Theorizing Issues Concerning American Multicultural Studies

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What Is Black in the Melting Pot?

A Critique of Afrocentrist and Postmodernist Discourses on Blackness

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Since the late 1980s, the field of Black studies has witnessed intense debates during which schools of thoughts with different orientations have attempted to define the meaning of Black identity in particular or plural terms that suggest unavoidable ideological clashes that demonstrate the richness and vivacity of the discipline. While there are many trajectories in these intellectual conversations about the meaning of Black identity, this chapter will focus on the salient ones that have surfaced among the works of many scholars of Afrocentrist or postmodernist schools of thought who have cogently examined the meaning of Blackness on their own terms. Referring specifically to intellectuals such as Molefi Kete Asante, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Paul Gilroy, Gerald Early, Stuart Hall, Manthia Diawara, and many others who made strong contributions to the debates on multiculturalism within Black studies, this chapter will suggest the varying influences that race and ethnicity have had on such nonmainstream critical approaches to diversity in American society. Moreover, it will suggest how universalist tropes of Blackness have been interpreted by scholars from the Afrocentrist or postmodernist schools of thought.

Defining Postmodernism

Any study of the ideological clashes between Afrocentrist and Black postmodernist theory must begin with a study of the central tenets of the latter school of thought. Understanding Black postmodernism requires analysis of the ways in which it defines the concepts of representation, narrative, meaning, and experience in ways different from how modernism describes such notions. Representation is not emphasized in modernism since the basic premise of this theory is that it is antirepresentational. This antirepresentationality refers to the impossibility of modernism to convey the voices and the vision of marginal culture. High culture and avant-gardist aesthetics of selected intellectuals such as Charles Baudelaire, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, not those of the supposedly "unenlightened" mob, are the focus of modernist representation. In his interpretation of Clement Greenberg's theory, Hans Bertens points out that Greenberg "defined modernism in terms of a wholly autonomous aesthetic, of a radically anti-representational self-reflexivity" (Bertens, 1995, p. 3). In modernist representation, art and language are, like in French impressionist painting and in the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, antirepresentational because they are autonomous and self-reflexive. In modernism, the value of art can be apprehended only in its form and self-referentiality, not in its relation with social and political context.

In a sense, postmodernism is antirepresentational like modernism. Postmodernism does not seek to represent things that suggest an essential meaning. It rejects the modernist tendency to represent or codify meaning in a singular and rational mode of investigation and understanding. In this sense, as Appiah suggests in his essay "Is the 'Post-' in 'Postcolonial' the 'Post-' in 'Postmodern'?" (1997), "Postmodernism is the rejection of the mainstream consensus from Descartes through Kant to logical positivism or foundationalism" (p. 426). However, postmodernism is still interested, to some degree, in representation. The goal of postmodernism is to discuss the areas of subcultural and subpolitical representations and meaning that modernism denied and repressed. This agenda, according to Bertens, focuses on "the return of representation and narrative, which for obvious reasons is only possible in those art forms—such as painting—where representation and narrative had been repressed" (p. 64).

The modernist definition of representation influenced its views about narrative, meaning, and experience. In modernism, narrative is not dependent on the social context. Like postmodernist representation, modernist narrative is a self-reflexive, self-referential, and autonomous story that can be understood only through a study of the form of the text and the aesthetics of the author. Yet postmodernism attacks modernist reduction of narrative.

Unlike modernism, postmodernism seeks to bring narrative back on the table and deconstruct its relationships with past, present, and future. For example, in the essay "The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life and the Concept of a Tradition" (1998), Alasdair MacIntyre rereads *Homer*, *Hamlet*, and *Julius Caesar* not as a mere authentication of Greek or Elizabethan tradition but as a game that allows us to discover the theories and actions of the past and to fantasize about the past by reassessing it according to our time and beliefs (p. 538). As MacIntyre suggests when quoting Barbara Hardy, "we dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love in narrative" in arguing the same point (p. 542). MacIntyre's universalist and critical approach to narrative suggests how postmodernism brings back to life the individual memories and experiences that modernism dismissed and viewed as dispensable and non–self-referential.

Moreover, MacIntyre's definition of narrative suggests the meaninglessness and antiessentialist nature of postmodernist study of text. According to Bertens, modernism tended to search for "timeless meaning" (p. 31). Unlike postmodernism, modernism perceives meaning as some sort of a universal truth that only the great mind can apprehend. From this perspective, the illiterate and unsophisticated reader cannot understand the meaning of the literary allusions and imagery of Dante, Henry James, Picasso, and other prominent writers and artists. In such modernist perspective, meaning has a mental, universal, and transcendental quality that dominates personal opinion. Some premises of the Enlightenment such as the Aristotelian perception of stars as the world of gods and heavens or Copernicus's claim that planets are circular were designed to be universal truths of the premodern era. Modernism rejected most of the premodernism cosmology by suggesting that religion is mostly brought about by psychological factors. Man created gods and heavens so that he could project his anguish and desires onto this being and weaken his fear of overthrowing bourgeois capitalism and building himself a paradise on earth. According to Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels's argument in "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," "The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself. The worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object" (p. 765). In this sense, religion, like the object, prevents human beings from demanding and gaining their full rights on earth since it eliminates the necessity of want.

However, despite its rejection of premodern assumptions about man, modernism came to establish essentialist meanings. Orthodox Marxism and Freudianism established the same limitations that they had sought to destroy. Orthodox Marxism ended up essentializing the class and power

basis of social struggle. Likewise, Freudianism established an essentialist dichotomy between "conscious self" and "unconscious self" (Kishlansky, 1991, p. 777), creating an oppositionality within identity that postmodernism seeks to destroy. Essentialism is also apparent in the interpretation of human psychology in Freudian psychoanalysis as a greatly unconscious sphere (therefore, not perfect as Rousseau used to think).

Yet, unlike modernism, postmodernism looks for and finds meaning not in stars or ideology but in texts, textuality, intertextuality, and the death of the author. Most importantly, postmodernism finds meaning in man and his immediate environment. As Bertens argues, postmodernist meaning is "inevitably, local, contingent, and self-sufficient" (p. 31) and does not represent an underlying truth. Certainly, the postmodernist rejection of unanimous and transcendental truth is in great opposition to modernist consensus on the essential quality of meaning. Therefore, one can say that postmodernism is a critique of and a break with modernism. The postmodernist emphasis on representation, multiple meanings, narratives, and experiences indicates a *dépassement* or a step beyond modernism. In this sense, there is a discontinuity between postmodernism and modernism. However, because modernism predates postmodernism and serves as a subject of its investigation and criticisms, one could say that there are continuities between the two theories. Postmodernism cannot exist without modernism.

The Impact of Postmodern Theory on Black Studies

Postmodernism has strong influences on the theorizing of identity in Black studies. For instance, in Black studies, the "Black family" is a concept that scholars have often used to explain the complex nature of Black identity within postmodern and (or) postcolonialist theories. Some Black scholars have used the concept of the "Black family" in order to suggest a therapy for the structural, behavioral problems that confront the Black community. Others have used it to criticize a sense of nationalism and essentialism that reacts against the political, social, and cultural fabrics of Western hegemony.

In many works of contemporary Black scholars, the family is a metaphor that is introduced by the collective possessive pronouns "we," "our," and "us." In "Black Pleasure, Black Joy: An Introduction" (1992), Gina Dent begins her rhetoric by suggesting the sense of double consciousness that the narrative of a "Blackness" filtered through notions of a collective Black experience and community brings into the life of the Black individual (pp. 1–2). The concepts bring the individual to a close relationship with the community while, at the same time, keeping him or her away from its center

and fundamental purpose. As Dent points out, "Every gathering has its points of profound collective understanding, never to be fully grasped except in the elusive phrase with which we attempt to reconstruct them. These phrases serve to remind us of our collective goals for the future, and yet point continually to our distance from them" (p. 1). Dent's statement begins a debate among Black scholars on issues about the Black family. As Dent points out, this debate is not an attempt to determine which point of view (essentialist or moderate; liberal or conservative) shall win, but about whether "we, peoples of the African diaspora, any longer have the right to invent an Africa?" (p. 7).

In his essay "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" (1992), Stuart Hall offers one of the most liberal and moderate answers to Dent's question. Drawing on the genealogy of Black resistance, Hall recognizes a tradition of postcolonial and civil rights struggle in which various Black scholars (such as Frantz Fanon, Léopold Sédar Senghor, W. E. B. Dubois, and John Blassingame) tried to create what Ngugi Wa Thiong'O calls "the decolonization of the minds of the peoples of the Black diaspora" (p. 22). Yet Hall believes that the postmodern continuation of this Black struggle should be centered on "sexual difference, cultural difference, racial difference, and above all, ethnic difference" (p. 23). Hall foresees the postmodern Black family in terms of what Gilroy considers a postcolonial African traditionalism that cannot be apprehended in essentialist terms only since it is a way to resist the dictates of hegemony and contribute to human struggle (Gilroy, 1993, p. 196). Like Stuart Hall, Gilroy, in his essay "It's a Family Affair" (1992) calls for a redefinition of the study of the Black family in terms of postmodern difference. Gilroy asserts: "We will have to refine the theorizing of the African diaspora if it is to fit our changed transnational and intercultural circumstances . . . we might consider experimenting, at least, with giving up the idea that our culture needs to be centered anywhere except where we are when we launch our inquiries into it" (p. 305). Gilroy's statement is an implicit criticism of the global nationalism of pro-Afrocentric scholars such as Asante whom he considers essentialist. Like Gilroy, Hall proposes a study of the cultural environment that surrounds the Black individual and is most distinguishable in local popular culture. According to Hall, "Popular culture always has its base in the experiences, the pleasures, the memories, the traditions of the peoples. It has connections with local hopes and local aspirations, local tragedies and local scenarios" (p. 25).

Building on Hall's emphasis on local space, Cornell West calls for a serious "holistic" analysis of the problems of the African American family. Witnessing a growing sense of nihilism, cynicism, self-denial, and anger in the Black American family, West proposes a cessation of the conflicts between liberal structuralism/conservative behaviorist scholarship and rhetoric and a serious

moral focus on the problems which afflict the local Black family (West, 1992, pp. 43–44). According to West, "The politics of conversion proceed principally on the local level—in those institutions in civil society still vital enough to promote self-worth and self-affirmation" (p. 44).

One wonders why there has been such an urge among contemporary Black scholars to warn against nationalist essentialism. Gilroy (1992) laughs at the etymology of the term *nationalism* when he says, in *It's a Family Affair*, that "the 'ism' in nationalism is often lacking . . . it is no longer constructed as a coherent political ideology" (p. 305). Likewise, West (1992) criticizes the Black nationalist tendencies of Louis Farrakhan and Al Sharpton for their "myopic mode," which is often, "though not always, reeking of immoral xenophobia" (p. 45).

Among other scholars, Diawara and Appiah have suggested how one can easily fall into the trap of essentialism. In his essay, "Reading Africa Through Foucault: V. Y. Mudimbe's Reaffirmation of the Subject" (1997), Diawara shows how, in his 1982 novel *L'Ecart*, V. Y. Mudimbe falls into the trap of nationalism by creating characters who represent an inappropriate antithesis of Negritude intellectuals. According to Diawara, Nara, one of the central characters in the novel, "argues against the anthropologists and historians who project images of their own desires onto the surface of Africa and posits as an imperative for himself the need to be more sensitive to the specificity of local knowledge" (p. 465). Nara's ideology reflects Mudimbe's attempt to suggest a redefinition of Africa outside of European terms. As Diawara suggests, Mudimbe's essentialism is blatant when he says: "We [Africans] must reanalyze for our benefit the contingent supports and the areas of enunciation in order to know what new meaning and what road to propose for our quest so that our discourse can justify us as singular beings engaged in a history that is itself special" (p. 463).

Like Diawara, Appiah suggests that essentialism is a constant risk that faces the postcolonial scholar. Appiah shows that the process of commodification of African art in Western territory often forces the native artist to present his object in essentialist terms. In "Is the 'Post-' in 'Postcolonial' the 'Post-' in 'Postmodern'?" (1997), Appiah gives the example of Lela Kouakou, a Baule artist, who, in 1987, presented his sculptures at the Center for African Art in New York. One of Kouakou's pieces, called *Yoruba Man with a Bicycle*, caught the attention of the audience and was interpreted by James Baldwin as a "contemporary" piece that shows an African man who is going to town (p. 422). For Appiah, Baldwin's judgment is a proof that African art can be interpreted in a personal way outside its original or African context. Appiah salutes the freedom from which Westerners such as Baldwin benefit in having the power

to judge other arts according to their own world. Yet Appiah (1997) finds injustice when many Westerners refuse to allow the African artist to present his art according to his own personal terms (outside of any reference to a specific tribal culture, for example; pp. 422–423). Appiah's criticism of the African artist's silence in the assessment of his own art stemmed from a footnote to an essay in which Susan Vogel, the curator of the above art exhibit, wrote: "African informants will criticize sculptures from other ethnic groups in terms of their own traditional criteria, often assuming that such works are simply inept carvings of their own aesthetic tradition" (Vogel, 1997, p. 11). Such a footnote encourages essentialism by giving the impression that African art is superficial when it is not made by an authentic artist and according to his or her traditional values. According to Appiah (1997), this discrimination between what is "authentic" and "inauthentic" is an essentialist dichotomy that European and American-educated African postmodernist intellectuals have promoted (p. 422).

Therefore, nationalism presents an everlasting danger since it can promote essentialism that is apparent in the rhetoric of racial, cultural, and ethnic uniqueness that permeate contemporary Black scholarship. Influenced by the theories of postmodernity and postcoloniality, Black scholars such as Hall, Gilroy, Diawara, Appiah, and others have sought to undermine essentialist nationalism in contemporary writing and political rhetoric. Yet, as the next part of this chapter suggests, similar kinds of essentialism can be promoted when Western-educated Black scholars undervalue the ideas of cross-cultural difference, indeterminacy, and meaninglessness in Afrocentric paradigms.

Afrocentrist Approaches to Race and Ethnicity

Since its popularity in American and world academic circles in the middle of the 20th century, the scholarship that is often described as being part of "Afrocentrism" has been misjudged and often ridiculed by numerous critics who either conflate it with ethnonationalism or reduce its significance to mere romanticization of Black history or Black pride. As a result, the core of the scholarship that ended up endorsing the label "Afrocentrist," which has been unduly imposed upon it, is often misunderstood by critics who cannot perceive its celebration of Black culture as a strategy for achieving political, economic, and social development. In an attempt to give a brief and clear synopsis of the history of Afrocentrism, this chapter will uncover and dismantle the myths that critics have often developed to support or criticize this school of thought.

First, it is important to stress that the terms *Afrocentrism* and *Afrocentricity* mean different things and that the expression *Afrocentrism* itself is a

misnomer. A good definition of the notion of Afrocentrism appears in the book *Afrocentric Thought and Praxis: An Intellectual History* (2001), in which, citing James Stewart and Maulena Karenga, Cecil Conteen Gray argues that the concept is used "most frequently in 'ideological discourse between advocates and critics'—especially those engaged primarily in popular media or popular exchanges" (p. 45). As Gray points out, another definition of the term *Afrocentrism* is the way in which "some people understand—or attempt to posit—Afrocentrism as being the African version or opposite of the oppressive, hegemonic European ideology known as 'Eurocentrism'" (p. 45). The bottom line is what Gray (2001) clearly states:

> Whatever Afrocentrism is, it is not Afrocentricity. Afrocentricity is an intellectual concept and category; it has "intellectual value"; and, as Stewart asserts, it adds to and contributes to "systematic intellectual approaches in the field" of Black Studies. (p. 45)

This last point is worth stressing because it alludes to the fact that Afrocentricity is a long and established intellectual discourse about the experiences of African-descended people that modern or contemporary theorizing of Blackness (that its preceded in the arena of critical inquiry) have often miscategorized as "Afrocentrism," a term that so-called "liberal" or "progressive" intellectuals imagine as being a Black form of narrow, Western, or White conservative nationalisms and concepts of culture. In "The Afrocentric Idea in Education" (2003), Asante corrects this misconception about Afrocentricity by saying that:

> Afrocentricity is *not* a Black version of Eurocentricity . . . Eurocentricity is based on White supremacist notions whose purposes are to protect White privilege and advantage in education, economics, politics, and so forth. Unlike Eurocentricity, Afrocentricity does not condone ethnocentric valorization at the expense of degrading other groups' perspectives. Moreover, Eurocentricity presents the particular historical reality of Europeans as the sum total of the human experience . . . It imposes Eurocentric realities as "universal," i.e., that which is White is presented as applying to the human condition in general, while that which is non-White is viewed as group-specific and therefore not "human." (p. 39)

If Afrocentrism is not the universalism that its detractors have etymologically and ideologically associated it with, what is it, then? Asante (2003) provides an answer:

> Afrocentricity is a frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person. The Afrocentric approach seeks in every

> situation the appropriate centrality of the African person . . . in education, this means that teachers provide students the opportunity to study the world and its people, concepts, and history from an African world view. (p. 39)

Asante's point is valid because it goes against the grain of multiculturalist theories of education in which the European worldviews are considered the undisturbed and unshakeable truths, while those of the diverse members of American society are denied and forced to adapt to the universal White concepts of history. In *The Disuniting of America* (1998), Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., berates Afrocentricity, and specifically Asante's conception of the ideology, as a laughable attempt "in breaking the White, Eurocentric, racist grip on the [American] curriculum and providing education that responds to colored races, colored histories, colored ways of learning and behaving" (p. 70). Schlesinger (1998) continues: "Europe has reigned long enough; it is the source of most of the evil in the world anyway; and the time is overdue to honor the African contributions to civilization so purposefully suppressed in Eurocentric curricula" (p. 70). While he derides Afrocentricity's representation of Eurocentricity as a dominant and oppressive paradigm, Schlesinger fails to see how he himself agrees that this dominance and potential of oppression are real. While mocking the Afrocentric view of education as an interest in history "not as an intellectual discipline but rather as social and psychological therapy" for minority groups, Schlesinger (1998) warns that such a practice will only make Whites angrier and more prone to abuse Blacks. He writes:

> In seeking to impose Afrocentric curricula on public schools, for example, they go further than their white predecessors. And belated recognition by white America of the wrongs so viciously inflicted on black Americans has created the phenomenon of white guilt—not a bad thing in many respects, but still a vulnerability that invites cynical black exploitation and manipulation. (p. 76)

Schlesinger's message is clear: Blacks should not ask for more than they are given because doing so will only give Whites more reasons to be intolerant toward them. In such a restrained context in which Blacks are confined, where is the fulfillment of American pluralism that Schlesinger dubiously celebrates in his book? Schlesinger (1998) seems to have a general bias toward not just Blacks but also many minority groups, as evident in the passage in which he represents the reconstruction of American history since 1987 in the "long-neglected fields" of "the history of women, of immigrants, of Blacks, Indians, Hispanics, [and] homosexuals," as a scholarship that is "partly on the merits and partly in response to gender and ethnic pressures" (p. 71). In this sense, Schlesinger would perceive Afrocentricity and its contemporaries as subnarratives not worthy of attention, thus denying the

significance of Afrocentricity in the theorizing of American pluralism and ignoring the centrality and agency of the ideology in the conceptualization of postmodern American conditions. In *Afrocentricity* (1988), Asante captures the meaning of *Afrocentricity* when he states:

> Afrocentricity is the belief in the centrality of Africans in post modern history. It is our history, our mythology, our creative motif, and our ethos exemplifying our collective will. On basis of our story, we build upon the work of our ancestors who gave signs toward our humanizing function. (p. 6)

This quotation suggests that Afrocentricity is not an ethnocentrist or anti–White intellectual paradigm, since it begins with recognition of the interrelatedness between the African subjectivity and the myriad identities of Blacks in "post modern" American history.

During the past quarter of a century, a number of Black critics have made harsh remarks against Afrocentrism, creating unnecessary gaps between the Afrocentric and the so-called postmodern approaches to Black studies. In his essay "A Blacker Shade of Yale: African-American Studies Take a New Direction," published in the March 2001 issue of *Lingua Franca*, Christopher Shea contrasts what he called "the academic cutting-edge" approach of the African-American Studies Program at Yale University with what he described as—supposedly from the terms of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.—the "voodoo methodology" of Temple University (p. 44). This statement reflects the deep schism that has been going on for the past quarter century or more and that has so far prevented Black scholars from recognizing and translating into action the strong similarities that their schools of thought share despite their differing political and cultural approaches to Black struggle and their variant conceptualizations of this struggle.

Among many Black postmodern critics, Appiah, Gilroy, and Early have expressed concern toward what they interpret as the tendency of the Afrocentrist movement to override the local specificity of Black identity in favor of a transcending Blackness that defines the position of all people of African descent in the modern world. Appiah, in his book *In My Father's House* (1992), refutes a definition of Blackness that overlooks the diversity of African communities and local customs when he says that "the pan–Africanists responded to their experiences of racial discrimination by accepting the racialism it presupposed" (p. 17). Appiah (1992) argues that

> though race is indeed at the heart of the pan–Africanist's nationalism, however, it seems that it is the fact of a shared race, not the fact of a shared racial character, that provides the basis for solidarity. Where racism is implicated in the basis for national solidarity, it is intrinsic, not extrinsic. (p. 17)

Racial essentialism has had practical utilities in the development of resistance in the Black diaspora since, as Schmeisser (2004) argues, "the historical significance of 'race,' racial essentialism and racism and how the cultural significance of 'race' was explained or expressed, were defining elements in the aesthetic debates of the New Negro movement during the interwar years" (p. 117). Schmeisser's quotation opposes the postmodernist representation of pan–Africanists as mere racial essentialism by suggesting how Black intellectuals invoked racial purity to further their cultural and political resistance.

Appiah's theory about pan–Africanists recoups with the postmodernist interpretations of Black identity of Gilroy, which prioritize the weakening significance of race in American society and ideological disassociation of the Black diaspora from Africa. Locating Afrocentricity in the early discourses of Cheikh Anta Diop and George James, Gilroy (1993) claims, in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, that such Black intellectuals, who once proclaimed the anteriority of Black civilization, misunderstood the currents of modernity and their relationships with slavery and imperialism (p. 190). Furthermore, as Karen J. Winkler (1994) posits, Gilroy criticizes Afrocentrists for tracing contemporary Black culture directly to African roots (p. A8). Such attacks on Afrocentrists are apparent when Gilroy (1994) derides Asante for saying that "Our anteriority is only significant because it re-affirms for us that if we once organized complex civilizations all over the continent of Africa, we can take those traditions and generate more advanced ideas" (p. 190). This is the type of statement that critics of Afrocentrism use to present the movement as irrelevant, outdated, essentialist, and anachronistic. Such an easy way of dismissing Afrocentrism and its proponents fails to inscribe the movement in its proper historical and intellectual context. In order to put Afrocentrism in its right context, I use the effective approach that Tunde Adeleke (2009) employs in his book, *The Case Against Afrocentrism*, by interpreting "Afrocentric essentialist thought" as "a comprehensive and dynamic agency in Black history" while "underscoring the contradictions and limitations" of this ideology (p. 22).

Afrocentrism is not irrelevant in that it is a Black cultural movement that seeks to rewrite the neglected history of Blacks in a modern history that has been marked by slavery, imperialism, and colonization. As Asante (1980) pointed out in *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, "Afrocentricity is the belief in the centrality of Africans in post modern history" (p. 6). Asante's Afrocentrism is steeped in the belief that race and class relations in modern United States are characterized by constant shifts in power relations

and diversity of cultures. As Asante states, in his essay "Harold Cruse and Afrocentric Theory"(2009),

> The future of the heterogeneous United States is not one giant amalgamation of cultures but rather a multiplicity of cultures without hierarchy resting on certain political and social pillars that support racial and cultural equality and respect. This multiplicity of cultural centers revolving around respect and equality is the future. (p. 4)

Thus, Afrocentric theory is a materialistic interpretation of socioeconomic relations that the continuity of the color line in the United States has complicated. Yet, in spite of its importance, Afrocentric theory is either ignored or vituperated in mainstream Black intellectual discourses on multiculturalism. For instance, Gilroy (1993) denies the democratic nature of Asante's Afrocentric agenda by displacing "Afrocentrists" from their social and political context. For example, he dismisses Cheikh Anta Diop's idea that Egyptian civilization was Black (Gilroy, 1993, p. 190) without putting this theory in the historical context that produced it. Such a dismissal is unfair since, as J. D. Walker (1995) suggests in his essay "The Misrepresentation of Diop's Views," "Diop must be understood in the context of French/Old World intellectual traditions" (p. 78). Within such traditions, Diop's thesis serves as a counterpoint to Europe's cultural hegemony. Gilroy (1993) admits that Asante's idea of the "anteriority" of Black civilization has the virtue of demystifying and rejecting "European particularism" dressed up "as universal" (p. 190).

Yet Gilroy (1993) does not develop Asante's claim and prefers to override the issue by saying that "A discussion of the extent to which these historiographical and linguistic claims can be substantiated would be a distraction" (p. 190). By refusing to explore the historiography and the contexts that shaped Asante's and Diop's views, Gilroy fails to regard them as part of the struggles of modernity. Most importantly, Gilroy's (1993) minimization of Diop and Asante contradicts the well-accepted theory that Greek civilization owes many of its great developments to Egypt. As Martin Bernal (1987) showed in *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, there is considerable evidence that Egyptian vocabulary influenced the vocabulary of Aischylos's play *The Suppliants* and the writings of Plato (p. 22). Likewise, as Bernal (1987) pointed out, Egyptian divinities, rituals, and religion were earlier than the Greek ones (p. 23). In the preface to *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, Diop (1974) gives the reasons that led him to affirm that ancient Egypt was a Negro civilization. Diop (1974) perceives his thesis as part of a national,

scientific, and cultural Third World revolution that sought to resist Europe's intellectual hegemony. Diop (1974) states:

> Have foreign intellectuals, who challenge our intentions and accuse us of all kinds of hidden motives or ridiculous ideas, proceeded any differently? When they explain their own historical past or study their languages, that seems normal. Yet, when an African does likewise to help reconstruct the national personality of his people, distorted by colonialism, that is backward or alarming. We contend that such a study is the point of departure for the cultural revolution properly understood. (p. xiv)

Diop's theory must be understood as part of a discourse in which Third World scholars question the methods and efficiency of the Western scholarly perspectives that tend to write Black people out of the history of great achievements. As Diop (1974) states, "Our investigations have convinced us that the West has not been calm enough and objective enough to teach us our history correctly, without crude falsifications" (p. xiv). In this sense, the highly criticized Afrocentric perspective of history should be viewed not as the antithesis to Western history but as a dialectical response to it. Diop's Afrocentrism must be considered an attempt to decenter history from its Western domination. In his preface to *Moving the Center: The Struggle for Cultural Freedom*, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O (1993) argues for the necessity to move history from its Western location:

> I am convinced with moving the center in two senses at least. One is the need to move the center from its assumed location in the West to a multiplicity of spheres in all the cultures of the world. The assumed location of the center of the universe in the West is what goes by the term Eurocentrism, an assumption which developed with the domination of the world by a handful of western nations. (p. xvi)

By failing to represent Diop as a narrative that resists Western hegemony, Gilroy compromises objectivity and neutrality. Instead of acknowledging and discussing this subaltern quality of Afrocentrist paradigms, Gilroy simply put its major thinkers such as Asante and Diop in the category of outdated traditionalists. Gilroy's (1993) representation of Afrocentrists as "obsessive purist[s]" prevents him from understanding their definition of tradition, time, and modernity as subaltern defense against logocentric and Manichean Western conception of history. Gilroy's (1993) idea that Afrocentrists glorify their past because they want to escape reality is defeated by Diop (1974), who argues, in *The African Origin of Civilization*, that his purpose "is not a matter of looking for the Negro under a magnifying glass

as one scans the past" (p. xvi). Diop's intent is not to present the Black individual as a perfect or superior being but rather as a determinate "agent" who has strength as well as weaknesses.

Taking on Appiah's and Gilroy's lead, Gerald Early (1999) argues in his essay "Understanding Afrocentrism: Why Blacks Dream of a World Without Whites" that Afrocentricity "is meant to be an ideological glue to bring Black people together, not just on the basis of color but as the expression of a cultural and spiritual will that crosses class and geographical lines" (p. 621). Early's statement misrepresents Afrocentrism by failing to interpret its conceptions of cultural and spiritual continuities outside the theoretical frame of essentialism. Hidden in Early's assessment is the notion that African American students' identification with Africa is a defense mechanism against White racism which, when pushed to the extreme, might prevent these students from immersing themselves in the mainstream American culture. This notion is apparent when Early (1999) dismisses the position of a Black student who told Angela Davis that "She [the student] was simply an African, wishing to have nothing to do with being an American or with America itself. She wanted Black people to separate themselves entirely from 'Europeans,' as she called White Americans, and wanted to know what Davis could suggest to further that aim" (p. 619). Although this student's position can be considered essentialist, as Early suggests, one cannot simply describe it as such without examining the structural realities and personal experiences that led the student to develop such a radical view of her identity. Finding such information, which requires statistics, studies on social and economic inequalities, and psychoanalytic factors that influence the student's sense of self, can help her benefit from the openness to multiculturalism that Early prescribes to the student. Summarizing Davis's response to the student, Early (1999) writes: "Davis answered that she was not inclined to such stringent race separation. She was proud of being of African but wished to be around a variety of people, not just people like herself" (p. 619). Davis's representation of her African identity as a factor that does not preclude openness to diversity suggests that collective identity must not always be perceived as an orientation that necessarily precludes intimacy within mainstream American culture.

Afrocentrism is, first and foremost, a movement grounded on actual social and political realities such as the exploitation and objectification of Black people across the globe for more than 400 years. Experienced in transatlantic slavery, European colonization, and neocolonization of African lands, this exploitation has led not only to the displacement of millions of Black people from Africa but also to the formation of planter-bourgeois classes across Western Europe, North and South America, and the

Caribbeans, where Black people have been exploited for centuries on the basis of their race. When one accepts that slavery and colonization were historical facts that displaced human and economic resources from Africa to the Western world, one must agree that theories of return to the African past such as Afrocentrism, which stress a continuum between the past and present conditions of people of African descent, are legitimate counterattacks to Western hegemony. This African-centered interpretation of the relationships between the conditions of modern Blacks and slavery is corroborated in the essay "The Ideology of Racial Hierarchy and the Construction of the European Slave Trade," in which Asante (1998) states:

> What some have called a trade, trafico negreiro, comercio negreiro, la traite negriere, and what Walter Rodney called a racial violence, I call a racial war prosecuted against presumed inferiors to establish the idea of white supremacy in economics, culture, religion, education, industry, politics, and culture power, thus the enslavement of Africans must be seen in a larger context of European domination where nothing was to prevent the use of collective violence, enslavement, against Africans in order for Europe to carry out its aims. Yet in the end we must declare victory over racism, racial hierarchy and racialized histories that seek to protect even now the racist project by denying its base in the enslavement of Africans.

This quotation suggests that Afrocentrism is postmodern in its approach since it requires that critics displace the Western narratives of conquest and victory and reinterpret them according to the moral, physical, and psychological violence that they have perpetrated against people of African descent. As Irena R. Makaryk (1993) suggests, like other postmodern theories such as postcolonialism, Marxism, poststructuralism, and feminism, Afrocentrism seeks to denaturalize the Eurocentric historical narrative that accounts for how capitalism, humanism, and patriarchy were formed without acknowledging the price that Africans (men, women, and children) paid for such developments (p. 612). In this sense, Afrocentrism is a theory that calls for racial and social justice through reparations for slavery and its consequences on the Black world. The notion of violence needs to be displaced from its normalized locus that reinforces traditional Western materialism and ethos and be evaluated in the continuity of discrimination, exploitation, and alienation of Black people. Such a relocation of violence in modern contexts requires analysis of the traumatic effects of a brutal past and racism on Black people, which is what Afrocentrist scholars do persistently against all odds.

The field of Black studies reflects strong and important debates among minority scholars whose conversations on identity, race, and culture mirror the changes in an American society that is increasingly becoming multicultural.

Such diversity is apparent in the various approaches of academics who use either an Afrocentrist, a modernist, or a postmodernist lens to study the complex nature of Blackness in American society. Scholars such as Appiah, Gilroy, and Hall, whose views on race somewhat mirror the mainstream American approach to multiculturalism, against more racially conscious scholars such as Asante, Early, and Diawara, provide differing interpretations of identity and culture that have greatly enhanced the prolific field of Black studies in past decades. In a next phase of my research, I will identify the various levels at which the theoretical premises of Afrocentrist and postmodernists scholars converge in ways that transcend the binary opposition between the two schools of thought and point to the need for all Black scholars in the Black diaspora and in Africa to recenter their paradigms in the complex and transnational Black political and cultural struggle for survival and independence.

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