

## Rethinking the Black Atlantic

### Trans-American Regimes of Violence, Epistemological Occlusions

One of the largest and longest periods of out-migration from Haiti occurred during the despotic Duvalier dictatorship (from 1957 to 1971 under the rule of François “Papa Doc” Duvalier, and from 1971 to 1986 under his son and successor, Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier). Some internal or return migration occurred following the overthrow of Baby Doc Duvalier in 1986; however, from 1991 to 1994, years of political turmoil in Haiti, refugees once again fled, en masse, political persecution, militarism, and extreme poverty. During the early 1990s alone, especially following the exile of Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1991 until his return to Haiti in 1994, thousands of Haitians fled anti-Lavalas and military junta violence, taking to the seas in small, ill-constructed *kanntès* or *batos*.

The specter of boat people stunned concerned communities throughout the Americas, perhaps especially Haitian diasporic communities in the United States and Canada, as well as in the Dominican Republic; however, this response was not the only, nor even the dominant, narrative. Stirred by anti-immigration sentiment, often racist and racially charged, the U.S. public, the mainstream media, and governmental institutions (the INS, the U.S. Coast Guard, the Krome Detention Center, Guantánamo Bay naval base)—seemingly less concerned with the welfare of Haitian refugees than with the resource and financial costs of granting refugees asylum in the United States (and in the Bahamas)—prompted the U.S. government to adopt the detain-and-deport policy first implemented by agreement between former president Ronald Reagan and Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1981, later affirmed in George H. W. Bush’s Kennebunkport Order issued in 1992 and in William Jefferson Clinton’s willingness to uphold the elder Bush’s policy despite having campaigned against it.

By examining literary representations of Haitian refugees, and the multiple, even contradictory, responses of individuals and institutions within the United States, in this chapter I reflect on how Haitian transatlantic crossings

and INS and U.S. Coast Guard policies reveal the Atlantic to be striated, regulated, monitored, and policed: the ocean is not a borderless, malleable terrain; it is, like landlocked areas, a territorialized sphere.

The plight of Haitian refugees adrift on highly regulated transatlantic waters forms a powerful rejoinder to Paul Gilroy's metaphorical ship as chronotope for transatlantic cultural production and exchange as theorized in *The Black Atlantic*. As Joan Dayan asserts, "[w]hat is missing [in Gilroy's study] is the continuity of the Middle Passage in today's world of less obvious, but no less pernicious enslavement" ("Paul Gilroy's Slaves, Ships, and Routes," 7).

While Gilroy suggests examinations of the Atlantic as "one single, complex unit of analysis" (*Black Atlantic*, 15), the sociologist's own analysis, regrettably, fails to incorporate Haiti's contemporary transatlantic traumas into his theorization of the black Atlantic. This is a profound oversight, especially given the historical context in which the book was written and published. I attempt to redress that gap—or the absence of Haitian transatlantic crossings—in Gilroy's conceptualization of the black Atlantic. I do so through a hybrid methodology incorporating historical and literary analysis.

First, I briefly overview the history of Haitian migration to the United States and Canada beginning under Duvalier and leading up to 1994, when U.S.-U.N. troops restored Aristide to power. After outlining the historical trajectories of Haiti's transatlantic migration patterns, I then draw from literary narratives that portray the plight of Haitian refugees crossing the ocean. Specifically, I analyze diasporic literary representations of transatlantic waters, Haitian refugees, and immigrant detention centers, and I address Haitian diasporic literary resistance to policing of the Atlantic by the U.S. Coast Guard and its legislated policies of interception, detention, and deportation. Through my analyses of these Haitian diasporic literary texts, I argue that the transatlantic crossings of Haitian refugees challenge us to rethink and refigure our conceptualizations of the black Atlantic.

I adopt and analytically extend Elizabeth DeLoughrey's provocative, if not fully developed, insight that the Atlantic Ocean is a nationally regulated body, not a free international zone ("Tidialectics"). Borrowing from Michel Laguerre's concept of "liminal citizens" and Guatam Premnath's notion of "limited sovereignty," I end with an elaboration of the contemporary means of regulation that make the Atlantic Ocean as controlled and territorialized now as it was when British and other European slave ships navigated its waters. In the contemporary context, Haitian refugees suffer in ways strikingly, and disconcertingly, similar to the ways that their enslaved African ancestors did. Analyzing Haitian diasporic literary texts representing transatlantic journeys and imperiled refugees, I argue that these writers articulate resistance

to patrolled black Atlantic waters; these writers reveal how oceans are highly regulated and policed, not open bodies for free, unhindered, or unimpeded movement; and they offer literary resistance to this form of oceanic imperialism.

### Recalibrating Gilroy's Compass: Haitian Refugees, Black Atlantic Currents

Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, published in 1993, is a groundbreaking interdisciplinary work (incorporating sociology, history, literary criticism, and cultural studies) that has made a significant contribution to rethinking African diasporic studies and critiquing the nationalist frames of African American and black British cultural studies. Theorizing the black Atlantic as a site of historical and cultural exchanges between individuals from countries on the continents of Africa, Europe, and the Americas, Gilroy examined how these exchanges disrupted, essentialized, or fixed identities grounded in race, ethnicity, or nationality. Gilroy's work, significantly, brought the insights of Caribbean, black British, and African American intellectuals and artists into creative fusion. *The Black Atlantic* thus notably shifted theorizations of cultural production away from nationalist frames or parameters toward transnational ones, and it offered resistance to racialized essentialism (or "cultural insiderism") as the ground of fertile possibility for black Atlantic cultures. Gilroy's work particularly challenged black nationalism as a cultural model for thought, ideas, art, and history. Offering the ship as a "chronotope" (a concept borrowed from Mikhail Bakhtin), Gilroy asserted that we needed to "rethink modernity via the history of the black Atlantic and the African diaspora into the western hemisphere" (*The Black Atlantic*, 17).

Despite these important theoretical gifts, *The Black Atlantic* does not integrate "the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis," as Gilroy advises; on the contrary, Gilroy's study represses Haiti (except as revolutionary memory) in his conceptualizations of the black Atlantic.<sup>1</sup> What is missing from Gilroy's analysis is the plight of Haiti's refugees, treacherously crossing the Atlantic, headed for Florida's shores in small, unstable boats. That omission is staggering, given the massive waves of refugees fleeing Haiti's military regime from 1991 to 1994, which was extensively covered by the international media. And that omission undeniably shapes Gilroy's conception of the black Atlantic. For all that Gilroy's book promises and proffers to us as cultural critics, it is not all about the "open boat" and the free movements of ideas and cultural practices; it erects and fortifies, unfortunately, its own discursive boundaries,

hemispheric if not national, but boundaries no less; it establishes its own historical blind spots—with salient material, political, intellectual, and cultural ramifications.

“The history of those new migrants, called ‘boat people’ or the ‘Haitian stampede,’ [arriving in] . . . rickety boats, are not exactly the ships Gilroy has in mind” (10) writes Haitian American literary and cultural critic Joan Dayan in “Paul Gilroy’s Slaves, Ships, and Routes,” her trenchant and pointed materialist critique of *The Black Atlantic*.<sup>2</sup> In her review, Dayan incisively elucidates the material, even eclipsing, blind spots within Gilroy’s metaphorical mapping of the black Atlantic, revealing “a cartography of celebratory journeys—[that] reads like an expurgated epic history” (“Paul Gilroy’s Slaves, Ships, and Routes,” 7).

*The Black Atlantic* needs to be reread and rethought from the vantage point of those who cannot make the journey, or those who are compelled to do so by circumstances of profound economic impoverishment and disturbing political violence, or those who do not survive the journey across the black Atlantic. While Gilroy respectfully nods toward ancestors who died making the journey of the Middle Passage, he forgets those who still undertake and make that perilous journey. “In Gilroy’s attempt to anchor ‘black modernism’ in ‘a continued proximity to the unspeakable terrors of the slave experience,’” Dayan writes, “the slave experience becomes an icon for history,” merely symbolic, devoid of material continuity (“Paul Gilroy’s Slaves, Ships, and Routes,” 7).

Furthering his analysis of the black Atlantic, in *Against Race*, Gilroy contrasts “encamped nations, rooted in one spot even if their imperial tendrils extend further, and the very different patterns of itinerant dwelling found in the transnational maritime adventures of Equiano and celebrated in the cross-cultural creativity of Wheatley” (121). Gilroy refers to seafaring movement, in contrast to land-bound national identity, as a “very different ecology of belonging” revealed in the “oppositions between geography and genealogy, between land and sea” (*Against Race*, 121). As he articulates, “we can begin to perceive the sublime force of the ocean, and the associated impact of those who made their temporary homes on it, as a counterpower that confined, regulated, inhibited, and sometimes even defied the exercise of territorial sovereignty” (*Against Race*, 121).

Within this model the sea and waves of oceanic movement contrast with the deep-rootedness of landmasses; the maritime seafarers with home-bred nationalists; the pelagic flow of syncretic, diasporic identities across waters with the rigid nationalism of landlocked states; deterritorialized aquatic movement with territorial stasis, or as Gilroy likes to maintain, between

“routes” and “roots.” But what regulatory mechanisms restrict and delimit movement across the Atlantic? And how are oceanic waters also geopolitically territorialized through state apparatuses that extend the territory of the nation beyond geographical boundaries into the sea, even into international waters? How has the Atlantic extended national sovereignty for countries like the United States that routinely patrol its waters?

Relying on seeds as the etymological ground for “diaspora” as a theoretical term, Gilroy imagines how dispersed seeds taking root in new soil complicate easy distinctions between geography and genealogy: “they are creolized, syncretized, hybridized and chronically impure cultural forms, particularly if they were once rooted in the complicity of rationalized terror and racialized reason” (*The Black Atlantic*, 129). Gilroy acknowledges violent disparities marking the black Atlantic from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries: “Slavery, pogroms, indenture, genocide, and other unnamable terror have all figured in the constitution of diasporas and the reproduction of diaspora consciousness in which identity is focused, less on the equalizing, pre-democratic force of sovereign territory and more on the social dynamics of remembrance and commemoration defined by a strong sense of the dangers involved in forgetting the location of origin and the tearful process of dispersal” (*Against Race*, 123–24). Gilroy argues, however, contemporary diasporic subjects “find themselves in a very different economic, cultural, and political circuitry—a different diaspora—from the one their predecessors encountered,” for, as he concludes, “live human beings are no longer a commodity” (*Against Race*, 130). While not enslaved, human cargo transported for profit—individuals often dehumanized by the horrifying means of transportation across the sea—certainly evokes the earlier transatlantic Middle Passage made by the enslaved ancestors of Haitian refugees.

Dayan similarly refuses Gilroy’s historical amnesia and his present ocular occlusion: “In Gilroy’s transit there is no historical past except as an empty fact turned into a fashionable call that dulls any response that could carry the Middle Passage, slavery, ships, and routes into the present transnational drive of global capital and political terror” (“Paul Gilroy’s Slaves, Ships, and Routes,” 7).

Gilroy’s distinction between the centuries-earlier slave diaspora of ancestral Africans and twentieth- and twenty-first-century travelers, though, fails to recognize the harsh material barriers confronted by many who flee persecution at home by bartering their meager life savings to reserve standing room on a *kanntè* or *bato*. As DeLoughrey incisively notes, “Gilroy avoids addressing how departures and arrivals are circumscribed or determined by national border policing” (“Tidalectics,” 36n19).