois proceeds from a racial to a political bonding with Africa displayed through the emotions performed during his onsite visits in the continent and the character of his relationship with his African counterparts. Although he uses race to forge an emotional connection with the continent, he materializes this feeling through his travel experiences across the Atlantic in the quest of his roots, a journey out of which he develops his conception of people of African descent's collective selves. He explains:

Christmas Eve, and Africa is singing in Monrovia. They are krus and Fantimen, women and children, and all the night they march and sing. The music was once the music of mission revival hymns. But it is that music now transformed and the silly words hidden in an unknown tongue – liquid and sonorous. It is tricked out and expounded with cadence and turn. And this is the same rhythm I heard first in Tennessee forty years ago: the air is raised and carried by men's strong voices, while floating above in obbligato, come the high mellow voices of women – it is the ancient African art of part singing, so curiously and insistently different (Du Bois, 1940, p. 60).

This comparative engagement with the cultures of the continent reiterates Du Bois's interest in promoting a sense of self-awareness within the Black community in America to address “the Black person's unhealthy relationship that leaves him unable to deal with his American reality from a position that is authentically his own” (Korang, 2001, p. 172). Moreover, it reinstates the cultural linkages between continental Africans and diasporic Blacks that Gilroy overlooks in his *Black Atlantic*. In the meantime, this cultural project displays the complexity of Black people's relationship with Africa. In this particular instance, Du Bois evokes cultural parallelisms which are more spiritual than realistic. This performance of belonging in Africa and America has a healing power for Black people in the diaspora who struggle for recognition within the American cultural polity. While this pan-Africanist engagement with the cultures of the continent and the diaspora instigates a form of collective pride within Black collective selves, it also enables us to explore the different means through which this spiritual pan-Africanism could be transformed into a political asset for a global Black community characterized by its multiple layers of diversity.

Du Bois's racial consciousness constitutes a fundamental asset that offers the possibility to develop an understanding of Pan-Africanism that accepts difference. His diversal expression of Blackness constitutes the foundation of his reclamation of an Africanity that can restore a Black diasporic self crushed by American racial politics. Du Bois writes:

My African racial feeling was then purely a matter of my own learning and reaction; my recoil from the assumptions of the whites; my experience in the South at Fisk. But it was none the less real and a large determinant of my life and character. I felt myself African by race and by that token was African and an integral member of the group of dark Americans who were called Negroes. (Du Bois, 1940, p. 58)

This evocation of the racial and spiritual dimension of Africanness conveys the particularity of the experiences of American Blacks. Its presentation as a matter of

individual learning suggests that race is an open cultural signifier that permeates people of African descent with a sense of self-determination, racial consciousness and diasporic identity. Du Bois's emphasis on the local articulation of race in America and his identification with African cultures that he has yet to reacquire with imply that Black cultures in the modern world are bound to be in contact with each other and forge what Edwards refers to as "difference within unity" (2001, p. 59). This transnational solidarity unveils the potential of race as a floating signifier⁶, that is, its articulation as an unstable category that shifts across different temporalities, spaces, and geographies. This fluid representation of race which contrasts with its essentialization in certain Pan-Africanist tropes enables us to question Gilroy's Atlantic framework which has introduced a different hierarchy within people of African descent.

Gilroy's inscription of the Black experience into the modern Western framework creates an ethnic hierarchy that undermines Pan-African unity. his use of the slave ship as a marker of modernity introduces a gap between Africa and its diaspora and freezes people of African descent's cultural differences into a decalage, that is, "a difference or gap in time (advancing or delaying a schedule) or in space (shifting or displacing an object)" (Edwards, 2001, p. 65). It is precisely this decalage that Gilroy misreads as a starting point for Black modernity undermining its dual function as both a point of rupture and a point of linkage between continental and diasporic Blacks. As opposed to Gilroy, Du Bois finds a way to fill this gap through cultural tropes that disturb the hierarchization of people of African descent into modern and non-modern subjects. That is precisely why Wright argues in *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (2015) that:

In his writing, Du Bois notes a birthplace in America for his body with two souls (an American, a Negro), but Africa arrives as a verb (to Africanize), a set of practices that could be deployed to change America – reinterpellate Americanness, so to speak, through an alternative epistemology. (p. 51)

In Du Bois's work, claiming Africanness is a corrective measure that not only interrogates the static, vertical, and hierarchized racial relationships within the American nation-state, but it also introduces a fluid, horizontal, and multilayered understanding of *diasporic difference*. That is the possibility for people of African descent to question the modern Western framework's correlation of difference with lack of subjectivity and the reimagination of unity across differences. It is only along these lines that Pan-Africanism can be reenacted as a theory of difference in which racial identities are envisioned as an unstable category, the meaning of which is determined by Black communities' positionalities in time and space. It is for this reason that Du Bois's understanding of race evolved from an America-centered theory of essentialism to a global sociocultural signifier. His ideological understanding of race in America is the starting point of a Pan-Africanism that materialized itself in his economic, political, and cultural relationship with people of African descent across the continent and the diaspora. In *The Negro* (2018), he argues that "race is a dynamic and not static conception, and the typical races are continually changing and developing, amalgamating and differentiating" (p. 9). Thus, Du Bois's experience in the United States, his global activism, and sense of an African cultural belonging enable him to transcend essentialist representations of race and claim its sociocultural significance. His transformative understanding

⁶ This term is borrowed from Stuart Hall's essay of the same title where he discusses race as an unstable category that changes meaning depending on the cultural context.

of the concept of race should also be applicable to different Black communities characterized by their heterogeneity in terms of ethnicity, gender, class and cultural geography.

Du Bois' culturalist conception of race – if not ethnicity – displays a Pan-Africanist ideology that realigns the movement with contemporary manifestations of difference in the global Black world. Although he was more interested in forging an inclusive nationalism that displaces the modern Western framework, his complex, yet at times controversial, intellectual engagements with race and culture show that his ultimate objective remains the celebration of difference. Nonetheless, Du Bois' understanding of difference was always compromised by his obsession with the Black condition in the United States. It is precisely why Kwame Anthony Appiah (1985) argues that:

Du Bois's antithesis is the acceptance of difference, along with a claim that each group has its part to play; that the white race and its racial Other are related not as superior to inferior but as complementaries; that the negro message is, with the white one, part of the message of humankind. (p. 25)

Despite these racial controversies, it is arguable that Du Bois' philosophy underscores the political potential that Pan-Africanism can exercise within modern Black communities. Its political and cultural virtues can be reimagined along the lines of difference, but one that is contingent upon an interactive, intersubjective, and transnational engagement with modern Black experiences at a global scale.

Pan-Africanism, Afropolitanism, and Global Blackness

The emergence of a new African diaspora in the United States and Europe not only nuances Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic but further complicates the significance of race in the construction of global Blackness. Contemporary politics of difference and cultural pluralism displace traditional racial ideologies and frame cultural belonging along the lines of transnationalism. That is precisely why, diaspora, as argued, remains an important framework through which Pan-Africanism can be reinvented. *Diasporic difference* not only questions the linear narrative of the modern Western framework, but it also presents cultural dislocation as the new condition of Black life and diversifies representations of Blackness in the contemporary era. As Yogita Goyal (2017) argues:

Older models of diaspora, from pan-African to Atlantic ones, did often implement US hegemony as Africa continued to be narrated in terms that prioritized diasporic needs and assumptions. But now the new diaspora writes back and advances the conversation beyond pan-Africanism, Bandung humanism, Gilroy's black Atlantic, or Brent Edward's practice of diaspora. (p. 259)

While these different discourses on Blackness reinforce the triangular representation of modern Black experiences, their continuous, yet discordant, engagements with the reality of race evoke shifting performances of identity that echo pan-African ideals in different ways. A broader consideration of the modern Black experience – Gilroy's middle passage epistemology, Du Bois's redemptive Pan-Africanism, and Afropolitanism's disruption of the single story – unveils constructions of Africanness that enable us to read Pan-Africanism as a postnational instantiation of global Blackness rather than a provincialist and racist movement.

The significance of pan-Africanism in the twenty-first century requires transnational engagements with the notion of difference that interrogate the canonization of the singular story of the Black diaspora founded on the Black Atlantic framework. The contemporary dislocation of the Black diaspora in different corners of the world shows that *diasporic difference* conflates discourses and timelines that resist monolithic representations of Blackness. As stated, Pan-Africanism and Afropolitanism are often presented as two different moments in the Black intellectual tradition with completely different projects. While the former places race as the cultural bedrock of people of African descent's identities, the latter "re-signifies the master trope of transnational space and subjectivity" (Skinner, 2017, p. 6). Since, as our reading of Du Bois shows, race is a floating signifier, the struggle for the recognition of Black subjectivity visible in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century discourses on Africa takes a new turn in the twenty-first century. People of African descent's global mobility shifts representations of *diasporic difference* from their racial and transatlantic purview to a more transnational and global worldview. Skinner (2015) explains further that "under the sign of the Afropolitan, Africa and its peoples are not merely the targets of worldly intervention, but the site and agents of worldly knowledge and practice" (p. 23). This resignification of Africanness from its association with the trauma of displacement to a celebratory understanding of cultural dislocation unveils agency as an additional layer of resilience in Black counter-discourses of modernity. It signals that people of African descent's contemporary stories of mobility problematize race and nation as modern paradigms of identity and center difference as a manifestation of agency. In this instance, the performance of Africanness transcends essentialist engagements with the Black condition as it was advocated by late nineteenth and early twentieth-century cultural Pan-Africanists, and involves as well, a sense of self-determination, postcolonial subjectivity and transnational affinity, all of which, can be found in a critical engagement with the discourse of Afropolitanism.

The articulation of difference within communities of African descent displaces monolithic representations of the meaning of race, agency, and liberation in the global Black diaspora. As argued, the trope of Africanness has been used, though inconsistently within Black intellectual circles, to counter the discourse of white-supremacy. Its association with an essentialist definition of racial identity in the older African diaspora for the triumph of a racial Pan-Africanism is challenged by a postcolonial generation of Africana scholars, writers, and activists whose interrogation of white supremacy lies on a seemingly more complex rendition of narratives of belonging that undermine the modern Western framework, one of the epistemic foundations of the nation-state. For Goyal (2021), for example:

Where Gilroy emphasized the history of violence and the memory of slavery as shaping a pained relation of Black Atlantic populations to the West, alienated from it, yet shackled to it, Afropolitans and Afropeans celebrate dislocation and entirely reject the model of trauma as constituting their identities. (p. 780)

This generation of Afropolitans characterized by a celebration of their self-described statuses as *cultural mutts* expresses their subjectivities at the interstices of different positionalities and localities which usually interrogate, yet are similarly challenged by, monolithic representations of the global aftereffects of slavery, colonialism, and transnational migrations. In "Bye-Bye Babar," Taiye Selasi (2005) explains the formation of Afropolitan identities as a process that happens

“along three dimensions: national, racial, cultural – with subtle tensions between them” (p. 10). This tension that reiterates decalage constitutes the bedrock of a variegated, multifocal, anti-essentialist, and supranational engagement with the world. While this Afropolitan representation of subjectivity postulates, as Selasi (2005) continues, that “nothing is neatly black or white,” it presents Africanness itself as a cultural signifier that enables people of African descent to expose their sense of cultural difference as a fundamental constituent of their subjectivity.

People of African descent’s tenuous relations with institutions of modernity such as the nation-state confirms the prevalence of a racialized global order in which the performance of Africanness participates in an effort to disarticulate the effects of global white supremacy. Although the different articulations of race in Pan-Africanism and Afropolitanism span different historical and socio-cultural contexts, representations of being and identity in each of these contexts should be conceived in the form of a shift rather than a break (Goyal, 2019). In each context, people of African descent, whether in an essentialist way or not, strategically deploy their racial, ethnic, and national identities to dismantle the racist foundations of the modern Western paradigm. They envision their identity from a certain essence (skin color, nationality, and roots) to articulate a political agency that will undermine the different manifestations of power exercised on Black bodies, cultures, and identities in the wake of modernity.

It is important to note, in conclusion, that contemporary debates on Pan-Africanism, Afropolitanism, Blackness and Diaspora transcend the essentialist/pluralist dichotomy. Each one of these concepts has a particular function in our contemporary engagement with Black experiences in modernity. Even though Pan-Africanism was originally theorized from an essentialist standpoint, it displays a racial politics of agency that interrogates the representation of modernity as a single story. While pan-African scholars such as Du Bois articulate this agency through cultural tropes to promote inclusion and the acceptance of difference within and beyond the modern nation-state, the Afropolitan generation uses these cultural tropes as placeholder that can connect them to the continent and help them overcome the anxieties of dislocation and (un)belonging within the modern nation-state. That is precisely why both of these discourses can be read as epistemic tools that allow the framing of Blackness as an Afro-diasporic concept that creates the conditions for people of African descent’s liberation from the shackles of Euro-modernity. Under the larger umbrella of diaspora, Pan-Africanism and Afropolitanism can both be imagined as modes of performing identity that interrogate the modern nation-state’s constrictive authority while showing the dysfunctions of a capitalist world system in which both the racial and postcolonial states undermine the subjectivity and agency of people of African descent.

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